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## Evolution of distance education in Iran

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### Abstract

Ministry of higher education of Iran in 1988 with establishing Payam Noor University tried to use distance education methods and other new methods to bring some basic changes in the concepts of traditional education and remove some of the deficiencies of the traditional education systems. Currently, the mass of young people who want to obtain an academic degree and the lack of enough educational space in different levels in the country, created the exceptional circumstances to move towards distance education and e-learning in Iran. By using these recent methods, we can increase productivity training, flexibility in time and place, and many other advantages such as creation hundreds of virtual classes and establishing fair educational opportunities for many people of our society. Recent research starts by comparing distance education programs in international and national level to identify the steps required to transform the program into an e-learning system. Our evaluation method is a qualitative approach. It describe background and evolution of distance education, express e-learning and its goals and present the necessities of e-learning as a new method of distance education in universities of Iran. It describes the challenges of e-learning in Iran and presents the strategies to strengthen e-learning in this country.

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*Keywords:* University; distance education; E-learning; student; Payam Noor University

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### 1. Introduction

Currently, the technology-based learning using computers and different web sites, virtual university, virtual class that extend global Internet network development possible way for the emergence of new training methods. In this conditions because of needs to extend skills and knowledge-based information technology-the traditional methods of educational system is not efficacy (Haghani2003). As a result, universities must use the virtual world in and distance education, to obtain the modern and efficient methods to achieve education. Such systems use the facilities of virtual world can increase productivity, flexibility in time and place, and many other advantages. Ministry of higher Education of Iran as a responsible of higher education has a serious attention to distance education in the last two decades. This ministry with establishing the Payam Noor University based on training using Open University and remote students, changed in traditional concepts of education. Axis of changes was elimination of time, place and limitations of traditional systems of educational resources. This to some extent due to change methods and approaches in education in Iran. But these changes did not fit with the continuity of world conditions.

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## 2. Method

In this research we use a qualitative approach to explore how the distance education system of Iran has evolved. Recent research investigated by a comparative approach, the historical background of distance education in Iran and the world. It is a descriptive study which is consisting of the goals, benefits, challenges and the necessity of e-learning in this country. Our main purpose is to present the necessities of e-learning as a new method of distance education in universities of Iran.

## 3. Comparative distance education background

Distance education is an educational method in which there is not a direct contact between professors and students (Doolatabadi, 2003) was introduced in Europe and America and then in the rest of the world including Iran. By comparing the existing distance education systems with Iranian system we can identify the challenges of e-learning educational system in Iran.

### 3.1. In the world

Historically entry way of thinking distance education or online education back to Open University in the mid-twentieth century in England (<http://en.wikipedia.org>). According to this plan, applicants with television programs and training obtained the university degrees. Also, with inventing the program of "University Without walls" and similar programs in United States (in 1960's) and starting educational workshops within this country (<http://www.digitalschool.net>), greater practical steps were taken in this field. Considering the wide and public access to computer in 1970's decade, the "modem bulletin board" accepted for the first time. In early 1980's by one of the founders of the Virtual University in the United States the "online units" of university was invented. In 1988 the first software as a "Digital-Professor" was suggested and used in America. Since then, many developments in Virtual University have created; including the 1995 American universities created the changes in the system and strengthened the possibility of expanding e-learning around the world. Actually, creating hundreds of sites with the ability to provide training on the internet world cover different subjects and each country try to strengthen its distance education system by similar and different methods.

For example, at present, some countries such as India consider the elements and strategies of e-book collection development and access which must be adopted by academic libraries, especially for distance education facilities (Tripathi, and Jeevan, 2008, pp104-114). Some others countries such as Germany have created legislations for distance education. In this country, distance learning courses can be divided into two groups: those which come under the Distance Education protection law and are regulated by the National Central Authority for Distance Education and those which are regulated by the state in other ways ([www.fernuni-hagen](http://www.fernuni-hagen)). In this regard, each country has its challenges to distance education. For example, in China, education is expensive and higher education utilizing digital technology is even more expensive (Potter Geoff, 2003).

According to a statistical estimate, there are millions of people around the world use e-learning educational in prestigious universities (Fotoorehchi, 2006). Today, distance education has a widespread application all around the world, for the individuals, expecting different conditions and expectations as an option for education (Özdemir Topaloğlu and Topaloğlu, 2009).

### 3.2. In the Iran

Distance education in our country except a short experienced of free University before the revolution and Payam Noor University based on methods of using telecommunication has not a long history. Payam Noor University in 88's for the first time used the distance education system seriously and raised non face to face classes (<http://pnu.ir/Portal/?p=14>). At the end of 1991's decades the virtual education project was placed on the agenda of Tehran University and its virtual site of e-learning launched nine courses for students at the beginning of year and explicated it at the same academic year for others. In the same year, the Ministry of higher education announced the the first virtual university would be founded under the license of Ministry as a non-profit institution and provide

educational services. Following this, some universities announced that entered the electronic education in their training programs and placed it in their present courses and some form of their single-courses. After little action in universities of using E-learning method, the Ministry of Education as a largest educational part of the country, begun the activities in this field and actually a number of the private Institutes benefit the E-learning method. Reviews of the recent background shows that Payam Noor University is the first state university which has the serious activities in distance education. Our study shows that, at the present, the popularity of distance education and e-learning has grown rapidly over the last decade in Iran higher education, yet many fundamental teaching–learning issues are still in debate.

#### 4. Goals of distance education and E-Learning in Iran

The most important objective of distance education is making it possible to access the knowledge that is needed with a small amount of money and without time and space limitations for those who is a part of society that need special education by means of distance education which is a system in web-based learning ((Özdemir Topaloğlu and Topaloğlu, 2009). Also the most important goal of E-learning in Iran is providing for everyone the ability or capacity to learn in long and short-term the expected contents. E-Learning in Iran has educational, cultural, social, research, economic and scientific goals. Each kind of these goals is influenced by education (<http://www.p30lords.com>). In comparison with India and China it seems that we have the same objectives but we have not special legislation for distance education system such Germany.

#### 5. Challenges of e-learning educational system in Iran

The comparative study shows that despite the many positive aspects of e-learning some believe the new training methods based on computer and Internet create the problems for training and even for social life of people. Excessive dependence on technology and physical problems of long-term working with computers and other weakness that result of low mobility are among the disadvantages that raise critics for E-learning in all of the countries. In our country, some problems in reaching the E-Learning are described as below: *First- lack of appropriate telecommunications infrastructure:* In fact, without virtually communications infrastructure, weakness of Internet networks and small e-learning systems we are even not at the average type. *Second – existence of lessons mnemonic with long text:* Most of our education system course is based on text type and retain long while we need for e-learning short contents with higher understanding of subject. So the educational system in these two cases is not compatible with each other and creates the problems for both teachers and students. While teacher–student interaction is a key success factor in distance education, it seems that little work has been done on the teachers. The same problem exist in distance education of some countries such Taiwan (Tao and Rosa Yeh, 2008, pp23-36). *Third - avoid student from social life:* New training methods, although facilities and provide more resources for students to be without the group, but because of avoiding social life create some problems. In fact, when a student use computer to establish communication through virtual ways, hence, the social relationship is not fully established. This issue can be adverse psychological effects on mind and spirit of him. Lack of "face to face communication" is one of the disadvantages in distance education; of course, this fault is resolved to a large extent with technology advances. Avoid the mass educational media is one of the disadvantages discussed for E-learning that with development of video conference and mass education and group training methods based on web this problem can largely resolved.

#### 6. Recommendations and initiatives

As a result of this study, the recommendations are provided to improve distance education and e-learning in Iran as below:

*The first initiative* for the challenges of e-learning system is to solve the basic problem of internet connection in Iran. Virtual University needs effectively to internet connection. Thus for starting e-learning the average communication infrastructure in the country is required. Low speed and relatively high cost of Internet reduces desired use of

internet in the classes and online and video and audio conferences. Therefore, increase of the speed of connection through fibre-optic service, particularly for students outside of Iran is required. In addition to increased speed, the security of Iranian web services against hackers must also be a lot to be solved. The experiences of the United States and some western countries confirm this solution ([www.learninghouse.com](http://www.learninghouse.com)). China can be a good example for us. In this country, delivery of academic courses via advanced high tech system (Advanced Distance Learning or ADL) is a major objective in its distance education programme (Potter Geoff, 2003),

*The second initiative* in this type of education is obtaining new methods of management and training computer experts. In this field special educational planning for the courses of practical units or Web sessions must be developed. The need for qualified staff in distance education field who knows the skills for distance education field is necessary. In China the distance education students study together in groups and the tutors are available to answer questions and guide study (Potter Geoff, 2003).

*Third initiative* - that the transition to e-learning and widespread changes in social relations is not necessarily considered as a major problem. But it should be regarded as an opportunity to resolve "dependency" on economic and technical and..... Existence of thousands of Iranian in advanced centres in the field of IT created an exceptional position has provided for the first time the possibility of mutation position and the transfer of advanced knowledge, experience and information and communication technology for our country.

*The fourth initiative* – In major policies we must be in position that the foundation of virtual is a opportunity for introducing universities of Iran and Iranian culture and language in the world and the virtual universities as economic units because of the political and cultural position of Iran can attract foreign currency and reduce our costs for higher education in comparison with the traditional method in the country.

## 7. Conclusion

Electronic education among the information technology tools, have a special position in our country. However, except for activities of Payam Noor University, there is a little attention to this issue and distance education. Currently, in international level, using of modern communications technology, created a global community learning centres that not only different staff, but students and even professors in different disciplines can familiar with each other and will be able them to use their scientific and educational abilities in common, without limitation in time and place. It is clear that distance learning is different from regular learning in the classroom. One of the main factors which influence the effectiveness of the learning process is the interaction that exists between the teacher and the student. If a few years ago, video and audio technologies like video recorder technology was considered as a new technology of education, today, by using computer and Internet there is a better learning opportunity even in indoor conditions. The conditions of Iran in field of education are an exceptional situation and moving toward electronic trainings is obligatory. Existence of Mass youth who wants university degrees and lack of space for different educational levels has caused many problems. Note, that we should instead spend huge amounts to build universities in the country, with very less amount can create hundreds of virtual classes and fairly educational opportunities for many people. Experiences of other countries indicates that the next major jump in university education is a combination method of teacher training and circuit training, including technology based on education and simultaneously Internet, education by educational CD, video and satellite that our universities in this field and for having a clear future must be leader.

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