

Improving Distance Education System: Problems and Solutions from the Perspective of Lecturers

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ABSTRACT

The modern Internet-based distance education is steadily moving forward, and has attracted more and more people's attention and gradually showed strong development momentum. The aim of this study is to assess the existing distance education practices at Sakarya University's eMBA program in terms of pros and cons as well as evaluate problems encountered by the lecturers. Also, we have discussed the possibility of solutions to the problems from the lecturers' perspective. The aim of this study is to assess the existing distance education practices at Sakarya University's eMBA program in terms of pros and cons as well as evaluate problems encountered by the lecturers. Also, we have discussed the possibility of solutions to the problems from the lecturers' perspective.

Keywords: *Distance Education, Lecturers, Problems of Distance Education Systems.*

INTRODUCTION

In which we live the "Information Age", technological improvements strikingly affect every area of our lives. These effects occur not only in the changes of making the life easier such as increased availability of transportation and communications, but also in the learning processes and learning methods which have a critical role in the development of individuals. Two most important improvements offered by technological developments are the computer and internet usage. The effectiveness of the learning process is increased and expected to continue increasing by using these two tools together. In addition, computer and internet usage have started a paradigmatic transformation in the education systems. Concepts such as web-based education, virtual class, and distance education have entered into the education and academic world along with technological improvements. These new approaches by their nature should be considered in a different perspective from the traditional face-to-face education. Otherwise, failures in implementation and deviations in achieving the desired targets of the educational plans may occur.

Compared with the traditional face-to-face educational environment, distance education system provides advantages to students such as open-education, flexibility and ease of sharing. In this system, firstly the time is no longer a constraint. Students are able to attend classes by choosing from the alternatives of the time zones. They can reach to educational resources and information comfortably independent from the location. In other words, system provides equality of opportunity for students. Students can find an effective sharing environment with both educators and other students different from the face-to-face education with the help of interactive feature of the system.

All the advantages offered by the distance education system to be effective, the system should be designed in the most appropriate form. There are studies in the domestic and foreign literature in order to question the performance of the system and analyze the problems (Glennie, 2006, Andresen, 2009, Rovaive Downey, 2010, Güneş, 2009, Guohonget al., 2012). In reviewing the literature it's seen that educator perspective and studies investigating the system are limited in the studies investigating problems related to distance education system. In this context, this study focuses on the educator perspective that has a critical role in the distance education and determining, analyzing and developing solutions of the problems. The study mainly looks for the answer to "How are the problems identified

by educators in the distance education system?”. In this context, taking into account the perspectives of the educators, sub-questions are listed as below:

- What are the problems associated with the management in the distance education system?
- What are the problems that occur depending on students' attitudes?
- What are the problems that occur depending on educators' attitudes?
- What are the problems that occur in relation to technical and infrastructure?
- What are the problems associated with the course contents and materials?

METHODOLOGY

In order to find an answer to the question in the context of research, a focus group is designed with the lecturers of Sakarya University e-Business Master's Degree Program. The reason for selecting the focus group study as a data collecting method is to benefit from the advantages of both observation and in-depth interviews (Altunışık et al., 2012). 6 lecturers have participated in the focus group meeting. The lecturing periods of these academic staff have varied between 5-10 years in this distance education program. The meeting has taken 2.5 hours. The interviews during the meeting have been recorded with the permission of the lecturers. Names of the lecturers have been hidden and given a code to each. Demographic characteristics of the participants can be seen from the Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Attributes of Participants

Topic Thought	Gender	ID*	Prof.Dr.	Assistant Prof. Dr.	Lecture time (year)
Operation	M	L1			10
Research	M	L2	X	X	10
Marketing					
Management	F	L3	X		8
Management	F	L4		X	5
Accounting	M	L5	X		9
MIS	M	L6	X		8

The participants are from the Business Administration field which includes the departments of Production Management and Marketing, Management and Organization, Accounting and Management Information Systems. Two of the lecturers are Assistant Professors and four of them Professors. In addition, two of them are women. Sound recordings which have been made during the focus group meeting have been evaluated by the authors of the study and a distance education expert from Sakarya University. The data obtained have been analyzed by the content analysis approach. Conceptual codes and themes are associated by determining and the data are interpreted within the framework of an inductive analysis with the quotations.

FINDINGS

The problems of the system have been identified in sub-titles within the framework of the perspectives and opinions of the distance education system lecturers. These are:

Problems and Solutions Related to Distance Education Program Planning

- 1) Inefficient management: The basic functions of management are planning, organizing, directing, coordinating, and controlling. The implementation of the management functions successfully has a critical importance in order to provide more quality education programs to students. Problems caused by inefficient management applications are stated as follows:

“..... the first year and the following years the program was successful. Students and lecturers were pleased the system. Directors opened new programs unplanned based on this success but in parallel with this nothing done to revise the system. Thus, managing the system became more difficult and the productivity of the education decreased.” (the lecturer coded L1).

Institutional support of the organization and managing effectively directly affects the operation of the system in the success of distance education system. There is a close relationship between the success and

performance of the lecturers and efficiency of the management. Yeung (2002) highlights the importance of total quality management applications in the educator-student relationship in his study which is about the development of an effective quality assurance model in web-based distance education.

- 2) Timing errors: One of the most important advantages of the system is the flexible course hours. However, from time to time the errors in the determination of course hours affect the students' involvement and their level of interest negatively:

"The determination of course hours is very important for the students' involvement and interest. The majority of our students are working and usually for private sector. For this reason, involvement and interest are low in the courses started at 7.00 pm. The courses from 8.00 to 10.00 pm are the most productive ones" (the lecturer coded L3).

On the other hand, various programs associated with the topics of students' private lives reduce the involvement on certain days of the week. Therefore, this condition decreases the effectiveness of education.

"I gave an elective lecture last semester; I did the course depending on the program on Monday night at 09:00- 10:00. Although there are considerable students choosing the course, the attendance to course was very low because of the live broadcasting of national league."(the lecturer coded L6).

- 3) Undeveloped of the procedures to solve the crisis or bottleneck situations: The emergence of crises and problems in the operation of any system may occur at any time. Problems associated with technical trouble may arise because of the nature of distance education systems' web-based structure. In case of the problems like this experienced and can not be resolved, the course may be canceled. For this reason, the presence of one skilled technical staff at any moment during the course is critical to ensure the continuity of the course.

"..... I also had a similar problem in the first semester of the program. Students were not able to use microphone and camera at the same time because of the nature of the system. I wanted to give all students an access to the microphone at the same time, but the system was locked and unable to continue the course. I couldn't solve the problem at that time because of the absence of a technical support."(the lecturer coded L4).

Problems Associated With Students And Suggestions

- 1) The problems that occur depending on the students' attitudes: As a general trend by the lecturers, students are disinterested to both face to face and distance education courses. This may be a different research. In this study, it has been tried to determine the students' attitudes towards distance education system. Attitudes are the form of expression of positive or negative assessments about objects, people or events (Schifmann and Kanuk, 2000). Attitudes are the determinants of behaviors (Tutar, 2012). Attitudes developed by individuals towards the object are decisive in the emergence of behaviors. According to the assessments of the lecturers, students believe that distance education system is easier than traditional face to face education.

"..... students say that distance education system is easier compared to face to face education and can pass the courses by working less....." (the lecturer coded L5).

The most important advantage provided by distance education system is to facilitate students' access to information. However, this may lead to be perceived as a simple and easy education model by students compared to face to face education. In other words, students may develop negative attitudes towards the system.

The applications of technological developments in the field of education increase the effectiveness of teaching. This process is a process of change and it's important for individuals to implement by understanding of exchange and its requirements in order to reach their goals. One of the roles of the lecturer is to be a control mechanism for students in traditional education systems. In Turkey's traditional education

system, there is the principle of lecturer's control on students and reminder their duties and responsibilities from primary education up to secondary education. Students exhibit attitudes that parallel to this understanding for teachers by depending on the habits. However, self-discipline (developing an internal control mechanism) is important to success in the distance education system.

"..... students grown in secondary schools in Turkey learn generally with the mechanism of "external-based control". In other words, students want teachers to follow them all the time and control whether they fulfill the requirements of the courses. However, these kinds of students fail in the distance education system. Students should have the "internal-based control" mechanism in the distance education system. They should fulfill the responsibilities about the course in order to improve themselves better and learn the best way."(the lecturer coded L3).

- 2) The reluctance of the students to proceed with the course: Students' "disinterest" to courses and "reluctance" to involvement have been expressed by almost all lecturers participated the focus group.

"..... As you know, virtual lessons are made in our distance education program. In addition, videos and pdf files that include weekly lectures are accessible to students. In other words, the system is designed as synchronous and asynchronous. This can be seen as an advantage for students, but they may think it's not so necessary to attend the lecture because of the presence of the videos and files. For this reason, the attendance is becoming less. Therefore, students may miss the discussions on the issue during the lesson. To eliminate this situation, I think it would be appropriate to continue the lessons with the help of a decision after testing the system as synchronous and asynchronous....."(the lecturer coded L6).

- 3) Deficient communication among students: The implementation of effective interpersonal communication is critical to achieve goals in the activities as a group. In case of the implementation of educational activities efficiently, communications to be open among students, sharing of the assessments about the lecture process and gains, and last the delivery of the feedbacks to the lecturers have a direct impact on the performance of the program. However, opinions presented in the focus group meeting can not create an efficient communication environment and affect this program's success negatively.

"..... students have very poor communications among each other. In my quantitative lesson, I say that if you don't understand anything let me know or send an e-mail after the discussion among you. No voice is coming to my ears. They don't communicate with each other and don't turn back to me" (the lecturer coded L2).

Problems Associated With Lecturers And Suggestions

- 1) The attitudes of lecturers towards distance education system
- 2) The attitudes and behaviors of lecturers towards students
- 3) The reluctance of lecturers

The effectiveness of the distance education system requires a point of view different from the traditional face to face education system. This is a process of change. Perception of this change by lecturers like students and develop attitudes towards this is important. In this context, it's possible to consider the attitudes of lecturers under two headings: attitudes towards distance education and students. The performance of the system will further increase when the lecturers are aware of the difference between virtual class and traditional class and they use the course materials by preparing with the appropriate content. However, the system performance decreases in the case of the opposite situation.

Students and lecturers are unable to come face to face with each other in the distance education system and this can lead to lack of communication from time to time. However, the system has non face to face mechanisms and means inherently. When parties increase their abilities to use these tools the effectiveness of education will also increase.

Problems Associated With Technical Characteristics And Infrastructure, And Suggestions

- 1) Deficiency of training: Distance education system is a system that increases the effectiveness when users have knowledge about technological innovations and improve the ability to use them. Therefore, at the beginning of educational programs orientation is a requirement for students and lecturers in order to understand how to use the system's technological capabilities. Otherwise, problems may occur.

“The program had been continuing for 5 years when I started to lecture. Login password and some basic information were reported to me via e-mail. No information was given apart from that. I tried to learn the system and its features by asking to system managers and other lecturers in my department. This is a deficiency. I also asked students about this and got similar responses. I think a guide or a manual should be definitely published.....” (the lecturer coded L2).

- 2) Problems associated with software: Software engineers have developed many different presentations for distance education applications. These software programs have several superior or weak properties among themselves. One of the most important deficiencies of the program which is the subject of this study is experienced during the attendance to courses. If several students want to attend the course in video and audio, software problems arise. This situation negatively affects the processing of the course in an efficient manner. A discussion atmosphere doesn't occur between the lecturer and the students particularly in verbal courses because of the absence of mutual interaction.

“I want to launch virtual discussion topics from time to time during the lectures. After determining the topic I want to get students to the course with video and sound. I can not get more than one student at the same time. We are getting off the subject while trying to get students one by one. Most of the time, I can not get any students to the course and I explain the subject. After a while I feel like lecturing against the wall. The efficiency is decreasing.....” (the lecturer coded L4).

- 3) The absence of required equipments of the students and not to use them: It is very important to be ready for required equipment and tools in order to use technology effectively. One of the most important advantages of distance education programs is virtual courses. Students can attend courses from home or anywhere with an internet connection. However, unless they have a camera or microphone they attend the course just as a listener. In this case, the effectiveness of the program decreases.

“The absence of required equipments is a major problem as well as the reluctance of students in the virtual courses. When I wanted to invite the students to course I sent an audio connection via microphone. I get responses such as “I don't have a camera or microphone, lecturer”. They don't really have or just find an excuse not to attend.....” (the lecturer coded L1).

- 4) The problems associated with internet connection: There are intermittent connection problems because of the different standard of internet infrastructure services across Turkey. In such cases, the effective processing of virtual courses is becoming impossible.
- 5) Lack of technical support: As mentioned in inefficient management heading, the absence of technical personnel during the virtual courses may occur troubles in terms of preventing potential problems.

Problems Associated With Course Contents And Materials, And Suggestions

- 1) Usage of course contents again and again without updating: The course contents as video files are not updated in distance education system because of the careless approaches of management and lecturers. There are lecturers using the same videos and course materials about four and five years. For this reason, outdated course contents make the students reluctant in case of following the courses.

“.....Unfortunately there are lecturers don't update the course contents for years. They relax themselves by thinking to discuss the current topics during the virtual classes. However, this causes a poor

quality of education and negative student attitudes towards the system.....” (the lecturer coded L1).

- 2) Usage of unsuitable and insufficient teaching materials: Distance education system has specialized applications and tools towards verbal and numerical courses. Applications such as smart boards allow lecturers to practice one to one and solve the problems, and allow students to follow the courses as live in especially quantitative courses with the advantages of technology. Similarly, a discussion atmosphere can be created for verbal courses by using features such as forums page. Furthermore, additional readings or case studies related to the course can easily be installed to the system. Of course lecturers are in a key position in case of the usage of these tools and increasing of the course’s effectiveness. If lecturers perform well in case of implementation of the tools, the performance of students’ attendance will increase. Thus, the course will be more effective.
- 3) Low relationship/complementarity between materials: There are three ready applications for students to follow the courses in Sakarya University Distance Education System which is the subject of this study: virtual live classes, recording of virtual classes and videos of lecturers have been made before. Alignment and relationship of the course materials used for these three applications are very important to demonstrate a complementary presentation of the course in order to make the course more effective.
- 4) Usage of simple course contents/low attractiveness: Course contents of the distance education system should be updated and prepared in an attractive way for students in today’s condition which is the fastest and easiest way to access to information. This has an important potential to increase the gains of students and prevent the reluctance towards lectures.

“..... it is very important to prepare the course contents properly in order to increase the effectiveness of the course and attract students. The interest of students increase suddenly and they demand a camera and microphone to express their comments when discussing the current economic news after transferring the theoretical part of the course. Visual materials such as a photo or video are highly effective attracting the attention of the students.....” (the lecturer coded L2).

It is a requirement that courses should be prepared from the marketing perspective to make them attractive for students. The idea of “best course contents are prepared by the lecturer” is an inadequate overview. If lecturers and experts in web page design and applications work together the results will be better. It becomes a necessity that team preparing materials in distance education systems should be from the design experts (Hakkâri et al., 2008). This topic also has a strategic importance for the program to obtain an advantage over competitors in terms of efficiency.

CONCLUSION AND EVALUATION

Technological developments and applications in the field of education increase the possibilities of individuals to access and use the information. Usage of computers and web-based applications in education (reduction of inequality of opportunity) provides many advantages to individuals such as efficient usage of educational resources, maintaining the balance of supply and demand, and enhancing the performance of education. It is important to detect critical points in distance education system in order to evaluate these advantages in the best way and to avoid problems during the application. In the light of the findings obtained from the methodology of this study can be listed below:

- 1) Preparation of plans for the purpose: A successful planning is the first step for success of the distance education programs and operation of the process. Otherwise, a structure left to its own devices will occur and it will be difficult to achieve the goals such an environment.

- 2) Preparation of a distance education guide: The preparation of a guide includes system principles and operations in the form of a handbook is a requirement. The guide will help parties (lecturers, educators, system managers etc.) to reach the solution quickly in case of possible problems.
- 3) Continuous monitoring and updating of the programs: For minimizing the problems in distance education systems, the presence of continuous monitoring mechanism provides to solve problems more quickly as well as prevent the growth of problems bigger.
- 4) Developing programs to increase students' motivation: Programs should be developed to enhance the attendance of students to courses. Grades of the students who attended the course can be increased to a certain extent as a simple step. In the context of technological applications, usage of interesting videos or animations in course materials, or encouraging students to prepare them is expected to create a positive impact on the motivation.
- 5) Developing *Change Management* programs: Nowadays, the concept of change affects all aspects of life. Individual or organizational change can be summarized as efforts to adapt to the current environment. An individual or organization can sustain its growth and development if it adapts to new formations in the current environment. In this context, development of change management programs which consider the web-based technological innovations has a key role in improving the performance of the system.

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