

Chapter 69

I Have a Story to Tell You: Engaging Learners and Issues in Distance Learning of Yasar University

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ABSTRACT

The current study was conducted to learn the factors affecting students' satisfaction in distance learning (DL) and to understand students' perceptions of the barriers to their studies. The study consists of two parts: qualitative and quantitative. In the quantitative part, survey was used, and in the qualitative part, case study was used. The research covers the academic year of 2012-13. The results reveals students' perspectives, expectations, experiences, and satisfaction about the newly established distance learning program and based on these give important notes and suggest to redesign and rethink teaching methodologies in distance education especially in high uncertainty avoidance cultures like Turkey.

INTRODUCTION

In Europe's top 10 Internet countries, with its 46.3 million users, Turkey is the 5th biggest Internet user country according to 30th of June 2014 ("Internet top", 2014). As a result of an increased penetration of the Internet in Turkey as well as all around the world, Distance Learning (DL) programs have become popular and its importance is highly likely to grow (Gaspay & Legorreta, 2009).

"Before the term 'globalization' started to be used in the 1980s, 'international' was the preferred term" (Cheung & Chan, 2010, p. 526). Internationalization means "relationships between and among countries, nations, and cultures" (Visser, L. 2012, p. 57). The internationalization of higher education is a must in a modern society and it refers to "institutional arrangements by governments, universities, organizations, and other education agents that involve the delivery of higher education in more than one country" (Visser, L. 2012, p. 57). "Various terms have been used interchangeably with 'global', for example, international, interterritorial, multinational and worldwide, and globalization has frequently been referred to as internationalization. However, the terms above still cannot fully explain the underlying meaning of globalization" (Cheung & Chan, 2010, p. 526). Globalization is different than internation-

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alization and it can be defined as “a process of interaction and integration of people, or organizations, companies, and governments of different nations” (Visser, L. 2012, p. 57). One of the results of globalization is a need for culturally diverse people to study and work with each other. Although, they will use a common language (e.g., English) in their classes or working places, the behavioral, attitudinal, and communicative, in other words, cultural differences will appear based on their values and in turn in their day-to-day practices (Gaspay, Legorreta, & Dardan, 2009).

Cheung and Chan (2010, p. 528) state the close relation between globalization and education in their following statement:

... the impact of how globalization affects the education field needs greater attention since the changes made in the current education sector are going to affect the competitiveness of the future recruits in the society, who are in fact the students studying in primary and secondary schools and universities at present, and eventually affect the overall competitiveness of the country. When compared with primary and secondary education, academic programs offered by universities should be more responsive to globalization because university graduates will directly enter the workforce after the completion of their university programs.

Cultural differences play an important role in a globalized and interactive learning environments. Students in one culture may appreciate the flexibility, convenience, and freedom that are given to them in DL, while students in another culture may find learning activities anonymous and unpractical in DL programs (Gaspay, Legorreta, & Dardan, 2009). So, it is essential to use DL in universities powerfully; because, “DL can be an effective agent of knowledge globalization, and make educational and economic opportunities available to all, if practitioners fully leverage its flexibility” (Gaspay, Legorreta, & Dardan, 2009, p. 47).

Turkey has the youngest population compared to all European countries. The Turkish population was approximately 76.5 million in 2013 and 12.5 million of them representing people between 15-24 years old (“İstatistiklerle Gençlik”, 2014). These numbers show the importance and emergence of establishing the distance learning programs in universities in Turkey. Because, even tough, remarkable number of universities were established in the last decade, there is a growing number of applicants for entering universities which gives tension to the university managements for finding sufficient classrooms, and a necessity in replying those needs with new educational technologies. Distance learning (DL) has been widely popular and accessible, but, faculty members participating in this method of teaching are in small numbers and students’ satisfaction level with those courses are low (Power & Gould-Morven, 2011). Students’ satisfaction with the courses in e-learning are important for examining their learning difficulties and obstacles. It is also important to get their first impressions and experiences especially in newly established DL programs so that necessary changes can be employed.

Wide use of emerging technologies gave birth to technology based distance learning. Emerging technologies can be defined as “tools, concepts, innovations, and advancements utilized in diverse educational settings (including distance, face-to-face, and hybrid forms of education) to serve varied education-related purposes (e.g., instructional, social, and organizational goals)” (Veletsianos, 2010, p. 12-13). Institutions face challenges for transforming traditional and face-to-face didactic teaching to the technology based distance learning (DL) (Banerjee, 2011). For example, DL is successful for educating people who understand the importance of technological progress, and have critical thinking and problem

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