SUPPORT AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES IN INTERNET-BASED DISTANCE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In this study, it is aimed to propose practical suggestions through determining the state of support activities and social activities among internet-based educational programs in distance education. In line with this aim, students' and instructors' views related with support activities and social activities practiced in the programs within internet-based distance education models applied in Mersin University Mersin Vocational Schools were gathered. 502 students and 30 instructors participated in the study. The quantitative data was collected through surveys, and the qualitative data was gathered through interviews. Frequencies and percentages were used to analyze the categorical data. Moreover, the qualitative data was analyzed via content analysis. According to the findings of the study, students needed to get support about education directives, career guidance, technical equipment, and personal problems.

The most frequently visited sources to get support by students are teachers, secretariat, and administrative units. However, students did not consider the supports they got from these units as sufficient. According to most of the students and instructors participated in the study, being involved in social activities was so prominent specifically to provide motivation for students. However, it seems impossible to be engaged in social activities in distance education due to the nature of distance education.

Students generally regarded themselves as unsocial, and they considered provided social interaction environment as insufficient. Students and instructors expressed that they mostly interacted through social networking sites. Further, they stated that the social environments they mostly faced with each other were final exams and graduation ceremony.

Keywords: **Distance Education, ınternet-based learning, support activities, social activities.**

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st Century in which technological developments change the world, training services also keep up with the change, and they provide individuals with life long learning. Distance education comes to the forefront with its technology-based lessons as being rapidly developing in new world order, as alternative to traditional campus-based structure.

Distance education, which occurs mostly when students and teachers are separated in terms of place and time (Moore and Thompson, 1997: 1; Perraton, 2010), emerges as an education process based on communication theories and education philosophies (Chaney, 2005).

Internet-based learning as education trained through using all kinds of internet environment is defined in many sources as the most rapidly developing kind of distance education (Imel, 1997; Singh and Reed, 2001; Perraton, 1998:34, Cited in: Usta, 2007).

The future of internet-based distance education programs possesses endless means since it is limited to technological developments bound to human imagination (Burns, 2011). Nowadays, technology becomes the most prominent part of the lives of the generation who was born and developed in digital world (Morgan and Bullen 2010; Kenny and Wirth, 2009).

Distance education which provides training to the students who cannot have formal education due to several reasons also contributes to educational equalization through reaching more students in higher education. It enables education right to women, who could not continue their education due to the fact that they are obliged to work or they faced with gender apartheid, and physically handicapped people (Chaudr and Rahman, 2010). Distance education raises its importance as being the most appropriate education system to today's adult learners' reality. Adults plan their own learning through using materials in internet-based education environment.

Many universities in the world follow distance education studies, and they carry on their studies to open new units. When appropriate basis is provided, it is emphasized that the effectiveness and success of distance education will increase (Varol and Bingol, 2002).

In today's world, internet-based education is presented as the alternative of traditional education. The analysis of the studies which compares face-to-face education and internet-based education shows that internet-based distance education is more effective than face-to-face education at very small scale and it is proposed that this difference will become larger in favor of internet-based education parallel with the developments in internet technology in the forthcoming years (Sahin, 2004).

INTERNET-BASED DISTANCE EDUCATION

Internet-based learning, as provided through using every internet environment, is defined in several studies as the most rapidly developing distance education type (Imel, 1997; Perraton, 1998:34; Singh and Reed, 2001). The future of internet-based distance education programs possesses endless means since it is limited to technological developments bound to human imagination (Burns, 2011). Internet-based distance education programs are designed to meet the needs of adult learners and provide learning to individuals in line with functional aims. In these programs it is aimed to actualize individuals' personal learning aims or perform their profession better (Clark and Mayer, 2005:13). Internet-based education may be defined as the education model which is carried out time and place independent, which computer is used as the tool for learning, presentation, and communication, and which is carried out in two different types according to student's and teacher's being in the interaction with each other synchronously and being asynchronously (Askar, 2000: 23).

Based on this difference, education environment can show also differences. Calli (2002) emphasizes when the satellite and large band technologies of asynchronous distance education actualized through limited internet and network infrastructure are stabilized, synchronous education will be applied in real terms, hereby it may be provided richer and more qualified education than formal education by eliminating communication and interaction problems. Since internet-based education includes internet pages designed for teaching, voice and image tools, interactive tools (chat, video conference, and so forth.), mass media (electronic mail, list and news groups), and so many other sources, it is a program that raises students' mental activities and has encouraging characteristics of research (Ozarslan et al., 2007). During the process of education, it is important to motivate students and give regular feedback to them (Ragan, 2009).

Preparation of the content of the lesson, evaluation of the assignments and projects, preparation of the exams, providing interactive communication environments need to be taken into account (Carr et al., Cited in; Al and Madran, 2004), and active learning needs to be encouraged (Graham et al., 2000).

Among the points that educators in distance educations need to take into consideration while determining the content of the lesson there are "teaching purposes, learners' needs, the most frequent access, the appropriateness of proper learning materials for learners' requirements" (Graham et al., 2000).

During the process of teaching-learning, teachers play an effective role as a guide of this process. At this very point, it is also quite important that the related teacher has distance education experience. Further, within the scope of internet-based distance education, internet page design is also vital in order to optimize the efficacy of the internet-based distance education. Internet page serves to the aim of teaching methods' practice, and it is the most prominent learning environment in which learner and teacher interact with each other. Within distance education programs, support activities and social activities occupy an important place among the most vital dimensions in promoting education and teaching. However, when the studies about the distance education programs (Bontempi, 2003; Cardak, 2006; Dimri and Chaturvedi, 2009; Karatas and Soncul, 2007; Küçük, 2010) are illustrated, most of the asserted missing points are related with support activities and social activities. Students need to take various support services both before the education service and during the time of education.

Thanks to these support services, it may be contributed to the development of students' self-efficacy and own management skills, and to actualize teaching objectives (Burn, 2010) in that these skills are the ones that students need to gain according to modern educational approaches. Support activities not only need to be used in order to actualize the teaching objectives, but also need to be used in the fields such as learners' knowledge, technology, psychological support, financial support, and et cetera. Students need to be supported to have necessary equipment so as to follow the lesson. Under the title of technological support, there appears both equipment support and raising the proficiency of technical knowledge. Moreover, there are library services, guiding services, administrative services, record services as support activities (Khan, 2004).

When it is investigated in terms of social activities, communication among students, instructors, technical and administrative personnel in distance education system, and the social side of this interaction differ from face-to-face education.

Behavioral pattern developed on the basis of technology is observed. It is quite important to provide an effective communication among the partners who form a unique community specifically in terms of student motivation (DiRamio and Wolverton, 2006; Svensson, 2002).

Social communication is generally fulfilled through social networking site in internet-based distance education. Universities have responsibility of enabling such communication. Apart from such official networking sites, there are also environments in which students establish to communicate with each other.

There appears a different view about the level of face-to-face interaction of individuals in the system or the importance of the activities based on face-to-face communication. There may be isolation problems in the group in case of exclusion of face-to-face communication (Dolan, 2011). Students' feeling as being part of a group and aspiring for collaborating with the others are among the important factors for actualizing teaching objectives and promoting students' motivation.

In the light of this information, among the main items in distance education programs, support activities and social activities are examined in this study. It is considered that the obtained data will contribute to the relevant literature.

This study is prominent in terms of the current state of the program, having information about its strong and weak points, and the application of this information in the studies of developing a program. When it is considered that there are few studies related with the mentioned issues of distance education, this study becomes important in the field.

In this study, support activity and social activity dimensions of eight programs (Computer Programming, Electronics Technology, Electronics and Communication Technology, Control and Automation Technology, Pharmacy Services, Management, Medical Promotion and Marketing, Health Care Management) in Distance Education Models applied in Mersin University Mersin Vocational School are investigated based on instructors' and students' views under distance education principles.

In line with this aim, research questions of this study are as follows:

- **What are the *views of students* about support activity and social activity dimensions of the programs executed via distance education in Mersin University Vocational School?**
- **Is there a significant difference in the mean points of the items according to gender, the graduated high school type and working experience (whether working in a job or not) variables as regards to the support activity and social activity dimensions of the programs executed via distance education in Mersin University Vocational School?**
- **What are the *views of instructors* about social activity dimension of the eight programs in distance education model executed in Mersin University Vocational School?**

METHOD

In this study, the situation determination was done through using survey model. The survey model is a research methodology which aims to describe a situation that either existed in the past or has been occurring presently as it exists (Karasar, 2008:86).

In the present study, the views of the students and the instructors in the mentioned program were gathered thorough using open-ended and close-ended survey items and interviews in order to determine the current situation.

The population of the study comprised of the instructors and the students in eight programs which distance education model was executed in 2010-2011 academic year in Mersin University Mersin Vocational School.

The population was not that much for sampling, therefore, sampling methodology is not preferred in the study.

The total obtained data percentage, after eliminating the surveys which were not coded appropriately or were not returned back, represented the whole population (Neuman, 2009: 350-351). The population of the research and the percentage of participation in the study were seen in Table: 1

Table: 1
The Population of the Study

STUDENT	INSTRUCTOR												
THE NAME OF THE DEPARTMENT	STUDENTS WHO ENROOLED FOR THE TERM (n)	STUDENTS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE RESEARCH (n)	THE PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS' PARTCIPATION IN THE STUDY (%)	TITLE	Instructors (n)	Instructors who participated in the interview (n)	The percentage of participation in the study (%)	Instructors who participated in studies related with distance education or adult teaching (n)	Instructors who participated in training related with distance education or adult education (%)	DUARATION OF INSTRUCTORS' LECTURING IN DISTANCE EDUCATION		DURATION OF LECTURING IN DISTANCE EDUCATION (n)	PERCENTAGE OF LECTURING IN DISTANCE EDUCATION (%)
COMPUTER PROGRAMMING	406	269	53,6	Prof.	4	3	75	0	0		fewer than 1 year	5	17
PHARMACY SERVICES	190	96	19,1	Assoc. Dr.	5	4	80	1	25		1-2 year	10	33
ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES	99	63	12,5	Asst. Prof. Dr.	10	8	80	1	12,5		3-4 year	8	27
MANEGEMENT OF HEALTH CARE INSTITUTIONS	60	13	2,6	Instructor	14	12	86	1	8,3		5-6 year	4	13
ELECTRONIC TECHNOLGY	80	26	5,2	Lecturer	4	3	75	0	0			3	10
BUSINESS MANAGEMENT	30	10	2										
MEDICAL PROMOTION AND MARKETING	25	12	2,4										
CONTROL AND AUTOMATION TECHNOLOGY	38	13	2,6										
TOTAL	**928**	**502**	**54**	**Total**	**37**	**30**	**81**	**3**	**10**		**30**	**30**	**100**

According to the table-1, the number of the students who enrolled for the spring term and continued their education in Mersin University Distance Education Programs was 928. Since the study was limited to the students who enrolled for the spring term, the population of the study was accepted as 928. The students were asked to fill in the Student View Questionnaire Related with Distance Education Programs. The number of the questionnaires answered appropriately and returned back was 502.

The percentage of the students' participation in the study was determined as 54%. There were 37 instructors who taught in eight programs which distance education model was being executed within the spring term of 2010-2011 academic years in Mersin University Mersin Vocational School. The interview was conducted with 30 instructors who accepted to participate in the study. The percentage of instructors' participation in the study was determined as 81%.

When the distance education experiences of the participant instructors were investigated, it was seen that 17% of the instructors have taught fewer than one year in the institutions in which distance education is executed, 33% of them have taught between 1-2 years, 27% of the instructors have taught between 3-4 years, 13% of them have taught between 5-6 years, and 10% of them have taught more than 10 years.

When the participation of the instructors in in-service training, congress, symposium, and et cetera in the fields of "distance education" and "adult education" was illustrated, it was observed that 10% of instructors participated in such training. The distribution of the students according to some variables was presented in Table: 2.

Table: 2
The Distribution of the Students According to Some Variables

Variables	SUBCATEGORIES	n	%
Gender	Male	350	69,7
	Female	152	30,3
Total		502	100
Work Experience	Working	400	79,7
	Not working	102	20,3
Total		502	100
Age	18-21	84	16,7
	22-25	266	53
	26-30	122	24,3
	31-35	19	3,8
	36 and over	11	2,2
Total		502	100
THE NAME OF THE DEPARTMENT	Computer Programmıng	269	53,6
	Pharmacy Servıces	96	19,1
	Electronıc Communıcatıon Technologıes	63	12,5
	Manegement Of Health Care Instıtutıons	13	2,6
	Electronıc Technolgy	26	5,2
	Busıness Management	10	2
	Medıcal Promotıon And Marketıng	12	2,4
	Control And Automatıon Technology	13	2,6
Total		502	100
Graduated High School Type	General High School	306	61
	Vocational High School	196	39
Total		502	100

According to Table 2, male students comprised of the most of the participants in this study (69,7%). The participants' 30,3% were constituted by female students. When students' work experience was considered, it was observed that most of them (79,7%) were working, and few of them (20,3%) were not working. When students' age range was investigated, the most of them, 53% percentage of them, were between 22-25 years old. Students' 24,3% percentage of them were between 26-30 years old. In terms of the enrolled programs, "Computer Programming" was placed on the top of the list as it constituted more then half of the participant students (53,6%).

"Pharmacy Services" was ranked as the second with 19,1% percentage, "Electronic Communication" was placed as the third in the list with 12,5% percentage. When participant students' graduated high school type was illustrated, 61% of them were graduated from general high school, 39% of participant students were graduated from vocational high school.

In this study, as quantitative data collection tool, "Student View Questionnaire Related with Distance Education Programs" which was prepared by the researcher, and designed through consulting to a specialist and reviewing the literature was used in order to obtain students' views. Draft questionnaire was formed with 10 items related with support activities and 6 items related with social activities based on the relevant literature and the data obtained through pre-study questionnaire applied to instructors and students.

The views of expert instructors, one professor and two assistant professors in Educational Sciences Department (Curriculum and Instruction) , one professor, one associate doctor and two lecturers who work in Mersin University Mersin Vocational School Distance Education Programs, were gathered in order for validation analysis of the draft questionnaire.

The prepared questionnaire was applied to a pilot group formed by 11 distance education students in Mersin University Mersin Vocational School as a pre-study. Students were reached with the support of Vocational School. The application was done in Mersin University Mersin Vocational School between March, 3-7.

After the application of the questionnaire, the incomprehensible items were detected and necessary revisions were done, and the questionnaire was finalized.

"Student View Questionnaire Related with Distance Education Programs" is uploaded into internet page (http://uzak4.mersin.edu.tr) of Mersin University Mersin Vocational School between 26 February-20 May 2011.

Students marked one of the alternatives, "agreed (0)-undecided (1)-not agreed (2)", in the 16-item-questionnaire. The analysis of the obtained data was done through using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) 11.5 and MedCal.v.11.01.

The illustration of students' views was presented through descriptive statistics as percentages and frequencies.

The differences between students' views and variables' item point averages were determined through t test analysis. Statistically meaningful difference is determined as $p<0.05$.

As a qualitative data collection tool, interview with instructors was used in this study. Interview technique, used as a widespread in qualitative studies, is a strong method used to reveal personal views, experiences, and feelings (Yildirim and Simsek, 2005:104). "Semi-structured interviews" with instructors were conducted in the study. Semi-structured interview is a technique which some part of it is formed with structured questions, and some part of it is formed with unstructured questions that enable individuals to response freely (Erkus, 2005: 101).

In developing "semi-structured interview" technique and its application, firstly semi-structured interview form was formed in line with the third sub research question of the study. While the interview form was being prepared, it was noticed questions' being clear, focused, and open-ended (Yildirim and Simsek, 2005:128-134). Interviews were conducted in offices of the instructors between 1 April-10 May 2012 by the researcher.

"Qualitative content analysis" was used in order to analyze interview data. Content analysis is defined as deep analysis done in order to reach concepts and relations which explicate the obtained data (Yildirim and Simsek, 2005:223-227).

Examples of coding related with each theme were written in quotation marks in a faithful way to their original statements. Coding of the data was also done by two field experts independently apart from the researcher. Agreed and disagreed codes were determined after coding the whole data, and inter-reliability among coders was calculated according to Reliability formula of Miles and Huberman (1994). Since the obtained results were more than .70, codes were found reliable.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings and Discussion Of The Sub-Problem

10 items were constructed in "Student View Questionnaire Related with Distance Education Programs" with the aim of eliciting students' views about support activities. In this part, table 3 presents the findings related with these items.

Table: 3
Frequency and Percentage of Students' Views Concerning Support Activities in Student Questionnaire (n=502)

Questionnaire Items Related To Support Activities	agreed		undecided		not agreed	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
1. E-Counselling service provides us to ask our questions about lessons to our advisory.	189	37,6	125	24,9	188	37,5
2. Counselling services facilitate to accommodate with distance education.	200	39,8	114	22,7	188	37,5
3. Support services such as help desk, telephone, e-mail, text messages, and et cetera are sufficient enough to ease solving our problems about the running of the system.	170	33,9	113	22,5	219	43,6
4. It is easy to contact with student affairs.	246	49	89	17,7	167	33,3
5. School secretary is interested in our problems.	210	41,8	131	26,1	161	32,1
6. We have opportunity to reveal our problems about learning with the help of counseling services.	133	26,5	152	30,3	217	43,2
7. Activities that students can communicate with each other through web are designed.	187	37,2	131	26,1	184	36,7
8. Time plan is designed in order that we can consult with instructors in the academic term within the frame of our problems.	156	31,1	120	23,9	226	45
9. Instructors are interested in students .	190	37,8	128	25,5	184	36,7
10. We have chance to contact with executives.	164	32,7	145	28,9	193	38,4

According to table 3, fewer than half of the students (37,6%) did not agree on the item "E-Counselling service provides us to ask our questions about lessons to our advisory". Very few of the students were undecided in this item.

Moreover, fewer than half of the students (37,5%) were disagreed with the item. While fewer than half of the students (39,8%) agreed with the item "Counselling services facilitate to accommodate with distance education", very few of the students (22,5%) were undecided. Further, very fewer than half of the students (37,5%) disagreed with this item. Very fewer than half of the students (33,9%) agreed with the item "Support services such as help desk, telephone, e-mail, text messages, and et cetera are sufficient enough to ease solving our problems about the running of the system". While very small part of the students (22,5%) were undecided with this item, nearly half of the students (43,6%) disagreed with this item. Nearly half of the students (49%) agreed with the item "It is easy to contact with student affairs". Few of the students (17,7%) were undecided. Fewer than half of the students (33,3%) of the students disagreed with the item. Almost half of the students (41,8%) agreed with the item "School secretary is interested in our problems". Very small part of the students (26,1%) were undecided, and fewer than half of the students (32,1%) disagreed with the item. Quite fewer than half of the students (37,3%) agreed with the item "We have opportunity to reveal our problems about learning with the help of counseling services". Quite fewer than half of the students (30,3%) were undecided, and very fewer than half of the students (36,7%) disagreed with the item. Quite fewer than half of the students (31,1%) agreed with the item "Activities that students can communicate with each other through web are designed". Very small amount of students (26,1%) were undecided, and almost half of the students (45%) disagreed with the item. Considerably fewer than half of the students (37,8%) agreed with the item "Time plan is designed in order that we can consult with instructors in the academic term within the frame of our problems". Very small number of the students (23,9%) were undecided, and quite fewer than half of the students (36,7%) disagreed with the item.

Quite fewer than half of the students (32,7%) agreed with the item "Instructors are interested in students". Very small number of the students (25,5%) were undecided, and quite fewer than half of the students (38,4%) disagreed with the item. Very small number of the students (26,5%) agreed with the item "We have chance to contact with executives". Very small number of the students (28,9%) also were undecided about the item. Nearly half of the students (43,2%) disagreed with this item.

Support activities play active roles in each phase of distance education programs. Within these activities, executives' and administrative personals' expertise in this field is prominent for using support activities effectively (Yang, 2010). The number of such kind of activities have been increasing recently; however, merely small number of educators and team who work in support activities have been adapted to this programs (Huang et al., 2011). Nevertheless, support activities are quite important for the efficiency of distance education programs and students' being adapted to programs (Thomas and Soares, 2009). According to the findings of the study, nearly half of the students found support activities as insufficient. When the relevant literature is reviewed, there appear different findings related with this issue. Studies of Kucuk (2010) and Kaba et al. (2012) support the findings of this study. Like in this study, these studies also found that students' satisfaction degree about support services were lower than the expected results. However, in the study of Cekerol (2005), it was observed that students were satisfied with counseling services. Based on these findings, it may be concluded that our country cannot provide support services so effectively. Institutions which execute distance education programs should give great importance to these actitives since support activities are directly related with planning and managing of the distance education program.

Problems in these activities have negative impact on students' academic success (Doherty, 2010). According to the study, counseling services which is an important dimension of support activities in the relevant programs is insufficient in terms of reflecting students' problems about lessons and facilitating the adaptation of students to distance education system. Students are not informed adequately about distance education system, school's practices and general regulations (passing the lesson, summer school, graduation, and so forth.). In this sense, students regarded counseling course which was taught by the researcher as a source to share their problems and refer when to solve their problems. Based on this, it may be thought that continuation of counseling course practices may be a prominent support activity for students.

Help desk, telephone, e-mail, and text messages are defined as supportive units in the investigated programs; however, it is seen that these services are insufficient to ease solving the problems of the students about running system of the program. Findings of the study support Cardak's (2006) findings about "technical support is not included sufficiently" and Karatas's and Soncul's (2007) findings that present students' problems due to inadequacy of technical support. However, library, technical and financial support, tutorials, and academic guidance services, which are provided in traditional education, need to be also provided to the students who take web-based education in order to motivate students of distance education (Bontempi, 2003). The reasons of students' need for technical support may arise either from the inadequacies of background provided by institution or from students' not having adequate tool and equipment due to their financial inadequacy. Therefore, the need of providing financial support services may emerge. As in formal education, scholarship for students also needs to be met in distance education.

According to the research, one of the most important sources referred with the aim of getting support for their problems related with system and teaching is their advisors and other instructors. However, the findings of the study present that regular and efficient communication is not achieved between students and instructors.

Further, it is found that the interest of instructors to students is so low. The sources of problems may be thought as communication problems with instructors and timing of chat hours. While the findings of the study are supported with Kucuk's (2010) finding, "student participate in asynchronous discussion environment is mostly due to getting educational support, but there are some problems about the time of receiving this support and its quality", Walker's (2003) finding differentiates from this study and from Kucuk's (2010) study with its finding, "teachers are interested in students' problems".

As a consequence of this, it may be thought that communion time is insufficient and students cannot receive sufficient support from the instructors within the frame of problems with instructors in an academic term. Nonetheless, instructors need to be sensitive towards students' individual differences, their responsibilities, and their problems (Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2009).

The density and type of social activities in distance education also differ from formal education. Social activities which students may be together psychically and which develop being university student awareness are among the important subjects of education programs. The findings about social activities obtained through Student View Questionnaire Related with Distance Education Programs are presented in Table 4.

Table: 4.
The findings related with social activities obtained through Student View Questionnaire Related with Distance Education Programs (n=502)

Questionnaire Items Related To Social Activities	agreed		undecided		not agreed	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
11. Activities that enable us to meet with instructors and our friends face-to-face are being designed.	127	25,3	115	22,9	260	51,8
12. Meetings such as group dinners, group trips, picnic, and et cetera are organized	84	16,7	103	20,5	315	62,7
13. Informative guiding services about how to benefit from the facilities in main campus are organized.	107	21,3	100	19,9	295	58,8
14. The distance education program we enrolled paves the way for our socialization.	131	26,1	106	21,1	265	52,8
15. Classroom awareness is developed with instructors and our friends.	128	25,5	128	25,5	246	49
16. It is important to vest and participate in parade in graduation ceremony.	160	31,9	245	48,8	97	19,3

According to Table 4, most of the students (25,3%) agreed with the item "Activities that enable us to meet with instructors and our friends face-to-face are being designed". The small number of students (22,9%) were undecided, and nearly half of the students (51,8%) disagreed with the item. Very small number of the students (16,7%) agreed with the item "Meetings such as group dinners, group trips, picnic, and et cetera are organized".

Further, very small number of students (20,5%) were undecided; however, most of the students (62,7%) disagreed with the item. Very small number of the students (21,3%) agreed with the item "Informative guiding services about how to benefit from the facilities in main campus are organized". Very small number of the students (19,9%) were undecided, and nearly most of the students (58,8%) disagreed with this item. Very small number of the students (26,1%) agreed with the item "The distance education program we enrolled paves the way for our socialization". Very small number of the students (21,1%) were undecided with the item. Almost half of the students (52, 8%) disagreed with this item. Very small number of the students (25,5%) agreed with the item "Classroom awareness is developed with instructors and our friends". Likewise, very small number of the students (25,5%) were undecided with the item.

Nearly half of the students (49%) disagreed with this item. Quite fewer than half of the students (31,9%) agreed with "It is important to vest and participate in parade in graduation ceremony". Very small number of the students (31,9%) were undecided, however, nearly half of the students (48,8%) disagreed with this item.

Social activities that may be organized in distance education differ from the ones in formal education. Partners construct a unique social group which shows behavioral patterns developing on the basis of technology (Svensson, 2002). The studies in the relevant literature propound that this social group also achieves social communication generally through internet via social networking sites (Dolan, 2011; Dooley et al., 2005; Kavathatzopoulos, 2006; Morgan and Bullen 2010; Svensson, 2002; Tanyildiz, 2003) and the findings of this study also support this view. However, as a negative result of social relations established through social networking sites, some students regard themselves as asocial.

This problem may be not only related with distance education system, but also this may be among the current problems of social life in today's world. Social support issue of which importance is proven in several studies is ignored in computer mediated communication environments (Kucuk, 2010). According to the findings of the study, students do not think they develop classroom awareness with their friends and their instructors; however, statements such as "*our class, my classmates*" in face-to-face interviews may show that they have class awareness. Further, the reason of students' being mostly undecided about vesting in graduation ceremony may be due to the inadequacy in their sense of belonging towards the university. As it is understood from this finding, students create environments where they can be in communication with each other. According to the findings of this study, students establish social sharing with each other generally through internet. This finding also is also supported with Dolan's (2011) findings. According to the findings of this study, the adjustments that may be organized in order that students, instructors and executives come together and socialize via social activities in related programs are found as inadequate. This finding also shows parallelism with Kucuk's (2010) finding explicating that "Social support of which importance is proven in several studies in computer mediated communication environments is ignored". However, it is quite important to provide environments where eye-contact can be established with the students in web-based distance education (Cosgrove, 2002). Motivation problem emerges as an important issue for distance education program students (Bontempi, 2003; DiRamio and Wolverton, 2006; Iwatsuki, 2009) and it may be thought that this problem can be solved with an effective social interaction mechanism.

Findings and Discussions Of The Sub-Problem

T-test is applied for each item in order to answer the question "Do item point averages of students' views about support activities change according to gender variable?", and the results related with this question is presented in Table 5.

Table: 5
T-test Analysis Table for Students' Views about Support Activities According to Gender Variable

Questionnaire Items Related To Support Activities	Gender	N	$\bar{X}$	S	sd	t	p
1	male	350	,94	,858	500	-1,943	,053
	female	152	1,11	,880			
2	male	350	,96	,875	500	-,622	,534
	female	152	1,01	,891			
3	male	350	1,10	,870	500	,204	,839
	female	152	1,08	,891			
4	male	350	,83	,897	500	-,426	,671
	female	152	,86	,889			
5	male	350	,92	,851	500	,814	,416
	female	152	,85	,864			
6	male	350	1,22	,808	500	2,170	,031*
	female	152	1,04	,832			
7	male	350	1,03	,864	500	1,480	,140
	female	152	,90	,848			
8	male	350	1,11	,857	500	-1,105	,270
	female	152	1,20	,871			
9	male	350	1,01	,856	500	,920	,358
	female	152	,93	,881			
10	male	350	1,03	,845	500	-,948	,344
	female	152	1,11	,834			

According to Table: 5, it is only found significant difference between female and male students in the favor of male students only in the 62nd item of Student View Questionnaire Related with Distance Education Programs about support activities (We have chance of sharing our problems experienced in learning through counseling services). Male students (X= 1,22; S= 0,808) explicated that they share their problems experienced in learning more than female students (X= 1,04; S= 0,832) at (p<.05) significant level.

For the other items in the questionnaire, no significant difference was found (p>.05).

T-test is applied for each item in order to answer the question "Do item point averages of students' views about support activities change according to working experience variable?", and the results related with this question is presented in Table: 6.

Table: 6.
T-test Analysis Table for Students' Views about Support Activities According to Working Experience Variable

Questionnaire Items Related To Support Activities	Working Experience	N	$\bar{X}$	S	sd	t	p
1	working	400	1	,867	500	,102	,919
	not working	102	,99	,873			
2	working	400	,97	,872	500	-,307	,759
	not working	102	1	,911			
3	working	400	1,10	,884	500	,501	,617
	not working	102	1,05	,842			
4	working	400	,81	,886	500	-1,248	,213
	not working	102	,94	,920			
5	working	400	,90	,856	500	,135	,892
	not working	102	,8922	,854			
6	working	400	1,17	,820	500	,144	,885
	not working	102	1,15	,817			
7	working	400	1,02	,861	500	1,340	,181
	not working	102	,89	,854			
8	working	400	1,13	,860	500	-,100	,920
	not working	102	1,14	,871			
9	working	400	1	,872	500	,870	,384
	not working	102	,92	,828			
10	working	400	1,08	,851	500	1,172	,242
	not working	102	,97	,801			

According to Table: 6, when the item point averages related with students' views about support activities were investigated, it was seen that there was no meaningful difference in students' views according to working experience, as working or not working (p>.05).

T-test is applied for each item in order to answer the question "Do item point averages of students' views about support activities change according to type of graduated high school variable?", and the results related with this question is shown in Table: 7.

Table: 7
T-test Analysis Table for Students' Views about Support Activities According to Type of Graduated High School Variable

Questionnaire Items Related To Support Activities	Type of Graduated High School	N	$\overline{X}$	S	sd	t	p
1	general high school	306	,98	,870	500	-,463	,644
	vocational high school	196	1,02	,865			
2	general high school	306	,92	,880	500	-1,529	,127
	vocational high school	196	1,05	,875			
3	general high school	306	1,02	,892	500	-2,217	,027*
	vocational high school	196	1,20	,840			
4	general high school	306	,87	,919	500	,937	,349
	vocational high school	196	,79	,852			
5	general high school	306	,84	,851	500	-1,730	,084
	vocational high school	196	,98	,856			
6	general high school	306	1,14	,827	500	-,916	,360
	vocational high school	196	1,20	,805			
7	general high school	306	1,01	,864	500	,619	,536
	vocational high school	196	,96	,855			
8	general high school	306	1,11	,848	500	-,708	,480
	vocational high school	196	1,17	,883			
9	general high school	306	,93	,850	500	-1,734	,084
	vocational high school	196	1,07	,879			
10	general high school	306	1	,843	500	-1,816	,070
	vocational high school	196	1,14	,835			

According to Table: 7; it is found meaningful difference in the only 59th item among the items related with learning-teaching process in Student View Questionnaire Related with Distance Education Programs in the favor of the students who graduated from vocational high school (p<.05). In the 59th item of the questionnaire (Support services such as help desk, telephone, e-mail and text messages are sufficient enough to solve our problems related with running of the system), the students who graduated from the vocational high school (X= 0,98; S= 0,803) think more than the students who graduated form general high school (X= 0,80; S= 0,842) in terms of exam questions' being prepared at the degree of applicability in the exams.

Table: 8
T-test Analysis Table for Students' Views about Social Activities According to Gender

Questionnaire Items Related To Social Activities	Gender	N	$\overline{X}$	S	sd	t	p
11	male	350	1,28	,826	500	,611	,542
	female	152	1,23	,864			
12	male	350	1,42	,785	500	-1,534	,126
	female	152	1,53	,708			
13	male	350	1,36	,810	500	-,248	,805
	female	152	1,38	,822			
14	male	350	1,27	,832	500	,409	,683
	female	152	1,24	,883			
15	male	350	1,23	,834	500	,085	,932
	female	152	1,23	,825			
16	male	350	,86	,689	500	-,699	,485
	female	152	,90	,740			

No meaningful difference between vocational high school and general high school graduate students and is found in the other items of the questionnaire (p>.05).T-test is applied for each item in order to answer the question "Do item point averages of students' views about social activities change according to gender variable?", and the results related with this question is presented in Table: 8. No significant difference is found between male and female students in terms of the related items with social activities in Student View Questionnaire Related with Distance Education Programs (p>.05).T-test is applied for each item in order to answer the question "Do item point averages of students' views about social activities change according to working experience variable?", and the results related with this question is presented in Table 9.

Table: 9
T-test Analysis Table for Students' Views about Social Activities According to Working Experience Variable

Questionnaire Items Related To Social Activities	Working Experience	N	$\overline{X}$	S	sd	t	p
11	working	400	1,26	,844	500	,135	,892
	not working	102	1,25	,816			
12	working	400	1,45	,757	500	-,444	,657
	not working	102	1,49	,792			
13	working	400	1,35	,818	500	-1,064	,288
	not working	102	1,45	,791			
14	working	400	1,28	,851	500	,945	,345
	not working	102	1,19	,832			
15	working	400	1,23	,842	500	-,136	,891
	not working	102	1,24	,788			
16	working	400	,88	,699	500	,503	,615
	not working	102	,84	,727			

According to Table: 9, when item point averages of students' vies related with social activities are investigated, no meaningful difference is found between the students who is working and the students who is not working as working experience variable (p>.05).

Table: 10
T-test Analysis Table for Students' Views about Social Activities According to Type of Graduated High School Variable

Questionnaire Items Related To Social Activities	Type of Graduated High School	N	$\overline{X}$	S	sd	t	p
11	general high school l	306	1,25	,837	500	-,335	,738
	vocational high school	196	1,28	,839			
12	general high school l	306	1,22	,856	500	-1,261	,208
	vocational high school	196	1,32	,832			
13	general high school l	306	1,36	,819	500	-,292	,771
	vocational high school	196	1,38	,805			
14	general high school l	306	1,39	,783	500	-2,423	,016*
	vocational high school	196	1,56	,724			
15	general high school l	306	1,23	,826	500	-,102	,919
	vocational high school	196	1,23	,840			
16	general high school l	306	,84	,703	500	-,986	,325
	vocational high school	196	,91	,707			

T-test is applied for each item in order to answer the question "Do item point averages of students' views about social activities change according to type of graduated high school variable?", and the results related with this question is shown in Table: 10. According to Table: 10; there is only significant difference between the graduates of vocational high school and the graduates of general high school in the favor of vocational high school graduates in the 70th item, among the items related with learning-teaching process, in Student View Questionnaire Related with Distance Education Programs (p<.05). The students graduated from vocational high school (X= 1,56; S= 0,724) think their education avail their socializing more than the students graduated from general high school (X= 1,39; S= 0,783) in the 68th item of the questionnaire (the distance education program which we enrolled avails our socializing) . No significant difference is found between graduates of vocational high school and graduates of general high school in other items of the questionnaire (p>.05).

To sum up, male students regard support activities as more effective in sharing problems about learning experiences than female students. This finding supports Dimri's and Chaturvedi's (2009) finding which points that "male students are involved in counseling services more than female students". However, these findings differ from Kaba's and et al. (2012) findings which present that the degree of being satisfied with support activities does not change according to gender.

Concerning support activities, there is no significant difference between male and female students. This finding shows parallelism with Dimri's and Chaturvedi's (2009) finding which concludes that "most of the students state that they are satisfied with their learning experiences in the university and there is no meaningful difference between male and female students".

According to the findings of the study, no significant difference is found between the students who are working and the students who are not working in terms of support activities and social activities. Concerning support activities, the students who were graduated from vocational high school think that help desk, telephone, text message, and such support activities are sufficient enough to solve problems about the running of the system. However, the students who were graduated from general high school regard this support services as less sufficient compared to graduates of vocational high school in terms of solving their problems. Based on this finding, it may be thought that learning experiences of the students, who were graduated from vocational high school, which prepare them for working life may have improved their problem solving skills.

These students may be thought as more efficient in getting help from support activities and solving their problems by themselves than the graduates of general high school. Further, concerning social activities, there is a significant difference between the graduates of vocational high school and the graduates of general high school in the matter of distance education program's in which they were enrolled contribution to their socializing. Graduates of vocational high school regard distance education as more effective in their socializing than the graduates of general high school. The differentiation in this item may be due to the expectancy of the students graduated from general high school about being involved in traditional campus-based higher education (Arslan, 2004). In our country, while general high schools serve for students who want to continue their academic education, vocational high schools serve for students who focus on starting working. In line with this, it may be concluded that distance education cannot meet the socializing expectancy of the graduates of high school.

Findings and Discussion Of The Sub-Problem

The findings obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted with 30 instructors who have been teaching in the eight Distance Education programs applied in Mersin University Mersin Vocational School were presented in this part. While displaying attractive and prominent statements of instructors, codes such as "A. lecture., B. lecture." were used. Open-ended questions such as "what are the social activities that can be done in distance education? And "what do you think about the presence of social activities in distance education? Were addressed to the instructors during semi-structured interviews. The obtained findings through content analysis are shown in Table 11.

Table: 11
Frequency and Percentage of Instructors' Views Related with Social Activities in Distance Education Program (n=30)

THEMES AND SUB-THEMES	f	%
THEME: Social Activities		
A. ocial Activity Perception		
1. Not Possible	17	57
2. Increases Motivation	15	50
3. Its not being is important inadequacy	13	43
4. Not necessary	4	13
B. ypes of Social Activities		
5. Chat time	23	77
6. Social networking sites	11	37
7. Final Exams	7	23
8. Trip-picnic-meeting	7	23
9. Graduation Ceremony	4	13

When Table: 11 is investigated, two sub-themes emerge within the context of instructors' views about social activities. Social activity perceptions were coded in the first sub-theme. 57% of instructors regard doing social activities as impossible. Half of the instructors (50%) explicate that social activities increase students' motivation. The percentage of instructors who consider social activities' not being in distance education as inadequacy is 43%; moreover, 13% of the instructors find social activities unnecessary. 77% of the instructors regard chat time as a social activity type. The percentage of the instructors who use social networking site is 37%. 23% of the instructors define final exams, trip-picnic-meeting type of activities as social activities. The percentage of the instructors who regard graduation ceremony as a social activity is 13%.

When instructors' views about social activities were analyzed, the salient and prominent statements were these ones:

A. Lecture: I invite students to the faculty in order to meet with them in the time of final exam and I think that the communication established with the ones who came to the faculty impacts positively on the success of them. I do activities such as chatting related with the department and knowing each other.

B. Lecture: Students create classroom awareness with the help of virtual communication established among them, sometimes I am also involved in this environment.

D. Lecture: We elect class prefect, such activities make them closer to the lessons and each other since social activities are important to make them concentrate on lesson even in distance education.

İ. Lecture.: students sometimes ask for meeting occasionally, doing trip, meeting, and such activities. I also participated in one these activities. However, there were only students who have lived in close destination. Such activities may be motivating if they are done more frequently.

L. Lecture : I do not think being together with students in distance education as necessary, it is also not possible due to their being in different cities.

K. Lecture: It cannot be expected from me to be interested in students since I do not know them, only we have chance to meet in meeting times.

M. Lecture. : Social activities are being organized. Meeting part was organized when students came for exams. We also invite students for graduation ceremony. Further, students can communicate with us in virtual networking sites and chat times, they can share their problems with us. The motivation of the students with whom I meet increases much more.

According to the findings of the study, most of the instructors state that it is impossible to do social activities with the students in web-based distance education environment. The reason of instructors' such attitudes may be considered as their perception of social activity in distance education. Instructors may have been evaluating social activities as face-to-face and in the same place. However, according to the findings, instructors explicate that they mostly interact with students in the internet environment during chat time and in social networking sites. Interaction between instructor and student in web-based distance education often occurs over internet through using e-mails and forum pages (Kavathatzopoulos, 2006). Face-to-face meetings occur in the time of final exams, graduation ceremony and trip-picnic-meeting, and such activities.

This finding supports Hawkins' and et al. (2011) findings which propound interaction between instructors and students occurs through graduation, interaction during lessons, support activities, and meetings. Instructors may gain important output in terms of the continuity of the program and students' vocational guidance as communicating with the graduates. Experiences of the graduates may be guiding both for students and instructors.

According to the findings, instructors state that they want to participate in social activities done with the students. However, it may be also understood from this finding that instructors do not see the planning of social activities as their own responsibility. Therefore, instructors do not create an environment where they can be involved in social activities with students. This finding may be supported with the view emerged in Hawkins' and et al. (2011) research claiming that "the interaction between instructor and students is started with students' questions in various subjects and instructors' expectancy is in line with this". However, being in interaction with students is one of the instructors' responsibilities. Social activities should not be regarded as only face-to-face activities. Even instructors' designing "user-friendly internet page" may foster interaction with students (Bartoletti, 2011).

Interacting with students through using social activities have positive impact on motivation of students towards lessons and students' success in learning (Burn, 2010; Dolan, 2011; Khan, 2004; Svensson, 2002). Likewise, Hawkins' and et al. (2011) claim which they propose the relation between instructor and students and the amount of it is quite effective in distance education supports this study.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

According to the results of the study, the most referred guides of the students to get support are instructors, secretary, and administrative units. However, students regard the support of these units as insufficient. The students who graduated from a vocational high school consider that they get more benefit from such activities than the students who graduated from a general high school. According to experience variable, there is not a significant difference among students' views related with support activities. When gender variable is taken into consideration, male students express guidance activities as more effective when compared to female students.

According to the most of the instructors and students, social activities are so important specifically to foster students' motivation. Nevertheless, social activity work in distance education seems quite impossible due to the nature of distance education. Students generally regard themselves as asocial and they find the provided social interaction environment as insufficient. Students and instructors explicate that they interact mostly through social networks.

Social environments in which they meet face-to-face are generally stated as final exams and graduation ceremony. Based on students' view about social activities, the only meaningful difference is found in graduated high school type variable concerning the correlation between socializing and distance education with regards to variables in this study. Students who graduated from a vocational high school consider that they have chance to socialize by the virtue of the program they were enrolled when they are compared to students who graduated from a general high school.

While preparing distance education programs, it is needed to ground on constructivist approach which is based on active learning and accepted in today's world. The studies in the related literature emphasize the efficiency of distance education programs designed according to constructivist approach (Jonassen et al., 1995; Bronack et al., 2006; Gurol and Demirli, 2001; Valadares, 2007).

In distance education programs, it is needed to build a construct which is based on current knowledge of the learner, and principles of meaningful learning and active learning. A program, which is student-centered, in which many methods and techniques are used, which is not stable, which dynamism is developed according to students' background knowledge, is a constructivist one (Yanpar, 2005:29). Based on the results of the study, in the light of constructivist approach, the implications are as follows:

- **It is needed to provide communication, coordination and cooperation between support services, and define their duties,**
- **It is needed to organize educational seminars about effective communication methods, handling with stress and problem solving for instructors and administrative personnel,**

- **It is needed to enable students with easy access to information sources through designing e-library service,**
- **It is needed to provide psychological counseling and guiding services,**
- **It is needed to plan how to carry on vocational guidance and classroom guidance with the help of organizing seminars for advisors,**
- **It is needed to encourage instructors who take extra tasks (increase online lesson hours, organize seminar) with awarding them for their such works,**
- **7. It is needed to do some works to create classroom awareness among students (e.g. sharing tasks such as class prefect, head boy, and et cetera, or prize competitions between classes),**
- **It is needed to detect communication among students, instructors and executives and their program cohesion through doing research including them all,**
- **It is needed to do questionnaire study in order to illustrate students', instructors' and executives' skills related with technology use and their attitudes towards these technologies. As a result, it is needed to organize seminars for satisfying the detected need,**
- **It is needed provide scholarship for students who ask for it, and it is needed to develop facilities for providing students with laptops in appropriate situations,**
- **It is needed to organize shared academic and socio-cultural activities with graduates,**
- **It is needed to continue education with graduates within the scope of life-long learning,**
- **It is needed to foster students to participate in Erasmus mobility programs and projects which support social and personal development of them through using supports in European Community projects,**
- **It is needed to update students' contact details.**

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