A Learner-Centred International Perspective on the Advantages of Distance Thesis

Uzaktan Tezin Avantajlarına Yönelik Öğrenen Merkezli Uluslararası Bir Bakış

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Abstract

Purpose: The research aims to specify attitude towards DT as well as advantages/strengths/opportunities of DT based on views of international learners in the times of the coronavirus or similar necessary conditions.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Qualitative data and qualitative data analysis techniques were need to reach the purpose of the research. Therefore, the study which was conducted to determine the views of international learners about advantages/strengths/opportunities of DT was designed by the qualitative model. Totally 14 international learners participated the research from different countries. An online form was administered to international learners in Turkey to collect data for the research questions. Qualitative descriptive analysis was used to analyze the data.

Findings: The findings consist of two subjects as the attitude towards distance thesis and the advantages of distance thesis. Attitudes of international learners towards DT are very positive that a great majority of the them confirm idea of DT (%85.70) and most of them (%78.57) want to apply DT in case of necessity like coronavirus. The advantages of DT are determined as follows: Flexibility, time saving, cost saving, access information in digital world, chance for working learners, uninterrupted supervision, communication with online meeting, working with digital information-applications-tools-technologies, learning diversity, getting a degree from university at a distance, collaboration with peers and experts from different institutions, support for modernization of universities, contribution to internationalization, achievement of self-management skill, not to being in the crowd.

Highlights: In the literature, no study was found that addressing advantages of distance thesis for graduate programs. In line with the opinions of international learners, the advantages of distance thesis were determined in the research. It has been revealed that international learners have a positive attitude towards distance thesis and they want to apply for distance thesis in times of pandemic or similar necessary conditions. This article can inspire new researches, new projects on distance thesis and the determination of the distance thesis framework in our country.

Öz

Çalışmanın amacı: Araştırma, koronavirüs veya benzeri gerekli durumlarda uluslararası öğrencilerin uzaktan teze yönelik tutumlarını ve uzaktan tezin avantajlarına/güçlü yönlerine/fırsatlarına yönelik görüşlerini belirlemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Materyal ve Yöntem: Araştırmanın amacına ulaşabilmek için nitel verilere ve nitel veri analiz tekniklerine ihtiyaç duyulmuştur. Uluslararası öğrenenlerin uzaktan tezin avantajları/güçlü yönleri/fırsatları hakkındaki görüşlerini belirlemek amacıyla yapılan çalışma nitel olarak tasarlanmıştır. Araştırmaya farklı ülkelerden toplam 14 uluslararası öğrenci katılmıştır. Araştırma sorularına yönelik veri toplamak için Türkiye'deki uluslararası öğrencilere çevrimiçi bir form uygulanmıştır. Verilerin analizinde nitel betimsel analiz tekniği kullanılmıştır.

Bulgular: Uluslararası öğrencilerin uzaktan teze yönelik tutumlarının çok olumlu olduğu görülmekle birlikte büyük çoğunluğu (%85,70) uzaktan tez fikrini onaylamakta ve çoğu (%78,57) koronavirüs gibi bir zorunlu durumlarda uzaktan tez uygulaması istemektedir. Uzaktan tezin avantajları şu şekilde belirlenmiştir: Esneklik, zaman tasarrufu, maliyet tasarrufu, dijital dünyada bilgiye erişim, çalışan öğrenenlere şans, kesintisiz denetim, çevrimiçi toplantı ile iletişim, dijital bilgi-uygulamalar-araçlar-teknolojiler ile çalışma, öğrenme çeşitliliği, uzaktan üniversite diploması almak, farklı kurumlardan akran ve uzmanlarla işbirliği yapmak, üniversitelerin modernleşmesine destek olmak, uluslararasılaşmaya katkı sağlamak, kendi kendini yönetme becerisi kazanmak, kalabalığın içinde olmamak.

Önemli Vurgular: Literatürde lisansüstü programlar için uzaktan tezin avantajlarını ele alan bir araştırmaya rastlanmamıştır. Araştırmada uluslararası öğrencilerin görüşleri doğrultusunda uzaktan tezin avantajları belirlenmiştir. Uluslararası öğrencilerin uzaktan teze karşı olumlu bir tutum içinde oldukları ve salgın ya da benzeri gerekli durumlarda uzaktan tez başvurusu yapmak istedikleri ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu makalenin ülkemizde uzaktan tez yazımı konusunda yeni araştırmalara, yeni projelere ve uzaktan tez çerçevesinin belirlenmesine ilham kaynağı olabileceği düşünülmektedir.

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INTRODUCTION

Distance education was started by sending a message to others by smoke, pigeon, letter newspaper, etc. By developing technology like television, internet, mobile applications, etc. distance education becomes more powerful to achieve learning objectives. Distance learning technologies contribute to face-to-face education in the universities (Bilgiç, 2021) in terms of out of school activities, learning environment, learning applications, out of school interactions, synchronous communication, e-exercises, e-books, etc. Today many disciplines use distance education like medical, engineering departments, nursing, chemistry, etc. not only bachelor but also postgraduate programs. We see that all levels of formal education institutions should be ready for applying distance learning during the coronavirus or another pandemic. There are a lot of difficulties emerging with the coronavirus in universities and institutions. One of them is how to manage the thesis process both for the supervisor and supervisee. Distance thesis (DT) is crucial and obligatory for that kind of difficult process.

Briefly, DT means preparing a thesis remotely using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) as the internet, online applications, web tools, emails, video conference programs, online technologies, etc. between supervisor and supervisee without communicating face-to-face. In the literature, distance learning experts do many researches about distance learning in terms of pros and cons, advantages, benefits, strengths, opportunities and solutions (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2014; Croft et al., 2015; Dağgöl Dişlen & Akcayoğlu İşpınar, 2023; Gilbert, 2015; Moore & Tait, 2002; Oliveira et al., 2018; O'Donoghue et al., 2004; Sadeghi, 2019) as well as a few for DT (Andrew, 2012; Gray & Crosta, 2019; Maor et al., 2016).

There is a high demand for distance graduate programs. Due to uncertainties, legal obstacles, negative perceptions, problems caused by instructors or administrators, quality issue, technical inabilities, lack of infrastructure and no road map for DT, almost all of the distance graduate programs opened are without thesis in Turkey as so in the world (İzmirli, İzmirli & Çankaya, 2019). So, DT is one of the value-added issues for distance learning and distance graduate programs. DT is one of the latest research topics in distance learning (Aitken et al., 2020; Huet & Casanova 2020; İzmirli, İzmirli & Çankaya, 2019; Nasiri & Mafakheri, 2015; Partridge et al., 2016; Stein & Sim, 2020), emerges some advantages inherently. After the determination of the advantages of distance learning in the literature, the researches can be focused to determine the *advantages of DT* with views of international learners.

The UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2020) underlined that 5.5 million international learners were all around the world in 2018 as compared with 2 million in 2000. International learners make enormous contributions and value to host countries' universities and society beyond financial terms (Tran, 2020) and they especially prefer to enroll in graduate programs for an academic career. In the near future, DT can be a factor in choosing a graduate program for international learners. So, views of international learners finding out advantages of DT can contribute to the researches those are drawing the framework of DT (Gray & Crosta, 2019; Maor et al., 2016). Also, supervisors and supervisees can apply DT in HE Institutions delivering face-to-face education in the times of coronavirus by following the DT framework.

Purpose of the Study

The research aims to specify attitude towards DT as well as advantages/strengths/opportunities of DT based on views of international learners in the times of the coronavirus or similar pandemic. Research questions include short answer, multi-choice, and open-ended types of questions. The following research questions will be examined in order to reach the aims:

Short answer or multi-choice questions of the research are shown below:

1. Where is your country?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your department?
4. What is your education level?
5. How many online/distance courses have you taken so far?
6. It is possible to perform a distance thesis?
7. Do you want to use distance thesis method in order to continue your thesis during no face-to-face meeting with the supervisor because of coronavirus or another pandemic?

Open-ended questions of the research are shown below:

8. What are the advantages/strengths of the distance thesis as compared with the face-to-face thesis?
9. What kind of opportunities do you have by distance thesis as compared with face to face thesis?

Limitations of the Study

It is stated in the international literature that there are few studies on distance thesis in the world (Aitken et al., 2020; Huet & Casanova 2020). There are a very limited number of postgraduate education programs with thesis and there is no research on how learners view the subject in our country (İzmirli, İzmirli & Çankaya, 2019). Within the scope of the study, data were collected from 12 international learners studying at postgraduate level in Turkey and 2 Turkish postgraduate learners who provide academic counselling to international learners. The research is limited to two questions about the advantages of distance thesis.

METHOD

Research Model

There are 2 open-ended questions in the research. Within the scope of the research, in addition to the options offered, unlike survey research, it is necessary to collect in-depth information from the participants about the advantages of preparing theses remotely (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). So, qualitative data and qualitative data analysis techniques were need to reach the purpose of the research. Case study is a qualitative research approach that aims to reveal information about a specific situation, identify situations and themes related to the situation (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2013). Therefore, the study which was conducted to determine the views of international learners about advantages/strengths/opportunities of DT was designed by the case study which is one of the methods of qualitative model. Within the scope of the research, it was tried to determine the differences and similarities in the perspectives, opinions and solution suggestions of each of the participants on the research topic. In the light of the opinions obtained, an in-depth and comprehensive analysis was made regarding the advantages of distance thesis.

Study Group

International learners in Turkey consist of the population of the research. Due to difficulties such as analyzing the data, reaching the population, time and cost, etc. the researcher chooses convenience sampling among nonprobability sampling techniques. Convenience sampling facilitates reaching the participants and collect data from the environment where close and known to the researcher (Creswell, 2009). Totally 14 international learners answered the questions from different countries. Table 1 presents the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender		
Female	3	21.43
Male	11	78.57
Country		
Afghanistan	3	21.43
Bangladesh	1	7.14
India	3	21.43
Kirgizstan	1	7.14
Macedonia	1	7.14
Madagascar	1	7.14
Nepal	1	7.14
Tajikistan	1	7.14
Turkey	2	14.30
Field		
Architecture	1	7.14
Communication	1	7.14
Education	2	14.30
Engineering	7	50.00
Finance	1	7.14
Sociology	1	7.14
Turkish Language	1	7.14
Education Level		
Master Thesis	5	35.71
Master Graduate	2	14.30
PhD Course	1	7.14
PhD Thesis	5	35.71
PhD Graduate	1	7.14
Total	14	100

As seen in Table 1, participants consist of 3 females (%21.43) and 11 males (%78.57) of international learners. 3 Participants are from Afghanistan (%21.43), 3 from India (%21.43), 2 from Turkey (%14.30), and 1 from Bangladesh, Kirgizstan, Macedonia, Madagascar, Nepal, and Tajikistan (%7.14). Fields of the participants consist of 7 Engineering (%50), 2 Education (%14.30), and 1 from Architecture, Communication, Finance, Sociology, and Turkish Language (%7.14). According to the education level there are 5 participants (%35.71) in the master thesis, 5 participants (%35.71) in the PhD thesis and 2 participants (%14.30) of Master Graduate. There is a 1 participant (%7.14) of PhD graduate and PhD course as well.

Only 2 participants have not taken distance courses up to now. 2 participants took just 2 distance courses. The other 10 participants took more than 3 distance courses. Due to taking distance courses, the majority of the participants (%85.71) can be stated that know about distance education.

Data Collecting

An online form was administered to international learners in Turkey to collect data for the research questions. The online form consisted of 7 short answer or multi-choice questions and 2 open ended questions. Short answer questions represented independent variables of the research. Open-ended questions were to reveal the views of international learners about advantages/strengths/opportunities of DT as compared with face-to-face thesis. Expert opinions were received to provide content and face validity for the online form and research questions. Themes for the advantages of the distant thesis were found by the researcher. Then the found themes were examined, evaluated, and checked by 2 field experts for the reliability of the coding. After the control, all researchers came together and shared their suggestions for revision through the exchange of ideas and finalized the coding in consensus considering distance learning literature. The data was collected between July and August in 2022 by way of online form. The address of the online form was sent to social media of UDEF (Federation of International Student Associations) Academy and YUDER (Yunusemre International Student Association) and the online form was filled out by 14 international learners with the help of UDEF Academy and YUDER.

Data Analysis

Qualitative descriptive analysis was used to analyze the data. Simple statistical techniques were used for independent variables of the research to find the frequencies and percentages of them. Due to the similarity of the answers towards DT for two open ended questions in terms of advantages/strengths and opportunities, data analysis was conducted with gathering under a single roof as advantages/strengths/opportunities of DT. Qualitative descriptive analysis was used for open-ended questions to analyze and find out the answers to the questions. In this method, findings are indicated with direct quotations to demonstrate what participants think about the topic (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005). In the finding part, the findings were illustrated by the citation from views of the participants like [P1, P2, etc.].

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness criteria are grouped under four main headings: credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Başkale, 2016; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). In this study, the following measures were taken to ensure trustworthiness:

Credibility: In this research; prolonged involvement, member checking and peer debriefing were conducted to ensure credibility. In the context of prolonged involvement, the researcher has known the participants for a long time. As part of member checking, participants stated that the research findings accurately expressed their views. In the context of peer debriefing, two independent researchers good at qualitative research helped for finding out themes of the research reliably. After the control, the researchers gave the final shape to the themes of the research in consensus.

Dependability: Within the scope of the research, data was collected from a total of 14 participants who were postgraduate learners from different countries and departments, and the collected data were compared with each other.

Confirmability: As part of conformability, the data of the research were recorded digitally. The purpose and process of the research are clearly stated. The data were analyzed using the descriptive analysis technique and the findings were obtained. The themes obtained as a result of data analysis are presented in the findings section. To demonstrate the confirmability of the research, the participants' own statements are included in the findings section instead of the researcher's opinions.

Transferability: Participant characteristics were given in Table 1 and participants were determined by purposive sampling method.

Research Procedures

There are more distance graduate programs with non-thesis than distance graduate programs with thesis in Turkey. Today, millions of learners have enrolled to distance undergraduate programs. They could want to enroll distance graduate program with thesis after graduation. There are thousands of international learners in Turkey. There is also a Covid-19 Pandemic Reality. In times of Covid-19 Pandemic, it is difficult to make progress on thesis for not only international learners but also domestic learners. After thinking about the conditions, aim and questions of the research were determined. Method part was clearly planned and organized after determination of aim and research questions. During the preparation process, literature review was carried out. Relevant international learners filled out data collection tool which developed as online form. The data was analyzed by qualitative descriptive analysis by considering validity and reliability. Two independent researchers good at qualitative research helped for finding out themes reliably. After the control, the researchers gave the final shape to the themes in consensus. The most important part of the research was to find out themes of advantages of distance thesis. Then, themes were explained by relating with literature review by the researcher of the paper and all the parts of the paper were completed.

FINDINGS

The findings consist of two subjects as the attitude towards distance thesis and the advantages of distance thesis. There are two questions in the research to identify the attitudes of the participants towards distance thesis. In addition to them, there are two questions in the research to specify the advantages/strengths/opportunities of distance thesis through the views of participants.

Attitudes Towards Distance Thesis

Attitudes are crucial to adopt a new method. If the attitudes are positive, participants will get used to adopt the new method easily. Also, positive attitudes make it easy to increase motivation and increasing motivation can provide positive effects regarding to academic performance, volition and course interest which elements can be a key for overcoming challenges in distance learning environment (Uçar & Kumtepe, 2020). The attitudes of the participants towards DT are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Attitudes of the participants towards distance thesis

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Idea of Distance Thesis		
Yes	12	85.70
No	2	14.30
Distance Thesis in case of Necessity		
Yes	11	78.57
No	3	21.43
Total	14	100

According to Table 2, 12 participants confirm that it is possible to perform DT as well as 2 participants do not confirm. Similarly, 11 participants accept that they want to use DT method to continue their thesis during no face-to-face meeting with the supervisor because of coronavirus or another pandemic. But 2 participants do not want to use DT method in the same process as seen in Table 2. The answers of the majority of the participants are "Yes" for both variables idea of distance thesis (%85.70) and distance thesis in case of necessity (%78.57). One of the participants gave "Yes" answer for the idea of DT and "No" answer for DT in case of necessity. The participant explained the oppositeness like that shown below:

"Traditional methods for preparing thesis can change. So, leaners should be ready for DT in order to keep up with the times. But I am traditional man. I do not want to write distance thesis because I want to meet advisor face to face and I want to get advice face to face to complete my thesis properly" [P2].

Analysis for Distance Thesis

Analysis of DT includes themes in terms of advantages/strengths/opportunities of DT. DT was derived from distance education. So, all the themes about distance thesis are connected to distance education. The study was focused on the advantages/strengths/opportunities of DT by descriptive analysis of collected data.

Advantages/Strengths/Opportunities of Distance Thesis

After doing descriptive analysis, themes for advantages/strengths/opportunities of distance thesis were found out as seen in

Table 3. Themes for advantages/strengths/opportunities of distance thesis

Themes	Frequency
• Flexibility	8
• Time saving	7
• Cost saving	4
• Access information in digital world	5
• Chance for working learners	6
• Uninterrupted supervision	3
• Communication with online meeting	3
• Working with digital information-applications-tools-technologies	4
• Learning diversity	2
• Getting a degree from university at a distance	2
• Collaboration with peers and experts from different institutions	3
• Support for modernization of universities	1
• Contribution to internationalization	3
• Achievement of self-management skill	3
• Not to being in the crowd	2
• No advantage	4

DT provides learners to be flexible for preparing the thesis. Learners can study anytime, anywhere, and anyplace to prepare distance theses with the advantage of online distance education (Dye & Torstein, 2008; Karadeniz, 2009; Oliveira et al., 2018; Taşkın, 2009; Veletsianos & Houlden, 2019). DT can be one of the applications of online distance education. Views of some participants about "flexibility" are as follows:

"Greater flexibility... Could study whenever, wherever. Could learn at your own pace… but can study whenever you have time and your job schedule allows it." [P7].

"We can open out laptop or smartphone wherever we are and be in communication." [P1].

"We can decide when and where we study." [P8].

Time-saving and cost-saving are classical advantages of not only distance learning (Oliveira et al., 2018; Twigg, 2003; Wall et al., 2006) but also DT. Digital materials and contents such as thesis proposal, feedback, etc. can be shared between supervisee and supervisor free of charge within seconds and with just a click. Views of some participants about "time and cost-saving" are shown below:

"Could save time and money." [P7].

"… We save a lot of time because we don't have to be at a certain place..." [P1].

"… distance thesis can be written for making good use of time as the time is very precious." [P2].

Distance learners are supposed to have digital literacy skills. Those skills can progress in distance learning process as well (Maor & Curie, 2017) While they are learning at a distance, they are aware of how to access information in digital world. Because they can access all the required information at a distance with using ICT throughout the distance program (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2014; Sampson et al., 2014; Uçar, 2020). There is no need to go library of the different universities to examine thesis about research topic. Distance learners are becoming specialist for accessing related information from digital datacenters and digital resources such as databases, e-journals, e-libraries, websites, e-books etc. relevant to their distance courses or DTs. They can do literature review easily and reach related information for all the components of DT such as introduction, method, finding, result and discussion, reference through ICT (Stein & Sim, 2020). When necessary information gathered, it is getting easy to write DT. One participant referred to "access information in digital world" by underlining accessibility.

Almost all learners have to work after graduation or receive fund from the research councils or other funding resources, and it seems like that. Carpenter et al. (2012) stated that of 6,161 Generation Y doctoral learners in the sample 94% were studying full-time in their research. Learners need alternatives to go on their educational process in post graduate programs especially in the knowledge era. After enrolling the distance master program and completing the courses, learners can start to prepare their thesis as well as having a job (Brace-Govan & Clulow, 2001; Feasley, 1983; O'Donoghue & Singh, 2001; Wall et al., 2006). It is a big chance for working learners. Views of participants about "chance for working learners" are as follows:

"You do not need to leave your employment position but can study whenever you have time and your job schedule allows it." [P7].

"For working learners it is good to have distance thesis." [P12].

"working during day and studying during night" [P14].

Unfortunately, most of the theses have been delayed during the coronavirus. Because there was no face-to-face meeting between supervisor and supervisee. Higher Education (HE) Councils and Institutions of the Universities announced interruption of face-to-face theses and they recommended to use distance learning techniques to provide uninterrupted supervision. It means HE Councils and Institutions confirmed that DT can be prepared in times of coronavirus or another pandemic by using distance learning techniques. Because learners need feedbacks about questions on their theses from supervisors to make progress with the theses (Albion & Erwee, 2011; Gray & Crosta, 2019). Taking feedback in case of necessity from supervisors can enhance learners' engagement (Zheng et al., 2020) in not only face-to-face thesis process but also DT process. Online meetings were recommended for communicating between supervisors and supervisees continuously together for making an agreement about distance theses as well as continuous feedbacks. A sample from views of participants about "uninterrupted supervision" is shown below:

"… Especially during the times of crisis when meeting in person is not possible, online meeting comes as a handy solution so that the collaboration on a project or supervision of learners can continue without any interruption." [P1].

Online meeting (lecture) is one of the most effective components of the distance education (Chen & Thomas, 2020). It gives a chance to meet instructors and fellows together. Online meetings provide crucial achievements in the context of communication and interaction for distance learning as well as DT (Barnes, 2000; Crosta et al., 2015; Huet & Casanova, 2020). After developing online meeting program, it can be said that distance learning can be as effective as face-to-face learning. Because, integration of class and lessons emerged in distance learning environment with support of online meetings. Synchronous applications such as online meeting eliminate lack of asynchronous applications. Distance learning became more powerful when the integration of

synchronous and asynchronous applications was completed. One of the most useful activities in DT process is to have an online meeting of supervisor and supervisee (Andrew, 2012; Butcher & Sieminsky, 2009; Maor & Curie, 2017; Maor & Fraser, 2015; Manyike, 2017). Online meetings provide supervisors and supervisees to have a meeting anywhere, anytime as well as building strong relationship in the scope of DT (Aitken et al., 2020; Andrew, 2012). A view of one participant about "communication with online meeting" is as follows:

"Online meetings offer the comfort of our private space so we can focus more on the agenda at hand... …Especially during the times of crisis when meeting in person is not possible, online meeting comes as a handy solution so that the collaboration on a project or supervision of learners can continue without any interruption. Online meetings can be necessary for learners working on their theses from a different city than where the advisor is…." [P1].

Today, the components of distance or online education are designed and produced with the help of ICT. That means all of them are digital such as the books are transformed to e-books. So, learners follow digital information-applications for their theses (Carpenter et al., 2012). It is easy to copy, past, edit and send the digital information and features of the digital information provide many advantages/strengths/opportunities for learners. As Sussex (2008) underlined one of them is the record opportunity. Online meetings between supervisor and supervisee for thesis can be recorded easily and watched repeatedly, e-mails between supervisor and supervisee are stored automatically by time info and a stored e-mail can be read whenever it needs. Digital applications-tools are another resources for DT such as Doctoralnet, Form@doct, PSVSP, CoTiques, Scrivener, Klok, #phdchat etc. (Bennett & Folley, 2014; Dowling & Wilson, 2017; Loureiro et al., 2010; Maor et al., 2016; Maor & Fraser, 2015). Maor & Currie (2017) demonstrated that working with Web2.0 applications make thesis supervision more participatory and collaborative. Similarly, advantages of ICT for learning can be thought as advantages of DT because of ICT usage in the DT process (Barnes, 2000; Carpenter et al., 2012; Hamada, 2011; Loureiro et al., 2010; Zvavahera & Masimba, 2019). Stein and Sim (2020) stated that advance level use of ICT for both supervisor and supervisee can provide high quality supervision for DT. A view of one participant about "working with digital information-applications-tools-technologies" is shown below:

"You can watch the lesson again and again." [P4].

"The development of technology and online programs are the big opportunities to write distance theses" [P3].

Internet, one of the crucial components of the distance education is the information bank of the world. Thanks to internet, learners can reach all the permitted information about their theses in the world as well as national information resources. At this point open access should be supported by relevant institutions and all of the people are encouraged to contribute to open access. Because not only distance learners but also face-to-face learners should access all the required information, tools and materials via ICT (Harsasi, 2015; Picasso & Phelan, 2014). Distance learners can find relative e-books, papers, statistics, reports etc. about their distance theses from different databases in the world. For example, more than 5 million theses from universities in nearly 100 countries can be accessible from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. Number of theses grows by 200,000 each year. Also, they can enroll for MOOCs, online courses from top of the universities in the world. So, this advantage provides learning diversity and it is a big chance for learner. A view of one participant about "learning diversity" is as follows:

"…Could learn from any university in the world… You can communicate with other people around the world who are taking the same course as you…" [P7].

Learners want to do master or doctorate after finishing a bachelor program. According to statistics of HE Council of Turkey, there are 2.071.925 learners in distance bachelor programs and 9757 learners in distance master programs with non-thesis. There is no distance doctoral program with thesis or non-thesis in some of the countries. After finishing distance bachelor programs, thousands of learners can do master with thesis or non-thesis at a distance to get a degree. If researchers and experts of distance learning set the framework of distance thesis properly (Gray & Crosta, 2019; Maor et al., 2016), then the number of distance master and doctoral programs with thesis can be increased. Therefore, international learners can enroll distance master or doctoral programs with thesis in the universities all over the world. The advantage provides learners to get a degree with thesis from university at a distance. Another advantage of getting a master degree with thesis permits to apply for instructor positions in the universities or to Re&De expertise in public or private institutions. For example, there are 153.000 Re&De experts and 112.000 research specialists in Turkey. The target of authorized organization is to being worked totaly 300.000 Re&De experts and 200.000 research specialists in Turkey in the scope of vision 2023 (The Ministry of Industry and Technology 2019). For that reason, getting a degree from distance master program with thesis can be good idea to be able to work as a Re&De expert or research specialist in public or private institutions. A view of one participant about "getting a degree from university at a distance" is shown below:

"…Could get a degree from any university without leaving on that country… "[P7].

Thesis jury consists of 3-5 field experts. They can facilitate the preparation of the thesis with their experience. Sometimes the field expert can be in different city or even in different country. If the learner enrolls formal institution, it will be more difficult to invite the field expert as a member of the thesis jury. But if the learner enrolls distance institution then the invitation will not be difficult. At the same time, the field expert coming from different place will share his/her experiences, give crucial feedback to learners and facilitate the thesis with increasing the its effectiveness. Those kind field experts give confidence to learners who

need correct advisory for their theses. DT provides learners to invite field experts from other institutions who will be member of thesis jury. That is a great collaboration to carry out innovative DT. It is a big advantage that everyone wants to catch whether preparing DT or face-to-face thesis. This time, distance learners are lucky for collaborating with experts all around the world towards DT. Experts of distance learning support to establish online communities to strengthen collaboration between all stakeholders in distance learning (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Evans, 1995; Loureiro et al., 2010; Maor et al., 2016). It is worth to examine a research that Locke and Reece (2005, pp:120-121) gave some samples about collaboration on distance learning efforts. Not only field experts but also fellows can contribute to DT as in the process of face-to-face thesis (Aghaee & Hansson, 2013; Carpenter et al., 2012). So, online supervision communities working as research support service can be built to enhance collaboration between supervisor, supervisee and fellows (Bennett & Folley, 2014; Crosta et al., 2015; Huet & Casanova, 2020; Manyike, 2017; Partridge et al., 2016). A view of one participant about "collaboration with peers and experts from different institutions" is as follows:

"…Could learn from any university and/or instructor in the world… You can communicate and interact not only with the professor through virtual means but also with other people around the world who are taking the same course..." [P7].

"…online meeting comes as a handy solution so that the collaboration on a project or supervision of learners can continue… Online meetings can be necessary for learners working on their theses from a different city than where the advisor is…." [P1].

DT can be carried out properly with ICT like distance learning. The institution must build infrastructure for operating DT as well as preparing supervisors and supervisees effectively in terms of pedagogy and research skills (Huet & Casanova, 2020). The institution also must follow the innovations as well as supporting for modernization to utilize convenient equipment ranging from blackboard learning system to distance thesis supervision (Maor & Fraser, 2015; Paudyal, 2006; Zvavahera & Masimba, 2019). For that reason, DT can be an opportunity to support for modernization of the relevant universities. A view of one participant about "support for modernization of the universities" is shown below:

"University should be modernized for distance thesis." [P5].

Learners from all over the world can take courses from universities or different Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) platforms with distance learning. In times of coronavirus in 2020, 20 million learners registered to Coursera and total number of learners reached to 65 million, 8 million learners registered to edX and total number of learners reached to 32 million, 4 million learners registered to Future Learn and total number of learners reached to 13.5 million. According to Class Central statistics (March 15th - May 15th, 2020), hundred thousands of learners from different countries from around the world became members of Class Central MOOC Platform as seen in Figure 1 (Central Class, 2020).

Locale	Countries Cities Languages Org Hostnames		Locale	Countries Cities Languages Org Hostnames
The United States	3,739,688 +999%		Bangkok, Thailand	333,890 +999%
India	1,626,664 +806%		Lagos, Nigeria	177,316 +579%
The United Kingdom	902,026 +999%		Mumbai, India	165,196 +999%
Canada	664,279 +999%		Pune, India	147,778 +999%
Thailand	587,858 +999%		Hyderabad, India	129,131 +781%
Turkey	308,363 +999%		Bengaluru, India	124,535 +438%
Australia	300,106 +817%		Istanbul, Turkey	119,743 +999%
Germany	287,357 +999%		Singapore, Singapore	107,880 +999%
Nigeria	282,397 +648%		Toronto, Canada	102,865 +999%
Italy	218,134 +999%		Delhi, India	93,373 +86%

Figure 1. Members of Class Central from around the world in times of Covid (Central Class, 2020).

The statistics show how distance learners contribute to internationalization in the world. Learners want to study with an expert from another country for their theses if they need. Learners can interview with experts from all over the world to find out answers of research questions in their theses as well as doing an international research. Learners can make discussion about the theses with other learners from around the world. So the advantage makes international relations more powerful and increases international collaborations. Partridge et al. (2016) stated that distance doctoral partnership having DT provides the opportunity to advance research agendas and to build strong international connections and partnerships. Distance learning communities are typically more diverse in terms of cultures, religions and nationalities (Huet & Casanova, 2020; Zvavahera & Masimba, 2019), so DT can contribute to internationalization. These are a couple of samples towards DT how to contribute internationalization. International learners can prepare their theses in their homeland with DT even if they registered a formal master or doctoral program in case the study topic is proper. A view of one participant about "contribution to internationalization" is as follows:

"Could take courses and learn from any university and/or instructor in the world…   …You can communicate and interact not only with the professor through virtual means but also with other people around the world who are taking the same course as you…" [P7].

DT can be difficult for some types of learners. If a learner who has insufficient motivation and insufficient self-study skills, then DT may be not for him/her. Learners must have some personal features and skills towards learning motivation, learning strategy, self-efficacy, digital literacy, lifestyle factors for successful distance learning (Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Rurato, 2011; Sadeghi, 2019; Wang et al., 2008; Yıldırım et al., 2014). Learning especially in online distance learning needs discipline (Butcher & Sieminsky, 2009; Oliveira et al., 2018). Learners who take learning responsibilities themselves must make a plan, prepare a schedule, determine their learning strategies and give decisions etc. for distance learning process to complete their theses successfully. Learners can improve self-management skill in the process. A view of one participant about "achievement of self-management skill" is shown below:

"You learn how to manage yourself" [P9].

People are warned about staying at home in times of coronavirus. The motto against coronavirus is like "Life fits home" in Turkey. Almost all formal educational institutions from preschool to graduate programs in the world have stopped face-to-face learning/teaching process and started distance learning/teaching process all around the world within the scope of struggling coronavirus. Because it has a big risky that virus can be infected especially in the crowd. Distance learners are no need to go out and interact with mess for DT. For this reason, it is one of the advantages of DT. A view of one participant about "not to being in the crowd" is as follows:

"Because of Covid pandemic it is better to do distance thesis to avoid the interaction with masses while travelling." [P12].

Learners have different features and attitudes. Some of the learners like something as well as the others may not. The truth complies with nature of the humankind. Two participants stated that there is no advantage even they took some distance courses because of their negative attitudes against DT. One of them suggested other learners to use DT if their characteristics is convenient for distance learning. He said he is traditional person so, DT is time loss for him. Two more participants stated that there is no advantage although they have positive attitude to write DT. Believing that DT is no simpler than face-to-face thesis could be the reason of the theme "No advantage".

DISCUSSION CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Today most of the distance learning activities based on communication and collaboration can be performed similar with face-to-face learning activities. Face-to-face learning integrated with distance learning is getting turned into blended learning. So, especially in times of pandemics such as coronavirus, distance learning is being important for face-to-face education institutions as well. Not only distance education institutions but also face-to-face education institutions can apply DT in this pandemic process. In the research, attitudes towards DT and advantages of DT were tried to specify for learners, supervisors and HE Instutions. According to the research, the results about attitudes towards DT and advantages of DT can be expressed respectively as follows:

- Attitudes of international learners towards DT are very positive that a great majority of the them confirm idea of DT (%85.70) and most of them (%78.57) want to apply DT in case of necessity like coronavirus.
- The advantages of DT are determined as follows: Flexibility, time saving, cost saving, access information in digital world, chance for working learners, uninterrupted supervision, communication with online meeting, working with digital information-applications-tools-technologies, learning diversity, getting a degree from university at a distance, collaboration with peers and experts from different institutions, support for modernization of universities, contribution to internationalization, achievement of self-management skill, not to being in the crowd.

In the literature, there are several researches about distance supervision (Aitken et al., 2020; Albion & Erwee, 2011; Andrew, 2012; Butcher & Sieminsky, 2009; Evans, 1995; Huet & Casanova, 2020; Maor et al., 2016; Nasiri & Mafakheri, 2015; Partridge et al., 2016; Paudyal, 2006; Sussex, 2008). Some of the researches underlined challenges and how to overcome the challenges of DT in order to increase the quality of DT in terms of distance supervision (Andrew, 2012; Butcher & Sieminsky, 2006; Huet & Casanova, 2020; Nasiri & Mafakheri, 2015; Partridge et al., 2016; Paudyal, 2006).

Regarding DT, the literature on postgraduate supervision at a distance is still very limited and more research is required for actual performance of the suggested strategies as stated Nasiri & Mafakheri (2015). After understanding the importance of the topic, the researcher decided to research advantages of DT according to views of international learners as well as taking attention of HE Institutes towards DT for learners who stop writing face to face thesis in the times of coronavirus. The other reason towards the research is to encourage opening distance graduate programs with thesis in the HE Institutions where the infrastructure is ready. The target is to being opened much more distance graduate programs to cultivate many Re&De experts towards not only for academy but also for other public and private sectors in accordance with information age.

In the research, specifically advantages/strengths/opportunities of distance thesis was elaborated with views of international learners enrolled to face to face graduate programs as well as utilizing relevant information in the researches abovementioned. In the research, result of attitude towards DT was supported by some other researches either which showed positive attitude

(Andrew, 2012; Butcher & Sieminsky, 2006; Partridge et al., 2016). Experts should take into account online research communities for attitude towards DT. Online research communities can have very positive effect for attitude towards DT because of availability for teacher presence, cognitive presence and social presence towards distance learners (Crosta et al., 2015; Garrison et al., 2000; Partridge et al., 2016).

The results of the research towards themes for advantages of DT were supported by some other researches. Andrew (2012) stated that there are some advantages of distance supervision similar with this research such as the flexibility of the remaining place, access subjects, communication with online meeting, record of supervisory moment, supported with e-community. Paudyal (2006) specified the advantages of DT supervision as the themes such as flexibility of the remaining place, cost saving, time saving, collaboration with experts in different institutions, use of ICT, access information in digital library, technology support, practice of virtual learning. Use of ICT is seen a special issue for DT supervision in the literature (Bennett & Folley, 2014; Dowling & Wilson, 2017; Maor & Currie, 2017; Maor et al., 2016; Loureiro et al., 2010; Stein & Sim, 2020; Sussex, 2008; Zvavahera & Masimba, 2019). According to the researcher and some of the researches in the literature (Barnes, 2000; Carpenter et al., 2012; Hamada, 2011; Loureiro et al., 2010; Zvavahera & Masimba, 2019) the advantages of ICT for both face to face and distance learning can be thought as the advantages of DT because of ICT usage in the DT process.

Distance learners should have some skills like self-directed, self-motivated, digital information literacy, ICT literacy, online communication skills, intrinsic motivation, internal locus of control etc. (Akgün Özbek, 2015; Dabbagh, 2007; Fırat et al., 2018; Özdamar-Keskin et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2008). Those skills provide distance learners to utilize advantages of DT as well as facilitating DT process. Otherwise, DT process can be tough to complete.

The advantages of DT can contribute to drawing the framework of DT with a few researches having same purpose (Gray & Crosta, 2019; Maor et al., 2016) as well as determining for accreditation and quality assurance standards of DT. Also, HE Institutions can support to carry out DT in case of necessity and proper by following the DT framework for distance learners and face-to-face learners. A couple of recommendations can be shared related to the research to increase visibility for advantages of DT as follows:

- The research can be repeated with supervisors having experience for distance learning or distance supervision.
- International learners can write their master thesis at home country remotely with the help of distance supervision by support of the faculty after finishing face-to-face master courses (Paudyal, 2006). Also, two distinct doctoral level distance graduate programs completed 9 DT between 2008-2016 and completed 200+ DT between 1997-2009 should be taken into account for distance graduate programs with thesis (Butcher & Sieminsky, 2009; Partridge et al., 2016). These kinds of samples can be a model for international learners how to being applied DT through distance graduate programs and face-to-face graduate programs in the case of necessity. A new DT model could be created with being synthesized similar successful samples of the distance graduate programs with thesis.
- A significant majority of learners want to continue their studies through the online teaching mode until the COVID-19 cases are under control (Gope, Gope & Gope, 2021). Emergency remote teaching is an obligation during the pandemic or similar outbreaks as stated Bozkurt & Sharma (2020). Faculty members, experts must overcome the obligation that learners of graduate programs can write their thesis without pausing. So, DT could be a solution not only international learners but also all the learners who stop writing thesis in face-to-face graduate programs because of the pandemic or similar outbreaks.
- Online research communities can help distance learners not only nationally but also internationally for communication and collaboration about DT (Bennett & Folley, 2014; Huet & Casanova, 2020; Loureiro et al., 2010). So, online research communities can be established towards distance learners both domestic or international in order to complete DT properly.
- Countries carrying out distance graduate programs with non-thesis towards international learners should take into account the views of international learners on DT.

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I/We hereby declare that the study has not unethical issues and that research and publication ethics have been observed carefully.

Ethics Committee Approval Information

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