

Distance Education Competencies of Faculty Members in Iran

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Introduction

The integration of computers and other information and distance education technologies is changing how students learn. Distance education provides a means for students to assess learning environments regardless of location/time constraints. Distance education also supports androgogical learning principles. While the Internet has fairly widespread adoption and use in educational institutions in developed countries, it is not the same for educational institutions in developing countries, including Iran. In studying agricultural faculty, Murphy and Terry (1995) found that low rates of adoption and use of information and distance education technologies was related to low technological competencies and lack of training and development opportunities. For the integration, adoption, and use of information and distance education technologies to be successful, training and development programs must focus on the needs of the learners.

Purpose and Methods

The purpose of this study was to examine factors affecting adoption and use of the Internet and World-Wide-Web. Faculty members ($N=180$) at the agricultural colleges of Tehran and Tarbiat Modarres Universities, Iran were the population for this study. The research design for this study was a descriptive and correlational survey method. A response rate of 96% was attained.

Major Points and Lessons Learned

Results showed that about half of the respondents used the Internet and seventy percent of those using the Internet had access to computers at the College Computer Centers. Only twenty percent of faculty had access to the Internet in their homes. Among the software packages that they used most were Word, SPSS, and Minitab. AGRIS, AGRICOLA and ERIC were the most used online reference databases. Respondents indicated they were fluent in using the Windows operating system. Faculty members indicated their interest in attending Internet courses. Departmental computing support management information offices were considered to be good sources of information and training with respect to the use of computer software and the Internet.

The result showed that the faculty encouraged their students to use computers to do their assignments and research references online. However, students were limited due to the lack of computers at the College of Agriculture. Eighty percent of faculty members had e-mail addresses. A majority of respondents indicated they self-taught themselves to use the Internet. Faculty used the Internet primarily to find scientific resources. Respondents indicated that the most important benefits of using the Internet were improving research and educational activities, and saving time in obtaining data. Respondents used the Yahoo search engine most often.

Educational Importance

The educational importance of this study is focused on three areas: distance education, needs assessment, and faculty perceptions. The results of this study will help Iranian Universities better understand its faculty members needs with regards to information and distance education technologies. Prior to this study, agricultural faculty members' perceptions toward information and distance education technologies had not been studied. However, faculty members in other fields and other countries have been studied. The results from this study can now be compared across nations and cultures to understand the generalizability of findings and applicability of recommendations.