

WHY DO LEARNERS CHOOSE ONLINE LEARNING: THE LEARNERS' VOICES

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ABSTRACT

Offering many advantages to adult learners, e-Learning is now being recognized - and preferred - by more and more people, resulting in an increased number of distance learners in recent years. Numerous research studies focus on learner preferences for online learning, with most converging around the individual characteristics and differences, if not the features of the technology and pedagogy used. For Turkey, the situation is also similar, with the number of adult learners who prefer online learning increasing each year due to several reasons. The result of this is an increase in the number of online programs offered by many universities. Hence, this research study has been conducted to reveal the prevailing factors causing learners to choose online learning. Through this qualitative research regarding online learners in a state university, it is found that having a full time job, accessibility and flexibility, individual responsibility, effective time management, physical distance, institutional prestige, disability are the common factors for under graduate and graduate learners in their preference for online learning. Awareness of these factors can support the stakeholders while designing e-Learning from both technological and pedagogical points of view.

KEYWORDS

Online learning, preferences, expectations

1. INTRODUCTION

Offering many advantages to adult learners, e-Learning is now being recognized - and preferred - by more and more people, resulting in an increased number of distance learners in recent years. Emphasizing that distance education has a bright and promising future, Zawacki-Richter and Naidu (2016) stress that, "In fact, there has never been a better time to be in the field of open, flexible, distance and online education than now!" (p. 20).

The commonly discussed factors that make online learning attractive for adults are: independence from time and place; accessibility, and; economic reasons. With the MOOC movement, extremely high quality online courses are now being delivered to learners by many well-known universities. Moreover, many universities are either providing online programs or courses as a support to traditional instruction, in the form of blended learning, flipped classes, etc. Indeed, there are almost no universities left who don't benefit from these advantages of technology usage and its support in teaching-learning processes.

A variety of reasons might account for these learning preferences. Çağlar and Turgut (2014) attempted to identify the effective factors for the e-learning preferences of university students; they concluded that, "Efficient usage of time and reduced educational expenses were found to be on top of the list as the most valued advantages of e-learning" (p. 46). Moreover, having responsibilities, a full-time job and no access to a nearby university may also cause learners to prefer online learning.

Among the factors that affect learners' attitudes toward e-learning, a positive attitude toward technology, ease of access and use of internet, computer literacy, perceived usefulness, self-efficacy, motivation, patience, self-discipline, and self-regulation seem to be widespread and the most commonly reported (Liaw, Huang & Chen, 2007; Nogueira & Machado, 2008; Sun, Tsai, Finger, Chen & Yeh, 2008; Berteau, 2009). On the other hand, Lim and Morris (2009) examined the influence of instructional and learner variables on learning outcomes for a blended instruction course and stated that "... age, prior experiences with distance learning opportunities, preference in delivery format, and average study time are those learner antecedents differentiating learning outcomes among groups of college students" (p. 282).

Regardless of learners' attitudes toward e-learning, instructional design plays an all important role during an efficient online learning process. From the literature, it can be seen that the most common instructional design models – such as ADDIE, ASSURE, Dick & Carrey, Smith & Ragan - start with the analysis step. This step can be broken down into analysis of the learner, content, media and aim. Nevertheless, the question is: after analysis, are designers really reflecting the possible applications in their instructional design process?

In many online learning programs learner analysis was carried out collecting learners' general demographic data. Even if the target group of learners have similar academic backgrounds, these learners tend to have very different individual properties (Navarro & Shoemaker, 2000; Conrad & Donaldson, 2010), expectations (Dabbagh, 2007; Moskal & Dziuban, 2001) and motivation (Keller & Suzuki, 2004; Kearsley, 2002) levels. Therefore, after enrollment, institutions or practitioners should conduct a deep learner analysis; this also influences the quality of instructional design in a holistic way. Thus, institutions can aim to decrease the drop-out rates (Park & Choi, 2009; Chyung, 2001), increase the attendance (Yudko, Hirokawa & Chi, 2008; Rovai, 2003) and, in general terms, maintain a more efficient learning process.

Numerous research studies have focused on learner preferences for online learning, with most converging around the individual characteristics and differences, if not the features of the technology and pedagogy used. A similar situation is seen in Turkey, with the number of adult learners who prefer online learning increasing each year due to several reasons. The result of this is an increase in the number of online programs offered by many universities. For this reason, the current research study has been conducted to reveal the prevailing factors causing learners to choose online learning. Thus, this research seeks answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the factors that affect students' preferences for online learning?
2. Are there any differences between program types in terms of student preferences?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This research is designed as a qualitative study. Participants were requested to answer two online open-ended questions at the beginning of fall semester, and asked underlying reasons for their choice of online learning method, and their expectations about online learning.

2.2 Participants

Participants of this study were the online learners of a state university who were enrolled in various e-learning programs. These programs were composed of six undergraduate degree and four graduate degree programs. Most of the online learners were females (55%), married (59%) and aged 18-25 (41%). Detailed demographics for the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant demographic data

		Undergraduate		Graduate	
		f	%	f	%
Gender	Female	1278	59,92	184	55,93
	Male	855	40,08	145	44,07
Marital Status	Single	1032	48,38	133	40,43
	Married	1101	51,62	196	59,57
Age	18-25	29	9	860	41
	26-33	136	41	761	36
	34-41	112	34	398	19
	42-49	45	14	80	4
	50 and up	7	2	18	1
Total		2133	100	329	100

2.3 Data Analysis

After checking all of the responses, it was found that 944 participants from undergraduate level and 178 participants from graduate level were suitable for data analysis. The collected data was coded separately by the researchers. None of the qualitative data analysis software has been used, because of not missing any statement. In this research, coding was conducted according to the participants' comments, and the codes and themes were generated by the researchers.

A member checking validation strategy was used in this research for validity (Creswell, 2007), and also an intercoder agreement strategy was used for reliability. Two different coders - apart from the researchers - analyzed the codes and themes for a second time. For this dataset, Cohen's Kappa coefficient was calculated and found to be 0.90, which is within the range of acceptability (Krippendorff, 2004; Landis & Koch, 1977). In terms of member checking, researchers called (via phone) 10 randomly selected participants, and talked about their online learning experiences and reasons for their preferences. During meetings they emphasized the similar preferences for online learning.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Undergraduate Students

After the qualitative analysis, researchers identified 12 themes within the undergraduate students' data. The themes for undergraduate level are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes for undergraduate students

Themes	f	%
Having a full time job	441	38,31
Accessibility and flexibility	218	18,94
Individual responsibility	113	9,82
Effective time management	106	9,21
Individual difficulties	83	7,21
Features of learning environment	82	7,12
Physical distance	43	3,74
Academic preference	23	2,00
Having a second degree	16	1,39
Institutional prestige	10	0,87
Aging	8	0,70
Disability	8	0,70
Total	1151	100

According to the data analysis, having a full time job is the most significant theme regarding the student's reasons for their preferences. They stated that the desire to run their work life and education together, and also the high tempo of work life forcing them to choose distance education programs. The majority of students were between 26 and 41 years of age, this data also proves that these students can be active workers in life. The students stated their situation, as is seen in the example below:

"I am working, and my age is 35. Still, I can complete my education into my area of interest, and have a diploma via distance education." [P-722]. *"I am working, and I don't have any time for traditional learning programs. I choose this program, because it was the only way for me to learn."* [P-715].

The other emerging theme was that of accessibility and flexibility. The nature of distance education is that it is independent from location and time, which are also important criteria in terms of students' preferences.

"Distance education gives me a large choice of time and location, so I don't need to be at an exact place and time. Also, I can continue to my other diploma program which I enrolled in before." [P-23]. "It's very easy to access and the practical, discretionary participation feature to the synchronized sessions is very important for me. Also, the opportunity of listening to sessions from records, and from different lecturers makes me choose distance education." [P-92]. "I choose distance education, because I can study whenever I want. I can listen to session recordings and there isn't an obligation about attending synchronized sessions." [P-373].

Another characteristic of distance education students is that, generally, they couldn't complete, or even start, their education because of their individual responsibilities. This situation can be seen from the codes and themes emerging from the data. Most of the students stated that they have to take care of their family and children, or even a relative such as a nephew, or their grandparents.

"I had to choose distance education, because there is no one to take care of my nephew." [P-53]. "I am married, and have 3 kids. I really appreciate that this opportunity is provided to us." [P-491]. "I choose distance education because I am married and have 2 kids. My kids are going to elementary school, so they need me at home." [P-592].

According to the analysis, a point will soon be reached where the large majority of students are likely to enroll on a distance education program, as this enables them to manage their time very efficiently, and also handle with family and work responsibilities as well.

Financial problems and being in a prison are addressed in the individual difficulties theme. Students stated that living far away from the university can cause a high level of transportation, accommodation and educational expenses for them. As a solution to such potential financial issues, they prefer distance education. In addition to this, students who have been in prison stated that continuing their education through distance education is a huge disadvantage for them even if in their circumstances.

After analyzing the students' data, researchers found that students consider distance education as systematic, coordinated, repeatable, offering good interaction with teachers, enabling participation from home, creating the chance for individual work, containing visual-audio presentation techniques, and offering virtual classroom activities. All of these specifications are considered in the features of the learning environment theme. Physical distance, having a second degree, institutional prestige, aging and disability themes also emerged from the qualitative data. Students stated their reasons as follows:

"I have a physical disability; as a result of this, transportation is a problem for me. So, I choose distance education" [P-522]. "I am a congenitally hearing disabled person; with distance education I can listen to my courses over and over" [P-840]. "The city I lived in doesn't have my program's formal version" [P-121]. "I am travelling a lot because of my job, so I have to be in different cities most of the time" [P-327]. "The appealing factor for me was the university's prestige. Having a diploma from such big university is very important for me" [P-878]. "I lost the chance to go to university years ago. I believe that learning should be from birth to death. Now I am at the age of 35, and continuing my education at this age makes me happy" [P-911].

3.2 Graduate Students

After analyzing the graduate students' data, 8 themes arose. Compared with the under graduate students' themes, it was found that there were 7 common themes, and only 1 of these was different from the others. These themes are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Themes for graduate students

Themes	f	%
Having a full time job	90	44,12
Effective time management	42	20,59
Accessibility and flexibility	26	12,75
Lifelong learning	24	11,76
Physical distance	13	6,37
Individual responsibility	7	3,43
Institutional prestige	1	0,49
Disability	1	0,49
Total	204	100

The lifelong learning theme consisted of students' wishes about increasing their academic knowledge, and providing professional development. Within the context of these aims, they stated that the reasons for their preferences as:

“Distance education provides me with continuing education, and I’m improving myself academically as well as in my work life” [P-13]. “I believe in lifelong learning, but I am dealing with a high tempo work life. I couldn’t attend a traditional program because of my workload, so I choose distance education. Distance education is a very useful system for busy people like me” [P-46]. “I choose distance education because it was the most appropriate method with which I can continue with minimum loss elsewhere. Besides, I believe that, after completing this program, I will be in a better position in my work life” [P-53].

When looking over the order of the themes, having a full time job was the most important, as was the case in the undergraduate program students' data. Effective time management, and accessibility and flexibility were the next themes in terms of importance. Also being married, having children, living outside of the city or country, and being a part of a leading university were the other reasons mentioned.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate the importance of distance education, which can provide the equality of opportunity independent of graduation level. Every person has the right to obtain a quality education, regardless of whether it is a graduate or undergraduate degree. Sometimes life obstacles can be a barrier in front of people's choices. In this study, the researchers aimed that identify the differences between students' reasons for their preferences for distance learning. It was found that, generally, these reasons were parallel between these two degrees, but also there were some differences regarding certain points.

The common themes for both of the groups were having a full time job, accessibility and flexibility, individual responsibility, effective time management, physical distance, institutional prestige, and disability. The differences were in terms of preferences at graduate degree level, individual difficulties, features of the learning environment, academic preference, obtaining a second degree and the aging process. For graduate students, the predominant difference was the desire for lifelong learning. Actually, these themes tend to represent the students' characteristics. Undergraduate degrees are fundamental for finding a job, so this is an obligation for most students. Because of this, people who have difficulties regarding their budget, health issues or special conditions prefer distance education to a greater extent. Similar difficulties aren't observed at graduate level. Graduate level is not an obligation for a job; it depends much more on intrinsic motivation.

This is why these seven themes weren't evident in the data analysis. According to the analysis, people who enroll on a graduate level program are seeking more professional development.

According to both qualitative and demographic data, those people who can't complete or even start their education due to family responsibilities are, generally, the female students. Consequently, with distance education female students are able to find their place in social and work life much more effectively than before. Social roles and/or cultural expectations can bring about certain disadvantages to females, but it is shown that distance education can play an important role in overcoming these issues.

Hence, although this research does not add any specific new findings to the field, it was important to revisit the underlying factors influencing learner preferences, since technology and pedagogy should be shaped according to these needs. Providing education services to all the people who need them, and also increasing the quality of education in an accessible way provides numerous benefits to people's lives. With the use of regular tracking systems, educational practitioners can better understand students' reasons for preferring distance learning, as well as their expectations. Thus, institutions can provide a more enhanced and comprehensive service.

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