

## **ICT policy as the power engine for ICT implementation in the process of teaching and learning is absent in Saudi education system**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The field of education has seen numerous changes in policy as well as many Information and Communication Technology (ICT) operational initiatives as to develop the teaching and learning process. However, in Saudi Arabia, the ICT use by teachers for teaching and learning is still low, despite many ICT initiatives that the Ministry of Education (MOE) has introduced to improve education quality. Therefore, this research aims to understand the current state of ICT in education in Saudi Arabia. The methodology adopted is an interpretivist qualitative approach using a triangulation method to analyse different methods and sources. The findings were analysed based on thematic analysis. The findings revealed the current situation of ICT is unsatisfactory and that the absence of ICT policy is the main reason.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The educational process is complex and requires concrete consideration and intervention from stakeholders. Therefore, the complexity of ICT in education requires well-planned strategies derived from a strong ICT policy in order to develop the implementation of ICT in education. The lack of clarity in ICT policy is likely to affect teachers' acceptance to changes involving ICT integration that are intended to improve the educational process. Vallance et al. (2009) agreed that the absence of a clear ICT policy would result in negative and failed implementation of ICT in the classroom. Also, it will not help teachers in the facilitation of ICT in their classrooms (Wozney et al., 2006)

According to Kozma (2008), in order to make change in different endeavours to develop the goals of education, strategic ICT policy needs to include its rationale, goals and vision in terms of how ICT could contribute to change for the schools and their stakeholders, parents, and the whole community. One may argue that dealing with ICT is practical and policy might not always be important. However, even in assuming all teachers and students are familiar with using ICT, there is no guarantee they will do so in the process of teaching and learning. Therefore, according to Kozma

(2008), while ICT can occur in schools in the absence of educational ICT policy, without being guided by an effective policy its sustainability in the process of teaching and learning is doubtful.

## **LITERATURE**

One significant factor affecting teachers in relation to their use of ICT in education is educational and ICT policies. For example, an extensive analysis conducted by Kozma (2008) demonstrates how supportive ICT policy has positively affected ICT use by teachers in a number of countries.

One of the issues related to ICT policies in education is the lack of clarity when making statements. One common example of this is ICT policy including its aims and objectives but lacking the provision of details assisting and guiding the targeted people in how to use ICT. This is confirmed by (Blamire and Balanskat, 2005), who criticise ICT policy in UK education, as the policy regards computers as a tool which can be used for learning, however, the policy misses how this tool can be used. Another study before this by (Watson, 2001), related the failure of ICT in education compared to the success of ICT use in other sections of business around the world to particular issues; the main issue was related to the clarity of ICT policy made by governments, with the UK's ICT policy used as an example of this.

Since ICT Initiatives are a significant approach towards the development of ICT integration in the educational process, departments of education must pay attention to their policies development to avoid any problems may hinder the effective ICT integration in classrooms. Examples of that include the ICT national framework of the education department in Australia, which aims to change the teaching and learning process effectively and prepare learners to be familiar with an ICT world environment in their future (Alhawiti, 2013). In particular, the framework takes into account a number of goals such as encouraging independent learning in and outside schools, enhancing students' achievement, keeping ICT capabilities developed and monitored, and ensuring technical and maintenance support for the process of learning and teaching.

## METHOD

The study used a Qualitative methodology that is within the Interpretivist paradigm, and the data collection was conducted through triangulation approach. The methods used were: 25 classroom observations; interviews with 25 teachers and five head teachers; 25 student focus groups in five secondary schools; and interviews with five policy makers. Thematic analysis approach was followed for the data analysis process.

## FINDINGS

All teachers and head teachers confirmed that the absence of ICT policies in Saudi education in schools is the top factor affecting teachers' use of ICT in their teaching. All of them confirmed that they were not aware of any ICT policies. They confirmed that there were no clear policies on which they could depend and they doubted if there were any real policies particularly designed for ICT. T23 said that, *"No, I am not aware of their policies and I do not know if they have [an] ICT policy but all I know from media, friends and colleagues [is] that they need an education environment with ICT use for both learning and teaching"*. T16 added, *"I heard that the MOE will provide schools with new ICTs to enrich the educational process and keep up with the developed countries"*.

However, regarding the official awareness from the MOE, the interviewees explained that all they knew was that the Ministry of Education sent out certain announcements or circulars to the local education authority in their city, who then sent them to all school managers, who then circulated them among all teachers for them to sign. H2 said, *"...what I do with such announcements is to keep a copy of them and then circulate them [to] all my teachers, requiring their signature to ensure they are aware of the nature of these letters"*. The majority of teachers stated that they did not find these letters useful with regard to their effect on their use of ICT. Thus, they viewed these announcements as they did any other announcements received by the school from the local authority. They explained that the announcements related to teachers' use of the new ICTs in their classrooms, but did not contain any information or guidelines on how these ICTs should be used. Participants suggested that these announcements relating to ICT integration could be acceptable if they resulted from clear policies and strategies. They confirmed that the MOE has made initiatives with regard to ICT in education by drawing up plans and providing them with programmes, but that

the MOE has failed to draw up a clear policy and strategy before announcing its plans. All participants also asserted that it is not surprising that the implementation of ICT integration in the teaching and learning process has failed in many programmes introduced in the past, because no detailed implementation guidelines have been drawn from the strategies. All of them gave the King Abdullah project for educational development in 2007 as a project that was widely funded but lacked many aspects, including the absence of a strategy which included the implementation phase. H1 stated, *“When the project was announced, I anticipated I would receive more details of the strategy of the project so the programme [could be] implemented properly, but there was nothing [about] any strategies. That is the main reason [for] its failure despite the resources that were available at that time”*.

## **DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION**

The most important issue revealed in the interviews with policy makers is that a specific policy with the national strategy to integrate ICT in education does not exist in Saudi Arabia. Instead, all ICT related initiatives are derived from the national development plans discussed in the contextual chapter of this thesis. The lack of ICT planning clarity is also confirmed by a number of other Saudi studies that also found this a major hindering factor for ICT integration in education (Oyaid, 2009 and Alsulaimani, 2012). So, although there have been generous government funds made available for ICT implementation in Saudi schools, the perception of policy makers is that the use of ICT is at a very disappointing level. Although these policy makers blame teachers for not using ICT in their teaching, they also admit that clear national ICT policies and ambitions would be important to encourage teachers to use these resources. The problem here is that teachers are asked to use ICT in their teaching without any prior direction on how to do it, including guidance on how ICT could be integrated in the deployment of the national curriculum (for example, the installation of IWB without any indication on how to use it.).

This study argues that the access to ICT will not be enough to make the changes needed for their full integration into the teaching and learning process. The most important aspect here is not emphasis on whether ICT is available in classrooms but how and why that ICT can enhance teaching and learning. This study has found this to be wholly inadequate. Therefore, ICT policy that addresses this issue and offers guidelines to schools and teachers is highly necessary. This is

supported by Kozma (2008), who emphasises the importance of ICT policy to include its rationale, goals and vision in terms of how ICT not only guides school stakeholders on how ICT can improve the educational process but also for the whole community. This is also in line with many studies (Webb and Vulliamy, 2006; Vallance et al., 2009; and Wozney et al., 2006) that emphasize the importance of national policy strategies and implementation guidelines for the success of these initiatives. The question of how ICT can improve the process of teaching and learning is crucial for ICT to be integrated successfully. In this study, the majority of teachers are digital users but could not make use of ICT in their classrooms, even if teachers were familiar with ICT, again highlighting the necessity for dedicated ICT policy that also offers guidance of how ICT can improve teaching and learning. The majority of interviewees claimed that most of the plans relating to educational development have been adopted from developed countries or from third-party companies without carrying out any pre-plan studies or visits to observe the current practices in schools. These are essential if a successful ICT integration plan specific to Saudi Arabia is to be developed. Such a policy should also explicitly translate this into training programmes before any related initiatives are implemented in classrooms. This is to say that in the first instance teachers need to undertake adequate and appropriate training and then this should be followed by the provision of appropriate ICT resources and the actual implementation of ICT to make the necessary difference in the teaching and learning process.

It should also include steps to ensure that all students and all teachers in all schools can equally access ICT. It must also be immune from changing political priorities to ensure the sustainability of the initiatives developed from it. Specific ICT policy, then, is one key factor towards the successful integration of ICT for the purpose of teaching and learning. Not only for teachers in schools where ICT is actually implemented but also for other stakeholders who are all required to work consistently at all levels.

This study argues that in order to understand the importance of ICT in education, it is important to understand it in the context of the broad purposes of education. These purposes are directly linked to education policies including ICT. However, the findings confirmed that Saudi education system has only a basic educational policy and no specific ICT policy. The Saudi educational policy has not been changed since its first foundation in 1970 (Qahtani (2010) and Alessa (2009)). The contextual chapter shows that although the Saudi educational policy and the national plans recognise the

educational purposes but they fail to address adequately the quality of education. Even though there is a body of evidence showing the importance of ICT improving the teaching and learning process, the current situation is not showing evidence of it yet in Saudi schools.

The findings confirm previous evidence from the literature in relation to the low level of ICT integration for the process of teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia from a comparative perspective (Ageel, 2011). Some of these differences clearly relate to the policy level. In countries like Finland, the implementation of ICT policies followed a sequential path of piloting, evaluation, conscientization and scaling up (Ubiquitous Information Society, 2010). In other cases, like in Australia, the government provided clear guidance to schools and teachers on how to use the new ICT provision. The deployment of resources was monitored and evaluated against a framework that included ten domains of quality use of ICT (Learning in an online world, 2008).

The findings of this study revealed not only there is not an existing ICT policy in Saudi education but also plans and initiatives of ICT are not clear and lack guidance and involvement of stakeholders because of the lack of specified ICT strategies which should be based on ICT policy. The Ministry of Education, should carefully learn from such examples when introducing a detailed ICT policy including, its visions, aims guidance of its implementation mechanisms including the responsibility of each actor; and involve teachers and other stakeholders in the drawing up of and planning of this policy, and any related plans and projects. It should be clear here that learning does not mean a copy/paste exercise, as the findings in this study showed that the borrowed development plans in education were not successful. They need to make a concerted and clear Saudi specific plan before drawing any policy. For example, theory of change, discussed in chapter two, is a very useful approach to think carefully what are the necessary conditions in terms of resources and support for an ICT initiative to achieve its expected aims. If they decide to, they must involve different stakeholders, including teachers. Theory of change does not necessarily work for just policies, but it can be applied to many other areas, such as in-work training in other sectors, where a particular change is desired through particular means.

The findings of this study revealed a lack of MOE support, including access to ICT and ICT provision, teachers' ICT skills and teachers training. However, without clear ICT policy, such issues are difficult to address. This is in line with the ICC Commission on the Digital Economy (2017) that

recommends a number of considerations to be taken into account in ICT policies. One of the most important recommendations is that ICT skills are required for teachers to use ICT in an effective way.

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