

**Quality of Distance e-Learning at Saudi Universities:
Students' Perceptions**

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Abstract

One key tool for promoting social justice in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (SA) is to ensure the growth and improvement of Distance e-Learning (DeL). This research study investigates DeL from the perspective of one key group of stakeholders, the students who are currently enrolled in DeL. Their views are presented on the importance and application of a set of standards regarding quality, while exploration of the study setting and context highlights the specificity of the education system in SA. A conception of quality in DeL is then explicated through a reading of the history of Distance Education (DE), the usage of quality in education today and the most significant current models of pedagogy and culture. This research hence provides the basis for a pragmatic methodology to analyse the perceptions of students regarding selected standards of quality.

A total of 591 students were surveyed in a mixed methods approach comprised of a questionnaire and a focus group. The data gathered from surveying perceptions of students is also used to construct a picture of the strengths and weaknesses of DeL in SA, as well as the barriers and enhancements to learning resulting from its introduction. Here, culture is found to be a major influence on the perceptions of the students, while DeL exists within a wider, behaviourist educational tradition. If they are to be effective, the introduction of Western DeL practices should therefore serve to negotiate the gap between the need for globalised skills and the local culture and traditions.

This thesis identifies manifold issues arising from the student's experiences that contribute to the obstruction of their expectations about quality; notably, a lack of staff training, large class sizes and a failure to employ technology (including Web2.0) adequately. Many of the problems raised in this study reflect the rapid pace and unplanned nature of DeL's introduction in SA. The recommendations subsequently made about strategic and institutional improvement suggest that quality is created through both progressive and planned change.

Dedication

To my parents, my family, and my brothers and sisters.

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Abbreviations

DE: Distance Education

DeL: Distance e-Learning

DoHE: Department of Higher Education

HE: Higher Education

ICT: Information and Communication Technology

IMU: Imam University

IT: Information Technology

KAU: King Abdulaziz University

NCeLDL: National Center for e-Learning and Distance Learning

OEP: Open Educational Practice

OERs: Open Education Resources

QA: Quality Assurance

QC: Quality Control

QE: Quality Enhancement

SA: Saudi Arabia

SPSS: Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

VLE: Virtual Learning Environment

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Statement of the Problem

The globe is currently undergoing two parallel if connected revolutions that are shaping the world of learning simultaneously. The first one is the Information Revolution and the unlimited amount of information that has become available from different technological sources. The second is the Communications Revolution and the ability to disseminate information on a local and global level through electronic means. Such innovations accelerate both the volume of knowledge transfer and the quality of information and technology. They have hence enabled the emergence of modern and influential trends in education systems across the world. One of the most important of these is e-learning.

The number of students in higher education (HE) is increasing year-on-year and exceeding the capacity of conventional institutions of education. Thus, large numbers of learners are not able to find a place in traditional universities. Moreover, many adults desire to continue their education but, owing to financial, social and geographical circumstances, they cannot attend regular classes at university. The challenge in Saudi Arabia (SA) is therefore twofold: to improve quality, and also to deal with increasing numbers of students (Alshathri, 2016).

In the light of these challenges, while in acknowledgement of the continuous growth of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), HE institutions in many parts of the world have sought to adapt these technological developments for the benefit of learners. Hence, diverse regional and global initiatives have been initiated to determine how HE could benefit from e-learning. The task has been to understand the feasibility of certain aspects of Information Technology (IT) that will aid the adoption and enhancement of several educational philosophies linked to online learning styles; open and distance learning is one.

As a relatively new approach to learning, it is true that distance education (DE) has a long history and has been developed and adapted through different generations of students and teachers. It had its origins in learning by correspondence, before starting to make use of the technologies of television and digital multimedia. After the emergence of the Internet in the late of nineties, it has been closely associated with e-learning, producing what is known as distance e-learning (DeL). Some of the most intractable problems in global education are those concerning the physical, economic and temporal limits of knowledge. The most powerful technological tool that has emerged to mitigate these issues is DeL, which has allowed the inclusion of groups previously excluded from HE. DeL offers policymakers a

solution that will allow previously impossible levels of access to information and education, overcoming hurdles that have been most apparent in the developing world.

Being that DeL offers so many benefits and appears relatively simple to implement, there has been a race to implement such programmes across many countries, particularly in the developing world. Up until 2014, the total investment in online learning was estimated to be \$107 billion (McCue, 2014). With such huge sums being spent, there is naturally a drive from policymakers to expect significant returns on their investment. However, there is a tension between this desire for quality and the rush to not be 'left behind' in the increasingly globalised race for economic success. Even in Europe, only one third of universities offering DeL have a quality strategy (Gabel et al., 2014).

Almusawi (2014) pointed in his study to evaluate the experiences of e-learning in the Arab world to the need for standards for quality control in this type of learning, along with the development of legal and administrative materials to positively affect the attitudes of officials and decision-making processes. From his point of view, there is a need for legislation to be issued by the Arabic ministries of Higher Education and Scientific Research (including SA), to consolidate general and special adoption of foundations for academic institutions interested in the application of DeL system.

Al Saleh (2009) demonstrates that the growth of DeL can be seen in several international developments in educational provision. These include projects in schools and universities, investment in e-courses and the establishment of virtual universities. In line with this shift towards new learning technologies, enrolments in DE continue to grow faster than in traditional HE institutions (Allen and Seaman, 2014). Bates (2005) claimed that, since the advent of online education, the demand for DeL programmes in United States, Canada and some countries in Western Europe has undergone a steady increase at a rate of 10% annually, compared to 2-5% for traditional education programmes. The latest statistics provided by the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) in the US have shown that enrollments in DeL programmes grew by 6.52% from autumn 2011 to autumn 2012, yet the number of students in traditional universities registered a decline of 2.64% in the same period (SHEEO, 2014). Such a trend can be seen in SA, where admissions to the Imam University's (IMU) DeL programmes increased twelvefold between 2009 and 2015 (IMU, 2015).

However, another consequence has been the fresh new challenges emerging with rising competition between HE institutions in providing this type of education. Institutions have had to upgrade the quality of education, adhere to new sets of standards and apply the concepts of

quality while fulfilling the requirements of accreditation. To meet these challenges and cope with increasing pressure to provide quality e-Learning services, Quality Assurance and Academic Accreditation has become a visible trend in many countries around the world, especially in developed nations under the precedent of applying a new type of education to established organisations and associations (Jung et al., 2011; Alharbi; 2012; Latchem; 2014). Indeed, the focus of the eleventh article on the importance of qualitative evaluation in HE, central to the UNESCO Conference on HE, is upon the need to establish independent national bodies, the development of international standards and agreed levels of quality assurance (UNESCO, 2002).

The opportunity for anyone to complete HE at any age is viewed in SA as a basic right of every citizen. The Department of Higher Education (DoHE) has therefore sought to establish different paths towards HE that will raise enrolment numbers, working under the ‘principle of equal educational opportunities and justice’, as stipulated in the policy document *Education in SA* (Ministry of Education, 1970). In fact, Saudi Arabia’s ‘Eighth Development Plan’ (2005-2009) emphasises the requirement that, to provide education in an appropriate way, the HE system should adopt, expand and diversify programmes; such as distance and part time education. These systems are more open and flexible for the individual to learn as they consider the circumstances of the learner (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2004). Hence, in 2007 the government of SA gave permission for universities to adopt DeL to affirm their commitment this vision and having provided the required financial support to enhance the programmes geared towards achieving such innovations. Since this date, many factors have driven several universities across SA to apply DeL, foremost of which are the absence of costly lectures, the inability otherwise to handle rising student numbers or even the reality that some institutions may apply to be DeL centres purely because of the funding available (even though they many little or no intention to provide the service that other universities do). The recent *Future Plan for Univeristy Education* (DoHE, 2014) has reaffirmed this commitment to increasing educational capacity.

As an administrator for this type of learning through the National Center for e-Learning and Distance Learning (NCeLDL), DoHE has played an important role in developing this kind of education through seizing upon the possibilities provided by technical universities; most notably, the DoHE has been committed to holding both workshops and international conferences. However, rather than being concerned with pedagogy, much of the work of NCeLDL relates to the implementation of the latest technology (Al-Khalifa, 2010).

Another measure taken by the DoHE in the continued pursuit of realising DeL in SA was the publication 'Regulation of Distance Education in Higher Education Institutions in Saudi Arabia' paper in 2009. Nonetheless, the regulations contained therein proved technical in nature, concentrating on the administrative framework (rules and conditions) required to support DeL in an institution. In other words, they have not provided guidelines phrased in terms of quality or pedagogy, and have thus proven limited in their effectiveness (Al-Attas, 2012). However, an alternative perspective on the importance ascribed to DeL by officials in SA would consider the fact that not one online learning qualifications gained outside the country has yet to be recognised, regardless of the institution's international prominence.

However, despite the efforts mentioned above, Alarini (2013), Zeitoun (2008) and Al-Khalifa (2010) amongst others (a review of the literature on DeL in SA can be found in Section 2.5) found that the implementation of DeL programmes in SA has faced certain difficulties and challenges which have prevented the learners from fully benefiting from their studies. These authors have identified two main reasons for these problems. Firstly, DeL is still in its early stages of application to education in SA. Secondly, unclear quality standards have been applied to DeL programmes.

The many challenges and obstacles experienced in DeL implementation have given rise to uncertainties amongst some of the members of the educational community, as well as some official bodies. These doubts are confirmed by Alharbi (2012) who has recognised the existence of the 'phenomenon of non-adoption of degrees', whereby degrees being awarded remotely by universities are neither recognised by public nor private bodies.

Moreover, the learning process has been devalued by the decision of government agencies to issue guidance that institutions should not recognise or accept these certificates in SA. Alharbi's study (2012) focused on the requirement of applying academic accreditation standards to DeL programmes in SA from the view of faculty members of some Saudi universities. Al-Draiby (2010) found that only 9.5% of academics teaching DeL believed the service was 'high quality'. Furthermore, Alharbi found that, when seeking to fulfil academic accreditation requirements in their DeL programmes, one of the greatest hindrances facing Saudi universities is the absence of national standards for academic accreditation of programmes adopting online education (Alharbi, 2012). These findings have been validated by Al-Sharidah (2011) who, in surveying employers in SA, found that they preferred conventional HE over distance learners. In some cases, they would not employ graduates with online degrees.

The implementation of DeL in SA has faced both external and internal problems. External insofar as there has been a lack of wider social acceptance of DeL as a suitable equivalent to traditional education. The internal problems relate to the low-quality standards of DeL in comparison to traditional education and when benchmarked against international DeL standards. Alaglan (2016), who studied DeL in SA in terms of ‘efficiency’ found a mixed picture of the effectiveness of courses at Imam University. The development of appropriate standards to improve the quality of HE is hence the most appropriate way of solving these internal problems. The hope is that they will eventually drive a transformation of social perspectives on DeL.

On the other hand, as Gani notes (2009), there is some ambiguity surrounding SA’s policies on quality in DeL. Although national strategies ascribe importance to this new learning approach, there remain problems at the level of delivery. (Indeed, we¹ touch upon this issue of public trust in the introduction and outline it in detail in Section 3.5). Moreover, studies such as those conducted by Alhawiti (2011) have shown that, due to its low social status, faculty are often unconvinced by DeL and are not motivated to teach the programmes. Conversely, Al-Shammari and Higgins ascribe university faculties’ ‘modest’ interest in DeL to the “absence of institutional policy” (2015, p.1). Hence, the existing literature focuses on the ‘provider’ side of DeL, meaning that a systematic analysis of quality from the perspective of the students as ‘users’ is lacking.

1.2 Research Aims and Questions:

This study aims to identify the views of students in relation to the quality of DeL in Saudi universities. The objective is to determine what could be done to improve the programmes, and the institutional framework in which they exist. In this sense, our research specifically aims to:

- Explore Saudi students’ perceptions of the importance of quality standards in DeL.
- Explore Saudi students’ perceptions of the current implementation of quality standards in their current DeL provision.
- Investigate students’ perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of their DeL courses.
- Investigate students’ perceptions of the barriers facing distance e-learning.

¹ The present study makes a stylistic choice to use ‘we’ to describe the author. We feel that this term captures the collegiate and co-operative ethos of academic research more accurately than the ‘I’.

- Investigate students' perceptions of the possible changes made to enhance the current practice of e-learning and maintain quality in DeL.
- Situate students' perception of quality in relation to their specific cultural context.

Hence, to address our research aims, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What are Saudi students' perceptions of the importance of quality standards in DeL?
- What are Saudi students' perceptions of the application of quality standards in their current DeL course?
- What are students' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of their DeL course?
- What are students' perceptions of barriers arising during their DeL course?
- What changes would students make to improve quality in DeL?

These research questions will determine the structure of the present study. We have made student perceptions the basis for an investigation into both quality and the strengths, weakness and barriers faced by students, along with their suggestions for changes that may enhance their experience. This is always contextualised in reference to the setting of the study and the cultural factors surrounding it.

As we will explain in the methodology chapter, this study has adopted a multi-method design incorporating both quantitative and qualitative approaches designed to assess the research questions. In addition, the two methods to be adopted in this project reflect our aim of understanding and dealing with the complexities of quality in DeL and the application of quality standards, alongside the perception of students towards quality and DeL in SA. We will therefore emphasise that standards and quality in DeL are not only important individually, but have a symbiotic relationship (see Figure 1.1 below).

Figure 1.1: The Dynamic Relationship between Standards and Students' Perceptions



The primary purpose of this project is to determine the current views of students about quality standards in DeL by taking advantage of a pre-existing set of standards developed by experts and commentators. We would therefore support the use of a quantitative method for the initial stage of this study, believing it to be both useful and sufficient. However, the addition of a qualitative stage will further strengthen our research by enabling us to consider the social and cultural factors affecting the views of students, specifically those peculiar to the current Saudi educational system. The importance of a mixed methods approach has been underlined by Duncan (2000) and Mason (2006), who argue that cultures and practices self-evidently change across countries. Hence, quantitative data alone cannot grasp this diversity and multidimensionality adequately.

1.3 Rationale for the Study

This study has been inspired by the desire of the researcher to contribute to a national dialogue on the status of DeL in SA. It is a debate of great importance and contemporary relevance in both the academic and the policymaking sphere; it has also attracted occasional controversy with regard to its role in our education system (Al-Sharidah; 2011; Alharbi, 2012; Alarini; 2013; Hamdan; 2014). As both a researcher with experience of DeL and a professional educational administrator with an interest in ensuring DeL's success, an investigation of DeL seemed like a natural choice.

This research therefore represents a continuation of my work at Masters level, and is designed to exploit the opportunities for further research I had first noted having completed that course. My study was not specifically commissioned by any organisation with an interest in DeL. Instead, it represents a personal choice to make what I believe to be the most effective contribution to our future generations of learners. Users of DeL are very aware of the potential barriers to their success as students, yet their voices have not been systematically listened to and analysed. My study hence aims to provide a platform to make these voices heard.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The present study attempts to shed some light on an important aspect of the educational process; namely, the determination of quality that help to identify and remove the constraints that may preclude the achievement of the goals of DeL. Any adoption of a new system requires a great deal of effort, especially at the outset, to ensure that it is developed properly and its quality is evaluated effectively.

To apply DeL successfully would require the same degree of value and prestige as that applied to more traditional face-to-face educational systems. To gain such equality between the two types of education, there is a need to apply quality standards that are appropriate to each. The current prejudice against DeL - that it may compromise the quality of education - places an onus on managers, practitioners, policy-makers, planners and researchers to show how DeL can be as good as or even superior to conventional forms of delivery. As money, time and effort is directed towards DeL, practitioners must show that it achieves quality in its educational outcomes (Latchem, 2014). Alghamdi states “few studies have examined the integration of online learning in the higher education system in Saudi Arabia” (2016, p. 26).

As we have noted, there are no determined standards currently applied to DeL in SA. The quality standards for DeL hence need to be determined to serve as a guide to ensure quality and to lead to an improvement in the public perception of DeL as an effective way of gaining valuable qualifications for those unable to attend university courses.

Moreover, this study can be understood to form part of a wider series of research projects regarding the field of online education as a global trend (Gabe, 2014). It thus aims to consolidate and develop the general use of ICT in HE, as well as for those who learn by DeL, notably in SA. It argues that such an undertaking will benefit those responsible for the education of distance learners who can use then the results of this field study. The research will hence provide a clear overview of the problems faced by learners and those factors that may hinder quality assurance in DeL. The objective will then be able to create the necessary policies to solve these problems and improve the whole spectrum of DeL.

This thesis will examine, reflect upon, and interpret quality in DeL, as evidenced in other nations. The cultural and contextual circumstances of these nations will be duly considered in awareness of the problems caused by transposing their particular circumstances to SA. It is thus hoped that the study will contribute towards the determination of a set of systematic, sustainable quality standards for DeL in SA. In turn, it is hoped that these standards can guide the debate around the DeL process and how it could be reformed on this national level. In addition, this research can contribute to enhancing the quality of DeL in developing countries, particularly those states that intersect with SA in terms of customs and traditions within the wider Arab world.

Although there has been a marked increase of research into quality in DeL and e-learning (examples include Meyer 2002; Ehlers and Pawlowski, 2006, Shelton, 2011), little of it has considered the perceptions of students in the development of quality standards (Irele, 2013).

Previous studies have largely focused on administrators and instructors rather than the learners themselves (Jung, 2012 a). However, Frydenberg (2002) went against this trend and stated that the opinions of learners rather than those of providers and governments must be the cornerstones of quality DeL. As with any type of education, DeL is not just a product or a service, but is an ongoing process of knowing and understanding, which exists in a space between learners and instructors. As such, it also relies upon the motivation and commitment of learners (Tucker, 2010; Jung, 2011). This insight provides the basis of the decision that if the experience of and performance in DeL of students is to be maximised, we must understand these learners' perceptions of that DeL in terms of quality. Young and Norgard (2006, p.113) declared, "in order to assure quality and consumer satisfaction, institutions and their faculty must pay close attention to their students' perceptions of online courses and programs". There is a clear and well know narrative regarding the development of DeL is well documented, however the technicalities of its provision, such as the process by which a DeL unit is planned within a HE institution, and how that institution ensures the provision of quality education for learners in its DeL courses is vague (Minnaar, 2013).

Regarding the Saudi Arabian context, despite the importance of studying students' perceptions and attitudes towards any changes in the educational system, and despite the efforts made by Saudi administrators to improve the quality of DeL, there is little evidence that any of these policies have taken students' voices into account.

The present study will therefore strive to capture students' perceptions of quality in Saudi Arabia's DeL setting. The rationale is that students are the first consumers of this practice, and so their perceptions and concerns must be considered to develop current practices and future planning. This research will aim accordingly to fill this gap and enrich the literature with the findings, analysis and conclusions that we have taken from the Saudi context.

1.5 Outline of the Present Study

Chapter One consists of the present introduction; namely, a brief background and a statement of the problem. It also outlines the research aims and questions, along with the significance of the study.

Chapter Two consists of the study setting and the context of the study. It explores the domain comprising the present study – Saudi Arabia – by making a note of its demographics

and salient characteristics. In the final section, we consider the recent history of education and DeL in SA.

Chapter Three is a literature review arranged in a tripartite structure that considers DeL, and then quality, before offering a final reflection and summary. It provides the conceptual groundwork for this study.

Chapter Four covers the methodology and research design. This chapter evaluates the major research paradigms and situates the approach taken in the present study before offering a rationale. The research design is then explained and justified, the instruments are described, the sampling techniques are discussed, methods of data analysis outlined, and validity and reliability considered. Ethical considerations are the final section.

Chapter Five is the data analysis in which the findings of the instruments are presented and the process of interpreting the information begins.

Chapter Six is the discussion. This chapter builds upon the data analysis in order to identify important findings and link them to concepts from the literature review, before triangulating the results of the instruments.

Chapter Seven comprises a discussion of the implications and conclusions to be drawn. It also addresses key DeL stakeholders in regard to the outcomes of the study. A final executive summary is then provided, before limitations are discussed along with opportunities for future research.

Chapter 2. Study Setting and Context

This chapter provides an overview of the context and setting in which the present thesis operates. It introduces the physical, demographic, economic and historical background of SA, before going on to consider the recent history of education and DeL there.

2.1 The Study Setting: Saudi Arabia

History

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded in 1932 by King Abdul Aziz Al-Saud. It is an Islamic state and Arabic is the official language, but English is used in parts of the private sector, such as banks and companies. In SA, there are no political parties and the system of the government is an absolute monarchy. Geopolitically, SA is the most important member of both the local Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the petroleum cartel OPEC.

Geography

SA is situated in the Arabian Peninsula and lies at the crossroads of three continents: Asia, Africa, and Europe. It is one of the main Islamic countries, occupying approximately 2,250,000 square kilometers (868,730 square miles). It is the largest nation in the Middle East and the fourteenth largest globally. The climate is hot and dry, while much of its area is desert or semi-desert biomes. Less than 2% of the land is cultivatable and the population is therefore unevenly distributed.

Demographics

SA has a fast-growing population. Currently, the population is approximately 31 million people, compared to 12 million in 1985. The total urban population in the three main metropolitan centers of Riyadh, Jeddah and Dammam is over 80%. Riyadh, the capital of SA, is located in the centre of the Kingdom, housing 26% of its population. It is not only the seat of government and home to ministries, embassies and diplomatic missions, but it also contains educational, financial, agricultural, cultural, technical, commercial and social organizations.

Economy

The export of oil transformed the SA economy in the latter half of the twentieth century. Being that 90% of government income derives from this sector, there have been peaks and troughs of development, with periods of recession followed by periods of ‘tafra’, a local term meaning ‘take-off’ in which growth is dramatic and rapid. These periods correlate to the

peaks and troughs of the oil price. The overall trend is one of growth, but this is not without its challenges. The main dynamo of the everyday economy is government spending and this, in turn, is based on oil revenues. The wider economy lacks diversity and is prone to macroeconomic problems, such as inflation and unemployment. SA joining the WTO 2005 represented a point of further integration of the Kingdom with the globalized economy.

The main economic priority of the government, expressed in various iterations of its Development Plans, revolves around diversification of the economy and the move to a less oil-reliant position. Historically, the state sector accounts for most of employment, but the bureaucracy is being reformed and government jobs are projected to decline as the private sector grows larger and becomes the primary dynamo of economic growth. The economy also relies on the importation of foreign workers in skilled sectors, while the government wishes to have adequate training in place to begin to fill these positions domestically.

Domestic reform is centrally planned in SA and as of 2016 the next cycle, the ‘National Transformation Plan’ is being initiated. This plan has a vision of transforming the nation in the short term, and boosting diversification of the economy by 2020, increasing, for example, tourism from 64.5m to 81.9m visits per year; consumption of home made goods from 33% to 50% of the total, and to begin to privatise key industries (Kerr, 2016 a). A second, ‘Vision 2030’ plan envisages a much more complete transformation to a modern mixed economy and a substantial private sector (Kerr, 2016 b).

Culture

The two most notable influences on culture in SA are its Islamic religion and its Arabic traditions. Although it should be noted that the social life of SA has witnessed some changes, due to external factors such as globalisation and modern social media, the dominance of the Islamic faith is still prevalent in many aspects of life (Elazabi, 2013). The dominance of religious belief and the primacy of Islamic codes of conduct are all-pervasive. In such a context, it is difficult to interpret and discuss education without considering the extent of the influence of culture and religion. One of the most important aspects is the subject of gender segregation at every level of education, either for the teaching staff or students, in accordance with the Islamic law practiced throughout the country. This segregation is not restricted to the educational domain and occurs over business, public transport and other social situations (Alhazmi, 2010). The dominant school of Islamic interpretation is Hanbali, based upon the works of the scholar and jurist Ahmed bin Hanbal. This tradition is described by Hamdan (2014) as a narrow and strict reading of Islam; one that minimises plurality.

Education

Educational opportunities are available to all children in single sex primary and secondary schools. According to the latest statistics from 2015, there are approximately 25,000 schools with more than half a million teachers under the charge of the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2015). The HE stage follows the secondary stage from the age of 18. The period of undergraduate study varies according to specialisation. Some courses such as Education and Science last for 4 years, while others such as Engineering and Computing are for 5 years and Medicine lasts for 7 years. In addition, most Saudi universities offer postgraduate courses for qualifications such as M.A. and Ph.D.

Education policy in SA is tied to the government's wish to diversify the economy and create additional employment. However, universal education was a relatively new phenomenon and follows from an earlier period in which investment was concentrated in the physical infrastructure and the construction of modern cities.

The education of girls has a history of differences from that of boys and the former have only been permitted access to HE in the past few decades. The government's policy is to "strengthen Saudi Arabia's position by building brains and investing in humans", therefore ensuring that the population attains the qualifications and skills necessary to match the religious, economic and social requirements of the country. A secondary goal is to eliminate adult illiteracy. The educational system in SA is free of charge for all citizens from pre-school until university; it also supplies free books and health services to the students. At over 25%, total education spending also makes up a high proportion of GDP (Ministry of Education, 2015).

2.2 The Study Setting: Saudi Higher Education

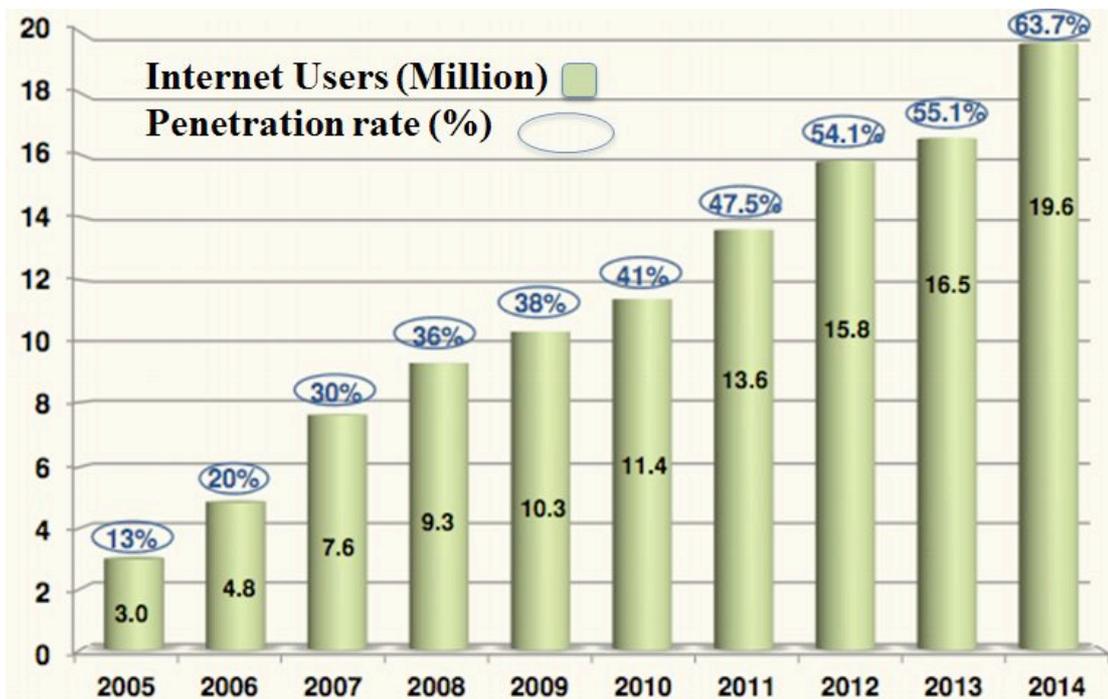
Founded in 1957, Riyadh University was the first modern university in SA. However, the growth of HE did not take off until the 1970s. The Ministry of Higher Education was founded in 1975 with a mandate to establish tertiary institutions and to grow the percentage of the population attending them. It is worth mentioning here that the beginning of 2015 witnessed the issue of the Royal Decree of merging the general and HE education in one ministry; namely, the Ministry of Education under two main departments (HE and General). There are currently 28 such HE government universities in the Kingdom. All of them are centrally linked to the Ministry of Education's HE department, which has ultimate responsibility for them. Students in traditional HE have no fees to pay but are paid a monthly allowance, equal to about £180.

At the turn of the millennium, the 7th Five Year Development Plan of the HE department aimed at widening participation. However, the 8th Plan represents a shift towards quality and performance. Abalhasan (2007) characterises this plan as one using instructional technology and blended learning to improve quality in the HE sector. The use of ICT is a key component in this transitional plan.

2.3 The Study Setting: Distance e-Learning in Saudi Arabia

The basis of any DeL system is the uptake of its operational technologies by wider society. In SA, both Internet penetration and the base of Internet users has increased rapidly through the new century and now accounts for 63.7 percent of the population according to the Communications and Information Technology Commission (2014 a) as shown in Figure 2.1 below.

Figure 2.1: Internet User Growth in SA



The total subscriptions to mobile telephony reached 53 million of a population of 31 million. In addition, the base of mobile smart-phone users has increased, bringing another stream of access to online information and resources. Historically the size of the country had prevented the physical ‘wiring’ of communications networks, while the mobile and wireless revolutions have transformed the population from a low base of use of these technologies to widespread proliferation in little over a decade. The Ministry of Economy and Planning is spending millions of dollars on infrastructure, while the use of ICT is being encouraged over a range of sectors and not just in education. As prices fall and quality increases, computer usage and

ownership is also rapidly growing. SA is the biggest ICT market in the Arabic world, while its telecommunications and IT industries represent over 50% of the total market in the Middle East (Al-Khalifa, 2010).

In SA, DeL has become popular within just a few years; this is due to geographical, social and economic factors as well as the support of accumulated experience in extramural study in some universities, such as Imam University (IMU) and King Abdulaziz University (KAU). Many HE institutions tended to adopt DeL in addition to their traditional programmes. The establishment of the Secretariat of the Distance Learning Committee for Universities and the HE Institutions of the Arab GCC in 2000 was given the function to support initiatives in DeL agreement countries. Later in 2007, the SA government agreed to the adoption of DeL, as well as the establishment of (NCeLDL) to support and activate this style of learning to be compatible with the founding of public universities and for the deanships in e-learning and DE.

A positive role has been played by NCeLDL in the development of this educational style, where it has served a practical and theoretical role in the improvement of the potential of technological universities, holding several workshops and conferences. Such actions have resulted in some recommendations that support this kind of learning and it has been implemented in SA HE institutions throughout the country. Moreover, there has been an observable need to develop a national strategic plan for its installation, developing a set of standards for the control and the adoption of software and applications of e-learning and DE (The Recommendations of the first International Conference on E-learning and Distance Learning, 2009).

It is worth mentioning that a prototype for DE - Patterns for DE - was applied about thirty years ago in girls' colleges within Saudi in cases where gender segregation is required in tertiary education. In this context, the teaching of female students by male lecturers can only be implemented through the use of closed-circuit television (CCTV) with a one-way video system and two-way audio communication.

In addition, some DE programmes do exist in the format of extramural study in some traditional Saudi universities, which have been considered a solution to the problem of the large numbers of secondary school graduates, including those who wish to follow lifelong learning. However, it is no longer considered efficient, owing to the weakness of the mail service in SA in general, which has caused problems to students waiting to receive materials, and the stunning development of ICT. Therefore, the decision made by SA government to

activate DeL, which relies heavily on the Internet, has led to its adoption by many Saudi universities alongside traditional education methods. Clearly then, SA has a short history and little experience of DeL compared to many other nations. Nonetheless, the Kingdom can use the latest technologies having observed how they are best used in other countries, thus circumventing the problems manifest in being the first to use and develop a system. The two most important SA universities that provide this type of learning will be highlighted in section 2.6.

To sum up, 15 Universities out of 28 in SA now offer DeL and there has been significant uptake. IMU University, for instance, has over 72,000 students registered for DeL. Moreover, as the uptake of students and the number of providers increases, the number of different course had also proliferated. Given this rapid growth, issues of quality are particularly pressing (Almohaisen, 2007; Al-Khalifa, 2010; Alkhalifa, 2013).

2.4 The Rationale for DeL in Saudi Arabia

DeL is an appropriate choice for providing HE to large numbers of people because it can overcome the time and space constraints faced by many students and provide an education at a lower cost than that of traditional HE. Alsoghyer (2005) notes that the annual average cost for a learner in DeL in SA is under a quarter of the cost of a student enrolled in a traditional university, while it can be up to half that, considering the dropout rate in DeL universities. This low cost might be due to the high capacity of DeL institutions in HE, compared to the traditional ones. This was confirmed by Sclater (2008) when he highlighted the number of students in the UK taking such courses. The situation remains the same today, as during 2016 more than 180,000 were enrolled in the Open University alone.

To overcome the challenges facing HE in the Arab region, many DeL institutes have been established over the last decade. According to Bousnina (2006), HE in the Arab countries must match population growth, which stands at a rate of 2.8% per year. This exceeds all previous records for the region, while it is more than twice that of the rest of the world. The whole Arabic region is undergoing a revolution in education and the provision of more DeL opportunities. Most of the Arab countries are at an early stage of development of online education. Furthermore, movement has been slow and there have been several missteps made (Sultan et al, 2012). In some of the smaller nations, external investment has been encouraged, although this has not been the case in SA. With regards to this case study of SA, many estimate a growth in the country's population to 37 million by 2020, assuming that the rate of

growth continues at the same current level. One of these predictions is summarized by a Saudi economic newspaper (Aleqtisadiah, 2013) and is shown in the following table:

Table 2.1: Expecations of Population Growth in SA

Year	Population	Annual rate of increase
2015	32 million	3.3%
2018	35.5 million	3.3%
2020	37.2 million	3.3%

In correlation with this expected population increase, HE at undergraduate level in SA will face an even greater gap between supply and demand, as predicted by Alsaif (2007) in the following table:

Table 2.2: Estimated Gap between Supply and Demand for HE Opportunities for Bachelor Degrees in SA during the Period 2009 – 2018

Years	Expected Demand	Expected Offer	The Gap	Years	Expected Demand	Expected Offer	The Gap
2009	343885	96386	247489	2014	426090	96396	329694
2010	360326	96396	263930	2015	442531	96396	346135
2011	376767	96396	280371	2016	458973	96396	362577
2012	393208	96396	296812	2017	475414	96396	379018
2013	409649	96396	313253	2018	491855	96396	392459

The capacity of HE institutions does not meet the demand for places, as noted by Alshehri (2005); as a result many students are outsourced to study overseas. On the other hand, in addition to the secondary school graduates who cannot be absorbed by traditional Saudi universities, there are other social groups of that want access to DeL. These include women, for whom it is difficult to share study with their responsibilities in the upbringing of children, and those whose financial circumstances do not allow them to complete a full-time university course (Alarini, 2013). This population find DeL to be a flexible form of HE (Al-Shehri, 2010). Additionally, the constraints upon women travelling without a guardian creates another barrier to their access to education.

El-Abassy et al. (2015) argue that DeL has a liberatory potential for women in SA due to the restrictions the patriarchal system in the nation imposes on them. The most effective method of widening their participation, it is argued, is through DeL. Though DeL does not remove all constraints of communication, it remains “one of high benefit for female students” (ibid, p. 16).

Moreover, most universities are in more densely populated areas, with readier access available to those living those urban regions. This organization has resulted in unequal opportunities for HE amongst residents of suburbs or villages. Finally, in Saudi universities, the restriction of admissions to undergraduate courses to those aged 18-23 has denied access to a large number of people who were unable, for whatever reason, to complete their learning in a sufficiently timely manner. Therefore, finding a suitable alternative to remedy what they have missed can be seen as a legitimate right for them. According to commentators, DeL is the pathway to this (Mirza and Al-Adbulkareem, 2011).

Following the objectives of the National Plan for Communications and Information Technology regarding the need to expand uptake of and integration of E-learning in the universities, the Ministry of Education's HE department commissioned a dedicated team to develop an optimal model for e-learning in HE institutions in the Kingdom. Thus, late 2006 saw the first phase of the NCeLDL in agreement with a Malaysian company (Meteor) with the first step towards recognition of DE in the Kingdom and the use of technology in e-learning. The objective of the center is to act as the core of e-learning in HE institutions, uniting the efforts of institutions to adopt these kinds of educational techniques and addressing the non-availability of the teaching faculty. Additional goals centered upon the development of general principles of standardization in the design of digital educational materials and ensuring contributions to the retraining and recertification of educational stakeholders. More specifically, the objectives of the center are focused on the following themes:

- The deployment of e-learning and DE applications at HE institutions in line with the quality standards.
- Contributing to the expansion of the capacity of institutions of HE, through e-learning and DE applications.
- Contributing to the evaluation of e-education and DE projects/programmes.
- Supporting research/studies into e-learning and DE fields.
- Setting the quality standards for the design of digital learning materials, production and dissemination.
- Providing counselling to those involved in e-learning and DE fields.
- Encourage excellence of projects in e-learning and DE for university education institutions.
- Holding meetings, organising conferences and workshops that contribute to e-learning and DE development.

- International cooperation with organisations and international bodies relevant to areas of e-learning and DE.

In summary, there are two main tendencies that can be seen in DeL regulation in SA. The first is the desire to improve access and give students the possibility to receive a HE who are either too old, in employment, female, or are unable to find a place in traditional HE. The second is the drive to promote quality in the sector, which is both a new and a rapidly expanding initiative. Rather than simply substitute it for traditional HE, this tendency believes that DeL can surpass it and create a class of IT literate, technologically at ease and independently motivated citizens required for an effective 21st century workforce.

2.5 Challenges for DeL in Saudi Arabia

However, this move towards DeL is not without its problems and there are some significant barriers presented to its uptake. Although the gaps in technological access that prevent entry to DeL are being removed, there are social stigmas attached to the process which have impacted upon it negatively. There is a low level of public trust in DeL degrees, while there is low motivation in the teaching population to become involved in DeL (Alhawiti, 2011; Al-Sharidah, 2011).

The Internet, as a relatively new part of Saudi Arabia's culture, is not primarily regarded as a medium for learning, for only 4% of Internet activity is educational (Communications and Information Technology Commission, 2014 b). This accounts for the poor perceptions in society about DeL. Although Internet usage and penetration are increasing, the type of use being made of the Internet is not equivalent to the modes of Internet usage associated with online learning.

In the highly centralised Saudi state, all teaching materials must first be agreed upon by the DoHE. For political and cultural reasons, the Kingdom is sensitive about allowing foreign providers into the domestic market and it does not currently recognise DeL qualifications from foreign providers.

In some respects, the low uptake of DeL in SA and the low regard in which it is held has formed a vicious circle that has suppressed its growth in the recent past. Bates (2009) has noted that there is serious concern about the quality of Saudi DeL which, in turn, has caused difficulties with accreditation. This in turn has reduced uptake and made the public suspicious about standards and accreditation. AlTameemy (2010) states that the consequence of this cycle is a systematic undervaluation of DeL, which the education system cannot easily break

out of. In the resulting laissez-faire environment, Gani (2009) notes that the most common methodology of enacting improvement in Saudi DeL is “a trial and error procedure”.

The lack of staff trained in the delivery of DeL is a serious obstacle (Al-Senaidi et al., 2009). The lack of institutional support, technical training and release time in the Arabic world prevents teachers from expanding their knowledge and developing their IT skills (Alghamdi, 2016). Whilst Al-Shammari and Higgins (2015) show that barriers to staff succeeding in DeL exist across institutional, individual and faculty level, the issues of greatest concern are those at institutional level, and relate to university-level policies and the lack of integration. Other problems arising from lack of staff development include improper understanding of issues related to software piracy and copyright, which in turn lead to problems with training and support (Alhawiti, 2011). Educators themselves have resisted change and are not inclined to support a transition from traditional learning delivery to DeL. Hussein (2011) goes further, stating that some faculty are actively concerned by the growth of DeL, as they fear that others with a better knowledge of technology could take their positions. These staff resist the growth of DeL. AlTameemy (2010) has found that university faculties in the Middle East have less favourable views of DeL than those in the USA.

Al-Khalifa (2010) has identified the following issues preventing effective DeL in SA:

- Lack of computer literacy.
- Lack of training in e-pedagogy.
- Lack of incentives to use DeL.
- Inadequate managerial and strategic funding in and understanding of DeL.
- Lack of coordination.
- Lack of DeL awareness in the private sector.
- Failure to make policy in Quality Assurance (QA) of DeL.
- Equivalency of DeL and traditional learning.
- Accreditation of DeL.
- Infrastructure in rural areas.

Conversely, Algamdi (2016) identifies remedies for the problems with DeL

- Increase public awareness of DeL.
- Develop infrastructure for DeL.
- Improve computer literacy of users and faculty.
- Provide technical assistance.
- Encourage faculty participation.

2.6 The Two Universities Used in the Study Setting

2.6.1 King Abdulaziz University (KAU)

As the first private university in the country in KAU originated in Jeddah, in the western region of SA, 1967 at the initiative of civil dignitaries of the city and was then transformed into a public university in 1974. It consists of 20 colleges and more than a hundred departments and has some areas of unique areas of specialism unavailable to other Saudi universities, such as oceanography, meteorology and nuclear engineering. It has also many of the masters and doctoral programmes in various disciplines, with more than 86,000 students and 2500 members of staff (KAU, 2015).

The interest in DeL in KAU began in 2005, when it established a deanship in DeL as a prelude to adopting it. The adoption of DeL was effectively enabled in 2007, with KAU being the first Saudi university to adopt this formula of learning (Al-Khalifa, 2010). Educational resources have been offered across media to support both real-time and asynchronous communication between instructors and learners, as well as amongst different learners using learning management systems and the virtual classroom. The university offers various DeL programmes in its three main faculties, which are as follows:

- Economics and Management (General Administration – Administrative Sciences)
- Arts and Humanities (Sociology – Psychology – Arabic – English)
- Business (Marketing – Human Resources – Law) (KAU, 2015).

2.6.2 Imam University (IMU)

IMU was founded in 1974 and is in Riyadh, SA. The university is comprised of 11 faculties, with more than 35,000 students and 1,300 members of staff. From the very beginning it has been renowned for its specialisation and excellence in Religious and Arabic Studies. However, in recent years, colleges and institutes have also been established in other fields, such as in Medicine, Computing and Business Management.

DeL was introduced in 2008 as an independent deanship (Deanship of e-learning and Distance Education) offering bachelor degrees authorized by the Ministry of Education's Department of Higher Education. There were more than 6,000 students admitted to DeL in the university in 2009, while there are currently 72,000 students enrolled in programmes (IMU, 2015).

The degree programmes provided are Islamic and Arabic Studies, Business Administration, and Economics. Lectures are broadcast live daily over the Internet. For the student's convenience, these lectures are recorded and uploaded onto a web site to view at their leisure. Communication between the student and lecturer occurs through forums, emails and virtual classrooms. The university has adopted an electronic scholastic programme known as "Tadarus" to facilitate the courses in which students may enroll (IMU, 2015).

2.7 Summary

In many ways, the setting of the present thesis is a distinctive one. Although parallels can be drawn between SA and the wider Arab world and, more particularly, the GCC nations, there have been significant differences of scale and independence in the approach taken to DeL in SA. The growth of DeL in SA has occurred alongside growth in the use of ICT and internet communications, as well as a growth in population and an increasing awareness of the need of the country to participate in the globalised competition that defines the modern economy. Despite the reality that these trends are in many ways supportive to the growth of DeL, barriers remain and, in particular, those caused by rapid growth in the sector and its relative newness.

Chapter 3. Literature Review

This literature review is organised in a tripartite structure under three main topic areas: distance e-learning, quality, and reflection. These areas are in turn sub-divided into a set of key concepts that underpin the theoretical basis of this study. Owing to the fact that DeL is a developing field, we have conducted a comprehensive survey of its characteristics to provide a concrete definition of what the present study considers DeL to be. An exploration of quality also requires a similar groundwork, being that an approach from the perspective of quality is the defining feature of the present study. The section on reflection focuses the wider analysis of the literature review upon the specific context in which the present study operates.

3.1 Distance e-Learning

Rapid technological developments, particularly in the field of ICT, have opened new dimensions regarding education. This has resulted in significant innovations and other positive effects upon systems of education. It has led in turn to changes to the principles and philosophies of existing patterns of education and the emergence of new ones.

As with the most of the innovations in education brought about by technology, the functions provided by e-learning works to promote important ethical aspects of education, such as access to lifelong learning, justice in the provision and reception of education, and equal opportunities in HE. E-learning has also established another important, revolutionary dimension of global education, which has led to the solution of many educational problems; that is, it has eliminated the physical, economic, geographical and temporal limits of knowledge and so achieving what is known as the globalisation of education. We should also note the trend of competition between major institutions that has emerged parallel to the availability of e-learning.

In fact, open learning and DE institutions are the largest beneficiaries of this innovation because they have been adopted by the leading institutions of developed countries. This decision to adopt innovations in learning and teaching is based on the background and experience of their educational institutions, accumulated for decades within their domain of education and in the presence of a technological and human infrastructure. Hence, the educational institutions that have, in turn, become reliant upon learning through the use of software and the Internet.

Al Saleh (2009) has identified some of the indicators of the growth of distance learning and the impact of ICT on human activity, including the spheres of education and training, pointing out that they will be greater in the future. These indicators include:

- The emergence of many DeL projects in schools and universities across the world.
- Growing investment in the DeL market, where thousands of e-courses around the world can be studied by individuals from their home.
- The emergence of the phenomenon of virtual university or electronic university-city, with different organisational models that offer electronically remote learning on local, regional and international levels.

Global investment in e-learning was estimated by Forbes to be \$107 billion in 2015 (McCue, 2014). In conducting a survey for the European University Association, Gabel et al. (2014) found that, in Europe, 91% of HE institutions offer ‘blended’ course with on and off-line elements while, furthermore, 82% offer fully online courses. However, only partial adoption was found on the part of these institutions and only 20% of institutions use e-learning across all courses. Despite the high level of investment, the spread of e-learning remains incomplete, while there are still institutions, even in technologically advanced Europe, which have not taken up the use of these new tools and approaches.

Despite the growth in e-learning in Europe, Gabel et al. (2014) found that only one third of universities had a DeL quality strategy, while only one quarter of nations had a quality regulator for e-learning. Such a situation has prompted educators to worry about the lack of control or regulation in regard to this proliferation and accompanying concern about its quality.

3.1.1 The Concept of Distance e-Learning

To understand the concept of DeL, we must first consider its key components: DE and e-learning. These two terms have a close relationship and much in common: DE helps support the interest in e-learning and its vertical growth on the level of HE, while e-learning has helped in the development of DE and its horizontal growth.

Distance Education

The growth of DE was a response to the Industrial Revolution and the manifold changes that it caused within education. Many of these developments have utilised the advancements in technology caused by this revolution. Harry et al. (2003) have situated the growth of DE as

contemporaneous with the Industrial Revolution in the UK and later in the USA (in the nineteenth century). Hence, from this base the concept of DE has been transmitted around the globe (Reddy, 1993). DE has become popular because it has enabled those to study who could not - for many reasons - otherwise participate in traditional HE. It has therefore emancipated education and its stakeholders from the traditional barriers they once faced by making it accessible across many dimensions, including geography, price, accessibility and time.

UNESCO defines DE as:

Improved capabilities in knowledge and/or behaviors as a result of mediated experiences that are constrained by time and/or distance such that the learner does not share the same situation with what is being learned. (UNESCO, 2001)

This definition offers a clear but basic understanding of DE while failing to capture the (increasingly) widespread use of technology that is now commonplace within DE. The development of technology has made the above definition too simple for the contemporary use and implementation of DE. Such advancements enable DE to be more flexible in its approach and any modern definition must reflect this change. Moore and Kearsley (2012, p.2) present an alternative definition that is more appropriate for the DE process that has recently been developed:

Distance education is teaching and planned learning in which teaching normally occurs in a different place from learning, requiring communication through technologies as well as special institutional organization.

A recent formulation of DE can be seen in Holmberg's (2003) recapitulation of Keegan's view of DE (1986), consisting of five elements. These elements are:

1. The quasi-permanent separation of the teacher and the student during learning.
2. The creation of an educational organization that provides the planning and preparation of learning materials and student services.
3. The use of technology to allow the teacher and student to access the content of programmes.
4. The ability to carry out two-way communication that will allow the student to create a dialogue with the teacher.
5. The quasi-permanent absence of the learning group.

Moore and Kearsley (2012) classify the institutions providing DE into distinct categories. They are:

- Single-Mode Institutions. Centres which are set up for the specific delivery of DE and which have no purely campus-based courses. Examples include Open Universities.
- Dual-Mode Universities. Centres which offer both traditional and distance teaching. Distance components are then provided according to the institution's policies regarding this medium, while traditional courses are supplied according to another set of rules regarding that medium. The university essentially offers parallel systems for course delivery, especially in terms of administrative organisation, though the pool of delivery staff may be shared.
- Individual Teachers. Centres which lack the distinctive policy set of a dual mode institution may offer online courses, yet these courses will not be standardised to the same extent. They will be designed and maintained by individual members of staff and are much more likely to mirror or mimic the methods of traditional HE.
- Virtual Universities and Consortia. These are rarely centres in their own right, but are portals and other constructs jointly maintained by a number of institutions across the layers listed above.

E-learning

E-learning (electronic-learning) is a term which became popular at the turn of the millennium. It refers to learning that takes place through the medium of a computer or a digital device. Stockley (2003) defines e-learning as, "use of a computer or electronic device [...] in some way to provide training, educational or learning material." Even in its short history, there have been conflicting conceptions of the role of e-learning. For some researchers, such as Rosenberg (2001) or Wagner et al. (2008), e-learning encompasses methods of uploading traditional pedagogical approaches and delivering the corresponding material via electronic means.

For other theorists, e-learning represents a later development in the potential of computer learning, in which the networked aspects afforded by modern communication software have become important. For Cross, e-learning is "learning on Internet time, the convergence of learning and networks" (2004, p.104). For McConnell, it is "networked collaborative learning" (2006, p.11). For Abbad et al. (2009), e-learning is, in a broad sense, electronic learning, and in a narrow sense it is web or Internet learning. Sangrà et al. (2012) situate e-learning in reference to something more specific than the use of technology within face-to-face learning as a tool of reinforcement. However, they take it to be less specific than focusing only on contemporaneous technologies like the virtual campus or specific real-time

platforms. Alalhareth and McBride (2015) concur that e-learning is the best term for describing Internet based learning in SA.

A further distinction may be drawn between e-learning, which takes place in a synchronous environment with immediate interaction, such as instant messaging, video link or real-time chat via an Internet or mobile connection, and asynchronous communication that takes place on message boards, e-mail or forums, for instance. In other words, synchronous delivery is a “same time–different place” mode while the asynchronous version is a “different time–different place” mode (Welch et al., 2013, p.6).

In e-learning there is a distinction to be made between blended and full delivery mode. Blended (sometimes hybrid or mixed) learning designates a combination of traditional face-to-face learning with elements of online learning. Conversely, in full delivery e-learning students sit their course without face-to-face attendance at class; they must therefore have access to the Internet to do the course. Hence, fully online courses are a subset of distance courses, being that there is no requirement for face-to-face meetings (Bates, 2005).

The present study considers DeL to be the most advanced form of DE, in which the technologies of the networked society are used to provide students and educators with an unprecedented set of opportunities to communicate and interact at a distance. DeL is thus fully enabled by the Internet, whose widespread use has permitted the revolution in the uptake of DeL, as we have described above. Although there are many activities that can be defined as DeL in the broadest possible sense, this study will utilise a conception of quality in DeL. Here, the standards that define this quality tend towards a modern definition of DeL, in which the teachers and students utilise technology to allow the maximum possible level of communication and interaction. Our study considers DeL to be a subset of DE, specifically one that follows the most up-to-date rules of best practice within the discipline.

In this study DE will be defined as:

Any organised educational process, whether it is individual or collective, where the teacher and learner are in different places either simultaneously or at different times. This process primarily takes place by using two-way communications through interactive media technology to complete a course or programme that is supervised by an educational institution that is officially recognised.

3.1.2 Genealogy of Distance e-Learning

It is difficult to determine the specific historical beginning of DeL because, over time, it has developed according to the nature of the available technology that existed at a given period (Picciano, 2001). However, the developments of DeL can be divided into two main phases:

First Phase: Correspondence Study Model

A correspondence study relies mainly on the use of printed materials and postal services that became available because of the industrial revolution that occurred in Europe during the late nineteenth century. Many reviews of the DE literature have noted that Isaac Pitman was the first to provide successful shorthand instruction by correspondence. In this sense, he utilised the postal services available in the UK from about 1840, which led to the establishment of many educational institutions across the country able then to apply a correspondence element to their approach to learning and so reach those learners who were not local but needed the services of these institutions (Verduin and Clark, 1991).

According to Holmberg (1986), in 1874 the University of Illinois Wesleyan of the United States embarked on the provision of learning by correspondence for postgraduate and undergraduate students. It was part of a programme similar to that which was applied at the universities of Oxford, Cambridge and London. By the end of the nineteenth century, the number of universities and colleges offering high education degrees through correspondence study had increased significantly, until it reached approximately forty-eight educational institutions in US alone that offered a PhD within the correspondence study model (as mentioned by Sumner, 2000). In France, demand for this method of education by correspondence appeared relatively late, during WWII, when the Ministry of Education established the *Centre National d'Enseignement par Correspondance* because wartime conditions had prevented normal population movement (Young, 2010).

Since 1940, many nations have created their own correspondence learning systems to help individuals unable to complete their education at all educational levels, such as China, Mongolia, Japan, India and Nigeria (ibid).

The method of teaching by correspondence lasted until the late 1960s and was marked by fully individuality and isolation from other learners during the learning process being that it involved only one direction of correspondence between the teacher and the learner (Bates, 2005). Moreover, it was also aimed primarily at those adult learners who were unable to continue their formal education because of adverse job, social or family conditions.

Second Phase: Information and Communications Model

The emergence and development of ICT (comprising of multimedia, radio, television, video, computer, satellite, internet and other forms of technology) and employment of these media to provide DE has had a deep impact in bringing about a radical change in the way of offering new educational pattern. Owing to this shift, the style of learning is wholly dependent on a method of correspondence, which restricts the freedom of the teacher and learner to only one way of communication, has since disappeared in most states. It has been replaced by a more efficient and dynamic system allowing a two-way of interaction between teacher and learner.

In addition to the rapid development and the successive of ICT that has encouraged the expansion of the scope of this model and its increasingly widespread usage, we should note other factors in play:

1. Increasing the complexity of the use of printed materials.
2. The availability of technical services support associated with this teaching and learning model.
3. The institution of the Open University in the United Kingdom (Keegan, 2003).

In 1920, several American universities - for example, Wisconsin, Iowa and Ohio - used radio as a medium supportive of their educational programmes by correspondence. Buckland and Dye (1991) estimate that nearly 176 radio stations were established in educational institutions over this early period, aiming to provide broadcast programmes and courses through the DE system. Later, in the 1930s, this situation also emerged in the UK, Australia and Canada. In addition, in this same decade, the Universities of Iowa, Kansas and Purdue began experiments to produce television programmes specifically to inform the learner and present them to all those benefitting from the DE system.

In the 1970s, the Open University in the UK employed multimedia technology effectively in all its educational programmes. It still collaborates with the BBC and other broadcasters to provide high quality learning material, some of which is so successful that it is shown on mainstream channels at peak viewing times (Selman et al., 1998).

In the last decade of the twentieth century a major development occurred in DE programmes through the application of digital technologies, like the Internet and networks, in the support of DE courses. In 1990, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation funded the development of Asynchronous Learning Networks (ALN) in certain American universities and colleges. The ALN project used low-cost techniques, such as the World Wide Web and text-based email, to

provide courses for individuals and business sector (Picciano, 2001). Such a shift in technology has led to the widespread provision of DE that is unprecedented in many countries of the world.

To conclude, we may observe from this brief historical summary that the continued and successive progress of ICT has had a direct influence of DE, and so a deep impact in determining the type of tools offered by this kind of educational system in various stages of its development. In addition, the changes in the political, social and economic development of some of the states that have practiced this kind of education have affected the history and development of DE.

Dron (2014) represents this historical progression in terms of three generations of media and pedagogical standpoint, summarised in the table below.

Table 3.1: Generations of DE

	1st Generation	2nd Generation	3rd Generation
Media Modes	Print or radio	CD ROMs, telephony	Forums and learning management systems
Educational Theory	Behaviourism	Constructivism	Connectivism

3.1.3 Technology and Distance e-Learning

As the previous section has shown, the development of DeL is closely tied to technological evolution in the delivery of DeL, correlated with progress in media technologies. Educational theory has tracked these changes in their development from behaviourism to constructivism and connectivism.

As such, there is no ‘end state’ of DeL and technology, as the two continue to develop in their process of evolution. However, we can note contemporary developments in technology and the types of technology use that might constitute quality in DeL. These media would be rooted in web 2.0 technology. Web 2.0 is defined by Newby et al. (2011) in terms of “communities”; that is, a set of tools that brings people together. A further characteristic of web 2.0 is that it is open-sourced and online, rather than a specially coded piece of educational software (Kim et al., 2013).

Furthermore, web 2.0 is characterised by the ability of the user to upload and modify, rather than just read what has already been given as content. Common uses of web 2.0 in education include the following: digital story telling; personal broadcasting; online meetings; wikis;

social media such as Facebook or Twitter or Youtube; and extending to communities of practice, such as discussion boards and newsgroups. It is beyond the scope of the present thesis to delve too deeply into the specific applications and tools that allow these processes. The definition of ‘technology’ used here is instead derived from the usefulness of that technology for the pedagogical outcomes of the course. Hence it is to be assessed, according to the methodology used here, by the perceptions of the students using it.

This method has several advantages, as it removes the onus of evaluating technology from the third-party perspective of the researcher and finds it in the user perspective of the student. As these students are currently located in the cultural milieu in which the present study operates, they are a qualified judge and jury of the effectiveness of technology in relation to their expectations and the expectations of the society in which they are embedded (see section 3.4.1 for a discussion of perceptions).

The technological platform through which the learner accesses the content of the course is known as the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Again, there is no “one way” of managing a VLE, and there are several variations on the standard platform providing students with resources, interactive opportunities with staff and peers, assessment and evaluation gateways. It also provides instructors with course and content creation tools and integrates with information management systems to reduce their workload.

A further contemporary development in the technology of DeL is in Open Education Resources (OERs), which are open, free and often-decentralised courses that have been uploaded to web 2.0. In many ways, the move towards OERs is self-fulfilling because when more free material is uploaded, the value of other educational materials declines. OERs also serve to track the disruptions in other media markets caused by the spread of the Internet.

Recently, a subset of these courses, the MOOCS (massive open online courses) have attracted a significant amount of hype. Conrad (2014) notes that these technologies are in their ‘early adoption’ phase and it may be some time before their impact can be fully assessed. Ehrlers (2013) posits a pedagogy of ‘Open Educational Practice’ (OEP) which represents a set of strategies to maximise the usefulness of OER resources. It also allows the navigation of the vast collections of data available online by carefully setting tasks which encourage learners to enter the OER. Such tasks are often “collaborative” - online enterprises in which students jointly interpret and mediate knowledge (ibid, p.91). As Latchem (2014) notes, the growth in OERs has opened up a new frontier in the assessment of quality in DeL, being that external bodies do not audit both resources and courses themselves. The trend in QA, he notes, is the

option of “taster courses”, which shifts the responsibility of assessment to the potential user. Again, this approach is in keeping with the methodology of the present study, one that relies on users/students’ perceptions of technology.

3.1.4 Globalisation and Distance e-Learning

Evans and Nation (2003) note that the recent growth of DE has been synchronous with the broad trend called ‘globalisation’. Altbach (2016, p.83) has described globalisation in HE in terms of “the broad economic, technological, and scientific trends that directly affect higher education and are largely inevitable” and this is indeed an important consideration when describing changes in the field. The importance of globalisation is derived from the fact that it “creates new ideas, values, identities, practices and movements” (Sethy, 2008, p.29).

This progressive transformation of social structures (ibid) hence involves the integration of national economies and societies towards a universal, global norm (Ahamed and Nair, 2014). Block and Cameron (2002) have called this a homogenising process, although Gunawardena (2014) cites opposing concepts of globalised hybridisation and synergistic relationships with local cultures. This mitigates the claim that globalisation is a simple “extension of American imperialism [or] Western hegemony” (ibid, p.78).

To some extent, this conflicts with the observations of Moore et al. (2005) that DeL is derived from theories originating in Western cultures and can therefore “come into conflict with the values that underpin the cultures of students taking courses from or in other countries” (Gunawardena, 2014, p.76). This section will thus consider how DeL should resist the temptation to forget, in this globalised world, the importance of respecting “educational differences, and the social, cultural [...] assumptions embedded in courses” (Gunawrdena, 2014, p.76). In this globalised context, this would allow a true exchange of ideas and the chance for “technologically developed countries [...] to learn from the perspectives of people in other countries” (ibid, p. 76). Evans and Nation (2003) criticise the distinction between developed and developing countries, noting that the former can still improve while that the latter may not “develop at the same pace, or possess a compulsive development culture” (p.782).

Gunawardena (2014) describes the effects of globalisation on HE as demand factors for two principal reasons. Firstly, the global knowledge economy means that the entry requirements for a ‘good jobs’ are suitable credentials, preferably from an HE institution (and more so from

a reputable one). Secondly, demographics and democratic ideals have created a larger cohort of potential students who wish to attend HE and believe they have the right to. These students stand to benefit from a process of globalisation that “influences teaching and learning, but also the ability of students to deal with social and cultural differences” (Hou, 2011, p.179).

Universities, which have operated in largely the same way for hundreds of years (Guri-Rosenblit, 2014, p.119), are being forced to adapt to the reality of a globalised world. For some institutions, this “offers exciting new opportunities no longer limited by national boundaries”, but for others, such drastic change has proved to be a threatening phenomenon.

A strategic plan in the age of globalisation may use DeL, which allows the institution to “transcend national borders and admit huge numbers of students” (ibid), though such strategies have the attendant risk of decreasing quality or creating conflicts between educational cultures. The struggle to maintain quality in DeL has resulted in an interest in international accreditation: “a symbolic and powerful indicator” (Hou, 2011, p.180).

According to Hou, the struggle both to maintain quality and to compete with international benchmarks will “likely exert pressures to varying degrees for quality assurance reforms within [national] education frameworks” (ibid, p.180).

Another development of the globalised world is an increasing emphasis upon inter-institutional collaboration. Teaching universities are less likely to consider themselves isolated institutions and so more likely to find global partners and networks (Guri-Rosenblit, 2014). Successful collaboration should theoretically provide synergies to reduce costs, attract students, create better and more flexible courses, ensuring superior infrastructures and richer student experiences. In practice, some partnerships achieve this, but others are little more than a ‘fanfare’ or failure (ibid). Collaboration is also necessary to maintain standards in a liberalised HE market with “many new providers [...] some of poor quality” (ibid, p.122).

However, globalised world requires globalised indicators of quality: “the successful operation of DE institutions and systems in the global arena depends highly on insuring their reputation as providing high quality education” (ibid, p.125).

Going beyond the naïve consideration that the Internet is a ‘neutral’ communications medium, Bowers (cited in Carr-Chellman, 2005, p.9) states that there are six dimensions across which it imports specific values. They are:

- (1) Context free forms of knowledge;
- (2) conduit view of language;
- (3) Western view of autonomous individuals;
- (4) Western ways of experiencing time;
- (5) western value of anthropocentrism;
- and (6) subjectively determined moral values. Though it might be easy to import a western course to another culture, such an act is ‘culturally and contextually bankrupt’” (ibid, p.80).

Boubstil et al. (2011) note five dimensions across which we must consider if a course is suitable for adaptation in a non-native nation: (1) Are English-dominated learning platforms used and if so, what impact may they have on second language speakers? (2) Innovations in pedagogy methods – should the curriculum impose Western teaching styles on a different culture? (3) Localisation – does the programme encourage local culture? (4) Relevancy of content to local needs and employment requirements. (5) Teaching model – is there a suitable pedagogue at the institution?

Globalisation and the DeL revolution have come hand-in-hand and the realities of the former are driving developments in the latter. One common thread in the literature is the speed of these developments, particularly those associated with technological change. Hence, the requirement for DeL is to perform the difficult task of tracking these developments in real time.

3.1.5 Distance e-Learning Students

DeL learners have different characteristics and backgrounds to students in traditional HE. Whilst the latter are usually between 18-24 years old, DeL learners' ages vary widely. In addition, there is a clear difference in the type of education they receive. Perhaps the most important of these differences is that regular attendance is prescribed for campus students in certain times and places and this can be contrasted to learning at a remove from the teacher for DeL students. Usun (2004) emphasises the importance of understanding the distinctive characteristics of DeL learners, to design effective and appropriate programmes that will meet their needs. Additionally, institutions running DeL must understand the potential challenges to learning in that domain.

The typical American distance learners, according to Moore and Kearsley (2012) can be characterised as follows:

- Adults aged 25-50.
- The key reasons why many students take DeL are to learn new subjects and skills, update old ones, fulfil a personal goal or for work-related purposes.
- Most participate in DeL programmes voluntarily.
- Most have previous experience of formal education.
- The more experience that the student has in formal education, the better her chances of completing the DeL course.

- DeL students tend to be more independent than traditional learners who take learning seriously; they tend to be committed, highly motivated and wish to put the knowledge they have learned to practical use.

Almaiql (2014) found that DeL students in SA tend to be disproportionately: older (45+), female, working in civil (governmental) employment, and taking Arabic language courses. In this study the main motivations for Saudi students taking DeL were found to be (in this order): educational, economic, and finally social.

Gallardo-Enchainique et al. (2015) note that many DeL learners are not ‘digital natives’ and may find the use of technology less natural than those born in recent generations. In many DeL courses, particularly in globalised institutions, there are a higher proportion of learners from other cultures and courses are less homogeneous (Amirault and Visser, 2010). The overall proportion of ‘non-traditional’ students is therefore much higher. For Fleming (2009, p.9) these students are, “low income or economic status groups, people with disabilities, students who are first in their family to participate in higher education, mature age students, and people from minority groups and refugees.” Overall, it is difficult to identify the characteristics of DeL learners, precisely because they are such a heterogeneous group. This problem is particularly notable in view of the relative homogeneity of the students in traditional HE.

Qureshi et al. (2002) cite MacBrayne (1995) who conducted a study of 672 students to determine that the top four motivations for distance learners were the following: the learner’s interest in the course offered; the location of the course; the strength of the learner’s efficacy and desire to obtain a degree; and finally, the impact of the course or degree on the learner’s future career path. Ohara (2004) finds that the main characteristic of a successful DeL student is the ability to enjoy new things, and to accept uncertainty. In 2009 Tapanes et al., found much the same thing: that the success of DeL is depended on students’ ability to tolerate ambiguity.

Disabled students are another student group who benefit from DeL (Harrison, 2007). Students who work full-time and housewives also find DE to be a practical and convenient method either to improve their situation in life or to pursue studies for their own sake (Halsne and Gatta, 2002). In terms of academic concern, Alali (2005) points out that students in DeL programmes can be classified into two groups. The first are students obtaining the general secondary school certificate or its equivalent, regardless of the graduation year. The second is comprised of students with HE degrees working in various sectors of society, who wish to

attain degrees in alternate disciplines commensurate to the nature of their jobs or who want to take short training courses.

3.1.6 Strengths and Weakness of Distance e-Learning

The following section contains an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses relating to the adoption of DeL as described by major theorists. In the context of this study, the intention is also for such an evaluation to map the theoretical basis of the research questions relating to the barriers preventing the provision of quality DeL, denoting what expert consensus believes it is.

Possibilities and Benefits

DeL has brought about advantages at various levels – at an institutional one, for the faculty and for learners. HE institutes that deploy DeL have shown significant success when in terms of access as well as the quality aspects of education (Schiffman et al, 2007). With regard to access, establishments have considered DeL to be a way to increase student accessibility and support the growth of continuing and professional education (Allen and Seaman, 2011). Students who enter HE no longer come solely from within the education system, but now have backgrounds in the corporate world, as professional training and development have become increasingly important (Irele, 2013).

Universities must consider these new streams of potential students alongside traditional consumers of education. In practice, this involves closer links between public institutions and private sector companies. Individuals involved with HE judge that teaching students across new locations or become involved with new markets of students are the key benefits of extending teaching to the DeL environment (Schiffman et al., 2007). DeL courses are now able to meet the requirements of distance students who live very far away, as well as nearby students who require additional flexibility, with the net result that enrolment in universities has increased (Anderson, 2008; Pachler and Daly, 2011). Beyond the dimension of distance there is also the factor of time, while the provision of asynchronous courses has enabled the learner to enjoy more flexibility. Such courses utilise tools such as forums, discussion boards and pre-recorded materials of good quality, as well as available-on-demand pedagogical content, such as lectures and other interactive learning activities (Hoffman, 2012). The

benefits of such courses are obvious when we think of mature learners with fixed responsibilities, such as children or employment (Lei and Gupta, 2010; Picciano et al., 2010).

Adult learners are a rapidly growing population group in the HE realm, as lifelong learning has evolved into a requirement for professional competitiveness, particularly amongst Generations X and Y, who suffer from underemployment, and see further qualifications as a remedy (Campbell and Schwier, 2014). This is because of developments in the economy as well as the job market (Bishop and Spake, 2003). DeL offers universities a chance to engage with this group of potential students, offering ongoing professional education opportunities online.

Daniel's prophecy that DE "will be a powerful tool for supporting lifelong learning" (2005, p.9) is already proving to be an accurate prediction. The very nature of DeL means that it is attracted to self-directed and autonomous processes of learning (Evans et al., 2008). The self-management skills implicit to this process are then transferable across several dimensions in being productive of an aptitude for lifelong learning. DeL therefore encourages lifelong learning, while also providing students with resources that develop self-regulated learning, thereby furnishing them with a skillset adapted to modern society (Peters, 2008).

DeL is also said to agree with the principles of social justice, as it is an inclusive platform that allows students to entry into HE whose participation would otherwise be minimalised or marginalised. This is particularly true for women in SA (El-Abassy et al., 2015). Amongst other limitations, some traditional barriers to entry in HE - such as location, accessibility issues, financial circumstances - are mitigated by the flexibility offered by DeL (Tait and O'Rourke, 2014). Additionally, DeL offers a 'second chance' to those who may have left the educational system at an early point.

With regard to quality, educational establishments consider DeL to boost their reputation, improve the degree completion rate, increase student retention levels and offer educational benefits (Allen and Seaman, 2011). Universities consider investments into technology infrastructure and progressing their online programmes to be notifications for the general public that they are forward thinking, critical to the future and technology-savvy (Betts et al., 2012; Chau, 2010). By using online technology in HE, these institutions are developing a tool as well as message for educational progress (Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt, 2006). As a result, this message offers a competitive advantage, being that a rise in retention rate, degree completion and educational benefits are results that clearly depict the 'high quality' of an

institution, highlighting its financial strengths and reputation (Schiffman et al., 2007) and overall success (Fisher and Baird, 2005).

With regard to pedagogical advantages, educators, employers and the general public consider DeL not to be as effective as more common methods of providing courses (Lowenthal and Hodges, 2015). However, this is a problem of perception rather than reality. Although one study shows that 80% of the faculty lack experience of DeL teaching or course development and 33% of academic officers believe online courses to be inferior to traditional HE (Allen and Seaman, 2011), numerous other research has shown that online students enjoy equal learning outcomes to traditional class-based students, or even surpass them (Kirtman, 2009; Zacharis, 2010; Horspool and Lange, 2012).

DeL provides new ways for each faculty to innovate and work flexibly within each institution of education; the staff is then able to establish and pursue different and productive learning methods, such as dialogue, collaboration and knowledge exchange (Dolan, 2011). DeL's digital materials and objects can be considered unique, unrestricted tools for innovation to flourish in education (Moisey and Ally, 2013). Due to the fact that DeL spreads class activities throughout a certain time span and location, together with the provision of different media, the faculty has more freedom when it comes to scheduling, geographical considerations and the online resources used to bolster their online teaching. DeL also improves the level of communication between teaching staff and the learners (Wright et al., 2009). While researching asynchronous learning networks, Swan et al. (2000) discovered that faculty satisfaction from online courses was closely linked with student learning and greater interactivity with students.

Students often prefer online courses due to their accessibility, cost, flexibility and ability to speed up degree completion. Studies have shown that convenience is the main benefit of DeL to students (Lei and Gupta, 2010, Cole et al., 2014). Online learning offers different educational scenarios that could be overlooked or unobtainable because of family situations, work schedules and commutes (Daymont and Blau, 2008). Evans and Haughey (2014) note that a key benefit of DeL is its flexibility for students, who can progress at their own speed. Additionally, online courses provide students with the chance to take on greater course loads because they can choose DeL pathways in conjunction with a full-time face-to-face education course (Carnevale and Olsen, 2003). As a result, students can finish their degree quicker.

Together with the flexibility provided, DeL increases the number of instances of interaction between teachers and learners. Kim et al. (2005) found that students had greater levels of

interactions with their instructors compared with traditional classroom environments. Furthermore, students stated that working together with their classmates online was advantageous when it came to the establishment of virtual teaming skills, which is of great benefit for the global business environment. This positive consequence is perhaps a result of DeL student attributing a greater number of events to being interactions of this sort. Dennen et al. (2007) note in turn that instructor contact, instructor presence in discussions, and expectations being made clear, all contributes towards the student's perception that their interpersonal communication needs are being met.

Through a case study of the initial experiences of an instructor researcher in teaching an online class, Campbell (2006) could pinpoint five key benefits of online teaching. Firstly, students take an active role in their education, appraise their learning and research their topics in greater detail of their own accord. Secondly, students can build knowledge independently. Thirdly, the asynchronous nature of online courses incites students to provide more measured answers. Fourthly, free access to their classmates' work provides the quality of students' work with a clear boost. Lastly, students increase their ability to use technology, which encourages them to use technology to assist them in other areas.

Learners have stated that the way face-to-face classes are run usually restrict their confidence in asking questions openly (Vonderwell, 2003). The online environment provides learners with anonymity; depending on learning preferences this can be a benefit or a drawback. Al-Harthi (2005) noted that Arabic students preferred to be anonymous in some respects, particularly if tutors fulfilled the role they expected in initiating communication. Conversely, Brindley (2014) argues that some DeL users wish to participate in a community that sees them as distinct individuals. These advantages underline the capabilities of DeL in offering a more interactive, social and beneficial educational experience for learners (Levine and Sun, 2003).

One immediately apparent advantage of DeL is its potential cost effectiveness, being that it offers larger student numbers, yet fewer inputs from staff. However, the true cost effectiveness of education is not, as Jung and Lee stated (2013), simply a factor of "costs alone", but of "cost in relation to educational value" (p.522). Jung and Lee go on to locate the tipping point at which this later standard was achieved to be around 1998, which reflects the point at which the pedagogy of DeL began to take full advantage of support systems and technological changes. Cost effectiveness must also be considered from the demand side (the student); here, Hodges (2009) found that lower course fees, lower travel costs and a minimisation of lost productivity are all offered to participants in DeL.

Limitations and Challenges

Related studies have shown that there are certain restrictions and problems associated with DeL environments. Online degrees and coursework are not always considered to be of the same standard as those conducted in classrooms. Adams (2008) researched 123 university search committee chairs to reach a full understanding of how to acceptable online degrees and coursework were when it comes to hiring staff. He showed that face-to-face communication between learners and teachers was considered to be a crucial element of a quality education. In addition, DeL degrees and coursework are not judged to have all the necessary elements required, even though such courses were provided by universities with a reputation for academic excellence.

Through online teaching, the position of the university teacher has changed. Seok (2008) has defined e-Teachers as individuals who are required to be instructional designers, instigators of discourses and technicians, as well as experts in their field. Furthermore, the virtual workspace means that these individuals are not only responsible for building a community, but act as motivators of their virtual attendees, ensuring information sharing (Seok, 2008). For Chang et al. (2014), the E-Instructor is a conduit that must process the complex information that is present in the DeL environment, while communicating this information in easily comprehensible terms for students. The E-Instructor is a both leader and a facilitator. Teachers usually have difficulty with this new way of educating people. DeL is a new type of education, being that its learning environment includes another layer of complication in contrast to traditional classroom environments that is the mediating role of technology (Kim et al., 2013).

Peltier et al. (2007) believe that teaching online is of greater complexity when compared to the usual approach of choosing a textbook, setting several readings and creating a collection of assignments. Innovations are facilitated by the Internet and telecommunications, meaning that teaching styles have moved the focus of teaching onto the learner (Garrison and Akyol, 2013) while epistemological perspectives become more in tune with constructivist ideologies (Dabbagh, 2005). Certain staff must adapt to these new styles and skills required. The skills involved in choosing suitable resources are different from those in traditional HE and training must be provided (Inglis, 2013).

DeL environments go against the more common lecture-based and teacher-focused systems that are common in HE. In most cases, DeL requires staff to create and plan new approaches to activities and interactions (Shearer, 2013). Issues with historic teaching methods are common, bringing uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of the new methods and doubt regarding its benefits (Phillips et al., 2007). Furthermore, studies have shown that teacher-focused approaches are preferred by HE institutions for online as well as classroom approaches (Gerard et al., 2011). This establishes a clear gap between the theories regarding the effectiveness of distance learning and its practices (Saba, 2013; Shearer, 2013).

A greater amount of work and time required by teachers; increasing student enrolments; a lack of administrative and technical support; and a lack of experience with DeL teaching are the main issues cited by researchers regarding DeL environments (Shea, 2007; Johnson, 2008; Lloyd et al., 2012). Moreover, instructors who do not have experience with online teaching, as is often the case, have problems allocating their time effectively when working in an unfamiliar environment (Van de Vord and Pogue, 2012). The faculty responsible for DeL teaching will often employ staff on part-time contracts, which only exacerbates the problems noted above. Maguire (2005) has categorised other barriers, including an increased workload and less time for research; lack of recognition and professional advancement compared to traditional teaching; lower monetary compensation. There were also concerns about lack of standards in DeL, the chance of low quality levels in DeL and the impact of working in DeL on their job security.

Research has highlighted several problems tied to DeL that can affect the learning experiences of students. These include: technical problems in use or access, such as the 'digital divide' described by Liebenberg et al. (2012); differing course designs (Yang 2007) and course designs which are not 'student empowering' (Hillen and Landis, 2014); uncertainty regarding peers' knowledge; and questions due to the lack of clarity in the results of online communications and potential misunderstandings (Campbell, 2006). DeL courses may have a lesser focus on the improvement of the communication skills of the students. This means that a student may have gained significant academic knowledge, but that students may not have developed the ability to communicate such facts (Al-Qahtani and Higgins, 2013).

In surveying the emotional states of 92 online learners, Zembylas et al. (2008) have discovered a significant cause of negative emotions was loneliness and isolation. In the study learners described their situation with words like distress, stress, alone, anxiety, desperation and hopelessness to report their emotional states in a series of qualitative descriptions in diaries, interviews and various e-surveys and e-communications. These problems must be

handled for DeL course retention rates to be maintained. DeL problems influence the attitude of students towards their online course experience (Yang, 2007), while these views will impact their decision to continue or stop taking part in online courses (Rodriguez et al., 2008). Husson (2014) shows that complaints procedures are an area of growing interest in DeL, with initiatives like SEEQUEL, an E-learner bill of rights being developed in the EU.

One assumption is that once a technology is embedded in a society there will be access to it for almost all students. Although this is a notion that might be viable in the developed world, it is not the case in the developing world, as “in developed societies access to the Internet is increasingly taken to be the norm [...] in developing countries the situation can be very different” (Rumble, 2014, p.208). Traditional online access via computers is not the only method applicable to DE. Shearer (2013) notes that any DE course must understand the culture in which it operates and the specific way it uses technology, be this by cell-phones rather than computer, chat services or SMS rather than the Internet, or more traditional 20th century technologies (TV, print, radio) rather than cutting edge ones.

Research has shown that effective design is crucial when it comes to mitigating the weaknesses of DeL. Young (2007) suggests that instructional design and pedagogy are the main focuses of any high quality online course. Once problems had been mitigated by effective design and the successful implementation of online courses, students benefitted from greater learning outcomes and were more effective in their work than those who were involved in DeL that proved to be poorly organised, and where the delivery and accessibility were negatively affected by technological factors (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). Existing literature on the limitations and problems of online courses have thus shifted the focus of recent studies to acquiring more understanding of the bases of DeL environments as being both technological (Meyer and Barefield, 2010) and pedagogical (Shelton, 2011). Van Assche and Vuorikari (2006) show that the provision of suitable resources can be a difficult balancing act, and requires careful course design.

From the perspective of social justice, there are issues with DeL, such as the asymmetry between payer and provider, and the fact the universities keep the fees for their courses despite the high dropout rates that can occur in DeL. For example, even an established provider like the Open University has a graduation rate of 20% (Tait and O'Rourke, 2014).

Whilst many DeL courses offer the promise of cost effectiveness, there can be downsides to distance courses, particularly in relation to the large fixed costs involved. The cost of equipment, staff training, and the establishment of online courses are sizable investments for a

HE provider, while student numbers must be sufficient to provide economies of scale (Jung and Lee, 2013). There are also costs associated with maintaining the DeL environment in terms of hardware and staff training. Though institutions may be tempted to recruit unlimited numbers of students, Bishop (2000) argues that 25 students is the ideal size of a cohort (per year, per course), while for Wentling and Park (2002) it is 22. Palloff and Pratt (2007) state that online instruction requires twice the amount of time from instructors compared to traditional education. Tomei (2006, p.45) states that: “the ideal traditional class size was 17 students while the ideal online class size was 12 students”. Goodyear et al, (2001) surveyed the class size in the Open University of the UK, and found they had, on average, 25 students per cohort. The private University of Phoenix in the US has a lower size, averaging of 8-15 students per online cohort.

Developments in DeL demonstrate that this type of education is more than a short-lived fad and is in fact a feasible approach for HE. DeL has multiple advantages for stakeholders like HE institutes, staff, and students. On the other hand, online course design must be given sufficient focus because it can bring about higher quality learning experiences; if not, the benefits of DeL will not be achieved.

This discussion of the two faces of DeL has shown that certain metrics should be met to ensure that there is a level of quality in DeL and that it can provide benefits to all of the stakeholders involved. The means of meeting these criteria are discussed in the following section as being ‘the keys to successful DeL’.

3.1.7 The Keys to Successful Distance e-Learning

The availability of DeL makes it easier for students to further their education, being that constraints of time and location do not apply to an online environment. Owing to these advantages, universities are constantly amending their teaching and learning procedures as they transition to more DeL processes. This thesis hence takes note the for key components of this transition: in *Institutional* strategy and vision; in faculty training and support; in the support offered to students; and finally, in the design of courses.

Institutional Strategy and Vision

Much of the literature around DeL stresses the importance of both having a vision and having the planning capacity to realise this vision. Campbell and Schwier (2014) show that changes in the vision of DeL providers will bring correlate changes in the organisational structure through which the DeL is delivered. These changes are exacerbated by the fact that there is

usually no single ‘plan’ for DeL providers to follow and that most innovation proceeds ad-hoc (Minnaar, 2013). Most typically, DeL will not share its processes with centralised, campus-based programmes, whose support services are built around the needs of traditional students. On the contrary, quality DeL requires a review of administrative and student services and technological plans in particular (Wright et al., 2009). Wetzel (2006, p.70) emphasises this reality, stating:

“Distance learning needs to be developed as a cogent part of an organization’s strategic planning in order to support its mission, fulfil a missing need, take advantage of new opportunities, and integrate with overall goals”.

Miller and Rader (2010) also stress the importance of the planning stage and its impact on organisational structures. Wright et al. (2009) note that developing countries often embarked upon the transition to electronic learning without knowledge of the full impacts upon institutions and their student bodies. Strategic planning is therefore vital being that it allows DeL to be an augmentation of the existing teaching structures without sacrificing the fundamentals of the educational process that have been developed and evolve according to the specific context.

For Minnaar (2013), this transition is best achieved through small scale, gradual change. The implementation of DeL requires all the values and experiences of stakeholders to be considered when creating a vision. If not, it risks losing the accumulated institutional experience that these stakeholders have developed, particularly with regard to the academic competencies which are so valued by teaching staff (Barberà et al., 2014). Being that stakeholders are incorporated into all levels of the planning phase, it is easier to derive consensus positions on the proposed vision (Wright et al., 2009). If outstanding issues are not considered or addressed in the planning stage, then there may be frustration and discontent amongst stakeholders.

Since the invention of the printing press, nothing else has impacted upon education to the extent the Internet has and will do (Draves, 2002). Being that people may often be conservative and defend their beliefs and methods rather than adapt to change, resistance is to be expected when DeL programmes are conceived and implemented. However, if policies and strategies were to be devised to address divisive issues, then the rate at which DeL is accepted could be increased. Yet the only means by which this can be achieved is by taking the views of all the relevant stakeholders into account, in order that the constraints of the environment be mitigated and so allowing the realisation of strategies aiming to create consensus (Draves 2002).

It is now no longer a question of whether or not a university should offer DeL, but how such programmes are designed and implemented. As the delivery platform is relatively new, this process is not without pitfalls and obstacles can arise unexpectedly. However, Bates (2005, p. 12) states that, “nevertheless, the imperfect nature of planning and management does not diminish the need for deliberate strategies to implement effective technology-based teaching”.

Kearsley (2013, p.434) provides a checklist for best practice in the administration of DeL programmes:

1. Schedule and communicate milestones to all stakeholders.
2. Define roles and responsibilities.
3. Provide for peer-interaction of faculty to share practice.
4. Collect multiple types of data.
5. Affect technology change through consensus.
6. Provide fiscal autonomy for departments.

Faculty Training and Support

A diverse set of researchers (Gulati, 2008; Green et al., 2009; Basaza et al., 2010) has recognised that the lack of staff experience in DeL is a major obstacle for the provision of DeL, while this agrees with Austin’s assertion that “one significant challenge [a] college faces is staff, because the development of quality online courses requires experienced instructional designers and greater assistance with video and multimedia components” (2010, p.30).

Although the instructional principles in DeL are not very different from those of a legacy classroom, training and support must be offered to delivery staff operating in this new paradigm. Hence, staff must be aware of the details of course strategy and implementation in the new environment (McNaught, 2002).

One factor in determining a change in teaching style is the older demographic of DeL students. When most students are older adults, teaching staff used to classes of 18-22 -year-olds may need to consider their teaching styles (Nakpodia, 2010). Rena (2007) notes that the quickening pace of change in the knowledge base requires creative and flexible solutions to improve curricula. Effective DeL teaching hence requires educators to utilise the traditional body of subject-based knowledge, as well as a set of new interpersonal skills that allow effective online communication with students (Chari, 2005). Deliverers of DeL will also require new technical skills regarding hardware and software issues in the DeL environment (Howell et al., 2004).

However, Young (2002) notes that most teachers are yet to acquire this skill set. In a Sloan-C survey of 69 American colleges in 2009, only one third of faculty members have fully taught an online course (Seaman, 2009). Hicks (2014) notes that the most effective and desired form of support for DeL faculty is just-in-time assistance capable of dealing with problems as they crop up. Taylor and McQuiggan (2008) posit that the best form of faculty development is a tripartite approach beginning with an orientation to the DeL environment then the provision of mentoring, while also offering on-going support.

Neely and Tucker (2010) suggest that DeL is suited to an ‘unbundling’ of faculty roles; that is, where the various tasks of a course leader which, in traditional HE, are assigned to one person, may now be split amongst several instructors. They conclude that this new method of teaching may offer cost savings and provide a better experience for learners and instructors.

The successful integration of teaching and technology in learning means that teachers should, in addition to developing technical skills, begin to assess their teaching methods and the beliefs that underpin them. Research shows that teachers frequently learn more widely both when they incorporate technologies and pedagogies that mesh together and when they have an opportunity to reflect upon and improve their teaching (Gerard et al., 2011).

Initially, the most important determinate of the applicability of integrating technology is the pedagogical mode within which a course operates (Loertscher, 2009; Lowther et al., 2008). Having conducted a meta-review of studies considering teaching and technology, Loertscher found that, “overall, across all uses in all content areas, technology doses provide a small, but significant, increase in learning when implemented with fidelity and accompanied by appropriate pedagogical shifts” (p. 48).

What is more, the beliefs of teachers about technology are important in influencing its adaptation. Although there are still issues with the accessibility of technology, it is certainly becoming more accessible with the passage of time. Both support and professional development are cornerstones of a policy that would integrate technology in order that it enhances the student-driven, dynamic learning environment (Kim et al., 2013).

Shattuck (2013) recently conducted a comprehensive review of the literature regarding faculty participation. This study focused on psychological motivations held by the members of staff participating in DeL and categorised them in terms of motivational and demotivational factors. The table below summarises the most important factors. To come to terms with how a particular faculty can perform well in the provision of DeL requires that their motivations be

understood; for example, permanent faculty staff tend to be motivated by intrinsic factors, whilst temporary and adjunct staff more by extrinsic factors (Chapman, 2011).

The quantity of demotivating factors listed below provide an explanation for the ‘reality check’ Shattuck asks us to take regarding DeL, noting that only one third of faculty (across 2,500 US HE institutions) have positive opinions about online learning (Allen and Seaman, 2010).

Table 3.2: Motivational and Demotivational Factors

Motivational factors	Demotivational Factors
<p>Intrinsic motivators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Personal satisfaction ▪ Professional growth ▪ Personal challenge ▪ Altruistic motives ▪ Esprit de corps ▪ Reaching new audiences ▪ Using new technology ▪ Increasing geographical accessibility ▪ Increasing demographic accessibility 	<p>Demotivational factors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of time ▪ Low levels of compensation ▪ Lower compensation per unit of time compared to traditional HE ▪ Lack of incentives and rewards ▪ Problems and costs with internet connections when travelling ▪ Lack of administrative support ▪ Lack of technical support ▪ Inadequate training ▪ Perceived lack of rigour ▪ Unpleasant students ▪ Restrictive medium ▪ Lack of personal authority to make changes when required
<p>Extrinsic Motivators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Support service ▪ Training opportunities ▪ Design support ▪ Fitting in with organisational goals ▪ Compensation 	

Adapted from Shuttack (2013)

Student Support

Providing learners with adequate support is crucial to the provision of effective DeL. Washington State University notes that, “success in attracting, serving, and retaining students will hinge more on excellent student support services than on any technology issues” (Chrispen et al., 2011, p.93). DeL providers must evaluate their institutional structures to maximise the provision of such support. Usun (2004) notes that DeL strategy can become wrapped up in a focus on teaching at the expense of student services, yet if learners are to be successful they must have these services in financial, personal, academic, legal and technical support issues. DeL environments should be designed to provide those students who cannot or

do not wish to attend campuses with an experience that corresponds to those of the on-campus learner; therefore, the online services provided must be equivalent to those provided physically (Krenelka, 2005). In a traditional university, students are assured of the opportunity to raise issues and concerns through face-to-face contact with tutors; this is not assured in the DeL environment, therefore it is for learner support to offer this ultimate guarantee that students will receive the guidance they require (Jung and Hong, 2014).

Curry (2013) notes that DeL can lag behind traditional HE in providing services to students such as personal and academic counseling. He goes on to note that, due to the improvements in synchronous communication made in the last decade, there is no excuse for providing an inferior service, especially considering the positive implications for retention rate and satisfaction it offers. Tait and O'Rourke (2014) also show that adequate counseling is important for enabling socially just outcomes in institutions. Brindley (2014) found that counseling is one of the three most desired services by students.

Institutions must consider the methods of providing support for students beyond course content, so helping students with other areas of learning. Online support has three levels: at its most basic, the creation of web-pages which contain information; secondly, adding means of communication to such web-pages (i.e. forms to make inquiries); and finally, the creation of webpages that allow personal interaction (Collins, 2007). The benefits to universities of providing DeL are many but prominent amongst them are the reduction of expenses, increased enrolment and greater efficiency. If universities are to enjoy these benefits they must be committed to providing access to and supporting DeL.

Hence, expectations are constantly increasing in regard to the level of support in DeL courses. Being that globalisation and the associated upload of more and more commercial services to the Internet both progress, students/customers are experiencing superior levels of support in commercial services and will assume the same will be provided by a DeL course (Hardy Cox and Belbin, 2010). In essence then, they expect an online course to be as simple and user-orientated as their experience of Amazon's website, for instance.

If learners are not ready for a DeL environment, then there can be repercussions and negative results for other learners and their teachers in the online environment (Fink, 2003). An important component of DeL is therefore the requirement to train students in using technology both in a general and content-specific context. Several studies have shown how such support increases the potential of students to succeed (McAlister et al., 2001; Owens et al., 2009; Iqbal and Bhatti, 2015). In many respects being a DeL student makes more

demands than traditional HE: students must set their own study schedules, balance them with other commitments and acquire a specific set of skills relating to the acquisition and use of resources (Brindley, 2014). Furthermore, students are expected to achieve integration with their peers in many different roles within the learning network (ibid). Learner support is increasingly designed to provide these skills to post-secondary learners who may not yet possess them when they begin a DeL course (ibid).

The availability of opportunities to socialise with other learners is one of the most desirable aspects of a DeL environment. We may observe a distinction between self-paced courses and those that operate within the virtual classroom – the latter providing more ‘natural’ opportunities for inter-group communication (Brindley, 2014). Students who can access online tutoring, counselling and study groups therefore benefit from better outcomes (McLoughlin, 1999). One problem with DeL, noted by Ehrmann (1999), is that students most in need of support are those who are least likely to ask for it. Being that the online world is a recent creation, older students, especially those in developing countries, are most likely to be computer illiterate. These groups should hence be provided with training and support if DeL is to fulfil its potential.

We should recognise, ultimately, that although a great deal of resources has been deployed to study learner support networks, Brindly (2014) notes that no ‘silver bullet’ has been discovered; that is, a single factor to explain student dissatisfaction and drop out. A combination of factors is therefore responsible for creating good learner support, and these are: “purposeful, proactive, and timely, focused on early intervention, anticipatory guidance, preparedness for online study, skill development, and social and academic engagement” (p.293).

Course Design

In course design, as in many areas of educational theory, a division can be drawn between the universalist perspectives, which claim there are an objective set of instructions for the successful creation and implementation of courses, and a separate (and often newer) strand claiming to incorporate considerations of “sociocultural, geopolitical, and economic context” (Campbell and Schwier, 2014, p.347). They thus provide a list of goals for a modern virtual learning community adapted and listed below:

- Sharing data, information and knowledge
- Connecting people-to-people, people-to systems and systems-to-systems

- Creating individual and organisational awareness of members' potentialities
- Facilitating the creation of a community knowledge repository, along with tools for engagement and stimulating the generation of new ideas
- Helping individuals build wider social networks
- Linking isolated cultures
- Ensuring that knowledge is accessible

Institutions must consider the pacing and content of DeL courses, while meeting the development of the curriculum and its support to ensure standards. Bates (2005) notes that DeL planning tends to concentrate on staff and budget planning rather than educational outcomes. Yet DeL is becoming a distinct field in education, while new pedagogical techniques are being created to aid its delivery (Keegan, 2003). Therefore, if it is to be successful, a curriculum must adapt to new technological advancements. Effective technology thus use encourages interaction between students and content, teachers and their peers (Wright et al., 2009).

Administrators tend to view technology as a means of achieving a goal rather than a goal itself (Bates, 2005). Omofaye (2006) attributes this perspective to the fact that the current generation of administrators has not used online technology in their learning and do not therefore make full use of it. Many developing countries overestimate the cost savings and potential to reduce staff that DeL apparently offers (Wright et al., 2009). Silberstein notes that, conversely, “[o]ne of the biggest myths about online education is that it is cheap. To produce high quality distance education courses, it is very expensive” (Silberstein, 2007). Shearer (2013) notes that as the demands being made on DeL course designers become greater, the requirement will be for a team with varied competencies to successfully design a course capable of meeting such modern metrics as, “rich media [...] accessibility or universal design [...] an accreditation focus across the curriculum” (p. 251).

Ultimately, an evaluation of the ‘correct’ way to design DeL is beyond the scope of this review, which has aimed to introduce the key factors that must be considered, rather than setting out to be prescriptive about methods. To this end, a list of these factors adapted from Shearer is provided in the Table 3.3 below.

Teachers can also be slow to adapt their styles, showing a reluctance to change (Anderson and Middleton, 2002). However, the sheer impetus behind the DeL revolution has forced the development of new and innovative teaching and learning (Anderson and Middleton, 2002; Bates 2005). This does not imply that DeL must ‘reinvent the wheel’ with regard to

instructional design, but that it should now consider how traditional models may be best incorporated to its specific environment. Naidu (2013) discusses the applicability of a series of pre-DeL models of instruction, concluding that they all have a part to play in current instructional design. Kim et al. (2013) call the effective use of technology ‘dynamic scaffolding’, noting that a range of platforms exists to offer instructors the opportunities to find new strategies for implementing pedagogical theories.

Table 3.3: Design Factors

Design factor	Key questions
Learner autonomy or learner control	How much guidance is given? – How much freedom do the students have? – Who are the audiences for the course? – Who control learning outcomes?
Learner-content interaction	What are the texts used in the course? – Who are their authors? – How are they interpreted? – What media are used in the course?
Learner-learner and learner-instructor interaction	What means of communication can be used? – Can interaction be timely? – Is interaction open-ended or closed? – Who are the stakeholders and what do they expect from the interaction?
Social presence	How is presence mediated? - What do participants expect their level of presence to be? - Will the online course mimic physical presence, or use technology to ensure its presence? – What virtual environments will be used?
Access	How will the course design consider: gender, culture, financial, geographic, disabilities, preparedness, motivational, linguistic, and other factors? – What are the course technologies, and are they ‘open’ and available?
Internet and technology access	Do participants have access to sufficiently high speed Internet? - What are the best and most common e-technologies for participants? - What are the technological costs of participation? – What mix of technologies is used?
Costs	What are the costs of participation? – Does the course offer value? – Does the course have a long shelf life? – Can the course be maintained once it is set up? – Which OER platforms are incorporated?
Technological usage	Does the course use web 1.0, 2.0 or OER technology? - Are social media represented?

Adapted from Shearer (2013, pp. 254-265)

DeL can suffer from a lack of feedback to students and this can lead to negative outcomes (Flowers, 2001; Zirkle, 2003). Galusha (2009) notes that there are two problems – namely, failure to give feedback and delays in giving feedback - and shows how these issues are problematic for students who want to feel involved in a community.

For Shute and Kim (2014), feedback is an essential part of successful formative assessment. It shows students how to attain their goals and improve their outcomes. Good feedback is specific, being that it demonstrates through insightful comment where errors occur and how improvements can be made. In its best manifestation, it encourages students to think about the process involved in the tasks they undertake, rather than solely on outcomes like passing. West et al. (2013) show that perceptions of the Open University in United Kingdom students in regard to feedback are essential determinates of their levels of motivation (which, in turn, affects the completion rate).

Moreover, Gunawardena (2014) notes that DeL offers new possibilities for feedback such as 'e-mentorship'. The provision of an e-mentor is hence beneficial to students, being that they may provide a culturally situated source of help for students seeking such assistance. Hence, Gunawardena et al. (2011) have conducted a study of Sri Lankan and US students, noting that when help was provided from an e-mentor who shared the cultural understanding of the protégé, he or she 'always welcomed' the feedback and found it to mitigate feelings of isolation. DeL environments must therefore be designed for the needs of learners from the bottom up, rather than simply being created as empty programmes by administrators who believe that 'the students will come'.

Van Assche and Vuorikari (2006) note the importance of sufficient resources being provided. They offer a theory about how many resources this would be, noting that if there are too few resources the students hear 'silence', whereas if there are too many they hear 'noise'. Therefore, quality in DeL resources has two aspects; firstly the quantity of resources provided, but also secondly the quality of resources provided. Furthermore, they distinguish between provision of resources in themselves and the provision of a framework within which students can discover their own resources. Again, both aspects are required for quality.

Conrad (2014) notes that resources can be provided by both instructors and shared amongst peers, and that successful DeL will provide a platform for both methods. Much current research revolves around the concept of the OER, resources that are free, widely distributed, and reusable (i.e. Dron, 2014). These resources transcend a specific course and can have impacts in several contexts. Resource based models of delivery also offer lower costs to the institution (Inglis, 2013).

In general, as expounded in the literature, there are many barriers that make it difficult to provide high quality DeL to students. This study will proceed to consider the specific

constraints in the Saudi context by considering the perspectives of undergraduate students participating in DeL courses there.

3.1.8 Summary

This section has discussed the genesis of DeL and its relation to DE, identifying a type of DE operating in a modern, technical context. DE may be seen to have grown symbiotically with technology, being that both have enabled improvements in the other. We have also discussed globalisation as another key historical development. The characteristics of the learners of DeL have been highlighted here, being they were show to constitute, in some ways, a very different demographic to that participating traditional HE. The discussion of ‘strengths and weaknesses’ has shown both the upside and the downside of DeL, providing a balanced assessment of its implications for stakeholders. This evaluation has in turn formed the basis of a discussion about the possibility of providing best practice in DeL through an identification of the keys to its successful implementation. The next section will hence introduce the notion of quality, submitting it to a similar mode of study.

3.2 Quality and Education

To improve quality in any area is to engage in an ongoing process, one that has no definitive ‘final point’. This section of the study will embark upon a critical investigation of what ‘quality’ is, with the overarching intention of putting in motion this process of quality improvement. Beginning with a consideration of what this concept means, this section will perform an evaluation of the extent to which ‘quality’ is applicable or suitable to describe best practice in education, HE and, finally, in DeL. This evaluation will pivot around a discussion of how the key term ‘standard’ will be used; a vital concept insofar as it enables us to engage with important models of quality used for assessing DeL.

3.2.1 Introducing Quality

As we see increasing complexity regarding external environmental conditions, the issue of quality is becoming a major topic in publicly operated services; for example, in educational institutions. There is an extensive and growing corpus of research relating to the nature of quality and the role quality plays in public service performance. However, scholars do not agree on what ‘quality’ is, nor are they in agreement on how ‘quality’ should be defined and assessed. Hence, the degree to which quality is a difficult term to define is reflected in the varied nature of opinions formulated by different researchers regarding the topic. For Harvey and Green (1993) and Turner (2011), for instance, ‘quality’ is a semantically uncertain term.

The etymological root of ‘quality’ is found in the Latin *qualis* (composition). In common speech, it designates an aspect of one object superior to that same aspect in another object (Ehlers, 2013). If one denotes the term ‘quality’ in this way, then one should focus an analysis of quality in public services on the foundational characteristics of a service or good.

According to Pitman (2014) and Schindler et al. (2015), the word ‘quality’ has connotations of *excellence, assurance, enhancement, zero error, fitness for purpose* and an *adherence to specified standards*. In fact, when attempting to eliminate a degree of the ambiguity that initially surrounded the term, an entire range of interpretations of ‘quality’ may be identified and investigated. Hence, to acknowledge both the importance and difficulty of the term, a series of concepts are regularly utilised in the literature of ‘quality’, including those of ‘value’ and ‘condition’.

Owing to the difficulty of defining the word ‘quality’, Gaster (1996) maintains that the term has generally been taken to encompass a set of features. These features are different in relation to the services concerned. Indeed, various figures from the spheres of politics,

education/academia, management, and customer service presented many different definitions of 'quality' to standardise what is a term with multiple meanings. We should note that each account of what the term means is coloured by individual objectives, values and experiences, as well as the background of the person attempting to define the concept.

For example, Juran and Godfrey (1998) settle upon a more customer-facing description of the term when they argue that quality means 'fitness for use'. In contrast, Feigenbaum (1991) suggests that the term relates to the fulfillment of customer expectations and requirements. Finally, the International Organisation of Standardisation (ISO9000) takes the term to denote the "degree to which a set of inherent characteristics fulfills requirements" (Tricker and Sherring-Lucas 2005, p.4, cited in Ehlers, 2013). Although the majority of these definitions are related to one another, it should be noted that the variance of the above is testament to the fact that there is no uniform way of defining the term.

The discussion that we have touched upon suggests that quality can be constituted of two contrasting elements: a 'subjective' element and an 'objective' element. Here, the subjective relates to anticipated and perceived quality, while the objective relates to readiness for utilisation or matching up to a specification. It is hence important to note that both these subjective and objective elements should be factored into a definition of quality (Ehlers, 2013). It is possible to argue that quality, as a term that can be interpreted in a range of plausible ways, is one used by different persons or groups, in specific environments, in accordance with the nature of their perspectives.

As we have seen, a range of both definitions and methods of applying quality has been developed through diverse semantic interpretations of the term. The formulation and adoption of such a range was primarily performed in industry, before it gradually moved into the service sector. More specifically, the notion of quality relates to schools, institutions of higher educational and online learning platforms. Pawlowski (2007) explains that approaches to quality in sectors of industry are very different to those of public services; for example, the use of concepts of 'quality' in education are context-dependent.

Pollitt (1992) surveys the various issues surrounding the methods of measuring quality. He presents a concise summary of what constitutes a quality approach in the public services sector and differentiates the view of quality held by service providers from that held by users of the service. To his mind, in view of this difference: "If it meets their wants and needs, it is a quality service, if it does not, it is not" (Pollitt, 1992, p. 3)

Pawlowski (2007) and Schindler et al. (2015) maintain that an adequate understanding of quality is the primary element in facilitating its enhancement. However, their conclusion once again is that no single definition of quality can be given. This point is reiterated by Pirsig (1976), who states that: “If no-one knows what [quality] is then for all practical purposes it doesn’t exist at all. But for all practical purposes it does exist”. In this sense, the notion of quality remains paradoxical.

Having considered the various ways in which quality can be defined, we should also take into account the viewpoints of numerous stakeholders. In terms of implementing educational programmes, administrators, learners, employers, governing bodies and instructors constitute the body of stakeholders that is involved in formulating an appropriate framework. Generally speaking, these stakeholders will define quality in ways that do not concur with each other. In the light of this problem, Cleary (2001) and Ehlers (2013) state that it is imperative for one to consider quality as an ongoing process of negotiation between stakeholders.

A contrasting viewpoint takes the concept of quality as one formulated in accordance with its outlooks and outcomes. For example, in classifying approaches to quality in terms of their objectives and outlooks, Biggs (2001) defines the concept in relation to two primary classifications: prospective and retrospective. **Retrospective** quality is characterised by a backward-looking process where one first analyses the activities that have been carried out and then performs a summative assessment of these activities based on external specifications. The primary motivation for this approach to quality is managerial rather than academic, in whose domain accountability is a top priority. Here, it is important to pay attention to the degree to which processes are frequently carried out in a hierarchical and bureaucratic manner. Biggs (2001) claims that, despite the way it is proposed, this approach does not focus on processes of teaching and learning. Instead, it is based upon a limited set of metrics relating to good teaching and management practices and cumulating in a cost-benefit evaluation.

It is crucial to underline the defining characteristics of retrospective and prospective quality that enable us to distinguish one from the other. **Prospective** quality is characterised by the attempt to enhance and improve upon ongoing operations. According to Doherty (2012), this approach emphasises testing, to identify mistakes and to ensure favourable outcomes.

Doherty makes the distinction between two types of quality (2012): quality control (QC) and quality assurance (QA). The first, QC, refers to a retroactive approach that corrects weaknesses and, whilst obviously useful in this regard, would lead only to adequate rather

than best practice. Conversely, QA is an approach which pre-identifies problems and tries to prevent their occurrence. If we think of this definition in abstract terms, then this approach would clearly lead to increases in the quality of the product or service. However, as Doherty notes, it also constitutes a move away from clear standards relating to fitness for purpose and user satisfaction can be problematic because it loses its anchor in an absolute and measurable metric; namely, does it work? For Doherty, QA can lead to questions about the ‘metaphysics’ of quality, those which QC otherwise avoids.

It is also possible to classify approaches to quality in accordance with the individual who evaluates quality in an internal versus external approach. This individual is known as an auditor. The internal approach to quality in institutions of higher educational underlines the importance of the continual improvement of the organisation because of self-assessment, while also emphasising the changes made based on the results. Contrastingly, the external approach emphasises quality assurance by carrying out audits related to institutional performance. Individuals or agencies who are systemically external will then base these activities on the predetermined standards they have defined.

Much of the literature regarding quality derives from the private sector. Buckley (2003) notes that this emphasis raises a number of issues when its insights are transferred to a public-sector context. Arawati et al. (2007) note that the public sector has been historically reluctant to focus upon quality to the same extent as the private sector. However, public-sector management has come increasingly to consider quality, owing to its importance both in meeting customer expectations and in competing in the modern mixed marketplaces where public and private sector evidently meet.

3.2.2 Quality in Education

The education sector follows the trends we have discussed insofar as it makes the provision of quality a central issue of concern. However, there are several ways in which education differs from other services and makes the application of quality standards unsuitable; most notably, the dependency of successful outcomes on students’ engagement (Kahu, 2013; Trowler and Trowler, 2010). In other words, different to other services, education is a process rather than a final product.

In spite of these differences, researchers have a propensity to borrow terminology from industry or business and apply such terms to education. Concepts like ‘zero errors’, ‘transformation’ or ‘value for money’ have been used. Taken from management-based theories, these terms must be reoriented to fit educational contexts (Mizikaci, 2006). Gaster

(1996) notes that much business lexicon can be unhelpful in an educational context, especially when comparing such terms to tradition academic touchstones regarding quality and independence of output and research. Tribus (1994) notes salient differences between education and businesses; namely, that the ‘school is not a factory’ and ‘the student not a product’. Instead, education is the product, requiring the student to be both worker and consumer in the process leading to the end product. Education should therefore be considered as a *relative* concept, or an act which takes place in a specific context. In contrast, industrial quality models are unlikely to be applicable without significant redefinition.

The question of quality in education raises several important issues of how to define it: who determines it; how and at what level it is measured; who is the ‘customer’ or interested party partaking of the quality; and whose agenda does the provision of the quality fulfil. These questions of determination anchor the discourse of quality in a framework defined by prejudice, power and control, while situating ‘quality’ in a larger structural context, considering the wider societal implications of the quality agenda (Napier, 2014, p.3).

The most persuasive classification of types of quality in education is provided by Elassy (2014), who builds upon Doherty’s afore-mentioned model and also that of Biggs (2001). Here, Elassy creates two categories of quality in education: a retrospective notion termed *quality assurance* (QA), and a prospective one called *quality enhancement* (QE). Somewhat confusingly, this model reclassifies Doherty’s prospective model of QA (see Table 3.4 below) as the retrospective term in the pair, although the structural similarity remains.

Table 3.4: Comparison of Quality Classification Across Models

	Minimum standard	Best practice
Doherty (2012)	Quality control (QC)	Quality assurance (QA)
Biggs (2001, 2003)	Retrospective quality	Prospective quality
Elassy (2014)	Quality assurance (QA)	Quality enhancement (QE)

In regard to finding a measure of quality specific to education, Elassy opts for QA out of necessity, being that it can benchmark performance to pre-determined standards. The model given here can be made more complex by integrating Cheng’s (2003) division of QA into ‘internal’, ‘interface’ and ‘future’ waves, relating respectively to institutionally planned goals, stakeholder needs and future stakeholder needs. Using a medical metaphor, Elassy uncovers the limitations of QA by comparing it to ‘diagnosis’, whilst it is QE that constitutes ‘treatment’. However, QE is not an unproblematic concept, as it requires ‘complex discourse’ in an ‘interpretive space’. Rather than defining the concept concretely, Elassy defines it

historically, depicting the transformation of QA into QE as the move from a historical to a modern regime of quality, as depicted in Table 3.5 below.

Table 3.5: Quality Assurance vs Quality Enhancement

Characteristic of QA	Characteristic of QE
External standards	Internal standards
Relates to assessment and accountability	Relates to improvement and development
Summative	Formative
Move from top to lower level	Moves from lower to top level
Focuses on past	Focuses on present and future

Adapted from Elassy (2014)

Gunn and Cheng (2015) highlight one consequence of this division between QA and QE, noting that it is government that imposes QA upon the educational system, entailing that it can be political in nature. In contrast, rather than being a managerial tool, QE is generated by educators and is therefore focused on practice. From our perspective as researchers, it is clear that QE, with its ear for the contextual and cultural specificity of the institutional setting it which it may be embedded, is increasingly significant for the auditing of e-learning in all its substantive aspects; that is, those beyond purely technical objectives, instead related to delivery platforms and reliability).

3.2.3 Quality in Higher Education

No matter what the mode of delivery for HE might be, it remains difficult to compose valid definitions of quality. The nature of ‘quality’ varies between agents in the provision of HE; hence, after examining bodies, teaching staff, bureaucracies and learners we observe that they all have differing perspectives. Hence, a definition of quality in HE a complex construct requiring the agreement of a variety of actors and institutions (Lockee, Moore and Burton, 2002). Cleary (2001, p.20) explains that this construct is:

Relative to the unique perspective and interpretations of different stakeholders groups (students, alumni, faculty, administrators, parents, oversight boards, employers, state legislatures, local governing bodies, accrediting associations, transfer institutions, and the general public.

Such a plurality of stakeholders can impede a consensus being reached regarding quality.

Quality has differing meanings according to time and circumstance. The differences that give rise to differing perceptions of quality may also result in differing measurements of quality.

Sir Christopher Ball (1985, 97) states that quality is the ‘Achilles’ Heel’ of HE, being that it is a sensitive issue and that there is no way of mitigating this sensitivity. Quality is an area

where differing views about the aims of HE meet. Within this multiplicity of definitions and viewpoints, perspectives operate either to defend the status quo or to propose new, alternative policies and standards by which HE can be assessed (Barnett, 2003). Moreover, quality is hard to define in the context of HE because there is no simple criterion available. Any possible evaluations are therefore being influenced by when, where, for whom and by whom such a determination is made. The complexity of teaching and learning in HE is also a significant barrier (Baird, 1988).

Thus, although quality is of importance for institutions of HE, its definition remains elusive (Harvey and Green, 1993; Kemenade et al., 2008). Polanyi (1966) states that the understanding of quality in HE comes from ‘tacit knowing’. Sallis (2002, p.1) is of the view that:

We all know quality when we experience it but describing and explaining it is a more difficult task. In our everyday life, we usually take quality for granted, especially when it is regularly provided. Yet we are all too acutely aware when it is lacking. We often only recognise the importance of quality when we experience the frustration and time wasting associated with its absence.

Though quality might remain elusive, it is clear that HE institutions are now engaged in a dialogue with the concept, and strive towards a maximisation of quality (Ezer and Horin, 2013). Houston (2007) notes that quality assurance (QA, as defined above) is often the preferred vessel for this interpretation of quality, being that it tends towards external accountability and control. However, the future of HE requires a QE approach, whose touchstones of “empowerment, enhancement, enthusiasm and excellence” (Ezer and Horin, 2013, 249) appear to agree with the modes of development required to attain educational excellence in the 21st century.

In view of the existence, of so many individual perspectives, it is often said the notion of quality in HE is hard to grasp (Harvey and Green, 1993). The fact that quality is important is not in dispute; the question is problematic only where the nature of this ‘quality’ is considered (Kalayci et al., 2012). Even papers such as those of Schindler et al. (2015), which aim to synthesise various approaches to quality in HE, derive neither a single definition of the term nor a set of terms capable of capturing its most important aspects.

Several approaches have subdivided quality into separate aspects; for example, as a tripartite division into conforming to requirements; of commitment to improvement; and of meeting expectations. Watty (2003) presents a fourfold definition - excellence, purposiveness, transformative capability and value - while Ellis and Moore (2006) opt for a twofold partition

into superiority of product and of the service that creates the product. Again, each of these models may be seen to have similarities.

However, the most famous and complete definition of quality in HE is provided by Harvey and Green (1993), who identify seven separate but interrelated axes along which a conceptualisation of quality can be plotted. They are: (1) excellence; (2) achieving zero error; (3) enrichment of students in terms of knowledge and development; (4) achieving a set of standards, benchmarks or expectations; (5) a philosophy regarding continual improvement; (6) value for money; (7) fitness for purpose. Quality can thus be defined according to how these seven elements or standards are achieved.

This study will thus consider this fourth dimension - that of standards - to be the most concrete and comprehensible conception of these measures of quality and the most suitable means by which quality can be quantified and improved. This approach will be explicated in a sustained discussion of 'standards' in the following section.

3.2.4 Standards

Harvey and Green (1993), note that when used to discuss the level of provision of a service, the term 'standard' is more restricted than 'quality'. Green (1997, p.113) posits the term standard to denote a "minimum threshold that a program must reach before a program can be offered". Clements et al. (2015, p.1100) state that a "standard defines quality as the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs." To make use of a standard is therefore to show if a product or service meets a pre-determined level of quality.

Researchers have concluded that standards should have the following attributes: measurability, uni-dimensionality and limited scope (Anderson et al., 2000; Harvey, 2006). However, the application of standards to the measurement of education is not unproblematic. The notion of a level to be necessarily attained may cause problems insofar as it represents a minimum rather than a maximum. It is hence not a call to excellence but merely to adequacy. Carroll (2003) states that if a standard is set too low, then the practitioners who attain it are not aiming for 'the best'.

Our study has chosen to use the term 'standard' in preference to other commonly used terms relating to the measurement of quality in DeL. These include, benchmark (Yang and Durrington, 2010); accreditation system (Seok, 2007); guideline (Jara, 2010); and quality indicators (Jung, 2011). Here, we follow the argument of Seok (2007) and Jara (2010) who

offer a comparative description of these various terms in practice. The terms ‘quality indicator’ and ‘quality dimension’ are dismissed as being tautological because they simply refer back to ‘quality’ as the measure of itself. Moreover, accreditation systems are generally a measure applied by a specific body if they feel their standards have been met.

An even more problematic distinction is between ‘benchmarks’ and ‘standards’, being that the terms are used interchangeably in the literature. However, if we take a broad survey of its use in the field of DeL, the idea of a benchmark is most commonly tied to a measurement of the level at which a provider operates and is then compared to that of another provider. As such, it is a tool to encourage best practice in a literal sense by aping the performance of the most successful institution. The present study prefers to consider quality standards, being that this term is generally associated with the importation of a set of previously determined dimensions, through which quality is measured. In the present study, these standards are not directly comparable with other institutional and cultural contexts, in which the students’ perceptions might be different. Morley (2003) notes how this generalisation across cultures is ‘epistemologically naive’. The use of the term ‘standard’ is therefore in agreement with its deployment in the pragmatic methodology used in our study insofar as it serves as a placeholder, marking a space in which students’ perceptions will be determined.

Nevertheless, as we have demonstrated in the previous discussion regarding quality, the concepts of standards remain hard to define, especially in HE institutions whose goals and objectives may vary and where these institutions have autonomy to decide how to meet these goals (Ogunleye, 2013). Marshall (2004) emphasises that standards are defined by providers of resources to maximise the returns on their investments. Seok (2007) notes that this return occurs in DeL due to two sets of factors. Firstly, the costs of establishing effective content in online course are lowered and secondly, the content of existing courses is more easily deployed by new providers following similar procedures.

In turn, Latchem (2014, p.318) provides a simple definition of standards as “agreed levels of service or organisational performance that should be met every time” and therefore collapses all of the major metrics by which DeL is measured into this category. One issue with defining standards in this way is the apparent universalism they claim to depict; the notion that standards fit all cultures and situations. Latchem (2014) argues that this can lead to cultural bias, being that the standards used are generally created by Western cultures. This may be less of an issue with technical standards, but when it comes to questions of pedagogical technique there are more significant differences, such as that noted by Talalakina (2010) between collectivist and individualist cultures.

3.2.5 Quality in Distance e-Learning

How can we situate quality in DeL in relation to quality standards in traditional HE? Jung et al. (2011) note the difference between Perraton (2000) claiming that DeL aims to become ‘on par’ with traditional education, while Stella and Gnanam (2004) hold a contrary position that DeL is so distinctive that traditional metrics of HE cannot be applied to it. The mediating position of Peters (2003), Koul (2006) and Irele (2013) centres on the belief that some aspects are applicable to traditional HE. However, DeL has distinctive features which go beyond these measures. Here, Irele (2013) concurs, situating early claims about quality in DeL courses in relation to resident instruction programmes (such as in Thompson and Irele, 2007).

Nonetheless, Lowenthal and Hodges (2015) note that one distinguishing feature of DeL is that course design and delivery are often split; if one element fails, the other can still show signs of quality. However, there is another tradition that views quality in DeL as something ‘set apart’ from the norms of classroom education (Peters, 2003). This debate derives from the fact that DeL has a short history compared to traditional education. However, the reality stands that quality education *is* quality and this will not change with the method of delivery.

When quality in education considers HE, the picture is complicated by the different definitions of quality held by the various stakeholders, including in DeL. Koul (2006) notes that governments are interested in those definitions related to value for money. In contrast, teachers are drawn to definitions relating to teaching processes (Jung, 2011), and students by delivery of these processes (flexibility, nature of interactions) (Ehlers, 2004). Meanwhile, those researching DeL have engaged in a meta-debate about the standards themselves and their relative universalisability or cultural specificity (Jung, 2011; Latchem, 2014). Shelton (2011) considers the difference between evaluative mechanisms that focus upon the pedagogic delivery of the course (and can be imported from traditional quality evaluations) and those more specific to areas of concern around DeL (such as its comparison to traditional education), before drawing a comparison with stakeholder derived efficiency standards based on retention, outcomes, and support.

Meyer describes quality in online learning as being “a complex and difficult concept, one that depends on a range of factors, arising from the student, the curriculum, the instructional design, technology used [and] faculty characteristics” (quoted in Shelton, 2011). Hence, any attempt to determine and then to weigh the quality and usefulness of DeL courses should start by defining a common understanding of ‘quality’. This task is made considerably more difficult because DeL reaches beyond the local, the regional or even the national, requiring

widely distributed stakeholders to share a single definition of quality. If no universal definition of quality is conceivable, can there be a basis for evaluating the ability of international programmes to meet the goals of domestic learners? Or in contrast, can domestic programmes be determined as suitable for an international audience? (Irele, 2013)

Contemporary theorists of DeL are no longer concerned with questions of equality; that is, insofar as DeL is always compared and contrasted with face-to-face learning, the focus of debate has turned to issues of quality. This emphasis largely revolves around the possibility of establishing standards of quality for this new and ever changing educational technology. Sherry states that the institution of these standards occurs by using: "existing guidelines and initiatives [which] offer structure for investigators who seek answers to the question of how quality-based distance learning might look" (2003, p.31).

In practice, since the beginning of the new millennium, there have been many approaches attempting to define the aspects that classify quality in DeL. These approaches may be broadly characterised as the creation of a set of standards (as defined above). They are hence frequently grouped into a few main dimensions that are then break down into sub-standards. Following the pragmatic methodology that it has employed, the present study believes that such commonalities within these standards can provide the basis for a set of measures by which quality can be defined in the DeL environment. Many of these sets of standards have been codified by various organisations attempting to define best practice and guidelines for the provision of DeL. The most notable studies and organisations having defined these sets of standards are described in detail below.

Jung (2011) identifies two foundational reports into DeL, those of Phipps and Meristosis (2000) and McNaught (2001), which have played a key role in the classification of standards. Both share an approach that identifies seven main categories, which are then broken down into specific metrics, reflecting a significant correlation between the studies, however McNaught emphasises the interactive nature of DeL. Although Frydenberg (2002) employs nine domains, the conclusions were similar to those previous two studies. Being that they are primarily managerial approaches, their recommendations concentrate on the assessment of the provider by a bureaucracy. In Jung's (2011) reading, Gillis' report (2000) represents the beginning of an alternate approach that concentrates on the needs of the user of DeL, the student, and applied standards to the needs of the students in a more concrete manner.

A variety of national agencies have created sets of standards for DeL across a set of dimensions. These include the Commission of Institutions of Higher Education (USA: 5

dimensions, 29 standards); the Quality Criteria for Distance Education (South Africa: 13 dimensions, 212 standards); 'E-xellence' (EU: 6 dimensions, 33 standards); National Agency for Higher Education (Sweden: 10 dimensions); Open and Distance Learning Quality Council (UK: 6 dimensions); or Open eQuality Learning Standards (Canada: 3 Dimensions, 22 standards). Jung (2011) synthesises the commonalities in the dimensions of these various reports, dividing them into the following meta-categories: institutional support, course development, teaching and learning, course structure, faculty support and evaluation. The broad picture of the application of quality standards to DeL is therefore clear at this macro-level, where all the reports agree on the division of standards into dimensions. However, the composition of the set of individual standards can vary between different accrediting associations.

Following its pragmatic methodology, our study aims to utilise the set of standards with the broadest support amongst the literature whilst, following Gillis (2000), remaining committed to applying standards based on the needs of students. Meyer (2002) states that the student should be at the centre of all the measures of quality in learning. This quality in learning is determined by considering interactions between the student and: (1) faculty, (2) peers, (3) content, (4) the multiple paths to learning, (5) learning styles, and (6) experiences which allow them to construct and reflect on meaning, (Meyer, 2002). The existing research on students' perceptions of DeL indeed shows that these variables are the main determiners of learning in online environments.

Russell (1999) takes 1999 to be the pivotal year in which DE became DeL and begins to focus on questions of standards and qualities. This paradigm shift was initiated by the proliferation of Internet technologies and access. It was at this turning point that HE became concerned with the imposition of 'best practice' in DeL. Thus, in the time intervening, significant research has been conducted about how this practice can be achieved.

The following section presents an outline of the most important studies that have identified dimensions of learning quality. Here, we will proceed to note the important characteristics of these models.

3.2.6 Significant Models of Quality in Distance e-Learning

1. IHEP

The first significant model of quality considered here derives from a research study sponsored by the National Education Association (NEA) and Blackboard Inc., where the Institute of

Higher Education Policy commissioned Phipps and Merisotis to consider existing distance learning benchmarks and practices by other organisations (IHEP, 2000) (in some studies this is referenced as Phipps and Merisotis, 2000). This research has aimed to supply quality standards for internet-based DE. It operated as a three-stage study, in which an initial total of 45 benchmarks were carefully evaluated in terms both of expectation and of the practice of the designers and participants of *Internet-Based Distance Education*. The second phase identified substantive distance-based learning institutions that were exemplars of best practice.

As the study progressed into the third phase, 21 benchmarks were removed, while in its final report, the study determined 24 quality benchmarks. These were grouped into seven categories: Institutional Support, Course Development, Teaching/Learning, Course Structure, Student Support, Faculty Support, and Evaluation and Assessment (see Table 3.6 below, adapted from IHEP, 2000). Being that IHEP benchmarks are used to measure quality of every aspect of *Internet-Based Distance Education* in an institution, the benchmarks are not all related to learners. The final three benchmarks, relating to teaching/learning, course structure and student support, are about the experiences of learners and therefore the focus of the current study.

IHEP is important for several reasons; in particular, it includes participants involved in the practice of DeL, rather than just being a theoretical enterprise.

Table 3.6: IHEP's 24 Benchmarks

Dimensions	Benchmarks
Institutional Support	1. A documented technology plan is in place to ensure both quality standards and the integrity and validity of information. 2. Technology delivery system is failsafe. 3. A centralised system provides support for the DE infrastructure.
Course Development	4. Guidelines regarding minimum standards for course development, design, and delivery; learning outcomes determine the technology being used to deliver content. 5. Instructional materials are reviewed periodically. 6. Courses are designed to require analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.
Teaching and Learning	7. Student interaction with faculty and other students is facilitated through a variety of ways. 8. Feedback is constructive and provided in a timely manner. 9. Students are instructed in the proper methods of effective research.
Course Structure	10. Before starting an online program, students are advised about the program to determine (1) self-motivation and (2) access to technology. 11. Students are provided with supplemental course information that outlines course objectives, concepts, and ideas. 12. Students have access to sufficient library resources. 13. Faculty and students agree upon expectations regarding times for

Dimensions	Benchmarks
	student assignment completion and faculty response.
Student Support	14. Students receive information about programmes. 15. Students are provided with hands-on training and information to aid them in securing sources. 16. Throughout the duration of the course/program, students have access to technical assistance. 17. Questions directed to student service personnel are answered accurately and quickly.
Faculty Support	18. Technical assistance in course development is available to faculty, who are encouraged to use it. 19. Faculty members are assisted in the transition from classroom teaching to online instruction. 20. Instructor training and assistance, including peer mentoring, continues. 21. Faculty members are provided with written resources to deal with issues arising from student use of electronically-accessed data.
Evaluation and Assessment	22. The program's educational effectiveness and teaching/learning process is assessed through an evaluation process that uses several methods and applies specific standards. 23. Data on enrollment, costs, and technology are used to evaluate effectiveness. 24. Intended learning outcomes are reviewed regularly to ensure clarity, utility, and appropriateness.

2. Sloan Consortium's Five Pillars (2002)

The Sloan Consortiums five pillars model uses the fewest dimensions of any model of quality and has the fewest subdivisions into specific sub-dimensional metrics of quality. The Sloan model can be read as a set of institutional guidelines that could provide the basis of a set of future standards (Shelton, 2011). It does not explicitly consider technological standards, while being geared towards the marketing and salability of the courses offered. In this sense, it is largely outcome-based in considering nebulous notions such as effectiveness and satisfaction, rather than more explicit benchmarks.

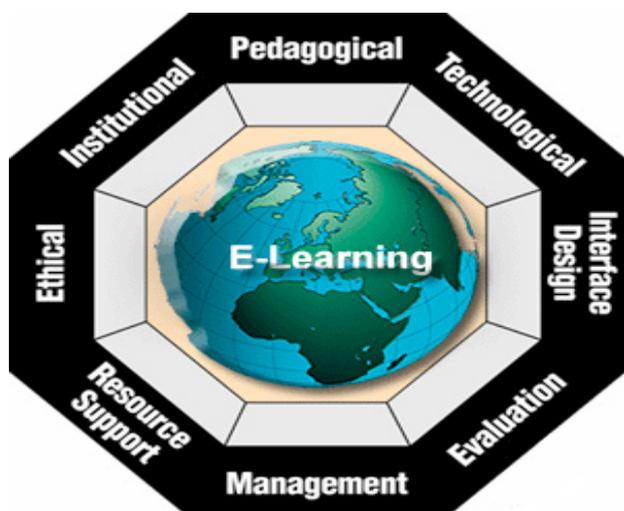
Table 3.7: Sloan Consortium's Five Pillars

Pillar	Areas of concern
Learning effectiveness	Evaluates learning activities.
Student satisfaction	The experience of the student, and their perspective about the programme.
Faculty satisfaction	The support and resources the faculty is given.
Scale (was <i>Cost effectiveness</i> in earlier iterations)	The institution's ability to provide the most effective product.
Access	Removal of barriers facing students and subgroups of students.

3. Khan's E-learning QUICK Checklist (2011)

A popular model, which is often illustrated pictographically according to Khan and Granato's (2011) octagonal framework below.

Figure 3.1: Octagonal Dimension Framework



It contains eight dimensions that provide a framework for the planning and developing of DeL courses. The checklist format entails an approach to the design of DeL from a logical perspective; that is, outlining the stages that should be considered by the builder of a quality online course. Kahn's formulation does not expressly compare his framework to previous attempts to formulate standards, yet it nevertheless shares the commonalities that unite these classifications.

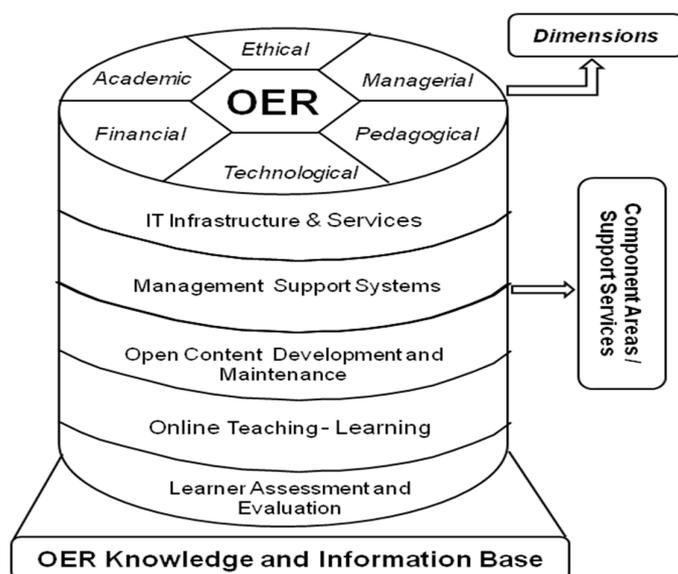
Table 3.8: Khan's QUICK Checklist (2011)

Dimension	Referent
Pedagogical	Teaching and learning
Technological	Issues of technological infrastructure
Interface design	The look and feel of the platform
Evaluation of e-learning	Assessment of learning and instruction
Management of e-learning	Maintenance of the e-learning environment
Resource support	Online support for e-learners
Institutional	Administrative issues
Ethical	Social, political and cultural concerns

Kahn's model provides the basis of Khanna and Basak's (2013) revised Open Educational Resource architecture framework. Here, the authors have only taken six of Khan's dimensions as depicted in the octagon, but have added five component areas that consider each of the

dimensions at various level of depth, creating a three dimensional model, as depicted below in figure 3.2. The components: IT infrastructure; management support; open content development; teaching and learning; and assessment and evaluation cover all the levels at which the dimensions must be applied, so adding richness to the model.

Figure 3.2: Khanna and Basak’s Model



4. CHEA’s Accreditation and Quality Assurance Study (2002)

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (USA) created seven meta-dimensions in 2002. These were used to evaluate the suitability of a university when considering if it should be accredited and therefore able to offer DeL courses. They thus evaluate whether institutions have the capacity to provide a platform for the hosting of e-learning. Thus, very broad standards are applied.

Table 3.9: CHEA’s Seven Dimensions

Dimension	Considerations
Institutional mission	Is the institution apt for e-learning?
Institutional organised structure	Is the institution structured to offer these courses?
Institutional resources	Can the university finance the course?
Curriculum and instruction	Can the university design a quality course?
Faculty support	Is the faculty capable of and resourced to produce quality?
Student support	Do the students have the facilities for e-learning?
Student learning outcomes	Does the university evaluate e-learning based on the achievements of learners?

5. Williams, Kear and Rosewell (2012)

This was an EU project to create a manual for excellence in DeL projects. It considers the planning, design, delivery and support phases of DeL, producing 35 benchmarks across six areas of criteria. The research is backed by institutions such as the Open University, while aiming to recapitulate the E-xellence (2005) framework, specifically in reference to DeL. It is addressed to a range of stakeholders, from administrators to delivery staff.

Table 3.10: Williams, Kear and Rosewell's (2012) Benchmark

Criteria	Benchmarks
Strategic Management	E-learning strategy is integrated – monitors developments of technology – technology is correctly resourced – E-learning systems are integrated with university software and procedures – cross institutional links supported and defined.
Curriculum Design	Personalised learning – balance of assessment methods – outcomes and skills are appropriate – courses are designed to create appropriate collaborative communities.
Course Design	Clear outcomes – content adapted to outcomes – appropriate experts employed – third party material properly integrated – interactive learning materials – adequate feedback available – courses conform to guidelines – fair assessment – course regularly reviewed and improved.
Course Delivery	Technical infrastructure fit for purpose – communications secure and private – system is maintained – E-learning tools are appropriate to models employed – information about use is provided – materials and information are monitored and assessed.
Staff Support	Suitable staff employed – training provided – educational improvement is awarded high status – good practice disseminated – staff workload considered – support and resources provided.
Student Support	Up-to-date information provided – rights and roles made explicit – communities are built – help desk and support available – access to resources.

3.2.7 Quality in Distance e-Learning: A Summary

There is no definitive set of quality guidelines or standards relating to DeL. Instead, there are several competing theoretical frameworks attempting to create such guidelines. This plurality of interpretations leads to the conclusion that there is still an ongoing debate regarding these standards. However, when surveying the literature, some continuities emerge and various distinctions are repeated, while other aspects are highlighted as being of importance. Some

key terms would include: pedagogical assumptions; technological implementation; support across several levels; interaction of teacher and learner; accessibility to staff and to materials; adequate feedback; coherent course design; institutional buy-in etc. A final key question regarding standards might be whom they are for and the realisation that there is no universal set that fits across all cultures. This is a key tenet of the present study and, accordingly, a question that is explored later in the present chapter.

Chickering and Ehrmann's (1996) principles for using technology in the learning environment (an update of an earlier (1987) set of principles regarding traditional learning they formulated) constitute one of the most convincing and enduring sets of guidelines for recognising quality in education. Being that they pre-date the age of mass DeL, they offer a set of classic principles that have been shown to ensure quality in learning:

Table 3.11: Chickering and Ehrmann's Principles of Learning

Principle	Chickering and Ehrmann's description.
Contacts Between Students and Faculty	Frequent student-faculty contact, in and out of class, is a most important factor in student motivation and involvement.
Reciprocity and Cooperation Among Students	Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated.
Active Learning Techniques	Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing prepackaged assignments and spitting out answers.
Prompt Feedback	Knowing what you know and don't know focuses your learning. In getting started, students need help in assessing their existing knowledge and competence.
Time of Task	Time plus energy equals learning. Learning to use one's time well is critical for students and professionals alike.
Communicating High Expectations	Expect more and you will get it. Expecting students to perform well becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.
Respecting Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning	Many roads lead to learning. Different students bring different talents and styles to college.

3.3 Cultural and Pedagogical Frameworks in Relation to Quality in Distance e-Learning

This section will move beyond a discussion of dominant pedagogical frameworks to a consideration of quality in education, from the perspective of cultural differences. This shift from models of pedagogy to models of culture will reflect the increasing importance in the literature of understanding that all learning is situated within a culture, along with the consequence of the adaptation of constructivist and connectivist models. Culture will be discussed in general, while key models that map culture cross ‘dimensions’ will be considered. We will then examine models that consider specifically the relationship between culture and education, as well as addressing the studies in which they are deployed.

3.3.1 Three Dominant Pedagogical Frameworks

The following analysis will consider various cultural and pedagogical constructs in recent literature, then proceeding to relate them to the concept of quality in DeL. We begin with a discussion of the predominant educational paradigms, with specific reference to three major instructional theories: objectivist (cognitive-behaviourist), social constructivist and finally, connectivist (Ehlers, 2013, p.108). We then go on to consider recent application of these theories to the distance learning environment, following Anderson and Dron’s (2011) classification of “three generations of distance education pedagogy.”

The general premise that underpins the development of instructional theories is that there has been a development in the last century from an exclusively objectivist paradigm to the current emphasis upon constructivist and connectivist theories. The consequences for the development of DeL are clear: should the use of learning technologies “adapt to the epistemic shift of the information revolution and the philosophical shift of the postmodern” (Tiffin and Rajasingham, 2003, p.6), or are they stuck in an earlier instructional mode, neglecting cultural perspectives (Remtulla, 2008)? Increasing integration of ICT into educational institutions would be expected to be complimentary to new modes of learning and teaching. However, Sutherland et al. (2004) and Spector et al. (2014) state that technological tools are themselves artefacts of a specific culture and therefore bearers of the specific attributes and traditions of those cultures. As we will now see, a sustained discussion of these complex issues is not possible without first grounding the debate in a thorough articulation of the specifics of each of these major instructional theories.

Objectivism

Objectivism, associated with behaviourism, was the dominant ideology in educational theory in the 20th century. Objectivism conceives of education as a uni-directional “transmission of knowledge” (Jonassen, 1991) from the teacher to the student. Instruction is therefore the passing of information from the expert (teacher) to the trainee (student). Such a model agrees with a conception of a uniform and knowable *objective* reality; that is, decontextualised, independent knowledge that works across all cultures (Biggs, 1996). Vrasidas (2000, p.3) provides a comprehensive summary of the important attributes of this approach:

- There is a real world consisting of entities structured according to their properties and relations. Categorisation of these entities is based upon their properties.
- The real world is fully and correctly structured in order that it can be modeled.
- Symbols are representations of reality and can only be meaningful to the degree to which they correspond to reality.
- The human mind processes abstract symbols in a computer-like fashion that mirrors nature.
- Human thought is symbol-manipulation and is independent of the human organism.
- The meaning of the world exists objectively, independent of the human mind and remains external to the knower.

Vrasidas (2000) states that this description characterises most traditional approaches to learning, such as linear and programmed models. Learning aims towards ‘terminal behaviours’ which are achieved by “[decomposing learning] into small units with carefully arranged sequences” (Lowyck, 2014, p.7). Critiques of objectivism therefore centre upon this methodology, described by Nunes and McPherson (2007, p.10) as: “shallow learning [...] regurgitating, and decontextualized [...] facts”.

In regard to DeL environments, Anderson and Dron (2011) characterise this approach as being associated with the ‘first generation’ of distance learning, one in which film, multimedia and television technologies were used to promote a specific type of uni-directional learning from teacher to student. This model maximises access to large numbers of students at a low cost (ibid) and can work when learning objectives are clearly defined. However, it has obvious limitations because it fails to provide the full “richness and complexity” which, according to Vaill (1996), actually characterises learners who “exist in a social context of great intricacy and depth” (Anderson and Dron, 2011, p.84).

Constructivism

Constructivism is opposed to the teacher-provided objective knowledge associated with objectivism. Instead, it focuses upon the conditions under which the individual student can construct knowledge (Jonassen, 1991). The learner's activities are therefore "[central] in constructing meaning" (Biggs, 1996, p.347). Under this system, knowledge and its acquisition are "dynamic rather than static, multi-dimensional rather than linear, and systemic rather than systematic" (Winn, 1993 quoted in Lowyck, 2014, p.8). Again, Vrasidas (2000, p.7) provides an excellent summary of the approach:

- There is a real world that sets boundaries to what we can experience. However, reality is local and there are multiple realities.
- The structure of the world is created in the mind through interaction with the world and is based on interpretation. Symbols are products of culture and are so used to construct reality.
- The mind creates symbols by perceiving and interpreting the world.
- Human thought is imaginative, developing out of perception, sensory experiences and social interaction.
- Meaning is a result of an interpretive process and depends on the knowers' experiences and understanding.

Moreover, despite the fact that a variety models of constructivism can be found in the related literature, all these types have common themes, emphasising the importance of:

- New knowledge built upon the foundation of previous learning.
- Context in shaping learners' knowledge development.
- Learning as an active rather than a passive process.
- The use of language and other social tools in constructing knowledge.
- Metacognition and evaluation as a means of developing learners' capacity to assess their own learning.
- Learning environments as learner-centred, stressing the importance of multiple perspectives.
- The requirement of knowledge to be subject to social discussion, validation and application to real world contexts (Anderson and Dron, 2011, p.85).

Constructivism is now becoming a dominant paradigm in lower levels of education, but in 1996 Briggs noted it was not a concept often called upon. To work effectively in such a context, learners require "properly developed schemata" (Lowyck, 2014). In DeL, such schemata are provided by "student-teacher interaction" (Anderson and Dron, 2011, p.86). This approach considers the teacher-learner relationship to be a social interaction, while the responsibility of the teacher is to allow the individual learner to discover and to reconcile complex information (Brooks and Brooks, 1993). Additionally, the DeL environment offers the promise of constructing a community, in which further student-to-student interactions are

facilitated, offering an extra layer in which the construction of knowledge may occur. Constructivism emphasises both interactive and independent learning.

Socio-Cultural and Connectivism

The final pedagogical framework is the socio-cultural tradition, which builds upon constructivism (and is sometimes called social-constructivist), widening the network of associations beyond the teacher-learner to include the entire social context within which the learning takes place. In this reading, knowledge is no longer the possession of an individual, but is jointly constructed (Mason, 2007) insofar as “it circulates between us” (Säljö, 1999, p.150). Hence, learning takes place when the individual interacts with the collective (Vygotsky, 1981).

This framework describes human understanding as ‘mediated’ (Lantolf, 2000), meaning that signs and symbols form the network through which we must interpret the world. Learning is therefore situated and embodied in praxis. Therefore, learners do not receive or create knowledge, but locate themselves in relation to knowledge in the wider cultural framework in which they exist. Sfard (1998) calls this method of learning one of ‘participation’, often in relation to a specific community of knowledge.

In the DeL context, we should recognise that this approach agrees both with problem-based learning and with computer-supported collaborative learning (Merriënboer and de Bruin, 2014). According to this framework, participation in groups or collectives increases student motivation and a deeper understanding of the content, being that it allows self-regulation of learning within the peer-group. For Merriënboer and de Bruin, social-constructivist ideology is opposed to the use of traditional lectures, which hark back to the older objectivist tradition in its approach to learning (ibid).

Anderson and Dron (2011) associate the socio-cultural framework with the third phase of DeL – connectivism - which shares the characteristics listed above. Kop and Hill (2008) define it as the entrance of a learner into a learning community, whilst Ehlers refers to it as “how learning happens in a digital age” (2013, p.108). Critiques of connectivism in practice revolve around the practicalities of creating and maintaining such networks, noting that the successful implantations of such a structure rely upon the quilting effect of highly connected nodes which hold the network together (Anderson and Dron, 2011). To some extent, these nodes reintroduce an element of centralisation and hierarchy into the learning space; without them, students may become “lost and confused” (ibid, p.89). Kop and Hill (2008) note that not all of the learners have the autonomy and judgement to be able to operate in such an

environment, inferring that it may instead be elitist. At this stage in the development of this theory, there is no consensus about the applicability of connectivism to DeL, being that equivocal reports of its operation are published (ibid). It may be that, in time, this position will become clearer.

Both of these later frameworks – those stressing that learning is situated and embodied - indicate that once objectivism has been rejected, any discussion of learning is permeated by the environment in which such learning takes place. This leads us to the consensual view that learning is constructed within a specific culture, in regard to which an understanding of the specificities of this culture is essential for an understanding of the nature of the learning involved. The following sections will build upon this analysis: the next considering technology and learning theories; then going on to trace the development of theories of culture, from our everyday understanding of the term, through to its deployment in a specifically educational context.

Technology, Interaction, and Learning Theories.

Section 3.1.2 explored the development of technology and its role in the evolution of DeL. The connectivist approach is only conceivable in the current, networked environment of learning that allows the entities involved in the learning process (teacher, student, resource) to connect across the flat spaces of networks rather than down the tiered topology of hierarchized space.

One of the core principles of learning is interaction between the various actors. According to connectivism, these connections should be as numerous as possible, rather than being exclusively in the behaviourist mode (from teacher → learner) or the constructivist mode (learner ↔ learner). Connectivism emphasise the links between teachers, learners and resources, so proposing that the optimal learning environment is one in which learners are free to explore these links.

There are three primary types of interaction in DeL: student - student (peer) interaction; student – teacher interaction; and student - technology interaction. For Kim et al. (2013), it is student - student (peer) interaction that recent technology has been enabled in DeL; this is an approach that allows collaborative and creative discussions amongst participants. In the best cases, students interact in small groups, have abundant resources and are ultimately guided by the technology to engage in projects that interest them. Conversely, differing levels of knowledge and motivation, as well as fear of misunderstanding, may prevent students from working effectively in this mode.

Student–teacher interaction is a traditional mode of education, but the role of the teacher is becoming less dominant over time and has instead become a co-constructor of knowledge (Crawford, 2000). These interactions are enhanced by support and motivation, through deadlines, feedback and reminders. Chat and discussion features can help teachers understand students’ concerns (Morgan, 2011). Finally, a broad range of media should be used (Wanstreet, 2009). This kind of communication requires that teachers make themselves available to the students; here, the biggest barrier is to be found when teachers do not do so.

The final mode of communication, student–technology, addresses the preferences of students in learning and usage. The technology should be both convenient and consistent in design as well as facilitating access. Students expect the use of web2.0 technologies. Students are becoming increasingly familiar with online environments and their skills are increasing in this regard. Problems can occur when students are unfamiliar with the technology and cannot use it – in this case there is fundamental problem with the course (Anderson, 2004). Students also need to gain a deeper set of study skills to utilise the technology and resources effectively; hence the transmission of these skills is vital to the effectiveness of DeL (Kim et al., 2013).

Ultimately, the degree to which an educational technology succeeds or fails must be measured by its pedagogical applicability: “Pedagogy before technology” (Beetham and Sharpe, 2013, p.3). Bates’ (2015) SECTIONS framework describes in greater depth how a technology can be assessed, according to the following elements: Students, Ease of use, Cost, Teaching functions, Interaction, Organisational issues, Networking, Security and Privacy. Interaction is a key tenet here, but must, for Bates, be weighted against other important factors.

3.3.2 The Concept of Culture

The study of ‘culture’ has been carried out across many different areas of academic study and research, including psychology (Matsumoto, 2009; Gurung, 2009), sociology (Hollins, 2008) and anthropology (Hofstede et al., 2010; Wanda and Warms, 2011). As with many other concepts under discussion in this section, to give just a single definition of culture is problematic. As Young (2014) notes, “Culture is everything! It is everything around us and everything ever created.”

The organisational anthropologist Geert Hofstede distinguishes two types of culture - the organisational and the national (Hofstede, 2011). The former is formative and unconscious, while the latter is developed later in life and partaken in consciously. Hofstede provides one of the most insightful definitions of culture, describing as “the collective programming of the mind that the members of one group or category of people from others.” The scale of these

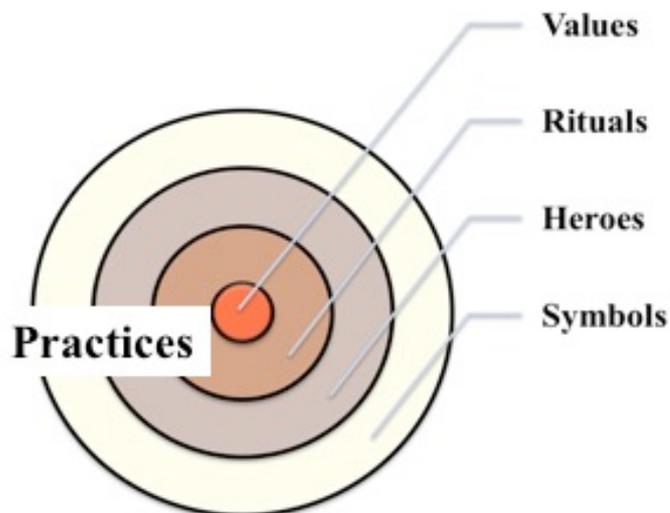
groups can range from the micro to the most macro level, from small organisations or collectives, to the largest entities such as states or genders. Hofstede's 'onion theory' (2005) of culture (see figure 3.3) considers the components of a culture to be its *symbols*, *heroes*, *rituals* and *values*. These four elements are described below:

- 1- *Symbols*: "Symbols are words, gestures, pictures, or objects that carry a particular meaning that is only recognized as such by those who share a culture" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p.8). This class of cultural components has the fastest turnover and can change or disappear rapidly. Certain symbols are more durable, such as religious and traditional iconography, while the more modern types of symbolism, associated with corporations or commerce, have a higher rate of churn.
- 2- *Heroes*: "Heroes are persons, alive or dead, real or imaginary, who possess characteristics that are highly prized in a culture and thus serve as models for behavior" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p.8). The exact cultural meaning of the hero can adapt over time, but the personalities involved persist more than symbols because they are more readily identified with being heroes.
- 3- *Rituals*: "Rituals are collective activities that are technically superfluous to reach desired ends but that, within a culture, are considered socially essential. They are therefore carried out for their own sake" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p.9). Rituals are concerned with interaction between people in daily life: greetings, table manners or the rules of conversation. One example is the rules to which business people would adhere when in a formal meeting; that is, those dictating how such a meeting will proceed. It should also be noted that a culture may have separate rituals that are appropriate in different situations.
- 4- *Values*: "The core of culture [...] is formed by values. Values are broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs over others [...] Our values are acquired early in our lives" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p.9). Values are the key to understanding the individual's interaction with their culture and so determining behaviour and dispositions in most situations. Values encompass the most important principles held by an individual: morality, goodness and their understanding of their place in the world.

For Hofstede, these outer layers are the more visible levels of culture, but also the most changeable. As we approach the centre of the 'onion', the deeper levels are much more resistant to change. These inner layers may be more difficult for an individual outside the culture to understand.

Straub et al. (2002) move this metaphor further in encompassing the concept of a ‘virtual onion’, in which the levels are no longer fixed, but move sequences and have more permeable, open orders. The rationale here is to illustrate the complexity and unpredictability of the cultural characteristics of any individual (Oliver, 2004).

Figure 3.3: Hofstede’s ‘Onion Theory’



These layers are similar to those proposed by Schein (1985, 1992), the other key theorist of culture, who classifies *behaviour and artifacts*, *espoused values* and *underlying assumptions*. Both theorists share a common interest in the interaction of the individual with the greater world of symbols, signs and patterns of behaviour in which they are enmeshed. Schein is a theorist of organisational culture; hence, his stages represent the distinctive properties of a group rather than a wider culture.

In Schein's theory, *behaviour and artifact* represent the outward appearance of member of the organisation, such as dress code, specific language, or aesthetic prerogatives; they can be difficult to decipher for an outsider with no further contextual clues. *Espoused values* represent the norms and operating philosophies that members of the organisation believe themselves to hold. The final level is the most important: *underlying assumptions* relate to the group's learned strategies for dealing with external adaptation and internal integration (Ehlers, 2013). Underlying assumptions are influenced by national culture of the members of the group. At the deepest level, they relate to how members of the group perceive, think and feel about the group.

Ehlers presents dynamic models of culture in which there is no guarantee of fixity of any cultural practice. While Ehlers (2013, p.47) describes culture as being “creation and recreation”, Weick (1993) conceives of the reality of an organisation in terms of its being an

“ongoing accomplishment”. In addition, Young (2014) claims that “cultures change and are never static”, while Mushtaha and De Troyer (2007) note that an individual’s modes of participation in her culture are created over time. Modes of cultural participation therefore evolve over a period of learning experiences encompassing a lifetime.

Culture is therefore a set of core values held by a group (Ford and Kotze, 2005). It is a set way of acting, one that influences the manner in which communication and interaction with resources and media take place. As such, the definition of quality held by a given individual will be very much a product of their cultural position. Understanding this position is thus a key goal of the present study, operating as it does within a specific cultural context.

3.3.3 Models of Cultural Dimensions

In the literature, the process of comparing one cultural standpoint to another takes place across ‘cultural dimensions’. These are often created by defining binary opposites that characterise the elements of cultures that may differ according to context. Hofstede has created five dimensions for use in such a process of comparison: *power distance*, *intolerance to ambiguity*, *collectivism or individualism*, *masculinity or femininity* and finally, *long term orientation*. These ‘deep’ aspects of cultural difference most commonly denote (dis)continuities across large cultural blocs, such as nations or even continents. In forming the basis of theories of learning culture, these elements will be discussed in a specific context later in this chapter, after a brief introduction to the general concepts.

Individualism – Collectivism can be defined as a continuum between opposed conceptions of the composition of the group. Individualism is “a preference for a loosely-knit social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of only themselves and their immediate families’, whereas collectivism is “a preference for a tightly-knit framework in society in which individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular in-group to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” (Hofstede, 2015).

Therefore, on the collectivist side, persons are willing to sacrifice individual needs for the greater goals of the group; they are therefore more willing to follow group preferences instead of their own. Conversely, the individual side is defined by the persons’ conception of themselves as separate and autonomous from the group. They are more likely to see a figure like a teacher as a peer rather than a leader, hence considering the work produced to be their own rather than that of the group.

Power distance reflects the degree to which members of the group consider themselves to be equal. If “less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 2015), then there is a high power distance. This is usually associated with national cultures in Eastern nations, where persons will see themselves as being unequal with authority figures (in an educational context: the teacher), who is in a position of knowledge and power. In Western nations, where the power distance is low, there is more of an egalitarian bias in persons’ perception about their place in an organisation. In this sense, they will, again, consider themselves as peers.

Uncertainty avoidance is the difference between “rigid codes of belief and behavior and [...] a more relaxed attitude in which practice counts more than principles” (Hofstede, 2015). Rigid codes and behaviour express a desire for precision, strictness and accuracy in terms of answers, timetabling and objectives. Meanwhile, ‘more relaxed attitudes’ are correlated with vagueness, relaxed attitudes and a preference for multiple pathways to be available.

Masculinity-Femininity is a continuum between two conceptions of success for the group. Masculine cultures favour an “achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material rewards for success” (Hofstede, 2015), while feminine cultures show a “preference for cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life” (ibid). Masculine cultures have organisational settings in which persons compete openly and are conscious of achievements and success, but more feminine cultures might have a more relaxed approach to attainment and focus on quality of life.

Long-term orientation manifests the extent to which a culture is traditional. Cultures that “maintain time-honoured traditions and norms while viewing societal change with suspicion” are thus to be contrasted with those which “take a more pragmatic approach: they encourage thrift and efforts in modern education as a way to prepare for the future” (Hofstede, 2015). Persons in possession of this traditional mindset are less likely to favour change in approaches, being more invested in the ‘old ways’.

A number of studies have used Hofstede’s dimensions successfully, such as that of Selinger (2004), which presents differences between collectivism and the autonomy of students in both Danish and French contexts. These results align with other measures of Hofstede’s dimensions within these two nations.

Thompson and Ku’s (2005) subjects were Chinese graduate students studying in the US. The study found that these students were more passive in online situations than the American students sitting the course. Their reading of the situation follows Hofstede’s (1980, p.43)

claim that, “Chinese culture is highly collective and feminine and tends to value group effort, harmony, affection, compassion and emotionality.” These students were frustrated by certain other cultural characteristics of the course: delays in feedback, failure to understand common cultural references of the native participants and the lack of face-to-face communication.

In his study, Al-Harhi’s (2005) considered six Arab students, again sitting graduate degrees in the US. These students were concerned with the independence expected of a student in the online environment, stemming from what Hofstede (1991) would categorise as Arab culture’s ‘high uncertainty avoidance’ (Hofstede, 1991). These students were less willing to participate in online debate, being that it appeared to them that native students were “showing off or trying to appear smart” (p.9). The latter perception reflects another feature of Arab culture, which is the value placed on modesty. There were also issues based around Arab culture’s traditional gender differences, to which should be added the incidence of communication problems arising from the students’ unwillingness to confront authority figures.

A survey of IBM employees in seventy-one different countries was conducted by Hofstede. This study included Arabic countries (Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, UAE and Lebanon). He also generalised the findings to represent all Arab countries, including SA. Collectively Arab countries exhibited a tendency to Power Distance (80/100), Uncertainty Avoidance (68/100) and Masculinity (52/100), but not towards Individualism (38/100). Tolba (2003), in turn, has studied Jordanian culture’s characteristics across Hofstede’s dimensions in regard to the investigation of user interfaces. Jordan’s characteristics were shown to reflect a high power distance, collectivism and high uncertainty avoidance; although they were also feminine.

However, Hofstede’s findings have not been left uncontested. Al Dulaimi and Bin Sailan (2011) have considered Hofstede’s (1980) national cultural dimensions in relation to Qatari national values. Qatar’s national culture was shown not to correspond to the results of other Arabic Countries measured by Hofstede in 1980. Other critiques of Hofstede include that of Ess (2009), who finds his work less applicable to online learning, or of Gunawardena (2014), who makes similar critiques. Yeganeh and Su (2006) note that Hofstede’s dimensions are more national than organisational, while failing to capture the diversity of subgroups within a national culture.

We will now turn to Hall (1976, 1990), who created dimensions that largely follow those of Hofstede. The two dimensions that distinguish his theory are those of *monochromic (M) time* in contrast to *polychromic (P) time* and *low-context* as opposed to *high-context* cultures. M time cultures are concerned with precise schedules and the segmentation of activities; their

culture is low context and depends on direct communication, rather than the context of the communication. P time cultures are their opposite, engaging in multiple, simultaneous activities and focusing upon relationship rather than schedules.

There is a dimension distinguishing high context from low context and referring to the relative directness or subtlety of communication style. High context thus communicates much more information non-verbally and Hall ascribes this style to East Asian nations. The converse style, low context communication, is concerned purely with information in itself rather than with subtleties - Hall ascribes this style to the USA. This low context / high context distinction is in accordance with Hofstede's position (1986).

Gunawardena (2014) notes that while Hofstede's dimensions relate to the cultural norms and rules of exchange within any given national unit, Hall's focus upon context and content – that is, on the quality of information delivered, rather than the rules surrounding the dissemination of this information – means that his dimensions are frequently more germane to an analysis of differences in online cultures. Many of Hofstede's dimensions – such as power distance – are determined by the technological architectures of an online service. The implication is thus that it is in the content that the researcher may spot cultural differences.

These models all distinguish bipolar dimensions that vary across cultures. However, none do so in a specific educational context. The next section considers this educational context in depth. Nonetheless, cultural theories of learning are becoming increasingly important in education theory, to the extent to which the cultural model given in a theoretical framework is as important as previously dominant pedagogical theories of objectivism and constructivism. This trend indicates the transformation of the binary opposition between these theories into a three dimensional space in which any 'realistic' (Jonassen, 2006) model of learning can be plotted. The addition of this cultural or connectivist axis hence transforms an oppositional theory of learning models into a complementary, one in which real learning may be seen to take place across these multiple dimensions (Jonassen, 1991).

3.3.4 Cultural-Pedagogical Models

Higher education, particularly in DeL environments, is characterised by contextualised processes, in which the objective or subjective status of knowledge (according to our old binary model) is less important than the cultural framework in which this knowledge is embedded. Frielick (2004, p.328) states that in the e-learning environment, "complex interacting influences shape the quality of learning outcomes." An essential aspect of understanding this process of learning is the mapping of the distinctive cultural assumptions

that characterise the environment in which learning occurs. This ‘mapping’ entails the uploading or transformation of models of culture into theories of the pedagogical environment. For example, much work has gone into transforming Hofstede’s dimension of cultural differences into an educational context. Wursten and Jacobs (2013) map Hofstede’s dimensions exhaustively on to traits in education in order to show how different cultures have divergent expectations in this area. They explore the preferences of the 20 best performing education systems according to *The Economist*; for example, the *power distance* dimension and the *collectivism* dimensions correspond to the preferences in the tables (3.12 and 3.13) below.

Table 3.12: Power Distance and Learning Cultures

<i>Low Power Distance</i>	<i>High Power Distance</i>
Student centred	Teacher centred
Teacher expects student to initiate communication	Student expects teacher to initiate communication
Teacher expects students to find own paths	Students expects teacher to outline paths
Students allowed to contradict and criticize	Teacher never criticised
Effectiveness of learning is a function of two way communication	Effectiveness of learning is a function of the excellence of teachers

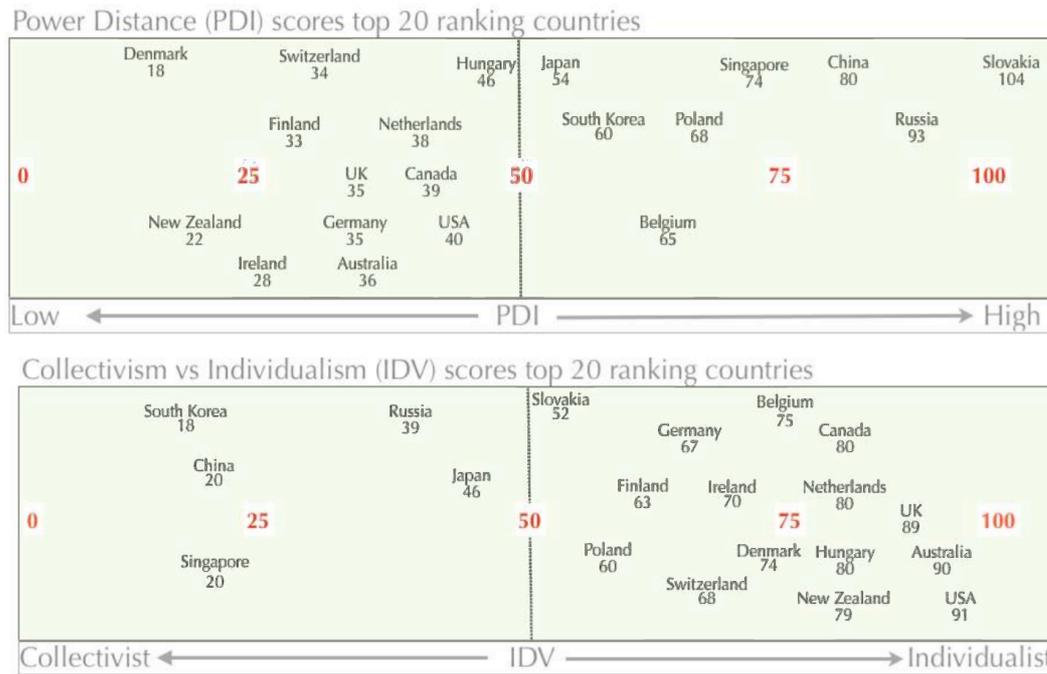
Table 3.13: Collectivism vs Individualism and Learning Cultures

<i>Collectivist</i>	<i>Individualist</i>
Students only speak up when called by teacher	Students speak in response to general invitations from teacher
Individuals speak in small groups	Individuals speak in large groups
Formal harmony to be maintained	Confrontation is possible
Neither teacher or student should lose face	‘Face consciousness’ is weak
Teachers give preferential treatment to certain groups	Teachers expected to be strictly impartial

Adapted from Wursten and Jacobs (2013)

These are the two dimensions considered the most important in the present study because they reflect the distance between Western and Eastern cultural pedagogical cultures. We can observe this clearly when the various nations are plotted on these axes on the graphs below:

Figure 3.4: Hofstede’s PDI and IDV for the Top 20 Nations



Adapted from Wursten and Jacobs (2013)

Hofstede’s other dimensions also map onto aspects of pedagogic culture, as shown below.

Table 3.14: Hofstede’s other Dimension and Pedagogy

<i>Femininity</i>	<i>Masculinity</i>
System rewards social adaptation	System rewards academic performance
Students try to behave modestly	Students try to be visible
Students study out of interest	Students study for career reasons
<i>Low Uncertainty avoidance</i>	<i>High Uncertainty avoidance</i>
Student comfortable without structure	Students expect structure
Teachers use plain language	Teachers use academic language
Teacher says “I don’t know”	Teachers expected to have answers

The set of binaries created by Hofstede’s model has been replicated by several other prominent theorists who have noted salient cultural differences between educational environments. These theories generally posit a difference between traditions or between epochs of learning, so differentiating the modes of learning in the Western or developed world from those of other cultures and nations. The most important of these models are explored below.

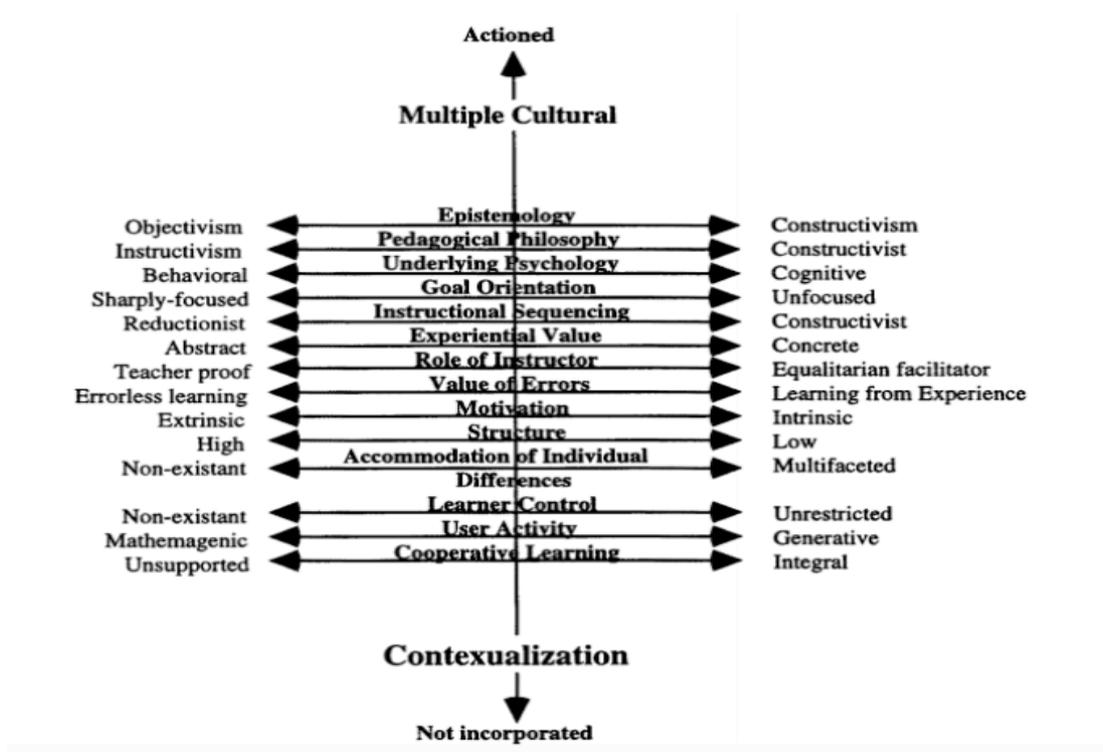
Reeves' model and Henderson's Model

Reeves' Multiple Cultural (1992, 1994) model identifies differences across fourteen dimensions. These dimensions, unlike those of Hofstede, were formulated with the educational context explicitly in mind. Henderson suggests that this model can provide a 'systematic evaluation' of interactive, computer-based learning (1996, p.1). The fourteen dimensions are then considered to give a complete picture of the cultural pedagogic assumptions of a piece of educational software.

Henderson (1996) has extended Reeves' model to consider the general conditions of a society, so proposing that these dimensions should be considered when importing pedagogical techniques from one nation into another. For her, "minority ethnic groups or developing nations looking for technological solutions to their educational or training needs will not be well served by packages designed for a majority Western culture" (Henderson, 1996, p.93).

Reeves' model could serve as a preference for the terms on the right side of the figure below, therefore favouring transition to a Western cultural model. However, Henderson's dividing central line is meant to indicate that positions on either side of this continuum are valid. Yet Henderson goes beyond this position of noting differences between national cultures to become entangled in an analysis of further micro-differences between learners within a given state.

Figure 3.5: Henderson's Model of Multiple Cultures



Adapted from Henderson (1996)

Both Henderson's theory and the critique of the post-Hofstede models' method of generalisation introduces the important caveat that some members of a nation may not conform to the characteristics that, as an agglomeration, the nation might hold. However, the normative consequences of this realisation are not clear when taken beyond the general notion that course design should not be exclusionary. An exact method for identifying how an intersection of class, gender, race, religion and minority/majority status can then be transposed on to a set of rules for optimal pedagogy is not provided.

Nevertheless, as Stefanou (2014) notes, there is a conflict between universalism and the individual when assessing cultures. McLoughlin (1999) has formulated the final stage of this model, proposing that course design should be flexible enough to incorporate multiple cultural realities, thereby meeting the needs of students from a wider spectrum.

Reigeluth's Model

Rather than focusing on deep cultural differences between Western and Eastern thinking, Reigeluth (1996) plots the difference between two ages of learning: the Industrial Age and the Information Age. This model views education as a tool for producing citizens suited for life in their society, suggesting that there is a contemporary switch to the realities of the Information Age. This switch then mirrors the development in wider educational theory from objectivism to constructivism.

Table 3.15: Transition between Industrial and Information Ages

INDUSTRIAL AGE	INFORMATION AGE
Standardization	Customization
Centralized control	Autonomy with accountability
Adversarial relationships	Cooperative relationships
Autocratic decision making	Shared decision making
Compliance	Initiative
Conformity	Diversity
One-way communications	Networking
Compartmentalization	Holism
Parts-oriented	Process-oriented
Teacher as "King"	Learner (customer) as "King"

Adapted from Reigeluth (1996)

Sfard's Model

Sfard's (1998) model distinguishes between an *acquisition metaphor* (AM) and a *participation metaphor* (PM). The former represents an uncritical or pre-critical form of learning (pure instructivism) in which the learner is the subject of a transfer of knowledge from the teacher. Metaphorically speaking, the mind of the student is a vessel to be filled with information given by the teacher. Sfard notes a rise in the 1990s of studies focusing on the communal, communicative, collective and cooperative aspects of knowledge. These studies therefore echo a constructivist approach and herald a shift to a PM paradigm in which the learner is part of a network, gaining knowledge in relation to the other nodes on that network. Whilst Sfard does not explicitly note it in his 1998 study, these two learning modes can be applied to the Western and Eastern styles referred to in the other models in this section. In using metaphor, Sfard's model presents the possibility of combining the AM and PM. It is therefore a departure from Henderson's model that posited two poles and a continuum in which a single position defined a culture. In contrast, according to Sfard we can be a little of both AM and PM, without contradiction.

Table 3.16: Sfard's (1998) Two Metaphors of Pedagogy

Acquisition Metaphor		Participation Metaphor
Individual enrichment	<i>Goal of Learning</i>	Community building
Acquisition of something	<i>Learning</i>	Becoming a participant
Recipient (consumer), (re-) constructor	<i>Student</i>	Peripheral participant, apprentice
Provider, facilitator, mediator	<i>Teacher</i>	Expert participant, preserver of practice/discourse
Property, possession, commodity (individual, public)	<i>Knowledge, Concept</i>	Aspect of practice/discourse/activity
Having, possessing	<i>Knowing</i>	Belonging, participating, communicating

Adapted from Sfard (1998)

Sanchez and Gunawardena's Model

Sanchez and Gunawardena (1998) explicitly tackle the question of Western and Non-Western modes of being. Their model is comprised of a table (see Table 3.17, below) that indicates salient differences between wider cultural settings. Western cultures are portrayed, in the

terms initially introduced by Hofstede, as being more individualistic and being in possession of a lower power distance.

Table 3.17: Sanchez and Gunawardena’s Distinctions between non-Western and Western World Views

<i>Non-Western</i>	<i>Western</i>
Emphasise group cooperation	Emphasise individual competition
Achievement as it reflects group	Achievement for the individual
Value harmony with nature	Must master and control nature
Time is relative	Adhere to rigid time schedule
Accept affective expression	Limit affective expression
Extended family	Nuclear family
Holistic thinking	Dualistic thinking
Religion permeates culture	Religion is distinct from other parts of culture
Socially oriented	Task-oriented

Adapted from Sanchez and Guarwardena (1998)

Moore et al. (2005) show how Sanchez and Gunawardena’s model forms the basis of a more detailed study by Robinson (1999), one that distinguishes a set of dichotomies between Chinese and Western norms, in a specifically educational context. These differing Western and Non-Western values are translated into a set of characteristics of students and teachers, so providing a model that details differing expectations of stakeholders in these two cultural contexts.

Table 3.18: Selected Differences in Robinson’s Distinctions between Chinese and Western Learners

<i>Western models and values espoused in DE</i>	<i>Chinese education and learners</i>
More open curriculum.	More closed curriculum.
Multiple sources for course content.	Restricted approved sources for course content.
Meeting individual needs given a high priority.	Meeting individual needs given a low priority.
Higher teacher autonomy over content and methods.	Lower teacher autonomy over content and methods; heavy reliance on approved texts and curriculum.
Tutor as facilitator or mediator, one source of information among several.	Tutor seen as teacher and source of information, conforming to book and curriculum.
High learner autonomy and choice. Ideal of ‘independent learners’.	Low learner autonomy, little choice. Learner dependence on teacher.
Low reliance on face-to-face teaching.	Heavy reliance on face-to-face teaching.
Attention given to processes of learning. High value placed on skills for learning, low value given to memorization. Repetition not encouraged as a learning strategy.	Emphasis on content of learning. High value given to memorization. Repetition frequently used as a learning strategy.

<i>Western models and values espoused in DE</i>	<i>Chinese education and learners</i>
Teacher has high level of responsibility for managing the learning of students.	Learner carries main responsibility for succeeding at learning because of learning-effort.

Adapted from Robinson (1999)

Robinson’s model leads us to the question of the homogeneity of ‘Eastern culture’ as opposed to a ‘Western’ one and whether all the nations of the Orient can be grouped together under one cultural-pedagogical model. Many studies have indeed noted this similarity; notably, Ford and Kotze (2005), Zhang (2007) or Edmundson (2006). Huang (2002) notes that collectivism is the dominant trait of Eastern cultures, favouring the group over the individual.

Students are unwilling to challenge teachers, particularly when in large group situations. This power distance is affirmed by Osman and Herring (2007) in relation to the wider Middle East. Their study goes on to note the Middle Eastern emphasis on ‘face’ (see also Gillham, 2004) and the maintenance of social harmony. These traits of Eastern cultures are often established in legislation. One such case is Japan, in which the Open University of Japan is bound by law to “offer educational services through broadcasting” (Latchem, 2014), therefore indicating that Japan is a high power distance nation. Again, such a status leads to a culture of lecture and recall, rather than a critical and constructive learning paradigm.

Eastern Cultures also tend towards an oral traditional, which places less value on certain forms of written communication, instead of favouring traditional practices expressed in speech. However, one exception to this is found in the treatment of Qur’anic knowledge in the Islamic world. Here, the primary duty of all institutional learning is to preach these texts, often by committing sections to memory (see Gursoy, 2005). Another such distinction may be found in the typical class sizes in Middle Eastern nations, which is not as large as that in the Far East (Zhang, 2007).

In conclusion, although the traits associated with Eastern Culture are largely applicable to these nations, there are exceptions. As such, there cannot be said to be a uniform Eastern culture, but a series of similar but discrete cultures constituting a region.

3.3.5 Notable Studies of Cultural-Pedagogical Interaction

As we have shown up until this point, culture determines what one learns and how one does so. However, the methods of learning differ in different nations and sub cultures (Merriam, 2007). There is also a heterogeneity within modern learning environments, both on and off line, through which the educator encounters diversity in the learners’ expectation and their preferred methods of learning (Gunawardena, 2014). This heterogeneity can range from the

old behaviourist tropes of drill and repetition to demands for a highly interactive and evolutionary learning style in accordance with connectivism. For Gunawardena, (2013) if there is an overall pattern emerging in the DeL environment, it is a preference for open fora in which ideas can be exchanged, where agreement and disagreement can interact and form meaning.

Harry and Perraton (1999) note a duality in DeL; although it widens access, it also carries a specific, modern cultural lode, one that threatens the status quo in educational practices. More specifically, Wang (2007) states there is a danger of cultural bias when DeL environments are imported from Western cultures. Talalakina (2010) elucidates this point in highlighting that collectivistic cultures, which have a preference for teacher-centred learning, can react unfavourably to Western-style programmes and their intrinsically individualistic assumptions about cultural values. Western educational culture encourages students to go against collectivist and high power distance values, requiring students to examine and critique issues and ideas in sustained debate (Latchem, 2014).

Contrasting assumptions about power distance can cause students to feel uncomfortable within a learning environment. Rye and Stokken (2012) have shown how African (Ghanian and Ugandan) students did not expect to encounter Norwegian students' critical communications with teachers and peers, and they considered this unacceptable in an educational context. Moreover, their own culture has an inflexible respect for the teacher's absolute authority. The study thus observed how, in the initial part of the course, these students worried about their ability to participate in such a virtual community. Likewise, Zhao and McDougall (2008) note that, in being unused to such a public forum, Chinese students in a Canadian university were far less willing to post in online discussions.

Karolak and Guta (2015) surveyed female students in SA who were exposed to Western (particularly American) teachers, and observed the issues in intercultural communication that were evident. Their discussion highlights several points at which the native students do not understand the cultural norms of the instructors, regarding phenomena such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance and collectivism. One notable thing about this survey is that the participants were found to be aware of such differences, and keen to 'learn how the others learned', showing that there is some potential for Western styles of communication in learning to be used in Eastern cultures.

Studying universities in their respective nations, Wang (2007) has investigated differences amongst Chinese, Korean and American students to examine their motivations when

participating in online discussions, their opinions on how the group worked and how willing they were to approach staff. This study demonstrated that students' cultural identity determines their level of participation in their perceptions about e-learning. Hence, Korean and Chinese students were willing to participate only in required discussions and activities, while American students participated because they wished to communicate with peers.

Moreover, all the groups were seen to favour asynchronous discussions over synchronous discussions. Wang (2007, p.303) attributed this desire in Korean and Chinese students to a cultural trait that he expressed as: "think more, talk less, and think it through before speaking." Across the three groups, individual assignments were considered boring and challenging. However, Korean students were less comfortable with online teamwork. American students communicated more to their instructors because they considered them equals; conversely, Korean and Chinese students were not comfortable in approaching them. Wang (2007) mapped these findings onto Asian cultures' preference for high power distance.

By conducting extended interviews, Shattuck (2005) looks at how Asian and other non-national students perceive the culture of an American distance learning course. He discovered a widespread feeling of marginalisation in this e-learning environment. According to his findings, a course based on constructivist pedagogy that encourages an intense level of interaction is a 'lonely' or 'uncomfortable' situation if the learner's home cultural expectations do not agree with the dominant educational culture.

In two studies (2008, 2011), Gunawardena et al. found that Sri Lankan students, who came from a more collectivist culture, were unwilling to engage in open disagreement with their American tutors in 'formal' online settings, such as the virtual-classroom. However, they were willing to do so when provided with an informal "virtual canteen". These findings can again be attributed to cultural differences between the Western instructors and their students.

Selinger (2004) has considered the potential for and practice of globalisation of e-learning courses from Western cultures; that is, in Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, South Africa, United Arab Emirates and the UK. The 300 students and 100 teachers surveyed in these countries formed the basis of Edmundson's (2009, p.42) summary that "e-learning courses are cultural artifacts, embedded with the cultural values, preferences, characteristics, and nuances of the culture that designed them, and inherently [create] challenges for learners from other cultures." Selinger concluded that the skills of local instructors were crucial to the success of an imported course, being that they were the vessels by which its cultural content would be transformed according to the cultural and pedagogic

norms of the society to which it was introduced. Conversely, without cultural context, content could not be disseminated.

In a study of intercultural communication, Chen (2000) posits that students' reactions to teaching methods are caused by their differing thinking patterns and styles of expression. A debate format can be problematic for certain participants, being that the debate is anchored in low-context cultures and requires elucidation of the argument through logical reasoning. Hence, to high-context culture students of an Asian or Latin American background such a format is uncomfortable. This discomfort is further exacerbated if the medium of discussion is bereft of non-verbal cues.

The result of these observations might be the assumption that these non-Western students need to be retrained to learn in the more modern Western-styled Information Age. However, Weinberger et al. (2007) also note the problems caused by transferring argumentative styles of knowledge construction across cross-cultural interactions. They go on to observe there has been a lack of engagement with the question of how learners of diverse cultures could engage with and benefit from the argumentative approach to a construction of knowledge outlined above. They conclude that research is needed regarding the interaction patterns demonstrated by collaborative learners across these different cultures. They hence propose an examination of the materials used to engage learners in argumentative discussions.

Latchem (2014) considers that numerous case studies illustrate potential problems with importing DeL courses to external cultures, particularly in reference to quality and standards in regard to these courses. He defines four dimensions of performance across which we should consider the appropriateness of transnational transfer. They are:

- The nature and extent of collaboration with the overseas partners in course development and delivery.
- Allowance for different states of e-learning readiness and teaching and learning styles.
- Inclusion of intercultural case studies, roleplays and experiential learning.
- Opportunities for interaction, reflection and conceptual and practical understanding of how people differ across cultures (Latchem, 2014, pp. 325-326)

3.4 Other Foundational Concepts

The final components of this literature review concern other important definitions that provide the basis of key concepts in the present study. In making the methodological decision to utilise perceptions of students as a source of data, we would emphasise that it is important to understand why perceptions are such a useful tool for the researcher and how they offer a useful perspective on quality in DeL. We will also consider the status of these students and their own self-understanding as customers or stakeholders, which is an influence on their perceptions.

3.4.1 Learner's Perceptions

The methodological decision to measure quality based upon the perceptions of the users of the service, the students, rather than upon a managerial model is considered essential by Jung (2012 b, p.2), who states that:

While inputs from providers, assessors and governments are valuable in managing and enhancing quality in DE [...] the success of DE does not derive only from the products and services delivered to the learner but also from the knowledge, understanding, and relationships that are co-developed by both learners and teachers [...] in order to improve learning experience and performance of distance learners, *it is essential to fully understand their perceptions of quality DE.*" (Emphasis added)

The above approach has been used by Cashion and Palmieri (2002) in identifying discrepancies between the needs prescribed by the providers of DE and those reported by learners in Australia. For instance, these may include the need for less provision of induction and technical training than that originally offered by the institution. In the European context, Ehlers (2004) has found discrepancies between administrators' assessment of the importance of new technology and the equivalent evaluation of the learners, who were less concerned by its application. However, these studies were carried out in a Western context and do not correspond to the findings of Muilenburga and Berge (2005) or Selim (2007), who found that learners in nations with poor digital infrastructures have encountered more serious barriers to their learning.

Ward et al. (2010) conclude that, in the US, students' perceptions of quality correlate with the nature of teacher-student interactions. They therefore tend to be synchronous, as is notably the case. Such findings differ from those of Jung (2011) who found that, in Korea, students were concerned with the provision of support and the nature of the learning tasks that they were set. Not only do such observations corresponds to a difference between the learning cultures in

these nations, but they bring to light a central concern in the assessment of DeL. That is, from the perspective of student assessment, different cultures have different expectations of learning and different manners through which they learn. Jamtsho and Bullen (2010) have extended this division into gender within a specific culture, further emphasising how the expectations of specific groups of learners affect their perceptions.

Moreover, it should be said that considering student perspectives would add value in regard to the purpose of understanding online DeL environments. James (2002) shows that students' perceptions can provide a source of sound judgements about quality in HE. This perspective is possible because they understand both the effectiveness of the education they experience and their own needs as students (Vonderwell, 2003; Lao and Gonzales, 2005; Jung, 2012 a). Students can assess quality in the spaces in which they are educated, the ability of the staff to teach and the methods they use to teach. They can also evaluate whether goals are clear, feedback is sufficient, assessment is transparent and fair, and how their tutors interact with them and treat them both as individuals and groups (James, 2002).

3.4.2 Students as Consumers or as Stakeholders

As discussed previously, the notion of 'quality standards' leads us to a set of questions about the nature of the students who are to assess whether they believe the standard or standards have been met. How do students in different contexts see themselves, their institutions and the notion of HE? Much of the contemporary literature revolves around the question of the student as consumer (Ostrom et al., 2011) in contrast to the stakeholder (Mainardes et al., 2010; Shanahan and Gerber, 2004). Freeman (1993) notes that increasing competition in HE providers indeed leads to the treatment of the student as a service user. Joseph et al. (2005, p. 68) underline that:

In a highly competitive environment, students have become more discriminating in their selection and more demanding of the colleges and universities they choose. Therefore, it is important for institutes to understand their expectations. A constant research and analysis is a necessary to improve education service quality.

This has several consequences, as students expect returns from their investment (i.e. Delucchi and Korgen (2002) find that 42% of respondents felt that payment "entitles them to a degree"), so placing the onus on improving their results on staff rather than their personal performance (ibid). However, there remains a resistance to the final definition of the student as consumer (Michael and Sower, 2007) being that quality in education does not always equate to "giving the students what they want", as a commercial enterprise is run. Eagle and

Brennan (2007) concur that the notion of ‘the customer always being right’ can hinder rather than help quality in HE. In consequence, a second conception of the student as a stakeholder is popular in contemporary literature (i.e. Venkataman, 2007). Moreover, much of the literature regards students as the key stakeholder in HE (Mainardes et al., 2010; Odhiambo and Hii, 2012). Douglas et al. (2008) agree that linking recruitment to student satisfaction and retention shows why satisfaction is such a key indicator for administrators.

However, such a conception of the role of the stakeholder places the student alongside other interested parties such as the state, society and university employees (Venkataman, 2007). Sloan-C (in Ehlers, 2013) states that ‘pure satisfaction scores and learning outcomes’ are not connected. We may thus conclude that there may be a tension between students’ positive perceptions of their education and the learning outcomes themselves.

3.5 Reflections upon the Theoretical Framework Considering the Study Setting and Context

This literature review has highlighted and analysed several ideas that together provide a theoretical framework for this study. The purpose of this theoretical framework is to outline both existing research and the specific context of this study. It does so to identify gaps in current knowledge and thus provide a rationale for our contribution to this discipline and research domain. The literature review identifies topics to be covered in the methodological framework of this thesis; specifically regarding data collection and fieldwork in SA.

Overview of global trends

We have identified the failure so far to attain a deep understanding of the status of quality standards in a Saudi-based DeL, noting that the field has only recently become the subject of sustained scholarly attention. Such a theoretical understanding is necessary to provide policymakers with the information they require to make suitable decisions in this important domain. This study hence situates itself within a theoretical framework that combines both Western and Saudi-based studies. While the former provides a deeper theoretical foundation to give depth to our research, the latter provides insight into the cultural specificity of this study and its context.

The DeL revolution is one aspect of a greater change brought about by globalisation in HE. The challenge of globalisation has forced HE institutions to become more competitive, particularly those in the developing world (Oliver, 2005). Processes such as networked learning, e-learning and the formation of virtual institutions have become increasingly essential (Masoumi and Lindstrom, 2012). Institutions of HE must hence change and adapt to these new circumstances or risk being left behind in the global race for competitiveness.

The provision of adequate DeL is inexorably linked with the quest to increase standards in HE and, in maximising the standard of its workforce, increase a nation's capacity to attract international investment. In this way, policymakers are increasingly aware of the importance of DeL in securing the future of SA as a civilised, modern and economically stable country.

We should recognise that DeL is a distinct field of education that draws upon new delivery techniques and pedagogical philosophies (Keegan, 2003). The success of the DeL curriculum depends on whether it can be moulded to work with existing and future technological advancements. The technology deployed by DeL should therefore be used to encourage

positive and effective interaction between the student, the course content, peers and teachers (Wright et al., 2009).

Despite the broad trend of progress, administrators nonetheless have a tendency to limit the possible routes to making technology more effective. One reason for this view is given by Omofaye (2006), who argues that individuals (administrators) may resist the use of technological solutions within education because it was not a key factor in their own education. In best practice, for instance, technology is seen more as a means of achieving pedagogical goals but not a goal in itself (Bates, 2007). Moreover, with regard to the use of DeL in developing countries, one of the major problems encountered is the belief that, by adopting it, an institution will save money and reduce the number of staff (Wright et al., 2009). Yet one prominent researcher in this field has observed, “[o]ne of the biggest myths about online education is that it is cheap. To produce high quality distance education courses, it is very expensive” (Silberstein, 2007). Minnarr (2013) states that institutional provision of DeL requires strategic thinking, and that it must be integrated across academic disciplines. Step-by-step implementation of DeL is regarded as the best model for implementation, with small initial successes being replicated across the whole institution.

The most widely utilised model of technological integration in DeL is that of Bates (2005), known as the ACTIONS model. It assesses the key implications of technology which must be considered in reference to quality in DeL, which are, in order of importance: *Access – Cost – Teaching and learning – Interactivity and user friendliness – Organisational issues – Novelty – Speed*. Bates’ list focuses on the experience of the course learners, and shares the priorities of students such as access and cost, placing them above more bureaucratic and administrative concerns like speed of installation or the organisational consequences of the technology. His model was updated to a SECTIONS model in 2015, comprising: *Students - Ease of use – Cost - Teaching functions – Interaction - Organisational issues – Networking - Security and privacy*. This amendment shows how some concerns have changed over the period of DeL, such as security and privacy, though the core components of interaction and teaching remain the same.

To progress with understanding the growth of DeL, what we might then enquire into are the effects of the new technologies, learning theories and learning-designs associated with it. Firstly, a shift can be seen from objectivist models of learning to constructivist ones, so moving the agency of learning from the imposition of truth upon the learner by the teacher to the active construction of knowledge by the learner (Moore, 2006; Andrew and Haythornthwaite, 2009; Conole, 2014). Secondly, technology is driving a change from

standardised, mass production and consumption to a focus on personalisation directed towards the local and the individual (Rumble, 2007). Thirdly, DeL environments are tailored more towards the promotion of ‘twenty-first century skills’; namely, creative thinking, critical thinking, collaborating and problem solving, along with an awareness of how developments in technology can allow the expression of these skills (Toffler and Toffler, 2006; Conole, 2014). Finally, Bates (2007) has shown how criticism of the quality standards applied to DeL is perhaps conditioned by the pre-eminence of both technical and external assurance standards and thus overshadows issues of didactic quality.

The Saudi Arabian Context

First-phase policy interventions in the Saudi context tend to base initiatives on investment in the latest technical innovations in the field of DeL. These initiatives are usually derived from the successful experiences of other nations, particularly of Western countries. Karolak & Guta (2015) note this is particularly the case with new institutions. However, this approach fails to appreciate that it is necessary to determine how appropriate such imports are in reference to the current cultural situation in SA.

The approach currently utilised follows a simple logic in the provision of DeL; that is, the decision to start from where others end is taken as the most effective way to obtain immediate results. However, this approach has not proved effective because the outcomes of Saudi DeL programmes have been disappointing for both the learners and the state (Alarini, 2013). The problem is that instruments, methods and tools created externally can be deployed without consideration of the specific cultural situation into which they are imported or introduced.

The quality of teaching and interaction in the pedagogic process in HE is determined by a number of variables, such as the skills and specialisms of the instructors, the ability and motivation of students, the organisational context and cultural specifics. These factors sit alongside legislative structures, such as rules, regulations, laws and the like. However, most approaches to technology-enhanced education concentrate excessively on just a few of these variables, mostly regarding technology and content production (Ehlers, 2013).

Latchem (2014) highlights that citizens of Middle Eastern countries utilise the Internet for two primary purposes - as a provider of information and a source of entertainment - but do not consider it to be a learning tool. Alongside this trend, we should also consider the long-standing custom of oral instruction in Arabic cultures, to underline that patterns of learning are different in countries such as SA.

Hence, Alharthi's survey (2005) of Arabic DeL students in the US reveals that students did prize the anonymity of online learning, yet still relied upon tutors to provide not only a structure of rules and procedures, but also to initiate communications. They were then less likely to make uninvited contributions or request clarification, and if no oversight was provided from course leaders, they would tend to procrastinate. Alharthi's (2010) study showed that Arab students would rather have a rigid structure and to have more interaction between themselves and their teachers, whilst American students did not want this to the same extent. Arab students would prefer specific instructions about what to do and how they can do it. If there is an unstructured open space with too much flexibility and not fixed way of providing input, they find the situation uncomfortable.

The World Bank (2008) has underlined that, in Arab countries, both teacher-led and face-to-face sessions have been considered benchmarks of quality in education. Conversely, ICT has primarily been considered a passive source of information transmission and learning. However, in the context of driving change in the learning culture in SA, Al-Saggaf (2004) has shown how online communities can provide a platform for sharing ideas and perspectives, and, in doing so, enhance their capacities for critical thinking. A study by the Arab Organization for Administrative Development pointed to Arab states suffering a digital divide, which reflected negatively on the Arab sites of the Internet, and attributed this to the lack of understanding and awareness of the importance of ICT in the development and production of knowledge that would enable the Arab citizens to benefit from modern technology (Algasim, 2011).

The dominant mode of education in SA is direct lecturing and rote memorisation. This 'spoon-fed' approach is ingrained in the expectations of students, and can be jarring when it comes up against the realities of the DeL environment, in which independent learning is a foundational tenet. Students prefer to be in a classroom where the teacher shoulder the responsibility, and do not like to be in charge of their own learning (Sultan et al., 2012). In 2011 Hamdan identified two axes along which SA students needed to develop if they were to be able to exploit DeL: firstly, that they would move from a passive to an active learning style. Secondly, that they would grasp the ethical issues involved in DeL such as privacy and respecting the work of others. Alharthi (2005) noted that, insofar as they lack these capacities, students from the GCC tended to dislike the experience of DeL in the US.

However, a more recent generation of studies has begun to inquire how recent attempts at DeL in SA have affected the students who participate in it. Hamdan (2014, p.310) sees that these students begin to access "learning resources such as journals, magazines and

periodicals, and intercultural communication forums [changing] their culture of learning”. This leads to openness to new perspectives, and makes younger DeL students “less traditional and strict in their views”. Al Seghayer (2013) notes that this new generation have begun to question traditional assumptions about what learning is. Hamdan (2014) notes that the Internet, as it is different to traditional, non-verbal means of communicating power, can teach students to be more independent.

Stakeholders and Quality in the Saudi Arabian Context

DeL has many stakeholders whose roles is to negotiate to provide a set of standards. For them, learners’ needs act as a mediating factor and enable us as researchers to compare, in turn, stakeholders’ beliefs about the quality of DeL. For Ehlers (2013), the key characteristic of a stakeholder is that they are a ‘quality expert’. The most complete picture of educational quality would therefore be comprised of both the views of the learners and the views of the institution. If this process centres on learners’ needs, it would then be viewed as a negotiation between the various stakeholders based on their internal norms and not as a set of external, objective factors. Standards would then be based on values and objectives, to empower all stakeholders to determine an open-ended, ever evolving process of setting the goals to which standards of quality will aspire (ibid).

When considering the challenges of addressing low retention rates, we must be aware of the overall quality of the learning experience, paying specific attention to the impact of adopting new learning methods. In the Saudi Arabian context, national statistics have yet to be compiled regarding the retention rate of online learners compared to traditional teaching. Only Alarini (2013) notes that the online learners have a lower retention rate than traditional learners. Indeed, in regard to retention rates, DeL cannot be improved unless the following are provided: (1) an overview of the implementation strategy and (2) analysis of students’ perceptions as influenced by certain characteristics of the online environment.

The best method of determining both (1) and (2) is to translate stakeholders’ expectations into quality standards. Now, both the policy goals of administrators and the perceptions of learners tend to be expressed in broad terms. In contrast, the process of breaking-down these bundles of perceptions or objectives into limited and measurable standards will enable our research to express the provision of quality more specifically according to our objectives.

Ehlers (2012) suggests that more emphasis be placed on learners' perspectives on quality. His conclusion is that online learners take the following into account when assessing quality in DeL:

- Tutors' and learners' levels of communication and interaction
- Opportunities to communicate and collaborate with peers and tutors
- Attainment of technical standards
- Time, financial and effort costs of the DeL in relation to its outcomes and benefits
- Provision of both standardised information and individualised information, where appropriate, according to course contents, learning methodologies and any technical issues arising
- Sense of 'presence' during course sessions; noting that this is valued significantly more highly by certain learners than others
- Pedagogical issues, including methods, materials, content, and learning goals.

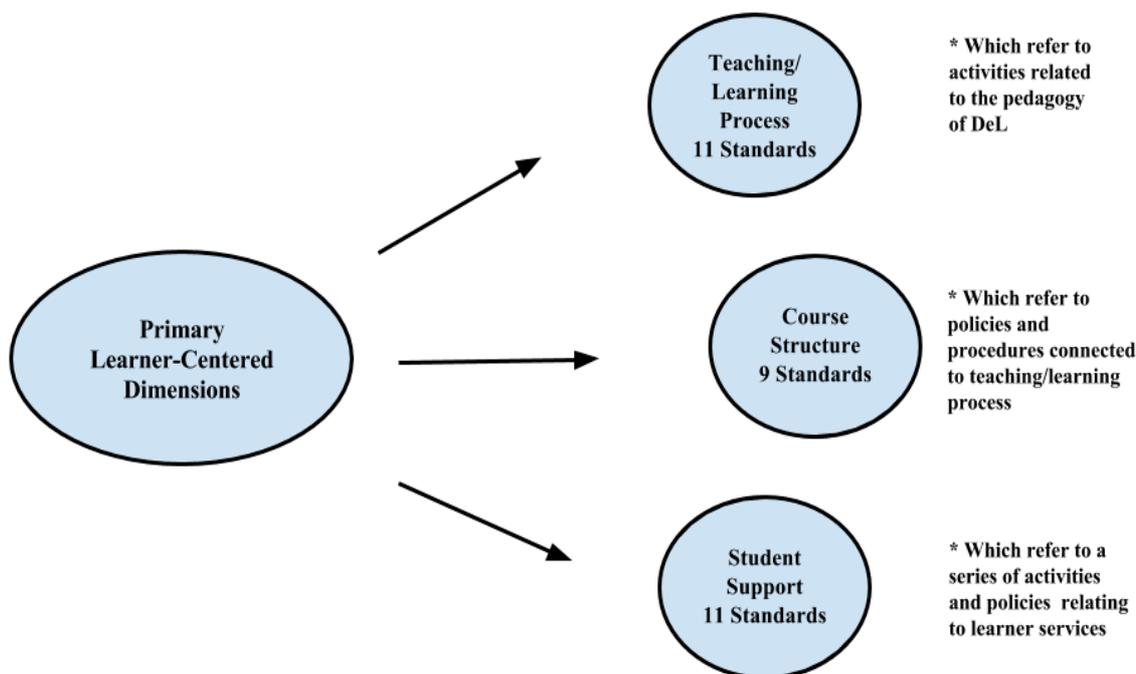
As previously discussed, quality has many different meanings (Clements et al., (2015). The most systematic approaches situate quality in regard to a specific community and context (Ochoa and Duval, 2009). ISO 9000 (2014) states quality relates to the ability of a product to satisfy stated or implied needs. A further definition of quality is as "[...] appropriately meeting the stakeholders' objectives and needs which is the result of a transparent, participatory negotiation process within an organization" (Pawlowski 2007, p.4).

Given the difficulties of finally defining quality in education and in DeL, our method has been to identify and follow consensus reached by the various studies in the literature review. Such a method is in keeping with the pragmatic methodology's focus on 'what works' rather than grand abstractions. This study has therefore identified and adopted a set of standards to determine the quality of DeL from students' perceptions in SA built upon those hereto examined in the literature review. We have then classified these standards in terms of three separate dimensions: the teaching/learning process; course structure; and student support. Figure 3.6 presents these three categories as the primary learner-centred dimensions selected by the researcher, while Chapter 4 section 6.1 provides an extended discussion.

Whilst it is important to understand students' views for utilising DeL opportunities, their perceptions of its quality standards cannot be detached from the wider social and cultural context of the society in which the DeL environment is situated. A consideration of the Saudi context is therefore essential as, firstly, information about the specific social and cultural

norms of the HE system provides a basis for an understanding of its uniqueness. Secondly, we recognise the necessity of accessing prior research in this context both to elucidate the present situation and shows the space in which this thesis and future study will be situated in its contribution to the specific domain of educational research.

Figure 3.6: Dimensions for Measuring Quality



Moreover, we can question the applicability of Western models such as IHEP to other cultures, as they are anchored in Westernised norms and values. We should therefore explore models of DeL quality outside of the Western world to consider the cultural and didactic values of the institutions to which they stand in relation. Although one could primarily argue that institutions can assure quality by standardising metrics of processes and performance both nationally and internationally to other universities' best practice, we should bear in mind that a review of the literature demonstrates that no 'one size fits all' model exists (Latchem, 2014). For example, Yeung (2003), considering the IHEP in the context of learning in Hong Kong, found that, although the bulk of metrics used were useful in that situation, practitioners demanded additional standards, finding the IHEP set to be incomplete.

Hauptman and Fritschler (2009) claim culture, demography and economics define salient differences between educational contexts. A current trend is to benchmark education systems against the US model, which has become the 'reserve currency' of education systems, providing a touchstone to which all others are compared. Obviously, there are benefits from

this global comparison of practice, but there are also drawbacks if such comparisons are incorrectly done. Hence, Hauptman and Fritschler's (2009) set of dimensions must be considered before any simple comparison is made, if the above errors of translation are to be avoided.

Using Perceptions to Determine Quality

For Jung (2012 a), although customer focus remains a core principle of quality assurance, up until now not many online learning quality assurance frameworks have managed to foreground the needs and expectations of students. She states that if quality is to be assured one must ascertain the following from questioning students:

- How far are the different learning styles, motivations and technological skills of students responsible for the differences in perceptions they have of quality in DeL?
- How far do learners with varying prior learning experiences determine the quality of DeL?
- Are learners' perspectives on DeL quality determined by culture?
- Are providers' and learners' perceptions of DeL similar, dissimilar or opposed?
- Can learners' perceptions of DeL quality be used to improve the quality of DeL, and further develop the culture of learning?

As the discussion in Section 3.2.4 noted, quality is defined from the perspective of the stakeholders in HE, and students are the most populous of these stakeholder groups.

Exploring their perspectives on the prevalence of quality is therefore a legitimate means of building a picture about the standards in an institution. Whilst it can be argued that students may have a more limited or less technical perspective than other stakeholders, they benefit from a more critical and reflexive appraisal of their situation, and can be considered more likely to give honest views about their institution than other interested parties.

Most previous studies have focused on the perspective of students in nations that have existing standards and longer experience of providing DeL. In contrast, SA has a limited, short term experience of DeL with no clear criteria for measuring the quality in this field. We therefore found it to be important to investigate the abstract importance of quality standards for DeL from the perspective of students, rather than only exploring how students perceive the application of those standards in practice, as in the existing research. Our aim here has been to understand the reality more clearly and in turn help policymakers to make the right decision, being that they are at 'the beginning of the road' in the context of DeL in SA.

The indicators of quality in DeL environments remain consistent in the literature, grounded as they are across the spectrum of learning theories from objectivism to constructivism. These indicators have been further reinforced by research on students' perceptions of learning both when indicators are and are not present. However, the extent is still unknown, especially in SA, to which these quality elements have been implemented in HE and the transferability of students' perceptions of their validity to the design of quality DeL. Therefore, in the name of determining the quality of DeL from students' perceptions we should investigate both students' perceptions of quality in their current course in relation to these standards, and the extent to which individual standards are important to them. Such an approach will allow us to consider student satisfaction as conceived by Allen et al. as an "evaluation by students about the quality of the education experience" (Allen et al., 2013, p.143).

We may then conclude that if DeL is to fulfil its promise, we must determine what students' perceptions are about DeL, and their perceptions on the quality of this experience and the application of these standards. The present study is therefore designed to adopt this approach by investigating both what students report about the importance of quality in the DeL and their perceptions of the application of these quality standards in their DeL environment. Instead of abstractly evaluating the general strengths and weaknesses of DeL - a topic that has been extensively investigated - this study operates within the context of the Saudi organisational setting. It asks what the population surveyed perceive about their experience of DeL. Methodologically, the study will explore students' perceptions, to discover barriers to the achievement of quality, and the requirements necessary to develop current practices in their specific context.

The Need to Recognise the Views of Saudi DeL Students

In comparison to DeL learners who are required to pay tuition fees, traditional students in state universities in the Saudi context not only study for free, but they also receive a monthly allowance approximately equivalent to 180 British pounds. Such a situation has made DeL students feel that they were in an unfair position, particularly those who believe they have been obliged to choose this method of education because of their poor achievement in secondary school. This sense of inequality or injustice can have a negative impact upon how students perceive the value of education and the sense of its importance to their lives and future careers. DeL students are therefore assumed to be more critical than their peers in traditional education and so constitute promising 'monitors' of quality. Administrators could therefore use the views of DeL students as a valuable resource. In the sense of the QA/QE

divide discussed in Section 3.2.3, students are a valuable resource for vocalising issues and creating ‘bottom up’ improvements in the QE mode.

It should be noted that the qualifications awarded to DeL students are not equivalent to those awarded for campus-based learning. Moreover, they are not recognised either by official or private bodies, and the tendency of some government agencies to issue guidance not to recognise or accept these certificates in SA also devalues the learning process. Hence, DeL is not prioritised to the same extent that traditional university education is.

There are multiple reasons why students select DeL. Some seek life-long learning, others wish to improve their career situation, while some may have an artistic or personal interest in a particular subject. Moreover, communities in developing countries regard the improvement of their social situation as an important objective. For instance, a certificate of education or university degree is a status symbol within Saudi society, giving the holder a degree of respect, appreciation and social standing.

Hence, there is exaggeration in the importance of a degree beyond its subject content. The association of specific titles with degrees then awards prestige, no matter how far removed the holder may now be from their original area of degree specialty. This trend is unlike those of other societies, such as Western ones, where a person is seen as an entity regardless of magnitude of their education and degree certificates. We would thus state that such a situation is a challenge for students in SA.

Moreover, in a centralised country like SA, concepts such as quality control and management are imposed via technocratic and top-down approaches. We should therefore emphasise to the contrary that education serves as a means of acculturation for learners rather than a system for manufacturing learners as ‘one-size products’. It is our responsibility then to create models that emphasise the holistic nature of educational processes.

3.6 Summary

This chapter has defined what the present study considers DeL to be. It went on to explore quality and to establish groundwork about what that concept is, in industry, and then in education generally, in HE specifically, and finally in DeL. Cultural models were discussed, and their implications for educational and pedagogical theory. The final reflection section considers the issues arising from the literature review in the specific context of Saudi Arabia.

To conclude, this study considers a relatively new phenomenon in education. Our research begins with quality evaluation and its standards (Koul, 2006), considering the transition

between DE in its traditional form and e-learning, which has changed the face of DE dramatically. The approach we have chosen (as will be explained more in Chapter 4) is one that is pragmatic mixed method in terms of research philosophy, enabling outcomes that are more practical, especially in a rapidly evolving environment that is new to this type of education, such as SA.

Chapter 4. Methodology

This chapter describes both methodology and research framework. We begin with an overview of research paradigms, focusing upon the advantages of the ‘pragmatism’ paradigm that we have chosen. We go on to present a more detailed rationale for using the pragmatic paradigm in the present study, showing its compatibility with a mixed methods research design.

We will explain, in addition, the data collection procedures employed, detailing in turn the design and administration of the instruments. Some crucial methodological considerations, such as the notion of ‘quality’ are discussed. Finally, the sampling strategy is described, the data analysis approach is considered, and the ethical content of this study and its wider implications shall be addressed.

4.1 Research Paradigms: An Introduction

According to Creswell (2003), selecting both a topic and a paradigm is the first step of designing any study. The term ‘paradigm’ was introduced to the social sciences research community by Thomas Kuhn (1996) in his prominent book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn took it to represent a set of “universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners” (Kuhn, 1996, viii).

Based on Kuhn’s description of a *paradigm*, two inferences can be recognised: Firstly, he gives the paradigm a distinct meaning, characterising it as a worldview that typifies the belief of investigators. Secondly, after considering that there is a multiplicity of worldviews held by scientists with essential differences in their definitions of reality and methodology, we should recognise that these worldviews will not be able to communicate with each other (Mertens, 2015).

In other words, *paradigm* is used in this study to denote the worldview, or a set of beliefs and practices, that guide researchers when studying educational phenomena (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Morgan, 2007). A paradigm represents a method of investigating and interpreting the world; in so doing, it provides a framework to reveal to researchers which phenomena are real, accurate and significance as the authentic objects of study (Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

Guba and Lincoln (1994, p.108) categorise paradigms in terms of their responses to three basic questions.

- The ontological question: What is the form and nature of reality and what, therefore, can be known of it?
- The epistemological question: what is the nature of the relationship between the knower and the known?
- The methodological question: how should the inquirer go about finding out whatever he or she believes may be known?

In the last two decades, the development of paradigmatic frameworks by researchers in social and human sciences has been both rapid and remarkable. The institution of progressive paradigms has enabled researchers to choose the framework that best fits with their goals and research questions. However, these approaches traditionally arise from two primary paradigms or philosophies: quantitative (also called positivist philosophy) and qualitative (also called interpretivist/constructivist), which are often viewed as opposed to each other (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2010; Bryman, 2012; Feilzer, 2010). Before the advent of mixed methods approaches, researchers were forced to make a choice between the positivist scientific model of research associated with quantitative methods and the interpretative/constructivist model associated with the qualitative (Howe, 1992).

The positivist paradigm claims that there are universal laws and that the researcher can therefore be objective and neutral in identifying them (Thompson, 1995). Thus, it is based on a foundationalist ontology that views social reality as an independent, real and possible object of examination (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). For positivists, since laws of cause and effect can be discovered, there are no qualitative differences between the natural and the social world if such general laws govern individuals' social behaviour. Positivism is characterised through the application of quasi-scientific methods that are used to analyse the social.

Positivism adopts the scientific approach to solving large problems by breaking them down into variables. The identification of different variables, and their isolation, so enables relationships of cause and effect to be established (Creswell, 2014). Such research takes the form of formulating and testing hypotheses. Once hypotheses are established, conclusions can be generalised to the larger social reality that follows the same underlying structure. It is therefore a deductive approach, in the sense that inferences derived from statistical hypotheses are used to establish general inferences regarding the nature of a population (Harwell, 2011). There is significant emphasis in positivism on measurement and comparison (Cohen et al., 2011). To succeed in this paradigm, researchers should be objective in carrying

out their study and drawing conclusions by setting aside their biases, subjective perceptions and experiences.

Questionnaires or instruments used must be designed with the recognition that positivism is complementary to easily quantifiable research data. Interpretivism has then emerged, conversely, as an alternative to positivism because, in concerning itself with subjective and context-based human experiences, it has provided a means of utilising data beyond the reach of positivist analysis (Schwandt, 2000).

Hence, the popularity of interpretivism in the social sciences increased in the 1980s, as a paradigm that rejects many of the tenets of positivism. Schwandt (2000) states that research in this paradigm is concerned with subjective meaning, seeking to understand individuals' definitions of a given situation. It is based on the tenet that "reality is socially constructed" (Mertens, 2015, p.12). Researchers construct an understanding of how populations view their world through events that they have experienced or observed (Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

The aim of an interpretive approach is to explore the beliefs of the individuals regarding the situation that they have studied. Such an approach favours the adoption of research instruments that yield qualitative rather than quantitative data. Interpretive research is commonly associated with an inductive approach, one considering situations or populations using words rather than numbers (Maxwell, 1996). This paradigm commits the researcher to the belief that, contrary to positivism, there is no underlying social reality but only a multitude of individual perspectives. Researchers must therefore be sure to consider their own specific experiences, perceptions and biases in understanding how they relate to the research project, having the possibility of influencing its outcomes.

In terms of research methods, the interpretive paradigm is consistent with the use of open-ended data sources, such as interviews, surveys or observation. Researchers in this paradigm must have the skill-set to process the information obtained through these instruments to understand the emotions, values, beliefs and assumptions held by everyone. Thus, to understand an event is to understand its context and perception, rather than any reality it may represent. Naturally, a researcher operating in an interpretive paradigm faces potential criticism related to their own subjectivity (Cohen et al., 2011).

The weaknesses of these approaches are quite apparent. Indeed, rather than constituting the necessary preliminaries which they are all too often presented as being, they instead lead to "long-lasting, circular, and unproductive debates" (Feilzer, 2010, p.6) that stand in opposition to any attempt to provide solid research. This explains why, by the 1990s, researchers were

considering mixing both quantitative and qualitative approaches, supporting the pragmatic view that both were of importance (Johnson and Christensen, 2012). Given that our study is based on the pragmatic paradigm, we will therefore present an overview of the basic assumptions of this approach, before outlining the specifics of its adaptation in this research project.

4.2 The Mixed Methods Approach

The two methods detailed above each accord with a distinct method of conducting research: positivism in the case of a quantitative one; interpretivism with a qualitative one. Both these positions are epistemologically dichotomous, meaning that they cannot be reconciled or combined when applied in their traditional sense, being that each one claims that the data provided by the other fails to track the truth and is therefore untenable.

In the literature of social science research, a ‘paradigm war’ has developed at two levels between scholars of the rival approaches that we have just considered. Firstly, in the 1970s there was a conflict between views on the idea of the fundamental differences (incommensurability) between quantitative and qualitative paradigms. Secondly, a decade later, in the 1980s, several researchers introduced the compatibility thesis to achieve a reconciliation of these two views (Denzin, 2010). If the two approaches can be taken to be compatible, we could then justify a ‘mixed methods’ approach in terms of its being a blend of the quantitative and qualitative approaches. However, this was only possible once the epistemological problems exposed in the paradigm war were resolved. Recently, several scholars have stated that the war between the quantitative and qualitative is over (e.g., Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2010). This underpins the claim that pragmatism provides an appropriate research paradigm within which a mixed methods research can be grounded (Harrits, 2011).

The mixed methods approach utilises both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously, making the claim that such data can be combined to provide a more complete description of the phenomenon studied. This approach thus involves abandoning the dichotomy of positivism and interpretivism and their divergent epistemological foundations; this shift away from research that is responsible for making such simple claims about underlying ‘truth’. The switch towards the mixed methods approach instead follows the modern belief that using both quantitative and qualitative data leads to a superior – and in many ways a ‘truer’ – depiction of the world.

Creswell (2003) presents six main research models using mixed methods approaches, one of which – the convergent concurrent model – has come to be viewed as the most popular contemporary design in social science research (Guest, 2013). Examples of good practice in mixed methods research abound in recent literature. One instance is the depiction of the ‘Crime Scene Study’ in Feilzer (2010) where it is shown how both types of data can be utilised to provide a complete perceptual description of a crime, or the investigation of Wittink, Barg, and Gallo (2006) into patients’ well-being, as highlighted by Creswell (2014). The design of this later study has influenced the construction of the present study, insofar as Creswell demonstrates how the convergent parallel design provides data that can be used to link themes and to validate findings.

4.3 The Pragmatic Paradigm

Pragmatism can be regarded as a philosophical position correlate with the mixed methods approach (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). As such, it seeks “to bridge the poles of positivism and constructivism” (Riazi and Candlin, 2014, p.138), by bypassing the undue concern of these approaches with epistemological certainty. Pragmatism instead appeals to notions of practical use and feasibility.

According to Dewey (1908, p.81), pragmatism is the “doctrine that reality possesses practical character.” Pragmatism should therefore be regarded as an action-oriented method of solving problems, and is associated with practicality, compromise, being prudent and goal orientation in relation to issues.

Pragmatists consider truth to be what is effective in the process of problem solving (James, 2000). Therefore, this approach is neither grounded in epistemological certainty as positivism is, nor does it deny it as interpretivism does. Pragmatists see knowledge in terms of impacts and results; being that the world is in flux, what is effective today is not guaranteed to be effective tomorrow. Pragmatism is doing what is realistic when considering existing circumstances. It is a holistic philosophy, managing objects and human experiences to produce the best outcomes, and as such it is strongly rooted in the reality of examples and lived experiences (Creswell, 2014). In its simplest form, pragmatism means understanding ‘the real world’ rather than an underlying reality, to learn how to overcome obstacles and to improve outcomes.

Cherryholmes (1992, pp.13-14) declares that, “For pragmatists, values and visions of human action and interaction precede a search for descriptions, theories, explanations, and narratives”. Teddlie (2005, p.215) further clarifies this notion stating that:

Pragmatists, decide what they want to research guided by their personal value systems; that is, they study what they think is important. They then study the topic in a way that is congruent with their value system, including variables and units of analysis that they feel are the most appropriate for finding answers to their research questions. They also conduct their studies in anticipation of results that are congruent within their value system. This general description of the way in which pragmatists conduct their studies portrays the manner in which many researchers in the social and behavioral sciences actually do conduct their studies, especially research with important social consequences.

The basic, underlying notion of the pragmatic approach is that the truth of a concept consists of its implication in practice. Consequently, truth can be defined in terms of ‘what works’ (Robson, 2011). Pragmatist researchers will therefore utilise complementary methods that they believe will provide the best solution for their research problems and questions. In other words, they may mix research elements using whatever philosophical or methodological tools will help them most effectively (Robson, 2011; Hibberts and Johnson, 2012).

Pragmatism is therefore a philosophy of ‘workability’. In this sense, neither the processes nor philosophical assumptions are more important than the consequences and what ‘works in practice’ (Creswell, 2014; Johnson and Christensen, 2012). Pragmatists hence believe that values play a large role in conducting research and in drawing conclusion from studies, and they see no reason to be concerned about that influence (Robson, 2011). An additional benefit for researchers focusing on utility is that by adopting pragmatism, they can choose alternatives to the dichotomous views of (post)-positivism and interpretivism (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2010; Feilzer, 2010; Morgan, 2007).

The two main features of pragmatism are:

1. The rejection of the dogmatic either/or choice between constructivist and positivist paradigms.
2. The search for practical answers to questions that intrigue the researcher (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009, p.86).

The pragmatic paradigm has been put forth as a philosophical framework that supports the use of mixed methods, being that there is not one set of methods that is otherwise appropriate to such an approach. Hence, the criteria for selecting the most appropriate mix of methods

resides in the following question: what fits with the research question in this study? (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Biesta (2010) outlines the basic principles of pragmatism as a philosophy that can inform mixed methods researcher. He follows Dewey's claim that no knowledge claim can be documented as providing 'the truth'. For Dewey and Biesta, therefore, to claim that any knowledge is unquestionably true is futile - a waste of time and effort. One should rather consider the proposition that different knowledge claims result from different ways of engaging in praxis with the social world.

Nonetheless, weaknesses remain in the pragmatic paradigm that should also be considered. Most critiques, such as those of Woodbridge (1904) or Lovejoy (1908), emphasise the expediency and contingency of an approach that disavows attempts to access truth; that is, one that abandons truth in favour of providing a short term solution to the problem encountered. The weakness of such an epistemological critique is that it assumes a perfect representation of truth to be either possible or available. In contrast, the history of social science research and that of the philosophy underpinning it has so far failed to determine a single methodology capable of arriving at an unquestionable 'truth'.

We might instead argue that a more pertinent set of critical positions would be those confronting the scope of pragmatic research. Randolph Bourne (who was a student of Dewey), for instance, criticised the pragmatist approach's affiliation with the status quo, in its tendency to shy away from radical solutions to problems or decisive breaks in social systems in favour of a gradual change accomplished merely with the 'tools at hand'. These critiques often come from a left-wing perspective, separating pragmatism from other modern paradigms such as action research, which are more expressly motivated by ideology.

In conclusion, the present study believes that the tendency of pragmatism to shy away from both axiomatic and dogmatic propositions - and therefore to be non-ideological - constitutes a strength rather than a weakness. We would therefore maintain that, in regard to determining a correct approach to our research, it is neither necessary nor useful to invest in claims about objects which are marked by their unobtainability or absence. Pragmatism offers a framework that can avoid the unproductive and circular debates about ontology and epistemology that characterise the paradigm wars of previous decades.

4.4 Justifying the Research Paradigm and Methodology

In many domains of research, it is generally accepted that decisions about research methods should be informed by the nature, aims and objectives of the research questions. Hence, they

should indicate what approach and methods will be used. This research has been conducted through the concept of a pragmatic, mixed method approach, which allows the application of solutions to the problems identified in the research questions (Creswell, 2014).

The first consideration of this study was to determine the philosophical stance which would best suit its objectives. As we have explored, the most pertinent debate has taken place between positivist and interpretivist depictions of social reality. These competing accounts hold that concrete, fixed facts are discoverable, but within a rigid conception of cause and effect. On the other hand, interpretivist approaches consider social reality to be a construct of human beings, where knowledge is constructed by individuals and does not represent a universal and underlying truth.

Given the research questions tackled by this study, it is clear that an expressly positivist position would be untenable because a set of objective data about the phenomena under investigation is neither available nor possible to attain. We therefore tend towards a naturalistic, interpretivist epistemology with the objective of building its data set from the perceptions of the participants involved. We recognise that these perspectives will both vary between individuals and hence will not map onto a final 'truth' about an unchanging reality.

Nevertheless, this study borrows elements from the positivist approach, such as the focus on producing quantitative data. It aims to produce a final analysis that reveals with accuracy the reality of the quality assessment of DeL in SA. We will therefore take a mixed methods approach as we move between these two polarised methodologies that are often considered mutually exclusive.

We have arrived at this research decision because of the following demands or objectives:

- We aim at the creation of a holistic understanding of how the population of the study understand their world and how this world-view shapes and determines their experience of observed events.
- We are investigating and analysing a particular phenomenon (i.e. the issue of quality of DeL in Saudi context) using the perspectives of those engaged in it.
- We hope to derive specific advantages from the use of specific case setting, in the hope that this will yield a framework for improving quality both in its own context and in other such cases (i.e. in developing countries).
- We need to be sensitive of the specific cultural framework in which the study takes place and the problems with importing universalist or Western values into this specific context.

Moreover, the paradigm in which a study operates is, according to Creswell (2003), determined by (1) the problem considered, in conjunction with (2) the researcher and (3) the participants and their capabilities. Our selection of the pragmatic paradigm described below comes from a consideration of Creswell's three actors in the context of this study. The approach adopted in the present study has been specifically created to address the research questions, yet it is also to reassure respondents and to promote open responses. The collection of oral reports, facilitated by mixed methods, has hence allowed respondents to provide strong responses which resonate with the specific cultural context of the location (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003, Creswell, 2003).

Furthermore, many researchers investigating students' perceptions towards quality in DeL have used traditional quantitative research design (questionnaire) operating in a positivist approach; that is, an approach that focuses on 'individual' experiences of quality for students in the DeL environment. Such methodologies fail to consider the complexities entailed in the concept of quality in DeL because, by focusing on specific values or norms, they underestimate the importance of social factors and other contextual considerations affecting the views of stakeholders (Ehlers, 2013; Jung, 2012 a).

McPherson (2007) states that any research data taking the form only of figures, number or statistics cannot be a foundation for new perspectives or insights of the type at which this study aims. The reason is that purely quantitative research is unable to reveal underlying quality factors in DeL, which may be determined by views, beliefs or judgments held by a stakeholder within the multi-variable environments associated with HE. To achieve its objectives more effectively, this study's research methodology has thus adopted a thorough holistic approach that has provided a platform for the analysis of quality and its implications in planning and delivering e-learning across the cultural context in which it operates.

In addition, the use of mixed methods – those underpinned by a pragmatic epistemology - permits the elaboration and triangulation of findings and therefore enables us to reduce the prior expectations or biases that might occur in the final analysis. We have also used triangulation to allow the researcher to uncover a more faithful depiction of the reality behind the data collected, and this can be used to cross-check the results (Yin, 2014).

Moreover, the mixed method model, as it triangulates qualitative and quantitative data, allows a deeper understanding of the contextual situation of the research. Accordingly, it is a good fit with a pragmatist methodology. Many scholars (e.g., Mertens, 2015, Cohen et al. 2011) have noted that there is no exclusively correct model for research being that a study can reflect one

or more than one approach. This being the case, researchers must be as transparent as they can be about the problem they are investigating and the procedures used to investigate it.

The pragmatic approach used in this study will allow the deepening of the comprehension of the complexities of quality in students' perceptions of DeL. It provides a sound basis for advising about change or continuity within the current provision as appropriate. As a concept, "quality" can be problematic, being that it is doubtful that any research participants in any study are likely to share a uniform understanding or experience of the phenomenon. This study instead acknowledges that 'quality' will have different meanings for different actors within the same context (Cleary, 2001; Lockee, Moore, and Burton, 2002; Latchem, 2014).

We may conclude then that quality is not a singular concept; rather, it is always context-dependent and always variable across universities, regional, national and international systems. The reality is thus that the questioner, the body being investigated, and the context of the investigation determine the exact meaning of 'quality'. Thus, if we wish to attain an adequate definition, such a subjective decision must be arrived at using a transparent and open method and should be reached with due concern about the surrounding environment, as well as the educational context (Ehlers, 2013).

Institutions of HE have multiple differences in terms of objectives, resources and institutional history. However, they all aim for across the board quality improvement, known as 'quality profiles', with the result that no nation has achieved a social, political or academic consensus about the definition of quality in HE (Ehlers and Pawlowski, 2006). Owing to these difficulties, if we wish to discuss the compatibility of existing approaches to the definition of quality, we must understand the underlying theoretical foundations they might share in common (Ehlers, 2013). Again, this points towards the applicability of the mixed methods approach taken by this study.

Research in this new field of quality and students' perceptions towards DeL is currently comprised of a small body of research in the Western context and some other parts of the world (Jung, 2012 a). We would hence underline that such research is still in its infant stages in the Saudi context, which makes adopting the pragmatic approach more convenient. With the limited data available, we should not be unduly concerned with circuitous and often fruitless diversions into the realm of metaphysics and the quest to make concrete decisions about the nature of reality.

The Saudi context hence favours a more 'sandbox' approach, in which the participating researcher actively works towards improving DeL provision in a 'hands on' manner. We

would argue then, to this extent, that the pragmatic approach would be very useful to new areas of research. Such an approach has enabled us, as researchers, to embrace the spirit of exploration in its urgency, rather than being forced to conduct research activities (and ourselves) in a manner stipulated by a specific epistemological worldview.

Taking into account the argument stated above, the complexity of quality and the perceptions and the aims of the present study, the pragmatic orientation of mixed methods research appears to be an appropriate choice. The aim of pragmatism in education is driven by the challenge of creating something that works, rather than striving to attain certain or absolute knowledge (Rorty, 2004; Gideon, 2003). Contemporary pragmatists therefore provide methodologies best suited to developing ideas for any individual educational system, given its unique context (Haack and Lane, 2006).

Most specifically, both the method (mixed) and the epistemological grounding (pragmatism) adopted in this project reflect our aim to understand and deal with the complexities of quality and application of its standards, distance e-learning and the perception of students towards it in SA. This country has little experience of DeL, yet it is seeing a significant expansion in its application. Thus, the purpose of this project is to determine the views of current students about quality standards in DeL by taking advantage of a pre-existing set of standards; standards developed both by associations researching in this domain, and by previous studies operating within it. It can be argued, in this respect, that solely employing the initial stage of this study (the quantitative one) would be both revelatory and useful.

Our opportunity then will be to research how other organisations or associations around the world - those that specialise in the adoption of institutions and DeL programmes - are developing their standards to be consistent with the local culture and its educational system. This approach will further enable our investigations to consider the social and cultural factors peculiar to the current Saudi educational system and how they may affect the views of students. Yune (2007) claims that efforts to standardise the expected norms of quality internationally can become trapped in a labyrinth of cultural misunderstandings, as they are often incompatible with quantitative methods of measurement.

To summarise this section, the importance of a mixed methods approach has been asserted by Duncan (2000) and Mason (2006), arguing that it is self-evident that cultures and practices change across countries. That is, quantitative data alone cannot adequately grasp this diversity and multidimensionality. Therefore, pragmatism underpins this study, as it is an approach that allows harmony amongst opposing philosophical viewpoints (Rosamond, 2007). Additionally,

pragmatism allows the avoidance of the paralysing and damaging dichotomy between positivism and interpretivism characterised in terms of the ‘paradigm wars’. Moreover, this approach agrees with the position of the pragmatist insofar as it holds that the highest knowledge comes from engaging with the problems and difficulties that permeate society. The required engagement with reality requires linking theory to practice, where it is imperative that practitioners connect educational experiences with students’ specific interests and needs (James, 2000).

4.5 Research Design

4.5.1 The Methodological Study Framework

Creswell (2003) emphasises that data collection should not be only limited to traditional approaches; it should instead be fundamentally directed in a way that underpins research requirements. This study has provided robust and rigorous data that is derived from triangulating students’ perspective in regard to the evaluation of quality in DeL in SA. Various methods must be deployed to elicit tacitly held beliefs or perceptions, while this study aims to provide an environment that permits students to reflect on how they should voice their opinions.

Our research has therefore adopted a mixed methods design, one incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods over two phases. Our approach is based on the premise that combining quantitative and qualitative methods in a single study can help reveal a wider range of aspects of the phenomenon being explored. Mixed methods can be defined as “research in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates the findings and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study” (Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007, p.4). In conclusion, then, this approach can provide a more holistic understanding of the issue, leading to better-informed education policies (Creswell, 2003; Steckler et al., 1992).

When dealing with something as complicated as quality assessment in DeL and the students’ own perceptions of quality in DeL, it is necessary to choose the research methods carefully. It was important to ensure that the views of participants were fully explored. Moreover, we believed that more than one approach was appropriate, for it was crucial to us that participants be given the opportunity to consider their responses carefully and express them clearly.

We thus took the decision to use Creswell's (2014) mixed-method design for our study, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods. Our reasoning here is that combining quantitative and qualitative methods can help to clarify various aspects of the subject of the study, with the aim of providing a more comprehensive understanding of the topic and so stimulating better education policies (Creswell, 2014). This approach is especially important for research seeking to focus on suggestions for new policies, such as this one does regarding students in DeL.

There are other justifications for the combination of these two approaches. Rather than using purely statistical evidence or merely interpretation, this research strategy may prove an effective way to explain a phenomenon more clearly and in greater detail, and so avoid viewing it from a single point of view (Robson, 2011). Furthermore, being that both qualitative and quantitative types of research have different strengths and weaknesses, a combination of the two mitigates their individual weaknesses, improving both quality and reliability, and so deepening the interpretation of the results (Johnson and Christensen, 2012). Also, the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is a superior approach, not simply because confidence in findings is increased due to consistency, but because they consider and delineate multiple realities (Ponterotto and Grieger, 1999). Finally, as we are dealing with human behaviour, which is naturally complex, the use of a single method runs the risk of providing only a limited perspective on it (Cohen et al., 2011; Creswell, 2014).

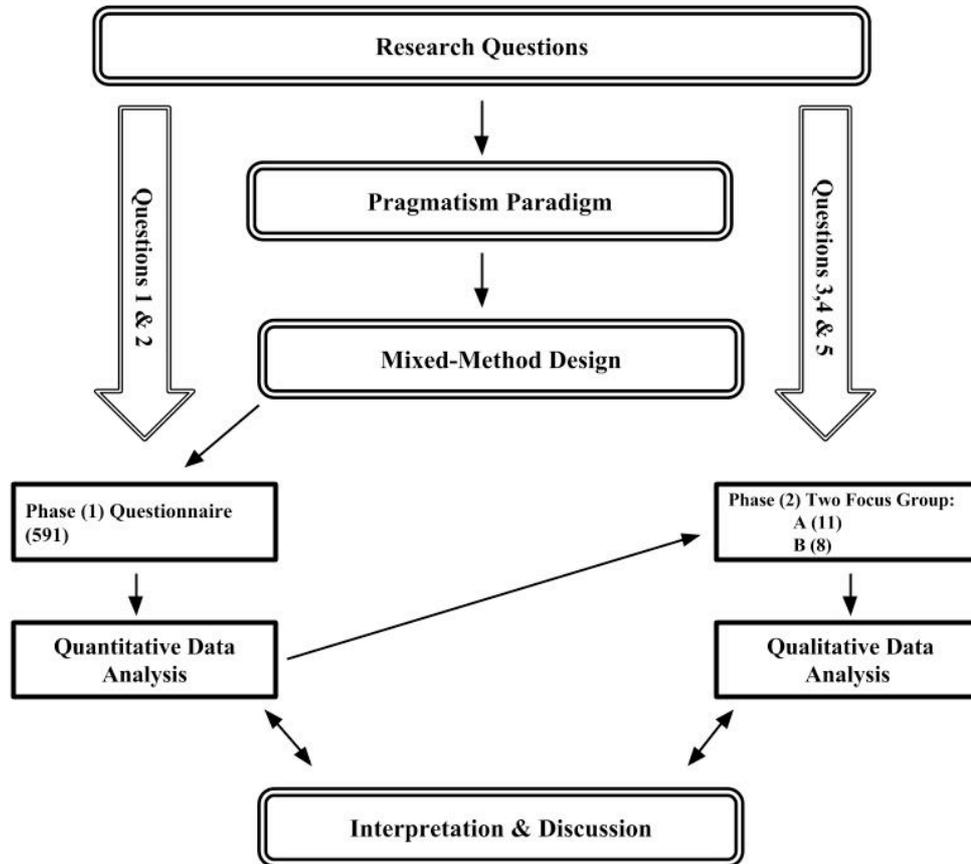
The research design proceeded in two distinct moments. In the first moment, quantitative data was gathered. This was followed by the collection of qualitative data from the focus group interviews; with the intention of supplementing and elaborating the previous findings via a more in-depth exploration during this later phase (Miles et al., 2014).

To attain the goals of this study, it was important to produce a general picture of the views of students regarding quality in DeL using the questionnaire. This was also key to ensure extended insights into students' perceptions and their opinions by using the focus group interviews.

As shown in Figure (4.1), the data derived from the questionnaire was analysed quantitatively, while the data derived from the focus group interviews was analysed qualitatively and both were integrated during the interpretation and discussion stage (Creswell, 2014). This methodological corroboration provided more detail and a fuller picture of the different aspects of the phenomenon. Such data can then be used to address secondary but complementary questions within the research. It also permits the data set to be triangulated, and is a

foundation for more sustained data analysis. Figure (4.1) below is the methodological framework used within this study. We will then present a description of the data collection methods. This will be after highlighting the methodology of the study.

Figure 4.1: Methodological Framework of the Study



4.5.2 Quality and the Research Design

The concept of quality is an essential component of the research questions presented in this study and is therefore embedded in the design. Section 3.2 has exhaustively discussed the many definitions associated with the term ‘quality’. Building upon this, this section shall explore how concepts of quality, though problematic, can be reconciled with the research method used in our study.

Objective Quality

The literature review has identified two strands from which an objective definition of quality could be constructed. The first is a historical approach, which considers a series of Western approaches to the concept of quality, defining it variously as QA, QC and QE. These concepts

have their roots in industrial tradition and industry, providing the most basic definition of what quality might be. A second strand of definitions come from the specific domain of education and includes the concept of standards, expressed respectively as: the metrics, benchmarks or criteria that define expected levels of service and examples of best practice. These two stands form the basis of a potential concept of quality as a tangible “thing” in the wider positivist tradition; that is, as a real element that can be observed and interrogated, providing absolute answers about what does and does not constitute quality.

Such an epistemic position is undoubtedly a difficult one to defend, relying as it does on the reification of an abstract concept - ‘quality’. Beyond this problematic, when used as the basis of a methodology or research design such an assumption tends towards the hegemonic, the top-down and to the imposition of the prejudices of external cultures or of the researcher him-/herself.

Subjective Quality

A second model of quality can be derived from subjective assessments of quality as perceived by individuals. This second model, detailed in section 3.3, notes that understandings of quality derive from individuals and are subjective, rather than objective. As such, quality is defined by the expectations of the subject, being that the subject is always situated and embodied in a cultural milieu. With its roots in a constructivist epistemology, this model works under the assumption that, in each case, quality is constructed by the interpretation of an individual. Therefore, we cannot refer to any essential epistemic essence of quality, but merely a set of shared constructs within subjects, which may overlap. Another term that permeates the research questions is ‘perspective’, and this term is taken here to represent these individual viewpoints.

However, the latter epistemic position is also possible to critique. Do all subjects have access to the concept of quality? Is quality simply awarded to anything the subject deems to possess it? Methodologically, the option of a ‘bottom-up’ research method is attractive based on these principles, but the researcher must be sure that the beliefs of the participants of the study can be validated.

Validation in this Study

In order to ensure validation with regard to quality, the method utilised in the present study draws upon both of these epistemic views. Nonetheless, validation will operate by interrogating students about their perspectives on quality. This approach will therefore utilise

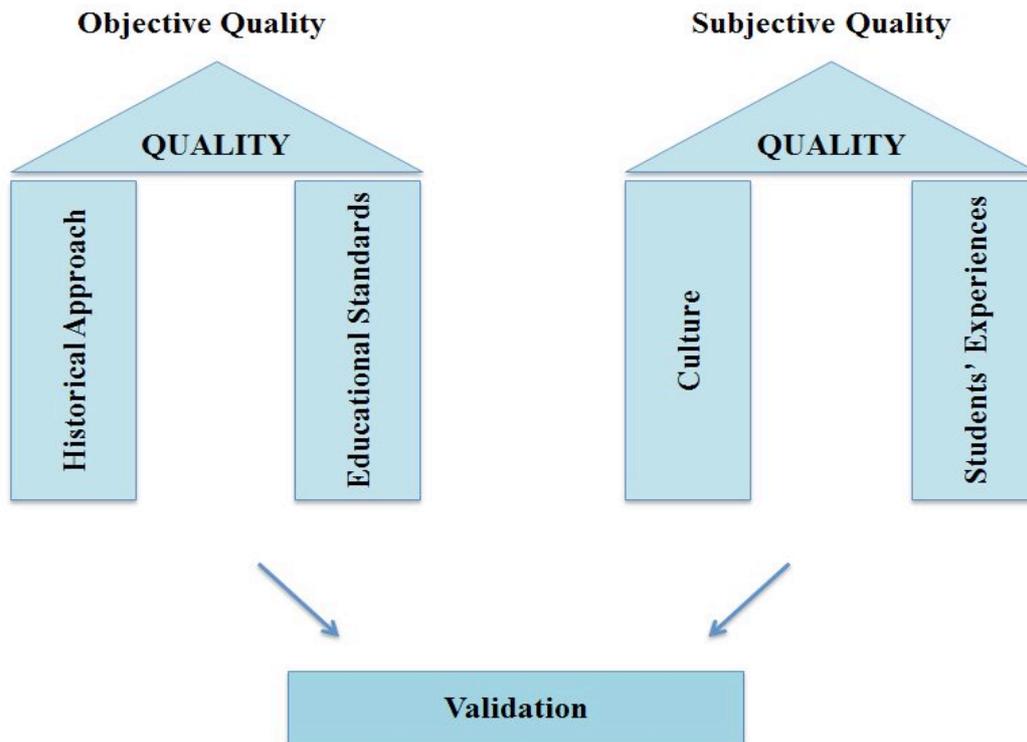
a subjective viewpoint on quality as its basis, while the forms of quality that it will survey are derived from an objective conception of quality; namely, quality standards. In keeping with the pragmatic epistemology utilised here, this approach is derived from the belief that what is lacking in the current understanding of Saudi DeL is an appreciation of what a key group of stakeholders. Here we are referring to what the students believe about their experience of quality and this study has indeed intended to fill this gap.

Validity is an important notion in a research design, and is assured here across multiple axes. Primarily, the literature review has considered expert opinion about the essential constructs used in the study, and has gone on to consider other researchers' views. The notion of quality used is based on standards, which are, again, fully explored in the literature review. In applying this research method, the perspectives of students regarding standards, and their ability to identify and describe them, has been validated by use of the mixed methods model, and the comparison of the datasets generated by the focus groups and the questionnaires. The validity of responses to the questionnaire was also assured by the 'double approach' taken, which considered both importance and prevalence of the quality standards, from the perspective of students. Additionally, it was explored in the pilot interviews and in data analysis (see Section 4.9).

Methodologically, the touchstone for assessing validity in the present study is in keeping with the pragmatic methodology. The definitions used here are useful insofar as they have been able to allow the researcher to investigate the research questions and shed light upon the phenomena studied. In the final analysis, quality is neither an objective absolute notion (objectivist), nor a purely subjective opinion (constructivist). Instead, it is a *tool* used by the researcher to allow the measurement of certain features of the DeL system in SA. If the definition of quality used herein suffices for that, then it has served its purpose.

The relationship between quality and validity outlined in the research design is summarised in the figure below.

Figure 4.2: Quality and Validity in the Research Design



4.6 Data Collection Instruments

The methodology that we have chosen for data collection in the current study are based on the findings of the literature review. We can say confidently that they engage with the nature of the variables and participants of the study. As we outlined in this chapter on the design of our research study, we have gathered data not only by means of questionnaires, but also through focus groups. Moreover, the data collection techniques that we have analysed possess both strengths and weaknesses. Thus, to emphasise the strengths and eliminate the weaknesses of this methodology we have used, as previously explained, a mixed methods approach for this research.

The following section describes these instruments used for in-depth data collection. Our analysis will cover the different research design stages and their refinement after the pilot study results, while also considering the other contextual issues that we faced during the fieldwork stage.

4.6.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire method constituted the first phase of data collection in this study. We have used it with the objective of answering the first question (*“What are Saudi students’*

perceptions of the importance of quality standards in DeL”) and the second question (“*What are Saudi students’ perceptions of the current application of quality standards in their current DeL?*”). We anticipated that using a self-administered questionnaire would enable us to collect enough raw data to make generalisations, being that the questionnaire could be used with a far larger number of respondents than an interview (Cohen, et al., 2011).

The rationale for adopting the questionnaire in this phase of the study was inherent to its aim of exploring students’ perceptions about the importance of quality in DeL, as well as examining its current application in their DeL programmes. To our mind, a questionnaire is the most appropriate method for determining quality across a set of standards and from the viewpoint of many research participants (Weisberg et. al, 1996).

Moreover, our questionnaire aimed to investigate any differences in Saudi students’ perceptions about both the importance and the application of quality in DeL. We wanted to explore these differences according to certain variables: gender, age group, education level and ICT skills. The questionnaire proved appropriate for investigating this range of variables, being that they had to be measured in ‘natural’ settings and have therefore not manipulated in experimental environments (Kothari, 2009). Such an approach has permitted us to take an economic approach to the study of the different variables, with the overall aim of saving time and cost. However, although the questionnaire has other advantages which that its use appropriate in the current study, it also has some limitations (Cohen et al., 2011; Robson 2011; and Wiersma, 2000). Both the strong and weak aspects of this aspect of our methodology will be analysed below.

Strengths

The questionnaire approach has several advantages. For research participants or respondents, it is primarily both quick easy and to complete. For the researcher, a questionnaire is a format that allows rapid transfer to a computer for data analysis. It also provides respondents with the time to consider their answers, so improving the accuracy of data and therefore providing a greater level of validity.

In addition, questionnaires minimise bias because the researcher is physically absent in the question and answer process. Moreover, they can provide data about large number of people while permitting respondents to answer anonymously. This is particularly important when they give information about personal attitudes.

At the same time, it is important to be aware that, in the case of our questionnaire, the results were large enough to be generalised. We can also say that because the questionnaire was the same for all respondents without variation, then it was more uniform than would otherwise be provided by interviews. Such an instrument is therefore widely considered to be an efficient method involving minimal investment in time, effort or the money required.

Weaknesses

On the other hand, the questionnaire approach has some limitations. The major disadvantage of the questionnaire is the notion of social desirability bias (Robson, 2011; Wiersma, 2000). The basic assumption of the questionnaire is that participants are willing and motivated to describe themselves accurately and honestly. However, there has been clear evidence that some people distort their answers to questionnaire items by giving socially desirable answers.

Additionally, a questionnaire requires careful preparation to avoid misunderstandings, misleading cues, or a diminished rate of return. In addition, any problems arising from the interpretation of self-administered questions by the research participants were, by nature, very difficult if not impossible to deal with (Robson, 2011). Hence, the phrasing of the questions, especially when surveying perceptions and feelings, can be problematic if not worded appropriately.

Design and Procedure

Generally, in the design process, different forms of questionnaires can be selected for use in educational research, according to the study questions, aims, the sample size and the type of data needing to be gathered. Investigators can thus elect to use structured, semi-structured, open-ended or unstructured forms according to their requirements (Cohen et al., 2011).

For this study, we used a structured (close-ended) method in the production of our questionnaires, in the form of a list of questions to be answered by the participant on a five point Likert Scale. The 'Likert Scale' is often used by researchers because it gives structured freedom to respondents across five ratings. The traditional layout of these instruments offer respondents intuitive, easily useable questions and provides a high degree of reliability. It also minimises the degree of guesswork or chance because it standardises the possible selection of responses in the instrument (Cohen et al., 2011).

However, the structured open-ended form has been also added to end the questionnaire to allow participants to feel free to provide more information of a type that is not included in the previous, structured form. In our study, we merged these two sources into a single form,

aimed at capturing general and specific information regarding participants' perceptions and views about quality in DeL settings.

Moreover, to develop and construct the content of the questionnaire, we have considered three main factors. Firstly, a review of relevant literature from organisations and institutions that are interested in establishing standards and guidelines for maintaining quality in DeL. Secondly, a review of previous studies that have adopted standards and guidelines in the design of their research instruments. Finally, an examination of the practicality of the instrument, given the expected sample of respondents.

We have hence derived vital insights from reviewing the existing literature about DeL and quality. This review has provided definite ideas about the status of quality in DeL and its philosophy, both in terms of the key principles and important practices of DeL, and in terms of the differences between the various stakeholders and the way in which they determine, individually, the most relevant aspects of quality in relation to their position.

Moreover, such revisions have provided us with a sound theoretical base when constructing the questionnaire and have provided a foundation for an analysis of students' understanding of and views and perceptions about quality in DeL. Revisiting existing questionnaires about students' views and perceptions, and about students' concerns regarding quality in an e-learning environment has assisted the researcher when formulating the questionnaire used in the current study.

We have followed the three criteria outlined above by reviewing studies that are interested in the quality standards of DeL and the online learning environment. Here we have clearly found common factors amongst them regarding classification. Following the proposition of Phipps and Merisotis (2000), we have identified seven dimensions of quality: institutional support, course development, course structure, teaching and learning, student support, faculty support, and evaluation and assessment (Sherry, 2003; Jung, 2011; Raybon, 2012). We selected the three criteria as the most relevant to this study in its focus upon students as one of the key stakeholders and in line with our research objective of investigating primary learner-centered dimensions of DeL (Yang and Durrington, 2010).

Thirty-one standards in total form three main dimensions of quality measures, including: Teaching/Learning Process (11 standards referring to activities related to the pedagogy of DeL); Course Structure (9 standards referring to policies and procedures connected to the teaching and learning process); and Student Support (11 standards referring to a series of activities and policies relating to learner services). These dimensions will be divided into the

following subcategories germane to an extended analysis in section 6.2 following Jung (2011). Jung’s study considered a larger initial set of standards than the present study, across the seven dimensions identified in Phipps and Merisotis (2000), before whittling down this list after the surveying stage to create a list of the most important dimensions for students, which were reclassified in the seven categories. This study has not followed Jung’s list *tout court*, as it intends to start from a ‘clean slate’ in determining which standards were important in the perceptions of SA students, without prejudging the result. They are listed in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1: Subcategories of the Three Dimensions

Dimension	Subcategories	Items
Teaching and Learning (11 Items)	Interaction	1, 2, 7
	Learning Tasks	6, 8, 9, 10
	Feedback and Assessment	3, 4, 5, 11
Course Structure (9 Items)	Resources	2, 3, 8
	Institutional QA mechanism	9, 7
	Information and Publicity	1, 4, 5, 6
Student Support (11 Items)	Technical Support	2, 3, 4, 5
	Complaints	9, 10
	Individual Support	1, 6, 7, 8, 11

Moreover, a common piece of advice in research methodology is to produce as short a questionnaire and interview as possible because a long session may lead ultimately to non-responses by being a burden on participants and only increase unwillingness to take part, (De Vaus, 2002). However, it should not be overlooked that the length of the questionnaire is influenced by other factors, such as the subject, aims and the target sample of the research. For this thesis, the questionnaire had a length of approximately six-pages after significant editing to limit its size; as Gorard (2003) states, self-administered questionnaires would ideally be shorter than eight pages. In addition, appropriate, tables, headings and a range of fonts were utilised to improve clarity and to make the appearance of the questionnaire more attractive.

Content

We will discuss the validity and reliability of the final questionnaire later. For the moment, we will say that it was divided into three sections (See Appendix B), with the first section seeking demographic information about respondents, including gender, age, university, their current academic year and their level of ICT skills. These questions were designed to acquire background information that has then been used to classify responses, to compare participants

within the sample and to identify whether significant differences were evident in their self-perception (Bell, 2010). The last part of this section asked about reasons for choosing DeL.

We consider sections two and three to be the main part of this questionnaire. To develop these questions, we then looked at standards of quality in previous studies of DeL and derived our own points of interrogation.

In accordance with the aims of this research study, we surveyed every adopted standard in two different ways. Firstly, in section two, respondents were asked to indicate the importance of the attribute identified in the standard. This question included a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from “5- very important” to “1 – unimportant”, with a neutral midpoint. Secondly, in section three, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement level of applying (implementing) this standard by the university in which they are currently studying. This question included a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from “5- strongly agree” to “1 - strongly disagree”, with a neutral midpoint. These Likert scale responses, once calculated as a mean, were attached to standard descriptive tokens. The tokens appear in the reporting of the data as detailed in the table below.

Table 4.2: Mean Likert Scale Value and their Matching Descriptive Tokens

Scale	Meaning	
5 – 4.21	Very Important	Strongly Agree
4.20 – 3.41	Important	Agree
3.40 – 2.61	Neutral	Neutral
2.60 – 1.81	Low Importance	Disagree
1.80 – 1	Unimportant	Strongly Disagree

To ensure the appropriate wording, some standards were re-worded for this study. For instance, the first standard used in the study was presented in two ways:

1. Student interaction with the faculty is facilitated through a variety of ways (in section two).
2. My interaction with the faculty is facilitated through a variety of ways (in section three).

When creating these questions, we found that it was necessary to choose words whose meaning was clearly understood by the respondents; that is, by using “simple, plain language and ‘avoiding’ jargon” (Bryman, 2012, p.258). To this end, it can be assumed that any quality standards developed by experts in their field and adopted by a specialised association may contain some terms that might be difficult for non-specialists to understand. We took this

factor into account when preparing the language of the questionnaires and so ensured that it was clear and corresponded to the educational level of the participants.

For the purpose of this questionnaire, importance in section two is defined as ‘a general, students’ view for the value on each of the standards’ and availability in section three is defined as ‘the students’ level of approval of the application of these standards in their present courses.’ The questionnaire concluded with one final open-ended question seeking to give the respondents an opportunity to express their views if they felt that they had other observations about quality not mentioned in the questionnaire that were worthy of inclusion.

The approach in this study, which uses both general questions and questions about personal experience was deliberately chosen to allow the greatest possible collection of data. Other studies in this area tend to focus on personal experiences, however, the present study aims to broaden the base of knowledge about the students’ perceptions of standards by interrogating them about standards in a more technical form. The students are asked about both their belief about an optimal experience, and their actual experience at the university. These questions fulfil two different functions. The first allows the researcher to discover what students’ preferences would be about the service they wish to have. The second is about the service they get. Used in this way, standards can offer two very valuable sources of data about students’ perceptions of DeL. These two approaches have been chosen methodologically to maximise the potential of the study to reveal important and as yet unknown preferences of students in both areas (the efficacy of this decision is evaluated in section 6.3.2).

We enclosed a cover letter with the questionnaire (See Appendix A), outlining the study’s aims and detailing the form in which the questions were to be answered. It also contained as a request for participants to respond within the expected time-frame. Finally, the letter confirmed that the data gathered would be rigorously confidential and only be used for the present research. We thanked participants in advance for their cooperation.

Cohen et al. (2011, p.400) argue that the purpose of such a covering letter is “to indicate the aim of the survey, to convey to respondents its importance, to assure them of confidentiality, and to encourage their replies.” We believe that the letter we sent out achieved these goals.

Overall, a questionnaire method was employed to study a wide range of DeL students, as well as inviting the participants to volunteer for focus group interviews. We assumed that, following the questionnaire stage of the study, participants would recognise the importance of the research and make themselves available for the later interview stage. Having produced the questionnaire in final form and having considered some formal procedures to get permission

to conduct the study and the strategy for its distribution, we moved on to the data collection phase. More details regarding these steps will thus be highlighted later in this chapter.

4.6.2 The Focus Group

For this research study, the second phase of data collection involved a focus group interview. Our aim here was to address research questions three (*“What are students’ perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of their DeL course”*), four (*“What are students’ perceptions of barriers arising during their DeL course”*) and five (*“What changes would students make to improve quality in DeL.”*)

The objectives of the focus group were to cover the areas the research questions focus upon. These topics were based on students’ perceptions about strengths and weaknesses of DeL, and students’ perceptions about barriers to DeL and perceptions about change. The focus group did not necessarily tackle these issues systematically, as there were moments in the discussion generated there that did not conform to the schedule of items to be discussed, such is the nature of the open debate that characterises a good focus group. The facilitator only stepped in when the participants needed to be nudged towards the phenomena being studied. Many of the issues to be considered in the focus group were identified in advance and arose from the issues raised by an initial analysis of the questionnaire and the results of the pilot interviews with two Saudi students. However, again, in the two main focus group interviews there was scope for amending the topic list and order spontaneously, so as to facilitate the freest possible discussions between the participants.

The interviews were therefore conducted after analysis the responses to the questionnaire. This part of the research was designed to triangulate the questionnaire, being that our task was to consider if the responses were consistent with those in the previous stage. Such a procedure helped to ‘supplement and validate’ the questionnaire data that was initially gathered (Miles et al., 2014, p. 12). This validation was also important given the complexity of the questionnaire items regarding quality standards and their general desirability, as these items had a level of technical complexity that it could be argued the students were not in a position to understand. Their responses during the focus group interview would be used to confirm they had the necessary understanding to talk about quality and its multiple aspects in general, rather than a narrow picture of their experiences.

Definition and Important Characteristics

In contrast to the questionnaire, the focus group is centered on communication between participants, rather than between the researcher and participants (Kitzinger, 1995). It is a “discussion-based interview that produces a particular type of qualitative data generated via group interaction” (Breakwell et al., 2006, p.276). The focus group has a range of applications, from marketing to government policy (Remenyi, 2012). In academia, it is usually used to improve the researcher’s understanding of complex phenomena. The researcher facilitates and encourages the participants in the group without ever expressly leading or directing them.

The input of the researcher should be limited to providing and initiating topics of discussion (Morgan, 1997), yet “insight and data [is] produced by the interactions between participants” (Sagoe, 2012, p.1). According to Oppenheim (2001), the focus group method can be selected to give freedom to the respondents and to add flexibility to the research process. The focus group is therefore not limited to one method of asking questions and recording responses, but serves to enable the researcher to present key questions in alternate ways.

In terms of this research project, the key characteristics of the focus group are the following. Firstly, it involved a verbal interaction allowing a degree of freedom for participants to express their views. Whilst it did not follow a set script, the researcher intervened minimally to keep the exchange focused on a series of broad topics. In turn, this allowed participants to speak in their own words (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2007). In terms of good practice, a focus group will not attempt to draw a consensus conclusion and the researcher should be careful not to ask this of the group. Indeed, focus group data is often more powerful and revealing when more divisive issues have been raised and more disagreements have occurred.

Goals

We can speak in two senses of the benefits gained from the focus group. Firstly, those originally intended by the researcher in the design of the study, and secondly those emerging in regard to the data collected for the study. In relation to the first of these goals then, a primary benefit of using a focus group is triangulation. In other words, the focus group is intended, in the research design, to explore, confirm and triangulate questions (Robson, 2011).

Secondly, the focus group provides the researcher with additional data, which is collected after the questionnaire, serving to refine the words and concepts brought out in the research and so reflecting more accurately those used by the population that is the object of research (Sagoe, 2012). A focus group adds richness and complexity to a research study, capturing the

voices of participants in a way that cannot be achieved solely by the questionnaire. Not only then does it help to triangulate the results of the questionnaire, but the focus group actually adds to this data.

The Researcher's Role

To achieve the goals outlined above, the researcher must strike a careful balance between facilitating and directing the group towards the broad topics vital to the project and avoiding leading participants in their responses. Remenyi (2012) states that, once initiated, the researcher should therefore step back from the discussion and allow participants to develop the conversation.

Intervention in the discussion is only required in exceptional cases; the challenge for the researcher is coming to know when these interventions are necessary, being that a certain amount of disagreement between participants is to be expected (Sagoe, 2012). The moderator should otherwise be neutral in his or her demeanour in regard to the participants (Krueger, 1998) and not venture personal positions on the topic in question (Gibbs, 1997). What is more, the topics to be covered by the focus group are to be selected carefully to maximise validity and readability, and to minimise said need for intervention.

Strengths and Weaknesses of a Focus Group

Many researchers (e.g. Cohen et al., 2011; Robson, 2011; Wiersma, 2000) underline that qualitative methods, such as interviews in general (including focus groups), have strengths as well as weaknesses as research tools. Both the strong and weak aspects will be analysed below.

Strengths

As a data collection method, the interview has several advantages. One of the essential strengths of the interview is that it gives participants greater freedom to talk about issues, rather than restricting them to the specifics of a pre-written questionnaire. In addition, research participants generally view interviews as having greater face validity. Interviews also allow the interviewer to ensure the question has been understood, to follow up with requests for more details and to have the opportunity to interpret non-verbal behaviour of participants. Furthermore, there is less opportunity for misinterpretation by the interviewer or the participant.

Weaknesses

On the other hand, the interview has some disadvantages. The main disadvantage is that both interview and data analysis will be time-consuming. Moreover, the interview is more inconvenient for students than the use of questionnaires. The lack of anonymity may also lead to participants being less open in their responses, while responses may not be completely uniform being that the reactions of one participant to the other during an interview may affect results. Furthermore, owing to some cultural and religious norms that do not allow a man to be alone with a woman in a closed place, the researcher may be obliged to conduct the interviews with participants of the opposite sex via phone or email, so affecting the opinions that are being expressed.

A particular problem for focus groups is the physical construction of the group. Individuals may be unwilling, for several reasons, to commit to joining the group or attending once having joined (Remenyi, 2012). The organisation of focus groups may hence require a long lead-time. Once the group does find the opportunity to meet, the dynamics of the participants can be a problem for the researcher if individuals are too vocal, or others disengage. Groups may then show overarching tendencies to reach pseudo-consensus or towards fractious disagreement, both of which are sub-optimal situations. The problems of dominant voices occurring are inherent to the focus group model and are a limitation of the method of which the researcher must be aware (Sagoe, 2012).

Moreover, focus group data is not suitable for making generalisations. Researchers must be aware that any attempt to do so leads to problems regarding both validity and replication (Remenyi, 2012). Sagoe (2012, p.8) notes that this is due to the “small and purposively selected” samples involved in the process which cannot legitimately be assumed to represent the larger population from which they are taken. In the light of this, Khan et al. (1991) emphasise that it is inappropriate to treat the findings of focus groups as quantitative research.

Conducting Focus Groups

Initially, to comply with the regulations of the authority of Riyadh city, an official letter was requested from both universities confirming that they had given permission for us to conduct the focus group with students. These letters were then provided to the administrative venue selected for the two focus group sessions.

We made various preparations in advance to ensure that we gained a successful outcome from the focus group. In terms of the sessions that needed to be considered, we sorted through the participants who had expressed a desire to participate in their returned questionnaires. We

then had to go about the task of locating a convenient setting for conducting the focus group sessions.

It is worth mentioning that from the beginning, IMU offered their assistance in providing us with a room for interviews. We appreciated and thanked them for their help, while explaining to them that we would conduct the sessions in an appropriate place outside the campus after receiving their agreement to do so. In taking this approach, we have followed the advice of Powell and Single (1996) who advise that a neutral venue should be selected, some distance from the institution being evaluated. We noted other considerations, included those provided by (ibid), who underline the importance of convenience, with the provision of a relaxed atmosphere.

Depending on their preference indicated, we utilised two types of media to inform prospective participants (by email or by telephone) of the focus group session's general aims, its duration and the date and venue. After a week of negotiations between the researcher and the participants, we finalised the day, time and venue. Three days before the two scheduled meetings, we emailed or phoned them again to remind them of this commitment. Thus, two evening weekdays (Monday for IMU and Wednesday for KAU) were set respectively and we rented a meeting room to a famous conference center in an easy place to reach. The venue was located in the well-known streets close to the IMU in a space equipped with up-to-date technology, as well as notepads and writing equipment provided for each participant.

We arrived at the venue an hour before the specific time to arrange tables in the shape of a square to bring the participants together as a group and contribute to a more informal and collegiate discussion. We also sent a 'consent letter' to each student in line with the ethical policy of this research which affirmed their consent to participate at each stage. In line with the nature of online study, we following the presumption that this would be the first opportunity the participants would get to meet each other. A card was placed in front of each participant allowing them to write their names after introducing themselves at the beginning of the session.

To begin the two focus group sessions, we started by thanking the respondents for their participation, giving them a personal introduction and offering them an overview of the research with its aims and importance. Some rules to facilitate dialogue in the session were explained. We made it clear once again that the forum would be confidential and the participants' names would be anonymous, while their identity is protected in the present study.

We then posed general questions to the two focus groups to enhance exchanges between the respondents. In the discussion, we focused on the strengths and weaknesses of DeL, the barriers faced by students, and the necessary requirements to develop the current practices. Throughout these talks, we asked probing questions where necessary, with the goal of aiding discussion of aspects of DeL we had identified as being of a major interest to the participants as the group developed, such as assessment methods.

We made sure to strike a careful balance between listening to participants and taking notes during the conversations. We paid close attention and made notes of specific points of conflict during the discussion, while also recording body language, facial expression and tone of voice. Two assistants attended each of the two focus groups to produce audio and video records. In both events, participants consented to both video and audio recording, which allowed the capture of both verbal and non-verbal reactions.

The duration of the focus group was one of the most important things to take into consideration. A balance had to be struck to avoid tiredness and boredom in the participants produced by excessive length of the sessions, but also ensuring that participants did not fail to discuss the questions in depth because of a shortness of time. Therefore, we divided the two focus group sessions into two parts each lasting one hour, included a break for a quarter of an hour for refreshments, coffee and tea. We thanked all the participants to conclude both focus group sessions.

To conclude, when considering the nature of this study and its aims as well as its cost, a decision was made to adopt the focus group method as a source of qualitative data instead of the others available i.e. traditional interviewing. Interviews are more revealing of individual biographies, but focus groups are more suitable for determining how knowledge and ideas are situated, develop, operate and evolve within the specific cultural context (Kitzinger, 1995). Hence, the motivation for using the focus group method is that group processes often allow people to investigate and illuminate their opinions and viewpoints further in forms that are not accessible during a one-to-one interview (Bryman, 2012).

Furthermore, the focus group has served to maximise returns in consideration of the time and cost constraints of the present study. This approach has allowed us to explore the students' perception of the strengths and weaknesses of DeL, the barriers faced and the necessary requirements to develop current practices. It has also enabled us to ascertain whether the answers given by group members were original and offered freely, while confirming the

phrasing of their words and the clarity of their meaning. We can conclude confidently that the benefits outweighed the time and cost expended on this tool.

4.7 The ‘Population’ and ‘Sample’ of the Study

The key to attaining valid results is that the researcher must be successful in selecting a sample that is appropriate in terms of type and size. The sample should also guarantee the possibility of generalising findings within the community being studied. To discuss both the population and sample of the study, we should first define the parameters of these two terms. Regarding statistics then, “population refers to the total number of cases that can be included as research subjects” (Matthews and Ross, 2010, p154), while the sample is ‘a portion or a subset’ of the total ‘population’ (Fink, 1995, p1). More specifically, Gorard (2003, p.57) distinguishes between a population and sample as follows: “The group you wish to study is termed the ‘population’, and the group you actually involve in your research is the ‘sample’.”

For the purposes of this study, the population is the DeL university students in SA sitting a bachelor’s degree. The accessible population was therefore drawn from all enrolled students at two universities, IMU and KAU, during the 2014/2015 academic year. Table 4.3 below shows the figures supplied by both universities.

The main purpose of adopting a multiple case setting is to enhance the reliability and validity of our findings. Moreover, the overall objective of this study has been to suggest standards and guidelines that can assist universities to ensure quality in their DeL in SA. Hence, we have investigated more than one context and setting in awareness that we have needed to provide a better understanding regarding the general DeL phenomenon.

Finally, the decision over which specific cases should be selected has required careful consideration in providing them with the most revealing and useful dataset. In this regard, as we have already mentioned, SA has little experience of DeL and yet is now party to a significant expansion in its application. Hence, we made the decision to work with the first two universities applying DeL in SA (as described in Section 2.6).

Table 4.3: IMU and KAU Students 2014/2015

Number of students 2014/2015			
University	Male	Female	Total
IMU	39,112	23,611	62,723
KAU	10237	5287	15524

In relation to the time in which it is collected, survey research can be classified according to two main types of design; it may be cross-sectional or longitudinal. Cross-sectional survey designs seek to study the views, perceptions and attitudes of a sample of a population over a particular period of time. On the other hand, for longitudinal designs, data is collected at different time periods only to study change over a longer period (Creswell, 2012).

In the current study, we adopted a cross-sectional strategy to represent the population of the study across the different stratifications used in the study. We hence analysed the two universities surveyed and the perceptions of students over four different academic years. Although it is obvious that such a strategy does not measure change, it does allow for the collection of data from a large sample at a short time at a relatively low cost (Cohen et al., 2011).

4.7.1 Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

Sampling is the process of selecting a sufficient portion ('the sample') of a population. Researchers then seek to generalise the characteristics of this fraction of the whole across the original community. They do so by studying these elements (participants) and understanding their characteristics.

There are a variety of sampling techniques featured in social research literature that can be followed in the selection of the sample. Generally, these methods come under the umbrella of two main modalities: probability sampling (random) and non-probability sampling (purposive) (Cohen et al., 2011). Random here does not mean 'haphazard' (May 2011, p.99), but signifies 'equality of opportunity'; that is, the degree of probability of inclusion being the same for everyone in the population, where each element may be a part of the sample.

Various sampling methods can be employed by researchers. 'Simple random sampling' involves selection of participants from a list (sampling frame) of a whole population by using a computer or random numbers tables. A second method of probability sampling is 'stratified sampling', which divides the characteristics of a population into stratifications, or subgroups, such as gender and age, then selecting the elements randomly by utilising simple random sampling. Finally, a 'cluster sampling' method can be employed when a population is composed of clusters or units that are broadly similar in terms of their important characteristics; for example, schools and nation states.

Nonetheless, in the absence of any kind of sampling frame and of unknown sample size, non-probability sampling should be used. Examples of this method include convenience sampling,

where the researcher's selection of elements is characterized by unidentified coincidence rather than being subject to any regulation. On the other hand, purposive sampling may be used when the basis of selection is subject to the experience and the knowledge of the researcher, who then determines the specific elements that represent the population of the study. Finally, researchers may opt for quota sampling where fixed criteria are used to select the elements; here the quota represents the number of elements required to fulfil each criterion.

For researchers, deciding on the size of the sample and the method of selecting is not an easy task. There is no straightforward solution to the problems posed by determining sample sizes (May, 2011; Bryman, 2012). Hence, representation of population using of samples remains a controversial approach (Wellington, 2000).

One means of determining an appropriate sample size is to select a sufficient number of participants used in statistical analysis. Depending on the nature of the study, Creswell (2012, p.146) thus suggests the use of an estimated number of participants according to the researcher's specific requirement. These are outlined as follows:

- Approximately 15 participants in each group in an experiment;
- Approximately 30 participants for a correlational study that relates variables;
- Approximately 350 individuals for a survey study, but this size will vary depending on several factors.

In addition, some specialists on research methodology have suggested that estimates be used as a guide or indeed basis for making the correct decision for determining the required sample size. These estimates will then depend on the size of the population and the prescribed margin of error (5%) that can be accepted. By calculating these figures, a 95% level of confidence can be achieved. An example of these guidelines would be:

Table 4.4: Determination of the Sample Size Depending on the Size of the Overall Population

Population (N)	Sample (N)
100	80
1,000	278
5,000	357
10,000	370
75,000	382
Infinity	384

Adapted from Bartlett et al., (2001) and Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009).

One can see from the information given in table 4.4 that if a survey has a population size of 5,000, a sample size of 357 is needed to represent the characteristics of the population within a prescribed margin of error of 5 %.

However, several authors agree on the important point that the sample of population selected should be as large as possible for the researcher (Creswell, 2012 and Bryman, 2012). For one, Robson (2011, p.271) claims that “the larger the sample, the lower the likely error in generalising”. Increasing the sample size would help to increase the probability that the sample represents the population, while the differences between the sample mean and the population mean entails that ‘sampling errors’ can be decreased to the largest possible extent (May, 2011; Matthews and Ross, 2010; Fowler, 2014). Moreover, some part of the sample might be unusable in some stages because of non-response or unintelligible answers; therefore, a large sample can compensate for the missing data (Kumar, 2005).

The conventions outlined above determine best practice in educational research. Yet it remains true that final decisions about appropriate sampling techniques and sample size are determined specifically by the research questions and their objectives. Nonetheless, constraints of time, cost and the availability of adequate information about the population and the nature of the study population have their own individual impact. These factors individual to each research study may determine researchers’ individual decisions about the selection of the type of the sampling method and the required sample size.

4.7.2 Sampling Procedures for the Current Study

Questionnaire Sample

It was important to consider that the two universities in SA where this study was conducted are in two different cities (Riyadh and Jeddah) which are relatively far away from each other (almost 1000 kilometers). In addition, we were limited to a time frame of three months to collect the required data. Therefore, in consideration of such limitations, before undertaking the field work we divided the target number of the sample size ($n=1200$) equally between both universities, i.e. ($n=600$) for each one.

We visited the two universities in the early stage of the field study period to complete the formal procedures and have the final approval to conduct this study. This early visit gave us enough time to negotiate with the gatekeepers in both universities about the information that was to be made available. From our point of view, this enabled us to determine the appropriate sampling method and sample size more specifically. We then obtained a full list

of DeL students in both universities and so adopted a stratified random sample from the total number listed.

It is important to underline that viewpoints about quality in DeL may be influenced by several factors, such as gender, age and level of experience in an e-learning environment. We hence adopted stratified sampling for this study, using the information provided by the gatekeeper. Being that the sample of this study involves some key variables - the academic year, specifically - the full representation of each subgroup in the sample was of important concern for the researcher. Therefore, we first created four stratifications for each academic year (one, two, three and four) and then drew a random sample from each of these stratified lists (May, 2011).

The purpose of this stratification was to organise the population to promote the representation of these subgroups, so making each group more homogenous (Matthews and Ross, 2010). The stratification performed in random sampling not only aims to retain the advantages of the random sampling method, but also to increase the accuracy of the analysis by allowing the researcher to weight the sample. This can help to increase the homogeneity within groups, while simultaneously reducing it between groups.

Finally, in terms of distributing the questionnaire, the population of this study was initially stratified by a single variable of interest - the academic year level. To facilitate this process with a known population, we obtained a full list of DeL students provided by the universities. The proposed size of the sample was (n=1200) in total divided equally between the two universities; six hundred students from each. The actual population from which the two samples were drawn differed due to the variable response rates shown in Table 4.5 below.

Table 4.5: Response Rates of the Sample

Universities	Sample	Completed Questionnaires	% Completed Questionnaires	Questionnaires in Correct Format	% Usable Returns
IMU	600	324	54%	318	53%
KAU	600	284	47%	273	45.5%
Total	1200	608	51%	591	49.2%

Moreover, to ensure that the participants are currently studying as DeL students at IMU and KAU universities, we sent the electronic questionnaire to them through the internal system in both universities. To maintain the privacy of students' emails, the administrative gatekeepers, in accordance with the wishes of the universities, distributed the questionnaires. The distribution of the questionnaire was conducted between mid-December 2014 and at the end

of January 2015. However, to ensure the largest amount of responses, we ensured that the questionnaire was sent to the participants in a timely manner.

Although we had completed of all the formal arrangements with universities where the study was conducted, we reached the point in time where the two examination weeks were about to start. Hence, we had to postpone the distribution of the questionnaire until the completion of the examinations period. Two weeks after the distribution of the questionnaire, I hence asked the gatekeepers in both universities to send another version of the questionnaire with a reminder to respondents who were late in replying to it.

Study Participants

Table 4.6: The Demographics of the Study Participants

Respondents Characteristics	No.	%	
Gender	Male	365	61.8
	Female	226	38.2
	Total	591	100.0
Age Group	22 or less	37	6.3
	23-30	271	45.9
	31-40	212	35.9
	Over 40	71	12.0
	Total	591	100.0
University	IMU	318	53.8
	KAU	273	46.2
	Total	591	100.0
Academic Year	One	168	28.4
	Two	145	24.5
	Three	149	25.2
	Four	129	21.8
	Total	591	100.0
ICT Skills	Beginner	79	13.4
	Intermediate	301	50.9
	Skilled	211	35.7
	Total	591	100.0

591 Saudi DeL students out of 1200 responded to the questionnaire. Both genders were asked: three hundred and sixty-five respondents were male (61.8%) and two hundred and twenty-six respondents (38.2%) were female. In regard to age and academic year, students were divided into four groups as shown in Table (4.6). From Table 4.6 it can be seen that most DeL students are less than 40 years of age with 45.9% of all participants of age between 23-30 and 35.9% of age between 31-40. Furthermore, from Table 4.6, it can be seen that 318 (53.8%) were IMU students and 273 (46.2%) were KAU students. The variable ‘academic year’ included four groups: one (168 students: 28.4%), two (145 students: 24.5%), three (149 students: 25.2%) and four (129 students: 21.8%). Finally, students divided into three groups

in terms of ICT skills: beginner (79 students: 13.4%), intermediate (301 students: 50.9%) and skilled (211 students: 35.7%); the beginners were therefore a minority.

Focus Group Sample

In regard to the literature on this topic, we have been able to acknowledge a distinction between the viewpoints of researchers regarding the optimal size of the focus group. Some researchers prefer that a group be composed of six to fifteen participants (Scott, 2011), while others would opt for eight to twelve (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999) and finally, others recommend a smaller size of four to ten (Kitzinger, 1995; Remenyi, 2012).

In our study, we defined the sample by identifying those who had indicated on their questionnaire that they wished to participate in the focus group. Twenty-two were from IMU University, while nineteen were from KAU University. The number who attended on the two days of focus groups was nineteen and they represented 46% of those who were invited (11 from IMU and 8 from KAU). In view of our objective to enhance confidence in the findings, we divided the sample focus group in this study between the two universities selected taking case studies from both (Kidd and Parshall, 2000). In addition, many studies recommend aiming at homogeneity of the group being that this allows researchers to make the most of people's shared experiences.

4.8 Data Analysis

The data that we have collected for this study has been analysed according to its type and according to a certain set of methods we have outlined below.

4.8.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

We performed two types of statistical analysis: descriptive and inferential. We employed descriptive statistics in terms of means, standard deviations, frequencies and percentages, whereas the inferential statistics comprised analysis of variance and correlation. To manage the results from the two types of statistical analysis, the data collected from the questionnaire was entered into the SPSS program (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) version 22.0 for Windows software.

4.8.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

Fundamentally, analysis of the focus group data is no different to any other qualitative self-reported data (Kitzinger, 1995). It is based on consideration of the transcripts not of only the recordings, but also the handwritten notes that we took while acting as the facilitator of the focus group sessions.

Thus, in terms of qualitative research, data collection cannot simply be moved apart from data analysis (Miles et al., 2014). It was at the moment of our interview with the participants that we began the process of data analysis. We then completed an initial analysis of the material after each focus group interview (Cohen et al., 2011). Finally, once the field work was completed, we prepared and managed the data based on the methods described by other notable researchers (Cohen et al., 2011; Bryman, 2012; Miles et al., 2014).

The video-recorded focus group interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed based on the research questions and the emergent themes. A ‘transcript’ was compiled as a written record of the contents of the video and audio, including non-verbal data added by notation as necessary. This was the source for the coding process: of differentiating and combining information in the transcript, and the formation of conclusions. As a noted researcher puts it in regard to transcription methodology:

Codes are labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. Codes usually are attached to data ‘chunks’ of varying size and can take the form of a straightforward, descriptive label or a more evocative and complex one (e.g., a metaphor). (Miles et al., 2014, pp.71-72)

This process is continued by building a list of broad themes and providing a set of findings under each theme. These themes reflected the codes as closely as possible to match the concepts produced by that analysis. This process enabled us to achieve simple cross-referencing and comparison of coded data at different levels across the study.

In the case of the present study, we see a qualitative and thematic analysis, taking themes from the literature review and isolating and coding them in the participants’ responses. We rechecked these results against the data to ensure accuracy and then extrapolated further themes by exploring similarities and differences between participant responses and those present in the wider literature. We then compared these final themes with the testimony of participants to ensure that they matched the students’ perceptions of the issues.

We added, removed and changed codes throughout the analysis process. We made these revisions to reflect the participants’ views more accurately. We also aimed at making a

transition from narrative codes to conceptual ones. During this process, we took care not to introduce any preconceptions about categories in the data held by the researcher.

It should be noted here that even though there are a variety of computer programmes such as NVivo were available for researchers to manage the qualitative data, we employed a conventional 'analysis by hand' rather than using information technology. We made this decision based upon the belief that, in comparison to manual analysis in which the researcher encounters the data, computer-based analysis utilises linguistic patterning to affect the richness of the dataset.

4.9 Validity and Reliability

It was important for us to consider the validity and reliability of the questionnaire and focus group approaches as the fundamental methods at the heart of this research.

4.9.1 The Questionnaire

We ensured the validity of the questionnaire in two ways - through face validity and internal consistency. Although the reliability and validity of the quality standards metrics that were adopted in this study have been used and verified across other studies, it remains that the reliability and validity regarding this specific survey instrument still must be determined. To do this we must be sure of the accuracy of the translation of these standards from English to Arabic.

Firstly, we submitted a final English draft to our supervisors for discussion and to ensure that we followed the standard measurement criteria to ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire (e.g. Oppenheim, 2001; Lietz, 2008). When this version was returned and finalised, we sought content validity by translating the draft in order that it be viewed by two Arabic education academics who have a PhD from the UK, and two other doctoral student colleagues from the same field of study. Each of these readers possessed a command of both spoken and written Arabic and English. We therefore performed a face validity check, in which we called upon the readers to verify the Arabic translation. This verification process resulted in some suggestions regarding the questionnaire's wording. Confusing questions were reworded.

To produce a final draft of the questionnaire, we delivered it to a Saudi translation centre to be worked upon by staff qualified to provide spoken and written Arabic. The translators were also asked to provide suggestions about the wording and appropriateness of the items. Their

input resulted in some changes in wording that served to refine the questionnaire in its final Arabic draft.

We had then to pilot the questionnaire to confirm further its face validity before the distribution process began. We selected six students, three from each of the universities at various academic levels. The student participants completed the questionnaire under our direct observation; we then interviewed the participants. The questionnaire was presented in an electronic version enabling the participants to complete it using either their smartphones or laptops.

The engagement in a two-way feedback process between researcher and the participants provided us with useful comments which, in turn, helped us to produce a final version of the questionnaire. Such comments focused upon the overall appearance of the questionnaire presentation and called for typographical errors to be rectified and some of the words to be clarified. For instance, ‘feedback’ can be expressed in two terms in Arabic; only one term was adopted for use in the questionnaire before it was piloted, but was considered ambiguous by some of the participants. We therefore made the decision to use both terms, putting one of them in brackets to provide further clarification. The font size of the sub-questions was another example; here, two students commented that they found it difficult to read. We responded by changing the font from size 10 to size 12.

In addition, we utilised the Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient method to test the reliability of the different scales and subscales of the questionnaire. This approach revealed statistically satisfactory levels, shown below in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7: Exhibiting the Reliability Coefficient Analysis scale "ALPHA" of each Dimension

N	Dimension	Importance	Application
1	Teaching/Learning Processes	0.748	0.913
2	Course Structure	0.788	0.884
3	Student Support	0.916	0.930
Total		0.819	0.918
All Dimensions		0.892	

We also checked the internal consistency by calculating the correlation between the items and the subscales of the questionnaire, as shown in Table 4.8.

Table 4.8: Exhibiting Pearson Correlation of each Item in each Dimension (N= 60)

<i>ITEM NO</i>	Teaching/Learning		Course Structure		Student Support	
	Importance	Application	Importance	Application	Importance	Application
1	0.517**	0.676**	0.523**	0.797**	0.777**	0.709**
2	0.493**	0.660**	0.652**	0.637**	0.675**	0.745**
3	0.634**	0.687**	0.537**	0.641**	0.614**	0.818**
4	0.511**	0.754**	0.733**	0.707**	0.789**	0.811**
5	0.520**	0.781**	0.746**	0.797**	0.802**	0.835**
6	0.524**	0.728**	0.688**	0.798**	0.782**	0.878**
7	0.631**	0.720**	0.566**	0.712**	0.814**	0.830**
8	0.633**	0.769**	0.579**	0.748**	0.827**	0.711**
9	0.615**	0.778**	0.600**	0.646**	0.580**	0.791**
10	0.334**	0.627**	-----	-----	0.769**	0.743**
11	0.501**	0.832**	-----	-----	0.751**	0.573**

** Correlation is Significant at the 0.01 Level (2-tailed).

Reliability and validity metrics inquire as to the appropriateness of the questionnaire used in a study. The high scores evident in tables 4.6 and 4.7 speak of the fact that the instruments used here were fit for the purpose intended. This study has both reliable and valid data according to these metrics. As reliability and validity complement each other, their co-existence is a further sign that this study has gathered appropriate data.

4.9.2 Focus Group Interviews

Having produced a first version of the focus group interview questions, we handed it to the supervisors for comment and then to the specialised translation centre to translate the questions into Arabic. One crucial concern for us in terms of good practice in conducting the focus group was the need to reduce bias to the maximum, be it from the researcher, the interviewees, or the content of the questions. Therefore, each item used in the meeting was organised to ensure consistency and objectivity (Cohen, et al., 2011).

We also maintained the reliability of the study by pre-testing the focus group with two students to ensure that participants would understand and interpret the questions in a similar fashion, and that there would be no ambiguity in the reception of the questions. To produce results which are trustworthy, we set out to build trust between researcher and participants by assuring the latter of the confidentiality of the focus group, so convincing them that they could be listened to without prejudice (Radnor, 2001)

We provided further assurance by asking the interviewees to review our interpretation of the data and to verify that we had accurately represented their views and experiences. Moreover, to improve the robustness of qualitative data reporting, the researcher utilised verbatim

quotations whenever the opportunity was available, so allowing accurate representation of the data.

We should note here that Kidd and Parshall (2000) underline how the emergence of similar perspectives across multiple focus groups and at multiple settings indicates significant validity of the content. We will consider how these themes are linked across different perspectives in some detail in the chapter on the research findings. We might note in addition that, as Rodriguez et al. (2011, p.411) state, some researchers who use focus group are confident that “trustworthy data can be elicited in relational, community settings”, so ensuring a high level of validity for focus groups.

For our project, the touchstone of transferability has been met by providing rich and complete descriptions of data (Cohen, et al., 2011). Lincoln and Guba (1985) hold that the reader rather than the researcher should be the agent in determining what part of a study is applicable to other contexts. Hence, the transferability of the present study has been enhanced by the detailed descriptions of context, methods, procedures and analytic frameworks we have provided here. Moreover, the quotations that we have made available also offer the reader a chance to engage with the original data.

Nonetheless, as a researcher adopting a pragmatic approach, one of the main purposes of this study has been to produce knowledge by both describing and engaging with the phenomena of this world; that is, with the desire to attain meanings that can be shared with others. As a method, pragmatism offers certain possibilities, while not being able to predict certainties of outcome in regard to future events (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The generalisability of findings across wider contexts might not be the explicit goal of pragmatic inquiry.

Nonetheless, the in-depth nature of the studies that operate through this method have provided their findings with the possibility to stimulate insightful explanations of the phenomena being studied i.e. those which may assist other people engaged in similar situations or scenarios.

4.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles remain a vital, modern consideration for a research project such as ours. For this study, such considerations were the primary conditions for both the access to and acquisition of informed consent of the participants. They also provided participants with the right to withdraw, while ensuring that their identity was protected as well as the confidentiality of their data (Cohen et al., 2011; Bryman, 2012). The value of establishing procedures to secure ethical considerations is that they aid researchers in providing a clear

framework for conducting research in a morally acceptable manner (Pring, 2004). For this research study, we will provide further clarification of how these ethical considerations in the following section.

4.10.1 Gaining Access and Attaining Distribution

In considering ethical issues for the present study, our intention was to comply with the standards advised by both the Newcastle University and the SA Cultural Bureau. The process of adhering to Newcastle University's regulation involved the application for ethical approval of the research project being assessed by the university's Ethics Committee; this was completed in the early stages of this study. Prior to undertaking the field study visit to SA to collect the required data, we considered other Newcastle University regulation when we completed two further administrative forms, the *Application to Undertake Study outside the University* as well as the *Risk Assessment Form*.

Nonetheless, the most important ethical issue involved the research participants and, in order to reach the respondents, we had to attain formal permission to conduct our field work. Many steps had to be considered in the acquisition of this permission. The first step was for Newcastle University to produce an official letter signed by the project supervisors and delivered to the Saudi Cultural Bureau in London. This requested approval to carry out the study and collect the data. In turn, the London Bureau contacted the Ministry of Education in SA to seek approval for the research. We produced a letter clarifying the title of the study, the research questions and objectives, and the proposed timeframe (three months). Finally, the Ministry of Education sent a letter to the Ministry of Civil Service for approval, being that the latter were acting as my sponsor.

By the time we arrived in SA, we had made personal contact with the gatekeepers of the IMU and KAU Universities to ask their permission and help in facilitating our study and the administrative tasks involved. The process overall led to our obtaining the permission of the respective administrators in the participating universities and ensuring that they were aware of our objectives. We then began to contact the students and so began the initial collection of data.

4.10.2 Informed Consent, Anonymity and Confidentiality

The procedure outlined above was not on its own sufficient to guarantee that each student was ready to be involved in our research project. Another ethical issue to address was obtaining students' consent to participate or, in ethical parlance, obtain informed consent. Informed

consent has been defined by Diener and Crandall (1978) – (cited in Cohen et al., 2011, p.78) - as “procedures in which individuals choose whether to participate in any investigation after being informed of facts that would be likely to influence their decision”. We informed comprehensively our study participants of the purposes of the research. We described the standards to which levels of data collection would adhere, while participants were made aware of their right to withdraw at any time, should they wish.

It was essential to ensuring the confidentiality of the participants. Esterberg (2002) stresses that participants must freely agree to be involved in research, while the researcher must protect the privacy of the participants and inform them of any potential risk associated with taking part in the research. Our consent letters made the following clear to all the participants: students would be anonymous and their identity would be protected; interviews and their recording would only take place with the approval of the interviewees; interviewees could leave the project at any time if they choose to; and finally, as we emphasised, honest responses were necessary to ensure that valid results were produced.

All the participants were assured that the information obtained about and from them would be confidential, and that their privacy would be maintained. Moreover, this information would be used uniquely for our research purposes. Finally, in considering all these ethical issues, we strived to show due respect towards the participants. This point is confirmed by Radnor (2001, p.39) who noted that “The principle of ethics-in-action focuses centrally on the need for the researcher to show respect for the participants.”

4.11 Summary

This chapter has defined the methodology used in the present study. We have considered wider issues in research paradigms before conducting a detailed review of pragmatism and its philosophical assumptions. We then presented an extended rationale for their adoption in the present study and discussed and justified the research design. Research procedures, data collection methods, sampling and data analysis have been addressed here and we have presented a model for each. We have also considered issues about the validity and reliability of the two methods and corresponding ethical considerations.

To conclude, the present study returns to Dewey’s notion that the claim to arrive at a final, unequivocal ‘truth’ is not epistemologically or ontologically possible regarding knowledge, and that any attempt to arrive at such a terminus is futile (see Biesta, 2010). However, within the spirit of pragmatism, it believes there are still more-or-less successful ways in which

research can proceed, particularly from the standpoint of that research's effectiveness. The approach taken in the present chapter has demonstrated that there are strong grounds for the present study's epistemological and ontological assumptions in the light of its goals regarding the possibility of effecting changes to the educational system in consideration. Moreover, it has provided a reasoned and justified description of why the model used is valid for the questions considered. However, in the pragmatic tradition, we would admit that problems and limitations may still exist within this study (see chapter 7.5). These will naturally be considered in the analysis and reporting of the findings presented in the following chapters.

Chapter 5. Findings

This chapter is based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis derived from the questionnaire and the focus group interview data, gathered from DeL students in IMU and KAU universities in SA. Both the questionnaire and the interview data will be presented successively: firstly, dealing with questionnaire data (591 participants) and secondly, dealing with focus group interview data (2 focus groups). The data from the open-ended questions on the questionnaire has been added to the other qualitative data in the focus group section (5.2) as it complements the data there.

5.1 Questionnaire Findings

The following section shall proceed through a preliminary discussion of the motivations of the participants, to their perceptions about the importance of quality in DeL. There shall then be a discussion of the perceived application of the standards in the students' present course. The following two research questions will be answered:

- What are Saudi students' perceptions of the importance of quality standards in DeL?
- What are Saudi students' perceptions of the application of quality standards in their current DeL course?

Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations and ranks) were used in analysing the responses of the participants towards the researched phenomenon. Additionally, to identify the differences in the participants' opinions about the importance of quality standards in DeL, as well the application of them in their current course, according to different variables such as students' gender (M/F), age (-22, 23-30, 31-40, +40), academic year (one, two, three, four) and ICT skills (beginner, intermediate, skilled), the researcher used Independent Sample T-tests to evaluate the differences in means between two groups and One Way ANOVA to evaluate the differences in means between more than two groups. The boundaries for these categories, when not naturally apparent (such as year of study) were delimited according to those common in the literature and after the pilot study. This part of the analysis is intended to reveal the degree of significance with which a variety of pre-determined categorisations can be used to group differing responses. The open-ended questions are analysed according to qualitative methods.

5.1.1 Motivations for Choosing DeL

To identify the reasons that motivate SA undergraduate students to undertake DeL, the researcher calculated frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations and ranks of the responses of the participants towards the motivating factors identified by the students. This used the data from part 1.2 of the questionnaire (see Appendix A). Students' responses to this section are analysed and ranked according to the mean scores, from the highest to the lowest.

Table 5.1: Motivating Factors for Choosing DeL

N	Items	N & %	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Mean	SD	Rank
2	Desire to pursue educational attainment and acquire a university degree.	F	388	98	65	24	16	4.38	1.01	1
		%	65.7	16.6	11.0	4.1	2.7			
3	To improve social status.	F	234	143	129	63	22	3.85	1.16	2
		%	39.6	24.2	21.8	10.7	3.7			
5	To secure a better job after graduation.	F	222	148	138	60	23	3.82	1.16	3
		%	37.6	25.0	23.4	10.2	3.9			
4	The possibility of combining study and work.	F	184	190	143	56	18	3.79	1.08	4
		%	31.1	32.1	24.2	9.5	3.0			
1	Previous grades in secondary school have not allowed me to study in traditional education.	F	47	68	104	182	190	2.32	1.25	5
		%	8.0	11.5	17.6	30.8	32.1			
Mean Average								3.63	0.74	

In this section students were presented with five statements relating to reasons that motivate them to undertake DeL. They were asked to indicate the degree to which they feel each item represents a reason to choose DeL, using a 5-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (the Likert scale used in the present study was described in depth in section 4.6.1). The mean of the responses selected was calculated for each statement, and the results, presented in the above table, are arranged in ranked order from the highest, (4.38) to the lowest (2.32), showing a wide variety of responses among students.

Data analysis in table 5.1 shows that most participants stated that the main reason for applying in DeL programmes is to pursue educational attainment and acquire a university degree. It can be observed that the *desire to pursue educational attainment and acquire a university degree* was the most popular choice (4.38). The next highly ranked motive is *to improve social status* with (3.85). The next two motives were *to secure a better job after graduation* and *the possibility of combining study and work*, at 3.82 and 3.79, respectively.

Interestingly, the issue of not having enough qualifications to access traditional universities was not a big concern for students as it was ranked as less important reason. This is evident in

the mean responses to the statement: *previous grades in secondary school have not allowed me to study in traditional education* (2.32). An overview of the above table shows the main factor motivating students to choose DeL are to obtain a degree and enhance their social position.

5.1.2 Students' Perspectives Regarding the Importance of Quality Standards in DeL

To explore the perceptions of Saudi students about the importance of the quality standards in DeL within the three dimensions (Teaching/Learning Processes, Course Structure and Student Support), the researcher calculated frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations and ranks of the responses of the participants. Students' responses to each of the three dimensions are analysed and ranked according to the means from the highest to the lowest as following:

Dimension 1: Teaching/Learning Processes

In this section students were presented with eleven items; each of them represents a quality standard in relation to teaching and learning processes in DeL. Students were asked to respond, based on their perceptions of the importance of the item, using a 5-point scale ranging from very important to unimportant (the Likert scale used in the present study was described in depth in section 4.6.1). The mean of the responses selected for each of the options was calculated for each statement, and the results presented in the below table. From the overall average result, it is clear that this dimension -from the students' perspective - is important, as it shows a mean of 3.97 on a 5-point scale.

The spread of responses to the items in the below table (5.2), regarding teaching and learning, range between 4.39 (very important) and 3.50 (important). The most important and third most important aspects of the teaching and learning process, for students, involve interaction; most importantly with faculty [*student communication and interaction with faculty is facilitated through a variety of ways*] (4.39), and then with peers [*student communication and interaction with other students is facilitated through a variety of ways*] (4.15). In between these two items comes the course materials' quality [*course materials are structured to facilitate individual study*] (4.24).

The fourth and fifth items in the order involve feedback [*feedback to students is provided in a manner that is constructive and non-threatening*] (4.14) and [*learners are encouraged to complete their courses and progress is monitored*] (4.13), and are therefore only slightly less important than the third item. Close to the above in importance is [*E-mail addresses and a message board are provided to encourage students and instructors to work cooperatively*]

(4.12), however below this item there is a gap to the next items, the first which fall below 4.0, in seventh and eighth place, [Modules use a variety of assessment methods] and [feedback to students is provided in a timely manner], respectively at 3.87 and 3.86.

Table 5.2: Students' Perceptions about the Importance of Quality Standards in DeL Relating to Teaching/Learning Processes

N	Items		Very Important	Important	Neutral	Low Importance	Unimportant	Mean	SD	Rank
1	Student interaction with faculty is facilitated through a variety of ways.	F	343	152	79	16	1	4.39	0.83	1
		%	58	25.7	13.4	2.7	0.2			
10	Course materials are structured to facilitate individual study.	F	260	230	87	11	3	4.24	0.81	2
		%	44	38.9	14.7	1.9	0.5			
2	Student interaction with other students is facilitated through a variety of ways.	F	246	214	113	12	6	4.15	0.87	3
		%	41.6	36.2	19.1	2.0	1.0			
4	Feedback to students is provided in a manner that is constructive and non-threatening.	F	225	246	100	17	3	4.14	0.83	4
		%	38.1	41.6	16.9	2.9	0.5			
11	Learners are encouraged to complete their courses and progress is monitored.	F	238	228	93	27	5	4.13	0.90	5
		%	40.3	38.6	15.7	4.6	0.8			
7	E-mail addresses and a message board are provided to encourage students and instructors to work cooperatively.	F	247	199	119	19	7	4.12	0.92	6
		%	41.8	33.7	20.1	3.2	1.2			
5	Modules use a variety of assessment methods.	F	155	248	155	21	12	3.87	0.91	7
		%	26.2	42.0	26.2	3.6	2.0			
3	Feedback to students is provided in a timely manner.	F	156	260	128	31	16	3.86	0.96	8
		%	26.4	44.0	21.7	5.2	2.7			
		%	20.5	41.6	29.4	6.3	2.2			
9	Learning activities promote an open collaborative environment among students.	F	107	246	175	48	15	3.65	0.95	9
		%	18.1	41.6	29.6	8.1	2.5			
8	Courses require students to work in groups (or teams) in order to develop understanding.	F	123	213	166	72	17	3.60	1.04	10
		%	20.8	36.0	28.1	12.2	2.9			
6	Tasks and assignments require students to engage in analysing, evaluating, and applying knowledge both inside and outside of the classroom.	F	95	225	171	82	18	3.50	1.02	11
		%	16.1	38.1	28.9	13.9	3.0			
Mean Average								3.97	0.54	

The lowest rating of importance was ascribed to [*courses require students to work in groups (or teams) in order to develop understanding*] and [*tasks and assignments should require students to engage in analysing, evaluating, and applying knowledge both inside and outside of the classroom*], respectively at 3.60 and 3.50, these final items were nevertheless considered important.

The results showed that the participants highly ranked the importance of issues related to interaction in the teaching and learning process. The items ranked 1,3,4,5, and 6 can all be considered to relate to interacting with various stakeholders. This reflects the importance of

communication and interaction between all agents in the teaching and learning process, a point that will be highlighted in the discussion chapter.

Dimension 2: Course Structure

In this section students were presented with nine items; each of them represents quality standards in relation to course structure in DeL. Again, students were asked to respond, based on their perceptions of the importance of them, using a 5-point scale ranging from very important to unimportant (the Likert scale used in the present study was described in depth in section 4.6.1). The mean of the results selected for each of the options was calculated for each statement, and presented in the below table. From the overall average result, it is clear that this dimension - from the students' perspective - is important, as it shows a mean of 4.12 on a 5-point scale.

Table 5.3: Students' Perceptions about the Importance of Quality Standards in DeL Relating to Course Structure

N	Items		Very Important	Important	Neutral	Low Importance	Unimportant	Mean	SD	Rank
2	Sufficient online resources learning are available to the students.	F	328	181	66	14	2	4.39	0.80	1
		%	55.5	30.6	11.2	2.4	0.3			
9	The university is committed to continuous improvement of programmes offered.	F	314	182	78	11	6	4.33	0.85	2
		%	53.1	30.8	13.2	1.9	1.0			
3	Online learning resources are reviewed and updated on a regular basis.	F	285	207	72	23	4	4.26	0.87	3
		%	48.2	35.0	12.2	3.9	0.7			
1	Before starting the program, students are advised to determine if they have the self-motivation and commitment to learn at a distance.	F	264	211	88	16	12	4.18	0.92	4
		%	44.7	35.7	14.9	2.7	2.0			
6	The grading policy is stated clearly.	F	197	266	103	23	2	4.07	0.83	5
		%	33.3	45.0	17.4	3.9	0.3			
4	Courses include a clear statement of what the learner can hope to achieve on successful completion.	F	217	227	105	37	5	4.04	0.93	6
		%	36.7	38.4	17.8	6.3	0.8			
8	Modules use a variety of content delivery methods (i.e., online videos, virtual conferencing, forums, written assignments) to accomplish learning goals.	F	184	267	105	31	4	4.01	0.87	7
		%	31.1	45.2	17.8	5.2	0.7			
7	Course design promotes both faculty and student engagement.	F	148	300	122	17	4	3.97	0.80	8
		%	25.0	50.8	20.6	2.9	0.7			
5	Specific expectations are set for students with respect to a minimum amount of time per week for study and homework assignments.	F	141	246	153	44	7	3.80	0.93	9
		%	23.9	41.6	25.9	7.4	1.2			
Mean Average								4.12	0.55	

Students' views in the above table (5.3), about the importance of aspects of course structure showed that they again rate all the items as very important or important, in a range between 4.39 and 3.80. Two of the top items in rank can be grouped as being about resources, the 1st

and 3rd, [*sufficient online learning resources are available to the students*] and [*Online learning resources should be reviewed and updated on a regular basis*] which, at 4.39 and 4.26 were considered very important.

The second most important was that [*the university is committed to continuous improvement of programmes offered*] which at 4.33 was very important. Items 1, 6, 4 and 5, all about course information were considered important (4.18, 4.07, 4.04 and 3.80).

The lowest ranking was afforded to [*course design promotes both faculty and student engagement*] at 3.97 and [*specific expectations are set for students with respect to a minimum amount of time per week for study and homework assignments*] at 3.80.

The most import aspect of course structure was the provision of resources. An interestingly low amount of importance was attached to item 7, regarding engagement, given that Table 3.5 showed students' concern with interaction in teaching and learning.

Dimension 3: Student Support

In this section students were presented with eleven items, each of them represents quality standards in relation to student support in DeL. Again, students were asked to respond, based on their perceptions of the importance of them, using a 5-point scale ranging from very important to unimportant (the Likert scale used in the present study was described in depth in section 4.6.1). The mean of the results selected for each of the options was calculated for each statement, and presented in the below table. From the overall average result, this dimension - from the students' perspective - is very important, as it shows a mean of 4.36 on a 5-point scale.

Table 5.4: Students' Perceptions about the Importance of Quality Standards in DeL Relating to Student Support

N	Items		Very Important	Important	Neutral	Low Importance	Unimportant	Mean	SD	Rank
3	Students can obtain assistance to help them use electronically accessed data successfully.	F	357	175	52	4	3	4.49	0.73	1
		%	60.4	29.6	8.8	0.7	0.5			
2	The university provides guidance to students in the use of all forms of technologies used for course delivery.	F	340	188	54	7	2	4.45	0.74	2
		%	57.5	31.8	9.1	1.2	0.3			
9	A structured system is in place to address student complaints.	F	340	187	58	4	2	4.45	0.73	
		%	57.5	31.6	9.8	0.7	0.3			
5	Technologies required for the course are readily available; either provided or easily downloadable.	F	321	204	60	2	4	4.41	0.74	3
		%	54.3	34.5	10.2	0.3	0.7			
11	Efforts are made to engage students with	F	323	202	55	9	2	4.41	0.75	

N	Items		Very Important	Important	Neutral	Low Importance	Unimportant	Mean	SD	Rank
	the programme and institution.	%	54.7	34.2	9.3	1.5	0.3			
10	The university has adequate procedures to handle difficulties between learners and university, and learners are aware of options to resolve difficulties.	F	308	210	62	9	2	4.38	0.76	4
		%	52.1	35.5	10.5	1.5	0.3			
4	Students are supported in the development and use of new technologies and skills.	F	291	219	68	12	1	4.33	0.77	5
		%	49.2	37.1	11.5	2.0	0.2			
6	A counselling service for students' academic and personal issues are available.	F	280	215	79	13	4	4.28	0.83	6
		%	47.4	36.4	13.4	2.2	0.7			
7	Technical support is offered on a prompt, timely and wherever possible personal basis.	F	255	254	72	7	3	4.27	0.76	7
		%	43.1	43.0	12.2	1.2	0.5			
1	Etiquette ('netiquette') guidelines for how students should behave online are clearly stated.	F	264	234	80	9	4	4.26	0.80	8
		%	44.7	39.6	13.5	1.5	0.7			
8	Support offered is sufficient to meet the needs of learners, encourage learning and facilitate completion of the course.	F	247	265	70	6	3	4.26	0.74	
		%	41.8	44.8	11.8	1.0	0.5			
Mean Average								4.36	0.54	

Regarding student support, students saw everything as being very important, the mean scores ranged between 4.26 and 4.49. Interestingly, the eleven items received eight ranks, as some got the same mean.

The top two items in terms of mean [*students can obtain assistance to help them use electronically accessed data successfully*] and [*The university provides guidance to students in the use of all forms of technologies used for course delivery.*] (at 4.49 and 4.45) related to the quality of assistance, and students obviously regard this as an extremely important aspect of support. However, the promptness of this support [*Technical support is offered on a prompt, timely and wherever possible personal basis*] was rated lower, at only 4.27, showing that students value the quality of information over its rapidity.

The lowest ranked, at 4.26 were [*Etiquette ('netiquette') guidelines for how students should behave online are clearly stated*] and [*support offered is sufficient to meet the needs of learners, encourage learning and facilitate completion of the course*].

Overall, the various forms of support students were surveyed about proved to be considered universally as very important. Given the tight clustering of responses in this table, it would not be appropriate to place excessive emphasis on their ordering, with a variation of only 0.23.

Summary of Importance in the Dimensions

It can be seen in the table below that Student Support (4.36) rated as the most important dimension in the perceptions of students. It was the only category that, as a whole, was very important – indeed, none of the individual items even dropped below this level. Course Structure (4.11) was next, and, as with Teaching/Learning Processes (3.95) was assessed as being important. The overall mean was 4.15, showing that students generally find these standards to be important.

Table 5.5: Students’ Perceived Importance of Quality Standards

N	Dimension	Average Mean	SD	Rank
3	Student Support	4.36	0.54	1
2	Course Structure	4.12	0.55	2
1	Teaching/Learning Processes	3.97	0.54	3
	Over all Mean of the Quality Standards	4.15	0.46	

5.1.3 The Differences in Perceptions about the Importance of Quality Standards in DeL

Gender

To identify the difference in Saudi students’ perceptions about the importance of quality in DeL according to gender, an Independent Sample T-test was used to evaluate the variations in mean scores between the two groups.

Table 5.6: Differences in Perception of Importance According to Gender Shown by ‘T-Test’

Dimension	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Df	T	P-value
Teaching/Learning Processes	Male	365	3.91	0.53	589	3.20	0.001*
	Female	226	4.06	0.56			
Course Structure	Male	365	4.04	0.53	589	4.62	<0.001*
	Female	226	4.25	0.55			
Student Support	Male	365	4.27	0.54	589	5.41	<0.001*
	Female	226	4.51	0.51			

*Significant at the 0.01 Level (2-tailed)

The results of T-test in the table 5.6 above show that there were significant differences between the participants of different genders in their views of the importance of quality in DeL across the three dimensions [Teaching/Learning Processes (T (df (589) = 3.39), $p < 0.05$), Course Structure (T (df (589) = 4.62), $p < 0.001$) or Student Support (T (df (589) =

5.41), $p < 0.001$]. This indicates that gender differences can be seen in the views of the students in every dimension. Female students were more concerned about quality in each of the three dimensions as their means were higher than that of the male students.

Age

To identify the difference in Saudi students' perceptions about the importance of quality in DeL according to the age, a One-Way ANOVA test was used to evaluate the variations in mean scores between the four groups.

The ANOVA results in the table 5.7 below show that there were no differences of statistical significance among participants of different ages in their views of the importance of quality in DeL in the three dimensions [Teaching/Learning Processes ($F(df(3,587)) = 1.14$), Course Structure ($F(df(3,587)) = 0.607$) or Student Support ($F(df(3,587)) = 0.377$). This indicates that the views of the students regarding any of the dimensions did not differ according to age.

Table 5.07: Differences in Perception of Importance According to Age Shown 'ANOVA'

Dimension	Age range	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Df	F	P-value
Teaching/Learning Processes	22 or less	37	4.11	0.60	3,587	1.14	0.324
	23-30	271	3.98	0.55			
	31-40	212	3.93	0.50			
	Over 40	71	3.96	0.61			
Course Structure	22 or Less	37	4.07	0.52	3,587	0.607	0.611
	23-30	271	4.09	0.61			
	31-40	212	4.14	0.48			
	Over 40	71	4.16	0.52			
Student Support	22 or Less	37	4.36	0.72	3,587	0.377	0.770
	23-30	271	4.34	0.57			
	31-40	212	4.38	0.49			
	Over 40	71	4.41	0.52			

*Significant at the 0.05 Level (2-tailed)

Academic Year

To identify the difference in Saudi students' perceptions about the importance of quality in DeL according to their academic year, a One-Way ANOVA was used to evaluate the variations in mean scores between the four groups.

Table 5.8: Differences in Perception of Importance According to the Academic Year Shown by ‘ANOVA’

Dimension	Years	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Df	F	P-value
Teaching/Learning Processes	First	168	3.92	0.60	3,587	1.10	0.345
	Second	145	3.96	0.53			
	Third	149	3.96	0.49			
	Foruth	129	4.04	0.52			
Course Structure	First	168	4.04	0.63	3,587	2.02	0.110
	Second	145	4.10	0.54			
	Third	149	4.17	0.46			
	Foruth	129	4.17	0.54			
Student Support	First	168	4.23	0.62	3,587	5.12	0.002*
	Second	145	4.43	0.46			
	Third	149	4.41	0.50			
	Foruth	129	4.41	0.56			

*Significant at the 0.05 Level (2-tailed)

The results of ANOVA in the table 5.8 above show that there were no significant differences between participants from different academic years in their views of the importance of quality in DeL in the two dimensions [Teaching/Learning Processes (F (df (3,587) = 1.10), and Course Structure (F (df (3,587) = 2.02)]. However, they show that there were differences of statistical significance, in the level of (0.05), between students in their views of the Student Support (F (df (3,587) = 5.12), $p < 0.05$). To determine the direction of difference a Post Hoc comparison LSD test was used as shown in the following table.

Table 5.9: Dependent Variable: Academic Year: with Importance of Quality Standards

Dimension	Years	M	P-value	First year	Second year	Third year	Fourth year
Student Support	First year	4.23		-	*	*	*
	Second year	4.43	.001	*	-		
	Third year	4.41	.002	*		-	
	Fourth year	4.41	.004	*			-

Post Hoc comparisons using the LSD test indicated that first year students were significantly less concerned about the importance of quality standards in Student Support dimension (M=4.23) than second year students (M=4.43) and third and fourth year students both in same level (M=4.41). Furthermore, there were no significant differences between second, third and fourth year students in this issue.

ICT Skills

To identify the difference in Saudi students' perceptions about the importance of quality in DeL according to their ICT skills, a One-Way ANOVA was used to evaluate the variations in mean scores between the three groups.

The results of ANOVA in the table 5.10 below show that there were significant differences between participants with different level of ICT skills, in their views of the importance of quality in DeL in the one dimension [Teaching/Learning Processes ($F(df(2,588) = 5.95)$, $p < 0.05$). However, there were no differences of statistical significance among students in their views of the Course Structure ($F(df(2,588) = 3.05)$, and Student Support ($F(df(2,588) = 2.18$). To determine the direction of difference a Post Hoc comparison LSD test was used as shown in table 5.11 below.

Table 5.10: Differences in Perceptions of Importance According to ICT Skills Shown by 'ANOVA'

Dimension	ICT Skills	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Df	F	P-value
Teaching/Learning Processes	Beginner	79	3.96	0.57	2,588	6.02	0.003*
	Intermediate	301	3.90	0.55			
	Skilled	211	4.07	0.51			
Course Structure	Beginner	79	4.08	0.63	2,588	3.05	0.056
	Intermediate	301	4.05	0.55			
	Skilled	211	4.19	0.51			
Student Support	Beginner	79	4.35	0.54	2,588	2.18	0.114
	Intermediate	301	4.32	0.56			
	Skilled	211	4.42	0.52			

Table 5.11: Dependent Variable: ICT Skills: with Importance of Quality Standards

Dimension	ICT Skills	M	Beginner	Intermediate	Skilled
Teaching/Learning Processes	Beginner	3.88	-		*
	Intermediate	3.95		-	
	Skilled	4.04	*		-

Post hoc comparisons using the LSD test indicated that skilled students were more concerned about the importance of quality standards in the Teaching/Learning Processes dimension ($M=4.04$) than intermediate ones ($M=3.95$) and beginners ($M=3.88$). However, table 5.11 showed that the significant differences were between skilled and beginner, but not between intermediate versus beginner and skilled.

5.1.4 Students' Perspectives Regarding the Application of Quality Standards in their Present Courses

In order to explore the perceptions of Saudi students about the degree of application in their current courses of the three quality standards in DeL, within three dimensions (Teaching/Learning Processes, Course Structure and Student Support), the researcher calculated frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations and ranks of the responses of the participants. Students' responses to each of the three dimensions are analysed and ranked according to the means from the highest to the lowest as following:

Dimension 1: Teaching/Learning Processes

In this section students were presented with eleven items; each of them represents a quality standard in relation to teaching and learning processes in DeL. Students were asked to respond, based on their perception of the degree of application in their current courses of the item, using a 5-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (the Likert scale used in the present study was described in depth in section 4.6.1). The mean of the responses selected for each of the options was calculated for each statement, and the results presented in the table below. From the overall average result, it is clear that this dimension - from the students' perspective - is a neutral position and that they neither agree nor disagree it is present, as it shows a mean of 3.33 on a 5-point scale.

Table 5.12: Students' Perceptions about the Application of Teaching and Learning Standards of Quality in DeL

N	Items		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	SD	Rank
10	Course materials are structured to facilitate my individual study.	F	93	261	166	51	20	3.60	0.96	1
		%	15.7	44.2	28.1	8.6	3.4			
7	E-mail addresses and a message board are provided to encourage students and instructors to work cooperatively.	F	96	219	166	71	39	3.44	1.10	2
		%	16.2	37.1	28.1	12.0	6.6			
3	Feedback to me is provided in a timely manner.	F	81	205	192	93	20	3.40	1.01	3
		%	13.7	34.7	32.5	15.7	3.4			
2	My interaction with other students is facilitated through a variety of ways.	F	79	191	222	71	28	3.38	1.01	4
		%	13.4	32.3	37.6	12.0	4.7			
5	Modules use a variety of assessment methods.	F	95	188	184	96	28	3.38	1.08	5
		%	16.1	31.8	31.1	16.2	4.7			
4	Feedback to me is provided in a manner that is constructive and non-threatening.	F	68	202	199	93	29	3.32	1.03	6
		%	11.5	34.2	33.7	15.7	4.9			
1	My interaction with faculty is facilitated through a variety of ways.	F	74	182	226	72	37	3.31	1.04	7
		%	12.5	30.8	38.2	12.2	6.3			
8	Courses require me to work in groups (or teams) in order to develop understanding.	F	92	163	196	99	41	3.28	1.12	8
		%	15.6	27.6	33.2	16.8	6.9			

N	Items		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	SD	Rank
6	Tasks and assignments require me to engage in analysing, evaluating, and applying knowledge both inside and outside of the classroom.	F	66	205	178	100	42	3.26	1.09	9
		%	11.2	34.7	30.1	16.9	7.1			
9	Learning activities promote an open collaborative environment among students.	F	67	180	205	99	40	3.23	1.07	10
		%	11.3	30.5	34.7	16.8	6.8			
11	I am encouraged to complete my courses and my progress is monitored.	F	66	177	156	113	79	3.06	1.21	11
		%	11.2	29.9	26.4	19.1	13.4			
Mean Average								3.33	0.82	

The spread of responses ranged from somewhat agreeing is present (3.60) to neither agreeing nor disagreeing is present (3.06). The top two items [*Course materials are structured to facilitate my individual study*] and [*E-mail addresses and a message board are provided to encourage students and instructors to work cooperatively*] were the only ones meeting the criteria of being somewhat present. These can be considered the deeper or more long term standards in this dimension, asking about the planning of teaching and learning.

The next set of standards perceived by the students relate to matters such as feedback and assessment, mixed with those about interaction. Regarding this first set, feedback and assessment, students believe that the standard regarding timeliness of feedback [*Feedback to me is provided in a timely manner*] is met slightly more (3.40) than that regarding the type of feedback [*Feedback to me is provided in a manner that is constructive and non-threatening*] at (3.32).

In terms of interaction, more standards are met regarding interaction with peers [*My interaction with other students is facilitated through a variety of ways*] (3.38) than with faculty [*My interaction with faculty is facilitated through a variety of ways*] (3.31).

The standards observed least frequently relate to learning activities: 8, 6 and 9 scoring 3.28, 3.26 and 3.23 respectively. The only are weaker than diversity of teaching methods related to encouragement, where [*I am encouraged to complete my courses and my progress is monitored*] was the lowest scoring standard at (3.06).

Dimension 2: Course Structure

In this section students were presented with nine items; each of them represents a quality standard in relation to course structure in DeL. Students were asked to respond, based on their perception of the degree of application in their current courses of the item, using a 5-point

scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (the Likert scale used in the present study was described in depth in section 4.6.1). The mean of the responses selected for each of the options was calculated for each statement, and the results presented in the table below. From the overall average result, it is clear that this dimension - from the students' perspective - is a neutral position; that they neither agree nor disagree it is present, as it shows a mean of 3.36 on a 5-point scale.

The spread of responses ranged from somewhat agreeing is present (3.73) to neither agreeing nor disagreeing is present (3.19). The top three items [*Each course includes a clear statement of I can hope to achieve on successful completion*] (3.73), [*The grading policy is stated clearly*] (3.47), and [*The university is committed to continuous improvement of programmes offered*] (3.42) were the only ones meeting the criteria of being somewhat present.

Table 5.13: Students' Perceptions about the Application of Standards of Quality in DeL Relating to Course Structure

N	Items		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	SD	Rank
4	Each course includes a clear statement of what I can hope to achieve on successful completion.	F	151	204	175	45	16	3.73	1.01	1
		%	25.5	34.5	29.6	7.6	2.7			
6	The grading policy is stated clearly.	F	90	218	194	58	31	3.47	1.03	2
		%	15.2	36.9	32.8	9.8	5.2			
9	The university is committed to continuous improvement of programmes offered.	F	108	190	180	66	47	3.42	1.15	3
		%	18.3	32.1	30.5	11.2	8.0			
5	Specific expectations are set for me with respect to a minimum amount of time per week for study and homework assignments.	F	87	191	195	83	35	3.36	1.08	4
		%	14.7	32.3	33.0	14.0	5.9			
2	Sufficient online learning resources available to me.	F	84	200	181	78	48	3.33	1.12	5
		%	14.2	33.8	30.6	13.2	8.1			
8	Modules use a variety of content delivery methods (i.e., online videos, virtual conferencing, forums, written assignments) to accomplish my learning goals.	F	90	177	190	86	48	3.30	1.14	6
		%	15.2	29.9	32.1	14.6	8.1			
7	Course design promotes both faculty and student engagement.	F	79	200	164	84	64	3.25	1.18	7
		%	13.4	33.8	27.7	14.2	10.6			
3	Online learning resources are reviewed and updated on a regular basis.	F	67	207	161	105	51	3.23	1.13	8
		%	11.3	35.0	27.2	17.8	8.6			
1	Before starting the program, I was advised to determine if I have the self-motivation and commitment to learn at a distance.	F	74	180	194	103	50	3.19	1.12	9
		%	12.5	28.8	32.8	17.4	8.3			
Mean Average								3.36	0.86	

An interesting dichotomy is between the top and bottom results, which both relate to pre-sessional preparation for the course. Whilst students found the standard relating to course objectives and aims [*Each course includes a clear statement of what I can hope to achieve on successful completion*] to be the most met (3.73), that about checking they participants were

suitable for the course [*Before starting the program, I was advised to determine if I have the self-motivation and commitment to learn at a distance*] was the least met (3.19)

In terms of resources, students found the standards about the quantity of resources [*Sufficient online learning resources available to me*] (3.33) to be met more often than that of the newness of resources [*Online learning resources are reviewed and updated on a regular basis*] (3.23).

Dimension 3: Student Support

In this section students were presented with eleven items; each of them represents a quality standard in relation to student support in DeL. Students were asked to respond, based on their perception of the degree of application in their current courses of the item, using a 5-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (the Likert scale used in the present study was described in depth in section 4.6.1). The mean of the responses selected for each of the options was calculated for each statement, and the results presented in the table below. From the overall average result, it is clear that this dimension - from the students' perspective - is somewhat provided and they agree it is present, as it shows a mean of 3.42 on a 5-point scale.

Table 5.14: Students' Perceptions about the Application of DeL Quality Standards of Student Support

N	Items		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	SD	Rank
1	Etiquette ('netiquette') guidelines for how I should behave online are clearly stated.	F	119	235	166	51	20	3.65	1.00	1
		%	20.1	39.8	28.1	8.6	3.4			
3	I can obtain assistance to help me use electronically accessed data successfully.	F	123	218	156	55	39	3.56	1.12	2
		%	20.8	36.9	26.4	9.3	6.6			
5	Technologies required for the course are readily available; either provided or easily downloadable.	F	86	247	176	62	20	3.54	0.98	3
		%	14.6	41.8	29.8	10.5	3.4			
2	The university provides guidance to me in the use of all forms of technologies used for course delivery.	F	72	251	186	56	26	3.49	0.97	4
		%	12.2	42.5	31.5	9.5	4.4			
9	A structured system is in place to address my complaints.	F	86	323	181	63	29	3.48	1.02	5
		%	14.6	39.3	30.6	10.7	4.9			
7	Technical support is offered on a prompt, timely and wherever possible personal basis.	F	93	200	217	53	28	3.47	1.01	6
		%	15.7	33.8	36.7	9.0	4.7			
4	I am supported in the development and use of new technologies and skills.	F	83	202	213	56	37	3.40	1.04	7
		%	14.0	34.2	36.0	9.5	6.3			
10	The university has adequate procedures to handle difficulties between learners and university, and I am aware of options to resolve difficulties.	F	101	187	177	85	41	3.38	1.13	8
		%	17.1	31.6	29.9	14.4	6.9			

N	Items		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	SD	Rank
11	Efforts are made to engage me with the programme and institution.	F	75	198	196	82	40	3.31	1.07	9
		%	12.7	33.5	33.2	13.9	6.8			
8	Support offered is sufficient to meet the reasonable of my needs, encourage my learning and facilitate completion of the course.	F	57	190	201	93	50	3.19	1.08	10
		%	9.6	32.1	34.0	15.7	8.5			
6	A counselling service for my academic and personal issues is available.	F	75	194	153	90	79	3.16	1.22	11
		%	12.7	32.8	25.9	15.2	13.4			
Mean Average								3.42	0.77	

The spread of responses ranged from somewhat agreeing is present (3.63) to neither agreeing nor disagreeing is present (3.16). This dimension is different to the others, in which few items were noted as being present, as more than half - six out of eleven of the items - were noted in this category.

The top standard, that [*Etiquette ('netiquette') guidelines for how I should behave online are clearly stated*] (3.65) is also the one that one might expect is the easiest for university to fulfil, as it is not qualified by a term such as 'sufficiency' in the way other standards are.

The other standards met most often involved the presence of technology and its use: [*I can obtain assistance to help me use electronically accessed data successfully*] (3.56); [*Technologies required for the course are readily available – provided or easily downloadable*] (3.54); and [*The university provides guidance to me in the use of all forms of technologies used for course delivery*] (3.49). The only technological standard that was neither agreed nor disagreed as being met was [*I am supported in the development and use of new technologies and skills*] (3.40).

Regarding complaints, the standard regarding structure and process [*A structured system is in place to address my complaints*] is somewhat agreed to be present (3.48) and is therefore met more than the one regarding the outcome of complaints [*The university has adequate procedures to handle difficulties between learners and the university, and I am aware of options to resolve difficulties*] (3.38).

The standards ranked 9 and 10 relate to individual rather than structured support: [*Efforts are made to engage me with the programme and institution*] (3.31) and [*Support offered is sufficient to meet my needs, encourage my learning and facilitate completion of the course*] (3.19).

Again, the standard met the least (3.16) was the most personal one, relating to counselling [*A counselling service for my academic and personal issues is available*], and this mirrors the lowest ranking standards in the other dimensions. An overall pattern can be seen in which impersonal organisational standards are met much more often than those involving personal contact and information about specific students.

Summary of Application in the Dimensions

It can be seen in the table below that Student Support (3.42) rated as the most prevalent dimension in the perceptions of students. It was the only category that as a whole was somewhat present – although some of the individual items even dropped below this level. Course Structure (3.36) was next, and, as with Teaching/Learning Processes (3.33) which students neither agreed nor disagreed were being met. The overall mean was 3.38, showing that students generally neither agree nor disagree these standards are being met.

Table 5.15: Students’ Perceived Application of Quality Standards

N	Dimension	Average Mean	SD	Rank
3	Student Support	3.42	0.77	1
2	Course Structure	3.36	0.86	2
1	Teaching/Learning Processes	3.33	0.76	3
4	Over all mean of the quality standards	3.38	0.76	

5.1.5 The Differences in Perceptions about the Application of Quality Standards in DeL

Gender

To identify the difference in Saudi students’ perceptions about the application of quality in DeL according to gender, an Independent Sample T-test was used to evaluate the variations in mean scores between the two groups.

Table 5.16: Differences in Perceptions of Standard Application According to Gender Shown by 'T-test'

Dimension	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Df	T	P-value
Teaching/Learning Processes	Male	365	3.41	0.87	589	2.59	0.010*
	Female	226	3.23	0.89			
Course Structure	Male	365	3.32	0.84	589	1.41	0.157
	Female	226	3.43	0.89			
Student Support	Male	365	3.42	0.74	589	0.17	0.865
	Female	226	3.43	0.83			

*Significant at the 0.05 Level (2-tailed)

The results of T-test in the table 5.16 above show that there were no significant differences between the participants of different genders in their views of the application of quality in DeL in [Course Structure (T (df (589) = 1.41), $p > 0.05$), Student Support (T (df (589) = 0.17), $p > 0.05$), but not Teaching/Learning Processes (T (df (589) = 0.010), $p < 0.05$)]. This indicates that gender differences can be seen in the views of the students in teaching/learning processes. Female students were more concerned about applying quality standards in teaching/learning processes, as their mean was lower than that of the male students.

Age

To identify the difference in Saudi students' perceptions about the application of quality in DeL according to their age, a One-Way ANOVA was used to evaluate the variations in mean scores between the four groups.

The ANOVA results in the table 5.17 below show that there were no differences of statistical significance among participants of different ages in their views of the application of quality in DeL in the three dimensions [Teaching/Learning Processes (F (df (3,587) = 0.98), Course Structure (F (df (3,587) = 1.94) or Student Support (F (df (3,587) = 1.75). This indicates that the views of the students regarding any of the dimensions did not differ according to age.

Table 5.16: Differences in Perceptions of Standard Application According to Age Shown 'ANOVA'

Dimension	Age range	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Df	F	P-value
Teaching/Learning Processes	22 or Less	37	3.21	1.01	3,587	0.98	0.400
	23-30	271	3.37	0.85			
	31-40	212	3.34	0.75			
	Over 40	71	3.21	0.82			
Course Structure	22 or Less	37	3.23	0.99	3,587	1.94	0.123
	23-30	271	3.45	0.90			
	31-40	212	3.33	0.74			
	Over 40	71	3.22	0.94			

Dimension	Age range	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Df	F	P-value
Student Support	22 or Less	37	3.25	0.87	3,587	1.75	0.155
	23-30	271	3.49	0.81			
	31-40	212	3.39	0.67			
	Over 40	71	3.32	0.84			

*Significant at the 0.05 Level (2-tailed)

Academic Year

To identify the difference in Saudi students' perceptions about the application of quality in DeL according to their academic year, a One-Way ANOVA was used to evaluate the variations in mean scores between the four groups.

Table 5.17: Differences in Perceptions of Standard Application According to the Academic Year Shown by 'ANOVA'

Dimension	Years	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Df	F	P-value
Teaching/Learning Processes	First	168	3.38	0.85	3,587	0.84	0.467
	Second	145	3.38	0.86			
	Third	149	3.29	0.72			
	Forth	129	3.26	0.84			
Course Structure	First	168	3.42	0.85	3,587	1.01	0.386
	Second	145	3.37	0.96			
	Third	149	3.26	0.80			
	Forth	129	3.40	0.82			
Student Support	First	168	3.43	0.78	3,587	0.62	0.598
	Second	145	3.43	0.80			
	Third	149	3.35	0.71			
	Forth	129	3.48	0.79			

*Significant at the 0.05 Level (2-tailed)

The results of ANOVA in the table 5.18 above show that there were no significant differences between participants from different academic years in their views of the application of quality in DeL in the three dimensions [Teaching/Learning Processes ($F(df(3,587)) = 0.84$), Course Structure ($F(df(3,587)) = 1.01$), and Student Support ($F(df(3,587)) = 0.62$).

ICT Skills

To identify the difference in Saudi students' perceptions about the application of quality in DeL according to their ICT skills, a One Way ANOVA was used to evaluate the variations in mean scores between the three groups.

The results of ANOVA in the table 5.19 below show that there were no significant differences between participants with different level of ICT skills, in their views of the application of

quality in DeL in the [Course Structure ($F(df(2,588) = 2.17)$, $p > 0.05$), and Student Support ($F(df(0,048) = 3.30)$, $p > 0.05$)]. However, there were differences of statistical significance, in the level of (0.05), among students in their views of the Teaching/Learning Processes ($F(df(2,588) = 3.53)$). To determine the direction of difference a Post hoc comparison LSD test was used as shown in table 5.20 below.

Table 5.18: Differences in Perceptions of Standard Application According to ICT Skills Shown by ‘ANOVA’

Dimension	ICT Skills	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Df	F	P-value
Teaching/Learning Processes	Beginner	79	3.56	0.88	2,588	3.53	0.030*
	Intermediate	301	3.30	0.80			
	Skilled	211	3.29	0.86			
Course Structure	Beginner	79	3.55	0.82	2,588	2.17	0.114
	Intermediate	301	3.33	0.84			
	Skilled	211	3.34	0.89			
Student Support	Beginner	79	3.64	0.73	2,588	3.30	0.232
	Intermediate	301	3.36	0.76			
	Skilled	211	3.32	0.79			

*Significant at the 0.05 Level (2-tailed)

Table 5.19: Dependent Variable: ICT Skills: with Application of Quality Standards

Dimension	ICT Skills	M	Beginner	Intermediate	Skilled
Teaching/Learning Processes	Beginner	3.56	-	*	*
	Intermediate	3.30	*	-	
	Skilled	3.29	*		-

Post hoc comparisons using the LSD test show that the significant differences were between the skilled ($M=3.29$) and intermediate ($M=3.30$) versus the beginner ($M=3.56$) in the Teaching/Learning Processes. Skilled and intermediate students were more concerned about applying quality standards in teaching/learning processes, as their mean was lower than that of the beginner students.

5.1.6 A Comparison of the Dimensions of the Two Universities

Nonetheless, the comparison below only considers selected dimensions, as it would be impossible to present the data set in its entirety without compromising the anonymity of the two universities. Such an outcome might have negative consequences for participants at institutional and personal levels; it has therefore been avoided. Tables 5.21 and 5.22 show the differences in the dimensions.

Table 5.20: Comparison between the Importance of Quality Standards Dimensions in the Two Universities

<i>N</i>	Dimensions	University A	University B
1	Teaching/Learning Processes	3.84 Agree	4.05 Agree
2	Course Structure	4.09 Agree	4.15 Agree
3	Student Support	4.35 Strongly Agree	4.40 Strongly Agree
Total	All the dimensions	4.09 Agree	4.20 Agree

Table 5.21: Comparison between the Application of Quality Standards Dimensions in the Two Universities

<i>N</i>	Dimensions	University A	University B
1	Teaching/Learning Processes	3.36 Neutral	3.52 Neutral
2	Course Structure	3.31 Neutral	3.38 Neutral
3	Student Support	3.38 Neutral	3.35 Neutral
Total	All the dimensions	3.35 Neutral	3.37 Neutral

Tables 5.21 and 5.22 show there to be no difference between the order of the dimensions between institutions in terms of the results. With regard to the category of *Importance*, University A stands at 4.09 while University B is at 4.20. For *Application*, the trend in both results between the two institutions is similar.

5.2 Focus Group Findings

This section will present the qualitative data gathered for our study. The source material is derived from two focus group sessions that took place in February 2015. Each session involved the institutions from which the sample was derived. The participants were drawn from the pool of respondents to the first phase of the study, which was a questionnaire. The meetings took place in a carefully prepared room near the central campus of IMU University in the city of Riyadh and followed the principle that such sessions, if they are to be maximally productive, should be held informally. Such an informal atmosphere is believed to help the students share their personal experiences and participate in the discussion more readily.

The objective of these focus groups was to produce richer and more detailed data than could be achieved through questionnaires alone. This approach is particularly relevant the axes of discovering student's perceptions about their DeL experience and the explanations about why these perspectives were held.

The interview questions were carefully chosen and participants were led by the facilitator, when required, to provide answers about students' experience across three primary questions. These were, firstly, 'What are students' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of their DeL course?' Secondly: 'What are students' perceptions of barriers arising during their DeL course and 'What changes would students make to improve quality in DeL?' Further dimensions provided a structure of secondary questions when required: how the strengths and weaknesses of DeL match students' needs; the status of DeL; the use of resources; and finally, their interactions with the instructors on their courses. Some additional questions were devised in case the primary questions were not answered in depth (See Appendix F).

Being that the answers elicited by these questions were based around the strengths and weaknesses of DeL regarding certain topic areas, the results here are presented according to the themes emerging from the groups. The topics that generated the lengthiest responses (for instance, Communication and Teaching Methods) have been sub-divided into smaller sections, to provide extra clarity regarding students' opinions. These areas were derived from an analysis of the transcripts of the interviews, which allowed an analysis of the findings based on the topics and the codes identified by the researcher. This approach allowed a consideration of the interplay of both strengths and weaknesses, along with a description of the students' agreements or disagreements around the issues in questions. It is therefore the method opted for here, rather than a simple list of pros and cons.

As very few learners used the open-ended questions on the survey, and as this data is qualitative, it has been incorporated in this section rather than being given its own section as there simply were not enough responses for it to be analysed separately.

Motivations of DeL learners

The students were aware that there were a variety of motivations behind their individual decisions to enroll in a DeL course. One student provided an illustrative example:

During the exam period, I met a man of an advanced age, and I asked him about his goal of study. He said: “I am retired school principal and I want to enjoy lifelong learning”. The student continued to explain that the purpose of enrolment in DeL can be for social status or for lifelong learning, or both. For me, as an employee, I aspire to both.

Here, the questions that the facilitator moved towards were: ‘To what extent can the problem of a lack of clarity about the idea of DeL impact the new experience?’ ‘If the students had a second chance, would they change their mind about engaging in this kind of learning?’ However, there proved to be a divergence of views among the students, as one participant went on to say that he “...expected that after the integration of the technology in DeL, society’s perception of it will be changed from what it was for [extramural study]”, but he has started in this system and it is difficult to give up. Students were focused upon the goals they could achieve, one commenting in the open question that they wanted to know about market needs for jobs, indicating a focus on the use of the qualification.

Pre-Sessional Information

Students generally agreed that the information they received before the course began was insufficient. One of the participants commented that “there is a preparatory course for one term before the start of each program (after payment of a fee), but there is no direct guidance on the nature of the programme. This often leads to the withdrawal of students during this term or immediately after”. There was general agreement among participants that setting a non-refundable fee is problematic given that they were unfamiliar with the nature of the course until they actually started it.

Furthermore, the students generally agreed that they did not have full knowledge of the nature of DeL, while the university gave them little guidance at the beginning. This absence is filled by students seeking self-help by making use of the experiences of their predecessors enrolled in similar or the same programmes. One student used the open question to request module outlines to be available pre-sessionally.

One of the students continued with this theme by saying that, “in general, given the lack of higher educational choices, the only option for many prospective students is to take a DeL course”. The students did not, therefore, see the importance of pre-sessional information, nor did they try to find out the nature of the programme. A student said: “There is simply no other viable option for us, because DeL is the only alternative to extramural study, which does not have a good reputation.”

Students’ Communication and Interaction

With the teacher

The most common issue raised by students as an obstacle preventing effective communication is the ineffective use of technology by teaching staff. Students have experienced frustration here because they feel that the teachers of DeL, which is after all electronic in nature, should be versed in the technology required to deliver the course. The discussion of the lack of reciprocal conversation during teaching time then led the facilitator (i.e. myself) to ask, “Is the teacher not available during synchronous lectures?” One student replied, “This is true, but communication features, which are controlled by teachers, are locked during the lectures by most of teachers.” This comment was supported by others and is evidently representative of the practice of several staff. There is a sense among students that instructors do not have a background in DeL; for example, voices are unclear because of the lack of knowledge of how to use the audio devices.

The research participants assumed that technical problems would not exist in DeL and that, once they access the platform, everything would be ready and formatted and the teacher would have knowledge of how to deal with the different devices. However, one student said that he had a lecturer last year, “who has gone through nearly half of the school year without knowing how the two-directional communication feature works.” According to this student, the difficulty was compounded by the fact that the course was mathematics, which often requires classroom discussion. Another point raised by the participants touched on non-synchronous conversation, where it was noted that “being sometimes occupied with their jobs or responsibilities is another obstacle that keeps students from live broadcasts.” It would appear that there is a lack of two-way conversation in the cases both of live lectures and pre-recorded ones, which mitigates the supposed benefit of having a live lecture.

Nonetheless, not all the comments were negative and other students acknowledged that some teachers are using the video alongside the audio for educational purposes, such as on the occasions when they use boards or props to show and explain diagrams. At the same time, the

disadvantage remained that this video feed would be concentrated on the supporting material rather than the instructor's face.

This lack of reciprocal communication led students to demand more face-to-face time with instructors. Students mentioned that despite the availability of many ways to communicate technologically, access to them was still very limited. Although the VLE used by the institution (Blackboard) has many features, the students were aware that they were not being used. In the absence of this full functionality, students felt that they are receiving significantly less than a complete service. One student stated that: "It is therefore necessary to meet face-to-face with teacher, especially one week or two before the tests to talk with them." This comment is representative of the view of many students that the most important topic of conversation to have with the teacher was a discussion of the contents of the exam in the period immediately preceding their sitting it.

As this topic touches on an important cultural aspect of the Saudi students' understanding of communication in education, the facilitator pressed the issue with the students, asking: "What kind of communication should take place between the instructor and the student?" One speaker explained, "Sometimes I need to communicate with the teacher face-to-face, it is not enough by only technology, I did not forget even my elementary teachers." This is a common concern for students who, being used to seeing their teachers directly, struggle to adapt to the anonymity of the teacher imposed upon them by the online environment.

However, it was also broadly understood that the demand of responding to each individual student in a course delivered online might be impractical for teachers. Although there was general agreement shown here, either by nodding heads or responding to a speaker with "True", the conclusion was that "there should be office hours opened by the instructor per week to the students." Another of the participants pointed to the difficulty of applying this action in practice, owing to the high numbers of students. Throughout the interviews, students were acutely aware of the large size of the groups in which they were enrolled. To solve the dilemma of student-teacher communication, one participant suggested that dialogue should be established through organising forums in which the instructor can answer student inquiries, particularly those repeated, to be of benefit to everyone.

In some respects, the focus group sessions were an opportunity for the students to air issues that they had in the course, however, despite their focus on these problems, some spoke of the positive aspects of DeL. Students described themselves as more confident using online resources when communicating with teachers and fellow students. These students also

enjoyed the beneficial impact these new experiences had on their ability to think critically as well as their overall verbal and written communication abilities. Such new learning opportunities enhanced their overall cognitive capacity and their overall knowledge on the subject of the programme.

Students who were satisfied with the course took a more measured perspective, and understood that other methods of education may be worse than DeL in terms of their objectives in achieving communications with teachers and peers. They stated that online education increased the ease with which students could interact with classmates and teachers. These, students perceived this as beneficial to the learning process, as they could immediately contact peers or teachers when they had a query, as opposed to asking such questions during registration or when schedules are being set. Again, this represented a favourable comparison with traditional education of extramural study. One student said:

“Online communication enabled students to discuss issues with the teacher directly and to receive responses to inquiries or updates more efficiently, especially in relation to course work. Online communication also enhanced the quality of the learning experience as students could communicate directly with the teacher and request feedback on each task they completed.”

With peers

Responding to the general impression that teachers were uncommunicative, a speaker underlined the fact that “as communication is certainly important, when I need it I usually resorted to other students, because most teachers do not respond to questions.” He cited the example of a question he asked a teacher three months ago but, as yet, has received no response. Another participant claimed that, “Sometimes I feel more comfortable communicating with students rather than with teachers because of the barriers between us and them.”

If the opportunities for peer conversation were not possible through use the university VLE, students created their own channels of communication. One participant explained that the most important means of communication between students are forums that are moderated and established by the students themselves and so out of the supervision of the universities (most of the group supported him). Such forums have apparently existed for a long time. Again, the most popular topics of conversation on such forums were related to direct preparation for the summative examination. There was a much less focus on cooperative learning, which would aid general comprehension of the course material without specific reference to formal assessment. Hence, the two main motives for communication with other students, as noted by

most participants, were to catch up in the event of absence, and more noticeably, with the exams approaching, to make inquiries about the most useful revision material.

In place of the connectivist, Web 2.0 environment, indicated in the literature, actual communication between peers was often limited to matter-of-fact affairs, such as the time-frame of the tests and homework, rather than discussions that might enrich the educational process. Therefore, as communication tended to be over short periods, they moved to appropriate platforms to conduct such truncated discussions. This has led to the creation of private groups through social media, available via smartphone applications such as WhatsApp and Twitter. In general, students do not see the importance of communication with one another regarding the educational process, where it is still the case that “the teacher is the foundation and on the top of the pyramid”, as one student highlighted.

One student in the open question asked that DeL should “spread the spirit of co-operation among students”, indicating that some students hope for more peer-peer interaction.

With the institution

One of the benefits of DeL anticipated by the students was that their communication with administrative part of the university would be simpler and faster. However, in referring back to the reality that some online features were disabled or not functioning, students said that there was a facility permitting complaints in regard to the course, but there was no response to queries. Furthermore, one student added that, “there is not even any identification of the body responsible for receiving and processing them.” Overall, the students found the system to be vague and unclear because of this limited functionality. Another of the students said, “As I do not reside in the city where the university campus is (and indeed, is almost a thousand kilometers distant to it), I am forced sometimes to travel by airplane to solve some issues.”

However, students were still aware that when DeL worked well, it worked to shorten communication distances. One student noted “DeL enabled me to submit assignments over Blackboard, which meant that I was not required to attend the school in person to turn in work.” In fact, many of the participants enjoyed the fact that they could take part in the course and access content regardless of time or geographical location.

Resources

There is some uncertainty and confusion among the students in understanding what is meant by resources and their importance. One of the students, participating in the first year of the course, said that, “by virtue of that there are specific curricula, there is no room for the

development of other resources”. A student who was in the advanced level disagreed and explained that the only resources available for foundation term are textbooks, although the other levels feature recorded lectures with voice and image.

The expectations of students regarding the number of resources available to them and the range of media thought what they had available appears to be shaped by their institutional and cultural experiences. Students pointed out that there are few resources available except the recorded lectures on the university website. Although students are sometimes obliged to buy certain books in the curriculum, some teachers provide a summary of the material at the end of the semester, which only eliminates the usefulness of the books bought by the students. “Therefore, the different resources should be available for free on the site of the university,” suggested one of the students. One student agreed in the open question, stating that “the university must – by definition – provide all study materials for DeL electronically”.

Generally, additional material was appreciated by student although it was not expected. Students were aware that, in very rare cases, in the ‘Course Contents’ feature on Blackboard, some different files of materials had been uploaded. The students attributed this contribution to the diligence of teachers and the understanding that they must upload the materials themselves. The most important source of added value on a course is the instructor, whose contribution can be positive, as above. However, there were other staff who were less proficient in the use of DeL.

Students found recurrent technical problems; for example, in the synchronous lectures, the image can be unclear with sound preceding the picture which is particular problematic for a course where this is the only teaching resource. All the students experienced technical issues on the part of instructors; that is, they do not deal well with the technology. Participants gave anecdotal evidence regarding times when the instructors behaved unexpectedly, unaware that they were broadcasting live.

In general, students were only vaguely aware on the importance of multiple resources to enhance communication between themselves and their instructors. In the group discussion, the participants discussed the nature of the sources available to them and who provided them. They concluded that the most tangible moment of learning is almost always centered on the efforts of ‘unpacking’ lectures by the students themselves.

In the open question one student noted that the resources were not always discoverable on the platform, and that it should be “[facilitated] ... so users can reach study materials very easily”.

Status of Extramural, DeL, and Traditional Study

The students in the focus group had ambivalent attitudes towards DeL. On one hand, there was a general belief that traditional education is superior to DeL. However, upon more detailed discussion, many ways in which DeL seemed to be superior were raised. Primarily, it remains an attractive option due to certain advantages that may be unavailable in conventional education, such as flexibility and independence. In addition, students hoped that by employing technology in the right way, they could choose the learning style that suited their educational preferences - whether that style would fall under behaviourist or constructivist methods.

All the students were aware that DeL was a distinct method of delivering education and they were keen to compare it to other delivery methods. One participant noted that he “chose the new without the old” (meaning DeL rather than Extramural) because he was hoping for more communication with teachers and believed that DeL provided more quality. Another participant compared DeL to the old system used when he was a student 30 years ago: “My objective in education then was looking for a job, yet now, after retirement, I am more motivated, because that pressure no longer exists.”

One student, who had already obtained a bachelor’s degree through the DeL system and is currently enrolled in the same system in a different specialty, said that he had applied for postgraduate studies in a Masters’ Degree from the same university from which he graduated. However, the application was rejected because the university argued that the bachelor’s degree he received was inferior as it was not traditionally acquired. In view of this experience, he concluded that “DeL is more like the sale of a certificate than provision of education”.

Despite this perceived difference in status between DeL and traditional education, students were aware that, in their reality, the DeL course made significant demands upon them; in other words, they did not consider the course to be easy. One participant noted that the curricula are long and demanding. He said: “We are asked to attend 194 hours, which is more than other systems require”. According to his understanding, the DeL course was more demanding than certain other forms of education.

Nonetheless, students found that the DeL delivery method had advantages: “A strength of DeL is that it offers superior communication and multiple sources of course material and methods of learning.” A second student saw a further strength insofar as “DeL offers the possibility of return to lectures at anytime we want.” The student went on to explain that some students prefer DeL because “they do not feel embarrassed to deal with the teacher, as they

may in face-to-face interaction.” This depersonalisation was viewed positively as promoting a feeling of justice among the students, in the sense that their treatment was more equal when they anonymous.

The experience of attending lectures (see the previous sections of the present focus group findings) was discussed at length by participants. However, the facilitator was interested to discover what the nature of the experience was, how the students perceived themselves and the course, and what was required of the student when attending. One student pointed out that either attending the live lectures or viewing the recording of them had to be completed before the end of the semester to be considered as compulsory attendance. This led students to believe that, regarding attendance, they have perfect attendance and so a superior record to students in a traditional education setting. In addition, they can refer to the recorded lectures if they could not join in the live lectures. However, some participants found that DeL was not as flexible in its approach as they would wish. Another student said:

“Attendance is inevitable, but instead of being regular fixed hours in university attendance – as for conventional students - this should be in the spare time of students in DeL, taking into account their functional and family responsibilities.”

Teaching Methods

Behaviorist tradition

One of the participants distinguished different types of teaching staff:

- (1) Those who believe that students should listen, and without any interruption. Of course, possible that the student feels bored because the absence of dialogue which leads the educational process to be negative and less enjoyable.
- (2) Those who react and interact to enrich the debate and spread the positive spirit of dialogue.
- (3) Functionaries unconcerned by education outcomes: generally negative and apathetic.

The predominant type of teacher matched the first of these three categories; here, students found teachers were well meaning, but their methods were thoroughly rooted in a behaviourist style of pedagogy with which they generally instructed the students. Nonetheless, one participant explained that students expected this type of teaching, as they had been conditioned to it: “It is one way - from the teacher to us- and this is what we have learned from primary school.” However, students were aware of the pitfalls related to teaching exclusively in this paradigm, being that “a person can graduate even if they are not particularly active learners, because of [didactic teaching methods] and poor assessment.”

Whilst the students were generally comfortable with the behaviourist approach, some wished to move beyond it:

“If there were good communication and interaction between teachers and students, as well as varied methods of assessment and that encourage students to discover the knowledge of themselves, such as independent research, the benefit would be greater.”

Such positions were articulated by a minority who were cognisant that their views were not shared throughout the student body. As a participant said:

“However, when talking about teaching methods and the desire to have more than one way, it must be noted that this is dependent on the students’ goal regarding the study, which falls under two types: some students are interested in quality and have a desire to get the information most useful to them in their lives; we find others looking for certificates and passes.”

Broaching the subject of the use of didactic teaching methods brought about some of the most animated conversation in the focus group. A participant commented that some teachers might resort to a didactic method in the live lectures due to students not being physically present or because of the lack of interaction with those were present in terms of discussion during the ‘live’ session. Another student opposed this critique, stating that, “Frankly, teachers are not obliged to use all the ways of communication” and justifying his belief insofar as “it is DeL and the nature of the students in this kind of education are that they busy and they have obligations.”

However, this perspective was strongly opposed by a different student who gesticulated, saying, “I do not want to differentiate between traditional education and DeL.” According to this student, DeL and traditional education are like each other. Eager to move the conversation on from this divisive issue, another student then concluded: “education in all cases, and in any kind, is not without its difficulties.”

Students also noted the lack of diversity in teaching methods. One in the open question stated “We want diverse styles of teaching in order not to feel bored of audio lectures”. Some participants attributed the impracticality of a constructivist approach to the large size of their classes. Students reported that up to 90 students made up the body of some courses, yet attendance did not exceed 15-20 in live lectures.

There was a tension between participants’ desire to experience a more modern form of education and concern about the potential difficulties that hindered their effective participation. The students stated that they were not sufficiently prepared at this stage of study

to activate different learning approaches, such as dialogues, problem-solving or critical thinking. Again, these problems stemmed from the didactic approach they have been conditioned to expect from their previous education. However, they believe that although another teaching approach was beneficial, a more constructivist approach should be postponed until the postgraduate stage of study. In regard to conducting personalised, individual research, there was a general impression among students that they do not have the ability to access the right knowledge. One student commented that, “Such stuff is to be decided by the university whose teachers study for four additional years; they understand the best possible benefit for the students, instead of wasting our time in the search for information”.

In order to activate multiple teaching methods, study materials must utilise different resources, although the current curriculum design is limited to a single source. Again, such a situation promotes the adoption of behaviourism and opposes constructivism. The large number of modules, many of which are not related to the students’ main subject, is another obstacle that prevents the activation of multiple ways of learning. One of the students explained that, “my subject of study is accounting, yet I am required to study some Arabic and religious courses”.

A student agreed that the didactic method was a problem in the open-ended question of the questionnaire, stating that: “[we must] [e]ncourage teachers to be more interactive during the lectures, as many of them just rely on the style of diction”.

Experience of instructors

When debate turned to the topic of the instructors, one student stated that, “We can learn from the non-certified.” At this point, another speaker intervened, pointing both hands to emphasise, as he spoke, that: “Educational attainment must be systematic and carefully considered and should be carried out by a qualified teacher.” He added that: “Without direction, education can be blind, like reading from any old book”. Students were found to look upon their teacher as a leader rather than a facilitator, in accordance with Hofstede’s ‘uncertainty avoidance’. Nonetheless, the archetype of the teacher retains cultural importance, and one of the most resounding points made was that: “In educational life one may meet some people (i.e., teachers) who make such an impact on ordering one’s development they cannot be forgotten.” Some of the other participants’ present nodded their heads in agreement, while one was moved to add, “or even their words too.”

In returning to the topic of requiring guidance from teachers, one student raised his pen to say:

By searching on the Internet, you can find many ways to learn, but online videos have downsides in their difficulties of communication and the viewer's lack of knowledge about the qualifications of the maker of the video. Contrary to this, systematic education guarantees a specialist teacher.

Technology and Teaching

It was notable that one student stated his opinion that instructors appeared not to differentiate between teaching in the classroom and in DeL. He attributed this tendency to their working only part-time in DeL whilst coming from traditional universities. Another speaker added: "Or they are retirees from normal university education, I believe that they have experience in their subjects, but they lack experience in the philosophy of distance education-based technology."

The extent to which restricted use of technology was deliberate or accidental was then debated. One student noted that some teachers intentionally stop the chat feature to prevent anyone from interrupting them when they present the lectures. Another speaker then added:

"The reason for the closure of chat is the nature of some of the students and their queries and questions that focused on matters unrelated to the topic of the lecture. Many search only for facilitation of the exam process and make demands to determine the parts of the curriculum to be examined. In addition, there is disruption as many hold side talks between themselves."

The provision by teachers of audio exclusively, and the refusal to use video, is regarded as a fundamental obstacle preventing the enhancement of teaching methods. Students stressed the necessity of activating the video properly to improve communication between teachers and students, "especially for a student who learns through visual communication."

Curriculum development

Students claimed that the curricula are prescriptive in their content, which limits the participation rate of students in analysis, synthesis and teamwork. One student stated: "I think that there is no significant development of the curriculum, as it does not change. We note the persistence of some errors that have not been corrected, though present over many years."

Another student confirmed that, "It is old; evidently students are sometimes required to return to recorded lectures that come from the first batch i.e. six years ago."

In the discussion about programme development in general, students pointed out that although it constitutes a remarkable development, it has been limited to the technical side:

Regarding teaching methods and curriculum, they are still lagging behind, which receives more importance from the university. Therefore, problems that hinder the development of DeL are on the human side, not the technical, and the issue is the teachers.

A student stated in the open question that:

The development of the programme by the university is mainly a formality, such as changing the design or colours of the website and posting general information about the accessing of resources and tools. There is no real improvement of resources and study materials that would help the student.

Student recommendations about enhancements regarding teaching methods

At the facilitator's behest, students produced a list of the steps they believed would be required to increase the effectiveness of instructors' performance:

1. Improving staff training.
2. Provision of an assistant to instructors during the live lectures – in particular, regarding technology.
3. Assigning a reasonable, limited number of students to the virtual classroom, which can help the instructor communicate with students and assume control of the lecture.
4. To encourage students to learn, students must be made aware of the importance of the work by providing them with a mechanism that shows their progress in academic attainment.

Feedback and Assessment

There is a general agreement amongst students that although there is some homework, there is no feedback from instructors. Students noted that a facility for feedback exists, as there is an icon in an application, but that it is not used at all. This is problematic because, although the assessment relies on the final exam, it assumes prior feedback meaning that the students themselves correct mistakes and learn from them. However, "the reality is that we receive feedback in grades only", as one of the speakers commented. The staff lack motivation to provide students with practice to prepare them for the final tests because they wish for questions not to be revealed, so that they can be reused again from previous years.

The fact remains that most of the assessment depends on the final examination, making students less motivated to communicate with the instructor during the semester. If there were different evaluation methods such as research and short seminars, then the need for communication with the instructor would be underlined. Currently, students stated that the level of communication with instructors was about 20% of what is required.

There is a common feeling amongst students regarding this weak encouragement on the part of staff that this may be due to the lack of homework and tasks that would require supplying feedback to students. One of the participants noted, that “they do not respond to the basics so how about some encouragement?” Another participant, whose beliefs about motivation were quite negative, added that “if there was a desire to encourage, university must send alert messages to students warning them about performance, and this does not exist at all.” However, another student believed that in this new form of education, the onus was upon the students to provide themselves with motivation to study. This student revealed that they maintained discipline by rewarding themselves every time they completed a reading or learned something new.

Technical support

Students are generally satisfied in regard to the IT problems they face because the availability of the call center which responds rapidly with technical solutions, such as downloading applications and programmes. However, with opening times of 8:00 am to 8:00 pm, only on weekdays, students pointed out that they actually needed to access it 24/7, taking into account the circumstances of the students who have work obligations.

Students did not generally perceive there to be a great need for training in technical support, due to the fact that SA keeps up with global developments in technology. However, they did not deny that they might encounter some difficulties, which can often be solved through communication with technical support. At the same time, the students stressed that no training or information has been provided to guide them through the basics of the gateway. Perhaps if there were, it would prove better than frequent reference for technical support.

Although the focus groups generally revealed that the experiences of DeL for the two cohorts were very similar, the interviews showed that there is variation in the issue of technical support between the two universities. Hence, where University A students showed their general satisfaction with it, University B students pointed out that its responsiveness is poor, giving the example of “Not responding to communication.”

Cost

In general, the students perceive the fees to be inexpensive and affordable, but still not equal to the service provided, “not even a quarter of what we pay”, as a participant underlined. They note everything (i.e. all the assessment of marks) in the final exam, which consists of objective, multiple-choice questions marked electronically. A degree of resentment is apparent when students compare their DeL course to traditional one: “Traditional students in the public universities do not even have to pay - indeed, they receive an allowance - yet they are a more expensive burden compared to the DeL students, who do not need buildings or equipment.” DeL students were aware that they were not a burden to the university because of the limited number of lecturers and large numbers of students per lecture - up to 50 students per lecture were reported.

A point was raised during the interview that, in general, many DeL students think that, upon joining the programme, they are assured to get the certificate. Another interviewee attributed the above to the fact that fees apply to join this kind of study which, again, is contrary to what occurs in the traditional university. A further point was raised regarding private universities existing in SA, being that their fees more much higher than for DeL. A discussion followed concerning the cost of education, and whether this made students customers and not stakeholders. Another issue was raised when one participant, apparently with the support of the majority, said that as the student is not obliged to physically attend a DeL classroom, such courses are less valued in society.

Students' summary of Barriers and solutions in DeL

To complement the less structured data gathered in the focus discussion, students were asked to summarise their perceptions about the barriers reducing the quality of their DeL experience and the solutions to these issues. Rather than subjective experiences of the process they held, this allowed the creation of a summary of their views and encouraged them to reflect upon the ‘big picture’ of quality in DeL. In many respects, the list matches the themes explored above; however, some additional elements, pertinent to the research questions, were identified in this process.

Barriers to successful DeL

1. The sense of isolation and the feeling of not belonging.

2. Misuse of technology during lectures by students, whether disturbing the teacher or having side conversations among themselves.
3. The presence of non-serious students who only want the degree certificate, which may affect communication in regard to the learning process.
4. The weakness of the deployment of human resources.
5. No differentiation between full-time students and students of DeL, who often have work and family commitments.
6. Poor communication between the teacher and student.
7. Sub-optimal use of the possibilities afforded by technology to encourage and promote learning.
8. Varying capacity of instructors in dealing with the technology, particularly evident during real time engagements.

Solutions allowing for enhancement of quality in DeL

1. Continuous updates of the curriculum.
2. Update the academic portal and other support services as required, including the requirement for attractive and user-friendly design.
3. Diversify teaching methods for teachers and reduce the use of didacticism.
4. Take advantage of all the possibilities available of the technical infrastructure (students believe that the exploitation of it does not reach 50%) despite its potential.
5. Universities should take serious steps to improve the reputation of DeL across society; for example, through conducting conferences and research, and listening to the views of students through the programme evaluation at the end of each semester.
6. Allocate certain times during the semester for direct meeting with the instructors.
7. Establishment of workshops and training courses for those who wish to develop their skills technologically.
8. Diversify the methods of assessment and do not confine assessment to the ultimate exam.
9. Document student attendance of synchronous lectures throughout the university year and to add it to the academic record to increase the credibility of the certificate.

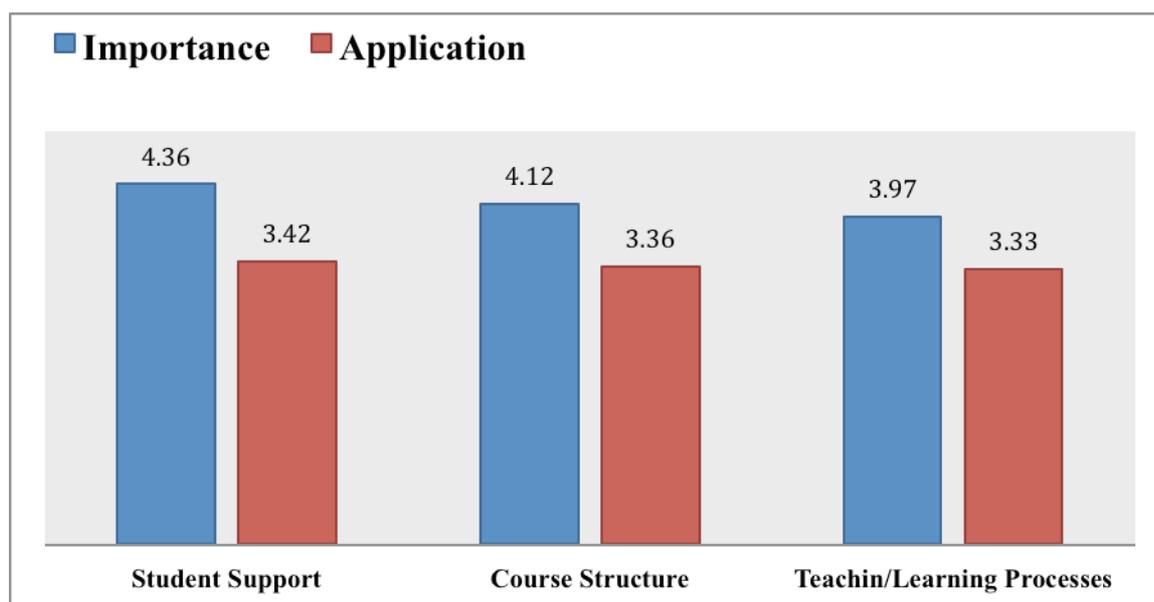
10. Connect the attendance for synchronous lectures with those eligible to take the final test in order to know who is committed.
11. Link study with real life, such as asking students to conduct applied research in the field of their work.
12. Curricula should focus on the specialised subject selected by the student, while removal of extraneous modules may contribute to the reduction of the study period from four to three years.
13. Not to expand the admission beyond a cohort that would adversely affect the quality of education.
14. When communicating with technical support, students must be given evidence about what they have complained.
15. Subjects should be spread across the academic year, ending them at different times to avoid pressure of all exams being at one time.
16. Due to the large number of students, it may be worth allowing private discussion and dialogue in at least one lecture per week to enable students to evaluate what they have learned.

5.3 Summary of quantitative and qualitative findings

Regarding the quantitative data, the figure below compares the students' perceptions of importance and application in the three dimensions considered in the study. The most sizable difference is between the level of importance and the level of application, which ranges from 0.94 (in Student Support) to 0.64 (in Teaching/Learning Processes). The next largest variation is between the perceived levels of importance, where the highest level was 4.36 (in Student Support) and the lowest was 3.97 (in Teaching/Learning Processes), a variation of 0.39. There was less of a discrepancy in the perceived levels of applications, where the maximum variation was only 0.09. According to the Likert classification used in the present study the only one to be 'very important' was importance of the 'Student Support' dimension.

Regarding the application of the standards, overall it was said that students were neutral regarding the application across two of the dimensions; they neither agreed nor disagreed they were present in 'Course Structure' and 'Teaching/Learning Process'. However, interestingly, the students slightly agreed that 'Student Support' was present. This could be related to the students' satisfaction with the technical infrastructure of the courses.

Figure 5.1: Comparison of Importance and Application in the Three Dimensions



The table below shows where significant differences in responses occur between different demographic groups in the study. It is clear that Age is not a factor, and Academic Year is only significant for first years in regard to Student Support. ICT Skills made more of a difference, with differences between skilled and beginners in the importance of Teaching/Learning and between skilled and intermediate versus beginner in the application of Teaching/Learning. Gender showed significant differences across a number of categories. This is discussed in Section 6.1 below.

Table 5.22: Significant and not Significant Differences of all Variables

Variables	Teaching/Learning		Course Structure		Student Support	
	Importance	Application	Importance	Application	Importance	Application
Gender (Male, Female)	(SD) in favour of Female	(SD) in favour of Female	(SD) in favour of Female	(NS)	(SD) in favour of Female	(NS)
Age (22 or Less, 23-30, 31-40, over 40)	(NS)	(NS)	(NS)	(NS)	(NS)	(NS)
Academic Year (First, Second, Third, Forth)	(NS)	(NS)	(NS)	(NS)	(SD) in favour of those who are in First year	(NS)
ICT Skills (Beginner, Intermediate, Skilled)	(SD) in favour of those who rated themselves as skilled versus those who rated themselves as beginner	(SD) in favour of those who rated themselves as skilled and intermediate versus those who rated themselves as beginner	(NS)	(NS)	(NS)	(NS)

Note: (NS)= not significant, (SD)= significant differences

In terms of the qualitative data, the most remarkable aspect is undoubtedly that the views of the students of the two institutions were very similar, and many commonalities were found in the responses. The only differences found were procedural and administrative, rather than relating to the students' experience of DeL. For example, the interviews showed that there is a difference in the assessment between the two universities, being that IMU only scores on the final exam while KAU has divided it into 30% for attendance and homework and 70% for the final exam. The only other significant difference found was relating to IT support (as detailed in Section 5.2.8).

Students took much of the technological infrastructure surrounding their courses for granted. The main themes emerging from these focus groups were pedagogical and focused around the activities of the instructors. To some extent, students were disappointed with the service they received. Despite the keenness of universities to conduct live lectures, the course material (curriculum) is comprised of ready-made, fit-to-template content. For example, most of the lectures are pre-recorded and uploaded at the beginning of academic term. However, not all students object to this method of delivery and many students learn by transcribing this pre-recorded content. This behaviorist-didactic instructional model is one that they have been raised to expect; on reflection, the prospect of a more independent and constructivist model concerns them. A second main issue is regarding assessment, although the students' concerns were perhaps more closely linked to their anxieties about passing the course they were sitting, rather than a desire to see a change in the methods used.

Chapter 6. Discussion

This chapter begins to construct a social-cultural model aiming to capture the essence of the students' perceptions that were described in the previous chapter. In the first section of the present chapter, the discussion will initially be driven by the findings of the questionnaire and then subsequently the focus group. Where appropriate, these results have been triangulated in reference to each other, and links have been made to the concepts established in the literature review. The subsequent sections are anchored in theory and will proceed primarily from the conceptual, cross-referencing the framework established in the literature review with the results of the fieldwork. The order is therefore first an *overview of the findings* showing what was found by the study, and then a *reflection* upon this data which continues the process of interpreting, illustrating and interrogating the findings. The third section relates this reflection to the *fundamental concepts* identified in the study; of technology, quality, (pedagogical) culture and perceptions.

6.1 Overview of Study Findings

This section considers the demographic variables of the study and their correlation with students' perceptions about both the importance and application of quality standards in DeL, before looking at the motivations of the DeL learners. It then proceeds to offer a sustained analysis of the results of the questionnaire (quantitative aspect), before discussing the results of the focus groups (qualitative aspect). This approach follows the order of the sections as they appeared in the questionnaire.

6.1.1 Correlation of Variables

This part of the questionnaire sought to shed light on the factors that could shape the perceptions of Saudi students towards quality of DeL in both its importance and application. The demographics of the students surveyed were broadly similar to the typical characteristics of a DeL learner, as identified by Moore and Kearsley (2012).

Table 5.23 (in the previous section) shows the demographic data: gender, age, academic year and self-evaluated ICT skills. The category of age was the only one of these demographics showing no significant differences. These findings demonstrate that there has not been a marked change in attitudes to pedagogy in SA because different generations hold similar views about what constitutes quality and how it has been applied.

Academic Year was only a factor in relation to the importance of *student support*, with first year students in the demographic. This finding can be attributed to the new experience in which the students were involved. They are more likely to come across new problems. They are more likely to have fresh memories of certain things surveyed in this dimension such as pre-sessional information.

Being 'skilled' in ICT skills corresponds to attributing more importance to *teaching and learning* items. These students appear more demanding in this respect and they can therefore be said to be more aware of other aspects of the course. We might consider that expertise in this area indicates more general skills and a higher level of autonomy. In conclusion, they may turn out to be more demanding consumers of other aspects of DeL.

The results of the study indicate that gender correlates with a significant difference in four of the six dimensional ratings (in all dimensions of importance and only in the Teaching/Learning dimension in the application). In each of these dimensions, female students gave higher scores to the items. This follows the findings of other studies, such as Jung (2012 b), reporting that female students are more concerned by quality.

This phenomenon is certainly worthy of further research as it is certainly the case that unique cultural barriers exist in SA. However, there is a global trend of female students responding to instruments like these with higher expectations (ibid). Al Harthi (2005) has shown how female Arabic students have different expectations about their experience of DeL, and this must feed into their beliefs. Other notable studies of the role of female students in DeL include: Al alharteh and McBride (2015); El-Abbasy et al. (2015). As discussed in Section 2.1, the only stage at which co-educational instruction takes place in SA is in DeL, and many of the female students may find this to be a challenging environment.

6.1.2 Motivations of DeL learners

The most important motivating factor for students studying DeL was the desire to acquire the qualification on offer. Attainment of this short-term goal is widely recognised as the primary motivation for DeL learners (Qureshi et al., 2002; Halsne and Gatta, 2002; Almaiql, 2014).

The next set of factors motivating learners in DeL are those relating to the expected consequences of taking the course one where the qualification was attained, including *social status* and *employment prospects*. The focus group found that both social status and employment prospects motivated a certain number of learners. One learner admitted that, "For me, it is both", indicating that different sets of these factors may co-exist in different ways in

different learners. This disagreed with Almiqal (2014), who placed social motivations below economic ones.

The factors that have the least pull for potential DeL learners were *combining study and work*, and *grades not allowing other education to be accessed*. It is hardly surprising that these two qualifying, pre-sessional factors, scored lower marks given the assessment criteria on the survey. Students who did not combine work and study tended to disagree with the first item, and those who had good enough grades to have accessed other study did so with the second. The rankings of the responses to the questionnaire, can thus be seen to reflect a cultural factor observed in SA; namely, that the degree itself, and its associated prestige, is preferred as a motivating factor, rather than the actual consequences of the degree in terms of producing employment.

6.1.3 Students' Perceptions of Importance and Application from the Questionnaire

This section moves sequentially through the dimensions considered in the study, noting key aspects of the findings. It hence provides a clearer and more guided summary of the data than the previous chapter, which was a more in-depth analysis.

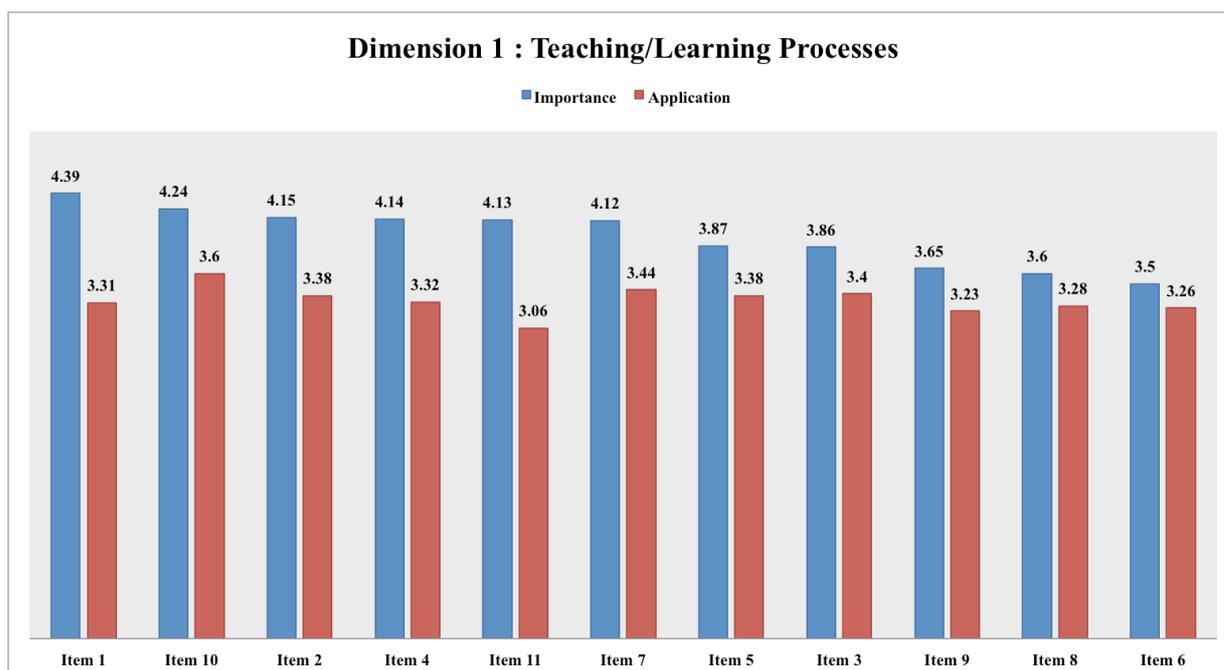
Dimension 1 – Teaching and Learning Processes

This dimension had the lowest overall importance ascribed to it; this may be considered surprising, as teaching and learning constitute the essence of the educational experience. The items in this list had the largest variation amongst all the dimensions. Moreover, the reported scores for application were lower than those of importance. This gap was to be expected, as each of the items in the study are derived from standards that are desirable in DeL; hence, they should all score highly on 'importance'. Conversely, students found their application not to be particularly noticeable or unnoticeable in general. This means that the results were distributed in bell-curves with a centre between slightly noticing of their application and not particularly noticing their application, so indicating that the students were lukewarm about their presence.

The bar chart below shows the degree of application (red) of the standards in this dimension compared to the ranked importance (blue) attributed to the standard by the students. Items 1 and 11 were the only two items with a difference between these dimensions of more than

1.00. The first of these, item 1, measures the types of interaction with faculty available on the course, while the second, item 11, concerns feedback and motivation.

Figure 6.1: Dimension 1 - Teaching and Learning, Comparison of Importance and Application



An interesting comparison can be made between items 1 and 2 in the chart above, which shows that although, in broad terms, both are equally present for the students, they value item 1 (contact with the teacher) more highly than item 2 (contact with their peers). This ties in with the cultural context of the survey which, as noted in Chapter 3, is characterised by a high power distance and a tradition of respecting the authority of scholarly heroes, whose modern avatars are the teachers. The data from the focus group supported the above, with several students reporting that they considered the teacher to be the most vital part of the course: “the foundation and the top of the pyramid”. However, it is interesting to note that the students reported that their communication with the teacher had been disappointing in some respects, while their communications with their peers had been one aspect of the course they found particularly helpful in many aspects. Nonetheless, these positive interactions with their peers on the course – a perfect example of how connectivism imagines DeL to work – were not enough to counteract their culturally established preference for top-down learning from their course instructor. It was clear from the focus group that students regarded email and message boards as opportunities to interact, and their responses to Item 7 on this subject were similar to those for 1 and 2.

The three items that refer to feedback in the results give very different findings. As mentioned above, Item 11 shows a large gap between student preferences and the application they found for the standard. Of all the standards about which students were surveyed, this was the one

most focused on motivation and support of the student as an individual. Again, this finding correlates with a common theme in the focus groups; namely, that students were often scathing about the lack of support given, stating that “They do not respond to the basics, so how about some encouragement?”

Items 9, 8, and 6 relate to the core of the teaching process – the learning theories that saturate academic discourse about education – which were given the lowest importance by the learners themselves. This phenomenon may have several causes. Whilst learners are less likely to be self-reflective about complex concepts they may not have encountered, there undoubtedly remains a strong cultural tradition of didacticism in SA. Hence, learners are conditioned to expect a certain approach to learning and even to associate this approach with quality.

Dimension 2 – Course Structure

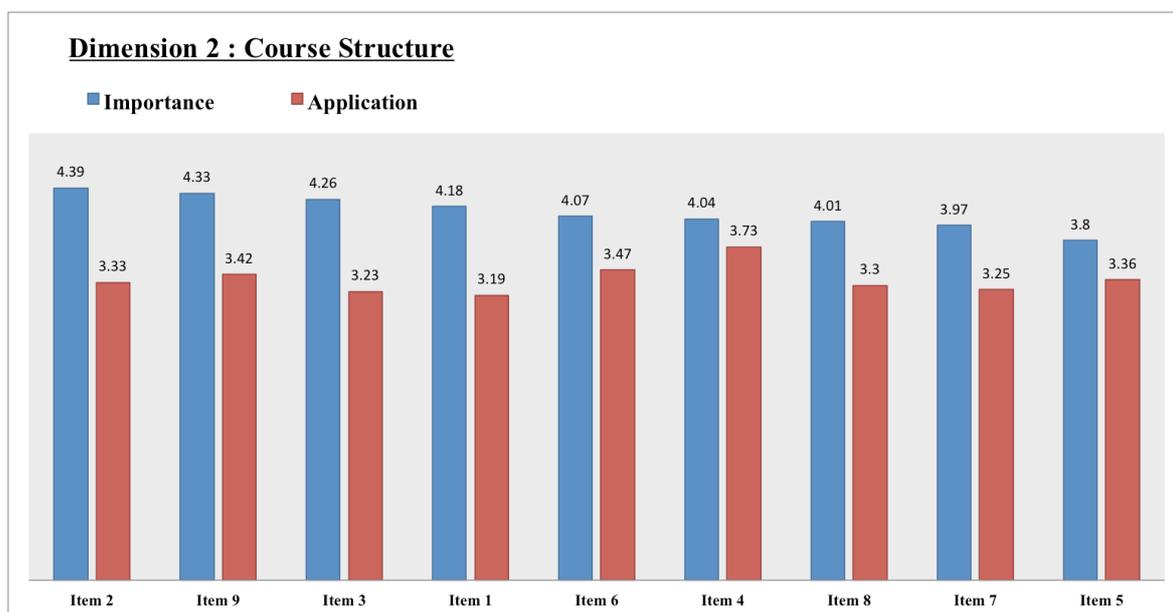
Students found this dimension to be the second most important and second most noticeable in application. Whilst some items in teaching and learning came close to being of neutral importance, all the items here were at least somewhat important. Again, in application, the items considered here were not viewed as being so prevalent as their level of importance may make us assume or wish them to be.

The bar chart below shows a comparison between the degree of application (red) of the standards in this dimension, to the ranked importance (blue) attributed to the standard by the students. A clear pattern can be seen in this dimension insofar as, amongst the items to which the students attribute importance, only two are found to be applied only somewhat. These items relate to resources being both sufficiently available (item 2) and constantly updated (item 3). The focus groups confirmed this desire because students expected the DeL platforms’ features to be more widely used and for there to be more supplementary material made available to them, beyond the basics of the course. Item 8 also asked about resources, showing that a variety of resources was not as desired by students, but present at the same levels as Items 1 and 2 showed.

Although we might expect students to lack the ability to judge item 9 relating to continuous improvement, there was much anecdotal evidence raised in the focus groups demonstrating how this standard was not met. Moreover, there was evidence that the students were displeased by what they took to be inertia amongst course leaders, particularly regarding course material where, “some errors ... have not been corrected, though present over many years”. A student with experience of Western universities mentioned in the open question that the Saudi system seemed less modern in its approach and that instructors favored tradition

over change. Similarly, Item 7, asked about institutional promotion of QA in course design, but was considered less important.

Figure 6.2: Dimension 2 - Course Structure, Comparison of Importance and Application



DeL students were also found to have solicited information about the course from friends and family who had sat it before. Hence, they expressed their surprise to find that the course had not changed since “the first batch i.e. six years ago”. More positively, regarding technology, students were more satisfied by the development of the course, as it is the “human side” they took to be lagging behind other elements. As Section 3.5 noted, policy interventions in DeL in SA have tended to focus on the technical side and the provision of infrastructure, rather than furnishing it with information.

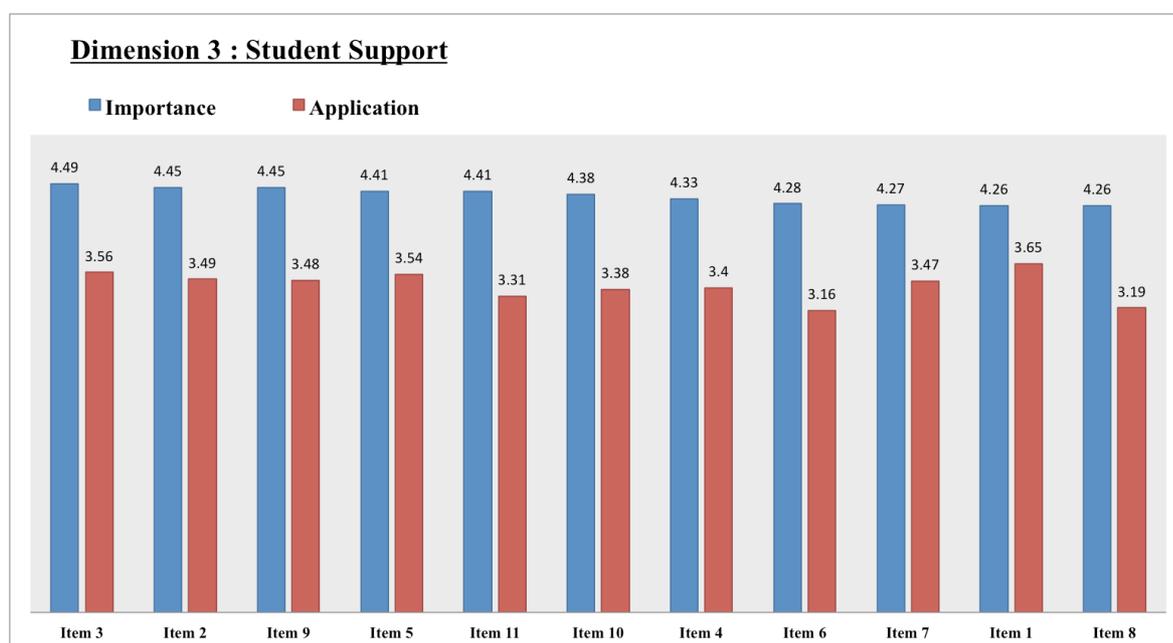
Item 1, that the students received adequate pre-sessional information, was also found to be important for students in the focus groups. Some students felt that DeL was their only option and that they were compelled to take it if they wanted to move forward with their studies. Other students had the opinion that there was very little guidance about what they could expect from their involvement in the course. Items 4, 5, and 6 also asked about information. Item 4 (a clear statement of what the learner may achieve) was found to be the most prevalent, and had the shortest gap in the dimension between provision and importance. Item 5 was neither desired nor present in the quantity the others were, indicating that students perhaps prefer to organise their own time in DeL. Only a slightly larger gap was found between clarity in the grading policy and the desire for it to be clear (Item 6).

Dimension 3 – Student Support

This was found to be the most important dimension to be provided, and was the one that students found to be present in application the most. Across both categories, it received higher means than the others and attained ‘very important’ status for desirability.

The importance ascribed to this dimension reflects the viewpoint of the students, whose daily contact with the technological framework required to make the DeL course operate gives them a high degree of sensitivity to its workings. Whilst some of the more abstract standards connected to teaching may be somewhat obtuse to a student, the more easily graspable and short-term standards in this category were immediately comprehensible to them.

Figure 6.3: Dimension 3 - Student Support, Comparison of Importance and Application



The items within the dimension of student support were universally considered important for students; the lowest rated one would have ranked second in Dimension 1 and third in Dimension 2. According to the questionnaire responses, they also constituted a higher mean presence of these dimensions, although some items did have low scores.

When ranked by importance, the top items can be categorised into two groups: technical support (3, 2, 5, 4, 7), and complaints (9, 10). When students in the focus groups were asked about technical support, the general theme to emerge was the need for technical support for staff, whom they often saw as misusing or failing to maximise the usefulness of the technology: “closure of chat” ... “refusal to use video” ... “[not] knowing+ how the microphone works”. However, when the students faced problems the technical support they encountered was often judged to be good.

They also experienced difficulties in making complaints: “not even identification of the body responsible for them”, and slow response times. However, students attributed a great deal of importance to being able to access to figures in authority to rectify emerging problems, while the lack of clear structure in DeL caused them concern. These concerns map on to Hofstede’s cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance.

Items 6 and 8 were the least present as items relating to personal support. Students found that they lacked the degree of contact with the institution they both wanted and expected; in their view, there was ultimately no-one who was responsible for them on a personal level. This perspective may be partly attributed to the large size of the classes in the university. Whilst in the literature review the ideal number was taken to range from 8 students (Goodyear et al., 2001) to 25 students (Bishop, 2000), the students surveyed in the focus group reported being in class sizes of almost one hundred! As the literature review noted, there can be feeling amongst administrators that the marginal cost of adding an extra student to a DeL course is almost nothing, therefore it is a tempting to universities to recruit larger cohorts. As Tomei (2006) argued, the ideal class size in DeL is about 2/3 of a traditional class. In reality, the DeL learner is not always the independent and self-motivated figure imagined by the course designer. Meanwhile, students’ feeling of isolation can lead them to seek extra contact and information from the institution. Such an approach on the part of students often overwhelms instructors, especially those who feel that they are not adequately compensated for the additional demands that a DeL course places upon them.

The student support Item 1, relating to introductory information about netiquette was found to be present (at 3.65, the most present) but not a major concern, perhaps showing how practiced in technology the students are. Item 11, that *efforts are made to engage students with the programme and institution* was demanded by students but neutrally present, indicating a weakness in encouraging engagement.

6.1.4 Strong and Weak Aspects then Barriers and Enhancements arising from the Focus Groups

Our analysis now moves on to the qualitative findings of the focus group and the open question. This section follows the research questions and presents a summary of how students perceived the strong and weak aspects of DeL. It then proceeds to consider potential improvements to their DeL experience, both in terms of the removal of barriers and of positive enhancements.

Strengths

The cost of the course was found to be low; even though this was considered unfair when compared to the free provision of traditional HE courses, it was itself still considered to be cheap. Students also mentioned concepts such as lifelong learning, which do not have a long history in SA, with the growth of DeL being seen as the basis of this desirable new idea. In addition, simply by creating another pathway to education, DeL offers a new choice for Saudi learners.

Learners who learnt out of choice rather than necessity tended to feel a sense of freedom in the DeL environment. Moreover, students enjoyed live lectures when they were available, particularly if visual demonstrations were offered as well as audio feed.

The students' solutions to some of the problems they experienced with DeL have become strengths in themselves, even if they had not been intentionally developed as such. For example, the sense of community and the sharing of experiences about the nature of DeL courses were factors that motivated many learners to approach DeL for the first time. Similar communities were formed by students on social media platforms offering each other support, particularly in exam periods.

The communications skills demanded by DeL were appreciated by a few students, who sometimes agreed that their verbal and written abilities were being both tested and improved by the courses. From students' descriptions of their experiences, it is clear there were moments in which their critical thinking skills were engaged and these instances were generally considered enjoyable. Moreover, communication did not only proceed upwards towards the teacher, but took place in the ways noted in the present study; that is, student-student, student-teacher and student-technology, with the latter being obviously distinctive to DeL. In the Arabic world, the ingrained cultural respect for teachers has been satisfied by the structure of the teacher led sessions in the DeL courses, while some students, who had an idealised view of the teachers, enjoyed these communications.

Communication with the teacher online, rather than face-to-face, was considered a major benefit by some students who, in some cases, preferred not to be identified individually in their communications. In other situations, this method of delivery is more satisfying for participants due to the cultural mores of SA in which certain interactions are restricted. Although in some cases, their view reflected disappointment with reality, the apparent ease of communication between student and institution on the educational platforms was considered a positive for the students participating in this study.

One undoubted strength of DeL was its capacity to reduce the need to travel in some cases, allowing students to submit electronically and from a distance. Students noticed that electronic platforms had the capability of offering them a far wider range of resources than they could access by traditional means. Students were hence pleased when teachers were diligent and used this facility. They also noted the capacity of the technology to cater to a wide range of learning styles and offer many different modes of learning. The permanence and ‘revisability’ of the resources entails that students can return to them as often and whenever they chose to.

The general technological standard was found to be high, and students were aware that many of the issues which formed barriers were on the side of the users and providers rather than the technological platforms: “The human side, not the technical”. When issues occurred, technical support was found to be quick and the students felt the level of technology used required was reasonable.

Although it is undoubtedly the case that many students expect their ‘hands to be held’ and be walked through their study with close supervision and instruction, such modes do not characterise the skill-set required for the global economy. Here, one of the students surveyed was keen to emphasise how DeL led to self-motivation and discipline being cultivated.

Weaknesses

Students reported there to be a significant drop out rate in DeL courses, some of which was attributed to the lack of pre-session information. Such a lack means that students do not know what they are signing-up for and are disappointed by the reality of the course. DeL can appear to be the only alternative, rather than a choice from many forms of HE.

Communication with and from teachers was a problem for many DeL learners. Students were frustrated by technology not being used properly by staff, who make errors with microphones and video cameras. Synchronous lectures were particularly prone to technical errors, so preventing effective communication. They also mentioned a problem with features of the platform being disabled, so students see buttons representing features they would like to use, but are unable to access the features. Students often had to create their own forums to discuss the course content, as none were provided for them.

In contrast to traditional study, the relatively lowly status of the DeL degree is a serious issue that has been raised through the literature review; this was also found to be an issue in the focus groups. One student reported that his previous DeL degrees were not considered

sufficient for him to enter traditional HE and that he was forced to continue DeL separately rather than integrating with a traditional university. The large group size led to other communications problems, such as the overuse of peer-peer chat facilities, which would ‘drown out’ the signal from the teachers.

As mentioned by the focus group, students are aware that DeL courses are not being updated as regularly as they would expect. DeL students are also experiencing a lack of encouragement and do not feel that they are being adequately supported as they pass through the course. Instead, they feel as if they are, individually, just another student to the instructors, rather than receiving individual attention.

Barriers

The high drop out rate in DeL is universal (Tait and O’Rourke, 2014), but Asian countries may be seen as having an even higher rate than the West – at 50%, twice as high (Pierrakeas et al., 2004). Lack of information before the session and the absence of a strategy to support learners have contributed to the exacerbation of the problem. Although social justice is an important policy aim, it is watered down by the drop out rate, which can disproportionately affect marginalised students. For example, one student was forced to travel to the university campus, over 1000km away, to resolve certain problems. These types of demands seriously detract from the rationale of allowing students who must remain at a distance to participate in HE. Flexibility should be a basic principle of DeL (Moore and Kearsley, 2012; Guri-Rosenblit, 2014), but there are institutional demands – such as watching a pre-recorded lecture at a certain time – which go against this fundamental tenet. Although the cost of DeL is low, it is still higher than that of free traditional HE, which again obstructs the attainment of social justice.

The culture in SA associated with the assessment style of DeL has led to students focusing on examination procedures or techniques, rather than the substance of learning the course content and participating in the learning experience. Hence, students want to speak to staff “one or two weeks before the test” with a specific view to getting information about the assessment. Again, passing the course is taken to be the final ‘end’ of the process, entailing that students do not have a holistic view of their learning. Most students were less willing to cooperate on tasks that had no direct bearing upon the summative assessment. They were also concerned about the level of attendance they were forced to endure for each course, believing it to be excessive.

We could thus conclude that requesting more input from staff in terms of communication with students, and via more channels, is a common student proposal to enhance quality. However, if the underlying problem is that staff do not have the time, or are unwilling to spend the time due to the low level of reward they receive, then proposing new dialogues is unlikely to fix the problem. Generally, staff who work in DeL feel they are undertrained and under-rewarded in that medium and, much like the students, have more respect for traditional HE. This may account for the fact that instructors in DeL tend to be older or semi-retired. In addition, many are recruited from traditional HE and not trained in the mores of DeL. Human resource management in DeL is generally weak and there is not sufficient specialist capacity to rectify this in the short term because it is a longer-term project.

Another problem is the feelings of isolation that DeL learners may suffer, especially if platforms are not developed offering web2.0 functionality that enables ‘bottom-up’ user-generated communication.

Enhancements

Students believe that existing technology is already far more advanced than the DeL platforms show and that the move to more ‘Web 2.0’ content will improve the quality of DeL courses. They see this change as perhaps happening slowly, but it is there nevertheless. Moreover, there is no lack of technical investment and support for new technologies in SA; again, this offers an opportunity for such technology to be used in the right way.

Such an integration of two-way communication technology would resolve one of the major problems experienced by students, which was the lack of face-to-face contact with teachers. The demand for more one-to-one contact to tackle common issues would be largely met if there were a wider range of tools available for teachers to use consistently to communicate with students. Most of the communications that students managed to create using extra-institutional sources, such as Whats-App lists and forums, tended to concentrate on narrow issues, such as time schedules and exam content. If these spaces were provided by the institution and furnished with suitable guidance, then they could become more valuable for the general educational experience of students.

Students wanted clarity about the resources they required. They needed to know what they would be provided with on the platform, distinct from what they needed to seek out themselves.

With regard to the low status sometimes bestowed upon DeL, and the scepticism the public has about its qualifications, students believe that DeL should become more like traditional HE, with conferences and research taking place rather than simply being an area for large cohort teaching. The lowly reputation of DeL has not only been attributed to the wider society outside of the course, but also to some of the participants on the course. Students wished for their attendance to be more closely monitored, entailing that students could not pass without viewing all of the materials. There was also a general disquiet in the focus groups about students whose attitude was that the fee they paid entitled them to the qualification without their putting much effort in. In acting in such a way, students could observe that their peers devalued their eventual degree. If assessment methods were more diverse, students would be less likely to concentrate only on passing the end-of-course assessment and so participate in the whole course.

The DeL curricula were also considered to be too fixed or 'set' and therefore too hard to customise. Students did not like to have to sit modules in which they were not interested and could not see the value of. The curricula were considered hermetic, while some students said they would rather have the topics studied related to 'real life' uses rather than in the abstract.

Overall, respondents were found to value some aspects of their DeL experience, yet there were many areas in which students were clearly not satisfied. These aspects fall across several categories. Some demand remedies from the institution, others from teaching staff, while some need to come from the students themselves. Many of these issues derive the cultural expectations of the students surveyed. In addition, the rush to adopt DeL, in a nation with relative inexperience of dealing with this type of learning in HE institutions has further complicated the situation.

6.2 Reflections upon the Questionnaire and Focus Group Findings

This section moves beyond an analysis of the data generated in the study to interpreting, illustrating and interrogating the findings. To do so, we have situated and contextualised the results of the study with reference to other key studies in the area, along with the theoretical framework informing the DeL research.

The results of the study show that Saudi students hold mildly favourable to favourable perceptions regarding the importance of quality standards in DeL. However, they are less certain these standards have been applied in practice.

In general, the two focus group interviews corroborate the results of the questionnaire, but also provide some in-depth additions. Nevertheless, inconsistencies and anomalies were noted in some respects, and these will be highlighted in the subsequent discussion where they are relevant.

The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of students regarding quality standards in their DeL course in two respects: firstly, the importance of this standard; and secondly the application of this standard. Our research then proceeded to identify what students believed were the strengths and weaknesses of their DeL courses, the barriers that they thought existed and the enhancements that could be made. All of these responses, anchored as they are in the perceptions, beliefs and experiences of the students, have been considered in the specific cultural context in which they exist, and have been interrogated in reference to the philosophies and world views of the students who have made them.

These standards have been grouped into dimensions in the present study (the construction of these dimensions, and their situation in relation to the wider community of practice in global standards and pedagogical theories of education is discussed in Chapter Three). However, in this discussion, these dimensions will also be related to the eleven subgroups identified in Jung's (2011) study. This methodology enables us to focus upon the items that were found to be most important in Jung's respected study of students' perceptions. In addition, such an approach allows a comparison of the results with other prominent studies and triangulates them in relation to the literature. The subgroups are: *Interaction, Learning Tasks, Feedback and Assessment, Resources, Institutional QA Mechanism, Information and Publicity, Technical Support, Complaints, Individual Support, Institutional Credibility, Staff Support.*

6.2.1 Teaching and Learning

This dimension can be divided into three sub-categories; those relating to *interaction*, those relating to *learning tasks*, and those relating to *feedback and assessment*.

Interaction

Ehlers (2004) noted that social and discursive interaction is perceived by European learners as one of the most important dimensions of DeL. This concurs with many other studies that have produced similar results (including Selim, 2007; Sun et al., 2008 and Jung, 2011). The findings of the present study did find interaction to be a key dimension, although students did not consider interaction to be, as described by Jung, "interactive [and] collaborative" (2011,

p.15). Hence, Item 1, the presence of interaction with the faculty was considered the most important in this dimension, whilst of the eleven items in total, Items 8 and 9, the existence of collaborative and group activities, languished in ninth and tenth place. Placed in between them was Item 2, referring to interaction with peers.

The focus groups then clarified the feelings of students regarding communication. No statement is more indicative of SA's educational culture than, "The teacher is the foundation and the top of the pyramid". In other words, the educational culture is deeply embedded in modes of didactic learning, placing the focus upon staff whose role it is to supply information in a downwards direction to the students. In terms of Reigelguth's (1996) model, these students are in an 'Industrial Age', mode of thinking not the 'Information Age'. Another link would be to Talalakina's (2010) study of power distance in education. Furthermore, similar results were found by Rye and Stokken (2012), when looking at African students' experiences in Norway.

However, while defining the previous educational experiences of students, this interaction was not always found to be present. The findings showed that Item 1, faculty interaction, was not particularly present in the survey results. In the absence of this contact, students formed their own networks of interaction that provided much of the information they wished to receive from the faculty.

It is interesting to note the nature of this information was largely a product of the course design. It was about practicalities, such as timetables, or about the content of the assessment. The above explains the higher perceived presence of Item 2, communication with peers. Items 8 and 9 were neither demanded by students nor provided by the institutions. However, it remains the case that over half of the students surveyed believed these two items were Important or Very Important and there are more students looking for this type of interaction than not. Indeed, one in five students did believe that group work, Item 8, is very important.

These findings lead us to Gunarwardena's (2014) conclusion that some learning cultures – those described as 'high power distance' ones, such as Morocco or Sri Lanka - are not rooted in interactions beyond that of teacher-student. That is, DeL students do learn to appreciate new methods of interacting offered by their courses. In this sense, culture is not a prison which cannot be escaped, but an evolving concept which changes over time: "the emergence of [DeL] learning cultures might transcend both the institutional cultures of learning in which the resources originated and the cultural learning styles predominant in the sites where they were taken up" (p.83). If Hall's (1990) assertion is correct that "culture is communication and

communication is culture”, then the spread of DeL practices – if they are based in quality - will be able to transcend the context in which they are born and re-make it in a process of becoming.

Item 7, asking about interaction through technology to both students and instructors was perceived to be the second most present in the larger dimension, indicating the underlying strength in the use technological platforms such as Blackboard. However, these interactional opportunities did not spread to learning and remained on the organisational level. Only one student in the qualitative data spoke about “the spirit of cooperation” as a learning opportunity rather than a social good.

The ability to take part in in the learning process regardless of geographical location is naturally the most appealing aspect of DeL. Nonetheless, according to Holmberg (2003), it remains the case that, the capacity to engage in a two-way dialogue between instructors and learners is a key feature of the DeL model. We can look beyond the cultural model to interpret this phenomenon. Indeed, several of the participants in the present study reported a perceived lack of interaction with instructors in person and via the online platform.

This finding may perhaps be attributable to the heavy workload associated with certain programmes (Pajo and Wallace, 2001; Kim et al., 2013) and the large number of course participants. Thus, to enhance the quality of the DeL learning model, communication between students and teachers must be increased, as well as the level of communication between course participants.

Our research also revealed that DeL increased the ease with which students could interact with classmates and teachers. In turn, students perceived this approach to be beneficial to the learning process because they could immediately contact peers or teachers when they had a query. In other words, they preferred to maintain contact rather than asking such questions during registration or when schedules were being set.

Perhaps more seriously, the findings indicate the absence of effective collaboration between students and teachers, which meant that some students received preferential treatment in terms of advisory sessions, whilst others did not receive timely responses to their inquiries. In fact, some students resorted to seeking help from classmates or online resources when they encountered problems; here, one student revealed that they relied primarily on their own forums to seek answers to any questions (see also Gunawardena, 2008 and 2011).

Students in SA generally remain in the ‘Eastern’ cultural model and their experiences of DeL seem to be more similar to those found by the following researchers: Wang (2007), in Chinese

and Korean students rather than in American ones; by Zhao and McDougall (2008) in Chinese students rather than Canadian ones; by Shattuck (2005) in Asian rather than American ones; and by Gunawardena (2008, 2011) in Sri-Lankan rather than American ones.

In each of the studies mentioned above, 'Collectivism' is high and 'Power Distance' is high, but there remains a desire for face-to-face, top-down teaching. Such abiding differences show the contention of Weinberger et al. (2007) that 'Western' modes of learning cannot be simply imposed on students, and that the culture in which an institution is embedded will condition the reactions of students to the education they receive.

Learning Tasks

Jung (2011) notes that most QA guidelines in DeL place an emphasis on learning tasks; however, this reality has not been reflected in her study. She attributed this to the fact that a plurality of quality tasks, with excellent content, were universally available in Korean DeL courses, and students took them for granted. Whilst this survey has similar results in student beliefs about the importance these standards, which were ranked as the bottom three in this dimension, there was also a belief amongst students that these standards were not being met, as they filled three of the bottom four places (only 'motivation' being less present).

Again, these dissimilar results should be explained with reference to the cultural context in which they have occurred. Most of the students have been embedded in didactic tradition of learning and are unused to a plurality of different tasks being set for them, to the extent that they do not see this as associated with quality. Indeed, being unused to these models of learning, many students distrust them when they arrive, and believe the course will be diminished by their presence, as they are unused to them, and feel they may fail assessment if called upon to use a new skill set (Wang, 2007).

The focus groups had some participants who asked for a broader range of tasks to be set, including more independent ones. However, the students who asked for these changes believed they should be postponed until postgraduate level, as they did not feel capable of being independent learners. The cultural status of teachers, the oral tradition and the general Hofstedian 'long-term orientation' (2015) of society in SA mean that there has not been a shift from behaviourism to constructivism, or from industrial age to information age styles (Reigeluth, 1996) at the same place as in some other nations.

The findings in this case also indicate that instructors failed to make use of available technological resources with several teachers instead focusing on conventional oral delivery

methods as a means of conveying information or exploring topics. According to Wright et al. (2009), the oral tradition as practiced in many cultures functions more effectively in a lecture-based format or in group discussions. The demographics of DeL students, often professionally employed (Irele, 2013), provide another resource in terms of practical and applied learning opportunities, which is under used.

Therefore, the dominant mode of teaching in DeL was found to be didactic, and the dominant direction of information transfer was from teacher to student. As students were generally comfortable with this situation, questions are raised in this analysis about the status of normative judgements, in which the necessity for historical change is weighed against the preferences of the population (this issue is discussed in detail in Section 6.3.3).

Feedback and Assessment

The students primarily demonstrated a favourable attitude towards the examination process and programme content which they felt to complement their academic capabilities. However, in reference to the above, several participants asserted that the absence of effective communication between teachers and students negatively impacted upon their overall grades, which were largely calculated based on written exam results. In addition, participants emphasised that the programme valued quantity over quality in terms of content and highlighted a lack of clarity regarding the terminology employed. As such, it may perhaps be necessary to examine alternative forms of assessment and to explore the extent to which students are happy with the course content.

The literature regarding feedback is unambiguous. Shute and Kim (2014) demonstrate that feedback is essential to the success of students in passing the course. Additionally, Zirkle (2003) and Flowers (2001) show that its absence can lead to negative outcomes. Beyond this, West et al. (2012) show that feedback has positive effects on other desirable metrics, such as course satisfaction. It also counteracts negatives, like feelings of isolation. As Gunawardena (2014) notes, DeL opens up many new possibilities for giving feedback that is both in-time and helpful. In terms of application, the findings showed that the timeliness of feedback (Item 3) was more present than that feedback being constructive (Item 4), or motivational (Item 11). This order was reversed when students were asked about the importance of the standards, while they wished for the feedback to be constructive and motivational, but were less concerned by the timing of its arrival. The focus groups noted that much of the feedback was automatically generated as responses to multiple-choice questions, which explains its

promptness. However, the features of the platform that allowed feedback were not used very often, or were simply not responded to.

The feedback given concentrated narrowly on the assessment, whose criteria were themselves narrow: “The reality is that we receive feedback in grades only”. Students were not unhappy with this manner of assessment that they had been used to throughout their education. Yet when we consider the literature on what constitutes quality in assessment, the system is shown to be deficient. Campbell and Schwier (2014) state that, in DeL and in learning generally, constructivist modes of assessment view this older, behaviorist style as unfair, being that it is standardised, impersonal and absolute. One student used the open question to state that the focus on the final assessment, rather than on varied assessment methods caused “stress for the students”. Another complained about the lack of alternative assessment methods. Assessment was the focus of most of the open question responses, which attests to how much tension it caused in the students. However, student in the focus group reported that they found some of the impersonal and standardising elements of DeL to be positive from the perspective of fairness and justice; they hence prized their anonymity. Again, this finding can be linked to the Robinson model (1999) and its distinction between the expectations of Western and Eastern learners.

Item 5, which surveyed students’ desire for a range of assessment tools did not receive particular assent, nor did they believe it was particularly lacking from their course. Yet one common theme from the focus group was the desire to anchor the course in less abstract and theoretical questions, being more practical and ‘applicable in everyday life’ tasks. This finding again links to Campbell and Schwier’s (2014, p. 361) contention that “Most distance learners live and learn in the world of work” and learners would hence be pleased to see assessments based in the world of practice.

6.2.2 Course Structure

This dimension can be divided into three sub-categories: those relating to *resources*; those relating to the *institutional QA*; and those relating to *information and publicity*.

Resources

The questionnaire surveyed the students’ perceptions of resources in items 2 (sufficient quantity), 3 (that they are relevant and reviewed), and 8 (there is a variety of resource types). Both the first two Items were found to be *very important* to students, and were ranked first and third, respectively. They were found to be applied in DeL to a much lesser extent, scoring

3.33 and 3.23, so that students neither agreed nor disagreed that they are present. One potential answer to this difference is that a lack of resources is one of the most tangible problems from the phenomenological perspective of the learner; hence, we would naturally expect it to score highly. However, the importance attributed to these items cannot be attributed solely to learners' abstract demands for them. As Van Assche and Vuorikari (2006) argue, sufficiency in resources is not assured by numbers of resources, but has a dimension of their quality as well. There is a perfect mean of resources between too many (noise) and too few (silence). In SA it tends towards the latter. The focus groups revealed many issues to do with the insufficiency of resources, ranging from their age, lack of varied sources and difficulty of access. Item 8 was less desired than the other two, indicating a preference for certain types of resource above diversity amongst most students; however, one student in the open question asked for "diverse methods and styles of teaching in order to not feel bored of audio".

From the perspective of students, DeL should then be given more resources than other forms of education, being that it is hosted on a platform designed to provide resources and that it operates on the Internet that, in itself, is a deposit of resources. Students are not being signposted to wider OERs which Dron (2014) argues are the future of DeL. The questionnaire results showed that students were largely positive about the provision of resources. However, due to the use of the generic term 'resources' in the questionnaire, what they might understand by the word was not clear. However, the results obtained from the focus group clarified this issue and showed that students hold a variety of views about the development of resources. They wish to see not only more, but also more up-to-date resources being presented. Hence, their touchstone for the concept of a resource is not perhaps the 'resource' of educational theory, but the general proliferation of resources found in web2.0 environments. When students are used to referring to "Uncle Google" in their daily lives, they need to interact with a range of quality web2.0 resources for it is with such commercial platforms that they compare those of their DeL course.

Students who are used to the web2.0 environment are, in many respects, more aware of the possibilities that DeL can offer than the staff who provide the DeL. Instructors were found to limit resources provided to the lecture that students then uploaded, while tutors did not offer secondary sources to students. The instructors' perceptions about technology and resources should be linked the sub-categories *learning style*, *staff support*, and *institutional QA* as the focus groups reported different reasons for the problems that students noticed. There were those caused by the didactic method, those caused by lack of training and finally, those

caused by laziness. However, despite the general support for ‘resources’, students retain a desire for those provided by the instructor, rather than discovered by themselves. Again, this arises from cultural expectations (Sultan, 2013).

The literature review showed that for Ehlers (2013), the modes of resource provision associated with DeL should be OER and OEP; however, as noted in the literature review, these are largely theoretical states towards which they believe the discipline is moving. However, as DeL in SA is at an ‘early adoption’ phase (Conrad, 2014), it is perhaps premature to expect such a sea-change. For, as Kim et al. (2013) note, abundant resources are a vital part of the experience of rich DeL, in which students interact with each other and with the resources to the fullest extent possible.

Institutional QA Mechanism

Institutional QA mechanisms were surveyed in Items 9 (continuous improvement) and 7 (QA in inspiring engagement) of Dimension 2. Whilst learners may not be aware of the specifics of institutional policy regarding QA, they can detect when it is not present. Hence, they are perhaps the keenest stakeholders to see an immediate improvement in quality standards in DeL. One common theme in the focus group was the potential of DeL to provide more than it did in practice, as students had experienced rich, web2.0 interaction in commercial areas and knew that it would be possible to achieve similar quality in their DeL. Being committed to receiving the most respected qualifications possible or engaging in lifelong learning, students were keen to be considered on the same plane as traditional HE rather than being taken to be in a separate discipline.

DeL students must be incorporated more effectively into the wider academic community. Typically, according to Moore and Kearsley (2012), DeL students are more likely to apply the theoretical knowledge they receive in practice and are generally more motivated and dedicated than students engaged in the traditional learning model. In fact, many of the participants claimed that there were too few coursework tasks assigned and felt that teachers did not offer enough feedback on their work. These results substantiate those of Galusha (2009), Flowers (2001), Zirkle (2003), Shute and Kim (2014), and West et al. (2013), supporting the arguments made by students that better feedback is required to identify errors, clear up any issues and eliminate any disputes regarding grades.

Although the present study has noted that DeL offers the chance to improve the situation regarding social justice in general (see Section 3.1.6) and therefore, by extension, in SA, as the number of DeL users grows, no specific items being surveyed have related directly to

social justice. However, we should note that Tait and O'Rourke (2014) have firmly established the link between quality provision in DeL and social justice, showing how materials, resources and learning systems with quality embedded in them lead to "genuine access to learning opportunities" (p.55) for all - a key tenet of social justice. The focus group indeed showed that students were very concerned about the status of DeL in relation to traditional HE and did not want to be involved with a 'poor cousin' of the educational options. This desire is explored in detail in the section *Institutional Credibility* (6.2.4) below.

Information and Publicity

Given the importance of adequate pre-sessional information in each of the recognised sets of standards, it would appear to be a significant barrier that Saudi students are not being made aware of the commitments required by the course before they register. Hence, there is a high dropout rate for all DeL courses internationally, while pre-sessional information is a vital part of the strategy to minimise such attrition. Given this lack of information, the fact that fees are non-refundable is a problem for social justice (see, for example, Tait and O'Rourke, 2014). The lack of choice for students is a demotivational factor for institutions seeking to provide maximal quality, being that there is no effective competition. The failure to engage students at the very outset of their course leads to the creation of an atmosphere in which attainment is devalued. Facing the reality of there being no mutual expectations established between the students and the institutions, this represents a missed opportunity.

The standard relating to pre-sessional preparation, Item 1, was the lowest scoring one in this dimension for reported application for SA students, and the third lowest overall. Other Items in this dimension were 4, 5, and 6. Items 4 (clear statements of aims) and 6 (clear grading policy) were similar in scores to item 1, whilst Item 5, about expectations on workload was considered to be much less important.

Commentators, such as Brindley (2014), are fairly certain of the risk factors responsible for the dropout rate in DeL. They cluster at the beginning of the course, and include reasons of not being self-directed, finding the course to be overly rigorous, and not finding the course satisfying. The first two factors are directly linked to the pre-sessional information students receive; in a context in which over a quarter of students believe that these standards were not met, it can be said that their needs are not satisfied. Indeed, as the students surveyed had already completed at least one year, the population would not represent the students who dropped out, so we can assume the number of negative responses would be higher if they

were included. This conclusion was anecdotally confirmed in the focus group, in which students vocally represented their peers who had left the course.

6.2.3 Student Support

This dimension can be divided into three sub-categories: those relating to *technical support*; those relating to *complaints*; and those relating to *individual support*.

Technical Support

Items 2, 3, 4, and 5 were surveyed in this sub-category. With the exception of Item 4, they were found to be the most important by students in regard to the development of new technological skills. The former three were found to be applied at high levels, filling three of the top four slots. These findings are broadly in line with those of Ehlers (2004) and Saito (2009), although Jung remains in disagreement (2011). Instead, in discussing the unexpected results of her study, Jung suggests they may be attributed to the varying ICT skills of the learners and suggests that they are worthy of further investigation. However, Table 5.11 and 5.20 which analyses ICT skills by ANOVA test in the present study show no differences across technical proficiencies.

The findings here imply that adequate technical support is necessary to offer consistent student services and rectify any technical issues experienced by the students. Nonetheless, students seem inevitably to encounter difficulties using the university website and portal, a finding which supports those of Shearer (2013) who also emphasises the need for stability and consistency when students access a resource. Additionally, he found that ambiguous instructions are associated with diminished feelings of independence and control.

We can also take the results of the research to imply that the university did not offer any training resources in use of the website and portal by students. Participant interviews revealed that students had contentious views regarding the necessity of such training as some argued that one week should be spent on training while others suggested that training was unnecessary considering the ready availability of technical support. Such a disparity is most likely attributable to the fact that the technical skill level of students varies widely.

Interestingly, a study by Fink (2002) revealed that students who do not have the necessary skills to take part in a DeL programme may hinder the progress of teachers and peers in the online classroom, which suggests that the learning requirements of those unskilled in the use

of computers and internet technology should be examined more closely. Such a measure would ensure that more students achieve favourable learning outcomes in the DeL.

Complaints

Items 9 and 10 surveyed students about the mechanism for making complaints. These items were phrased in terms of structure and process and the students believed they were of importance. The four items relating to technical support and the two items in this category took up the top six places in this dimension. They were found in applications of a lower rank than in importance.

Again, the focus group interview revealed interesting perceptions, as students explained that although the complaints procedure was formalised and understood, it rarely led to any result. The complaints system appeared byzantine to students, with no identification of the actual bodies responsible for processing complaints. Yang (2007) shows how this can be detrimental to student's satisfaction, and Zembylas (2008) to their mental health.

In fact, Web2.0 support in other domains has led students to expect similar responses in their lives as students. Latchem (2014) situates a complaints mechanism as an essential part of QA, being that it provides a channel for feedback which lets providers know what is broken and such knowledge is the first step towards remediation. Husson (2006) shows that complaints procedures are an area of growing interest in DeL, with initiatives like SEEQUEL, an E-learner bill of rights being developed in the EU.

Individual Support

The Items (1, 6, 7, 8) that received the lowest scores in this dimension of students' perception of importance were those concerning individual support. Items 6 (adequate counselling) and 8 (support and encouragement) were also found to be the least present. Whilst Item 7 was found to be more present, it was ambiguous insofar as it mentioned timeliness, as well as a personalisation of responses. Item 1, about netiquette was not as important as others in the dimension but much more present. Considering the dimension of student support as a whole, the most pertinent question may be: Why do students in SA not expect or receive individual support to the extent they want technical support? The answer may be found in the cultural context of the study. SA society, in Hofstedian terms, has a low level of individualism. This leads to a de-emphasis on the students' status as an individual, both from the perspective of the institution and the students themselves. Moreover, students are less likely to speak up for themselves and wait to be spoken to by the institution (Wursten and Jacobs, 2013). In a high-

power distance culture, they are also less likely to initiate communication about themselves. The case setting outlined that students in SA are less likely to be able to express 'voice' across a range of contexts, while their educational experiences are in some ways reflective of this (Hirschman, 1970).

Whilst some students received a satisfactory response to their inquiry by using these forums, it is clear that academic advisors should still be available to support students if they experience any issues. However, the limited number of employees and the excessive workloads may restrict the extent to which such employees can deal with student inquiries. Yet students expect this kind of support from a modern university (Brindley, 2014).

Although educational institutes attempt to offer more technology resources as part of their curricula, the literature review and the findings of this study indicate that the limited provision of support and guidance is a crucial issue cited by DeL learners (Chrispen et al., 2011; Krenelka, 2005; Jung and Hong, 2014). Further studies by Usun (2004); McAlister et al., (2001); Owens et al., (2009); and Iqbal and Bhatti, (2015), have also revealed that the provision of high quality student support services was the key determinant of student retention in comparison to other technology-based factors. Two key factors were identified in this study as those which have caused students to perceive a lack of support. Firstly, the lack of information available pertaining to the university for incoming students and secondly, the restricted level of communication between the student body and relevant departments, most of which was conducted over the phone.

Item 11, (efforts are made to engage students with the programme and institution) was found to be of low presence, indicating that there is room for improvement in the communication between university and learners, particularly in terms of motivation and engagement. Top down communication tends to be formal and informational rather than personal and encouraging in the DeL in SA currently. A student pointed to this in open question stating that there needs to be "ease in the interaction between student, teacher and institution". The focus group highlighted that bottom up communication with the institution was often impossible with "no identification of the body responsible".

6.2.4 Other Categories Raised in the Focus Group

The present study was designed to be a mixed method approach in order not only that issues emerging from the questionnaire could be discussed, but because the issues concerning quality perceived by the students, that were not explicitly covered by the items in the questionnaire could be raised and discussed. Meanwhile, the additional topics that were most

commonly discussed matched two of Jung's categories; these were *institutional credibility* and *staff support*.

Institutional Credibility

Themes of institutional credibility were touched upon by the questionnaire (in part 1.2) when learners were asked about their motivations to study DeL. The most frequently cited motivation was to gain the qualification at the end of the course. Therefore, students were very concerned that the qualification was recognised as having the same status as other qualifications of a similar level. Although DeL learners are often more diverse than traditional HE, there are two dominant objectives (Alali, 2005): high school graduates who are pursuing a first degree and students with degrees who are aiming at further qualification. Both groups are concerned with the social status of their degree programme. However, the very difference of the average DeL learners compared to the homogenised groups in traditional HE (Fleming, 2009) may lead to an assumption that DeL is not as high quality a product. Almost one in five students in the questionnaire agreed that they were in DeL because their grades were insufficient to study in traditional HE. Here, again, the provision of quality DeL can be considered a good in relation to social justice (Tait and O'Rourke, 2014).

Institutional credibility was a theme often raised in the focus group. Students were concerned by the relationship between DeL and traditional HE, but also with the wider societal status of DeL. One stand-out example was that of the student who was sitting a second DeL course because his previous one was not considered sufficient to qualify for Masters' study (as if it were traditional HE). This leads to a view that a DeL qualification is a transaction - something bought rather than something earned - and reflective of educational achievement. However, some students believed that they saw in DeL a chance to progress out of the didactic teaching of traditional HE and a chance to use and enjoy modern teaching methods across a variety of styles.

Jung (2011) notes that institutional credibility is strongly correlated with overall perceptions of quality in DeL from the perspective of learners. This may be considered unsurprising, as the two are tautological. However, such an observation brings to light the difficulties of raising the status of an institution, once it is established as a poor relation. The students in the focus group believed that the status of DeL was generally improving and they believed that, in time, it would be seen as having equal quality to traditional HE. However, at this stage, it seems that 'national recognition' (Jung, 2011) is not perceived as being there for students of DeL. In a sense, it is the other stakeholders who are letting down students of DeL, with

insufficient care and esteem coming from institutional planners - who are happy to relegate DeL to second place - and insufficient commitment to quality being shown across the pool of instructors. This will be the topic of the next sub-category.

However despite these issues, many students reported that DeL was convenient (Lei and Gupta, 2010; Cole et al. 2014), flexible (Daymont and Blau, 2008), adaptable (Carnevale and Olsen, 2003), and had generally provided them with an option to continue their education. Thus, students were still positive about the process, despite problems with status.

Staff Support

The literature shows that if there is lack of quality in DeL, the fault does not necessarily lie with the teaching staff, but it may be a product of institutional failures to train, motivate and compensate DeL instructors (for a thorough survey of the literature regarding this, see Shattuck, 2013). Some of the failings discussed with technical issues in the focus group can be attributed to the lack of training that staff receive in using these new methods of delivery. Seok (2008) describes the DeL teacher as an ‘instigator of discourse’, who must therefore adapt to the medium of that discourse. As the role of teachers in SA is so important, teachers are considered leaders rather than facilitators and they are therefore the central figures of the classroom. Meanwhile, students are particularly quick to ascribe a lack of quality to an educational system in which they do not have sufficient ‘face-to-face’ time with the instructor. The appointment of more female faculty, allowing this face-to-face time, is essential for social justice in DeL in SA (Al alhareth and McBride, 2015).

The most obvious problem for teachers is the lack of experience in DeL (Austen, 2010), being that the discipline is a relatively new one. Allen and Seaman (2011) found that 80% of faculty lacked experience of DeL. Further issues include: the development of teaching styles that complement the DeL learner and the DeL platform (Nakpodia, 2010); training in technical skills associated with DeL delivery (Howell et al., 2004); and training in DeL pedagogy (Seaman, 2009). Shuttack’s (2013) discussion of motivational and demotivational factors influencing DeL teachers shows the range of influences that may affect staff performance. Many of these issues speak to the case of DeL in SA, such as the lack of time with which instructors feel they have for dealing with students. With class sizes approaching 100, it is hardly surprising that instructors feel they cannot treat every individual in the class as a separate person, but should rely upon teaching the students. With regard then to the demotivational feelings associated with the lack of authority to make changes, staff in the centralised system in SA do not have the authority or ability to make amendments to their

courses and so they tend to feel powerless. Finally, there is not yet an institutional culture that rewards and motivates quality and best practice in DeL, as these issues have not been fully explored and resolved. These findings concur with Al-Shammari and Higgins (2015), who argue that the most significant barriers to success in DeL in SA are found at this university level.

6.3 Fundamental Concepts

This section revisits the most fundamental concepts [the technology of DeL, quality, culture, pedagogy, perceptions] used in the present thesis and, after methodological preparation, begins to construct a model of *Quality, Culture and Pedagogy in DeL*. It is hoped that such a model will provide a basis for framing the research questions and enabling the analysis of student experiences outlined in the research aims.

6.3.1 Technology and DeL

DeL is essentially a technological process. Section 3.1.3 discussed the importance of technology in driving DeL, therein noting that students expect courses to utilise the most advanced technologies available. This expectation was reflected in the findings, where students expressed their desire to be provided with a fully functional web2.0 experience when online. They hence expected the platform to feature a mixed range of media and to provide facilities for two-directional communication.

Moreover, Kim et al. (2013) have found that engagement and motivation can be derived from the utilisation of web2.0; this can be clearly seen in the students' conceptions of quality in DeL. In other words, they took services such as WhatsApp and Twitter as the basis for their expectations for online learning.

These expectations fit with the patterns of globalisation observed in Section 3.1.4, where it was argued that the experience of communication on the biggest, world famous social media sites has a homogenising effect upon peoples across the globe. The structures of Google or WhatsApp, both of which are universal and transnational, now enter into a complex relationship with the local cultures they encounter. In the multi-national race for success, quality may be wrongly associated with 'newness', such as in developing countries where users perceive new Internet services to be 'modern' or of a high quality merely because they come from the West.

Nonetheless, technology was not found to be a major issue in the present study, being that the levels of satisfaction were relatively high in terms of perceptions of quality. Moreover, both the students and institutions have managed to adapt several applications to DeL successfully. However, this situation may not be the case with all the nations implementing DeL. Instead, it is specific to the economic strength of SA, insofar as the country has been able to afford cutting edge technologies where deemed necessary. This finding fits with the assumptions of Section 3.1.3, those stating that the evaluation of specific types of technology would not be part of this research study unless they formed part of the students' perceptions about the nature of quality in their DeL experience.

6.3.2 Quality and Perceptions

The present study has shown that students' perceptions are a source of rich and insightful information about quality standards in DeL, following, for example, Jung (2012 a), Ehrlers (2004), Cashion and Palmeri (2002), and Ward et al. (2010). As noted above, items such as those concerning *institutional QA* may cause skepticism about the possibility of students being in a position to judge fully whether or not they are desirable or available. However, the students' responses showed that they have a deep understanding of the education system in which they are immersed, and of the strengths and weakness and the opportunities and barriers they face.

In a similar vein, the wording of the items in the study – whilst checked for neutrality and translation (see Section 4.9.1) – raises questions about the differences between students' perceptions, such as service users, in contrast with those of educational theorists or administrators, who form the groups that most commonly engage with and create these standards. One issue is the difference between the level of theoretical knowledge required to 'unpack' a standard and relate it to the proper domain of educational theory to which it relates; this is a task that one might expect an administrator to perform, but perhaps not a student. A second is the presentation of obvious 'goods' to the students, which they would be unlikely not to desire – for example, the technological support – in comparison with those which do not appear to be obviously 'good', or do not equate to 'goods', such as being compelled to work in groups. No questionnaire of this nature can be written totally neutrally; however, the phrasing of this one was carefully judged to be able to permit the students to speak as clearly as possible. Hence, in this regard, it can be considered a success, as their perceptions have been clearly captured – a task which James (2002) believes is vital. Here we could also consult the final part of Section 3.5 (*The Need to Recognise the Views of Saudi*

DeL Students) which makes the case for the importance of the present study and the contribution that it has made towards knowledge of students' perceptions.

Another strength inherent to the method of sampling students' perceptions lies in the diversity of voices in the population sampled (see Table 4.6). This method, allowing those who do not usually get a voice to speak across age groups and other social divides, can only be considered positive from the perspective of social justice. For planners, "disregarding the diversity of students may result in failure" (Schulmeister, 2004, p.2), yet the discourse of quality is too often centred on the prescriptions of experts and administrators, rather than the main consumers of the education. Personal issues, such as anxiety and motivation, are phenomenological factors which colour the views of students about the education they receive; however, they are often disregarded by discourses about quality that concentrate on measurements of abstract metrics and benchmarks (Ehlers, 2013).

The Sloan Consortium has noted that "the gap between theoretical assumptions and pragmatic decisions when designing learning environments and when teaching, cannot be bridged by simple deduction, but is subject to norms and value judgments" (Sloan-C, 2003, in Ehlers, 2013, p.132). The present study thus conceptualises DeL as "a negotiation process in which all stakeholders—and thus also the learners—have to participate in" (Ehlers, 2013, p.137). As such, it contributes to the task of giving these learners a voice.

6.3.3 Quality, Culture and Pedagogy

Any thesis in education must constantly situate its claims in reference to questions of pedagogical styles, which have remained the foundation upon which educational theory is built. Yet this study has investigated the notion of quality in education from the perception of the student, and has therefore established an epistemological position with regard to quality that is based on the subjective options of the population of the study; moreover, these perceptions are rooted in the cultural norms and expectations within which this population exists (Henderson, 1996; 2007).

Approaches such as Henderson (1996; 2007) and Reeves (1994) have depicted the symbiosis between the cultural background and pedagogical style, which has established a cultural-pedagogical modelling of learning. Later studies, such as Shattuck (2005), Wang (2007) and Gunawardena (2008, 2011), have considered smaller cohorts of students in DeL and have situated their views on education in relation to the cultural-pedagogical frameworks from which they have emerged.

The present study has discussed, at length, the cultural setting in which it operates and has painted a picture, in both literature review and in the findings, of a culture which is deeply attached to a didactic model of instruction in which quotidian pedagogy sees a group of students sit and listen to the instructor lecture. Young's (2014) observation that 'Culture is everything!' has been found to be true. The aim of this process is a behaviourist notion that knowledge is transferred from the vessel of the teacher into the learners. This style has deep roots, emergent as it is from the oral tradition and established as traditional in a culture that is *long-term oriented* (Hofstede, 2015) and conservative. The students' perceptions solicited in the present study are therefore shaped by this tradition in reflecting the views of individuals from the culture of SA.

However, in DeL these views have been questioned because, as Altbach (2016) notes, education cannot be isolated from global trends. The most pressing issues of the modern era are the twin challenges of the globalised, information age. Firstly, no country wants to be left behind economically. Secondly, each wishes to secure the electronicisation of education in which all institutions can have immediate access to the most up-to-date platforms and information, entailing that no culture can isolate itself on a global scale.

Therefore, the space in which this study operates is between understanding the perceptions of students and their views about what constitutes quality, and the tenets of educational theory about quality and how it is constructed. This mediation between the views of students and those of experts has not been performed to push a particular agenda or to pit one against the other. Instead, according to the methodological aims of the study, has sought to investigate how changes can be made in this space of compromise between the old (culture) and the new (technology). As discussed in Section 3.3.2, Ehlers (2013, p.47) describes culture as being "creation and recreation", and even this recreation is never a repetition of the same.

Hence, the exploration of these cultural factors - in the pragmatic epistemology in which this study is rooted - becomes an investigation of the possible; "cultures change and are never static" (Young, 2014). The questions raised reflect issues are not simply limited to 'what must be done?' but also consider the following: 'If it is possible?'; 'How may it be done?'; 'In which conditions may it be done?'; and 'Under what sort of time-line?' Schien (1992) and Hofstede (2005), in their 'depth' models of culture show the enormity of this task.

A firm theoretical foundation and an understanding of cultural-pedagogical models allows an exploration of the frameworks with which quality in DeL can be developed and both QA and QE can take place. The mixed methods research in this study has considered the cultural-

pedagogical values involved on a number of different levels and with different resources. In the present study, several of the Items surveyed and much of the discussion in the focus group was found to be revealing of this cultural pedagogical framework; hence, it has helped to triangulate and develop the perspectives of the learners in relation to the models.

6.3.4 Towards a Model of Quality, Culture and Pedagogy

The most influential model in pedagogical culture is that of Henderson (1996; 2007). The present section reimagines Henderson’s model (shown in figure 3.5) through the lens of quality in the light of what can be known about pedagogical culture. Some of the Items included in the questionnaire provided were shown to be implicitly revealing about students’ positions on dimensions of Henderson’s cultural-pedagogical framework, whilst other dimensions are beyond the scope of this study, as they are not surveyable in the form of students’ perceptions. Examples of this later type of dimension tend to be the most complex and abstract concepts, about which one could not easily discern students positions due to the multifaceted complexities that these dimensions cover; that is, epistemological beliefs or the basis of decisions about instructional sequencing. Others may suffer from perception bias, such as motivation.

Bearing in mind that, in acceding to the research aims, this study has surveyed one group of stakeholders - the students. The cultural-pedagogical model offered by this study is hence as follows.

Table 6.1: A Cultural-Pedagogic Model Based on Students’ Perceptions of Quality

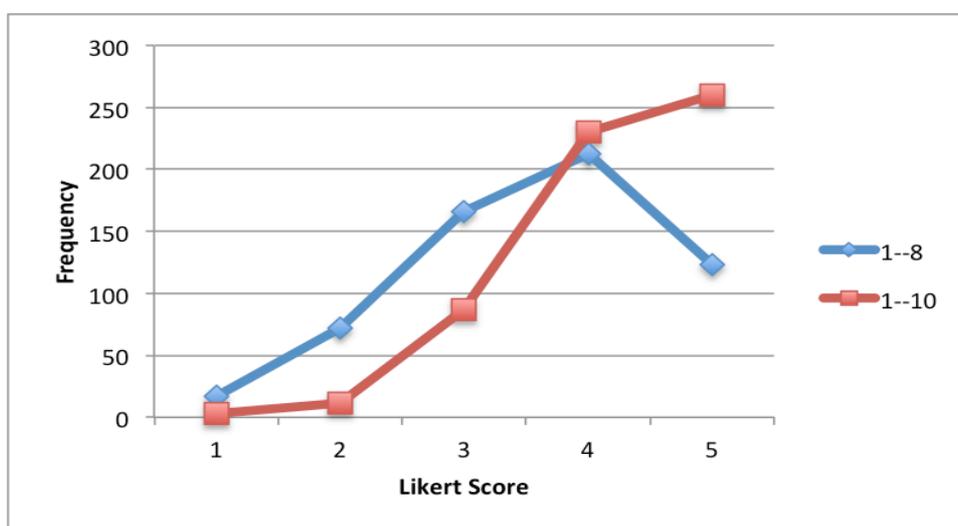
Instructivist	<i>Pedagogical Philosophy</i>	Constructivist
Behavioural	<i>Underlying Psychology</i>	Cognitive
Sharply-Focused	<i>Goal Orientation</i>	Unfocused
Abstract	<i>Experiential Value</i>	Concrete
Teacher – proof	<i>Role of Instructor</i>	Equalitarian facilitator
Errorless Learning	<i>Value of Errors</i>	Learning from Experience
High	<i>Structure</i>	Low
Non-existent	<i>Accommodation of Individual Difference</i>	Multifaceted
Non-Existent	<i>Learner Control</i>	Unrestricted

This section will consider each of these dimensions and show what the findings have revealed about students’ perceptions of quality within them.

a. Pedagogical Philosophy

The pathway to beliefs about this dimension is through the Items that surveyed the students regarding their belief about working together to engage with knowledge, versus working individually. Items 1-10 (the shorthand used in this section identifies questionnaire items first with the dimension number, from 1 to 3, and then with the item number in that dimension) has asked students about studying individually. The importance attributed to this dimension derives from cultural expectations embedded in the style of learning that students are used to. This can be compared to Items 1-2, 1-7, 1-8 and 1-9, all of which point towards that which are considered to be the ‘gold standard’ practices in DeL encouraging constructivist methods of learning. These dimensions have all scored much lower than 1-10 except 1-2; results that were not linked directly to learning tasks, but only to communication in general. They therefore also have social connotations. The chart below compares items 1-10 (working individually) and 1-8 (working in groups), showing that far fewer students believe the latter is very important, fewer that it is of neutral importance, and many more that it is of lower importance.

Figure 6.4: Item 1-8 versus Item 1-10



The literature about quality is definitive about the favourability of constructivist modes of pedagogy (Moore, 2006; Andrew and Haythronthwaite, 2009; Conole, 2014). Yet the students participating in the present study did not share this view. This phenomenon is perhaps worthy of future study, potentially in an action research methodology to determine not the size of the difference between these views but rather the direction of change, in assessing if constructivism is becoming more accepted culturally in SA as students become more used to its presence as a mode of delivery. It is worth noting that constructivism is still regarded as something that is favourable overall; the discrepancy is that instructivism is associated with

quality. As noted in the discussion of *institutional credibility*, societal notions of quality are vital in determining whether or not a course is to receive recognition. This leads to the notion that any movement towards constructivist modes of pedagogy cannot happen too rapidly, being that there is an expectation that there will be, at the least, a mixed form of instruction in DeL in SA. This expectation has implications for life-long learning – which is something theorists of DeL believe to be vital (Peters, 2008) – as constructivist modes are much more effective than auto-didacticism.

One of the important tasks for researchers in this area is to consider the notion of pedagogical philosophy further and its relation to quality. The focus group interviews have revealed a tension between students' desire to have a more modern education and their fears that they were not adequately prepared to receive it. DeL is also expected to mirror traditional HE in which instructivism is even more deeply embedded. For those students who think that quality is achieved by cloning traditional HE, the more modern methods in DeL are therefore considered a sign of the absence of quality. A further consideration is that, given the large class sizes reported, it might not be possible to move into a constructivist mode.

b. Underlying Psychology

Much of what can be said about this dimension has been covered in the previous section, as instructivism and behaviourism on one side (Vrasidas, 2000), and constructivism and cognitivism (Anderson and Dron, 2011) on the other are tied together in the literature.

One item which has been taken as revealing here is 2-7, concerning *faculty and student engagement*, which can be taken to represent two-way communication in the classroom, both from the top-down and from the bottom-up. The modal response of respondents was to find this 'important', reflecting a view that it is not an essential component of education to become involved in sustained dialogues with the instructor. However, it is still considered a social good by many, giving them the opportunity to engage in light interaction with the instructors and to gain some sort of social presence before them. It is still the case that in the high-power distance culture of SA (Hofstede, 2015), very few students would wish to question the teacher directly about the content of the course, but they would prefer to have some interaction with these respected figures (Alharthi, 2010). The focus groups have illustrated just how many students were aggrieved about the failure of instructors to use video features or chat features, which they saw as depriving them of face-to-face time. It is also revealing that the response of many was to ask for the office hours or availability of their instructors. Here again, it may be

the case that many have not experienced a fully cognitivist mode of learning and are therefore unsure if it associated with quality.

c. Goal Orientation

Items 2-4 asked about learners receiving clear information about what they may achieve upon completion of the course. These items were considered to be of relatively low importance as indicators of quality, although they were considered the most present Items in this dimension. It is clear from the question about student's motivations and from the focus group that the majority of students in DeL are primarily concerned with the medium-term goal of achieving the qualification, rather than the longer-term goal of what this may lead to or the shorter-term goal of experiencing the process of education as a journey (See Henderson (1996) where short term goal focus is associated with behaviourist modes of thinking). Such a focus on concrete rather than abstract aims disagrees with the observations of Moore and Kearsley (2012) who found students reported the converse. As many students found DeL the only channel to pursue, they are more concerned about getting to the end of it than of engaging in the process, as they may not have selected the course they wanted, but the one that was possible.

d. Experiential Value

Again, this dimension can be connected with the one above. SA learners are oriented towards the qualification as an abstract thing because their course does not engage in concrete, 'real-world' issues. The major Items here are 1-6, which enquired about *applying knowledge both inside and outside of the classroom*. Again, it was not found to be particularly important as a sign of quality in DeL, while ranking lowest in the dimension of teaching and learning processes. Moreover, they reflect many cultural issues explored in the study. Firstly, learners are not all motivated to work beyond what is necessary for their qualification, while many – as described in the focus group - do not want their study to go 'outside the classroom'. However, for many more, their experience of learning is in an 'industrial age' mode (Reigeluth, 1996) and they regard the product of the 'learning factory' in which they are present (the university) as being the degree itself, a qualification. Learners are trapped in Sfard's 'acquisition metaphor' mode of thinking, whilst they remain unfamiliar with the manner of the participation metaphor (Sfard, 1998).

This dimension can also be correlated with Item 2-3, noting that a course should be updated regularly and engage with contemporary information and data, rather than older information from which it must be abstracted. There may also be a correlation with Items 1-5, in regard to

a variety of assessment methods, which would reflect a move away from abstract testing to more praxis-based demonstrations of learning.

e. Role of Instructor

The role of the instructor was explored in the focus group. Students retain a belief that the instructor is still the centre of the educational world, who is responsible for deciding and leading the direction of study throughout the course. In claiming that “without direction, education is blind”, one student captured the essence of this dimension. Here again, we can see that the associations of quality in DeL held by students in SA would not necessarily correlate with those held in the literature of quality in pedagogy. Such findings agree with Sultan et al. (2012) and Hamdan (2011). Students believed that education was hierarchical and that the teacher was the ‘top of the pyramid’. However, it is worth noting that this tendency is less than in previous times, and that DeL offers a method of moving away from it, as argued by Al Seghayer (2013). In Item 1-1, communication with the instructor is considered to be of a high importance in the questionnaire, yet this appears to relate to the clarity of information flowing down from the instructor, rather than a two-way dialogue or challenging their position.

f. Value of Errors

Students reported that courses were mainly focused around one mode of assessment - to pass a multiple-choice test. Pedagogical success was therefore narrowly defined by producing an error-free version of what the teacher expected to receive back. Students were aware of this and reported in the focus group that the focus of their communications, both with each other and with the teacher, would be about the content of the test and how to pass it. The lack of feedback is considered a problem by students, as it affects their ability to score highly in the tests. Good feedback is consistently considered a key indicator of quality in DeL (Shute and Kim, 2014; West et al., 2013). As feedback is limited in its scope (“grades only”), students do not think about their learning in ‘shades of grey’, but only as right/wrong in the test.

g. Structure

Students in the focus group noted that the structure of the courses does not change from year to year, never mind within a module or a session. Students have associated quality with the facility in DeL to return to materials and to be able to, to an extent, set their pace of learning and to be free to review topics (“DeL offers the possibility of return”). Many had family or other responsibilities that necessitated this. They did not consider a more developed notion of

flexibility in the direction of the course, insofar as it might organically change its objectives as it developed. Indeed, there is ambivalence in students' views about flexibility, as some found that it was something to be feared rather than celebrated, being that it brought further complications to their assessment and gave them more work to do. Perhaps in this dimension, we see students moving towards a more 'information age' style of learning, as envisaged by Al Seghayer (2013).

h. Accommodation of Individual Difference

This dimension can be tied with the conclusion about **a.** and **b.**, as it relates to the provision of a variety of learning methods. However, in this dimension these learning methods are directed by the needs of the individual students. Yet, as seen there, objectivism does not lead to accommodation of differences (Vrasidas, 2000). An Item pertinent to it is 3-8, which asks about the support given to meet learner's needs, so they can complete the course. Whilst students in SA did associate this with quality, they ranked it as the least important item in Dimension 3.

Another Item investigating this is 2-8 concerning the use of multiple types of resource. A general lack of diversity in teaching methods is present here; this also includes cases in which students' needs may not be met if resources are not provided in different forms. Brindley (2014) notes that the skill set of dealing with multiple resources is one of the most important ones developed by DeL learners.

i. Learner Control

Item 2-7 asked students about the engagement between students and faculty encouraged by the design of the course. This was considered to be an important sign of quality but, as this section has shown, there is little cultural context in SA for students to move away from the guidance of the teacher and to set the pace of their learning. It seems unlikely that the engagement indicated by this standard refers, in the perceptions of students, to a dialogue between themselves and the instructors which evolves the course as it progresses and sets its aims and objectives.

As noted in section **g.** above, learners are concerned about setting a suitable time-scale for their learning, but do not want to influence its direction. This is entirely in line with Sultan et al.'s (2012) observations about Saudi learners. Setting learning time, they believe, is dictated by the teacher, whose position is explored in section **e.** While students noted that the curricula did not change over time, they were more concerned with the rectification of errors rather

than changes of direction. Again, this approach can be attributed to the centralisation of the educational process in SA and the lack of agency given to stakeholders, developments of which students are aware.

Future Possibilities of Culture and Pedagogy

The cultural factors associated with DeL were also acknowledged by several of the participants, being that online learning methods have slowly altered the learning culture by making it feasible for students to gain qualifications online. According to one student, DeL has altered the learning culture because people have become more and more reliant on Internet technology. As a result, the manner in which people communicate and interact has progressively evolved. This concurs with the discussion of culture evolving in Section 3.3.2, particularly Young's (2014) claim that "cultures change and are never static". One particularly astute student highlighted the dual impact of online learning on culture because the former prompts the positive development of a new culture of learning, while the existing culture informs the development of technology designed to facilitate cultural progress. Online learning provided by Western universities had a higher reputation with the students. One who had experienced it noted in the open question that he considered that it showed signs of quality not present in that offered in SA.

Most students interviewed in this study felt that this new learning mode could alter the learning culture (following Al-Sagaff (2004)) through the provision of content from a broad range of sources that allows people to acquire a variety of insights and perspectives on a specific topic. However, when specially asked about more collaborative tasks using the novel features of web2.0, students were found to be less responsive than for other items (see Dimension 2 Item 8). They are aware of many web2.0 technologies and being that SA is one of the leaders in the Arab Region in uptake of platforms like Twitter, there is a broad base of technological familiarity. The challenge of the future is to make these citizens think about web2.0 as an educational resource as well as a social platform.

6.4 Summary

The present section shall briefly recap the most important information from this chapter, which contained an overview of the findings, reflections upon these findings, a discussion and an analysis of concepts.

Background

The most important factor regarding the background of students was gender. Age, academic year and ICT were much less significant.

Motivation

The primary motivation for sitting a DeL course was to acquire the qualification on offer.

Quantitative Findings

The questionnaire surveyed students about three dimensions. The most important and the most applied one was Student Support. The second was Course Structure, and Teaching and Learning was the third.

Qualitative Findings

The open question and focus group found that the strengths of DeL were its flexibility, cost and accessibility. Weaknesses included the dropout rate, problems with communication and the low status of the degree in society.

The barriers of DeL were that staff appeared untrained in the use of the ICT, the narrow focus on assessment, lack of web2.0 tools, and poor communication with teachers.

The possible enhancements included more resources, improving communication and an improvement in the morale and motivation of students.

Reflections

The reflections distinguished eleven sub dimensions that were derived from the three main dimensions. The sub dimensions were *Interaction, Learning Tasks, Feedback and Assessment, Resources, Institutional QA Mechanism, Information and Publicity, Technical Support, Complaints, Individual Support, Institutional Credibility, Staff Support*. It was found that, across these sub dimensions, the notion of the pedagogical culture in which DeL in SA is situated is key to understanding the students' perceptions and their notion of quality.

Modeling quality, culture and pedagogy

The notions of technology, quality, perceptions, culture and pedagogy were revisited and interrogated in terms of the study's findings. These concepts were used to situate a model of quality, culture and pedagogy capable of explaining the findings of the study in terms of their specific context. This model, based on Henderson (1996; 2007) described the findings in terms of nine dimensions:

- Pedagogical Philosophy
- Underlying Psychology
- Goal Orientation
- Experiential Value
- Role of Instructor
- Value of Errors
- Structure
- Accommodation of Individual Difference
- Learner Control

It was found that the learners in SA showed the characteristics of those in an 'Eastern' culture, with a particular emphasis on the importance and role of the teacher. The implications of this cultural setting and its influence on the learner's experiences of and perceptions about DeL is discussed in the final chapter, where it is shown that change and reform must be considered in a social context, and cannot be determined abstractly. Instead, a holistic approach is taken, considering the parameters in which improvements to the quality of DeL in SA can be made.

Chapter 7. Implications and Conclusions

This final chapter of this thesis is addressed to the stakeholders who have the capacity to affect the direction of development of DeL in SA. It will begin here by analysing the implications for future reform within three sections. The first section will consider the theoretical implications of DeL and situate the findings in relation to the academic discourse considered in the literature review. The second section will address policymakers at a strategic or institutional level, providing recommendations for concrete changes both to the framework for and the delivery methods of DeL. The final section will consider the methodological implications of this study, offering advice to future researchers in this domain, who may choose to approach such questions via a pragmatic methodology.

A final discussion, under the heading of Conclusion, will provide an Executive Summary of the major contributions made by the present study to the body of knowledge, examining students' perceptions of quality in DeL in SA. Avenues for future study will be indicated, and a summary of the limitations of the present study will be briefly discussed.

7.1 Theoretical Implications

The results of the present study have brought to light the tension between the local priorities of students in SA and the globalised-technical approach regarding quality standards in DeL. As Altbach states: "these broad [...] trends [...] are inevitable" (2016, p.83), and therefore cannot be ignored. The literature review has established that a generation of theorists are beginning to investigate the application of DeL in diverse localities and that there is an emergent line of argument that 'one size does not fit all' (Latchem, 2014). Instead, there must be some consideration of the local context. This does not mean that nothing can be borrowed, nor that we cannot learn from the experiences of others. However, the assumption that, after certain stages of 'translation', the possibility exists to import external DeL practices (such as Edmundson, 2007) fails to grasp the deeper levels of culture that the present study has investigated. With its focus on constructivist and connectivist modes of learning, the Western approach to DeL is foreign to learners in SA, who associate quality in education with the styles to which they are accustomed (Gunawardena, 2014).

However, there remains a tension between the desires of students in SA to set off down this path to a more 'modern' mode of learning and the realities of the education they receive; discourse may be even more entrenched in its belief that the traditional, didactic method is the most appropriate form of teaching. In many ways, SA now bears witness to competing

discourses in the field of DeL, those existing between the students and the institutions, between traditionalists and modernists, and between localists and globalists. The major implications of this study are that: firstly, mediation between these stakeholders is required to find the correct path for DeL in SA; and secondly, by any reasonable measure, the balance is currently tipped too far in the favour of the traditional and didactic methods. Such didacticism is usually paired with a one way, broadcast media (Anderson and Dron, 2011) and not the potentially richer information-environment of a DeL platform. As we have outlined in the Study Setting, the general political programme in SA aims to integrate the national economy with the global; hence, the skill set required for this change necessitates a move toward the constructivist skills that the globalised economy demands.

Saudi culture teaches students to depend upon their teachers as the primary source of knowledge. This rather traditional educational model entails that many people struggle to adapt to more student-centred learning modes, particularly when group discussions are a prerequisite for learning. Our findings have shown that the provision of DeL programmes has begun to address this resistance because they enable students to engage with peers and teachers in a variety of innovative new ways to enhance their learning outcomes. Although this process is at a nascent stage, it has been shown that students believe participation in communication using online platforms can offer new ways of interacting with peers and teachers.

However, it is clear that it would not be feasible to follow the suggestion simply to import global-culture DeL and so make long-term changes to the traditional learning model in a short timeframe. The reason is that major foreign cultures, such as the Saudi culture, have deeply embedded traditions and historical values. That being said, students in SA have become more accepting of alternative learning modes and are now developing a brand-new culture of learning due to their exposure to online learning methods and the web2.0 environment in general.

The transition from one-way communication to two-way communication between students and teachers and students and their peers is perhaps the most fundamental difference of this new learning culture, being that students are now invited to interact more openly with one another and the teacher in the VLE. As such, Saudi students have adopted more student-centred learning methods as a consequence of receiving online learning. However, these changes driven by students' expectations and capabilities are relatively shallow cultural changes compared to the deeper well of the national pedagogical culture. To fully enact a pivot towards constructivist learning, a greater degree of 'buy-in' from institutions would be

required. This change requires changes at an organisational level in the culture of HE institutions which, in certain aspects such as class size, are clearly not prompting an environment in which collaborative and exploratory learning can take place. However, it should be repeated here that cultural change cannot take place on only one agent level; instead, there should be a more general introduction of the learning styles which constitute quality in DeL at all levels of education.

7.2 Practical Implications

The present study offers a range of practical implications addressed to a wide range of stakeholders. They are grouped in correspondence with the main factors, and the sub-divided into strategic, meta-level implications, and then those on a meso-institutional level. These recommendations stress the necessity of change in DeL provision to be slow, gradual, and rolled out in stages (Minnaar, 2013). Minnaar demonstrates why this measured approach is superior to an ad-hoc deployment across several axes, noting that if many stakeholders become disappointed and frustrated by DeL programmes that lack quality, it is irrevocably devalued as an institution. In a nation with little historical experience of DeL, this caution is even more necessary, allowing time to review and reflect upon both opportunities and barriers as they arise.

Institutional support and Vision

Strategic Level Implication

Campbell and Schwier (2014) state that there must be a vision underpinning any plan about DeL. DeL must be considered a practice in itself and not an inferior version or replacement for traditional HE. To ensure the successful delivery of a DeL programme, universities must develop a cohesive overview of the goals of the programme and must become familiar with the attitude and approach of teaching staff towards the concept of DeL. This would enable the development of a comprehensive plan to transfer from the traditional to the virtual learning environment (Wright et al., 2009; see also Shearer, 2013 in Table 3.3). Nonetheless, limited research regarding DeL in SA would naturally make it harder for institutions to collect the necessary data. Thus, a specialised DeL research centre should be founded to perform research on the behalf of all institutions offering DeL programmes. This centre should ideally focus on the requirements of students, teachers and administrators. Minnaar (2013) showed that most providers of DeL make changes on an ad-hoc basis, working as individuals. Their experiences of what is effective and not effective are only understood on an institutional level, and sharing of these concepts does not take place. This means that in the absence of a

centralised strategy, or of at least a discursive forum for the discussion of strategy, mistakes will be re-made in other places, and successes will not be repeated.

It is natural that institutions will explore and occupy new spaces of possibility and many HE providers in SA offer DeL to students; however, this instinct must be checked if quality is to be maintained. One particular set of problems is caused when the motivation for an institution is financial. Here,

Institutions rush to provide technology-enhanced learning or ODL, which is in contrast with their initial goals and strategies, in an effort to stay competitive in the field or for financial reasons. Financial reasons are usually the wrong reasons for implementing ODL or technology-advanced learning. (Minnaar, 2013, p.82)

The present study follows Minnaar's recommendation that the path to DeL must be pursued slowly if quality is to be maintained throughout its rollout, as rapid and ad-hoc expansion can lead to problems. In the short term, the use of blended learning, a fusion of face-to-face and online learning, may be a stepping-stone that could allow both institutions and students to adapt to the new online environment.

Institutional Level Implications

It was clear from the study findings that students were generally supportive of the concept of DeL, while this support was strongest when they considered the flexibility of DeL. According to the participants, one of the key benefits of DeL was the ability to take part regardless of time or location. The institutions offering DeL should remain aware of the needs of students for flexibility, striving to increase it wherever possible. As Draves (2002) has stated, the Internet may be the biggest change in society being that the printing press and institutions should not act passively, simply floating upon this tide of progress, but actively pursue the opportunities it has provided. Guri Rosenbilt (2014) characterises teaching universities as the type of institution with the reach to engage in international partnerships or as members of global networks and such opportunities must be exploited.

Institutions can be tempted by the prospect of importing DeL courses and modules from external providers, yet this must be moderated. Even the most advanced models of cultural adaptation (Edmundson, 2006; Young, 2008) can only cope with simple issues of translation if unsupported by experts. The importation of larger chunks of education material requires mediation by educationalists with a solid grounding in culture or, as recommended by Kinuthia (2012, p.96), "instructional designers and instructors [must] work closely with departments and colleagues who specialise in topics of culture". However, there are too few staff with this specialisation and further training must be encouraged.

It should also be noted that, in addition to such practical advantages, DeL offers a series of benefits in terms of diversifying the range of learning styles and teaching cultures available to students in SA, while institutional strategy should continue to aim towards this. DeL has also had a favourable impact on the students' learning experiences by increasing their cognitive power and encouraging them to take a broader view of the topic. As such, online learning takes the emphasis away from traditional book-based learning and instead focuses on the communal exchange of knowledge and the critical discussion of research topics. Such a change cannot be enacted overnight and would require the support of many stakeholders, particularly the delivery staff who are required to teach the students, as discussed in the section below.

Faculty Training and Support

Strategic Level Implication

There are many motivating factors affecting the attitudes of HE staff, as expressed in Table 3.2. Sufficient support must be provided to institutions to provide the highest quality DeL, and this involves offering sufficient rewards, both financial and social, for instructors to commit fully to DeL. Despite the apparently alluring marginal costs of enrolling additional students, DeL cannot be done 'on a shoestring'.

In addition, training on a national level may be required to ensure best practice can be shared and that institutions do not unwittingly repeat the mistakes of others or overlook their successes either. Again, Minnaar's (2013) recommendation of gradual change is pertinent. It may not be possible to provide quality DeL overnight being that, for Minnaar, it can take up to five years to build up a core staff establishment that is equipped to fully operate DeL. Expectations must therefore be realistic if quality is to be provided.

Institutional Level Implications

In facilitating the delivery of DeL programmes, the provision of teacher training in the application of available technology is a crucial factor in ensuring the positive learning outcomes of students. However, the provision of support services and training in the use of such technology is just as important as the provision of technology services alone will do little to improve the situation unless teachers are first trained in how to utilise such services effectively. University management should also stress the value of using a wide range of teaching methods and eliminate any negative attitudes that staff may have developed towards new technological resources. For instance, training courses could be provided along with a robust and dependable technical support system.

Minnaar (2013) states that: “Small successes draw people to the change process”. Her logic is that, “In the end it is easy to get the buy-in of academics when small successes are a reality in ODL delivery.” Yet the experience of DeL in SA has all too often taken the opposite path, in which an institution has attempted large-scale change but this has caught staff in a state of unreadiness and unwillingness to invest the levels of time and commitment required to achieve quality. Although education is subject to a division of labour along classical fault lines of subject and faculty, there is seldom a division into competencies such as “communication, curriculum design, course design, assessors, motivators, facilitators” (Minnaar, 2013). These skills are not always directly transferrable from traditional HE but, according to Moore and Kearsley (2005), educators should be specialists in these skills across the medium in which they are being delivered. Here, research reported that many staff were simply assigned from traditional HE without extra training.

Student Support

Strategic Level Implications

One of the most commonly expressed worries of the students surveyed in our study concerned the status of DeL compared to traditional HE. Students have a strong desire not to have their degrees taken as ‘second class’ qualification and wish to receive equal recognition with traditional HE. This would indeed be desirable to legitimise and accredit the skills of learners who, upon completing their course, are at least as well-educated as those leaving traditional HE. However, achieving the equalisation of DeL and HE requires a push to normalise the status of DeL in education and there are concrete steps that can be taken in this respect, such as universal acceptance of the validity of DeL degree in public sector employment and as an entry path to further study.

Institutional Level Implications

The consensus about student support in DeL is that the latest technological platforms are “more proactive, more purposeful, and more effective in helping learners succeed in their studies” (Brindly, 2014, p.305). The technical tools are available for learner support in SA to be outstanding, yet they are clearly not being utilised to the full at an institutional or classroom scale.

This study identified the lack of communication between students and teachers as a key obstacle to the learning outcome of students. Naturally, a meeting in person is difficult to organise on account of large student numbers and their diverse geographical locations. Nonetheless, to facilitate more effective DeL teachers must make use of all the available

technological resources, such as email, Skype and chatrooms. It is also advisable to use social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. In addition, teachers should set aside specific times in which they are available to engage in dialogue with students and answer any questions they may have. Beyond this commitment, it is clear that there are issues of ambiguity inherent to the DeL curricula that lead to setbacks because students and teachers are unlikely to ever meet face-to-face. Thus, student inquiries are often not answered satisfactorily and, as such, efforts must be made to ensure that the curriculum is easy to understand and follow, to avoid students requiring issues to be clarified or addressed by teachers who may not have time to do so adequately.

Gaskell (2009) argues that the most effective method of retaining students in DeL is through a two-way dialogue about expectations and feedback between students and the institution (see also McLoughlin, 1999). However, it was found in the case study that there is not even effective one-way communication from the institution to the students. This is an area that is easy to improve, and offers great rewards, as it ensures students are more likely to achieve their goals and to be satisfied (Iqbal and Bhatti, 2015).

Course Design

Strategic Level Implication

During the strategic planning phase, planners of [DeL] need to buy in to a singular vision to move forward. It is recommended that the [DeL] policy and the mandate from government on [DeL] be clear to ensure alignment of all policies and processes for [DeL] delivery (Minnaar, 2013, p.102).

The role of best practice in the provision of DeL is to ensure there is a cascading sequence in the planning stage, which begins with setting goals driven by strategic and visionary thinking and then leads to a SWOT analysis of HE, social context and economic forces. It is crucial that this leadership be provided to institutions, guiding them with the concrete aims that DeL sets out to achieve. As Miller and Rader (2010) and Campbell and Schwier (2014) note, in quality practice all specific course planning is downstream from institutional planning. Wright et al. (2009) emphasises that this can be a problem in developing or modernising countries.

Institutional Level Implications

The planning of units should involve a template that can be adapted to the specific needs of the situation. DeL rollout should be carefully planned and should initially be offered in the course whose content and students are most amenable to the medium.

Interaction is an essential part of an educational experience, while DeL must be designed to offer students the interaction with instructors that they demand and associate with quality. Moreover, it should also encourage further and deeper interaction with peers and technology and resources. Such an approach would constitute a shift to a more constructivist form of education but without sacrificing the students' desire to interact with the figure of the teacher, which remains of significant cultural importance to them. Currently, students are denied social presence both through restrictions imposed on the platform and large class sizes. Key attributes such as intimacy and immediacy (Shearer, 2013) are not being created by the impersonal teaching methods reported in the findings. Currently, DeL in SA is at the beginning of a path towards developing interaction, yet we should bear in mind the goal of moving towards a time:

When the focus of attention shifts from content to learning activities and human interactions around content and peers, [and] social learning and evolving communities of practice enrich future learning. (Ehlers, 2013, 2)

Some students appeared to be more confident about using online resources when communicating with teachers and fellow students (Hamdan, 2014 discusses such students in SA). These students also enjoyed the beneficial impact that these new experiences had on their ability to think critically, as well as their overall verbal and written communication abilities. These new learning opportunities also enhanced their overall cognitive capacity and their overall knowledge of the subject of the programme. Shearer (2013) suggests that social media must be integrated into DeL, being that learners were already comfortable with the technologies. Indeed, the present study has shown that they expect such technologies to be used in DeL and associate their presence with quality.

To some extent, the findings also indicate that students appreciate the greater level of control over their learning outcomes offered by DeL, particularly in relation to the ability to submit assignments online, offer feedback and engage in discussions with topics of interest that arise. A student-centred approach to learning will also place emphasis on the importance of such control and this has been responsible for considerable improvements to the learning culture in SA. However, as Shearer (2013) states, DeL courses must be carefully designed to ensure deep learning takes place, being that the nature of the platform tends to encourage superficial discussions that are rapidly superseded or forgotten.

However, bearing in mind the comfort that learners in SA have derived in the current assessment model, such changes must be gradual rather than sudden, while they must bear in mind the dominant cultural modes that currently exist. Behaviourist assessment is associated

with fairness for some learners, being that there is a ‘right’ answer, while for other learners it may be unfair because it is “standardised, impersonal, absolute” (Campbell and Schwier, 2014, p.360) and fails to take their needs into account. Moving beyond behaviourism entails the differentiation of learners and their abilities. The platforms of DeL provide opportunities to scaffold learners through tasks that involve learning styles they are not used to. Scaffolding is becoming an issue of interest to scholars of DeL (Belland, 2014). Furthermore, in DeL, both content and assessment can be tailored towards the experiences and preferences of learners and can therefore start from a concrete rather than abstract perspective. Hence, the best courses coming from a quality perspective of, particularly those utilising the perspective of the learners, will harness students’ skills, identities and experiences to add richness to the learning process (Campbell and Schwier, 2014). Again, this topic cannot be considered in isolation from the others, being that such richness requires investments from *institutional support* and in *faculty training and support*.

7.3 Methodological Implications

Situating the study findings in relation to the preceding literature review was an opportunity to note many interesting discontinuities and lacunae. These observations have, in turn, raised theoretical questions about the methodological feasibility of situating this specific study within firm epistemological conditions, if any are applicable. For example, the dominant discourse in research on assessment points towards pluralised modes across several styles (Campbell and Schwier, 2014), yet the students surveyed demonstrated no desire to move to such a model.

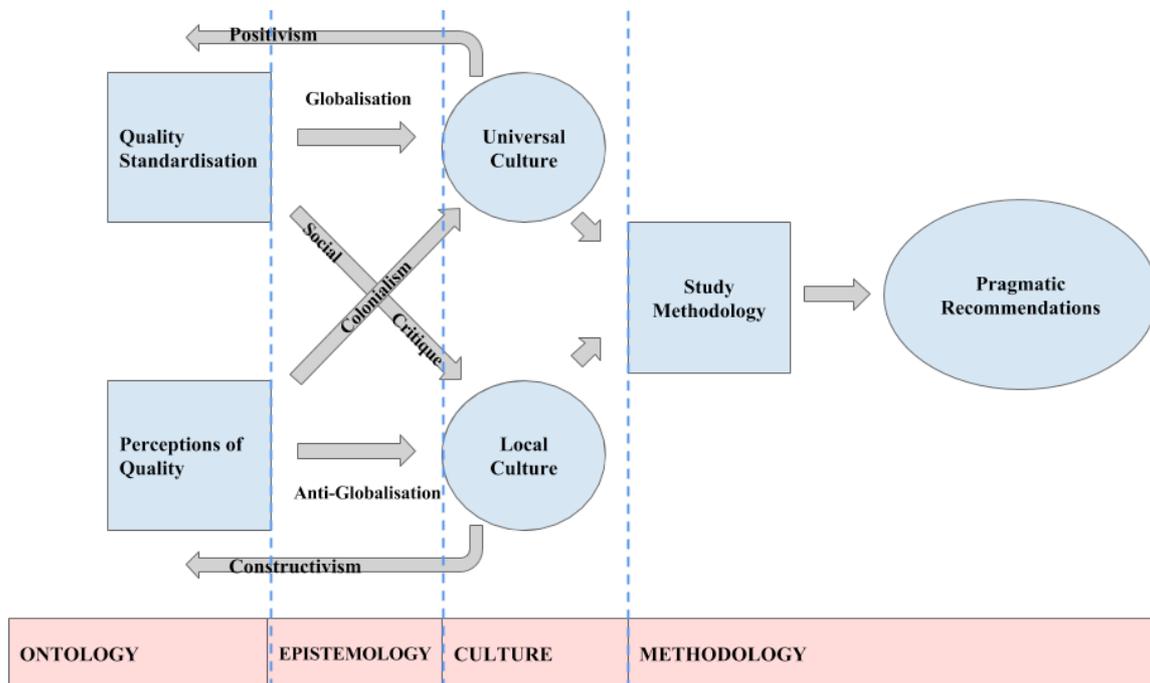
Consequently, there seems to be no palatable choice left to the researcher here with regard to the conflict previously cited between the dominant positivist/constructivist paradigm. He is either to endorse a one-size-fits-all Western model on positivist grounds or to accept that there is no correct solution to the problem, where each culture is equally correct in choosing the model with which it is comfortable. The other alternative is to attempt the construction of an epistemically dubious position as one that attempts to occupy a space in the middle. However, at this stage in the research, the researcher is satisfied with a choice that relies upon ‘what works’; that is, to opt for a method that looks at outcome rather than theory, where the possible rather than the abstract or ideological becomes a strength.

The theoretical discourse of education and the views of the students involved in this study were often found to be in opposition. Hence, the notion of resolving this dialectic in favour of one side or the other – which may be the consequence of a more ideological epistemology –

seems to be fundamentally flawed. The path to improved DeL in SA thus involves a compromise between the desires of students and the use of the new methods and technologies imported via knowledge of the best practice across the world. Both sides must learn from the other's strengths while, conversely, accepting their own weaknesses. It would seem counter-productive to question such a pragmatic approach.

The methodological revelation at the heart of this study thus concerns the importance of culture in understanding perceptions. The ontological and epistemological concepts upon which this research project draws form the grounds for its understanding of truth. Hence, our study shows how, in one sense, these concepts provide the basis for the most revealing observations on the social-cultural framework in which our study population exists. The model below clarifies this position of importance (Figure 7.1). Each of the arrows represents a major theory in moving towards or emanating from the crucial cultural level. Hence, researchers following this study would be advised to give precedence to socio-cultural theories in the process of framing how they will understand and contextualise their work.

Figure 7.1: Towards a Model of Cultural Context and Methodology



7.4 Executive Summary

The digitalisation of HE and the growth of DeL are currently changing the landscape of education. The speed of change is increasing, while there is fierce global competition between nations to produce the workforces that can excel in the modern information age (Oliver,

2005). There is a strong rationale for the use of DeL in SA, being that it offers levels of inclusion and social justice that are not provided by traditional HE. However, there are also many challenges and barriers faced by DeL, which is a very new and unexplored phenomenon in a culturally traditional nation. Nonetheless, rather than the risk being left behind in a networked world (Masoumi and Lindstrom, 2012), the government of SA is pressing on with the introduction of DeL on a larger scale.

This thesis has considered the dominant discourse regarding quality in DeL and found that there are sets of standards developed by e-quality models rooted in Western or Anglo-Saxon culture. Each of these standards focuses on similar metrics by which quality can be measured. Approaches to quality in educational theory were shown to derive from industrial approaches to quality. Consequently, they often take on an objectivist character, focusing on set benchmarks that are seen to denote the best practices. A second discourse was analysed which was one of pedagogy and culture. This discourse, more subjectivist in nature, has exposed deep differences in culture and expectations of learning in Western and Eastern modes. Here, using both Hofstede (2015) and Hall (1976, 1990) Saudi culture was shown to be largely Eastern in its approach, raising a set of questions about the effectiveness - and even the possibility - of importing the Western model of DeL to the nation. The Western model - low context, according to Hall - can be confusing and disappointing for those not used to it.

Much of the existing research on legislative approaches to DeL in SA has concentrated upon technology. As discussed in Section 3.3.1, there is a causal question about the use of technology in DeL. Remtulla (2008) asks if technology alone can change culture, or if it is only a tool of a specific culture. Spector et al. (2014) conclude that it is incapable of making a difference alone. Yet in SA, the first 'lever' to be pulled is always that of technology. Such a focus amounts to the error of concentrating on technology as the goal itself, rather than as the means to pedagogical goals (Bates, 2007). The literature review has shown that this is a common problem when DeL is imported to the developing world (Sutherland et al., 2004).

The group of stakeholders who are perhaps most disappointed with the outcomes of DeL in SA are the students themselves (Alarini, 2013). Whilst they appreciate certain aspects of their courses, they were disappointed with the lack of status awarded to DeL degrees in society. They have also perceived failure on the part of the faculty to utilise the advantages provided by DeL platforms.

Jung (2011) has argued that the most effective pathway to improving quality in DeL is to understand the views of its users, the students. The path to understanding these views

involves gauging their perceptions about their experiences of DeL. Our study has attempted to understand the perceptions of students in SA, not only in regard the barriers and obstacles they face but through the strengths and weaknesses they found in their courses.

The concerns of Saudi learners have been characterised in several existing studies (Alharthi, 2005; Al-Sagaf, 2004; Algasim, 2011; Sultan et al., 2012; Al Seghayer, 2013). Here, students were found to favour a certain behavioural model of education that they have been conditioned culturally to expect and so to associate with quality. In contrasting notions of quality with notions of cultural specificity, our study has hence investigated the space in which these students exist. We have begun to capture their perceptions about quality, not only in terms of objectivist benchmarks considered to constitute quality in the Western models, but also in terms of their own sets of values and beliefs.

The study thus seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are Saudi students' perceptions of the importance of quality standards in DeL?
2. What are Saudi students' perceptions of the current application of quality standards in their current DeL course?
3. What are students' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of their DeL course?
4. What are students' perceptions of the barriers arising during their DeL course?
5. What changes would students make to improve quality in DeL?

The purpose of the first question was to discover what students believe to constitute important standards in DeL. The second question aimed to find out whether these standards were being applied to their course, or if they felt that they were lacking. Together, these two questions allow a comparison between what students want and what they feel they are given.

The third question then sought to determine those elements that students took to be positive and negative about their DeL experience. The fourth and fifth questions aimed to find out how students believed their DeL experience could be improved, through the removal of barriers or by making enhancements. As a set, these questions have enabled us to investigate Saudi student experiences of DeL and the cultural context within which they have held these beliefs.

The method used in this study was mixed, that is, there was a quantitative element comprising a survey of 591 students and a qualitative element through interviewing two focus groups (a total of 19 students) selected from the sample. The analysis of quality in education, and

specifically in DeL in the literature review, has provided a framework for understanding commonly measured standards, and this was the basis of the list of 31 items surveys across three dimensions.

These three dimensions were then tailored to represent the benchmarks that would be most appropriate to ask students. For the purposes of this research, they were categorised as those involved in *teaching and learning processes*, *course structure* and *student support*. Two criteria were used in the study: perception of importance of the standard, and perception of application of the standard. Whilst many previous studies have concentrated only on the importance of the standard, the present has also considered its application. In other words, we wanted to explore whether, in accordance with its pragmatic methodological assumptions, it could generate prescriptions for removing barriers and making changes to the provision of DeL.

The pragmatic methodology chosen was selected because it provided flexibility in researching this evolving, dynamic field of education without being tied to dogmatic epistemological or ontological conceptions of truth or reality. Such predetermined positions could compromise the study's ability to take a holistic view of students' beliefs about DeL. Furthermore, it is hoped that the study will yield a set of practical recommendations that can make an immediate impact of the quality of DeL in SA.

Upon addressing the first research question on *students' perceptions of the importance of quality in DeL*, it was discovered that Saudi students believe that *student support* is the most important dimension, and the only one to be considered *very important*. Learners were particularly convinced of the importance that technical support is provided to them, and that there is an adequate complaints procedure. However, whilst the students surveyed considered each of the three dimensions crucial to their DeL experience, the other two – respectively *course structure* and *teaching and learning processes* – were only considered to be *important*.

The items scoring the lowest in the survey concerned *learning tasks* and the *nature of the pedagogy* on DeL courses. It was found that Saudi students were not particularly concerned with having diversity in learning tasks, nor with collaborative work being set. This was the first observed instance of the tension, as described above, between the Western doctrine on quality in education and the cultural expectations of the learners on the DeL course.

Upon addressing the second question on students' perceptions of *the current application of quality standards in their current DeL*, it was found that the perception of the application of standards is isomorphic with the perception of importance, with few variations. Nonetheless,

there was universally lower ratings of application, averaging about 0.7 lower on the Likert scale. This finding demonstrates a clear gap between what students desire and what they are given regarding DeL standards.

In the teaching and learning processes category, it was observable that the items relating to constructivist learning scored the lowest in both categories. The conclusion to be drawn here is that students took these elements to be of neutral importance and that they did not particularly see them as being applied.

The third question revealed students' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of their DeL course. However, during the focus groups, it became clear that there was a complex relationship between culture and pedagogy in SA. Hence, in consideration of the issues explicitly raised by students, the following list emerged:

- The primary strengths of DeL included: the low cost, practicality and accessibility; flexibility; the community of learning; the opportunities to communicate with teachers and peers; and the range of resources. Moreover, the technology used was considered excellent by the students.
- The primary weaknesses then included: the drop-out rate; frustrations with communications; the status of the degree; and the lack of updated courses.

In terms of responding to the questions outlined above, the issue with which students failed to grapple expressly was that of culture and pedagogy. Nonetheless, it was clear to us as researchers that this question was the key to understanding the current state of DeL in SA.

Finally, regarding the fourth and fifth questions on *What are students' perceptions of the barriers arising during their DeL course* and *What changes would students make to improve quality in DeL*, the following issues were raised:

- Barriers included: lack of pre-sessional information; lack of flexibility; feelings of isolation; assessment-focused courses; issues with communication (particularly from teachers); lack of staff support and training; and failure to integrate web 2.0.
- Enhancements included: the possibility of using web 2.0; better communication; more resources; a better status for DeL; more flexibility with the curriculum; and a change in the attitude to learning of some students.

Common to many of the issues raised in this study is the fact that these problems may be attributed to the fast pace of the introduction of DeL and its unplanned manner. If there were more structure given to institutional planning and the staff training and support phases of planning new initiatives, then many of these errors could be rectified. Institutions must also learn from each other's successes and spread best practice. The role of technology in DeL can be problematic as planners often see it as the key to good DeL, which is to the detriment of the underlying pedagogy. There is a need for cooperation between technical specialists and educators to ensure collaboration in the design.

When we draw the threads of the study together to capture the essence of students' views on DeL quality in Saudi universities, it is easy to identify the importance of culture in our reflections on educational reform. On the one hand, we have considered the literature about quality in DeL while, on the other, we have taken account of the views of students embedded in their educational culture. These views are similar on certain issues, such as the importance of technology being fast, reliable and up-to-date, but in other areas they differ.

The most notable difference concerns pedagogic culture, in which we see the students' preference for didactic, behaviourist methods contrary to the approach favoured by more modern educational theory. When we examine their opinion on crucial notions such as that of interaction, we see the demands of the students for a certain type of top-down, teacher-oriented integration. This preference is rather different to the constructivist, peer-to-peer interaction that modern educational theory holds to be the gold standard.

The *National Transformation Program 2020* (2016) states that, as well as supporting lifelong learning, the establishment of a student-centred learning model is a priority. The path to improving DeL should consider both the views of educational experts and the concerns of the students with their notions of quality, especially in the light of the low status currently held by DeL in SA. Educators understand the goals of education in terms of the needs of learners, whilst technical staff can be distracted by the fascination of the new.

In other words, modernity in DeL is about more than just the technology itself. Instead, it comes from the potential usage of third generation DE technologies, such as web 2.0, to implement new styles of pedagogy. These technologies can provide a platform for more than simple behaviourism, even if they are often underused by educators and unappreciated by students. However, hope for a new age of DeL in SA can be seen in the findings of the focus group in which some students have appeared to move away from traditional educational styles and towards new ways of thinking.

Moreover, the spread of the Internet and web 2.0, along with the increasingly pressured demands of global business, have motivated young Saudis to rethink their traditional views on education and shift towards more of an ‘information age’ perspective. Institutions should then use this change in attitude to secure a bridge between traditional notions of quality and new notions of quality, working to create a culture in which constructivist and connectivist education is both desired by students and associated with excellence.

We should note that Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir’s *Chatham House Address* of 7th September 2016 emphasised that the notion of change is inherent to Saudi society. From his perspective, the kingdom has been embracing waves of change since its reformation in 1932. In conclusion, educational policy in online learning has already played a part in meeting the *Vision 2030* (2016) objectives both of integrating with the needs of employers and contributing to effective e-government. Meanwhile, as learning technology, DeL still has the potential to go even further.

7.5 Limitations

It is worth noting some potential limitations of the present thesis. Firstly, the models provided must be considered provisional. As researchers, we selected the benchmarks and standards used as the best possible instruments for capturing students’ perceptions. However, other important standards not included here and it would be wrong to deny that these other benchmarks may be of significance with regard to the questions examined here.

Furthermore, the sampling of students in place of other stakeholders in the institutional context, such as teachers or administrators, has proved to be a limitation. In effect, we have limited our research to the perspective of only one group in the education system. As the discussion in Section 3.2.1 noted, following Ehrlers (2013), different stakeholders have different definitions of and expectations about quality.

We should also note that there are many overlapping definitions of notions such as DeL, e-learning or DE. In addition, there are multiple conceptions of quality, benchmarks or standards. Similar studies use different definitions and models of these terms to this one, and there may be differences in the findings.

The population of the study also reflects those individuals who were willing to participate, rather than the body of students as a whole. If the sample had been wider, then the results may have been different. Moreover, the mixed methods approach employed here proved incompatible with the social mores prevalent in SA, meaning that it was impossible to capture

the views of both genders in the focus group stage. In fact, the researcher was willing to amend the methodology to accommodate female focus groups but there were no participants willing to participate after the proposed change in approach.

The students sampled were not divided by subject group, and there is potential for finding that exemplary practice and less successful teaching is concentrated in certain subjects – this would not be found by this data. However, the curricula for all subjects are to some extent mixed in this early stage of DeL and many modules are shared across courses. This may be worthy of future study, such as comparing between different specialisations (i.e. Art and Science) or between two different modules in one course (Mathematics vs. Arabic for example).

The items in the questionnaire were designed to reflect students' experience of DeL. However, we did not introduce an item enquiring about their overall satisfaction with the course because of the possibility that students dissatisfied with the course would use the questionnaire as an opportunity to protest about it. Such responses would negate the objective standards against which we had hope to survey them.

Problems of this nature are somewhat unavoidable in Likert-type surveys. Nonetheless, an additional item about overall satisfaction may have been a useful addition, if only to determine whether those students reporting negatively about standards were dissatisfied with their experience of DeL.

In addition, the survey was complex in nature and made demands of participants both to understand the items and to map their beliefs about their importance and application effectively to Likert-scale scores. It is possible that some misinterpretation occurred when students completed the questionnaire and so perceptions about the referent of the questions varied from student to student. Similarly, we did not establish an objective means of evaluating the strength of Likert-scale responses. Hence, different students may have believed that the numbers reflected different gradations of both importance and application.

The questionnaire may have benefitted from additional structured open-ended forms to be added, for each dimension, to allow participants to feel free to provide more information of a type that is not included in the previous, structured form. Though the focus group aimed at gathering this sort of information, it would have allowed responses from a larger sample.

We should also note that while every effort was made to ensure accurate translation between the Arabic and English versions of the survey, it is never possible to achieve total

equivalence. In other words, the potential problem remains that the two languages do not allow the survey responses to be expressed in precisely the same terms.

Many of the studies into the cultural-pedagogical models upon which the study is based utilise a Western/Eastern dichotomy. Here, those aspects referring to Eastern culture have been used to understand the cultural beliefs of students in SA. However, more specific research is required to understand the particularities of the culture in SA. In other words, it should be understood as an entity in itself and not as an extension of a nebulous 'Eastern' culture with which it is not isomorphic.

Researchers have frequently argued that, in many cases, the findings of case studies are not generalisable (Yin, 2014). Nonetheless, in the context of SA, we can highlight a few similarities between the universities providing DeL. These are as follows:

- All Saudi Arabia's DeL institutions are under the control of the DoHE; therefore, their decision-making capabilities are not completely independent of the DoHE.
- Saudi universities resemble each other in terms of their centralised administrative and organisational structure. Consequently, problems arising from this centralisation have had a similar impact upon different institutions.
- The two universities selected as case studies for this research were the first two universities to apply DeL in SA; they may therefore be considered as role models for other Saudi universities seeking to implement DeL.

Therefore, we can conclude that the findings of this study are potentially transferable to similar cases in the Saudi context. However, there are specific things about other universities that are not captured in the sample. For example, we should note that newer universities in SA may have different policies to the older ones sampled here.

7.6 Future Research Recommendations

Many potential avenues of future research have been illuminated not only by the findings of this study with regard to the implications of DeL, but by the limitations noted above. The hope is that this study has begun a trend for investigating quality from the perspective of Saudi Arabian students. Moreover, further questions that may be clarified through the employment of similar methods, as well as issues arising from our findings demanding the use of other research methods.

This study has outlined the relatively short history of DeL, which has nevertheless become a topic of debate in government and in every stratum of SA society. We have noted that this type of education depends entirely on the separation between the student and the teacher, limiting communication to electronic channels. Therefore, our study has not examined certain forms of integrating of e-learning – such as in blended learning - that have been applied by some Saudi universities. Further research is needed to examine students' views of quality in blended learning, addressing the technical side in such a domain, as well as determining how this kind of learning may be affected by cultural and pedagogical factors. It is in such a way that a more comprehensive comparison can be made between it and DeL.

In terms of broad methodology, this research has shown that analysing individual perceptions in terms of standards may provide the basis for a study seeking to differentiate students' views about quality. Indeed, there are other sets of standards and other institutions that may be surveyed using similar methods. Moreover, the mixed methods approach employed in this study has highlighted the benefits of using focus groups. They have proved to add clarity and triangulation to the results derived from our questionnaire data.

Nonetheless, there are populations still unrepresented by our methodology being that it only surveyed those who are current students. These unrepresented groups may include those who drop out, as well as recent graduates. The drop-outs may, in particular, be a rich source of information about barriers to success in DeL, as well as problems with the current system. Conversely, recent graduates would be able to speak of opportunities and enhancements in the domain.

Overall, our study has captured a static picture of students' perceptions in SA. The most interesting elements of the discussion have been around the notion of culture and its relation to pedagogy. One of the key questions we found here concerns the direction and speed of change in students' expectations and attitudes. A future study might consider how these changes over time would be worthy of further investigation, particularly in view of the rapid pace of development there.

It would also be interesting to see this methodology repeated in other contexts. Indeed, the picture found is not of a simple Western-Eastern division, but of a much more complicated, fragmented set of local cultural patterns and institutions, each of which has had an effect on pedagogy and education. In many ways, the classification of nations into either 'Western' or 'developing' can no longer capture cultural differences comprehensively. Instead, there is growing evidence that the Western/Eastern classification may be more revealing.

Many of the recommendations made here have been at an institutional level, suggesting change in both administrative and faculty behaviour. Subsequent research of the inter-relationships between students and providers, one investigating the capacities of each group to achieve change both individually and together; would help to enlighten us further about public policy and the best solutions for effecting change in DeL. Furthermore, we would consider to be valuable any future studies into the changes and transformations experienced in faculty who have adapted to and used DeL.

The study indicated that students were generally satisfied with the technology used in their DeL course. However, a question remains as to the extent of their awareness of OEP and OER technologies and the range of platforms becoming available (Ehrlers, 2013). One fruitful line of inquiry would potentially be to concentrate on student satisfaction with regard to the different technologies being developed in this area. Such research could guide future allocations of resources into the most effective platform, so helping to homogenise future development of DeL. In other words, there are aspects of quality relating to technology that must be unpicked from pedagogy to be fully understood.

Finally, one of the most practical steps we might take would be, for instance, to further investigate the technologies and pedagogies that are constructivist in nature but are associated with quality by students in SA. These ‘outliers’ may provide the key to changing the dominant pedagogical culture from the ‘industrial age’ behaviourism, to a more ‘information age’ constructivism. In fact, Hamdan (2014) has begun to work towards a theory of a reciprocal relationship between culture and DeL, claiming that the adaption of the later alters learning culture. Alongside our study, we would emphasise that Hamdan’s narrative of empowerment, culture-change and critical thinking maps out the groundwork for future generations of educational theorists in SA to explore. The task for researchers will be to study the effects of the changes that DeL has made both to the learning culture in SA and then to the wider cultural framework. Hamdan presents a set of skills developed by online learners that are not currently held by traditional HE students in SA. Hence, future research highlighting the practical uses of these skills would be a sound basis for resolving the problems of the status of Distance e-Learning in Saudi Arabia.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Cover Letter for the Questionnaire

Dear Distance e-learning Student,

This is to confirm that this questionnaire is part of a Doctoral degree study conducted by Ali Alhathlol and entitled ‘Quality of Distance e-Learning at Saudi Universities: Students’ Perceptions’. Distance e-Learning –in this research – means university and higher education programmes that are provided at distance via the Internet and its applications on the Web, whether the learning is synchronous (live with the teacher) or asynchronous (recorded). The objective of this study is to identify the views of students in relation to the quality of Distance e-Learning at Saudi universities, in order to determine what could be done to improve the programmes, policies and applications for Saudi Universities that apply Distance e-Learning.

Considering that your point of view plays an important role in raising the quality of distance e-Learning, as you are the most important stakeholder, I have prepared a questionnaire, aiming to determine the quality of distance e-learning in Saudi universities. The questionnaire is in three sections, firstly asking you about your background, and then asking about your perceptions of the importance of some quality standards in Distance e-Learning. The final section is about the level of application of these standards that you perceive in your current course. These sections are divided into three dimensions, which group similar topics together. Therefore, I would be grateful if you could kindly read and answer the following survey.

This data is only for this piece of research. It is wholly anonymous, and you cannot be identified from it. You may withdraw from the survey if you choose at any point, as it is wholly voluntary. 20 minutes of your time will help the researcher and more generally the service of distance e-learning in Saudi Universities. Your feedback is therefore very much appreciated.

The questionnaire should last around 15-20 minutes. There are no correct or false answers. All of the information gathered will be confidential. It shall not be used for any other purpose but this study.

Thank you. I look forward to reading your responses.

Should you be interested in reading the outcome of this study or have any other questions about this research, please do not hesitate to contact me via my email.

The researcher
PhD student – School of Education.
Newcastle University, UK
a.alhathlol@ncl.ac.uk

Appendix B: The Questionnaire - English Version

Background

0.1 Personal details

- Please tick (✓) to what applies to you:

1- Gender:

F

M

2- Age range (years):

22 or less

23-30

31-40

Over 40

3- Your University:

IMU

KAU

4- Academic Year:

One

Two

Three

Four

5- ICT Skills:

Beginner

Intermediate

Skilled

0.2 Reasons for Choosing Distance e-Learning

Please tick (✓) to the appropriate box on how much you agree on the reasons and motives that led you to study in distance e-learning.

For each statement, please indicate your level of agreement by using the following scale:

5= Strongly Agree; 4= Agree; 3= Neutral; 2= Disagree; 1= Strongly Disagree

	Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1-	Previous grades in secondary school have not allowed me to study in traditional education.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
2-	Desire to pursue educational attainment and acquire a university degree.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
3-	To improve social status.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
4-	The possibility of combining study and work.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
5-	To secure a better job after graduation.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

Section 1: The importance of quality standards in distance e-learning.

In this section I would like to know about your point of view on the importance of the following quality standards in distance e-learning in general, for you.

Each of the following statements represent a quality standard in distance e-learning, and these standards fall under three main themes (*1-Teaching and Learning Processes, 2- Course Structure and 3- Students Support*).

For each statement, please indicate your level of agreement by using the following scale:

5= Very Important; 4= Important; 3= Neutral; 2= Low Importance; 1= Unimportant

Dimension 1.1: Teaching/Learning Process

Item	Very Important (5)	Important (4)	Neutral (3)	Low Importance (2)	Unimportant (1)
1- Student interaction with faculty is facilitated through a variety of ways.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
2- Student interaction with other students is facilitated through a variety of ways.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
3- Feedback to students is provided in a timely manner.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
4- Feedback to students is provided in a manner that is constructive and non-threatening.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
5- Modules use a variety of assessment methods.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
6- Tasks and assignments require students to engage in analysing, evaluating, and applying knowledge both inside and outside of the classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
7- E-mail addresses and a message board are provided to encourage students and instructors to work cooperatively.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
8- Courses require students to work in groups (or teams) in order to develop understanding.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
9- Learning activities promote an open collaborative environment among students.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
10- Course materials are structured to facilitate individual study.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
11- Learners are encouraged to complete their courses and progress is monitored.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

Dimension 1.2: Course Structure

Item	Very Important (5)	Important (4)	Neutral (3)	Low Importance (2)	Unimportant (1)
1- Before starting the program, students are advised to determine if they have the self-motivation and commitment to learn at a distance.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2- Sufficient online learning resources are available to the students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3- Online learning resources are reviewed and updated on a regular basis.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4- Courses include a clear statement of what the learner can hope to achieve on successful completion.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5- Specific expectations are set for students with respect to a minimum amount of time per week for study and homework assignments.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6- The grading policy is stated clearly.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7- Course design promotes both faculty and student engagement.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8- Modules use a variety of resources (i.e., online videos, virtual conferencing, forums, written assignments) to accomplish learning goals.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9- The university is committed to continuous improvement of programmes offered.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Dimension 1.3: Student Support

Item	Very Important (5)	Important (4)	Neutral (3)	Low Importance (2)	Unimportant (1)
1- Etiquette ('netiquette') guidelines for how students should behave online are clearly stated.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2- The university provides guidance to students in the use of all forms of technologies used for course delivery.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3- Students can obtain assistance to help them use electronically accessed data successfully.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4- Students are supported in the development and use of new technologies and skills.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5- Technologies required for the course are readily available; either provided or easily downloadable.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6- A counselling service for students' academic and personal issues are available.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7- Technical support is offered on a prompt, timely and wherever possible personal basis	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8- Support offered is sufficient to meet the needs of learners, encourage learning and facilitate completion of the course.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9- A structured system is in place to address student complaints.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10- The university has adequate procedures to handle difficulties between learners and university, and learners are aware of options to resolve difficulties.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11- Efforts are made to engage students with the programme and institution.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Section 2: The availability of these quality standards (the above-mentioned in the previous section) in your current course and the degree of its application.

In this section I would like to know about your point of view on the availability of the same standards, which I mentioned in the previous section, and the degree of application of these standards by the University that you are currently doing your programme in.

For each statement, please indicate your level of agreement by using the following scale:

5= Strongly Agree; 4= Agree; 3= Neutral; 2= Disagree=; 1= Strongly Disagree

Dimension 2.1: Teaching/Learning Process

Item	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)
1- My interaction with faculty is facilitated through a variety of ways	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2- My interaction with other students is facilitated through a variety of ways	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3- Feedback to me is provided in a timely manner.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4- Feedback to me is provided in a manner that is constructive and non-threatening	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5- Modules use a variety of assessment methods.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6- Tasks and assignments require me to engage in analysing, evaluating, and applying knowledge both inside and outside of the classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7- E-mail addresses and a message board are provided to encourage students and instructors to work cooperatively.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8- Courses require me to work in groups (or teams) in order to develop understanding.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9- Learning activities promote an open collaborative environment among students.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10- Course materials are structured to facilitate my individual study.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11- I am encouraged to complete my courses, and my progress is monitored.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Dimension 2.2: Course Structure

Item	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)
1- Before starting the program, I was advised about the program to determine if I have the self-motivation and commitment to learn at a distance.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
2- Sufficient online resources available to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
3- Learning resources and materials should be reviewed and updated on a regular basis.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
4- Each course includes a clear statement of what I can hope to achieve on successful completion.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
5- Specific expectations are set for me with respect to a minimum amount of time per week for study and homework assignments.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
6- The grading policy is stated clearly.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
7- Course design promotes both faculty and student engagement.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
8- Modules use a variety of content delivery methods (i.e., online videos, virtual conferencing, forums, written assignments) to accomplish my learning goals.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
9- The university is committed to continuous improvement programs offered.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

Dimension 2.3: Student Support

Item	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)
1- Etiquette ('netiquette') guidelines for how I should behave online are clearly stated.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
2- The university provides guidance to me in the use of all forms of technologies used for course delivery.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
3- I can obtain assistance to help me use electronically accessed data successfully.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
4- I am supported in the development and use of new technologies and skills.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
5- Technologies required for the course are readily available; either provided or easily downloadable.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
6- A counselling service for my academic and personal issues is available.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
7- Technical support is offered on a prompt, timely and wherever possible personal basis.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
8- Support offered is sufficient to meet my needs, encourage my learning process and facilitate successful completion of the course.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
9- A structured system is in place to address my complaints.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
10- The university has adequate procedures to handle difficulties between learners and the university, and I am aware of options to resolve difficulties.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
11- Efforts are made to engage me with the programme and institution.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

Do you have any observations relating to the quality of distance e-learning that were not covered by this Questionnaire?

.....

.....

.....

Thank you very much for the time taken to complete this questionnaire. For in depth information the researcher will conduct an interview with you. If you wish to participate please give the details below:

Name:

Telephone number:

Email address:

Appendix C: The Questionnaire - Arabic Version

معلومات عامة

١.٠ أولاً: البيانات العامة:
- الرجاء وضع علامة (√) أمام ما ينطبق عليك:

١- الجنس:

ذكر أنثى

٢- فنتك العمرية:

أقل من ٢٢ ٢٣-٣٠ ٣١-٤٠ أكثر من 40

٣- جامعتك:

جامعة الملك عبد العزيز جامعة الإمام محمد بن سعود

٤- السنة الأكاديمية:

السنة: الأولى الثانية الثالثة الرابعة

٥- المهارات التقنية:

مبتدئ متوسط متمكن

٢.٠ / الأسباب والدوافع التي دعتك للتسجيل في التعلم الإلكتروني عن بعد

العبارات التالية تهدف إلى التعرف على الأسباب والدوافع التي دعتك للتسجيل في التعلم الإلكتروني عن بعد. فضلاً أشّر إلى مستوى موافقتك في كل فقرة مستخدماً المعيار التالي:

٥ = أوافق بشدة؛ ٤ = أوافق؛ ٣ = محايد؛ ٢ = لا أوافق؛ ١ = لا أوافق بشدة

لا أوافق بشدة	لا أوافق	محايد	أوافق	أوافق بشدة	العبرة
<input type="checkbox"/>	١- معدلي في الثانوية لم يمكنني من الحصول على فرصة للدراسة في التعليم الجامعي العادي.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٢- الرغبة بمتابعة التحصيل العلمي والحصول على شهادة جامعية.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٣- لتحسين المكانة الاجتماعية.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٤- إمكانية الجمع بين الدراسة والعمل.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٥- لتأمين فرص عمل أفضل بعد التخرج.				

الجزء الأول: أهمية معايير الجودة في التعلم الإلكتروني عن بعد

في هذا الجزء أود أن أتعرف عن وجهة نظرك في مدى أهمية معايير الجودة التالية في التعلم الإلكتروني عن بعد بشكل عام، والتي تمثل التطبيق الأمثل بالنسبة لك.

تمثل كل عبارة من العبارات التالية معياراً من معايير الجودة في برامج التعلم الإلكتروني عن بعد، وهذه المعايير تدرج تحت ثلاثة محاور رئيسية (١ - عمليات التعليم والتعلم، ٢ - محتوى البرنامج، ٣ - دعم الطلاب)

فضلاً أشر إلى مستوى موافقتك في كل فقرة مستخدماً المعيار التالية:

٥ = مهم جداً؛ ٤ = مهم؛ ٣ = محايد؛ ٢ = منخفض الأهمية؛ ١ = غير مهم

محور ١.١: عمليات التعليم والتعلم

العبارة	مهم جداً (٥)	مهم (٤)	محايد (٣)	منخفض الأهمية (٢)	غير مهم (١)
١- أن تكون عملية التفاعل والتواصل بين الطالب وأعضاء هيئة التدريس ميسرة بطرق مختلفة ومتنوعة.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
٢- أن تكون عملية التفاعل والتواصل بين الطلاب فيما بينهم ميسرة بطرق مختلفة ومتنوعة.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
٣- أن يكون تقديم التغذية الراجعة (تقويم الأداء) والتعليق على الواجبات للطلاب في الوقت المناسب.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
٤- أن يكون تقديم التغذية الراجعة (تقويم الأداء) للطلاب بأسلوب بناء ومفيد، غير منفرد.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
٥- أن يُستخدم في المواد الدراسية (مواد البرنامج) مجموعة متنوعة من طرق تقييم التحصيل الدراسي.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
٦- أن تتطلب المهام والواجبات أن يشارك الطلاب بأنفسهم في عمليات التحليل والتقييم وتطبيق المعرفة والمعلومات داخل وخارج الفصل الدراسي.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
٧- أن يتم توفير البريد الإلكتروني ونظم المحادثات الفورية (منصات النقاش)؛ لتشجيع الطلاب والمعلمين للعمل بشكل تعاوني.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
٨- أن يكون التصميم للمواد الدراسية بطريقة تتطلب من الطلاب العمل ضمن مجموعات من أجل الوصول لفهم أفضل للدروس.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
٩- أن تشجع أنشطة التعلم على إيجاد بيئة تعاونية مفتوحة بين الطلاب.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
١٠- أن تكون المواد الدراسية مصممة لتسهيل مهارات الدراسة الفردي.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
١١- أن يشجع الطلاب على اتمام البرنامج ويتم مراقبة مستوى تقدمهم.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

محور ٢.١: محتوى البرنامج

العبارة	مهم جداً (٥)	مهم (٤)	محايد (٣)	منخفض الأهمية (٢)	غير مهم (١)
١- أن يتم قبل بداية البرنامج والدراسة إخبار الطلاب عن طبيعة البرنامج؛ ليقرروا ما إذا كانت لديهم الرغبة الذاتية والالتزام للتعلم عن بعد.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
٢- أن توفر مصادر ومراجع كافية للطلاب على الانترنت.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

غير مهم (١)	منخفض الأهمية (٢)	محايد (٣)	مهم (٤)	مهم جداً (٥)	العبرة
<input type="checkbox"/>	٣- أن يتم مراجعة وتحديث مصادر التعلم عبر الإنترنت بشكل منتظم.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٤- أن يتضمن كل برنامج دراسي (مادة دراسية) تقريراً واضحاً عما يمكن أن يحققه المتعلم في نهاية البرنامج الدراسي.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٥- أن يتم وضع توقعات محددة للطلاب فيما يتعلق بالحد الأدنى لمقدار الوقت المطلوب تخصيصه أسبوعياً للمذاكرة وأداء الواجبات المنزلية.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٦- أن يكون نظام توزيع الدرجات معطناً بوضوح.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٧- أن يكون تصميم البرنامج يدعم مشاركة المعلم والطالب على حدٍ سواء.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٨- استخدام مجموعة متنوعة من مصادر التعلم للمواد الدراسية (مثل: مقاطع الفيديو بالإنترنت، منتديات الحوار والنقاش، كتابة البحوث...) لتحقيق أهداف التعلم.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٩- أن تلتزم الجامعة بالتطوير المستمر.				

محور ٣.١: دعم الطلاب

غير مهم (١)	منخفض الأهمية (٢)	محايد (٣)	مهم (٤)	مهم جداً (٥)	العبرة
<input type="checkbox"/>	١- وضع مبادئ وتوجيهات مكتوبة توضح كيف ينبغي أن يتصرف الطلاب على الإنترنت.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٢- توفير دليل للطلاب لكيفية طريقة استخدام جميع أشكال التقنية المستخدمة في البرنامج.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٣- أن يتمكن الطلاب من الحصول على المساعدة التي تمكنهم من استخدام البيانات الإلكترونية بنجاح.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٤- دعم الطلاب في تطوير واستخدام التقنيات والمهارات المستجدة.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٥- أن تكون التقنيات اللازمة للدورة متاحة بسهولة؛ إما متوافره أو سهلة التحميل.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٦- توفير خدمة تقديم التوجيه والإرشاد للقضايا الأكاديمية والشخصية للطلاب.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٧- أن يكون الدعم المقدم للطلاب فوري وفي الوقت المناسب وبصورة شخصية كلما أمكن ذلك.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٨- أن يكون الدعم متاح كافيًا لتلبية الاحتياجات المعقولة للمتعلمين ، يساعد على تشجيع عملية التعلم لديهم وييسر اتمام البرنامج بنجاح.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٩- وضع نظام هيكلي للتعامل مع شكاوى الطلاب.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	١٠- أن يكون لدى الجامعة إجراءات كافية للتعامل مع أي إشكالية تطرأ بين المتعلم والجامعة ، ويكون المتعلمون على دراية تامة بكل الطرق المتاحة لهم لحل هذه الإشكاليات.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	١١- بذل الجهود لضمان تفاعل واندماج الطلاب مع البرنامج والجامعة.				

الجزء الثاني: مدى توافر هذه المعايير (السابقة الذكر في الجزء السابق) في برنامجك الحالي ودرجة تطبيقها.

في هذا الجزء أود أن أتعرف عن وجهة نظرك في مدى توافر نفس المعايير السابقة، التي ذكرت في الجزء السابق، ودرجة تطبيقها من قبل الجامعة التي تدرس بها في برنامجك الحالي.

فضلاً أشر إلى مستوى موافقتك في كل فقرة مستخدماً المعيار التالية:

٥ = موافق تماماً؛ ٤ = موافق؛ ٣ = محايد؛ ٢ = غير موافق؛ ١ = غير موافق تماماً

محور ١.٢: عمليات التعليم والتعلم

غير موافق تماماً (١)	غير موافق (٢)	محايد (٣)	موافق (٤)	موافق تماماً (٥)	العبرة	
<input type="checkbox"/>	١- عملية تفاعلي وتواصل مع المعلمين ميسرة بطرق مختلفة ومتنوعة.					
<input type="checkbox"/>	٢- عملية تفاعلي وتواصل مع الطلاب الآخرين ميسرة بطرق مختلفة ومتنوعة.					
<input type="checkbox"/>	٣- التغذية الراجعة (تقويم الأداء) والتعليق على واجباتي تُقدم في الوقت المناسب.					
<input type="checkbox"/>	٤- تُقدم التغذية الراجعة (تقويم الأداء) لي بأسلوب بناء ومفيد، غير منفرد.					
<input type="checkbox"/>	٥- المواد الدراسية (مواد البرنامج) يُستخدم فيها مجموعة متنوعة من طرق تقييم التحصيل الدراسي.					
<input type="checkbox"/>	٦- المهام والواجبات تتطلب مني أن اشارك بنفسي في عمليات التحليل والتقييم وتطبيق المعرفة والمعلومات داخل وخارج الفصل الدراسي.					
<input type="checkbox"/>	٧- توفير البريد الإلكتروني ونظم المحادثات الفورية (منصات النقاش)؛ لتشجيع الطلاب والمعلمين للعمل بشكل تعاوني.					
<input type="checkbox"/>	٨- التصميم للمواد الدراسية يكون بطريقة تتطلب مني العمل ضمن مجموعات من أجل الوصول لفهم أفضل للدروس.					
<input type="checkbox"/>	٩- أنشطة التعلم تشجع على إيجاد بيئة تعاونية مفتوحة بين الطلاب.					
<input type="checkbox"/>	١٠- المواد الدراسية مصممة لتسهيل مهاراتي في الدراسة الفردية.					
<input type="checkbox"/>	١١- اتلقى التشجيع على اتمام برنامجي ويتم مراقبة مستوى تقدمي.					

محور ٢.٢: محتوى البرنامج

غير موافق تماماً (١)	غير موافق (٢)	محايد (٣)	موافق (٤)	موافق تماماً (٥)	العبرة	
<input type="checkbox"/>	١- قبل بداية البرنامج تم إخباري عن طبيعة البرنامج حتى يتسنى لي أن أقرر ما إذا كانت لدي الرغبة الذاتية والالتزام للتعلم عن بعد.					
<input type="checkbox"/>	٢- المصادر والمراجع المتاحة لي في الانترنت كافية.					
<input type="checkbox"/>	٣- يتم مراجعة وتحديث مصادر التعلم عبر الإنترنت بشكل منتظم.					
<input type="checkbox"/>	٤- يتضمن كل برنامج دراسي (مادة دراسية) تقريراً واضحاً عما يمكن أن يحققه في نهاية البرنامج الدراسي.					
<input type="checkbox"/>	٥- يتم تحديد توقعات محددة لي فيما يتعلق بالحد الأدنى لمقدار الوقت المطلوب تخصيصه أسبوعياً للمذاكرة وأداء الواجبات المنزلية.					

غير موافق تماماً (١)	غير موافق (٢)	محايد (٣)	موافق (٤)	موافق تماماً (٥)	العبارة
<input type="checkbox"/>	٦- نظام توزيع الدرجات معلن بوضوح.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٧- تصميم البرنامج يدعم مشاركة المعلم والطالب على حدٍ سواء.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٨- يتم استخدام مجموعة متنوعة من مصادر التعلم للمواد الدراسية (مثل: مقاطع الفيديو بالإنترنت، منتديات الحوار والنقاش، كتابة البحوث...) لتحقيق أهدافي في التعلم.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٩- تلتزم الجامعة بالتطوير المستمر.				

محور ٣.٢: دعم الطلاب

غير موافق تماماً (١)	غير موافق (٢)	محايد (٣)	موافق (٤)	موافق تماماً (٥)	العبارة
<input type="checkbox"/>	١- هناك مبادئ وتوجيهات مكتوبة توضح كيف ينبغي أن اتصرف على الإنترنت.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٢- هناك دليل متوفر يشرح لي كيفية استخدام جميع أشكال التقنية المستخدمة في البرنامج.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٣- أستطيع الحصول على المساعدة التي تمكنني من استخدام البيانات الإلكترونية بنجاح.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٤- أحصل على المساعدة والدعم في تطوير واستخدام التقنيات والمهارات المستجدة.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٥- التقنيات اللازمة للدورة متاحة لي بسهولة؛ إما متوافره أو سهلة التحميل.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٦- خدمة تقديم التوجيه والإرشاد للقضايا الأكاديمية والشخصية متوفرة.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٧- الدعم المقدم لي فوري وفي الوقت المناسب وبصورة شخصية كلما أمكن ذلك.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٨- الدعم المتاح لي كافياً لتلبية الاحتياجات المعقولة، يساعد على تشجيع عملية تعلمي وييسر لي اتمام البرنامج بنجاح.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	٩- يوجد نظام هيكلي للتعامل مع شكاوى الطلاب.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	١٠- الجامعة لديها الإجراءات الكافية لمعالجة أي إشكالية تطرأ بيني وبينها وأنا على دراية تامة بكل الطرق المتاحة لحل هذه الإشكاليات.				
<input type="checkbox"/>	١١- تبذل الجهود لضمان تفاعل واندماج الطلاب مع البرنامج والجامعة.				

هل لديك أي ملاحظات تتعلق بالجودة في التعلم الإلكتروني عن بعد ولم يتم تغطيتها في هذا الاستبيان؟

.....

أخيراً:

شكراً جزيلاً على وقتكم المبذول لاستكمال هذه الاستبانة.

سوف أقوم بإذن الله تعالى بإجراء عدد من المقابلات الجماعية للتعرف على وجهة نظر الطلاب عن كثر حول الجودة في برامج التعلم الإلكتروني عن بعد. إذا كنت ترغب في المشاركة يرجى إعطاء التفاصيل أدناه:

الاسم:

الجوال:

البريد الإلكتروني:

Appendix D: Interviews Introductory Letter

Dear Student ...

Thank you very much for accepting to participate in the interview. I am Ali Alhathlol. This interview is part of my Doctoral degree and is entitled ‘Quality of Distance e- Learning at Saudi Universities: Students’ Perceptions’. Distance e-Learning –in this research- means university and higher education programmes that are provided at distance via the Internet and its applications on the Web, whether the learning is synchronous (live with the teacher) or asynchronous (recorded). The objective of this study is to identify the views of students in relation to the quality of Distance e-Learning in Saudi universities, in order to determine what could be done to improve the programmes, policies and applications for Saudi Universities that apply Distance e-Learning.

You have already completed a questionnaire about the topics covered in this focus group.

During the session we will consider those issues in more detail.

The data gathered is only for this piece of research. It is wholly anonymous, and you will not be identified from it. You may withdraw from the survey if you choose at any point, as it is wholly voluntary. Your time will help the researcher and more generally the service of distance e-learning in Saudi Universities. Your feedback is therefore very much appreciated.

Thank you.

Should you be interested in reading the outcome of this study or have any other questions about this research, please do not hesitate to contact me via my email.

The researcher
PhD student – School of Education.
Newcastle University, UK
a.alhathlol@ncl.ac.uk

Appendix E: Participation Information

--/--/----

Supervisors:

- 1- Prof. Sugata Mitra, Email: Sugata.Mitra@ncl.ac.uk
- 2- Dr. James Stanfield, Email: James.Stanfield@ncl.ac.uk



Dear Participant,

Thank you for participating in this research project. Here is some information about our project which Newcastle University wishes you to be in possession of:

1. Purpose and objectives: This study is designed to help understand and improve quality and its standards in Distance e-Learning.
2. Participant selection: You have been selected as you agreed to take part in this study when contacted by your university.
3. Voluntary participation: As you have agreed to take part, your participation is voluntary. If you do not wish to take part you are free to withdraw now or at any time.
4. What is involved: you will complete a short questionnaire.
5. Risks and benefits to you: there are no risks, and you will help improve Distance e-Learning.
6. Anonymity and Confidentiality: your answers here will not be associated with your name, only as a participant in the study, unless you specifically opt for the data collected about you to be associated with yourself. All data will be kept confidential.
7. Confidentiality and access to data: Only the researcher involved in this study will have access to the data. It will not be passed to third parties.
8. Dissemination of results: will be published only as the report for this particular thesis. I can be contacted if you require more information or wish to read the completed study.
9. Storage of data: All data gathered will be kept securely in the Newcastle University IT system and destroyed once the study is complete.

If you have any questions or find there are any issues arising from your participation please do not hesitate to contact me, a.alhathlol@ncl.ac.uk and I will assist you in any way possible. You may also contact the supervisors listed above.

Appendix F: Participants Consent Form



I, the undersigned, confirm that (please tick box as appropriate):

1.	I have read and understood the information about the project, as provided in the Information Sheet dated --/--/----.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation and the researcher has answered any queries to my satisfaction.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	I voluntarily agree to participate in the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	I understand that I can withdraw my data from the study at any time.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.	The use of the data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been explained to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.	Select only one of the following:	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would like my name used and understand what I have said or written as part of this study will be used in reports, publications and other research outputs so that anything I have contributed to this project can be recognised. • I do not want my name used in this project. 	<input type="checkbox"/>
10.	I, along with the Researcher, agree to sign and date this informed consent form.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Participant:

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Researcher:

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Appendix G: Focus Group Interview Questions - English Version

Main questions

- What are students' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of their DeL course?
- What are students' perceptions of barriers arising during their DeL course?
- What changes would students make to improve quality in DeL?

Secondary questions

1. Why did you choose distance e-Learning?
2. What do you think are the strengths of the Distance e-Learning course, and do these match your needs as a distance learning student?
3. What do you think are the weaknesses of the Distance e-Learning course, and do these match your needs as a distance learning student?
4. What is the status of Distance e-Learning compared to traditional Higher Education and extramural study?
5. How would you describe your interaction with your lecturer and with your peers in the distance learning process?
6. How would you describe the role of the instructor in your Distance e-Learning course. What about your role?
7. What sort of resources were provided in your distance e-Learning?
8. How could your Distance e-Learning course be improved?
9. If you could change one thing about the course, what would it be?

Appendix H: Focus Group Interview Questions - Arabic Version

أسئلة المقابلة الجماعية

الأسئلة الرئيسية:

- من وجهة نظرك، ماهي أكثر جوانب القوة والضعف في التعلم الإلكتروني عن بعد؟
- من وجهة نظرك، ما هي أبرز العقبات التي تواجهك في التعلم الإلكتروني عن بعد؟
- من وجهة نظرك، ما هي التغييرات والمقترحات التي من الممكن ان تساعد من رفع جودة التعلم الإلكتروني عن بعد؟

الأسئلة الثانوية:

- ١- لماذا اخترت التعلم الإلكتروني عن بعد؟
- ٢- برأيك، ماهي جوانب القوة في التعلم الإلكتروني عن بعد؟ وكيف تؤثر تلك الجوانب على حاجاتك منه كطالب تعليم عن بعد؟
- ٣- برأيك، ماهي جوانب الضعف في التعلم الإلكتروني عن بعد؟ وكيف تؤثر تلك الجوانب على حاجاتك منه كطالب تعليم عن بعد؟
- ٤- ما هو وضع التعليم الإلكتروني عن بعد مقارنةً بالتعليم التقليدي والدراسة بالانتساب؟
- ٥- كيف تصف تفاعلك مع المحاضر والطلاب خلال المحاضرات المباشرة في التعلم الإلكتروني عن بعد؟
- ٦- كيف تصف دور المحاضر في دراستك في التعلم الإلكتروني عن بعد. ماذا عن دورك؟
- ٧- ماذا بشأن نوع مصادر التعلم التي يتم توفيرها لك في التعلم الإلكتروني عن بعد؟
- ٨- برأيك، كيف يمكن تطوير التعلم الإلكتروني عن بعد؟
- ٩- لو كان باستطاعتك تغيير شيء واحد في برنامجك الحالي، ماذا سيكون؟