

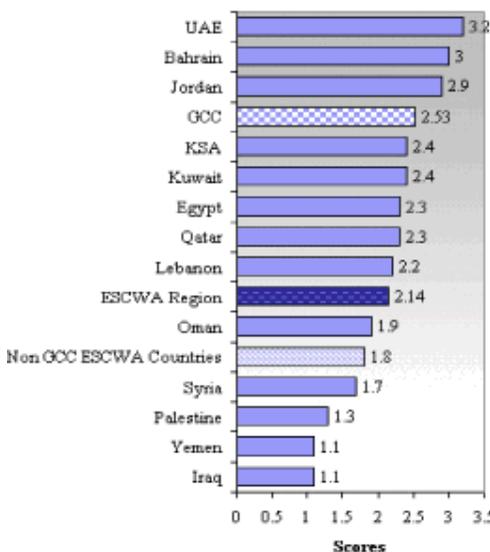
Digital literacy key factor to enhancing socio-economic well-being and boosting e-Government readiness

Sustained focus on spread of digital literacy essential to shape a technologically empowered society, says ICDL Chief

August 27, 2006

ICDL GCC Foundation, the governing body and the certification authority of the International Computer Driving License program in the Gulf States, has remarked that while IT penetration in the Middle East has picked up considerable momentum in recent years thanks to various government-led initiatives, the Arab world must step up focus on digital literacy awareness and initiate widespread of IT education and training. This will ensure social inclusion and create a digitally literate society which will lead to faster socio-economic progress, the ICDL GCC Foundation has observed.

Ranking of ESCWA members according to maturity level in information society, 2005



Jamil Ezzo, Director General of ICDL GCC Foundation, said, "Research has proven that a digitally literate community and workforce are identified as a key factor for social well-being and economic growth in modern societies, and an unwavering commitment to IT skills development is required to realize this objective in the region. Governments have to realize that today computer literacy is just as important to the society as basic skills of reading and writing."

Digital literacy refers to the ability to use modern computing and e-services in order to be functional in modern society, to participate confidently in the affairs of society, and to prosper in that society. Digital literacy competencies are the enabling competencies for the citizen to be functional and confident using the applications of the information age to achieve own current everyday work, personal or community tasks and duties.

"It is encouraging that there is sufficient recognition in the Arab world for the importance of the growth of Information and Communication Technology and the need for a digitally literate population to take advantage of new technologies. However, the region has been found lacking when it comes to ensuring that the general public acquires the necessary skills to use these technologies. It is imperative we move quickly

to change this situation by laying increased emphasis on understanding digital literacy. With the region heading towards e-governance, the very survival of an individual at the workplace or in society will be linked to personal level of computer literacy," said Ezzo.

Commenting on the role of ICDL, Ezzo said, "With today's growing use of computers in the workplace and education, measuring a person's digital literacy skill level has always been a challenging problem. ICDL is a vendor neutral digital literacy program developed by the European Computer Societies and later introduced to the Middle East by UNESCO to support the governments of the region in implementing national digital literacy initiatives which contribute to the reform efforts in the fields of education and administration as well as in implementing the e-government systems. The ongoing initiatives of adopting the ICDL program which are taking place in the region are aimed at furthering digital literacy among various sections of society, with a special emphasis on including women and individuals with special needs."

Analysts see strong historical parallels in the influence of digital literacy on socio-economic development. A few decades back, there had been strong literacy movements throughout the region, driven by a realization that a literate society held the key to sustained social and economic progress. Today, with basic literacy having reached admirable levels and with the increasing use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the concept of literacy has taken on a new dimension, and has practically been replaced by digital literacy as the new growth-driver.

Ezzo also pointed out the crucial role that digital literacy plays in readying societies to adopt e-government services, quoting a recent report by the United Nations Department of Economic & Social Affairs (UNDESA) which placed the Gulf region's e-governance readiness at approximately 50 per cent, compared to 91 percent for index-leading United States.

"This establishes the fact that e-governance readiness is determined not just by government initiatives aimed at making comprehensive government services available online to citizens, but also the level of acceptance and participation of the society in e-services. Governments can launch the latest online services and implement the most advanced technologies, but if the citizens are not able to use them, they are of no added-value. Therefore, a sustained focus on digital literacy awareness, education and training is called for if we are to shape a technologically empowered society that is receptive of e-governance initiatives" stressed Ezzo.

Incidentally, the recent Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) report has shown that several Middle East & North African countries are moving to higher maturity levels in their Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) strategies and policies. For instance, Kuwait, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have risen to maturity level 3 as a result of clear strategic goals that have sought to leverage strong local funding capabilities. In the UAE, which had already attained the level 3 maturity, the lack of a comprehensive federal ICT strategy is offset by the existence of clear ICT strategies and effective implementation at the local level, particularly in Dubai.

"Over the years, ICDL has been strategically implementing national digital literacy programs around the Gulf region, in partnership with various governments and concerned bodies. The ICDL program has become a pillar to governments' effort in administration reform and in revamping the educational system. ICDL has been successful in addressing the requirements of government departments in line with their shift towards electronic governance," said Ezzo.