E-learning as an alternative strategy for tourism higher education in Egypt

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Abstract: - "[E-learning] is part of the biggest change in the way our species conducts learning since the invention of the chalkboard or perhaps the alphabet. The development of computers and electronic communications has removed barriers of space and time. We can obtain and deliver knowledge anytime anywhere" [1: 6]. Egypt was relatively far from applying such educational system due to several reasons, mostly technical. However, over the last few years, the need for establishing a robust distance education system in Egypt has dramatically grown due to an escalating demand for more flexible educational options. It was then 2008 when a milestone change occurred, as the Egyptian government considered going heavily for e-learning by launching the Egyptian Education Initiative aiming to reform the education system through the use of Information and Communication Technology. This research aims first to shed light on the status of tourism e-learning in Egypt now; second, to clarify the potential advantages and disadvantages of applying tourism e-learning; and therefore, to explore the suitability of using e-learning as an alternative method for delivering tourism higher education. This will ultimately help decision makers understand significant issues such as the obstacles of applying e-learning as well as any long-term drawbacks.

Key-Words: - Tourism, Tourism education, Distance education, Higher education, E-learning, Egypt,

1 Introduction

"Distance education has been with us for more than 160 years [2: 223]. Depending on the utilized communication methods, distance learning could be classified into three chronological phases: the correspondence phase (teaching by using printed materials via mail), the multi-media phase (e.g. teaching by using recorded audio and audio-video materials via media broadcasting methods such as radio and TV), and the distance interactive phase (e.g. teaching by using live audio-video materials mainly via the Internet) [3]. *"For much of that time* [mainly during the first two phases]*, distance education has been seen as a poor substitute for classroom-based forms of education* [2: 223], as it has frequently been tainted by being unable to provide an appropriate tool for establishing rapid and easy dialogue between educators and learners, and among learners themselves [4]. However, the emergence of the Internet during the 1960s and its development into a massive communication tool during the 1990s [5] have formed a defining moment in the distance education approach; specifically, because of its enhanced interactivity, connectivity and convergence, which have enabled distance education to overcome the lack of interactivity

inherent in its earlier forms [2]. Now, the Internet is portrayed as an education delivery platform enabling students to receive and interact with educational materials and to engage with teachers and peers in ways that previously may have been impossible [6]. Consequently, the Internet gives colleges and universities the chance to improve their existing programs, and also to create new avenues of service. Of course, Internet is not the only method for delivering e-learning; the list includes, as well, several other methods such as TV for interactive materials and CD-ROM, video and cassette devices for recorded materials.

Thus, the term e-learning (electronically delivered learning) has been coined to reflect the situation where an electronic medium (e.g. TV, CD-ROM, Internet) is utilized to provide distance education [6]. Of course, other terms such as computer-based learning, on-line learning, virtual learning, open learning, flexible learning, blended learning, contiguous leaning, distributed learning [4], and web-based learning frequently exist – and even used incorrectly as synonyms – but the term "e-learning" actually dominates [7]. In this context, there is enough evidence to support the view that a fully rounded vision of e-learning does not always

exist and that the term e-learning is still ambiguous [8]. Providing one of the best available definitions, Urdan and Weggen [9: 8] define e-learning as *"the delivery of learning materials, packages or opportunities (i.e. content) through various forms of electronic media, including the Internet, intranets, extranets, satellite broadcast, audio/video tape, interactive TV and CD-ROM"*. Functionally, Rumble [2] believes that e-learning is designed to fulfill three purposes: make learning materials available to students in an electronic form, teach and support students online and provide on-line administrative services. Thus, it could be argued that educational entities which claim providing e-learning are likely presenting all or some of the following services: Online live lectures; online live discussions (i.e. student(s)/lecturer and student/ student(s); online related groups (e.g. e-mail groups, news groups); online administrative services (e.g. enrolment, billing, info, advising); online testing; live lectures via interactive TV broadcast ; ready-made materials (e.g. recorded CDs, audio/video tapes); and downloadable materials via Internet (e.g. recorded lecturer, printable materials).

Here, it should be mentioned that e-learning was not originally directed to serve regular scholars. The initiative came from the belief that *"more and more countries are moving toward a knowledge-based economy. In such economics, the workforce must be capable of learning continuously. E-learning… is both the fruit of these changes and the means of assimilating them"* [10: 7]. Consequently, it could be claimed that e-learning has initially emerged as a promising solution to lifelong learning and on-job workforce training [11]. Thus, it is common to locate numerous literature linking between e-learning and workforce development and training [e.g. 12, 13, 7]; or to recognize few texts identifying e-learning as a training tool [14]. Afterwards, this aim was expanded to include offering opportunities for individuals who are unable to enroll and regularly attend a conventional class-based higher education. Currently, e-learning is widely utilized as either supplementary or alternative pedagogy for conventional class-based education, which makes e-learning more available for regular scholars. Thus, several researchers [e.g. 2, 15, 16] deem that it is not a surprise to recognize that demand for e-learning has increased radically over the last two decades, which has created a new market in the education industry. In this context, many colleges and universities have already introduced e-learning programs depending mainly on the Internet as a delivery medium. Entrants into this market include traditional colleges and universities, purely virtual institutions, and large commercial employers [17]. Accordingly, volumes of literature have been published to discuss the evolving current role of e-learning [e.g. 18, 19, 17, 20], and to raise questions about the probability of facing massive increase in e-learning enrollment, and how this situation will contribute to the future of the educational scheme. Such scenario is not unexpected. In 2002, the National Academies of the USA launched a study on the implications of the information technologies for the future of the nation's research universities [21]. The study concluded that *"the new technologies will not only influence the intellectual activities of the university (learning, teaching and research) but also change how the university is organized, financed, and governed"* [22: 471].

2 Research Aim

Although the well recognized importance of both tourism industry and education and the significance of e-learning, especially for a country like Egypt, where one of the major educational problems is the overloaded classes, to date no inclusive research exists to examine the application of e-learning as a method of delivering tourism higher education for mass scholars in Egypt. So, considering that this research is one of the earliest studies to investigate tourism e-learning in Egypt, this research will initially shed light on the current standing of e-learning in Egypt before proceeding to: Identify the present status of e-learning in the Egyptian tourism higher education; explore the potential advantages and drawbacks of using e-learning in tourism higher education; and consequently, explore the suitability of e-learning for tourism higher education. This will likely allow better understanding of the current trends of e-learning in Egypt, which should facilitate recognizing significant issues such as the potential obstacles of applying e-learning in the Egyptian tourism higher education. it will also help separate hypes and hopes from documented findings which should improve both implementation and future research [7].

3 Research Methodology

Data for this research has been collected by adopting a combination of "content analysis" and "semi-structured interviews". In this context, content analysis has been widely employed as a competent data-collection method [23]. This method includes

gathering data from sources such as journals, official records, official websites and visual documents (e.g. films) [24], where contents *"rather than acting as an introduction to the research…take on a central role as the actual thing that is to be investigated"* [25: 158]. For this research, websites of relevant Egyptian ministries besides all the Egyptian tourism colleges (20 private and 7 public colleges) have been explored, and their contents have been analyzed aiming to investigate the e-learning services provided. However, reviewing the official websites was exceedingly useful for exploring issues such as the online services provided (e.g. administrative services), but it, of course, could not give definite answers concerning other issues such as the implementation of e-learning, as Internet is just one of several methods which could be utilized for delivering e-learning (e.g. CD-ROM, TV), or the advantages and disadvantages of e-learning. So, semi-structured interviews were conducted with tourism academic staff members from the participant colleges. The usage of semi-structured interviews was practical in several ways: First, it facilitated asking analogous questions for gathering comparative data which helped represent responses in numerical format. Second, it was appropriate for altering the sequence of topics, as well as, expanding the scope of discussion to probe for more information when useful.

In this context, a pilot study was initially conducted to filter the research population. Consequently, an initial search for official websites shows that out of the 27 Egyptian tourism colleges, 16 colleges do not have websites. Checking the websites of the remaining 11 colleges revealed that four websites are not providing any e-learning services; rather, they are presenting conventional information including, general info (e.g. college location and availabilities), administrative info (e.g. enrollment conditions and procedures), academic affairs (e.g. departments, studying plans), and students' activities (e.g. students' union). Initial interviews, using a mix of interviewing techniques: telephone, e-mail and face-to-face, were conducted with representatives from these 20 colleges (the 16 colleges, which do not have websites, besides the four colleges that have websites without any indication of e-learning application) just to explore the implementation of e-learning in these colleges. However, none of these 20 colleges considers applying e-learning at the time being. Notably, the seven remaining colleges, which the pilot study reveled to have websites with indications of providing e-learning services, are all public colleges. As a result, two different checklists were designed to facilitate the interviews. The first checklist was designed to navigate 20 semi-structured interviews with staff members from the 20 private colleges which are not currently applying e-learning. This checklist includes two areas: obstacles of applying e-learning and suitability of e-learning for tourism education. The second checklist was designed to guide 14 semi-structured interviews with interviewees from the seven public colleges (table 1) which are currently applying e-learning. This checklist contains four additional areas: the current application of e-learning, the e-learning potential advantages and disadvantages, and the required infrastructure. In the two cases, the interviewees were allowed to develop their own ideas and to pursue any new thoughts they believe to be associated with the researched issues.

College	University	Est.	College	University	Est.
Tourism and Hotels	Helwan	1975	Tourism and Hotels	Minia	1997
Tourism and Hotels	Alexandria	1983	Tourism and Hotels	Menofia	1997
Tourism and Hotels	El-Fayoum	1993	Tourism and Hotels	Mansoura	2006
Tourism and Hotels	Suez Canal	1994			

Table 1: Tourism public colleges in Egypt

4 Standing of e-learning in Egypt

Higher education was initiated in Egypt in 1816 when the earliest higher schools were established. At that time, Egypt was particularly interested in "specialized" higher schools such as the schools of medicine, engineering, languages and administration. Gradually and with assistance of the Egyptian postgraduate students coming back from Europe, those schools were transformed into European modern-style colleges and institutes. A milestone leap occurred in 1908 when the first Egyptian national university was opened (i.e. Cairo University). Afterwards, other universities were sequentially established (e.g. Alexandria 1942, Ain Shams 1950, Assuit 1957), and Egypt was, at that period, regarded as a leading educational model in Africa and the Middle East [26]. At present, Egypt has an extensive higher education system which encompasses 17 public universities, 16 private universities, 51 public non-university institutions and 89 private higher institutions; and about 30% of the Egyptians in the relevant age go to university [27]. On the other hand, during the last two decades,

the need for establishing a robust e-learning system in Egypt has dramatically grown due to the escalating demand for more flexible educational options. An initial step was launching the "Egyptian Distant Learning Open University" (EDLOU) in 1991 mainly to serve workforces who are looking for enhancing their educational standard, and to give a new opportunity for students who have missed, for a reason or another, their chance in conventional academic education [28]. In this context, EDLOU presents the first Egyptian educational entity, which depends entirely on e-learning. Subsequently, several other steps were taken such as establishing the e-Learning Competence Centre to lead and co-ordinate all the e-learning projects in Egypt [29], initiating TV satellite educational channels, launching official websites for universities, colleges, and schools, besides encouraging academic staff members to upload educational materials on the Internet [30].

In May 2008, a milestone was crossed when Egypt, at the World Economic Forum on the Middle East, celebrated launching the Egyptian Education Initiative (EEI) under the umbrella of the Global Education Initiative (GEI) aiming to reform the Egyptian education system through the use of Information and Communication Technology [31]. The EEI was launched to face several challenges including overcrowded classrooms, a low teacher-to-student ratio and an incremental cost per student. The EEI aims, as well, to stimulate learning skills, provide equitable and high-quality education for all learners regardless of their number, location and gender, and transform learning into an interactive experience. Those aims should ultimately support the efforts to foster a knowledge-based society in Egypt [32]. It was then clear to the Egyptian government that, in order to fully expedite the benefits of e-learning, a solid Information Technology (IT) infrastructure has to be developed. Thus, as a result of launching the EEI and inspired by a strong will to create an environment conducive to enhancing e-learning, the Egyptian government announced, in 2008, its roadmap for providing the required e-learning infrastructure. The plan divided e-learning into three tracks: pre-university track, higher education track and lifelong learning track. Regarding the higher education track, the plan includes applying seven key procedures [32; 33]: Providing all the universities with a high-speed Internet network; establishing video conferencing capabilities linking all the universities together; piloting wireless campus in several universities; supplying 52 labs, in Helwan University as a pilot model, (a student-to-machine ratio of 20:1);

establishing e-content developing lab – dedicated for helping staff members to produce e-learning materials –in each university; qualifying universities staff, and administrators to use Information Technology efficiently; and inviting world class specialists and local experts to check the current availabilities to ensure that technical materials are sufficient, efficient and in place. Finally, it could be claimed that the current escalating trend towards e-learning in Egypt is highly stimulated by a list of stakeholders, including: First, potential distance scholars (e.g. international students; employees with tight timetable; disable students; students living in remote areas). Second, some educators who are feeling the pressure of providing quality education to the current growing number of students. Third, universities which perceive e-learning as an opportunity to widen access to their courses, whilst improving the quality of education, as well as being a future source of income [34]. Fourth, the organizations providing technical support. Fifth, the Egyptian government, which looks to e-learning as a major component to overcome several challenges [32].

On the other hand, tourism education started in Egypt in 1962 when two institutes and a hotel training centre were established. In 1968, these two institutes were converted into higher institutes. In 1975, those two higher institutes were merged in one entity, the "Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, Helwan University", which remained as an inimitable example until 1983 when several public and private tourism higher institutes were subsequently established [35]. Now, there are 27 tourism higher education entities in Egypt (seven public colleges, 16 four-year institutes and four two-year institutes) [36]. As a result of launching the EEI in 2008, tourism colleges are presently encouraged to apply e-learning, which stimulates discussions and raises questions on the readiness for, as well as, the potential advantages, disadvantages and suitability of applying e-learning as either an alternative or supplementary approach in tourism higher education. In this context, reviewing the websites of the participant colleges and the academics' interviews show that tourism e-learning is still in its introductory phase in Egypt. At the time being, only seven out of 27 tourism colleges are providing some e-learning services. In some colleges (e.g. Al Monofia), e-learning services are preliminary as it includes basic services such as e-mail groups and news groups. In its most sophisticated form, it comprises providing downloadable materials (e.g. Helwan) and in few cases broadcasting recorded lectures via the Internet (e.g. Al Mansoura).

Generally, it could be recorded that the Egyptian tourism colleges are providing some e-learning services including: Online related groups (e.g. e-mail groups); online administrative services (e.g. timetables; results); downloadable materials via Internet (e.g. lectures).

Accordingly, it could be claimed that, at this stage, the Egyptian tourism colleges do not fully exploit the Internet capabilities for e-learning; in stead, they just imply a simple transfer of conventional education materials on the Internet; or they apply what Sigala and Christou's [37] called *"learning webification"*. However, the domination of this pedagogic form in the Egyptian tourism higher education is not a unique case. *"This is the earliest and most extensive category of online instruction"* [6: 30]. As well, taking into consideration the novelty of the Egyptian e-learning experiment, starting with such simple applications could be acceptable. It is also remarkable that while recorded materials (e.g. audio/video materials) were widely used in the EDLOU at the 1990s, they do not exist at all on the list of the education materials utilized in the Egyptian tourism colleges now. One the other hand, the disappearance of all the private colleges from the list of e-learning providers simultaneously with the existence of all the public colleges is unmistakable. This could be justified by the fact that large investment is usually appealed for both establishing the requested IT infrastructure and qualifying the staff members for fulfilling their new duties efficiently [11]. Thus, it could be claimed that the significant financial, technical and logistical support provided by the Egyptian government for the public colleges, has played a key role in the existence of e-learning in the public tourism colleges earlier than in the private colleges.

5 Potential Advantages of E-learning

Analyzing the interviewees' opinions, concerning the potential advantages of applying e-learning in tourism higher education in comparison with conventional classroom learning, revealed the following thoughts:

1. Faced with the demand engendered by the population growth, e-learning comes to be seen as a major way of meeting the incremental demand for education. In this context, 93% of the interviewees believe that applying e-learning will mostly ease off the overloaded classes in the Egyptian colleges. Welsh *et al* [7] record that educational entities use e-learning when they are pushed to deliver education to number of students which exceed their classroom capacity. This situation fits typically with the Egyptian educational entities which are surely suffering from congested classrooms. In its inclusive report entitled *"higher education enhancement project 2002"*, the World Bank expected that the number of students enrolling in the Egyptian higher education entities would boost by approximately 6% annually through the period 2000–2010 [38]. However, reality exceeded expectations as the students' number accelerated from 659,000 in 1999 to 2.5 million in 2007 with an annual increase rate of 20%. This situation has put enormous pressure on the already-shaky education infrastructure. Consequently, The Economist [39] describes the current standard of education at the Egyptian public universities as *"abysmal"*, where facilities and staff are not in place to cater to the escalating number of students.

2. Although e-learning initiatives require considerable investment in both IT infrastructure and staff, comparing to conventional education, e-learning, on whole, delivers education for a relatively lower cost [11]. According to the World Bank, Egypt is one of the cheapest countries, when it comes to the cost of Internet, as it costs about 5 $ monthly per user [40]. This may justify why the gap in the Internet usage between the lower and the higher income segments in Egypt does not exceed 33%. Consequently, students' financial background will definitely not be a barrier when applying e-learning in Egypt. One the other hand, it has to be mentioned that the initial investment required to develop highly interactive e-learning courses can be high, so cost savings are certainly not automatic. However, applying e-learning will probably reduce the total expenses of higher education in Egypt [33]. Only 14% of the interviewees mentioned "reducing expenses" as one of the potential advantages of applying e-learning broadly in Egypt.

3. Despite one of the main advantages of e-learning is that it facilitates providing education for students in remote areas, who can not physically attend conventional classroom education [11], this advantage seems to be insignificant from the interviewees' point of view. Only 29% of the interviewees think that applying e-learning will seriously help deliver education for the local students accommodating in remote locations (e.g. Western Desert; Sinai and Red Sea). Even lower percentage (21%) assumes that e-learning may help private institutes which currently enroll few international students. On the other hand, 57% of the interviewees believe that this advantage is actually not of a valid importance for Egypt at the time being. First, Egypt has 27 tourism education colleges

[36], which are geographically well-distributed, all over Egypt. Second, Egyptian public colleges are legally not permitted to register international students. Finally, only 7% of the interviewees mentioned the importance of e-learning for disable students.

4.   Living in an extremely dynamic world, it is accepted now that students have to deal with a wide body of knowledge and to acquire the ability to go into a lifelong learning process. This situation is particularly valid in the case of tourism education, where one of the major features of tourism is its continuous changeability and dynamicity [41]. Given such nature, e-learning seems capable of managing the growth in the amount of information that tourism students need to learn. Investigating the curriculums of the Egyptian tourism colleges reveals that students are averagely studying 38 to 41 courses over a period of four full academic years; contact hours are averagely 60 hours per course [42]. It is believed that this situation often leads to information overload during education, resulting in ineffective education process when students cannot retain all of the information presented to them. Thus, 42% of the interviewees state that e-learning will facilitate delivering information over a longer period of time, which is likely to improve information retention. Yet, 57% of the interviews record that e-learning will definitely enhance the students' ability regarding acquiring knowledge by themselves.

5.   E-learning offers a learner-centered, self-paced learning environment [11]. Finally, 86% of the interviewees claim that most notably e-learning guarantees flexibility in respect of time of learning. This makes it peculiarly attractive for part-time students.

6 Potential disadvantages of e-learning

The application of such new educational approach will undoubtedly create new opportunities but will, as well, face new obstacles, which might be beyond the availabilities of the Egyptian conventional universities. Thus, understanding the potential obstacles and drawbacks is critically important. Interviewing the Egyptian academic staff reveals their concerns regarding the following issues:

1.   An old but still existing notion states that learning is a socio-cognitive activity, within which the negotiation of shared meaning through social interaction will result in cognitive dissonance, allowing individual learners to restructure their own concepts [43]. In this context, some interviewees express their concern that e-learning may impel academics to focus on delivering information, forgetting that education involves more than information provision. This is particularly vital for tourism education as tourism is basically a social activity. An indispensable part of tourism education in Egypt relates to teaching students the essence of sophisticated social behavior and the rules of face-to-face conversation with tourists. Accordingly, 71% of the interviewees state their apprehension regarding the lack of interaction inherent in e-learning. From their point of view, such deficiency makes e-learning less attractive and potentially less useful. Consequently, e-learning may fail to provide an environment within which social and cultural learning can take place, and within which discussion and argument could flourish. This will potentially lead to a major shortage in the students' social abilities.

2.   A fundamental aim of the Egyptian tourism education is to empower students with the skills required to function effectively in their future. Investigating the curriculums of the Egyptian tourism colleges reveals that students are averagely studying 38 to 41 courses. An average of 4 to 10 of these courses contain practical activities (e.g. food service, cooking) [42]. 43% of the interviewees believe that those particular courses will be more negatively affected by the implementation of e-learning. Some skills (e.g. guidance, food services, cooking) can hardly be taught without the instructor's direct contact and observation.

3.   There are also logistical concerns. E-learning requires different sort of skills and knowledge and much more preparation time than in-classroom teaching [11]. Years ago, lecturers' deficiency in technology-related skills was forming a major factor that deterred applying e-learning efficiently [see 44; 45]. Today, those required abilities do not actually agonize 79% of the interviews, who assume that currently, academics have sufficient skills to prepare their own materials. Supporting the same idea, Lominé [46] advocates that the thought that e-learning requires a high level of IT literacy is a myth. As well, there are a growing number of software applications for online education (e.g. WebCT, Blackboard and TopClass), which are designed to fulfill the needs of a segment which is not composed of IT specialists, but of academics with understandably limited IT abilities. However, there are still 21%, who believe that staff members are not qualified enough to prepare e-learning materials and that more training programs are required. On the other hand, there is the preparation time problem, which annoys 64% of the interviewees.

4.   As e-learning is based on a pedagogical model that emphasizes the students' role as responsible for their own learning, several researchers [e.g. 47: 6] stress that the students' maturity and self-discipline are vital conditions for the achievement of a successful e-learning process. 21% of the interviewees are worry of such requirements. Kumar *et al* [48] deem that lack of self-discipline is the main reason underpinning the higher dropout rates in e-learning programs compared to conventional programs.

5.   Since multimedia materials are heavily used in e-learning systems, a high-bandwidth network is a basic requirement for efficient content access [11]. 86% of the interviewees mentioned multimedia materials as an essential tool, they will probably use if they provide their courses electrically. However, only 14% of the interviewees presume that the need for a "high-bandwidth network" could seriously hinder the application of e-learning. Such small percentage might be due to the incremental growth of the Internet bandwidth in Egypt over the last ten years [40].

7 E-learning suitability for tourism

As early mentioned, 43% of the interviewed staff members believe that tourism courses with practical sides could be negatively affected by the implementation of e-learning as some skills can hardly be taught without the instructor's direct contact and observation. On the contrary, 36% of the interviewees deem that e-learning might be much more useful for practical courses in certain cases.

"For example, it is difficult for me to accompany all my students to visit a travel agency, an airline company, the airport or to check the internal cabin of an airplane. Using e-learning I can provide them with videos or CDs of these places with my comments and they can watch it again and again". (Interviewee no. 2 Helwan University)

"Students are now learning even from the cooking TV programs. I think there is no point in fighting against or ignoring the revolution of communication and technology – and I mean the Internet and TV basically – and how they are affecting our life now. Our main concern should be how to make the best use of them in providing education…we exceeded the point of asking are they suitable for tourism education or not; instead, we should ask how could we fit with this new reality". (Interviewee no. 2 Mansoura University)

Then, 21% of the interviewees assume that applying e-learning in tourism education, has no difference than applying e-learning in any other educational discipline. Referring to this point in particular, Lominé [46: 44] advocates that e-learning can take many forms and that *"there is no reason whatsoever why subjects taught within Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism could not and should not jump on the online bandwagon".* On the other hand, another main concern relates to what could be entitled *"the potential impacts of e-learning on the students' social communication abilities".* Understanding the essence of establishing robust and healthy social communication and networking channels with both tourists and communities is imperative for tourism students as they need to know how to deal with people. According to 92% of the interviewees, students learn big part of these skills though their educational life by dealing personally with their peers and lecturers and by experiencing the university daily life. 71% of interviewees express their concerns about the lack of interaction inherent in e-learning, even if interactive methods such as the Internet are used.

"Even if we use interactive methods such as the Internet, there will still be a missing part…I would rather call it the physical coexistence in one place… Graduates will deal with tourists is a real life not in a virtual life - at least, for the time being". (Interviewee no. 1 Helwan University)

However, this is not unexpected as the correlation between "student-teacher and student-student interactions" and "learning outcomes" has always been a subject of discussion that has been well documented in both traditional and virtual classrooms [e.g. 49; 50]. It has also been approved that teachers' verbal (i.e. giving praise, soliciting viewpoints, humor, self disclosure) and non-verbal behaviors (i.e. physical proximity, touch, eye contact, facial expressions, gestures) can lessen the psychological distance, leading to greater learning [e.g. 51; 52; 53]. These verbal and non-verbal interactions are more vital in case of tourism education, not only for maximizing the students' understanding, but also for preparing them for working and involving in a highly socialized activity like tourism. Anyway, several researchers [e.g. 54] believe that the same absence of social interaction exists, as well, in conventional classroom education and that campus-based universities are often far from perfect given the prevalence of overcrowded lectures and the lack of opportunities in large institutions for students to know and hence to discuss their ideas with either their teachers or even their peers; a claim which absolutely match the current situation in the Egyptian overcrowded universities.

8 Research findings

1. E-learning has been launched in Egypt stimulated by a governmental need for establishing an elastic higher education system to face several challenges among which are overloaded classrooms and a low teacher-to-student ratio. In this context, the Egyptian government has conducted a recognized effort for establishing the required IT infrastructure which is currently receiving regressive criticism. On the contrary, efforts of supplying academic staff members with competent knowledge regarding e-learning seem unsatisfactory as several indications could be evidenced. For example, a status of misunderstanding concerning essential facts of e-learning could be noted, where terms such as e-learning, open learning, distance learning and computer-based learning are alternatively utilized as synonyms without proper understanding. Second, some lecturers still perceive e-learning as just transforming lecture materials into downloadable files through the Internet. Third, some of the lecturers are not aware enough of the full capabilities of their universities, most obviously the existence of e-content production labs. Thus, a significant effort is required to provide academics with a clear vision of the e-learning features and requirements, before embarking into the realm of e-learning, to avoid controversial arguments and misunderstandings.

2. Functionally, it could be claimed that e-learning is still in its preliminary stages in Egypt, where most of the Egyptian colleges which assume applying e-learning techniques are actually using *"blended learning techniques"* [55: 59]; or in plainer words, a combination of e-learning and classroom-based conventional learning. As well, most of the utilized e-learning materials are asynchronous in nature. *"Asynchronous e-learning materials"* are materials that are pre-recorded or available to students at any time, potentially from any location (e.g. Power Point slides published on websites, CDs, and videos tapes). Less common is *"synchronous e-learning materials"* or materials which are live and which require all learners to be in front of their computers at the same time (e.g. online lectures or live TV broadcasting) [56]. However, these later materials have not been provided by the Egyptian colleges yet. This situation is not unexpected, putting into consideration the relative newness of e-learning in Egypt. Haven and Botterill [57: 77] entitle this preliminary pattern of e-learning *as "the content and support model* [where] *a relatively static body of content provides the core of the course and is supplemented by tutorial support with a low level of interaction"*.

3. Similar to the situation in the Egyptian e-learning generally, e-learning in tourism is still in its beginning concerning both the number of colleges involved and the services provided. Only seven out of 27 tourism colleges are currently providing some e-learning services, which varies between primitive services (e.g. e-mail groups and news groups) to slightly sophisticated services (e.g. downloadable text-format materials). It is also notable that all the colleges, which are involved in e-learning, are public colleges (seven colleges). This could be justified by the significant financial, technical and logistical contribution which the public colleges are receiving from the Egyptian government. At the same time, all the private colleges are not participating in e-learning. These colleges seem to be reluctant concerning the application of e-learning may be due to the huge investment required, which goes beyond their current availabilities.

4. Applying e-learning in tourism higher education in Egypt will help achieve several advantages for the students, lecturers as well as the education process itself. Egyptian academics believe that most importantly, e-learning will help ease off the problem of the overloaded classes, which should enhance the quality of education provided. Second, different segments (e.g. part time students) will benefit from the time flexibility. This should encourage the Egyptian colleges to create more programs for such segments, which are currently not served. Third, current regular students will directly benefit from three compact advantages: enhancing their self-learning abilities; having more time for information retention; as well as, serving students in remote areas. Fourth, "international students" is another segment which will benefit from applying e-learning in tourism education in Egypt, especially putting into consideration the position of Egypt as a leading country in both tourism and education in Africa and the Middle East. This should open new markets for both public and private colleges. Fifth, "reducing costs" seems to be an unconsidered advantage maybe due to the huge expenses, which are currently paid for establishing the required IT infrastructure. However, universities will start feeling the financial benefit of e-learning after completing their infrastructure. Sorrowfully, "serving disable students" was mentioned by only 7% of the interviewees.

5. Following the worldwide trend, "lack of interactivity" represents the main concern of the Egyptian academics when dealing with e-learning. Egyptian academics believe that tourism students in

particular need to practice social interaction for gaining the skills required for dealing with tourists. Several other potential problems exist as well including: logistic and technological requirements; need for time; and fear of students' lack of self-discipline. However, these potential problems do not really annoy the majority of the Egyptian academics.

9 Conclusion

Despite the relative newness of the Egyptian e-learning experiment, the Egyptian government has been succeeded in establishing the required infrastructure for e-leaning. However, deficiencies still exist especially regarding qualifying the Egyptian academics to participate efficiently in the e-learning process. Consequently, lot of misunderstanding and misapplication could be noted amongst academics who generally believe that the advantages of tourism e-learning out weight its disadvantages, but they are still unable to grip its reality and to find their way into the best implementation of e-learning. Regarding application, tourism e-learning is limitedly applied in Egypt at the time being, as only seven public colleges are currently providing some e-leaning services, which are mostly of a simple nature. Tourism private colleges are currently languid concerning the application of e-learning despite the potentiality of success especially with regard to serving international students. However, it could be concluded that, despite the current recessive problems, applying e-learning in the Egyptian tourism higher education seems promising. Finally, it is fully understood that conducting an inclusive research regarding the suitability and applicability of e-learning would require investigating how students perceive the advantages and disadvantages of e-learning to finally draw an interesting parallel between students' experiences and those of their tutors.

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