

An Evaluation of Distance Learning in Higher Education through the Eyes of Course Instructors

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Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate lecturers' views on the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning. The participants in the study were six course instructors of online courses, namely, Atatürk's Principles and History of the Reform, Turkish Language and Foreign Language. The data were collected through four open-ended interview questions: 1) What are the advantages of distance learning? 2) What are the disadvantages of distance learning? 3) What are the online teaching problems you have experienced so far? and 4) How can distance learning be made more effective? The interviews were conducted in Turkish, and then transcribed. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcribed data. According to the findings, the advantages of distance learning can be categorised into three groups: advantages for university students, for university lecturers, and for the university. The most frequently mentioned advantageous of distance learning is the accessibility of education for all students. The most frequently mentioned disadvantage was the lack of teacher-student interaction, students' not participating in classes regularly, and technical problems. Most of the lecturers also mentioned that learning environments should be facilitated through socialisation.

Keywords: *distance learning, university instructors, higher education*

Üniversite Öğretim Elemanlarının Gözünden Yüksek Öğretimde Uzaktan Öğrenimin Değerlendirilmesi

Özet

Bu çalışma üniversite öğretim elemanlarının uzaktan öğrenmenin avantaj ve dezavantajlarına yönelik görüşlerini araştırmayı amaçlamıştır. Katılımcılar Türk Dili, Atatürk İlkeleri ve İnkılap Tarihi ile Yabancı Dil (İngilizce) derslerini uzaktan eğitim yoluyla öğrencilere sunan altı üniversite öğretim elemanıdır. Veriyi toplamak için dört açık uçlu soru sorulmuştur: 1) Uzaktan öğrenimin avantajları nelerdir? 2) Uzaktan öğrenimin dezavantajları nelerdir? 3) Şimdiye kadar çevrimiçi ders verirken hangi problemlerle karşılaştınız? 4) Uzaktan öğrenim nasıl daha etkili hale getirilebilir?. Yüz yüze ve Türkçe yapılan görüşmeler yazılı dökümana çevrilmiş, ve tematik analiz yapılmıştır. Sonuçlara göre uzaktan öğrenimin avantajları üniversite öğrencileri için avantaj, üniversite için avantajlar, ve öğretim elemanı için avantajlar olarak kategorize edilmiştir. Öğrenciler için en büyük avantaj eğitime ulaşım kolaylığıdır. En fazla belirtilen dezavantaj ise öğretim elemanı ve öğrenci arasındaki etkileşim eksikliği, öğrencilerin düzenli derse katılmayı, ve teknik problemlerdir. Ayrıca, üniversite öğretim elemanlarının çoğu öğrenme ortamlarının sosyalleştirerek geliştirilmesi yönünde öneride bulunmuşlardır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *uzaktan öğrenim, üniversite öğretim elemanları, yüksek öğretim*

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Introduction

In order to bring their higher education systems up to a transparent, understandable and competitive level, in countries with different economic, political, social and cultural structures, the Bologna Process, which is the process by which countries restructure their own higher education systems, aims to create a European Higher Education Area, that is, to standardise the member countries' higher education systems. Various efforts are also being conducted to keep up with the developments in the European Higher Education Area and to adapt the higher education system in Turkey. In this process, lifelong learning has become very important. Lifelong learning means all types of learning activities engaged in by an individual throughout life with the aim of developing knowledge, skills, interests and competence with a personal, communal, social and employment-related approach. The goal of lifelong learning is to give individuals the opportunity to actively engage in all stages of economic and social life so that they can adapt to the information society and take better control of their lives in this society (MEB, 2009). Bađcı (2007, p.2) also defines lifelong learning as an education process that continues "from the cradle to the grave". Among the goals that Bologna member countries are expected to achieve with the development of the social dimension in higher education are "to create flexible learning paths for access to higher education and within higher education," and "to provide everyone with an equal opportunity for access to higher education (YÖK,2010). As an important means of providing flexibility and equality in education, distance learning is, therefore, a very important part of lifelong learning. The terms distance education, distance learning, distance teaching, open learning, online learning, asynchronous learning, and e-learning are used interchangeably (Caner,2016).

A rapid increase in the use of distance learning has also been observed in higher education programmes in Turkey in recent years, aimed at reaching different target groups and increasing access to learning during the lifelong learning process. In line with the procedures and principles related to distance learning in higher education institutions, distance learning can be defined as: "education by which higher education institutions plan and conduct their education activities based on information and communication technologies, and in which the lessons are delivered in person by the course instructor simultaneously without the necessity for students and the instructor to be in the same place, based on mutual interaction between the student and instructor and among the students themselves (Clause 4/f)" (YÖK,n.d.). Associate degree, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes can be opened in higher education institutions (Clause 6/1a); a maximum 30% of courses in daytime and evening education can be provided only via distance learning (Clause 6/1c)(YÖK, ibid); higher education institutions can provide the courses specified in Clause 5-i of the Higher Education Law no. 2547 via distance learning and can take these from other higher education institutions where this education is provided (Clause 6/1d); for every course or course branch in distance learning, the number of students is limited to 200 for associate degree programmes, 150 for undergraduate programmes, and 50 for postgraduate programmes.. The courses are delivered simultaneously in person by the instructor by establishing communication among the students and between the students and instructor with simultaneous tools such as video conferencing, virtual classrooms and forum applications (Clause 7/1); in cases in which some courses in daytime and evening education are provided by both formal instruction and distance learning, students register for their preferred course type during the course selection period (Clause 8/2); assessment and evaluation related

to courses delivered via distance learning in distance learning programmes can be carried out using assessment and evaluation tools (homework, projects, practice, written, oral, etc.) specified in accordance with the curriculum approved by the higher education senates or in the form of a central exam, either face to face or in an electronic environment, either supervised or unsupervised (Clause 12/1); midterm exams, if required, are given unsupervised in an electronic environment, while final exams and makeup exams are given supervised either face to face or in an electronic environment (Clause 12/2)(YÖK,n.d.).

Based on these principles, the use of distance learning in associate degree, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes has increased. However, Kaya (2002) states that there are deficiencies and discrepancies in the laws and regulations for the provision of distance learning. Moreover, a number of studies in the literature mention problems experienced with distance learning (Galusha, 1997; Ilter, Aksu&Yılmaz, 2005; İşman, 2008). A multidimensional examination of the implementations and content of distance learning, and an awareness of the problems encountered in existing distance learning programmes in which distance learning is used, are needed for good quality and effective education (Bilgiç & Tüzün, 2015). The aim of this study is to serve as a guide for higher education institutions that conduct existing programmes and/or wish to offer a distance education service in the future, by discussing the problems experienced in existing practices in which distance learning is implemented in higher education institutions. The research questions of the study are:

- 1) According to the university lecturers, what are the advantages of distance learning?
- 2) According to the university lecturers, what are the disadvantages of distance learning?
- 3)What are the online teaching problems of university lecturers they have experienced so far?
- 4)What are university lecturers suggestions in relation to making distance learning more effective?

Method

Research Model

The present study is a qualitative case study since it aims to describe in-depth experience of a group of university instructors of online courses. Qualitative research is "an approach to the study of the social world which seeks to describe and analyse the culture and behaviour of humans and their groups from the point of view of those being studied" (Bryman,1988;pg.46).

The study Context and the Participants

The study took place at a state university in Turkey which offers courses such as Atatürk's Principles and History of the Reform I/II, Turkish Language I /II and Foreign Language (English) I/II in a distant format. These courses are first-year compulsory courses and are taken via distance learning in both the first and second terms. For each lesson, which lasts two hours a week, one hour is delivered live (online) on the distance learning platform, while the other is followed offline by the students via the documents, reading-research assignments, e-learning materials, etc. that are loaded into the system by the course instructor after the live lesson.

In the present study **convenience sampling** method is used. Farrokhi and Mahmoudi-Hamidabad (2012) defines convenience sampling as " a kind of non-probability or non-random sampling in which members of the target population, are selected for the purpose of the study if they meet certain practical

criteria, such as geographical proximity, availability at a certain time, easy accessibility, or the willingness to volunteer (p.g 785).

The participants in the study were six course instructors of online courses, namely, Atatürk's Principles and History of the Reform, Turkish Language and Foreign Language (English). Two of the instructors are female, and all have had teaching experience in higher education settings for more than five years.

Data Collection Tool

The data were collected through four open-ended interview questions: 1) What are the advantages of distance learning? 2) What are the disadvantages of distance learning? 3) What are the online teaching problems you have experienced so far? and 4) How can distance learning be made more effective?

Data Collection

Firstly, after a list of names and email addresses of lecturers teaching courses via distance learning had been prepared from the university's website, emails containing information related to the study such as the aim of the study, the research questions, and how the data were to be collected, and asking them whether they wished to participate in the study, were sent to the lecturers. After suitable days and times had been determined with the lecturers wishing to participate in the study, the four open-ended questions, which comprise the research questions of the study, were asked and the responses given were digitally recorded. The interview sections were conducted in Turkish and face to face in each the lecturer's own office.

Data Analysis

In the present study inductive content analysis is used to analyze the data. The aim of the content analysis is "*to identify the analyzable units (codes) ...and summary them under meaningful labels*" (categories)(Armborst,2017, p.g.2).There are many approaches in how to implement such data organization. Saldana (2013) defines an approach with three levels: On the first level, a code is attached to certain units of text. On the second level, interrelated codes are clustered into categories. On the third level, category groups are clustered into themes. Elliott (2018) uses *category* as a synonym for *theme*, and makes a broad distinction between *codes* and *themes* by indicating that while codes are formed at the primary [first level], categories or themes are formed from the analysis of codes at the secondary level (pg.2852). In the present study, Saldana's approach is adopted, and the content analysis is done on the primary and secondary levels. That is, after converting the recorded interviews into written text, these steps were applied for each question: the six participants' written statements for the question were written one below the other. Meaningful data were segmented into smaller data units. Statements expressed in different ways but having the same meaning were grouped together and labeled with codes relevant to the content. Finally, similar codes were grouped into themes. Thematic analysis process for the 1st research question data is displayed in Table 1 as a sample. Responses given to all research questions were analysed in the same way.

There is not a 'one size fits all' method to achieve reliability in qualitative research (McDonald, Schoenbeck &Forte, 2019). Similarly Elliott (2018) mentions about the ongoing debates whether reliability should be regarded as a matter of agreement or disagreement, or whether the agreements or disagreements need to be measured.

Table 1. Qualitative Coding Process of Research Question 1

Data units	Codes (Primary Level)	Themes (Seconda ry Level)
<i>The advantages for the lecturer are that he/she does not have to hurry between faculties to get to class on time. He/she can deliver the lesson in a certain place in a comfortable environment, without having to move.</i>	Stable teaching environment	Lecturer
<i>...he/she is not faced with problems in a classroom atmosphere such as a student's obstructing or disrupting the lesson; he/she can focus only on the subject in such a way as to concentrate fully on it, and can therefore complete the lesson without losing its wholeness</i>	Smooth flow of the lesson	
<i>...the lecturer delivers the lesson once only. The lesson does not have to be repeated over and over again due to students' questions about the parts they do not understand. This is the way I apply it: when the lesson is over, when the subject is completed, if my students have questions, I only give answers to those questions.</i>	Avoidance of time and effort	
<i>we are talking about a process that keeps a learning facility active independently of time and place.</i>	Flexibility in time and place	Students
<i>students who cannot take part in these lessons for various reasons have the chance to learn by following the lessons recorded on the database....</i>		
<i>..., even by repeating them several times.</i>	opportunity to review the course content frequently	
<i>People who cannot take part in active educational activities because they do not have access to transport for geographical reasons or due to other local factors can, thanks to distance learning, become a part of the teaching-learning process wherever they are regardless of any specific location</i>	Ignorance of geographical distance	
<i>..., it allows you to keep up with your lessons during a long period of treatment in hospital, while you are doing your military service, or even while in prison,</i>		
<i>.... it provides them (disabled students) with an easier means of accessing information.</i>	Educational opportunities for disabled students	
<i>Regarding our physically disabled students, it provides them with a much better education opportunity.</i>	Easy access to instructional materials	
<i>students have been given an easier means of access to lecture notes.</i>		
<i>If you are a working person, you are given the chance both to continue with your duty and to receive education</i>	Educational opportunities for working students	
<i>....,it allows employees to keep abreast of new developments without necessitating loss of work</i>	Low-cost education	
<i>it is a lot less expensive than formal education</i>		
<i>it eliminates unnecessary expenses such as accommodation, transport and food</i>		
<i>...that the institution at present has insufficient teaching staff and academic staff, so many lecturers do not have to be taken on for a large unit and for so many students, and lessons can be delivered to a large number of students with a much smaller number of lecturers.</i>	opportunity to teach a large number of students with few staff	Institution

In their meta-analysis study, McDonald *et al* (2019) reviewed 251 qualitative papers and found that only 32 of them (12, 7%) measured inter-rater reliability (IRR) while 55, 4 % described a method for agreement in relation to reliability. The process of qualitative comparison which requires the coders to review and discuss discrepancies till they reach an agreement may be more important than statistically calculating the level of agreement (Elliott, 2018; McDonald *et al*, 2019). Therefore, in the present study reliability in coding is achieved by ‘reaching agreement’ with a second coder who has a doctorate degree in the field of English language teaching is asked to be the second coder. A subset transcript was selected and the two coders independently coded the data unit. In the first meeting, they compared the similarities and differences on their code lists. They discussed on the parameters for the application of each code. At the end of the preliminary meeting, the codes are broadened, combined with each other, or new codes are added. A similar reviewing and revising process was also implemented for the secondary level of analysis (themes) in a second meeting until consensus was reached.

Findings

The findings are presented separately for each of the four research questions. General findings of the qualitative content analysis are described in terms of codes and themes with sample quotations.

Research Question 1: According to the university lecturers, what are the advantages of distance learning?

The course instructors evaluated the advantages of distance learning in terms of the student, the institution and the lecturer. In terms of the students the emerged categories are: flexibility in time and place, opportunity to review the course content frequently, ignorance of geographical distance, educational opportunities for disabled students, easy access to instructional materials, educational opportunities for working students, and low-cost education. Lecturers are stable teaching environment, smooth flow of the lesson, and avoidance of time and effort. Only one category emerged in relation to the institution: Opportunity to teach a large number of students with few staff.

The biggest advantage for lecturers was expressed by one instructor as avoiding the waste of time and effort incurred by weaving a zigzag path between faculties to give lessons:

“The advantages for the lecturer are that he/she does not have to hurry between faculties to get to class on time. He/she can deliver the lesson in a certain place in a comfortable environment, without having to move.”(F,1)

The same lecturer stated as an advantage the fact that the flow of the lesson could not be disrupted by students:

“The lecturer is not faced with problems in a classroom atmosphere such as a student’s obstructing or disrupting the lesson; he/she can focus only on the subject in such a way as to concentrate fully on it, and can therefore complete the lesson without losing its wholeness. This is a big advantage. At the same time, the lecturer delivers the lesson once only. The lesson does not have to be repeated over and over again due to students’ questions about the parts they do not understand. This is the way I apply it: when the lesson is over, when the subject is completed, if my students have questions, I only give answers to those questions. In terms of both the lecturer and the saving of time, this is a great advantage.” (F, 1)

Regarding the institution, an advantage stated was the use of fewer teaching staff; a large number of students could be taught with few staff:

“Regarding the institution, considering that the institution at present has insufficient teaching staff and academic staff, so many lecturers do not have to be taken on for a large unit and for so many students, and lessons can be delivered to a large number of students with a much smaller number of lecturers “(F,2)

One of the most important advantages of distance learning according to course instructors is that it offers students independence in education without being tied to a particular time or space:

“When asked what the biggest advantages are, this is one of the first things that come to mind: we are talking about a process that keeps a learning facility active independently of time and place. When this is compared with the traditional teaching method in particular, we see that distance education removes many barriers in education, that is, it makes them disappear “(M, 1).

“As for the advantages for the students, I consider it like this: the student has the chance to listen to the lesson unlimitedly “(F, 1)

“Distance learning can be carried out online and offline. Online learning means that the course lecturer delivers the lesson actively at the relevant lesson time. Offline learning takes place during the period after the lesson time in such a way that a lesson recorded on the database is followed and listened to again by the student. Now, not every student can participate in an online lesson. While our lessons are scheduled on the lesson timetable for a specific period, students who cannot take part in these lessons for various reasons have the chance to learn by following the lessons recorded on the database, even by repeating them several times. We can also evaluate this as an advantage of distance learning” (M, 3).

One of the lecturers stated that distance learning was a huge advantage for those unable to receive education because of geographical distance:

“People who cannot take part in active educational activities because they do not have access to transport for geographical reasons or due to other local factors can, thanks to distance learning, become a part of the teaching-learning process wherever they are regardless of any specific location “(E,1).

One instructor also mentioned the importance of distance learning with regard to disabled students:

“To approach the subject from this viewpoint, all people can also be disabled, and if we consider this from the viewpoint of disabled students, it provides them with an easier means of accessing information. I believe that we have to consider the issue from this aspect as well “(E, 4).

Similarly, distance learning offers a big advantage to students who are both studying and working:

“If you are a working person, you are given the chance both to continue with your duty and to receive education. You have the opportunity to be given a lesson by a lecturer who has a grasp of the subject and is an authority in that subject, but to whom for various reasons you cannot have access face to face. Time and location restrictions are reduced to a minimum level “(M, 2).

“It provides the opportunity for large groups to receive instruction at the same time. For example, it allows you to keep up with your lessons during a long period of treatment in hospital, while you are doing your military service, or even while in prison, as long as the necessary conditions are provided. In economic terms, it is a lot less expensive than formal education. “(M, 3)

One course instructor asserted that students could access information easily via distance learning:

“Thanks to distance learning, we can confirm that students have been given an easier means of access to lecture notes. We generally share a series of lecture notes with students prior to the lesson or during the lesson according to the content of our courses. In traditional education activities, the student will perhaps experience a process of seeking lesson notes, of reproducing them, and of obtaining them, but with this system, the student has the possibility to obtain lecture notes or other sources of information directly from the information source, that is, from the lecturer responsible for the course “(M,1).

Another advantage suggested was that distance learning is less expensive than face-to-face education:

“ Since it eliminates unnecessary expenses such as accommodation, transport and food, I can say that distance learning has advantages and makes a contribution in an economic sense as well “(M,1).

Research Question 2: According to the university lecturers, what are the disadvantages of distance learning?

The lecturers stated the disadvantages of distance learning as lack of interest in lessons, mechanical delivery of lessons, unproductive presentation of practice-based lessons, lack of face-to-face communication, decreased motivation both for the course instructor and for the students, and lack of opportunity for interaction among students.

One of the instructors expressed her concerns about “the extent to which the lessons are productive”, since students did not follow the lessons:

“In my opinion, it is important to evaluate the productivity of the instruction. This year, the sixth year of the distance learning course is about to be completed, but the state of participation by students in these lessons is very low; in fact, we see that there is very little, if any at all. Of course, this reduces productivity.”(F, 1)

One of the course instructors regarded the mechanisation of the lesson delivery as one of the disadvantages of distance learning:

“In normal education, it is possible for the lecturer to make eye contact with the students, to use body language, to arrange the flow of the lesson according to the students’ questions, or to raise or decrease the level of the lesson according to the level of the students, but this is not possible with distance learning. The lessons take on a routine form. They become mechanised, and remain at the level of merely transferring technical information. Actions like increasing or lowering the level depending on the students’ level cannot be performed with distance learning” (F, 1).

One of the lecturers considered that courses like English and Turkish were not suitable for distance learning since the procedure for their lessons is based on practice and they require the use of different materials:

“With regard to our course in particular, distance learning is a very good system, since our course involves narration, and there is no question of using the board. There is no need to use any kind of material, either. Since it involves narration, we are at ease, but the same thing does not apply to our English and Turkish lecturers, as they have to teach language by using materials” (F, 1).

One instructor explained that a disadvantage of distance learning is that it is student-centred:

“At the basis of distance learning, although information exchange between the instructor and student is a factor which enables the teaching learning process, we can say that it is essentially a student-centred programme. Responsibility lies rather more with the student, since the lecturer delivers the lesson during the lesson time but the student cannot, due to a number of excuses or other reasons, listen to the lesson; if he/she does not actively participate in the lesson, information deficiency occurs in the student, who does not benefit from the knowledge given here. That is, we can mention disadvantages like inability to immerse the student in the subject and excluding the student from the subject, and this can have a negative effect on the teaching-learning process.”(M, 1)

Lack of communication between teacher and student, and the artificial learning environment based on this, was expressed as a disadvantage of distance learning:

“Moreover, another factor is that no matter how great the opportunity for oral, written and visual communication there is in distance learning, there is no question of the face-to-face, one-to-one educational activity that we encounter in traditional methods in a classroom environment. Therefore, according to the feedback we have received from students as well, establishing one-to-one and face-to-face communication in a classroom environment always opens the door to a more intimate atmosphere. For this reason, I think that when feelings and ideas are transferred directly to the other party without any artificial medium between them, this situation can affect the teaching-learning process in a better way. However, certain methods such as scientific studies and other questionnaires to be conducted by our university lecturers and colleagues on this subject are also very important” (M,1).

The fact that the lack of communication stated above has a negative effect on the motivation of both the student and the course instructor was detailed by one lecturer as follows:

“Since the lecturer is not in direct contact with the students, he/she may not derive any pleasure from the work that he/she does. The lecturer is deprived of any interaction in a classroom environment. The same disadvantage applies to the student. Since I have no students in front of me, I also cannot get into an instructive mood when delivering the lesson via distance learning. Since the student is not in a classroom environment, he/she cannot concentrate on the lesson.”(M3)

One lecturer mentioned the problem of students studying only to pass the class rather than to learn the subject, and consequently, focusing only on exams, due to lack of motivation.

“A student will only study for exams in courses like these. Inputs that arouse curiosity cannot be instilled in the student’s mind”. (M, 2)

One lecturer expressed his opinion that distance learning is not suitable for students who have not been able to develop autonomous learning, as follows:

“It is a problematic education method for individuals whose capacity for self-study is not developed and who need the support and motivation of the lecturer.” (M, 6)

“It is an ineffective method in terms of teaching practically based subjects. Even in some subjects related to my branch, activities like trips enable retention of learning” (M, 5).

The lack of communication among students and the feeling of alienation resulting from this was stated by a lecturer as one of the disadvantages of distance learning:

“Since the students take part in the course independently of each other, they are deprived of advantages such as learning in groups, socialisation, and cultural interaction.” (M, 4)

Research Question 3: What are the online teaching problems of university lecturers they have experienced so far?

The analysis revealed that the lecturers identified problems in three main areas: interaction (lack of communication and socialization, and participation in the lesson), technical problems (problems related to the software, lack of technical knowledge, infrastructural problems), and physical problems.

One lecturer stated that there was a lack of participation in online courses by students, and that consequently; there was little interaction, which decreased the productivity of the course:

“At the moment, in many classes, there are no students at all, and those with students do not exceed 3-5 students in number. In such situations, it’s a case of teaching the course to ourselves. In fact, that’s not a problem for me; we are used to it, but I want to evaluate the situation especially with regard to productivity for the student. I found it really difficult to get used to transferring to the first distance learning system. I had psychological problems for the first five months. In terms of delivery, since we conduct the lesson according to the question-answer method, getting used to distance learning was a big problem for me. But now I am used to it, there is no problem. I believe that if it is used productively, distance learning is an ideal method, but at the moment, our productivity is out of the question “(F, 1).

One instructor stated that she felt physically uncomfortable due to continually remaining immobile while delivering the lessons:

“My problem is that I continually sit still. If we could move about during the lesson, it would be fine. Sometimes when I am tired, I turn off the camera view, and continue with the lesson with verbal narration. Actually, if there were an environment prepared in some kind of studio, if I could walk about, if there were a few students, if I could conduct the lesson with that motivation, it would be a much healthier method. Open University tried this once and theirs was a very nice method “(F, 2).

The problems resulting from the fact that students did not know how to use the system and lacked technical knowledge were expressed as follows:

“We don’t encounter any major problems related to our course. We do experience a few problems. Of course, the viewpoint from which you ask and the viewpoint from which I have to answer are also important. Speaking from my point of view, we can experience technical problems. Just as the problems can be related to the software system of the distance education system, we also can encounter certain problems in areas like lack of infrastructure, technical equipment and internet facilities. Besides this, people who are not equipped with any knowledge about software, which is the main support of the distance learning programme, and who not have enough knowledge about technology, can experience certain problems with the distance learning programme. That is, “which button should I press?” “How can I activate the microphone?” “How can I share the lesson notes?” since before creating the lessons, this is a preliminary preparation period. For creating a virtual classroom and uploading notes, you have to take the physical equipment needed for the task, like setting up the camera and sound, into account. We can sometimes have technical problems and difficulties due to certain technological infrastructure problems” (M, 1).

Similarly, another lecturer mentioned encountering problems related to the technical infrastructure:

.” I mostly have technical problems such as loss of connection, being unable to enter the system, and sound transmission problems. “(M, 6)

The “lack of communication” most frequently expressed as a disadvantage of distance learning also has a negative effect on the course instructors. One of the lecturers expressed how his inability to establish communication with the students affected his academic life as follows:

“We lose touch with the lesson according to the situation of the day. For example, in case of a problem like lack of sleep, since you are deprived of the stimulating factors that exist in a classroom environment, you may find it difficult to concentrate on the lesson. Instead of students, there is a screen in front of you. It is possible to communicate with students with instant messages, but since we have a profile of students who do not attend many lessons even in a classroom environment, the rate of participation in lessons during distance learning is not very high. If we are in a classroom environment, I can recognise my students and communicate with them with my voice. In a distance learning environment, I cannot establish a student-teacher relationship, which is one of the essential principles for healthy learning, in my opinion. I only enter an environment called school during exam periods, and this is a disadvantage for a lecturer’s personal development. We become distanced from academic life, and find it difficult to keep up to date with current “(M, 2)

Research Question 4: What are the university lecturers’ suggestions in relation to making distance learning more effective?

In relation to lecturers’ suggestions the main themes emerged were: system software and increasing interaction. The course instructors made suggestions related to the use of system software that was easier to use and recommended that training be given prior to the programme related to how this system could be used effectively.. The most frequently expressed problem stated by the lecturers was that the students did not possess enough knowledge about the operation of the system. Therefore, the main recommendation made by the instructors was related to students’ operation of the system and the course instructors’ being informed about their role in this system.

“I think that the connection between the student and lecturer is very important. That is, this connection must not be broken, since at the moment the exams are done by the university’s distance learning centre. We have no authority to interfere with the grades whatsoever. Of course, in terms of objectivity, of evaluation, this is a good thing for me, and I think that this a nice method. On the other hand, the student knows the course lecturer as an interlocutor. They call us constantly and try to communicate with us. We try to explain this to all the students. That is, we need a system with which we can establish a connection with the student in a happy way. Yet although we are in the sixth year of distance learning courses, our university has not been able to provide this. There is a loss of contact with the students; for example, the student cannot reach the lecturer, he/she cannot comprehend the system, he/she cannot access the university’s distance learning centre. The students say they cannot get access to the recordings. Even though you say you haven’t removed a recording from the system, the student says he/she cannot follow the recording. This means that the infrastructure should be made more efficient, and the students should

be given information and oriented in a healthy way. I believe that if this is achieved, no problems will remain “(F, 1)

The lecturers also expressed the opinion that the students did not know how to use the system and that they needed to be given training related to use of the system. In the statement below, the course instructor stated that similar to the students, they also experienced problems based on lack of technical knowledge:

“The technological deficiency and inefficient technical infrastructure need to be activated and used in a healthier way. Students who lack knowledge in this regard should be informed in a detailed way and even educated on the subject. The problems that we experience can also be experienced by students. “How do we use the system?” “How do we enter the system?” or certain programs such as JAVA software need to be updated so that they can use the system. I can say that students should be informed about this subject in a technological sense” (M, 1)

Similarly, another lecturer made suggestions related to solving technical problems:

“Technical facilities can be increased. Measures for increasing interaction can be taken. The student monitoring system can be developed.” (M, 5)

Since use of the system software was complicated both for the course instructors and for the students, use of a software program that was easier to use was strongly recommended:

“Another important issue is that distance learning in different universities, in different institutions can be carried out with different software and under different names. Although some of these programs are easy to use, some of them can be a little difficult to use; you can think of them in the same way as mobile phones. Some mobile phones are easy to use, while some are difficult. You cannot work this out. I can say that using a more practical and manageable software system can be effective with regard to making distance learning more effective”. . (M6)

Mentioning the importance of making students more active, one of the lecturers stated that this was difficult with the existing software, and that therefore, the use of software that would ensure more active participation of students would increase the quality of distance learning.

“To attract students to distance learning, that is, for this educational activity to be made more active, implementations that will give a little more priority to the student can be made. Again, I can give the example of mobile phones. Nowadays, there are various applications such as IOS and Android, that is, if applications are introduced that can develop a person in various senses, that can bring the student to the forefront a little with software systems in this context, and make them more active, then distance learning can be more effective, since no matter how much we say that distance learning is student-centred, when we look at the matter from a real perspective, the lecturer is at the forefront, as the lecturer continually narrates, and the number of students entering the lesson is very low, I should say, since we cannot attract students to the system, that is our disadvantage, our handicap. The lecturer is 90% at the forefront, and is predominantly the person who delivers the lesson, who teaches, and the student, unfortunately, remains in the background. Therefore, some programs or applications can be developed that will make the student more active “(M, 1).

One of the lecturers stated that no matter what recommendations were made and implemented, he believed that distance learning was not beneficial, like this:

“Even if only once or twice a year, lessons can be conducted by coming together with students other than during exams. Yet even if such is the case, I believe that this type of education is ineffective and unproductive. Based on this logic, we can claim that all theory lessons can be delivered by distance learning, yet this was carried out at one time at Anadolu University, and because it was considered to be ineffective, limitations were placed on this practice. My personal opinion is that it is not a beneficial method “(M, 6).

Discussion and Conclusion

The most frequently reported advantageous of distance learning by the lecturers is the accessibility of education for all students, which is also mentioned in many studies in the related literature (Çivril, Aruğaslan & Özkara, 2018; Tuncer & Tanaş, 2011)

One of the disadvantages expressed with regard to distance learning was lack of communication. Similar studies emphasise the necessity for students to be adequately and regularly informed about the guidelines (Gürer, Tekinarslan & Yavuzalp, 2016; Özgöl, Sarıkaya & Öztürk, 2017; Torkul, 2012).

Another disadvantage reported was lack of interaction. The course instructors stated that just as this deficiency affected the students negatively; it also had a considerably negative effect on themselves. This situation can be explained with Moore's interaction theory. Moore defined three different types of interaction in distance learning environments (Moore, 1989): interaction between the student and course instructor, interaction among students and interaction between the student and content. Hillman, Willis and Gunawardena (1994) broadened this definition for internet-based education and added interaction between the student and the interface as a fourth kind of interaction. Student-interface interaction expresses interaction between the student and technological environment, and can be enabled with enrichment of social learning environments via email and discussion boards (Tulunay-Ateş, 2014). It is seen that content supported with animation, pictures and videos as scenario-based content is also effective in drawing students' attention to the lesson and creating an easier and more understandable learning environment (Taşlıbeyaz, 2018). In distance learning, providing an infrastructure, preparing and presenting content, and transferring content to an internet-based distance learning platform is a team task. After the instructor has prepared the lesson, it is converted to a digital environment and loaded onto a content portal by content experts. However, due to reasons such as preparing interactive content differently to scanning lesson notes and putting them in PDF format, inability to always provide adequate coordination between course instructors and content designers, and instructors not being able to allot enough time for developing and presenting web-based courses, this may not be carried out (Balçı, 2011). In the related literature, instructors who deliver courses via distance learning state that their lesson loads increase and that as a result, they prepare lessons in a short time and their lesson notes are insufficient (Baturay & Yükseltürk, 2015; Özgül *et al.*, 2017; Yıldız & Selim, 2015). In distance learning, failure to prepare good-quality materials or to create suitable learning environments may lead to problems being encountered in distance learning (Tuncer & Taşpınar, 2007). As mentioned by some of the lecturers in the study, the most important of these problems is lack of interest in the course by students. There may be multiple reasons why the students lose interest. According to Caner (2012) lack of interaction in the online environments reduces human motivation. Apart from the poor quality of instructional materials, the way teachers deliver the lesson is also one of the factors effecting students' motivation for the course. In this study, lecturers stated that not only the students, but also, they themselves suffered from low motivation. In their study, Özgül *et al.* (2017) also stated that one of the disadvantages of distance learning was teachers' experiencing a feeling of lack of job satisfaction and losing professional enthusiasm. Considering that the lecturer's way of delivering the lesson and his inclusion of the student in the lesson are the most important reasons affecting success in the course, the need for course instructors to receive educational support related to teaching methods is emphasised (Özyürek *et al.*, 2016).

Problems related to students' lack of technical knowledge were also expressed by the course instructors. A similar finding was also revealed by Özgül *et al.* (2017). It is stated that students' having experience with computers has a positive effect on their achievement (Baturay & Yükseltürk, 2015; İşman, 2011). With regard to the problems expressed by the lecturers related to equipment and software stemming from the university's infrastructure, it was stated in the study by Özyürek *et al.* (2016) that the most common online problem was frequent loss of internet connection.

In 2007, the percentage of open learning programmes compared to total higher education programmes was 35% (YÖK, 2007), while in 2011, the percentages of students in open education and face-to-face education as shares of the total number of students in higher education were 45% and 55%, respectively (Günay & Günay, 2011). This is a clear indicator of the speed with which distance learning, which has grown in importance together with lifelong learning, has spread in our country. However, studies related to examining distance learning activities, which have begun to be implemented within formal education in recent years, are still very new and few in number. In this context, it is considered that the conducting of follow-up research related distance learning activities carried out within formal education in universities will be important for increasing the quality of distance learning in Turkish universities.

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