

STUDENTS' VIEWS ON DISTANCE LEARNING IN TURKEY: An Example Of Anadolu University Open Education Faculty

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to reveal the students' views who are studying in different departments of distant education programs provided by Anadolu University in TURKEY. Qualitative research method was used in the study and purposeful sampling was followed. The research was conducted with 10 students who were working in different jobs and taking distance education courses in different departments. The interviews carried out face to face with the participants by the researcher were recorded by getting their consents. The interview data recorded were later transcribed. Then the texts were given to the participants and the recordings were verified for their accuracy and completeness, so the reliability of data was obtained. Content analysis method was used for the data analysis. When the findings obtained as a result of data analysis were examined, the students taking distance education courses in different departments stated that this education method was a great opportunity and chance for them. Moreover, it was determined that the participant students in the study had positive attitudes and views towards distance education, but they had some negative views such as lack of course materials.

Keywords: Distance education, student views, positive and negative statements.

INTRODUCTION

All the countries give importance to education in the developing world and every country is making an effort to provide training to their citizens. Undoubtedly, the most important reason for this effort is to be able to compete with the developing countries and be least dependent on outside financial sources in the world where science and technology is rapidly growing. However, as it is known, education is quite expensive and it is rather difficult to recruit qualified staff that will provide training in adequate numbers. When viewed from this aspect, it is rather difficult for the countries to give formal training which promotes quality and equal opportunities to their citizens. In addition, each region providing training may not have the same conditions. While some regions don't have any difficulties recruiting qualified staff and providing infrastructure to achieve formal education, it becomes almost impossible in some other regions. This is a condition which becomes prominent in our country, too. For example, the classrooms are very crowded in rural areas and also the teachers working in these areas are either newly appointed or the teachers have limited teaching experience. There have been problems especially about girls' education in our country, but this problem has been tried to be solved with 4+4+4 education system. However, female students encounter problems with their families about their university education in another city. Under these circumstances many female students can not continue their education.

Moreover, although students, either female or male, want to continue their formal education in another city, the families are barely able to cover expenses of their children such as accommodation, food and transportation and unfortunately, they do not want them to study in another city. Although this problem is tried to be solved by opening a university in every city, students have to choose the departments in the university which is located in their cities. In other words, a student who cannot or does not want to get an education in another city are obliged to make their choices among a narrow range of disciplines. When such and similar problems are considered, it is really important that students should be given opportunities to receive distance education.

The term "distance learning" consists of different terms which are not fully synonymous. Some of the terms included in distance learning are correspondence courses, studying at home, external study, distance education and distance teaching, distance learning or distance education (Elmas, Doğan, Biroğlu and Koç, 2008; Kaya, 2002; Kaya, Erden, Çakır and Bağırşakçı, 2004). Distance learning or distance education is a mode of delivering education and instruction on conditions which occur due to the limited traditional teaching- learning methods in a classroom where it is not possible to carry out in-class activities and therefore the interaction and communication between the planners of educational activities and the practitioners and the students are provided from a specific centre via specially prepared teaching units and various means (Alkan, 1987). Distance learning is the most modern education system which is independent of time and distance, enables individualized education opportunities, and is implemented via information technologies and especially via Internet. (Baturay and Bay, 2009). The implementation of distance learning was first carried out via mail in 1728 and thanks to the developing information technologies today, it has become more qualified and available with teleconferencing and internet applications. Thanks to these distance learning applications, despite the fact that teachers and students are located remotely from each other, they are able to communicate effectively via videoconferencing and audio recordings (Isman, 2011).

Distance learning programs which were considered to reinforce traditional education programs in Turkey at the beginning became popular as a result of an increasing demand for education and Ministry of Education (MEB) started distance learning via mail in 1961 (Zırhlioğlu, 2006). While there are universities which fully offer distance learning courses in Turkey like Anadolu University, there are also institutions which offer associate, undergraduate and post graduate programs, some courses and applications of these courses via distance education. Distance learning programs are available in some universities in Turkey such as Ankara University, Ahmet Yesevi University, Istanbul Technical University, Middle East Technical University, Istanbul Bilgi University, 100. Year University, Fırat University, Sakarya University, Selçuk University, Gazi University and Atatürk University (Höçük, 2011). Anadolu University, which has been offering distance education since 1982, has produced many graduates and it still continues its education with about one million seven hundred thousand students. Anadolu University with its open and distance education system including 12 graduate and 46 associate degree programs continues to offer education services to Turkish citizens not only in Turkey but also in North Cyprus Turkish Republic, Azerbaijan, and some Western European countries.

Open education, commonly a distance learning program, is an educational model which offers education without using the indoor areas of schools or rarely uses them.

The basis for the open education centres on the use of technologies which enable and facilitate the individuals to learn on their own (Hakan and Bozok, 1989). Although there are studies conducted about distance learning or open education available in literature, a study which investigates the students' views on its applicability, advantages and disadvantages has not been encountered. This study designed in qualitative research method aims to identify the gap in this field and in this study, the views of the students studying at Open Education Faculty are emphasized and suggestions are made about the deficits detected.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study is to reveal the views of the students who study in different programs of distance education offered by Anadolu University in Turkey.

METHOD

Qualitative research method was used in the study. Qualitative research method is a research approach which generates data without using any statistical operations or numbers (Çepni, 2009). The most important characteristics of qualitative research are that it has a focus on natural settings and context sensitivity, the researcher acts as a participant, it has a holistic perspective, it enables the researcher to present perceptions, it has flexibility in design and it uses inductive analysis (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2004).

Sampling

Purposeful sampling was used in the study. In qualitative studies, samples are small in order to explore the sampling in-depth. Therefore, purposeful sampling is preferred in place of random sampling (Munn, Johnstone & Holigan, 1990). Criteria which are thought to be important for selection in this sampling are determined and it is considered that the sampling selected according to these criteria may represent the population with its all qualities (Yin, 2003).

Table: 1
Characteristics of the students participating in the study

Participants	Field of Studies in Open Education	Gender
P ₁	Social Services	Female
P ₂	Law	Male
P ₃	Theology	Female
P ₄	Business Administration	Female
P ₅	Theology	Male
P ₆	History	Female
P ₇	Social Services	Female
P ₈	Law	Female
P ₉	History	Female
P ₁₀	Social Services	Male

The study was carried out with the students who are studying in different departments of Open Education Faculty in Anadolu University and taking their exams in Bayburt University.

The names of the participants were not used within the frame of research ethics. Thus, the participants were coded as P₁, P₂, P₃, P₄, P₅, P₆, P₇, P₈, P₉, P₁₀. The characteristics of the students participating in the study were given in Table: 1.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interview was used in the study as data collection tool. This method is advantageous as it gives opportunity to ask questions about a specific topic and explore them in detail and if the answer is unclear or incomplete, the case becomes clearer by asking the questions again and therefore, you can complete the answers (Çepni, 2009).

Face-to face interviews carried out by the researcher with the participants were recorded by a recorder after getting approval from the participants. After the interviews, the recorded data were transcribed. Then, the texts were given to the participants to verify the accuracy and completeness of the recordings and the reliability of data were obtained. Content analysis was used for data analysis. Content analysis is defined as a systematic and replicable research tool used to summarize some words within a text with smaller content categories based on specific codes (Büyüköztürk, Kılıç Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz, & Demirel, 2008). The raw data obtained from the interviews were coded and the categories were determined. The data were classified under these categories and they became meaningful for the reader. The researcher carried coding and categorization repetitively. Therefore, by sticking to the problem and purpose of the research, unnecessary codes were eliminated, new codes were added where necessary and categories were titled. Each of the participants' views was presented in tables. In addition, the reliability of the questions were obtained with expert views, relevant literature, and piloting. The findings obtained from the analysis were presented in the next section of the study.

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

The findings obtained from the participants for each question were presented in tables.

Question 1

"Why did you prefer open education as an education system?"

The responses of the participants to question 1 were presented in Table: 2.

Table: 2
The analysis results of the responses given by the participants to question 1

PARTICIPANTS	CATEGORIES
P ₁	Self-development
P ₂	Self-development
P ₃	A second university
P ₄	Permission of a family
P ₅	Permission of a family
P ₆	A second university
P ₇	Permission of a family
P ₈	Self-development
P ₉	Self-development
P ₁₀	Key entry points

The question *"Why did you prefer open education?"* aimed at detecting why the participants preferred open education as an education system. When the responses of the participants P₁, P₂, P₈ and P₉ were considered, most of the participants stated that they had chosen open education system to develop themselves. P₄, P₅ and P₇ stated that their families allowed them to continue their education only in open education, P₃ and P₆ preferred open education because they wanted to graduate from a second university and P₁₀ stated that he could only get key entry points from the university entrance exam to register only in Open Education Faculty. The responses of P₁ and P₇ given below explain the existing state:

P₁:

"I continue formal education. However, I preferred to study Social Services department in open education as I'm interested in Social Services."

P₇:

"My family did not want me to study in a city far from my hometown. Therefore, I preferred to study in open education because I wanted to be near my family and continue my studies in the department I wanted."

Question 2

"Why did you prefer Anadolu University Open Education Faculty?"

The responses of the participants to question 2 were presented in Table: 3.

Table: 3

The analysis results of the responses given by the participants to question 2

PARTICIPANTS	CATEGORIES
P ₁	Quality of education
P ₂	Program diversity
P ₃	Quality of education
P ₄	Recommendation
P ₅	Testing system
P ₆	Program diversity
P ₇	Recommendation
P ₈	Quality of education
P ₉	Quality of education
P ₁₀	Uniqueness

The question *"Why did you prefer Anadolu University Open Education Faculty?"* aimed at detecting why the participants preferred Open Education Faculty. When the responses of the participants P₁, P₃, P₈ and P₉ were considered, most of the participants stated that they preferred it because the education offered was of high quality. P₂ and P₆ stated that the faculty contained the departments they wanted, P₄ and P₇ stated that their relatives or their friends recommended it, P₅ said that he could take exams in the city where he lived, and P₁₀ stated that he knew that open education was only offered by Anadolu University. The responses of P₂ and P₉ given below explain the existing state:

P₂:

"I preferred it because it contained the department which I wanted to study."

P₉:

"I preferred Anadolu University Open Education Faculty because of its high quality education."

Question 3

"In your opinion, what are the advantages of open education?"

The responses of the participants to question 3 were presented in Table: 4.

Table: 4

The analysis results of the responses given by the participants to question 3

PARTICIPANTS	CATEGORIES
P₁	Allowing sufficient time
P₂	Diversity in departments
P₃	Allowing sufficient time
P₄	Being in every city
P₅	Testing system
P₆	Diversity in departments
P₇	Existing in every city
P₈	Existing in every city
P₉	Existing in every city
P₁₀	Existing in every city Faculty

The question "*What are the advantages of open education?*" aimed at detecting the participants' views about the advantages of open education. When the responses of the participants P₄, P₇, P₈, P₉ and P₁₀ were considered, most of them stated that the greatest advantage of it was that open education offered services in every city in Turkey. P₁ and P₃ stated that open education system provided them the convenient time to continue their education and P₂ and P₆ stated that it was advantageous because it offered education in many programs. The responses of P₃ and P₄ given below explain the existing state:

P₃:

"I receive formal education too. I study my open education courses at nights and at the weekends so I continue my education here, which is a very important advantage to me."

P₄:

"Although I started my education in another city due to my family's job, I'm now living in Bayburt. Because Anadolu University Open Education Faculty offers education in every city, I can continue my education. Its greatest advantage is that it offers education in every city."

Question 4

"What are the disadvantages of open education?"

The responses of the participants to question 4 were presented in Table: 5.

Table: 5
The analysis results of the responses given by the participants to question 4

PARTICIPANTS	CATEGORIES
P ₁	No idea
P ₂	Lack of material
P ₃	Not being able to ask questions
P ₄	Not being able to ask questions
P ₅	Lack of material
P ₆	Lack of material
P ₇	No idea
P ₈	Not being able to ask questions
P ₉	Not being able to ask questions
P ₁₀	Not being able to ask questions

The question *"What the disadvantages are of open education?"* aimed at detecting the participants' views about the disadvantages of open education.

When the responses of the participants P₄, P₇, P₈, P₉ and P₁₀ were considered, most of the participants stated that when they felt the need to ask questions about the courses, they could not find an educator and it was a disadvantage.

While P₂, P₅ and P₆ stated that they needed materials for the courses in the form of lecturing, but they could not get it, which was a disadvantage, P₁ and P₃ did not state an opinion. The responses of P₂ and P₄ given below explain the existing state:

P₂:

"I can find written materials for the program I study; however, I have great difficulty in finding materials in the form of lecturing. I believe that lack of materials which are told by an educator for each lesson is a disadvantage."

P₄:

"While studying, there are sometimes sections which I have difficulty in understanding and I feel the need to ask questions about the sections I don't understand. It is a disadvantage that I can't ask the sections I don't understand to an educator."

Question 5

What are your expectations for open education in order to make it more applicable and of high quality?"

The responses of the participants to question 5 were presented in Table: 6.

Table: 6
The analysis results of the responses given by the participants to question 5

PARTICIPANTS	CATEGORIES
P ₁	Have the right to take an exam
P ₂	Audio-visual materials
P ₃	Course
P ₄	Course
P ₅	Audio-visual materials
P ₆	Audio-visual materials
P ₇	Course
P ₈	Course
P ₉	Course
P ₁₀	Course

The question *"What are your expectations for open education in order to make it more applicable and of high quality?"* aimed at detecting the participants' expectations from open education. When the responses of the participants P₃, P₄, P₇, P₈, P₉ and P₁₀ were considered, most of the participants stated that courses about the lessons should be run in the cities where they live. P₂, P₅ and P₆ stated that opportunities to reach the audio-visual (video) materials which explain the courses must be offered. P₁ stated that they had only the right to take mid-term and final exams but they should be also given the right to take makeup examination.

The responses of P₅ and P₁₀ given below explain the existing state:

P₅:

"I can find the written materials about the program which I study; however, I have difficulty in finding materials in the form of lecturing. I believe that lack of materials which are told for each course by an educator is a disadvantage."

P₁₀:

"While studying, there are sometimes sections which I have difficulty in understanding and I feel the need to ask questions about the sections I don't understand. It is a disadvantage that I can't ask the sections I don't understand to an educator."

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Based on the findings and interpretations obtained from the study carried out to reveal the views of the students studying in different programs in open education offered by Anadolu University, it was concluded that participants had many positive views about open education and they had also expectations about getting materials.

This result is consistent with the studies conducted by Agaoglu, Imer and Kurubacak (2002); Baraz (2005); Birol and Teker (2002); Can (2004); Çekerol (2005); Demiray and Sağlık (2003); Kurnaz (1996); Serter (2005).

The responses of the participants to the question "Why did you prefer open education as an education system?" were that " they wanted to develop themselves, their families allowed them to continue their studies in open education , and they could only get key entry points from university entrance exam to get into open education. It is understood from the given responses of the participants that open education is a very important mode of learning for the individuals to continue their education and develop themselves. This result is consistent with the study conducted by Kurnaz (1996).

The participants gave the following responses to the question which aimed at detecting why the participants preferred Open Education Faculty: "Education offered was of high quality, it contained the department they wanted, their relatives or friends recommended it, they could take the exams in the city where they live, and they knew that only Anadolu University offered open education." The idea which comes into prominence from the responses is that distance education is of high quality, it is widespread, and it has a wide range of opportunities. However, it was revealed that one of the participants did not know that distance education was also offered by other universities. It was revealed that the findings obtained from the analysis of the responses to the question which aimed at detecting why the participants preferred Open Education Faculty was consistent with the research carried out by Çekerol (2005); Demiray and Sağlık (2003); Kurnaz (1996); Serter (2005).

The responses of the participants to the question which aimed at detecting the advantages of open education in the institution where they study revealed that most of the participants stated that distance education services offered in every city of Turkey by Anadolu University was the greatest advantage. The other advantages are that open education has allowed convenience of time and it offers education about many programs within its body. As it is understood from the responses obtained, distance education offered by Anadolu University, which is carried out in every city and in many fields, makes great contributions to the development of education in Turkey. This result was also consistent with the research conducted by Baraz (2005); Can (2004); Çekerol (2005); Serter (2005).

Two participants did not state their opinions to the question which aimed at detecting the disadvantages of open education in the institution where they study, but five participants stated that they could not find an educator when they wanted to ask questions about the courses they took and three participants stated that they could not find materials about the courses in the form of lecturing.

The responses of the participants implied that they did not find the courses given and the materials in the form of lecturing adequate. This result is consistent with the study carried out by Birol and Teker (2002).

In responding to the last question which aimed at detecting the participants' expectations from open education, more than half of the participants stated that courses should be organized about the lessons in the cities where they live. While three participants stated that opportunities should be provided to find audio-visual materials (videos), one participant stated that they had the right to take midterm and final exams, but they should have the right to take makeup examination as in formal education. The responses to this question revealed that the participants stated their expectations intended to correct the issues which are posed as disadvantages.

The following suggestions can be made in parallel with the findings and interpretations obtained from the study carried out to reveal the views of the students studying in different programs in open education offered by Anadolu University;

- Anadolu University runs courses on particular lessons by cooperating with the universities in other cities; however, these courses should be run for every lesson by taking into consideration the demands from students and must widen the range of opportunities.
- It is revealed that students have difficulties getting materials. In fact, many institutions offer open education services in our country and every institution have its own materials. These institutions share these materials with their respective students with specific passwords. However, the services offered must make contributions to country's future and individual's learning, so the institutions should share all the lesson materials with the students without considering whether they are their respective students or not. A similar suggestion to this one is encountered in the study of Demiray and Sağlık (2003).

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