

REVEALING RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM IMPLEMENTING E-COACHING PROGRAM INITIATIVE FOR FIRST-YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN SAUDI ARABIA**Essam Almuhsin
Ben Soh**Department of Computer Science and Information Technology, La Trobe University,
Melbourne, Australia**ABSTRACT**

This study explores the implementation and impact of an e-coaching program tailored for first-year university students in Saudi Arabia. Leveraging technological advancements and experiences from remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, the program aimed to enhance student engagement and academic performance. Findings indicate positive student satisfaction with the program, highlighting the importance of personalized guidance and alignment with student needs. Challenges include cultural nuances and limitations in data collection. Recommendations for future research include expanding the scope, modifying conceptual models, extending program durations, and implementing awareness strategies.

Keywords:

e-coaching, Saudi higher education, first-year students, technology, academic performance.

INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia has experienced significant technological advancements in line with the goals outlined in the Saudi Vision 2030, aiming to cultivate a skilled workforce and diversify economic revenue streams. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the resilience of Saudi Arabia's IT infrastructure during the shift to remote learning. With widespread access to internet and communication applications, especially among youth and university students, education and daily interactions have undergone profound changes.

This study capitalized on Saudi Arabia's technological progress and experiences with internet communication applications during remote learning to develop an online e-coaching solution tailored for first-year university students. Acknowledging the critical role of guidance and support during this transition, the study aimed to foster student engagement and academic performance, drawing from established research in academic and personal development. By fostering a sense of belonging, trust, and engagement among students, such support mechanisms can profoundly impact academic performance and participation in extracurricular activities [1-2-3-4].

Despite the evident need, e-coaching programs are noticeably absent in Saudi higher education [5-6-7], no records indicate the implementation of e-coaching programs specifically designed to support first-year students in Saudi universities [8]. This research sought to address this gap by investigating the impact of e-coaching programs on first-year students' academic and social adaptation. By identifying key factors influencing student engagement with e-coaching and gathering insights from university stakeholders and students, the study aimed to inform the design and implementation of an experimental e-coaching program for enhancing personal success. This paper presents a synopsis of the e-coaching program's implementation and the study's findings, challenges encountered, and recommendations for future e-coaching research.

Experimental Implementation of the E-Coaching (Personal Success) Program

The e-coaching program (Personal Success) that was used in the experiment was adopted from one of the most valuable coaching models, which is the Critical Alignment Model (CAM) [9]. The CAM encompasses four dimensions spanning various facets of cognition: Environment, Structure, Implementation, and interpersonal dynamics (People), rendering it a holistic framework amalgamating the strengths of diverse coaching models [10].

The e-coaching (Personal Success) program underwent experimental implementation, featuring technical specifications, sequential modules, and activities over five weeks, alongside key outcomes and weekly coach reflections. Thirty-four students, randomly selected from pre-experimentation survey participants, engaged in the program. Each session focused on at least two of the four CAM dimensions, with a brief introduction to elevate students' e-coaching awareness and highlight the benefits of online coaching. Throughout the experimental phase, students were introduced to essential skills, including self-awareness, self-management, motivation, and prioritization, expected to positively impact academic performance and social engagement. Sessions addressed various aspects, such as cultivating a growth mindset, critical thinking, goal setting, and life balance. Practical techniques like the "Eisenhower Matrix" and "Pomodoro" were provided to enhance time management and task prioritization skills. The program concluded by reinforcing learned skills and emphasizing goal setting, self-motivation, and confidence-building techniques like SMART goals to navigate the challenges of the first year of university [11-12].

Verification of Satisfaction with the E-Coaching (Personal Success) Program

To assess the efficacy of the proposed e-coaching program, student satisfaction served as the primary success metric [13]. Twenty students who participated in the program's experimental phase were interviewed to gauge their satisfaction levels. Analysis of their responses revealed a unanimous consensus among participants regarding their satisfaction with the "Personal Success" e-coaching program, thus affirming its success. Students attributed their satisfaction to several key factors:

- The coach's ability to cultivate friendly, interactive relationships and maintain effective communication.
- High interactivity and responsiveness, with prompt guidance and feedback when needed.
- Tailored guidance tailored to individual circumstances and capabilities.
- Alignment of program content with student needs.
- Acquisition of valuable skills such as time management, organization, and prioritization, applicable across various contexts to support academic and social goals.

Many students reported notable improvements in interpersonal skills, time management, and task prioritization, facilitating better interactions with educators and peers and timely completion of assignments. Some students also noted increased sociability, enabling them to initiate and maintain new relationships, potentially benefiting their academic performance indirectly.

Key Finding: Innovative Approach to E-Coaching Program Implementation

This study represented a pioneering effort within the Saudi higher education landscape, introducing a requirements-based e-coaching program tailored to discern, analyze, and address the needs and expectations of both students and the university. To the best of the author's knowledge, previous studies in the Saudi context that explored e-coaching or related online mentoring and educational programs typically treated needs and expectations as findings or recommendations rather than as a foundational element for program design and implementation. Consequently, such initiatives often faced criticism for their inability to provide personalized guidance or mentoring and for offering generic advice that lacked relevance.

In contrast, this study stands out as the first in the Saudi context to prioritize the design requirements of e-coaching programs. It introduces a methodologically rigorous process for gathering and analyzing requirements from diverse sources, translating these requirements into coaching approaches, techniques, tools, and implementation frameworks, and evaluating the outcomes of the experimental implementation of the proposed e-coaching program.

Furthermore, this study underscores the significant role of e-coaching awareness in influencing the relationships between external and internal factors of the technology acceptance model (TAM+++). The proposed TAM+++ comprises three sets of constructs: internal (perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and intention to adopt e-coaching programs), external (compatibility and interactivity of the e-coaching program and students' subjective norms), and behaviour control constructs (self-efficacy and computer self-efficacy). By examining these relationships pre- and post-implementation of the e-coaching program, the study demonstrates a quantifiable, significant positive change in these relationships with the enhancement of students' e-coaching awareness. This underscores the pivotal role of e-coaching awareness in facilitating students' ability to connect external factors with internal constructs and activating the influence of behaviour control factors, fostering a positive intention to adopt e-coaching programs.

The study offers practical recommendations for coaching experts, e-coaching program designers, and coaches, based on qualitative and quantitative data analysis and observations from the experimental implementation of the proposed e-coaching program:

1. Allocate ample time for one-to-one coaching to ensure the successful design and implementation of e-coaching programs. Individual meetings foster open communication, enabling tailored responses that cater to students' unique needs and promote trust in the guidance provided, thereby enhancing engagement and participation.
2. Deeply understand the contextual and cultural attributes of the target population to develop effective coaching approaches that address specific problems and resonate with coachees' mindsets, steering clear of generic advice that may lack practicality in specific contexts.
3. Consider contextual factors such as religious practices and technology preferences to determine the optimal communication frequency, timing, and channels. Adapting communication strategies to align with cultural norms and technological trends maximizes participation and engagement. As an illustration, while WhatsApp enjoys global popularity as a communication platform, its functionality for calls and video conferences is restricted in Saudi Arabia. Consequently, a considerable number of individuals opt for Telegram as an alternative communication tool in the region.
4. Emphasize human interaction in e-coaching programs, particularly in contexts where e-coaching awareness is limited. Peer interaction and engagement with coaches stimulate idea generation, foster understanding of program activities and thinking techniques, and facilitate peer learning, offering advantages not attainable in fully e-coaching programs.
5. Employ a rigorous process for collecting and analyzing requirements to ensure the delivery of guidance and training that address real needs and goals, avoiding the provision of unnecessary guidance and the wastage of time and resources.
6. In the Saudi higher education context, prioritize the enhancement of participants' e-coaching awareness as it emerges as a critical success factor for achieving desired program outcomes. Improved e-coaching awareness fosters better perceptions of program usefulness and ease of use, thereby encouraging participation and engagement.

Challenges and Limitations

Several challenges and limitations hinder the generalization of the study's findings and the practicality of the proposed TAM+++. The research was confined to the Saudi context, where numerous cultural nuances, particularly the collective and religious inclinations of the Saudi community, exerted significant influence on both the formulation of the technology acceptance model and its outcomes. Such cultural idiosyncrasies may render the model and its findings inapplicable to diverse societies due to inherent cultural disparities. Furthermore, the study targeted first-year students within the computer science and engineering college at Hail University, a group likely possessing elevated computer proficiency compared to counterparts in other disciplines. This disparity in computer efficacy could skew the accuracy and transferability of the findings to other academic departments. The concept of computer efficacy, posited as a behavioral control factor, might have been bolstered by the participants' advanced computer skills, a dynamic potentially absent in other student populations.

Gender diversity presents another formidable obstacle. Governed by stringent regulations, Saudi universities enforce strict gender segregation, impeding access to female participants and complicating the research process, particularly for male researchers. The absence of female representation in the study cohort undermines the broad applicability of the findings, which may be susceptible to biases stemming from gender imbalances.

Moreover, the adoption of semi-structured interviews to gauge student satisfaction with the proposed e-coaching program, while valuable, lacks robust support from quantitative metrics to validate outcomes. Challenges in accessing students' academic and non-academic records, owing to privacy regulations and institutional constraints, thwarted efforts to track progress effectively. Additionally, time constraints necessitated the experimental implementation of the e-coaching program over a condensed period, limiting the duration for participant engagement and data collection. Consequently, the truncated timeline may compromise the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the study's conclusions.

Recommendations for Future Research**Expansion of Research Scope:**

- Include first-year students from diverse colleges with varied backgrounds and computer skills.
- Incorporate female representation to enhance sample diversity and broaden the applicability of findings.

Modification of TAM+++ Conceptual Model:

- Explore the possibility of adapting the TAM+++ model to include additional variables, such as technical factors reflecting students' educational backgrounds or gender-related cultural variables influenced by the inclusion of female students.
- Diversify research samples to identify new or alternative needs and expectations.

Extension of E-Coaching Program Duration:

- Extend the duration of e-coaching programs to encompass the entire academic year.
- Obtain access to students' academic and non-academic records to facilitate tracking of performance and collection of quantitative data, such as academic scores, retention rates, and participation in extracurricular activities.

Continuous Research Efforts:

- Emphasize the ongoing need for research aimed at digitalizing coaching and integrating it as a fundamental component of the educational process within the Saudi higher education sector.
- Address technical and social factors influencing students' engagement in e-coaching.
- Establish a database of students' needs and expectations across various educational backgrounds and settings to inform the development of interactive, adaptable, fully e-coaching programs.
- Consider diverse technical, organizational, and social factors influencing Saudi students' decisions and behaviours.

Awareness and Adoption Strategies:

- Define effective mechanisms to enhance awareness of e-coaching among Saudi universities and students.
- Promote the incorporation of e-coaching programs into the educational system at universities.
- Increase students' acceptance and adoption of e-coaching programs through targeted initiatives and awareness campaigns.

By addressing these suggestions in future research endeavors, the advancement of e-coaching programs in the Saudi higher education sector can be further propelled, aligning with the objectives outlined in the Saudi Vision 2030.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this study highlights the significance of e-coaching programs in supporting first-year university students in Saudi Arabia. Despite challenges, the research demonstrates the potential of tailored e-coaching interventions to enhance academic performance and social engagement. Moving forward, addressing cultural nuances and expanding research efforts are crucial for integrating e-coaching into Saudi higher education, aligning with the goals of the Saudi Vision 2030.

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