

Evaluation of Distant Education Programs with Regards to Various Shareholder Opinions

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Abstract

The strong demand and rapid increase in the number of programs concerning distant education programs has put the quality problem of distant education services into the agenda. It is crucial to determine the strengths and weaknesses of distant education programs, the problems encountered by these programs and making the required improvements. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the quality of the education given in distant education and of the assessment-evaluation approaches based on the opinions of various shareholders in the field of distant education and observation of synchronous courses. The phenomenological design was used in this qualitative study. The criterion sampling method, one of the purposeful sampling methods, was used in determining the universities whose distant education system would be examined. The study sample consisted of 5 universities, among universities with at least 3 years distant education experience, which offered at least one of the associate degree, bachelor's degree or master's degree programs online and which had various learning management systems. With this respect, coordinators who work in the distant education systems of these universities, instructors who gave distant education lectures in these universities and a service provider who offered a learning management system to one of these universities (a total of 11 people) were included in the study. The snowball sampling method, one of the purposeful sampling methods, was used in determining the participants. The data were collected through semi-structures interviews and observations and evaluated through the "content analysis" technique. It has been stated that distant education programs should be arranged according to especially the course content, teaching materials, learning-teaching process, the support provided, technology that is being used and evaluation-assessment methods; and the weaknesses of the components were detected with regards to the unique features of distant education. The importance of evaluating distant education programs regularly and carrying out necessary improvements based on evaluation results was also put forward.

Keywords: distant education, program evaluation, shareholder opinion, observation

1. Introduction

Together with technology being actively used in every field of education, learning platforms such as distant learning, co-educational learning, blended learning, online learning and e-learning have been established. Distant education, which resulted from the rapid population increase and the educational demand, plays a key role in education. While there are many definitions in the literature on distant education, it is generally defined as an educational practice carried out between a teacher and student in a different time and place setting and which is based on student efficiency and self-learning principle (Karataş, 2005). In order to design and establish distant education, learning objectives should be set and content should be prepared accordingly, a mutual interaction between students and teachers should be enabled, assessment and evaluation should be carried out, educational media and devices should be created and provided for students (Reznicek, 2002). Distant education programs should be arranged based on observable learning outputs, should offer assistance to students in accessing these outputs and should include processes in evaluating whether or not the students have accessed these outputs (Sullivan & Rocco, 1996).

As systems, distant education institutions receive specific inputs from their environment so as to maintain their existence and successfully carry out the duties assigned to them. They process these inputs according to pre-determined methods and principles and give outputs. They require feedback to see whether or not the outputs are beneficial and to determine their weaknesses (Kaya, 2002). After adapting the system approach to the field of education, practices carried out to maintain the existence education, which has been considered as a "system", to gather information about the operations by observing the system's outputs and to make decisions are referred to as "evaluation" (Uşun, 2006). Program evaluation consists of information related to decision on accepting, changing or removing program-based educational resources and is the process making decisions on the effectiveness of the program (Demirel, 2005, p.183).

Program evaluation implementations of face-to-face and distance education are generally similar and involve comprehensive processes such as determining the objectives, designing, data collection and analysis.

Quality of learning, effects of the materials and services, determining the convenience of courses with learners and similar issues are evaluated in both programs. The primary differences among face-to-face education program evaluation and distant education program evaluation are due to the structure of distant education and related to factors such as openness to evaluation, things to be evaluated, success criteria and evaluator (Kaya, 2002). Cost can be added to these factors as well. Rumble (2001) lists the factors affecting cost as the number of students, the number of programs provided through distant education, duration of programs, use of materials with copyright, the technologies being used and material development.

The accreditation/quality assurance system is not taken into consideration when higher education institutions in Turkey establish distant education programs, distant education centers and Faculty of Open and Distant Education (Bakioğlu and Can, 2013). While there are no evaluation and accreditation processes for current distant education programs, new established distant education programs are evaluated by the Distant Education Committee under the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) (Koçdar, 2011). However, these evaluations are carried out based on performance indicators developed under 4 levels, namely *institutional policies*, *structural regulations*, *program and content development* and *course presentation process* (Özkul and Latchem, 2011). There are many studies emphasizing the problems that occur due to lack of structuring current distant education programs in Turkey based on specific standards and failing to evaluate the given education. Studies have underlined many problems such as lack of instructional design in the field of distant education, avoiding instructional methods appropriate for distant education, weaknesses of the assessment and evaluation system, lack of a general evaluation of the system of universities offering distant education, ambiguity of the distant education management system, failing to establish a quality and standard chain, insufficient educational quality, problems in accessing the university education, lack of research and development practices, weaknesses in fulfilling student preferences, failing to offer the required support to people who provide open and distant education services (İşman, 2008; Özkul and Aydın, 2011; Can, 2012). Evaluating the effectiveness of learning opportunities and the extent to which learning objectives are attained concerning online education programs of institutions is crucial for carrying out the improvements and developments necessary for the programs based on the evaluation results (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2011). Thus, universities offering distant education require an evaluation study concerning the quality of their education and of the assessment-evaluation approaches they adopt.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the quality of the education given in distant education and of the assessment-evaluation approaches based on the opinions of various shareholders in the field of distant education and observation of synchronous courses. With this respect, the answer for the following research question will be sought:

- How do various shareholders (coordinator- instructor- service provider) consider the teaching and evaluation-assessment dimensions of distant education programs?

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

The phenomenological design was used in this qualitative study. The phenomenological design focuses on facts which are recognized but are not perceived in detail and deeply. The phenomenological design offers a convenient basis for studies in cases where the researcher is not totally unfamiliar with the subject but does not fully know the meaning (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2006). According to Creswell (2013), a phenomenological study identifies the shared meaning of the experiences of a few people concerning a phenomenon or a concept and the main purpose is to degrade individual experiences on the phenomenon to a general explanation. Researchers gather data from people with experiences on the phenomenon and make an integrative description which defines the essence of the individuals' experiences. This description consists of "how" they experience "what" (Moustakas, 1994). The experimental phenomenological design was preferred in this study, participant experiences were emphasized and researcher comments were included less.

2.2 Study Sample

The criterion sampling method, one of the purposeful sampling methods, was used in determining the universities whose distant education system would be examined. The logic of the criterion sampling method is to examine and review every condition, which is a common strategy in quality assurance practices, that makes up for various pre-determined significance criteria (Patton, 2014). The study population consisted of universities offering distant education; the study sample consisted of 5 universities, among universities with at least 3 years distant education experience (who started giving distant education back in year 2012), which offered at least one of the associate degree, bachelor's degree or master's degree programs online and which had various learning management systems. With this respect, coordinators who work in the distant education centers of these universities, instructors who gave distant education lectures in these universities and a service provider who offered a learning management system to one of these universities (a total of 11 people with one coordinator, one

instructor and one service provider from each university) were included in the study. The snowball sampling method, one of the purposeful sampling methods, was used in determining the participants. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and observations, the data collection tools were interview questions and an observation form. The data were evaluated through the “content analysis” technique. The demographic information about the coordinators, instructors and field experts are given on Table 1.

2.3. Data Collection Instruments

In order to gather evaluations of various shareholders on distant education programs, an interview form, whose draft form consisted of 14 open-ended questions, was created after carrying out a literature review on the interview process. Interview questions were examined by 3 students doing their doctorate in Educational Programs and Teaching and a peer evaluation was conducted. The questions were discussed by 3 instructors, one in the Department Of Computer and Instructional Technologies Education, one in the Department of Distant Education (coordinator) and the other in the Departments of Educational Programs and Teaching. The questionnaire obtained its final form after the question items were arranged based on the expert opinions of the instructors. The number of questions was reduced to 12 after these evaluations. The revised form was sent to the instructors via e-mail and was confirmed by them once again.

In this study, the synchronous courses given through distant education by the universities in the sample were observed by the researcher through participant-observer method so as to understand how the instructional process is structured. The observation form was developed based on the observation form in Uygurer’s (2014) study; the form took its final structure based on three expert’s opinions. Observation findings were expressed in written form and recorded on the observation forms.

2.4. Data Collection Process

In the data collection process, appointments were made with people to be interviewed and the time and place of the interviews were determined. The semi-structured interviews were conducted on a total of 11 people, one service provider, five coordinators and five instructors, in 2014-2015 spring term and each interview took about 45-60 minutes. The coordinators and instructors who were interviewed were asked to answer the questions with regards to both their own universities and in general to the distant education programs in Turkey. Thus, grasping a private and also a general perspective was aimed. The interviews were voice recorded under the permission of the participants.

The qualitative data were supported by participant observations. Because the required permissions were obtained from 3 of the 5 universities in the sample concerning a simultaneous observation of the synchronous courses, observation findings on the distant education courses of these universities are presented. During the synchronous course hours, the researcher logged in the distant education system with the username and password and watched the synchronous courses defined for him. With regards to each course watched; notes were taken concerning the observed course and subject, number of students participating in the course, observation date and observation duration. Then, codes were determined related to the items in the observation forms concerning the behaviors expected during the distant education process based on the observation levels of each behavior.

2.5. Data Analysis

Interview findings are one of the data resources. The semi-structured interviews conducted on 11 participants concerning distant education programs were recorded and the researcher took brief notes during the interviews. The voice recordings were transcribed later on in written form and analyzed through the content analysis method. Six themes were set in the study. These themes were adaptation of the course content, adaptation of the learning-teaching process, technological infrastructure, adaptation of instructional materials, support and adaptation of assessment-evaluation. The themes, categories and codes were transcribed and delivered to two students doing their doctorate in the Department of Educational Programs and Teaching (concerning peer evaluation) and two instructor’s, one in the Distant Education unit and the other in the Department of Educational Programs and Teaching, for evaluation and regulations were made on the categories and codes based on peer and expert evaluations. The themes, categories and codes were placed under the related research question in tables and findings were explained through participant statements.

Observation findings were collected by the researcher via the participant-observer observation of the synchronous courses given through distant education by the universities in the sample. Findings presented in the observation form and which were written during course observations were analyzed through the content analysis method. Observation findings were initially arranged according to their meanings and given in the findings section after being placed under the main categories related to the research questions. Archival records of the synchronous courses were observed by two experts and observation findings took their final form after the researcher observations and expert opinions were compared.

2.6. Validity and Reliability

Method, resource and analyzer diversification was used in this study. Interviews were supported by observations and method diversification was achieved. The findings obtained from the interviews and observations were compared and interpreted; the opinions of the coordinators, instructors and service providers were compared and interpreted. This indicates that the qualitative data resources were diversified. The interview findings were sent to the participants after being transcribed for confirmation, in addition, voice recordings of the transcribed interview texts were examined and compared with the texts by another person and necessary changes were made. Thus, analysis diversification was enabled. Opinions of different groups (instructors, coordinator, service provider) were collected and various other universities were selected through the purposeful sampling method and participant diversification was achieved.

Depth-based data collection was emphasized by conducting semi-structured interviews with the participants so as to increase credibility. In order to achieve transferability, the sample was determined based on the purposeful sampling method and the characteristics of the participants and distant education systems were described in detail. In order to increase consistency, the data were presented directly, without any comments, the documentation of the interview findings was confirmed by an outsider who followed the text by listening to the voice recording. Interview finding texts were e-mailed to the participants for confirmation and necessary arrangements were made.

3. Findings

When the interview and observation findings are analyzed, it is evident the adaptation of the course content, adaptation of the learning-teaching process, technological infrastructure, adaptation of instructional materials, support and adaptation of assessment-evaluation themes were established.

3.1. Theme 1: Adaptation of the Course Content

One of the themes obtained from shareholder interviews was “Adaptation of the Course Content”. Under this theme, based on distant education, the necessity of the course content being re-designed (12) and assurance of the course content (8) was emphasized. Under the category related to the necessity to re-design course contents based on distant education, designing the content in accordance to distant education (4) and the necessity to change the program designs according to students was emphasized. A shareholder expressed that the course content should be arranged differently according to distant education as given below:

The content dimension is important. Serious problems don't occur when the instructors share the documents synchronically, in other words via face-to-face. The student can ask questions when he doesn't understand something but the student may also fail to understand something when a note related to distant education is uploaded or when the instructor is not on his computer at that moment. Thus, preparing a content is a different process, a different field in distant education. Instructors giving distant education don't always prepare these appropriately. Honestly, I think that the instructors should be trained on this issue. I think that preparing a content is a unique process. This process shouldn't just be assigned to instructors.. Instructors prepare contents as if they are giving one-to-one courses. I think that the students shouldn't get confused when they open the content afterwards. (May 2015, M, Coordinator, A:30)

A shareholder expressed his opinions about the need to change the program design according to the student profile as below:

Unfortunately, the content is prepared by ignoring the needs of the students (talking about distant education programs). I mean this is the structure, is there a school? Yes there is. Then it should be distant. Which students? I mean who takes the student into consideration? I'm being a bit harsh but this is how the structure is. But it should roughly be like this, we can group those who receive this education into two. First, those who can't attend formal education receive it, and second, those who study or work somewhere demand it. We should seriously sit and think of those who don't go anywhere to receive this education. Why? You give a diploma, so does the other party, then do you give the diploma more easily? You should give a diploma easily. A student who couldn't be placed in the formal sociology program is placed here, he enters this department with a low score and becomes a sociology graduate. We need to apply a strict education program on him too. On the hand, one who works in a sector, who wants to improve himself, a housewife might be interested, one might be interested in economy and business, he or she is welcome to come and study. I think that their programs should be a bit different. A bit more flexible. They won't get that diploma and go work in that profession. But we are not in the state to go and discuss these. I mean we don't design these programs based on the students. Whoever claims this is lying. There are significant differences among the audience, I roughly grouped them into two but we can group them into three or four, thus I don't know how sound it is to give them all the same education. (April 2015, M, Coordinator, A:47)

Other issues stated by the shareholders were about the quality of the course content and furnishing the students with necessary formation, the problem of course acquisitions and lack of content standards, the importance of teacher factors who present the course and contents, the need to update course contents and the fact that everyone repeats the contents by themselves. With regards to the assurance of course contents, shareholders stated that publishers refused preparing electronic books due to financial issues and emphasized the financial problems encountered in assuring course contents. Shareholder opinions on this issue are given below:

...The institution should have a policy, a digital content policy. Why? Because this is wealth, get 50 employees in a unit, it is impossible to prepare something with a million questions from the big books published by the publishers. As an expert instructor, I can say that there are no tendencies towards this. Thus, we need to ally with these forces.... It is a burden on students to ally with these forces (professional publishers who prepare digital contents), so there needs to be an institutional policy to manage such an event. The institution can either, like in foreign countries, demand a digital content fee from the student at the beginning of the year or can include its own wage policy; the foundation or state universities can establish an institutional policy by informing students 'these courses have these digital contents, digital contents are used, they cost this amount' and set a mechanism for poor students, search their financial conditions and these students can benefit from the library budget portioned from various units of the institution. Or another institutional policy can be like this, we express these because we always discuss them, these costs can be covered by the library, the library can buy these digital contents and offer them free of charge to the students. (March 2015, M, Coordinator, A:39)

Various opinions have been expressed about the parties who are responsible for preparing the course contents. While two shareholders stated that the field expert and educational technologist should prepare it, three shareholders emphasized private sector assistance. In order to increase the quality of course contents, it was suggested that teachers should earn from the contents. Opinions of one of the shareholders were:

It would be better if the expert in the subject and a person from the Department of Computer Education and Instructional Technologies (BÖTE) work together in preparing the course contents. Because those who are in fields other than the faculty of education are uninformed about objectives and acquisitions, it would be better if the content is initially prepared roughly together and then built and prepared according to the standards. Then everything would be standardized and quality would increase. (March 2015, M, Instructor, A:33)

When the "adaptation of the course content" theme is analyzed, it is evident that course contents should be re-designed according to distant education and support by field experts, educational technologists, the private sector and publishers are required in assuring the contents.

3.2. Theme 2: Adaptation of the Teaching-Learning Process

According to the interview findings, it was observed that the learning-teaching process was emphasized, lack of active student participation (8) and the importance attached on synchronous/asynchronous courses (7) were underlined. Other themes under this category were the use of various instructional methods, problems and suggestions related to instructional methods and instructor-student interaction.

The reasons why students fail to actively participate in courses were listed as the concern of encountering problems such as power cut, no compulsory attendance or no effect of attendance in completing the grade, lack of taking the attendance properly, the attendance having been taken after logging in-out of the system, the change in participation based on the course type and content (synchronous/applied course). A shareholder expressed how student participation is not promoted as below:

Some students *don't attend classes* because it's optional for students. There are students who don't attend in any of the courses for weeks, just like in the open university... Compulsory attendance was put in force this year. There is 40% compulsory attendance. But I don't think it changed anything. Those who want attend, those who don't want don't attend. We tell them (that you can't pass synchronous courses if you don't watch them) but still *nothing happens even if they don't watch them* (laughs). The last time I asked them again if the teachers let them pass, the students said that they did. But it's as if *we frighten them a bit*. When we tell them that might fail, but eventually they'll all pass. (April 2015, F, Instructor, A:29)

Among the suggestions for increasing student participation were the need to effectively use the conversation window, following attendance to synchronous courses through the system, communicating with students through the platforms they use (like social media), designing an interactive classroom setting (participant contribution to distant education through planned questions in a planned classroom setting), getting coordinator assistance in student-teacher relations in synchronous courses (like question-answer), the teachers conducting office hour practice and performing application in the classroom. A shareholder expressed her opinions on the use of conversation windows as below:

We constantly text each other anyway, I speak but they reply in written form. In fact, I haven't forgotten,

in one course I kept the time, they wrote for half an hour on the board, they *wrote for half an hour and I answered the questions for half an hour*. It is an option for actively communicating. If the teacher is an instructor who can use the technology well, then there are no problems. But (I know that) some instructors have difficulties on this issue. For example the instructor *focuses on teaching the subject or on the slides, they fail to clearly see what students type on the sub-window*. These constitute problems. Thus, instructors need to be in good terms with technology. *They need to be able to control 4-5 stimuli at the same time* (April 2015, F, Instructor, A:30).

It was stated that various methods and techniques were not used in distant education settings; it was emphasized that many methods such as game strategies and virtual laboratories can be applied. It was claimed that various instructional materials and course designs (hybrid/blended/online) should be widespread. Various shareholders gave their opinions on this issue as below:

Not only the course content but also *which of those would be best to use in presenting the course* is important. For example where is the student, who is the target audience, how can we include the target audience in this, with which presentation model.. For example we try to include variables the process such as should we apply the *hybrid* model, the *blended* model, should we use this model because it should be *totally distant* and what can we do to engage the student in the process while designing the content although it is totally distant... For example we apply the 2+2 model in the hybrid model, 2 course hours are given distant and 2 course hours are given face-to-face. But the complement each other. In other words, the 2 hour distant course complements 2 hours face-to-face and the 2 hours face-to-face complements the distant courses. This is a model. There is the 3 to 1 model too, 3 weeks are given online and 1 week is given face-to-face. There are different hybrid models. This is possible by *closely analyzing the target audience, act in accordance with the needs* and creating a setting in which the instructor can act freely and believe that he or she can complete the process without creating any reactions and barriers. (March 2015, M, Coordinator, A:39)

This year I tried the *game strategy* in distant education, I tried to awaken in children's' minds that some things are good and some things are bad through games and visual aids. I got quite good results from this. It gave the same results of the students over here although it is distant education (April 2015, F, Instructor, A:29).

Shareholders were observed to state various opinions on the difficulties of synchronous-asynchronous courses. It was emphasized that both courses should be benefitted from and that asynchronous courses should be given more frequently, one shareholder stated that only synchronous courses should be given. It was also stated that the duration of applied course hours should be increased and synchronous course hours should be decreased. Shareholders were observed to emphasize the directive of YÖK which obligates all courses to be synchronous and this was considered as a weakness. A shareholder's opinions on the difficulties of synchronous-asynchronous courses are given below:

As you know in distant education *attendance is not obligatory in synchronous courses*. It is difficult for students to follow the courses if they are all synchronous. I think that *motivation decreases* when you don't actually participate. But I think that students' motivations will increase when their courses are asynchronous because they can access them whenever they want and that they won't miss anything for a certain period of time. I believe they *benefit more from a content that they access to whenever they want*. I think that *both methods should be blended according to the structure of the course*. Because, some course were given synchronously before YÖK acted the directive but that was due to the structure of the course. That course is given that way. But for example we used to give theoretical courses asynchronously and assist them with synchronous courses every 2-3 weeks. But I think that composing them or making the decision with the instructor will increase quality rather than obligating a solution. (April 2015, F, Coordinator, A:29)

The problem that shareholders stated most frequently concerning instructional methods applied in distant education programs was promoting application (4). Lack of group work and the fact that the instructor gives the course by reading from the presentation were among the other problems stated by the participants. Shareholder opinions on these problems are given below:

For example there is hair designing given distantly, *because it is full distant education, students receive distant education without any practice*. The student is going to be a barber or a hairdresser, they get a coiffeur diploma without cutting hair once. I mean imagine it that way, someone gets a coiffeur diploma without cutting a hair of a person. (April 2015, F, Instructor, A:29)

Courses.. It changes depending on the instructor, because *some instructors read presentations, they just read from the presentations*. Some instructors... We are against this, I mean reading and stuff. We upload the presentation there. But I only follow the important parts of the subjects from there. (April 2015, F, Instructor, A:29)

Instructor-student interaction is one of the most frequently repeated categories (6) under this theme. Shareholders

stated that e-mails and messages of students are not responded immediately and that the students experienced problems due to this. Students were reported to communicate through the social media as a solution. Opinions of a shareholder on this issue is given below:

It was difficult to access the *instructors-coordinators* of some departments. We encountered problems with the students as well. The inner communication network is not very sound. As a result, we chose to communicate through Facebook. I give courses afterwards too, I give formation courses, during those courses... there were students, I'm narrating what the students said, "Teacher, *distant education would corrupt without Facebook*". The reason is because *there is no communication*. We can't access the teacher or other officials, we get informed through Facebook, for example Betül learns something and goes shares it there, everyone gets informed and they talk about it here. Students used to say this would no longer continue if it weren't for Facebook, these are their opinions... The reason why they chose Facebook is because peer communication is faster there. Otherwise they can't access their instructors. And in most departments, I can say about in 80%, the instructor gives the course content in w Word document at the beginning of the term, he gives the questions too, then he only comes for 50 minutes and leaves, *in many departments you won't be able to see the instructor again*. You never will. If you speak with other people they will say the same things. (March 2015, M, Instructor, A:33)

When observation findings are considered, it is evident that one, three and 20 students participated in the 3 different simultaneous distant education courses and that student participation in the two observed courses was not sufficient. The instructor of a participant who listened to the course simultaneously didn't use any resources other than the presentation during the course and didn't apply any new instructional methods. The students were not included in the process through asking questions or other techniques and no communication was made with the students during the course process. The fact that the instructor doesn't implement a new instructional method and doesn't include the students to the course can be considered as causing low-participation of students. At the beginning of the other course, which two participants listened simultaneously, the instructor explained the subject and expressed that various materials will be used during the course. However, the instructor then began reading the presentation and continued to read them until the end of the course. The course progressed very monotonously because the instructor read the written parts of the presentation with low pace; but read the tables and figures, which were more attention-grabbing and memorable, faster and without commenting on them. The instructor made no communication with the students during the course and asked no questions to them. That the instructor completed the course by reading from the presentation is an observation which is in accordance with the findings. The fact that instructors don't appropriately use the advantages of distant education and various other devices, that various instructional methods are not applied, that tables and figures are examined on the presentation without interpreting, that students remain as passive audience in the teaching process are among the reasons why participation is low and partly explain the bias and resilience displayed by various sections of the society.

At the beginning of the other course, which twenty participants listened simultaneously, the instructor stated that he allowed practice when he gave the course face-to-face but will not allow practice because the course was going to be given distantly. He stated that only 2 students attended the virtual class on the first week but he appreciated it when the number increased the following week. He told the students that they can ask questions when they like. He showed a photo on the screen which he took in Germany on the highway and showed how vehicles move in emergency cases. He informed the students about course objectives. Students wrote in the conversation section and communicated with the instructor. The instructor continued the lesson by explaining the subject with his own words through various images, videos, regulation texts and materials rather than just reading the text on the screen. The course progressed by giving examples on the subject. Students gave examples from their own life related to the subject by typing on the screen and thus participated in the course. A summative theme, images on the subject and regulation related to the subject were presented during the course. The course took almost 1 hour although the duration of the course was 45 minutes and the instructor informed the students about the subject that will be explained the following week. The instructor expressed that he will e-mail the course materials and that the students can access them through the web-site, the course finished after the instructor and students presented their appreciation. During this course, the effects of the instructor being aware of the advantages of distant education and benefitting from them appropriately, designing course materials according to distant education and conveying them to the students and communicating with the students in a desired way on the course setting were observed. The problems encountered in allowing practice in distant education courses were observed to continue.

3.3. Theme 3: Technological Infrastructure

One of the themes obtained from shareholder opinions was "Technological Infrastructure". Features that the learning management systems (LMS) should carry (17) and problems related to technological infrastructure (11) were the most frequently stated points under this theme. Mobile assistance (5) and being updated (4) were

among the features of LMS that were emphasized. It was underlined that LMS's should be integrated with the school automation, all procedures should be carried out through a single system, should allow teacher-student communication, should have a sound infrastructure, should have facility with cloud technologies, should be practical, should offer standard and language assistance and it was suggested that students should vocally participate in synchronous courses. Opinions of two participants on mobile assistance and being updated are given below:

We are transforming into a mobile world, I suggest that we should think about how we can adapt this to mobility, because the student doesn't stay in his house just because it is distant education. Or everyone cannot always carry a laptop with them. (M, Coordinator, Age:30)

In order enhance the service we provide, we need to constantly use different technologies and create a potential structure of one or two people who are reserved to examine new technologies and discoveries, offer us examples about them and who will convey these to the students. I believe that such a structure will develop us further so we should either orient these with experts who can convey these to the implementers or we should integrate these means to universities. Otherwise, even if you present current technologies in a sound way new devices will still be invented and benefitting from them becomes a crucial factor in making them more common. (March 2015, M, Coordinator, A:39)

Electricity/ internet/ system based issues (7) were the most frequently stated problems related to technological infrastructure. It was also stated that there were problems related to course recordings, sound-image synchronization and adaptation between materials and mobile devices. Two shareholder's opinions on this are given below:

We offer server assistance in our university. I mean in a distant server university with a software. When the electricity are cut in the building, when there is an electricity problem in the server or in the building or when there is a physical problem in the building then distant education is interrupted. We have this weakness. We have a generator as well but it doesn't always operate. This leads to problems.... If this service is obtained from agencies offering professional service, distant education can be promoted without interruption. (May 2015, M, Coordinator, A:30)

When we consider it from the students' perspective, the systems we use are not integrated yet, we have adopted a new system. It was integrated before because we used it for long years. Because it is new, it was a rapid change and we haven't completed the integration yet. Maybe this is a weakness. (April 2015, F, Coordinator, A:29)

When observation findings are considered, it was observed that in one of the distant education courses the expressions of the instructor were not simultaneous with the tables and images, the sound came either early or late and this was asserted to cause distraction in the student and a difficulty in understanding the subject.

3.4. Theme 4: Adaptation of Instructional Materials

One of the themes obtained from shareholder interviews was "Adaptation of Instructional Materials". The need to design the materials according to distant education (13 times) and the quality/improvement of the materials (10 times) was emphasized most under this theme. Shareholders stated that the materials should be re-designed in accordance with distant education and should be uploaded to the system beforehand; they underlined the importance of copyright agreement. Shareholder opinions on re-designing materials according to distant education are given below:

There is a misunderstanding, you're not to turn the traditional education to distant, you are to re-design it according to distant. (March 2015, M, Coordinator, A:39)

The instructor brings the same course notes from the formal course and explains the subjects the same way as in the formal course. (April 2015, M, Coordinator, A:47)

When you use the materials you use in face-to-face courses in online education or in distant education, you fail because those materials are not convenient for those settings. You need to create your own specific material. I give much effort on this, we design courses on Adobe Captivate, my friends thankfully help me. We use some course videos while giving the lessons on Adobe Connect. We use lots of online materials so that students can take a look at them afterwards, thus, it should definitely be considered in a different domain concerning content. (March 2015, M, Instructor, A:40)

Opinions of a shareholder concerning the necessity for copyright agreements are given below:

Instructors do have a high level of resource concern. I don't know if it is the same in other countries but they don't want to share their resources. Not even with their students. They don't want to share their resources because they prepared them, they want to keep them and if they share them with the students they will be uploaded on the internet and shared everywhere. But some, not all. This is a serious obstacle. No one wants to share their resources that they prepared from various other resources, and the problem of copyright arises, they want to use them themselves, maybe they'll publish them later. They maybe are right in their own sense but this creates a serious material problem. (April 2015, F,

Coordinator, A:29)

Features that course notes should carry were also underlined; it was stated that course notes should be as simple as the presentations and shouldn't be complex like the course book. It was suggested that there should be interactive and audio books. For material improvement and quality, it was stated that distant education settings should embody material and animations. It was suggested that the information given on discussion settings, resources, what will be done on which week, what will be completed and how much time will be spared, animation and videos, program sharing should be increased and the white board application should be used more effectively.

3.5. Theme 5: Support

When observation findings are considered, it is evident that the support given to instructors (26) and students (9) was emphasized. It was stated that instructors should be given technical support, content support, financial support, assistant support related to distant education, they should do pilot works before the lesson, they should receive devices such as computer-camera-microphone and motivational support. Shareholder opinions on technical support and content support are given below:

I think that distant education instructors should be trained. *Technically*. They encounter problems when they use the devices. The camera closes or something else happens, the instructor's hand touches somewhere and the screen goes blank or they can skip to another screen. They suddenly panic. I think they should be trained about the problems they can encounter in distant education beforehand. Instructors should be informed about specific things, even if they are not always technical. (May 2015, M, Coordinator, A:30)

In asynchronous courses we *try to check the course content twice with the instructor*, out technical and educational technologists help them in preparing exams, quizzes and other things, in designing the courses at the beginning of the term and in marketing them to the students, I call it marketing, the state of presenting the course to the students. (March 2015, M, Coordinator, A:39)

Support given to students consists of support in using the system, institutional support, content/course book supply and communication. A shareholder expressed his opinions on this issue:

We need to define the service not only as presenting the course but as recording, the course process after recording and then the final process. Evaluation and assessment actually includes all these but we need to offer them a different service than normal students. A student needs *a student's certificate, a military service certificate* and the distant education institution should offer additional service to its students than normal students, the reason is because those students are distant. I think improvements in this field are necessary. The school still considers them as students who come and go to the school every day. You can solve specific problems when the students come to the school every day but you can't in distant education. (May 2015, M, Service Provider, A:35)

According to observation findings, an instructor of a university offering distant education had difficulty in accessing the presentation, was able to find the presentation after opening a few presentations but only half of the presentation was on screen when opened. The students informed the instructor about the problem through the conversation screen, the problem was solved after informing the instructor that the conversation screen had to be made full screen. This finding indicates the importance of giving instructors technical support and training them in computer-literacy. Two universities were observed to assist their students by sending e-mails and messages about the date and time of the synchronous courses.

3.6. Theme 6: Adaptation of Assessment-Evaluation

Adaptation of assessment-evaluation, which is one of the most crucial elements of the educational process, was one of the topics that shareholders stated frequently. Most frequently given suggested under this theme were trust/cheating problem (9), calculating the percentages in assessment-evaluations (10), alternative assessment-evaluation methods (8) and problems encountered and resolution suggestions (13). Under the trust/cheating problem category, it was emphasized that students generally helped each other in the assessment-evaluation process and that a sound evaluation process did not achieve. Accessing the real students and asking the same questions in various exams were among the other problems stated. The trust/cheating problem was expressed by shareholder as below:

Students complete their midterm exams all together. Because it is done on the internet. Even we know it, but there are still things that we haven't heard of. (March 2015, M, Instructor, A:33)

We usually have homework and quizzes. Or we give bigger assignments like projects. We set their deadline towards the end of the term. Quizzes substitute for midterm exams. But *students also solve their quizzes together with their friends*. One person in the class answers the questions because everyone's exam is conducted distantly and the instructor doesn't see anything. I think that the quizzes and all are inefficient. Because we don't know who answered the questions. We need things that we can

be sure that the students completed themselves and participated willingly. They complete their quizzes with their friends as well. That's why I gave assignments rather than quizzes this year. I suggest that *applied assignments* should be given as homework. For example students can prepare a dish in the nourishment course. I suggest you take a photo together after they prepare it. Some will be delicious, some might taste well but this time we know that they prepared them on their own. (April 2015, F, Instructor, A:29)

The most frequently mentioned measure concerning the trust-cheating problem was preparing a question bank. Establishing exam units in every area and conducting the exams there, keeping the number of questions high, enabling the students to believe the need for assessment and evaluation and educating them through distant education culture were among the other suggestions given. Opinions of various shareholders on this issue are given below:

We *update* various methods each year by following the reactions of students or their perception, or the ways they chose to escape from distant education. For example, by preparing a *question bank*, we ask our questions from there and prevent the same questions to reach each student. Thus, we try to decrease or prevent question sharing among students. And we say (to our instructors) that if 10 questions are going to be asked, then prepare at least 20-25 questions so that 10 of these 20-25 questions will be sent to the students randomly and the same questions won't reach everyone. There will be more question diversity. I mean through the question bank. On the other hand, instructors who ask *open-ended commentary questions* can only prepare 1 exam. They want the student to directly express his expressions. But because this is not possible in tests, we try to keep *the number of questions high* in quizzes. (April 2015, F, Coordinator, A:29)

One of the things that should be done is *to bring the student to a local classroom and on a computer*, if you're going to make an exam, in a specific classroom under the inspection of an observer, but everyone has his own section, just like the *TOEFL or other national exams*, the exams will be conducted on computers, either open-ended or multiple choice. But they will eventually be conducted in your location. Or other institutions send ambassadors, there are seven regions in Turkey where students can come together, a center is selected from each region, if you have a mainstream audience like this, a school is selected from each city of the mainstream audience and everyone goes to that school, the exams are conducted with paper and pencil, they are collected and sent back to the centers. Or they can come to your computer lab, maybe in the future all the universities will have a computer lab, they will be in a central place, students will go there, take their exams under the inspection of an observer and send the exams to you. This can be done. Maybe agencies will be established for this. (March 2015, M, Coordinator, A:39)

The necessity to re-design the percentage score calculations of assessment-evaluations was also an opinion stated frequently. Suggestions such as giving weekly responsibilities like homework to students, increasing the effects of quiz and homework on the scores, considering attendance in calculating the scores, following the students' activities in the learning process and including them in evaluation, making midterm/final exam percentages more flexible, setting a different percentage for homework and projects in related courses were made under this category. Opinions of a shareholder on this are given below:

In distant education, we call the students only in the finals, this is the advantage of distant education, then the final exam naturally has an *80% effect* on the score. *YÖK can show more tolerance on this issue, this can be left to the instructor's initiative.* The instructor might set it as 40% or 50%. Or there can be *exceptions for courses that require project assignments.* These are for disburdening the institutions. Because when it comes to inspection, problems will occur due to not applying the rule set by YÖK. Thus, it is rather difficult to go beyond these. That's why these courses can be left to the initiative of the instructor or there can be exceptions. *Especially for applied courses.* (April 2015, F, Instructor, A:29)

One other serious problem was that exam statistics were not evaluated; opinions of a shareholder on this issue are given below:

...I think it (either midterm or final) should be conducted better. How can this be achieved? For example, *we have the statistics of all exams.* We have data on how many correct or incorrect answers one gave. But these are never taken under review, *no one asks us.* Up to now I haven't seen a step taken to look back and see how many people gave correct or incorrect answers, what answer was given to the questions, which questions were answered wrong, was the topic included in the material, I should evaluate the results and check the material, I should ask my instructor, was the question wrong, was it confusing, was the question preparing technique problematic; I didn't see any approaches to consider these. We currently have all these data. We still keep the exams we conducted with universities. We can see what answer a student gave to a question. More detailed analyses can be conducted. For example if we want to compare the success levels students who regularly log in the system and who don't, we have

the data for this. There are lots of data. But no one processes them. (May 2015, M, Service Provider, A:35)

It was underlined that alternative assessment-evaluation methods such as project, problem solving based evaluation, portfolio, peer evaluation and evaluation of student discussions related to distant education should be adopted more. Participants suggested that various question forms should be used in exams, knowledge and understanding levels should be evaluated, practice content homework rather than theory-based homework should be given, plagiarism instruments should be used in evaluation and a professional assessment-evaluation unit should be established.

5. Conclusion

In today's world, where the majority of processes are carried on the internet, distant education is preferred worldwide due the advantages it offers in finance, time, space, equality of opportunity, supporting individual education and offering the opportunity to improve oneself to people of all ages. Giering (2012) stated that there has been a rapid increase in online grading programs, that many universities have prioritized developing online programs and focused on student enrollment in these programs; and emphasized that this indicates the success in the field of online education. However, the strong demand and rapid increase in the number of programs concerning distant education programs has put the quality problem of distant education services into the agenda. Programs should be evaluated in order to determine and improve the weaknesses and strengths of a program and to determine the problems encountered in a program, educational needs, resources required in education and the desired educational results (Sanders and Nafziger, 1976). Uşun (2006) stated the importance of evaluation by emphasizing that it is a factor which reveals undesired or insufficient products and their resources. In this study semi-structured interviews were conducted to evaluate distant education programs' assessment-evaluation dimensions and distant education courses were observed through the participant-observation method. The weaknesses of distant education programs were revealed through interview and observation findings.

When study findings are considered, it was recognized that course contents should be re-designed according to distant education and that there is a need for person and institution assistance from various areas of expertise in assuring course contents. Schrum (1999) criticized implementations which advocated that they promote distant education by transferring face-to-face education materials on the virtual setting. According to Çağiltay (2001), distant education has a unique structure and is very different from the education given in a classroom setting; thus, the issue should be discussed by taking various perspectives into consideration.

It was observed that various problems such as not allowing for practice and group work in courses, reading the presentations in some courses were encountered. It was emphasized that various instructional methods should be adopted in courses and both synchronous and asynchronous courses should be benefitted from. It was also suggested that hybrid course designs should be used in various courses rather than giving all the courses online. Similarly, Simonson (2007) stated that it is emphasized in the report published by USA Ministry of Education (USDE, 2006) on distant education that it will be advantageous when distant education programs are supported by normal educational programs.

When study findings are considered, it was observed that active student participation in the lessons are not sufficient and technical problems such as electricity cut, no obligatory attendance and poor attendance taking were stated as the reasons for low student participation. However, there are also studies which advocate high level of active learner participation and which state that the online learning settings where learners undertake active roles should be developed (Schrum, 1999; Aydın, 2008). Among the suggestions for increasing *active student participation* were the need to effectively use the conversation window, following attendance to synchronous courses through the system, the teachers conducting *office hour* practice, allowing practice in the classroom, getting coordinator assistance in student-teacher relations in synchronous courses, communicating with students through the platforms they use and designing an interactive classroom setting. According to the researcher's observations, participation in courses where the instructor includes the students in the process, who asks them questions and who uses the conversation window actively is more. Similarly, Baker (2003) states that instructors should apply the virtual office implementation through conversation rooms. According to Palloff and Pratt (1999), interaction between students is not prioritized in online education settings, there are no discussion opportunities that students can actively participate because closed-ended questions are asked, instant feedback is not given and the learning process is teacher-based rather than student-based. These factors play a key role in failing to enable active student participation in courses.

Failing to promote a sound interaction is one of the major obstacles in distant education. As Aydın (2008) states, interaction is at the basis of learning-teaching processes. However, the findings of this study indicate that there is a lack of teacher-student communication and a problem in accessing instructors. Wetzel (2009) underlined that distant education students can have communication problems with their friends, instructors and the institution and stated that communication with the instructor is crucial in classroom achievement.

Features of the learning management systems applied in distant education programs are also crucial. Balaban (2012) states that learning management system and content management system software are not selected appropriately in the distant education system and that there is a technological infrastructure deficiency. This study stated the importance of learning management systems; and emphasized the importance of giving mobile support, being updated, integrating with the school automation, infrastructure, being practical, standard assistance and language support. It is considered that the facilities offered by the learning management system will increase the effectiveness of learning.

The necessity to re-design the materials in accordance with distant education to upload them to the system beforehand; and the importance of copyright agreement were emphasized in this study. Galusha (1997) stated that the course material design should be convenient for education and underlined the importance of designing course materials so that students with less or no experience with distant education can also benefit from. Fallow (2007) states that course materials should be designed by taking the needs of students who receive distant education into consideration. Similar with the findings of this study on copyright agreements, Pardeu (2001) states that faculty and university administrators should compromise on the copyrights of distant education course materials and should follow a common procedure. Collecting students' benchmarks on using learning resources and resorting to the course for quality and research studies are crucial for making necessary improvements in the materials.

The support given to instructors in distant education is more crucial than in face-to-face education because educational contents, materials and settings should be created with a different understanding and devotion in distant education settings. Saba (2001) stated that instructors who give or want to give online education should be financially supported; and underlined that they should be provided with more free time, higher wage and more opportunities. This study also states that instructors should be provided with technical support, content support, assistant support and motivational support and suggests that they should be financially encouraged and purchase themselves computer equipment. Support given to students consists of support in using the system, institutional support, content/course book supply and communication. Similarly, Can (2012) underlined that it is crucial to inform students while they enroll to a distant education program and course and added that they should even be trained if necessary.

One of the most serious problems related to assessment-evaluation processes was the trust/cheating problem. Instructors and coordinators specified that they couldn't prevent the students to get help from each other and the internet during the exams carried out on digital platforms and complained that they couldn't conduct an effective student evaluation. Tan (2002) defined cheating as using unpermitted resources or getting help from someone during the exam; and emphasized that the biggest problem encountered in distant education evaluation studies was student achievement through cheating. Ravasco (2012) also stated that technology facilitates cheating. When study findings are considered, it is evident that asking questions of various types, using a plagiarism instrument in evaluation, preparing a question bank and establishing exam centers in very region for exams were suggestions made for overcoming the cheating problem in assessment-evaluation practices. Olt (2002) states that evaluation questions should be selected from an extensive question pool and that the questions that will be asked to each student should be selected randomly. Kaya and Tan (2014) indicate that instructors should be careful in online evaluations of distant education programs and that it will be beneficial to conduct exams on students at different times or to re-conduct them.

It was underlined that percentage score calculations of assessment-evaluation practices and their effects on the overall score should be arranged and the effects of projects, assignments, attendance and student activities on the overall score should be increased. With regards to student evaluations, Çağıltay (2001) criticized the extent of the effects of exams carried out under observation on the passing grades and stated that this has prevented alternative evaluation methods for distant education settings and led to making evaluations through exam systems which are adopted in the classical classroom settings. Focusing more on process evaluations in distant education settings will enable the evaluation to be conducted more conveniently.

While there are common features among distant education practices and formal education, there are also differences. Distant education programs should be carried out differently from face-to-face education with regards to course content, instructional materials, learning-teaching process, support provided, the technology that is used and assessment-evaluation methods and these factors should be re-designed by considering the unique features of distant education. Evaluating distant education programs regularly and carrying out necessary improvements based on evaluation results will increase the quality of the education given.

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Table 1. Demographic Information of the Shareholders

Uni.	Duty	Branch	Working Period	Working Period in Distant Education	Title	Age	Gender
U1	Coordinator	Software Engineer	8 years	4 years	Specialist	30	M
	Instructor	Obstetrician and Gynecologist-Occupational Health and Safety Specialist	44 years	2 years	Asst. Prof.	69	F
U2	Coordinator	Instructional Technologies	5 years	5 years	Instructor	29	F
	Instructor	Food Engineering/Nutrition	4 years	2 years	Instructor	29	F
U3 (State Uni.)	Coordinator	Electrical Engineer	25 years	8 years	Assoc. Prof.	47	M
	Instructor	Instructional Technologies	8 years	4 years	Asst. Prof.	33	M
U4	Coordinator	Business/Management Information Systems	9 years	9 years	Specialist	34	F
	Instructor	Marketing	10 years	3 years	Asst. Prof.	31	F
U5	Coordinator	Instructional Technologies	15 years	15 years	Assoc. Prof.	39	M
	Instructor	Economy	8 years	3 years	Asst. Prof.	40	M
Private Sector	Service Provider	Informatics	14 years	8 years	General Manager	35	M