

ATTITUDES OF GRADUATE STUDENTS TOWARD DISTANCE EDUCATION, EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGIES AND INDEPENDENT LEARNING

Associate Professor Ozana URAL, Ph.D.
Elementary Education Department,
Atatürk Faculty of Education
University of Marmara, Goztepe
Istanbul, TURKEY

ABSTRACT

Distance education systems are being used in along with the traditional education systems in order to respond to the demand for higher education. Technological advancements, interactive learning possibilities are forcing the traditional universities to make more use of the distance education systems and technologies. Most of the traditional universities to create the opportunity for their students to be independent learners and learners who can organize their learning processes by using distance education systems and technologies. It is thought that students who can learn on their own and who can organize their learning processes will be more likely to use lifelong learning opportunities. In Turkey where there is a great demand for higher education, the use of distance education systems and technologies in traditional universities is not common. These traditional universities can make use of the distance education systems and technologies in certain lectures and cope with the pressure of the increasing number of students. Successful implementation of the distance education applications in traditional universities will affect the mega Turkish education system in a positive way. In this study, the views of the doctoral students at traditional universities on the use of distance education systems and technologies and independent learning are determined. Findings indicate that doctoral students do not have a positive attitude towards the use of distance education systems and technologies, and they do not agree with the idea that distance education systems can support independent learning.

Keywords: Distance education, educational technologies, independent learning.

INTRODUCTION

With the increasing need for education in modern society, the number of educational institutions has also increased. Looking back to the process of industrialization and the creation of modern society we see that the first applications of distance education started with the institutionalization of education .Although the pressure increases on educational institutions due to the societal demands, still education is not accessible for a lot of people who demand education in institutions.

The first example of a distance education practice which was called 'correspondence education' was done through the exchanging of learning materials between the student and the teacher by mail. As success stories of the correspondence education students were heard, the pioneer practices of distance education at universities were initiated in 1856 in Europe, in 1873 in the USA (McKenzie, Christensen and Rigby, 1968; Simonson and others., 2000).

Besides the many reasons such as the difficulty in responding to the increasing demand for higher education at traditional campus-based universities, the recognition of education as a human right, the increasing views on regarding education as a basis of democracy and better analysis of education costs, the advancements in technology also necessitated for many countries to make space for the distance education systems in their educational systems.

Although various terms such as home study, independent study, external studies, distance teaching and distance learning have been used for distance education the common ground is that the learner and the teacher are separate from each other during most of the learning process.

The Open University in England which initiated the distance education system in 1970's has been very successful in providing flexible and technological educational environments and thus it had an important role in the development of distance education systems. Open University practice which creates a second chance for the college leavers and a second degree for those who want to have another degree, increases the quality of education in a society. It also helps equality of education by making education attainable for more people effects the professional business world by creating vocationally qualified individuals. Other advantages of the system are for those who can not attend schools because either they have to work, care for their children or they live in geographically isolated areas. The motivating characteristics of this system are that, they provide the students the opportunity to learn when they want, and, at their own pace which is suitable for their capacity.

Until the beginning of 1980's distance education was defined as a system in which students received education organized by an institution, separated from the teachers, communication between the institution and learner facilitated through printed material, media devices and computers (Moore,1973;Holmberg,1977). This system was criticized many times because of the one way communication, lack of instant feedback for the student and its socialization problems.

Despite all the criticisms, responding to the increasing demand for education through distance education systems were found to be more logical than increasing the number of traditional universities. Although the cost of the preparatory stages of distance education is comparatively high, the fact is that the same program can be applied for many students at many times with the same quality. Effective distance education costs can be also economical and this issue has utmost importance especially for countries which have limited sources (Bates, 1998). Otto Peters' studies with analysis of the distance education institutions led him to propose that distance education could be analyzed by comparing it with the industrial production of goods (Keegan, 1996; Simonson and others, 2000).The first classification of distance institutions at higher level was done by Peters. According to his typology there are two main models which are western and eastern models. Comparing western and eastern distance education models, it seems that the western model is based on the development of individual learners and the eastern model is based on the socio- cultural development of the community (Keegan, 1996; Simonson and others., 2000).Perhaps the differences in the needs and understanding of the applications in eastern and western models also differentiated the problems found in the systems. In the western models the emphasis was given to facilitating and helping the individual learning on their own, whereas in eastern models the efforts to make the distance learning accessible for the majority of the people was of the highest importance.

Specific conditions of the countries, the background and needs of the students and the students' thoughts and attitudes on the education systems have crucial roles in making the differences in the practices in eastern and western models .

MEGA DISTANCE EDUCATION SYSTEMS: ANADOLU UNIVERSITY

Distance education systems providing remedial university degree opportunities have an important role today. Many countries handle very large number of students. Thus, very large systems of distance education having more than 100.000 of students a year have appeared and called for very large distance systems (Keegan, 1996). One of these very large or "mega" systems is Anadolu University established in 1982 in Turkey.

Established with the intention to provide university degree opportunities for the majority of the society, Anadolu University can be referred to as belonging to the eastern models. Its "Open Educational Faculty" has been providing education in many subjects through printed materials, television programs and academic counseling (Alkan, 1987; Demiray, 1990). When it was first established, it only had 29 479 students (Odabaşı and Kaya,1998), today the registered number of students reached 600 000. It is offering 34 different programs (aof.anadolu, 2007). The fast increase in demand may have been caused by social and economic factors. Another factor is the insufficient response to the increasing demand for higher education. A huge demand for higher education creates the competitive university entrance exams and this exam is not only a source of stress for students but also for families and parents but large number of candidates are preparing for the university race every year (Ural and Erktin,2005;Erktin and Ural,2006). In Turkey where university degree is a big advantage to get a decent job, very few students can study at the universities they wish to study. The capacity for the university degree programs other than the distance education programs is 415.815 students in 2007-2008 (Osym, 2007). Many students who could not enroll in one of these programs will direct their attention to the distance education system. The fact that many students who can not study a traditional degree can switch to distance education programs seems to bring ease to the Turkish education system, yet this also creates many problems for the students.

Students wishing to study in a traditional campus-based university are not really enthusiastic about studying at the distance education program. In distance education systems motivated, autonomous students who can organize their learning depending on their needs and abilities, who consciously choose this independent ambience and autonomy are the desired students (Moore,1994; Simonson and Schlosser,1998).When Moore developed the concept of "autonomy", he was inspired by adult education theories. Most of the adult educators defined the adult learner as independent, autonomous and self-directed (Titmus, 1989). Because of the desired learners' characteristics, adult learners and distance students are expected to be independent students. It is assumed that such students would be the ones to continue their lifelong learning efforts.

TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

Technological developments and the use of internet mostly removed the criticism which continued until the 1980's, about the problems caused by one way communication. Providing a two way communication and the possibility of occasional meeting for socialization purposes have changed the distance education system into a new system in which technical media is used in a two way

communication between the separated teachers and learners (Garrison and Shale,1987; Lewis,1989). In such a system students have to plan their learning. Wedemeyer and Moore especially emphasized the importance of autonomy, independence and freedom in such a system (Moore,1994; Keegan,1996). Although the idea of a student who can learn independently sounds nice, the reality can be different. Keegan (1996) says that the term 'privatization' is much closer to the reality.

A "private situation" can be defined as a situation in which students can learn on their own, independent from an institution. Smith (1987) says that distance education is characterized by the privatization of institutional learning.

Since the students are on their own during most of the time of the learning process in distance education, learning to learn by themselves will make them become more academically successful. From the point of view of the information processing theories, no matter what kind of education system is used, how the students organize their own learning is of critical importance.

In this theory the individual's understanding of his or her own learning processes, his or her self-motivation to reach an aim and awareness of her own cognitive processes is considered as self-regulated learning (Boekaerts ,1997). Metacognition is an important component of self-regulated learning. It can be defined as knowledge and regulation of human cognition (Shraw, 1998). People can control and regulate their learning performance through metacognitive knowledge. Although the idea that students should have the skills to regulate their own learning is generally supported, this idea becomes a necessity for students in the distance education system.

Distance education seems to be a good experience for an individual who is an independent learner and who learns by himself. An introduction to distance education presented through developed technologies during university education may be a first step for adult learners to seize the technological educational opportunities in their future life. Most of the adults acquire college-level learning outside the traditional institutions. Distance education is the most popular way for them (Kizito, 2006). Although various dimensions of technology are used for both traditional higher education systems and distance education in our country, the advantages provided by the use of technology can not be benefited from sufficiently. The use of computer and internet usage in higher education is increasing, although the rates change for different faculties. However, the use of computers and internet as means of meaningful teaching instruments has a low percentage (Erktin, and others,2002). The use of internet and computers for effective teaching at universities is still avoided (Davenport and Eraslan, 1988). The topics, how to use computers and the internet at universities, what type of influence they can bring on to the existing education system are still under discussion .

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Making use of distance education and its technologies for providing better teaching, and for strengthening the effectiveness of teaching programs are not frequently observed, and if they are observed, the applications are usually experimental. Even the universities with the poorest conditions can provide their students internet access, but here what is mentioned is to the use of technology to improve the quality of education and to guide the students in the planning and regulating of their

learning. These qualities are the essential qualities of distance education technologies which will create benefits for students of the traditional campus-based universities.

In some campus-based universities there are such limited applications of distance system for certain courses in Turkey. The use of distance education technologies in campus-based universities will help to deal with the problem of insufficient capacities for the increasing number of students. In some developed countries there are elective courses taught with distance system in traditional universities, these application can be taken as a model. It is advisable to make a survey investigating students' attitudes towards these applications. In this study the thoughts and attitudes of doctoral students toward distance education system, technologies and independent learning were examined.

METHOD

For the sample of the study, one of the biggest universities in Turkey regarding the number of students Marmara University was chosen. At the University of Marmara, graduate students that are registered to various doctorate degree programs have to take two obligatory courses called "Doctorate Teaching Courses". Each is 3 credits and are taken at the last stage of their doctorate studies if they had not taken these courses before. These courses are about developmental and learning psychology, educational techniques and research methods.

In 2006-2007 autumn and spring terms 169 (90 male and 79 female) students were enrolled to take these obligatory courses. These doctorate students were from various departments such as law, communication, engineering, science, theology and fine arts. The students from different backgrounds have to take these introductory lessons, because most of these students work at Marmara or other universities as research and teaching assistants at that time, and they will probably be future academic staff at these universities. It is hoped that these lessons will contribute to their teaching skills.

As these scholars are volunteer learners with the intention to reach to the highest academic levels, distance learning technologies can be seen as a right method of learning for them; so, it was anticipated that they might prefer these technologies. Students' thoughts on taking these introductory lessons through distance learning system were asked and attitudes toward distance education system, educational technologies, and independent learning were examined in this study.

Sample: The sample of the study was 67 (32 female and 35 male) doctorate students who had to take obligatory teaching courses and who worked as research assistants at various universities in the 2006-2007 academic year.

Data were collected by a questionnaire which was designed by the researcher. A questionnaire with 4 sections, formed by open-ended questions about personal information, use of technology, distance education and independent learning was prepared and used.

A total of 25 questions with the following distribution of topics were asked: 6 questions were about the personal information section (sex, age, field of study, position, marital status, number of children), 9 questions were about the use of technology (like frequency of use, using aims, accessibility, using at home and at work), 5 questions about distance education (distance learning application at

traditional universities, levels, fields, experience of distance education), 5 questions were about independent learning (definition, perception about independent learning, views on their students).

FINDINGS

The sample of the study consisted of 22 to 46 years old students, 54% of them were teaching assistants, 46% of them were research assistants, 34% of them were married, 18% of them had one child, 9% of them had two children, 35(52%) of them were males and 32 (48%) of them were female doctorate students. In the Turkish university system research assistants provide help for the courses and research activities. Teaching assistants teach mostly introductory lessons. All of the subjects had computers with internet connection which they could use at the universities, and all of them had computers at home, few of the students (5%) did not have internet connection at home.

All of the students used the internet for scientific research, for preparing projects and homework, for communication, for shopping and for entertainment. All of the sample say they use presentations on computers to make teaching easier. However they cited that they used classical teaching methods when they used computers for teaching. All agreed that using computer technology and internet in lectures was necessary.

The percentage of students who thought that distance education lectures should only be given at doctorate level was 41%. In a similar study 37% of the students claimed that social lessons(21%), science lessons(5%) and laboratory courses (19%) weren't suitable to be taught through distance education (Ural, 2005).

The percentage of students who thought that distance education was not suitable for science (5%) and laboratory courses (17%) in this study is quite similar to that previous study (Ural,2005). 32% of the sample think that they might accept to take the obligatory doctorate teaching courses through distance education if conditions suited them. There was no explanation for "suitable conditions".

Majority of the sample defined independent learning as "learning of students who can succeed after studying on their own". However, their definitions weren't very clear or specific. 82% of the sample considered themselves as independent learners, if their unclear definitions were taken as a reference point, to be a doctoral student was sufficient enough to be considered as an independent learner. 61% of the sample did not consider their students who are studying bachelors degrees, as independent learners.13% of the sample did not state their opinions on this matter. 54% of the sample claimed that distance education students are not independent learners. The answer to the question why students could not practice independent learning was answered as old habits". It can be concluded that the sample's opinions on independent learning were not very clear.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

It is believed that traditional universities should also provide courses suitable to distance education systems. In this study the views of doctoral students on having courses designed in a distance education system in a campus-based university, use of technology and independent learning were determined.

According to the results, doctoral students were using technology intensively in their academic and daily lives, but they were reluctant for the lectures and programs designed in distance education system. These students claimed to want to use technology as an aid to the traditional teaching system. Better presentation of the technological uses of distance education systems may change the views of these students. There has been a lot of successful models for applying computer-assisted learning in science since late 80's (Jones, Scanlon and O'Shea, 1987). Means (2003) says that technology can help a lot to provide meaningful education. She claims that programs such as GLOBE, Hands-On Universe had enabled students to achieve their scientific goals and gives examples of these. In this study however, most of the students thought that using distance education technologies in science lessons could not be useful and efficient. Although there are some researchers who are very cautious about using technology in education, saying that we do not know the effects of these technologies with expensive infrastructures on children's social, emotional, and cognitive development like Healy (2003), it seems that it is almost essential to have technologies at university level.

Doctorate students think that distance education lectures should be mostly at doctorate levels but not that much at previous levels of education. They don't have clear views about the concept of independent learning and they seem to be distant to the thought that distance education encourage students to become self-planning and independent learning type students. The findings of the study show that the doctorate students do not feel very enthusiastic about having distance education lectures for themselves. Their views are parallel to the thought that distance education lectures should only be given at the very last stages of academic instruction. The findings indicate that maybe the reason behind the negative attitude of doctorate students towards distance education can be the insufficient information they have about the topic. In addition certain problems found in the existing distance education system may influence their thought negatively, as well.

In our country where there is a great and increasing demand for higher education , many students who can not enroll to traditional universities are directed to distance education faculties which form a mega system every year, that is why most of these students of distance learning programs do not have qualities we expect from a distance learning program. These students are not guided properly and they don't have enough information and counseling how to study on their own. In order to pass their exams they have to enroll again to certain private education institutions which exist in most of the big cities (kurs.memurlar.net ,2007). The basic criticism directed towards our existing distance education system is the lack of academic and psychological counseling for students. A lot of students have no chance to learn how to become independent learners. In such a mega bodies these services are very difficult to be given, yet a solution is to be found. With traditional universities becoming part of the distance education system, solutions will be easier, such as sharing counseling systems, encouraging students to be independent learners. This change can bring positive effects for both systems.

Although many students enroll to distance education, still the demand for higher education can not be fully responded. In June 2007, 1 million 640 thousand 259 students have taken the university entrance exam, but the capacity of the faculties (4 and 2 year degrees) is 425 thousand (Osym,2007) which means only one in four students will have a chance of higher education and the chances of them studying the degree they want is much less. Furthermore, campus-based traditional universities

have difficulty in providing a good quality education due to crowded classrooms. As a result, to lighten the capacity load of traditional universities, distance education lectures can be part of the solution.

The advantages of distance education lectures for the students of traditional universities can be the qualities of independent learning, self-planning, qualities which will help them all their future educational life. Distance education can bring ease to the education systems of countries similar to Turkey's education system which is under pressure of increasing demand. As the number of distance education lectures increase in traditional universities, these universities will be able to offer distance education degrees and programs by time. Before some application of distance system in traditional universities, it seems that traditional university students have to be convinced for the advantages of the distance education system. Finally, as a preparation for these applications further research has to be done investigating views of different groups and investigating potential problems.

BIODATA AND CONTACT ADDRESSES OF AUTHOR



Ozana URAL is associate professor at the Atatürk Faculty of Education at the University of Marmara. In 1994 she received the Ph.D. grade in Adult Education at University of Bogazici, Istanbul.

Her main research interest concerns adult education, preschool education, women and parent studies, stress and anxiety, and educational psychology.

Ozana URAL
Elementary Education Department,
Atatürk Faculty of Education
University of Marmara, Goztepe Campus,
34722,Istanbul, TYRKEY
Tel: +90 216 345 66 24
Fax: +90 216 338 80 60
Email: oural@marmara.edu.tr
REFERENCE

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