An Analysis of Capstone Courses Given Through Distance Education in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to determine the opinions and experiences of participants who took both distance and formal education courses concerning practice. The case study method was employed for this study. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Distance education software and recorded virtual course videos were analyzed and observations were made. The participants comprised eight students enrolled in formal education courses and who also took distance education courses during the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 academic years, two instructors who were giving lectures through distance education and an instructor promoted in the students’ education program. Findings indicated that the participants were aware of the time and space advantages of distance education but they do not use the system because they are not given sufficient information and they do not know how to use it. Findings also showed that virtual courses were almost never watched, and the most important factor related to this lack of use was the lack of interaction with instructors.

KEYWORDS

Capstone Courses, Distance Education, Program Evaluation, University Student

INTRODUCTION

Distance learning has been responsible in the changing of behaviors and attitudes in the field of education. Indeed, it may be one of the most important trends in education in the 21st century (Ustati & Hassan, 2013). Distance education has grown rapidly both at higher education institutions, as well as at workplaces around the world and this trend continues to grow every year (Allen & Seaman, 2011; Radford, 2011). Today, many universities are striving to increase distance education opportunities (Danesh, Bailey, & Whisenand, 2015). Therefore, the number of educational programs available on the Internet has been increasing at a high rate (Hirumi & Bermudez, 1996). For example, in the United States, as of 2013, 33.5% of students in higher education were recorded as taking at least one course in distance education (Allen & Seaman, 2014).

The technology-assisted distance education model is expanding in Turkey just as it is across the rest of the world (Aydin, 2013a). Since 2010, the number of students enrolled at Faculties of Distance Education and Distance Education Centers in Turkey has been increasing. Furthermore, lectures can be provided via both institutional and distance education courses. According to a decision made by the (Turkish) Council of Higher Education (YOK) in 2011, the number of lectures that may be provided through the medium of higher education is limited to 30% of the courses offered. Distance education...
programs may only be delivered following the submission of course content to higher education senates and following approval by the Council of Higher Education (YOK, 2013). As a result of this change in attitude towards online courses, many universities have started to offer common and capstone courses such as Turkish Language I-II, Foreign Language I-II, History of Ataturk’s Principles and Revolutions, Physical Education I-II, Fine Arts I-II, City and Culture: Istanbul and Culture of Disaster through distance education. Thus, students who fulfill undergraduate and postgraduate matriculation criteria for higher education and who have enrolled at higher education institutions have started to receive courses via distance education. However, learners may fail to understand the experience that they will undergo when course material is presented via distance education courses to these same students who are entitled to receive instruction in the same topics via lessons in a more traditional institutional educational setting, namely the university classroom.

Distance education, which has become widespread in the 21st century, is actually a concept with a long history. That is because what is defined as distance education today is based on the well-established method of correspondence education (Karasar, 1999). Nowadays, computers and Internet distance education, which evolved out of the postal model of correspondence courses, has expanded widely and at a breathtaking speed. The transmission of information via electronic devices became more widespread together with the emergence of printed books (Kadim, Sisman & Gulsunar, 2014). Transferring information to digital media is viewed as the factor that accounts most readily for these rapid developments.

Distance education is generally classified in four categories (1) open-scheduled online courses (asynchronous), (2) hybrid distance learning (synchronous and asynchronous), (3) computer-based distance learning (synchronous) and (4) fixed-time online courses (synchronous) (Kirali & Aydin, 2016; Rao & Krishnan, 2015). Distance learning is used in modern education to reduce geographical limitations (Farag, 2012). As one definition of distance education posits, it is an education model that permits learners, instructors and educational materials in different settings to come together through the provision of digital platforms (Bayam & Aksoy, 2002). In addition, even though learners and instructors remain physically separated during the learning process, distance education provides communications employing various methods (Keegan, 1986; Rao & Krishnan, 2015). Distance education is “an economic and interactive way of education carried out through the means of information technologies independent from time and space” (Seven, 2012, p. 2). In other words, it can be defined as a learning process that takes place even when the teacher, content and learner are found in different settings (Aydin, 2013b; Verduin & Clark, 1994). From this point of view, based on the advantages it offers, distance education is accepted as an alternative solution for preventing the inequality of opportunity that students frequently encounter and for enabling students to improve themselves.

Students prefer distance education for several reasons such as the provision of learning at any location at any time, increased student interaction, skills gained by using technology and the provision of wider access to instructors. (Aspillera, 2010). Apart from the changed role of the instructor outlined above, the advantages of positive distance education are defined as (1) an effective teaching environment experience, (2) teaching as science and art, (3) the quality of teaching, (4) the quantity of teaching and (5) active learning and teaching (Arends, 2008). Enhancing distance education with the incorporation of computers and the Internet promotes interaction between a large number of users and instructors at the same time; this by extension helps in delivering distance education to larger numbers of students. Distance education practices have become rapidly widespread through advantages such as flexibility and the individual learning environments that the Internet offers (Tümer, Şahin, & Öztürk, 2010).

However, a lack of interaction in distance education constitutes a major constraint (Güllüşen, 2011); for instance, some studies have shown that interaction between humans is a key principle of delivery of effective distance education (Anderson & Simpson, 2012). Therefore, interaction remains the most important component of the distance education (Anderson, 2008). An inability to offer interaction may account for a lack of interest displayed by instructors and learners towards any