

MASTER'S DEGREES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION IN TURKEY AND OPINIONS OF STUDENTS¹

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Abstract

The number of undergraduate students who want to specialize in their own fields or in others are increasing. For this purpose, they do master's degrees. However, graduate students who also work cannot achieve their purpose, because of reasons such as class hours clashing with working hours, or long distance between work and school. Some who enroll programs cannot complete them, and some others cannot attend master degree programs since the programs they want to enroll are in other towns, or since they lack foreign language skills. Master's degree programs in distance education eliminate the time and distance constraints for graduate students who work. The aim of the present study is to get the opinions of master's degree students on distance education system via a questionnaire by which they can evaluate it. The questions revolving around success factors of distance education were sent to students through social media online. It is difficult to determine clear limits of success factors of distance education models, however the study focused on rather general criteria. Specific missions of each and every university may well imply new criteria and exclude some others. The questionnaire of the present study includes questions on comprehensive criteria in institutional management, assessment and improvement of education, technical service, educational mediums, educational designs, etc. The questionnaire with 32 sections was conducted with the students enrolled in 2016-2017 spring semester. A random sample of 247 volunteers participated the questionnaire and the data were presented in tables with their frequency and percentage. The findings include suggestions for practitioners and researchers.

Keywords: Distance Education, Distance Master Degree Education, Student Opinion, Survey

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TÜRKİYE'DE UZAKTAN YÜKSEK LİSANS ÖĞRETİMİ VE ÖĞRENCİ GÖRÜŞLERİ

Öz

Günümüzde lisans mezunlarının birçoğu kendi alanlarında yada kendi alanlarının dışında farklı bir alanda uzmanlaşmak istemekte ve bu amaçla yüksek lisans yapmayı hedeflemektedirler. Ancak iş hayatına atılan mezunlar, ders saatlerinin mesai saatleri ile çakışması yada mesafe gibi nedenlerle bu arzularını gerçekleştirememekte, başlayanların bir kısmı da öğrenimini yarıda bırakmaktadır. Diğer bir kısım mezun ise hedeflediği yüksek lisans programının başka şehirde olması yada yabancı dil konusunda yeterliliğinin olmaması vb. birçok nedenle yüksek lisans yapamamaktadırlar. Belirli kısıtlar altında bu amaçlarını gerçekleştirmeyi hedefleyen mezunlar için, zaman ve mekân kısıtını ortadan kaldıran uzaktan yüksek lisans programları bu amaca hizmet etmektedir. Bu çalışmada Uzaktan Yüksek Lisans öğretimini tercih edenlerin sistemle ilgili görüşleri alınmaya çalışılmış ve sistemi değerlendirebilecekleri bir anket formu oluşturulmuştur. Uzaktan eğitim başarı faktörleri çerçevesinde oluşturulan anket soruları, sosyal medya aracılığı ile öğrencilere ulaştırılmıştır. Sürekli gelişen uzaktan öğretim modeli için başarı faktörlerini keskin sınırlar ile belirlemek oldukça zor olmakla birlikte, genel olarak tüm sistemi kapsadığı düşünülen kriterler belirlenmeye çalışılmıştır. Her üniversitenin misyonu kapsamında yeni kriterler eklenebilir veya mevcut kriterler çıkartılabilir. Bu nedenle hemen hemen tüm sistemi kapsayacak; kurumsal yönetim, eğitim değerlendirme-iyileştirme, teknik hizmetler, öğrenme ortamı, öğrenim tasarımları gibi kriterler gözönüne alınarak sorular yapılandırılmıştır. 2016-2017 öğretim yılının, bahar döneminde sisteme kayıtlı öğrencilere uygulanan anket, 32 maddeden oluşmaktadır. Araştırmaya raslantısal örnekleme yöntemi ile 247 gönüllü katılmış ve elde edilen veriler, frekans ve yüzde hesabı yapılarak tablolar halinde sunulmuştur. Anket sonuçlarından elde edilen bulguların uygulayıcı ve araştırmacılar için fikir verebilecek önerilerden oluşmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Uzaktan Eğitim, Uzaktan Yüksek Lisans Eğitimi, Öğrenci Görüşleri, Anket

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Introduction

In Turkey, like in many other countries, many people who complete their university educations tend continue with graduate studies. However, for various reasons, many cannot achieve this. Distance education is a training process that enhances the opportunity of equality for those who cannot benefit from face-to-face training facilities, employing specially prepared systematic and interactive two-way communication with the use of technology and mass media to support the educational process without limitation of time and space. (Moore&Kearsly, 2005; Kaya, 2002; Simonson, 2001; Keegan,1986).

Distance education which provides equality of opportunity in education in undergraduate and graduate degrees. The development of information and communication technologies, and the enrichment of learning and teaching environments have made it easier for many universities to establish distance undergraduate programs in order to meet the public demand.

Universities that start distance education graduate programs run the system with technological infrastructure and qualified instructors. However, students' opinions about the system provide very important information for the system's sustainability. This study is a descriptive study on student profiles and opinions about the distance education system. The findings are presented in tables and graphs.

1. Distance Education

Distance learning began in late 19th century, and has a conceptual feature that covers the interdisciplinary field of work which has been widely used in the late 20th century (Aydm, 2011: pp. 18-49).

Distance education is a system of teaching and planned learning, in which teaching normally occurs in a different place from where learning happens, and the system requires communication through technologies as well as a special institutional organization (Moore & Kearsley, 2012: 2).

Globalization has accelerated competition in the field of education as in many other fields. Technological developments, an accelerator of globalization, have forced educational institutions to use technology in order not to fall behind in the competitive environment. The opportunities provided by technology have led to an increase in open and distance learning activities (Kürşad & Horzum, 2005: 103-121).

Technology is the infrastructure and backbone of distance education (Bates, 2005: p. 3). It always allows the distribution of information and communication everywhere. Interaction and communication between students and teachers in distance education are provided by technological means (Ally, 2004: pp. 3-31). In distance education, printed and audio-visual technologies are used in various components of the system. Technologies such as online media, TV, radio, printed materials, learning management systems, content management systems and virtual classrooms are used in the production and distribution of content in distance education in the student-teacher interaction (Okur, 2012: 4).

Individuals who benefit from distance education systems are as diverse as those who prefer traditional learning methods. The main characteristics of distance education are as follows:

- Distance education is time-independent. An individual may resume his or her education any appropriate time. She decides how she will use her time to complete her training.
- Distance education is independent of place. Individuals with limited educational opportunities in their environment are provided with the necessary qualifications to be educated without any change, hence, "equality of opportunity in education" is ensured.
- Distance education ensures that the student behaves more responsibly. It is student's will that determines when the content should be covered to be successful. She is aware of the fact that the lessons are for her own personal development, and she has the freedom to attend classes whenever she wishes.

- Distance education is not an individual process, though. It is possible to work on team projects, and communicate and collaborate with other students who take the same course via the opportunities provided by information technologies (e.g., e-mail, chat, forum, etc.).

Distance education is more flexible than traditional methods, therefore, the individuals involved in distance education systems have different characteristics in terms of age, cultural background, disability status, work and family life. The institutions which offer distance education reflect the practices of the era of industrial society, in which a structure is applied to every lesson and the teacher is at the center. It is expected that in the coming years, the demand for higher and lifelong education needs of learners from various age groups will increase for new skills of the information economy (Çetinsaya, 2014: p. 87).

1.1. Distance Education Learning Environments

Distance learning differs from traditional education and learning methods in that in-class activities cannot be employed. Therefore, the planners and practitioners of distance education have to develop specifically designed units and media to provide the students and teachers with communication and interaction opportunities.

The communication between practitioners and learners of distance education is provided by internet technologies. Teleconference meetings, electronic mails, e-books and e-journals are the alternatives to traditional means of education, and they constitute the essential components of online distance education (Al & Madran, 2004). E-learning emerged as the most important technological element of distance education after the advance of the Internet, and immediately became an irreplaceable part of electronic learning environments (e.g. Internet, intranet, etc.). E-learning can be planned as both synchronous and asynchronous fashions, according to the specific needs. Various technologies provide opportunities for efficient participation in both synchronous and asynchronous applications (Soong, Chan, Chua & Loh, 2001; Lammintakanen & Rissanen, 2005; Martz & Reddy, 2005; Novitzki, 2005; Pituch & Lee, 2006; Bekele & Menchaca, 2008).

Synchronous learning (i.e., simultaneous e-learning, or live e-learning) is defined as simultaneity of communication among individuals, and direct informational input. In synchronous learning, teachers and students of distance education meet in a shared period of time, although they are in different places (Kantar, İbili, Bayram, Hakkari, & Doğan, 2008). In asynchronous educational platforms, teachers and students are independent from each other in covering the related educational materials. This method results in an essential alteration of the role of the teacher. The function of the teacher is not teaching anymore: It is direction. Many researchers claim that the disadvantages of asynchronous education can be eliminated by inclusion of synchronous elements in it, and enhancement of it by communicational means (Duran, Önal and Kurtuluş, 2006).

1.2. Distance Education and Master's Degree Education in Turkey

John Dewey's "Teacher Education Report" in 1924 brought distance education forward in Turkey. The notion of education with letters, which forms the basis of distance education, was introduced in 1933-34.

Distance education applications in Turkey begun by providing in-service training for employees with short-term education with letters in the Faculty of Law, Bank and Commerce Research Institute in Ankara University in 1950. Later, in 1961, Center of Education with Letter was established within the Ministry of National Education. These practices were followed by the establishment of the Trial Higher School of Teachers and the Higher Education Institution (YAYKUR). After these developments, Anadolu University was commissioned with the task of distance higher education in 1982 with the Law No. 2547. Anadolu University started its open and distance learning applications in 1982-1983 academic year with undergraduate programs in Economics and Business, within the Open Education Faculty. Open and distance

learning is offered to learners in many countries to provide access and flexibility in education, and it has an important role in solving the problem of capacity in higher education in Turkey (Özkul, 2000: 95-112).

68 of the 184 higher education institutions in Turkey offer open and distance learning programs. Among these institutions, there are 47 undergraduate open and distance learning programs, 17 undergraduate programs, 11 undergraduate completion programs, and 55 master degree programs. (Koçdar & Doğan Görü, 2015: 29).

Table 1: Master's Degrees in Distance Education in Turkey (2018)

<u>Master's Degree in Distance Education In Turkey</u>	<u>Number of Programs</u>
Afyon Kocatepe University	1
Akdeniz University	1
Altınbaş University	2
Amasya University	3
Anadolu University	9
Ankara University	5
Atatürk University	7
Atılım University	2
Bahçeşehir University	6
Bartın University	5
Başkent University	7
Beykent University	5
Bülent Ecevit University	2
Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University	2
Çankaya University	1
Çukurova University	6
Dicle University	1
Dokuz Eylül University	5
Ege University	5
Eskişehir Osmangazi University	1
Gazi University	8
Gaziantep University	1
Hacettepe University	3
Işık University	1
İnönü University	3
İstanbul Arel University	5
İstanbul Aydın University	1
İstanbul Bilgi University	6
İstanbul Esenyurt University	2
İstanbul Kültür University	2
İstanbul Medeniyet University	1
İstanbul Medipol University	8
İzmir Ekonomi University	1
Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University	4
Karabük University	5
Karadeniz Teknik University	6
Kastamonu University	2
Kırklareli University	2
Kocaeli University	1

Maltepe University	2
Manisa Celal Bayar University	4
Marmara University	2
Mersin University	5
Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University	3
Okan University	5
Ondokuz Mayıs University	7
Orta Doğu Teknik University	1
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan University	1
Sakarya University	17
Selçuk University	1
Süleyman Demirel University	4
Trakya University	3
Yalova University	1
Yüzüncü Yıl University	1
(55 University) TOTAL	196

The number of universities and programs offering distance education at graduate level increases each academic year. Distance education, a very important alternative for those who want to continue their business careers while having graduate education, or for who pursue graduate studies at a university in a city other than the one they are living, offers education that can compete with formal education, thanks to the technological advances of our time.

According to Section 1 of Article 7 in “Procedures and Principles of Distance Education in Higher Education Institution” constituted by the Council of Higher Education, graduate degree programs in distance education in Turkey, courses must be delivered by the instructors themselves by video-conferences, virtual classes and forums with the interaction among students and instructors in a synchronous fashion. The scope and content of the present study is in accordance with this regulation.

The education which graduate students in distance education receive is similar to that of traditional programs.

- All lecture notes remain accessible on the website until the end of the semester.
- At the end of each week's lessons, tests and interactive questions are applied.
- Course pages are supported by diagrams, graphics and similar visual elements, and animated with presentations and animations.
- While students work on new topics weekly added, they can go back and review their previous course grades until the end of the semester.
- Students can also follow the textbooks included in the program package. Homework and practice exams are published on the website. Homework and researches are completed and sent by the students, and evaluated by the teaching staff online.
- The basic communication consists of online conversations and forums. Communication can be enriched by the technological infrastructure of the universities.
- Online Interview (a simultaneous chat line used to activate the communication between the academic staff and the students by appointment).
- Forum (a discussion platform on the Internet, an active communication environment in which current topics are discussed with the participation of all students).

2. Problem

Although graduate degrees are offered in distance education by many universities, the question whether they obtain their goals is still pending. It is not an easy task to measure the success, asking the opinions of students on critical success factors is a partial solution.

There are no clear delimitations of success factors in distance education, but there are many studies in the literature which can lead us. Many researches (Cheawjindakarn et. al. 2012, Chantanarungpak, 2010; Selim, 2007; Allen & Seaman 2005; Govindasamy, 2002; Volery & Lord, 2000; Turkan&Cihan, 2015) indicate the following factors in the success of distance education: (Figure 1)

Figure 1: *Critical Success Factors in Distance Education*



Institutional management includes the decision making processes on distance education actions in all levels, and the management of the entire system. Assessment and improvement of education is determined by the demands of all shareholders of the system. These shareholders are learners, teachers, institutional managers and technical personnel. They all contribute to the processes of assessment and improvement of distance education.

The factor of technical services is of utmost importance, since it provides the basic relationship between the students and the system, and it has to be sustained under all circumstances. It includes basic procedures such as the transmission of complaints and requests of students, management of databases, conduction of tests, etc. The basis of academic support provided for the learners in distance education is the management of educational environment. Communication and interaction among teachers and learners, and planning of academic activities are the activities of educational environment.

Learning design includes the technical procedures of course delivery in accordance with pedagogical parameters in such a way that learning is efficient and fast. Its elements include the determination of the aims and scopes of courses, course materials, homework, assessment and evaluation methods, and the design of learning environments.

In the present study, the participants were briefly informed about the definitions of the factors listed above, and their opinions on the actual applications were asked.

2.1. Limitations

The limitations of the present descriptive study on the opinions of graduate students about distance education are as follows: Firstly, the sampling universe spread to a wide geographical area, and only students who use social media were included by a random sampling method. All the participants are enrolled students who voluntarily participated the study. Therefore, the size of sampling set is representational, and cannot be generalized to the whole country.

Another limitation is about the period: The study was conducted with certain number of students enrolled in a certain semester. In other periods, the findings would well vary.

A third limitation of the study is that it is based on quantitative data. Although quantitative data provides the researchers with an explanation of present conditions, qualitative data is necessary to fully understand the motivations and reasons of the students' opinions.

2.2. Method

The aim of this study is to get distance education students' opinions about the education process and the system in Turkey. For this purpose, a questionnaire was designed, and in this form, first, the questions revealing demographic characteristics of the participants were required. Then, the students were asked to answer questions about the system. In this context, this study is a descriptive survey. Descriptive surveys are conducted to depict the present conditions on the basis of some variables in a sample (Karasar, 2005).

2.3. Population and Sample

There are 55 universities and 196 programs providing distance education in Turkey. The scope of the research is all students enrolled in distance education in Turkey in 2016-2017 academic year.

One of the nonprobability sampling methods, i.e. random sampling, was used for the study considering the area and the restrictive factors such as population density and time. The questionnaire was shared on social networks and reached the number of representative samples required.

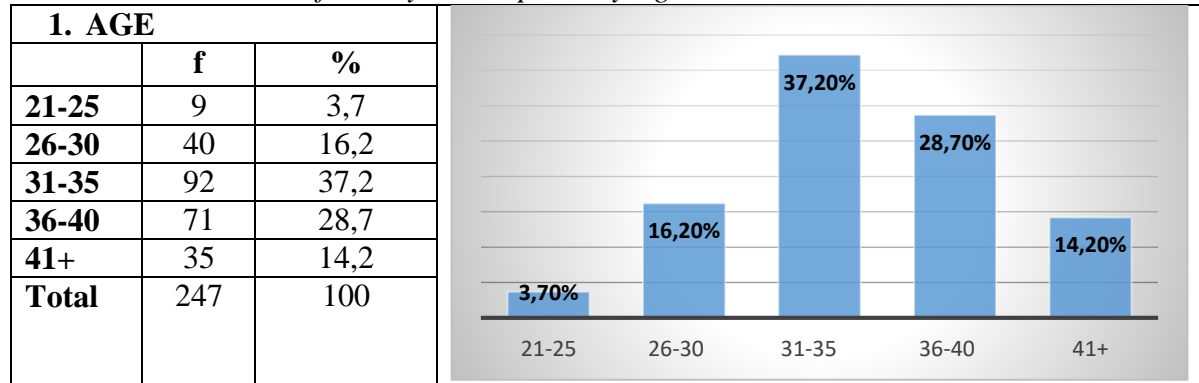
For the analysis of the data, SPSS was used. The results of the questionnaire are a study to determine the opinions of the individuals who are receiving the distance master's degree. In the descriptive research model, a current situation is investigated. A descriptive research involves statistical operations such as frequency and percentage, which allow the collection, description and presentation of numerical values for the research topic.

The questionnaire included questions primarily to determine the demographic characteristics of the participants. At the end of the questionnaire, the opinions of the participants about the distance education graduate programs were figured out.

2.4. Analysis of Findings and Comments

The distribution of the participants according to age is as follows: 37.2% of them are in the age range of 31-35 years, 28.7% in the age range of 36-40 years, and 14.2% over 41 years of age. (Table 2.)

Table 2: *Distribution of Survey Participants by Age*



The distribution of the participants according to gender is as follows: 36% of them were female and 64% were male. (Table 3.)

Table 3: Distribution of Students Attending the Survey by Gender

2. GENDER		
	f	%
Female	89	36
Male	158	64
Total	247	100

A bar chart showing the distribution of students by gender. The x-axis has two categories: FEMALE and MALE. The y-axis represents the percentage. The bar for FEMALE is at 36% and the bar for MALE is at 64%.

28.7% of the participants were students in social sciences and humanities, 27.1% were in engineering, 16.2% in educational sciences, 12.9% in philology, 6.9% in science, 6.1% in health science, and 2.1% in agriculture, forestry and aquaculture. (Table 4.)

Table 4: Distribution of Participated Students' Graduation Areas

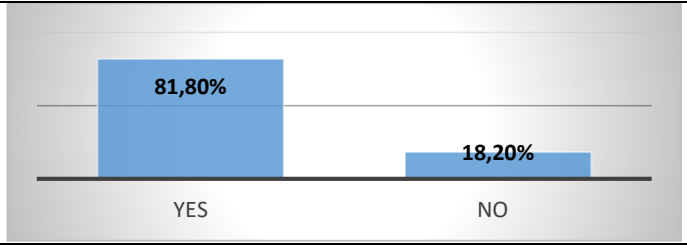
3. Distribution of Participants According to Their Graduation Areas		
	f	%
Educational Sciences	40	16,2
Science	17	6,9
Philology	32	12,9
Fine Arts	-	-
Law	-	-
Theology	-	-
Architecture	-	-
Engineering	67	27,1
Health Science	15	6,1
Social and Humanities	71	28,7
Agriculture, Forestry and Aquaculture	5	2,1
Sport Science	-	-
Total	247	100

A bar chart showing the distribution of participants according to their graduation areas. The x-axis lists various fields: EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES (16,20%), SCIENCE (6,90%), PHILOLOGY (12,90%), FINE ARTS, LAW, THEOLOGY, ARCHITECTURE, ENGINEERING (27,10%), HEALTH SCIENCE (6,10%), SOCIAL AND HUMANITIES (28,70%), AGRICULTURE, FORESTRY AND..., and SPORT SCIENCE.

81.8% of the participants had a job, and 18.2% did not. (Table 5.)

Table 5: *Do you work in a job?*

4. Do you work in a job?		
	f	%
Yes	202	81,8
No	45	18,2
Total	247	100



The questions of the survey were designed on the basis of success factors. As for the participants' opinions in terms of institutions, 73.3% of the participants consider the graduate programs in distance education as efficient and beneficial for the needs of the country. However, only 49% of them think that their university manage the process well. 80.2% of the participants think that the purposes of graduate programs are clearly determined, and 60.7% of them are not informed whether the institutions allocate sufficient resources for the programs (Table 6).

Table 6: *Opinions on Institutional Management*

	YES		NO		NO IDEA		$\sum f$	$\sum \%$
	f	%	f	%	f	%		
5. Do you think graduate programs in distance education serve the needs of the country?	181	73,3	37	15	29	11,7	247	100
6. Do you think that your university manage distance education process well?	121	49	103	41,7	23	9,3	247	100
7. Do you think that the purpose of the graduate program you enroll are clearly determined?	198	80,2	21	8,5	28	11,3	247	100
8. Do you think that your university allocates sufficient resources for the distance education system?	62	25,1	35	14,2	150	60,7	247	100

63.2% of the participants think that the technical infrastructure of their universities are insufficient for distance education system. 67.7% of the participants claim that at the beginning of the semester, there are no technical controls. 65.6% of the students think that audio-visual transmission is sufficient, however, 69.2% of the participants claim that they were not informed about the system sufficiently. 63.2% of the participants do not find the system announcements up-to-date and enough, while 51.8% of them find themselves proficient in information technologies. A general question on whether they are content with technical services, about half of the participants say yes, and the other half say no (Table 7).

Table 7: Technical Services (Non-Academic Support)

	Yes		No		No Idea		$\sum f$	$\sum \%$
	f	%	f	%	f	%		
9. Do you think that the infrastructure of the university is sufficient for distance education?	81	32,8	156	63,2	10	4	247	100
10. Were there any technical controls at the beginning of the semester?	70	28,3	167	67,7	10	4	247	100
11. Do you find audio-visual transmission sufficient for the courses?	162	65,6	77	31,2	8	3,2		
12. Are you sufficiently informed about the system?	67	27,1	171	69,2	9	3,7	247	100
13. Are the system announcements up-to-date and sufficient?	51	20,6	156	63,2	40	16,2	247	100
14. Do you find yourself proficient in Information Technologies?	128	51,8	52	21,07	67	27,13	247	100
15. Are you content with non-academic support services in general?	105	42,5	107	43,3	35	14,2	247	100

When students were asked whether they were satisfied with the support services, 42,5% answered they were, while 43,3% said they were not, and 14,2% said they were not sure. The reason for dissatisfaction for 34,6% was that they had difficulty in organizational structure, while 56,1% stated that the infrastructure was insufficient. 9,3% of the respondents indicated that call centers were insufficient (Table 8).

Table 8: Reasons for Dissatisfaction with Non-Academic Support Service

16. What are your reasons for dissatisfaction with non-academic support services?	f	%
Institutional Structure Issues	37	34,6
Inadequate Infrastructure	60	56,1
Call Center inadequacy	10	9,3
Total	107	100

As for the participants' opinions on assessment and improvement of education, 83% of the students claim that their universities pay attention to their suggestions, complaints and discontents about the system. 87% of them claim that they are satisfied with their distance education, and 89.5% of them claim that their expectations are met (Table 9).

Table 9: *Students' Opinions on the Assessment and Improvement of Education*

	YES		NO		NO IDEA		$\sum f$	$\sum \%$
	f	%	f	%	f	%		
17. Does your university pay attention to your suggestions, complaints and discontents about the system?	205	83	23	9,3	19	7,7	247	100
18. Are you satisfied with the graduate program you have in distance education?	215	87	15	6	17	7	247	100
19. Does Distance Graduate Education meet your expectations?	221	89,5	19	7,7	7	2,8	247	100

221 participants who claimed that their suggestions, complaints and discontents about the system are taken into consideration by the university claim that the institution replies them in various ways: 53.9% of them get emails, 33.5% of them get phone calls, 7.2% of them have face-to-face communication and 5.4% of them get SMSs about their problems (Table 10).

Table 10: *If you answered Question 18 as yes, please indicate the way you communicate with the institution*

20. If you answered Question 18 as yes, please indicate the way you communicate with the institution.		
	f	%
E –mail	119	53,9
Sms	12	5,4
Phone calls	74	33,5
Face-to-face meetings	16	7,2
Total	221	100

15 students claimed that they were not satisfied with the education they get, and when asked the reason why, 53% of them complained about the amount of homework; 26% of them cannot adapt to the technology, 12% think that the curriculum is too difficult, and 4% claim that their expectations are simply not met (Table 11).

Table 11: *The Reasons of Dissatisfaction with Distance Education*

21. What are the reasons for your dissatisfaction?		
	f	%
The amount of homework	8	53,33
Technology incompatibility	3	20
The difficulty of syllabus	2	13,33
Expectations not met	2	13,33
Total	15	100

Another question was why the participants preferred distance education. The reasons of attending to distance education are as follows: 56% career, 32% specialization, 9% personal development, 2% obligation, and 1% other. (Table 12)

Table 12: *Reasons of Preferring Graduate Programs in Distance Education*

22. The reason for preferring distance master's degree?		
	f	%
Career	138	56
Personal Development	22	9
Specialization	79	32
Obligation	5	2
Other	3	1
Total	247	100

Another success factor in distance education is education design. 76% of the participants claim that they were informed about the distance education system before they enrolled, and 38.5% of them had negative prejudices about it. 88.3% of them think that distance education is an efficient system, and 72% of them consider that the course materials are sufficient. 60.7% of the participants think that course contents match the purposes of the program, and 73.3% of them are content with the assessment and evaluation methods. 33.2% of the participants make use of readings, course notes, recommended videos and other academic resources, 39.3% of them do not use them, and 27.5% of them have no idea about this.

Table 13: *Opinions on Education Design*

	Yes		No		No Idea		$\sum f$	$\sum \%$
	f	%	f	%	f	%		
23. Were you informed about distance education system before you started your distance graduate education?	189	76,5	58	23,5	-	-	247	100
24. Did you have any negative prejudice about distance education system before you started distance graduate education?	96	38,9	101	40,9	50	20,2	247	100
25. Do you think that distance education is an effective system?	218	88,3	17	6,9	12	4,8	247	100
26. Do you find distance education materials sufficient?	178	72	50	20	19	8	247	100
27. Does the course content match the goal of the program?	150	60,7	28	11,3	69	28	247	100
28. Do you make use of readings, course notes, recommended videos and other academic resources?	82	33,2	97	39,3	68	27,5	247	100
29. Do you find the assessment and evaluation system sufficient?	181	73,3	46	18,6	20	8,1	247	100

On educational environment, 55.9% of the participants find the academic support sufficient. 68.8% of them consider that the synchronous and asynchronous online course contents are adequate, and 62.8% of them find distance learning tools and courses sufficient. The positive and negative opinions on distance education technologies are in almost equal numbers.

Table 14: *Opinions on Education Environment*

	Yes		No		No Idea		$\sum f$	$\sum \%$
	f	%	f	%	f	%		
30. Do you think the university provides sufficient academic support for the distance education program you enrolled?	138	55,9	101	40,9	8	3,2	247	100
31. Do you find synchronous and asynchronous online course contents sufficient?	170	68,8	30	12,2	47	19	247	100
32. Do you find distance education technologies and courses adequate?	155	62,8	62	25,1	30	12,1	247	100

2.5. Results and Recommendations

This section includes the results on the basis of data gathered for the research, and recommendations for future practitioners and researchers. The results and recommendations will be explored by an analysis of descriptive findings on the participants.

The distribution of the participants according to age is as follows: 37.2% of them are in the age range of 31-35 years, 28.7% in the age range of 36-40 years, and 14.2% over 41 years of age. The distribution of the participants according to gender is as follows: 36% of them were female and 64% were male. 28.7% of the participants were students in social sciences and humanities, 27.1% were in engineering, 16.2% in educational sciences, 12.9% in philology, 6.9% in science, 6.1% in health science, and 2.1% in agriculture, forestry and aquaculture. 81.8% of the participants had a job, and 18.2% did not.

The questions focused on the success factors in distance education, and the respondents were all graduate students enrolled in a distance education program. The findings were interpreted and recommendations derived. Critical success factors are not clearly categorized, however, based on the literature review, the following topics were suggested: Institutional management, assessment and evaluation in education, technical services, education environment, and education design. The questions were grouped under these topics.

In terms of institutional management, most of the participants are satisfied. They think that graduate programs in distance education serve the needs of the country, however, universities, in the opinion of the most of them, cannot sufficiently manage the process. Most agree that the purposes of graduate programs in distance education are clearly determined, but generally they do not have any idea whether universities allocate enough resources for it or not. These negative opinions indicate that students should be informed by the institutions in better and more efficient ways, such as sharing statistical information about the system. The web pages of the universities include some information about themselves and about the distance education system, however this information is insufficient. Institutions may well prefer to ask students what they want to know about the institution and the system, and design their informative pages accordingly. For the sustainability of this, this information should be updated periodically.

Another success factor in distance education is non-academic support services, which can be defined as macro systems including the entire educational system. Some students may have some problems and difficulties with the system, and they may need support. The services provided for such circumstances can be named as non-academic support services. Many participants claimed that technical infrastructure is not sufficient, and technical tests were not held at the beginning of the semester. This is a very crucial finding for practitioners and researchers. Technical support is of utmost importance for the sustainability of the system. The

students' discontent must immediately be taken into consideration. Although 65.6% of the participants are satisfied with the audio-visual transmission of courses, the issue should be reviewed again and again. The tools of communication constitute the core of distance education system. Therefore, any discontents should immediately be eliminated. Another aspect of discontent is based on the insufficient and outdated announcements. In general, non-academic support services are considered to be inadequate. The inadequacy of infrastructure turns out to be the source of this discontent. 37% of the participants claim that they have problems with institutional structure issues.

Non-academic support services are inextricable components of distance learning programs. An important criterion of success is the number of students kept in the system. Many global reports about the subject indicate that "proper student support is not only necessary for the success of distance education institutions, but also a promotion element in the market of e-learning."

University is only one of the aspects in non-academic support services. Students also have to become proficient in using information technologies. Half of the participants of the present study consider themselves proficient in information technologies. As the system is based on information technologies skills, the students who do not have necessary skills should be trained in them, so that withdrawal would be eliminated.

Assessment and evaluation of education is also an important success factors in distance education, and it is used as micro systems that enhance students' skills, performances and efficiencies before, during and after classes. The participants claimed that their complaints, suggestions and discontents about the system are generally taken care of. The feedback methods include e-mails and phone calls. 87% of the students are satisfied with their educational preferences, and 89.5% of them claim that their expectancies were met. These findings show that system is successful, as students express their content in a system where they have to study independently, by themselves. 15 students (6%) who expressed their discontents were asked about the sources of their discontent. 53% of them complained about the amount of homework, 26% of them cannot adapt to technology, 12% think that the curriculum is too difficult, and expectations of 4% are not met.

Another question was why they preferred distance education graduate programs. Most of the participants replied this questions as career and specialization. We can deduce that most of the students made their choices in an awareness. High rates of content is a pleasing finding.

Education design is a factor of success in distance education. In the scope of this topic, there are four basic questions to be answered:

- For whom will the programs be developed?
- What is to be taught?
- Which sources will be used?
- How will teaching be tested?

Success in education design necessitates adequate answers to these basic questions. This research includes questions that aimed at revealing the students' opinions on education design. The participants' answers show that many of them already had information about the system before they enrolled, and they did not have any negative prejudgments about it. Activities and course materials are so crucial in distance education, and the participants of the present study claimed that they were satisfied by the system and by the course materials. They find course contents appropriate to the programs, and they are also content with the assessment and evaluation system.

33.2% of the participants claimed that they make use of reading materials, notes, recommended videos, and other academic sources, 39.3 of them do not use them, and 27.5% of them have no idea about it. This issue should be reconsidered since the low percentage of source use is not a good sign for an educational system in which students study by themselves.

Education environment is also another success factor in distance education. Management of education environment is the core of academic support provided for the students of distance education. 55.9% of the students consider the academic support sufficient. Synchronous and asynchronous course contents are considered to be sufficient also, by 68.8% of the participants. Another sub criteria in education environment is about the courses prepared by distance learning tools. There are four types of technologies used to prepare distance education courses:

- Audio tools (conference recordings, radio broadcasts, lecture recordings, etc.)
- Visual tools (slides, movies, videos, etc.)
- Computer based applications (computer aided teaching, computer based teaching, internet based teaching)
- Printed materials.

In graduate degrees in distance education, educational technologies do not vary as they do in undergraduate programs. Synchronous courses streamed online, lecture recordings, slides, videos and lecture notes are the most often used tools. 62.8% of the participants find these educational tools and their products sufficient.

The findings and the problems this research reveals indicates the following issues to be attended by prospective researchers and practitioners in this field:

- A model for process management in distance graduate studies should be established.
- Needs of graduate students in distance education should be analyzed and web sites of universities should be redesigned accordingly.
- Technical support in distance education should be standardized. A voluntary training should be organized for teachers and students before the semester begins.
- Updated information on the system should continuously be generated and tested.
- Student satisfaction should be researched.
- Academic support materials for students' independent studies should be produced.
- Distance education technologies should be efficiently used and their efficiency should be tested.

This study can be repeated and widened by future researches in other institutions in order to determine the efficiency and quality of distance education graduate programs in Turkey.

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