Social factors influencing the adoption and development of Electronic Theses and Dissertations (ETD) programmes in the Arab Gulf States

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings from a research that explored social factors influencing the adoption and development of ETD programs in the Arab Gulf States. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of five groups of stakeholders with an interest in the implementation of ETD programmes from five Gulf States universities. Research participants identified a number of social issues that influenced the adoption and development of ETD programmes in the Gulf States. These issues included the influence of other people, such as the influence of peers, the influence of academic supervisors on students' attitudes; the influence of promotional and advocacy activities on a university community and the influence of seeing other universities already adopting ETD programmes. In general, the research participants perceived the importance of social factors, especially promotional activities, in influencing the adoption and development of ETD programmes in the Gulf States.

Keywords

Social influence, Promotional activities, peers' influence, supervisors' influence, ETD programmes, Arab Gulf States.

INTRODUCTION

Electronic theses and dissertations (ETD) can be defined as theses and dissertations by masters and doctoral students that are digitized, submitted, archived and are accessible in electronic formats (Allard, 2003; Goldsmith, 2002; Park, et al., 2007). There are two standard types of ETD. The first one is born digital, that is, a student-created digital document converted to the suitable submission format (usually PDF) and made available online with related metadata. The second type is an electronic document created by the university scanning a student's printed thesis or dissertation (Allard, 2003; Fineman, 2003; Fox, 2001; Goldsmith, 2002).

ETD initiatives emerged in the 1980s after the development of electronic publishing on the Internet and the technological platforms and software that support it (Reeves, et al., 2006). The idea of ETD submission was first mentioned in 1987 by Universal Microfilms Inc (UMI) in the United States. Twenty years later, many institutions have joined this initiative, now called the Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD). NDLTD now has more than 233 members from all over the world (Reeves, et al., 2006). These include institutional, consortial and individual members.

Several interrelated factors have been found to influence the adoption and development of ETD programmes in university libraries. These include the perceived benefits of ETD programmes, the availability of the required resources, technological, cultural, and social factors. This paper discusses the perceived social factors that influence the adoption and development of ETD programmes in the Gulf States.

Objective

This paper is part of a larger research project that examines the adoption and development of ETD programmes in the Gulf States. In particular, the research aims to explore the enablers and barriers influencing the adoption and development of ETD programmes in the Gulf States. To date, no qualitative or quantitative research has been undertaken in the Gulf States to

explore the enablers and barriers to the adoption and development of ETD programmes. The findings of this research will help academic institutions plan for the future and make informed investment decisions in adopting ETD programmes. This paper focuses on the social issues that have been found to influence the adoption and development of ETD programmes in the Arab Gulf States.

Research Method

The full research project used both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. This paper presents the findings of the first qualitative phase. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with forty five key informants (postgraduate students, academic staff, library managers, system administrators, and postgraduate officers) in the Gulf States. The research was conducted in five universities: Sultan Qaboos University (Oman), United Arab Emirates University, Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University (Saudi Arabia), University of Bahrain, and Kuwait University. This research employed a technique called constant comparative analysis to analyse the gathered qualitative data. This approach offered a sound framework for working with a large amount of descriptive data. According to Pickard (2007), this technique involves taking one piece of data and judging it with all others that may be related or diverse in order to develop conceptualisations of the potential relations between pieces of data.

THE FINDINGS (SOCIAL INFLUENCE)

Venkatesh, et al., (2003) in their Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) found that social Influence is one of the direct determinants of behavioral intentions. They defined this determinant as the degree to which an individual perceives that important others believe he or she should use the new innovation. For this research, this factor was interpreted to mean how others influence the attitudes of the different parties involved in ETD programmes. A literature review showed that there were some cases where academic staff advised their students to make some access restrictions to their theses (McMillan, 2005). This shows that postgraduate students' decisions are, sometimes, influenced by their research supervisors. Moreover, Greig (2005) claimed that the absence of a person responsible for promoting the ETD programme in the university community was a barrier to the adoption and implementation of an ETD programme at the University of Glasgow.

Interviewees of this study perceived several social issues as influencing the adoption of ETD programmes in the Gulf States. Analysis of the interview findings showed some variation in opinions in terms of social influence. On one hand, around two thirds of the research participants indicated that their attitudes toward ETD programmes would not be influenced by other people's opinions. On the other hand, the majority of the research participants highlighted that conducting promotional activities would have a great influence on people's opinions toward the adoption of ETD programmes. The following sub-sections analyse and discuss several issues that were categorised under social influence. These issues include the influence of other people on the research participants, the influence of academic supervisors on students' attitudes, the influence of promotional and advocacy activities on a university community, the influence of seeing other universities already adopting ETD programmes, and concerns about the perceived quality of theses and dissertations.

Peers' Influence

Perceptions gathered from the research participants showed that the attitudes of the majority of the research participants would not be influenced by others' opinions. They explained that they were already very convinced by the importance of ETD programmes and, thus, they were unlikely to change their attitudes. Some of them further claimed that they were able to change others' opinions about these programmes. However, a minority of participants expressed a possibility of changing their attitudes toward ETD programmes. They indicated that ETD programmes are a new idea and they have a lack of knowledge about it.

As stated earlier, the majority of the research participants indicated that they were very convinced by the idea of making theses and dissertations electronically available and, thus, were unlikely to change their attitudes toward ETD programmes. In this regard, an academic staff member reported that "I will never change my attitude because I am very convinced by the importance of this programme". A postgraduate student also stated that "I personally convinced that making theses and dissertations electronically available in the internet is very beneficial. Therefore, I will not change my attitude".

Some of the research participants not only indicated that they would not change their attitudes toward ETD programmes, they also expressed that they were in a position where they were able to convince other people about these programmes. A member of academic staff stated that "I have reached a stage where I can help to convince other people about this programme". A postgraduate officer, in addition, stated "I do not think anyone can influence my positive personal opinion about the idea of making theses electronically available. In contrast, I think I can influence others by convincing them of the importance of this project".

A few of the research participants on the other hand, expressed a possibility of changing their attitudes toward ETD programmes based on others' opinions and recommendations. Some of them explained that they have a lack of knowledge about ETD programmes at the current time. They also expressed that they will change their attitudes if others provided compelling evidence to the contrary. An academic stated that "if there are serious problems that I do not see at this moment, maybe I will have to change my thinking". Another postgraduate officer also expressed that "if others have compelling evidence to the contrary; yes, I might change my mind".

Research Supervisors' Influence on Students' Attitudes

The literature reviewed showed incidents where some academic advisors advised their students to restrict access to their theses and dissertations (McMillan, 2005). This example indicates that academic advisors can play a significant role in encouraging or discouraging their students to participate in ETD programmes. The research interviews focused on the relationship between academic supervisors and their postgraduate students in terms of participation in ETD programmes. Academic supervisors were asked whether or not they were going to advise their students to participate in ETD programmes. Postgraduate students were also asked if their attitudes toward ETD programmes would be influenced by their supervisors. Perceptions gathered from academic staff showed that the majority of them were going to advise their students to participate in ETD programmes. With regard to students' perceptions, the majority of them indicated that their attitude would not be influenced by their supervisors' advice. Nevertheless, a few of them explained that they might change their attitudes because they believe that their supervisors have better experience and knowledge about these programmes.

Almost all of the academic supervisors indicated that they were going to advise their postgraduate students to participate in ETD programmes and make their theses electronically available. These perceptions reflect supervisors' appreciation of the benefits of these programmes. An academic staff member reported that "I will encourage my students to participate in this programme". Another academic stated that "for sure I will advice them to participate because of the benefits of these programmes". On the other hand, only one academic staff member indicated that he might advise his students to make some sort of access restriction to their thesis if there were lack in the appropriate copyright policies. In this regard, he explained "I will advise my students to participate but with some kind of access restrictions. I will not advise them to agree to make their theses electronically available before I make sure that their copyright is protected".

Analysis of postgraduate students' perceptions shows that the attitudes of the majority of them would not be influenced by their supervisors because they were convinced by the importance of ETD programmes. Even though they indicated that they would listen to the points of view of their supervisors, they expected that they would retain on their positive attitudes toward ETD programmes. One postgraduate student stated that "I will listen to my supervisor's point of view and at the end I will follow my opinion because I am very convinced that this programme is very beneficial and important". Several students further expressed that their supervisors had no role or authority over their decision to participate in ETD programmes. They also thought that the copyright of the theses belonged to students only and supervisors had no authority over theses. In this regard, a student stated "because the thesis is my work and my supervisor was only giving me advice, the copyright belongs to me and the researchers; supervisors have no relation to the thesis' copyright". In addition to these opinions, other students expressed self-confidence about their attitudes toward ETD programmes and indicated that they might be able to change the attitude of their supervisors toward ETD programmes. In this regard, one postgraduate student claimed that "I do not think my supervisor will change my opinion about this programme. In contrast, I will try to convince him of my point of view".

On the other hand, there were a few postgraduate students who indicated that they might change their attitudes based on their supervisors' opinions and advice, especially if they provided evidence and their arguments were convincing. One postgraduate student reported that "If my supervisor provided evidence of what he/she is claiming, then I would change my opinion".

Promotional and Advocacy Activities Influence

From the literature reviewed, promotional activities have been found to be an enabler for adopting ETD programmes (Asner and Polani, 2008). According to Greig (2005), the presence within the senior management of the university of a person responsible for informing and discussing the legal issues of concern to postgraduate students and academic staff can make a big difference and have a significant impact on students' participation in ETD programmes. On the other hand, he stated that the absence of such a person was a barrier to the adoption and implementation of an ETD programme at the University of Glasgow (Greig, 2005).

Like the literature findings, the interviews also showed that the research participants gave emphasis to promotional activities in successful adoption of ETD programmes. The majority of the participants perceived that conducting appropriate promotional and advocacy activities would help to attract people to ETD programmes by making people obtain awareness

about ETD programmes and their importance and benefits. In addition to this, several participants, postgraduate students and academic staff in particular, suggested that promotional activities should give people assurance that copyright is protected and preserved. Such awareness, as a result, would encourage the university community to appreciate and support the adoption of these programmes. On the other hand, a minority of participants highlighted that promotional activities were not undertaken properly at their universities. The following sub-sections outline the influence of promotional and advocacy activities.

From the interviews conducted, the research participants suggested that promotional activities should inform people about ETD programmes and their importance and benefits. They thought that once people obtained awareness about ETD programmes and their benefits, they would be more willing to support and participate in these programmes. A library manager outlined this idea and stated that "I think the existence of promotional activities will have a positive influence on the adoption of this programme. Such activities will make students and academic staff gain awareness about the benefits of this programme and its importance". In addition, a few participants indicated that promotional activities would help to bring more administrative support to these programmes. They explained that by making people at a higher level obtain awareness about these programmes and their benefits, administrators would be more willing to support the adoption of these programmes. In this regard, one postgraduate officer reported that "making people obtain awareness about the importance and benefits of ETD programmes will give the project wide support from administrators and other related people". One library manager also reported that:

The appreciation of this programme at the administration level is the main enabler to the adoption of ETD programmes. The person who has the power to take a decision should appreciate the importance of this project. If this person is convinced and appreciates the importance of this project, he/she will provide and offer all the financial support, hardware and software, and establish all the required policies and legislations.

In addition, the majority of academic staff and postgraduate students indicated that promotional activities should cover the copyright issues and clarify how theses are protected and preserved. They also observed that once people are confident that the copyright issues are managed appropriately this would encourage them to support and participate in these programmes. In this regard, one student expressed that "promotional activities will give me more confidence about this programme, especially if I know that there will be protection to my copyright by the university". An academic staff member suggested that "promotional activities should convince people about ETD programmes and assure them that copyright is protected and preserved".

Nevertheless, a few participants expressed concern about promotional activities at their universities. They indicated that such activities are either limited or not available at all. An academic staff member expressed that "I did not hear about any promotional or advocacy activity about these issues". Such a lack in conducting appropriate promotional activities would have a negative influence in encouraging more people to support the adoption of ETD programmes. Additionally, the absence of promotional activities would result in a lack in the awareness and appreciation of the importance of ETD programmes, especially at the administration level. An academic staff member stated that "the lack of awareness by the university administrators about the importance of this project is the main barrier to the adoption of these programmes". Going back to the literature reviewed, Greig (2005) claimed that the absence of a person responsible for promoting the ETD programme in the university community was a barrier to the adoption and implementation of an ETD programme at the University of Glasgow. Thus, based on the literature findings and a few participants' perceptions, it can be concluded that the lack in conducting appropriate promotional activities would be considered as one of the main barriers to the adoption and development of ETD programmes in the Gulf States.

Influence of Other Universities

From the interviews conducted, library managers and postgraduate officers indicated that seeing other universities already adopting ETD programmes would motivate and encourage them to adopt these programmes. They explained that seeing other universities adopting ETD programmes would give them the opportunity to benefit from their experience. In particular, they would be able to benefit from their experience in how they had dealt with legal issues, such as copyright and plagiarism issues. As a result, participants thought that benefiting from others' experience would save much time and effort for their institutions. In this regard, one library manager stated that "for sure, such institutions have already gone through all of the adoption procedures and faced several challenges and got enough experience. Certainly, if such institutions gave us their experience, this will save much time and effort".

Perceived Quality of Theses and Dissertations

A few academic staff and postgraduate students mentioned that concerns about the quality of theses and dissertations are one

of the reasons for people rejecting ETD programmes. They explained that some students may refuse to participate in these programmes if their theses are not in a good condition in terms of following the scientific and appropriate way of conducting and writing research. They would be afraid if they allowed online access to their theses that other people would read their theses and criticize them. They also indicated that the university may not accept making theses and dissertations electronically available if they are not in a good quality. In this regard, an academic staff member stated that:

> One of the reasons that hinder the adoption of this project in some universities or in some specializations is that theses and dissertations are not of a good standard and do not reach the level that allows them to be published and made available electronically in the internet. Therefore, these institutions try to be careful when putting theses online and, therefore, do not put substandard theses because theses represent the university quality and the quality of its scientific research.

Based on these perceptions, the quality of theses and dissertations would be considered as one of the barriers to the adoption and development of ETD programmes in the Gulf States.

DISCUSSIONS OF THE FINDINGS

As in the literature review, the research participants perceived the importance of social factors, especially promotional activities, in influencing the adoption and development of ETD programmes in the Gulf States. However, with regard to others' influence on the research participants' attitudes, the majority of them indicated that they would not be influenced by others' opinions. They explained that they were very convinced by the importance and benefits of ETD programmes. Thus, they were unlikely to change their attitudes toward these programmes. This finding highlights the influence of the appreciation of the benefits in others' influence on the research participants' attitudes toward ETD programmes. On the other hand, only a few participants indicated that they might change their attitudes. Members of this group explained that they had a lack of knowledge about ETD programmes. This finding highlights the importance of conducting promotional activities in order to make people gain awareness about ETD programmes.

With regard to the influence of academic advisors over their students, the majority of the interviewed academics expressed appreciation of ETD programmes and, thus, they were going to advise their students to participate in ETD programmes and make their theses available electronically. This gives an indication that the influence of academic advisors will be positive and, thus, can be considered as an enabler to the adoption and development of ETD programmes in the Gulf States. On the other hand the majority of postgraduate students expressed that their attitudes toward ETD programmes would not be influenced by their supervisors, especially if it is a negative influence. Students explained that they were also convinced of the importance of ETD programmes. This finding again highlights the influence of the appreciation of the benefits in students' attitudes toward ETD programmes. These perceptions give an indication that students had strong motivation and were willing to participate in ETD programmes. This, as a result, can be considered as one of the enablers to the adoption and development of ETD programmes in the Gulf States.

With regard to promotional activities, the research participants highlighted the importance of conducting appropriate promotional activities. They explained that promotional activities would help to make people gain awareness about ETD programmes and their benefits to them. Additionally, promotional activities would help to make clear how theses' copyright is protected. They further thought that once people were aware of ETD programmes and their benefits, they would be motivated and more willing to support the adoption of ETD programmes. Several participants, in addition, assumed that making people at the top level of management obtain awareness about these programmes and their benefits would help to bring more administrative support to these programmes. These findings, as a result, highlight the importance of conducting promotional activities in order to adopt ETD programmes successfully. They also highlight the influence of the availability of appropriate promotional activities in the appreciation of the benefits of ETD programmes.

However, a few participants reported that there was a lack of appropriate promotional activities at their institutions. This is because either some of the universities investigated had not yet adopted an ETD programme or had just started the first steps in adopting ETD programmes. Nevertheless, such a lack of promotional activities would have a negative influence in obtaining motivation and support from the university community. The research participants explained that some people may have a lack of knowledge about ETD programmes and the related legal issues. Thus, they might not appreciate the importance of adopting such programmes. In particular, people in the university administration would not support the adoption of these programmes if they were not convinced of the importance of these programmes. Thus, the absence of appropriate promotional activities would be considered as a barrier to the adoption and development of ETD programmes in the Gulf States. We have seen earlier that the absence of a person responsible for promoting the ETD programme in the university community was a barrier to the adoption and implementation of an ETD programme at the University of Glasgow (Greig, 2005).

With regard to the influence of seeing other universities adopting ETD programmes, the interviewees indicated that this would give them more motivation and willingness to adopt the same programmes. They explained that they would be able to benefit from other universities' experience in adopting ETD programmes. In that, they would be able to examine the steps other universities went through in order to adopt these programmes and see how they dealt with legal issues, such as copyright and plagiarism. Thus, the adoption of ETD programmes in other universities is considered as enabler to the adoption and development of ETD programmes in the Gulf States.

Another social issue reported by a few participants is the perceived quality of theses and dissertations. They explained that some people, especially postgraduate students, would be hesitant or may refuse to participate in ETD programmes because their theses were not of a good quality. They would be afraid if they allowed online access to their theses that other people would read their theses and criticize them. Thus, the quality of theses and dissertations would be one of the barriers that confront some people from participating in ETD programmes.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the research participants highlighted the importance of social factors in influencing the adoption and development of ETD programmes. In that, they understood that conducting appropriate promotional activities would have a positive influence on the adoption and development of these programmes. For example, promotional activities reported would help to make people gain awareness about ETD programmes and their benefits. Additionally, promotional activities would help to make clear how theses' copyright is protected. As a result of such activities, people would be motivated and more willing to support the adoption of ETD programmes and also would help to bring more administrative support to these programmes. However, a few participants indicated that there was a lack of conducting appropriate promotional activities at their institutions. Thus, the absence of appropriate promotional activities was considered as one of the barriers to the adoption and development of ETD programmes in the Gulf States. We have seen in the literature reviewed that the absence of a person responsible for promoting the ETD programme in the university community was a barrier to the adoption and implementation of an ETD programme at the University of Glasgow (Greig, 2005).

Additionally, the research participants highlighted the benefit of seeing other universities already adopting ETD programmes. They considered the ability to learn from others' experience as an enabler to the adoption and development of these programmes. They indicated that this would give them more motivation and willingness to adopt the same programmes. With regard to others' influence on the research participants, the majority indicated that others would not be able to change their attitudes toward ETD programmes. This reflected strong motivation and appreciation of the benefits of ETD programmes. Additionally, we have seen that many academic advisors are going to advise their students to participate in ETD programmes and make their theses available electronically. Thus, this also can be considered as an enabler to the adoption and development of ETD programmes in the Gulf States. In general, social factors can be categorised as one of the enablers to the adoption and development of ETD programmes. The only exception is the lack of appropriate promotional activities at the investigated institutions. Additionally, concerns about the quality of theses may make students and universities more reluctant to make such theses electronically available. Poor quality of theses may cause some people, especially students, to hesitate from making them available publically in the internet. A few students suggest that making their theses electronically available would make them more accessible and, thus, people may criticise their work. These issues can be barriers to the adoption and development of ETD programmes in the Gulf States and further research that address them will be important.

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