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Learners' opinions toward structuring a graduate program in distance education

E.Pınar Uça Güneş*

Anadolu University, Eskisehir, 26470, Turkey

Abstract

Increase in education needs, technologic developments and subsequently the opportunities for applying these technologies in education accelerated the prevalence of distance education. Besides, the need for qualified staff in distance education field also increases. Training learners to be experts, which have the necessary knowledge and the skills for distance education field, will be possible through founding the graduate programs in the field. In structuring such a program, individuals which take place in graduate programs in distance education field as learners are one of the groups that can be consulted.
Problem Statement: How are the learners' opinions toward structuring a graduate program in distance education?
The Purpose of the Study: The main purpose of this study is to evaluate the learners' opinions toward structuring a graduate program in distance education.
Method: This is a qualitative study; interviews were conducted with learners which have been attending a graduate program in distance education field. The scope, management, characteristics and implementation dimensions in the case of structuring such a program in the future were considered in the interviews. Consequently, learners' opinions about the courses and the contents that should be given, changing decisions related to courses, coordination among the stakeholders, future plans, properties and the quality of education, applications that can be used were analyzed.
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Keywords: Distance education; graduate program.

1. Introduction

Increase in education needs, technologic developments and subsequently the opportunities for applying these technologies in education accelerated the prevalence of distance education. In particular, Turkey has a young population and education needs can be met with the help of distance education. As a matter of fact, today, nearly half of the students in higher education in Turkey are distance learners. Day by day more universities in Turkey present programs using distance education method. In parallel with these developments, the need for qualified staff in distance education field also increases. Training learners to be experts, which have the necessary knowledge and the skills for distance education field, will be possible through opening graduate programs in the field. Then, there

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* E.Pınar Uça Güneş. Tel.: +0-222-335-0580/ 2572.
E-mail address: epuca@anadolu.edu.tr.

occurs another question: how to structure this kind of programs. Program stakeholders' opinions will be valuable in structuring such a program, and in this phase, individuals which take place in graduate programs in distance education field as learners are one of the groups that can be consulted.

2. Purpose

The main purpose of this paper is to discuss how to establish the scope, management, characteristics and implementation of the program based on the learners' perspectives.

3. Definitions

Characteristics: The properties and quality of the education.
Implementation: The approaches, learner-instructor interaction, learning environments, assessment methods.
  Management: Activities such as adding or removing courses, changing or updating the content of the courses, organizing, providing coordination, planning for future.
  Opinions: The participants' perspectives, expectations and experiences toward structuring a graduate program in distance education.
Scope: The courses and the contents of courses.

4. Importance

The expectations in accordance with the findings of this study are
- to guide in the case of enterprises to establish new graduate programs in distance education field;
- to make the management, scope, characteristics and implementation arrangements when structuring programs;
- to provide high quality education for learners;
- to satisfy the learners' expectations;
- to maintain the learners' high level motivations;
- to find out the problems related to structuring programs and provide sound solutions for the people to solve these problems; and
- to guide the current and future experts in graduate programs in distance education.

5. Method

5.1. Research Design

This is a qualitative case study. The individual interview technique was used to obtain the participants' perspectives, expectations and experiences in an optimum way toward structuring a graduate program in distance education.

5.2. Research Questions

The research questions given below are scrutinized in this study:
To structure a graduate program in distance education,
1. how should the courses and the contents of courses be designed?
2. how should the changing decisions related to courses be made?
3. how should the coordination be among the stakeholders?
4. what should be the future plans?
5. how should the properties and quality of the education be?
6. should there be applications which are different from traditional face-to-face education? What kind of?

The first question is related to the scope dimension; second, third and fourth ones are related to the management dimension, the fifth one is related to characteristics dimension and the last one is related to implementation dimension of a program.

5.3. Participants

The purposeful sampling technique was used to find the participants. There were 10 volunteer participants (6 women and 4 men) in this study. The participants were the graduate students at the distance education in Turkey.

5.4. Data collection

The data were collected by the semi-structured and open-ended individual interviews. Each participant was interviewed once. The researcher interviewed with 8 of the participants face-to-face whereas she interviewed with 2 of them by utilizing MSN messenger software due to the time and place restrictions. The face-to-face interviews were audio-recorded whereas the MSN conversations were logged by the computer with the permission of the participants.

5.5. Data analysis

First, each interview was transcribed. Content analysis method was used in order to examine the data in depth, to reveal concepts and relations, to explain and interpret them after arrangement within the framework of themes (Yıldırım, & Şimşek, 2006). The following analysis plan was developed.

1. Coding
1.1. Separation of the data into meaningful segments
1.2. Derivation of the codes
1.3. Reviewing the data and the codes together
1.4. Making necessary modifications in codes
2. Thematic coding
2.1. Determining the relations between the codes
2.2. Identifying the themes based on the determined relations and the research questions of the study
2.3. Reviewing the data, codes and themes together
2.4. Taking a field expert's review of the codes and themes
2.5. Making necessary modifications and arrangements in the themes and codes.
3. Arranging data
3.1. Arranging the data according to the themes and codes.

6. Findings and Discussion

Courses and Contents
The participants' opinions about how the courses and the contents should be can be evaluated from three angles: determining factors, subjects, and implementation.
Determining Factors
Developments, requirements and opinions are the determining factors. The learners expressed developments in information and communication technology, new learning environments, new understandings of learning, state-of-the-art publications should be considered when structuring courses and contents.
Subjects
Courses in research methods and design of online learning were stated as imperative. Education, communication and technology dimensions of distance education and the necessity for courses and contents including these dimensions were emphasized. In addition to courses from education and communication fields, there should be courses from other fields including theories (e.g. organization theories). Courses related to introducing distance education field, field studies and applications in Turkey, field terminology should take place. Most of the learners

agreed that beside the theoretical courses, there should be practical courses, or even maybe one single project-based practice course that learners use technology and develop learning environments. A learner suggested there can be courses correspond to branching. Also, there was a suggestion for a quality-based course.

Implementation

One of the learners was more concerned with the arrangement of the courses and the structure of the contents. He told that the order of the courses is important and the contents should be concretized because learners would mostly have different backgrounds.

Changing Decisions Related to Courses

It can be said that there were five main categories about changing decisions: opinions, requirements, developments, interactions and evaluation results.

Opinions

The data analysis showed that opinions should be considered to make changing decisions related to courses. Learners, instructors, society, delivery institution, other colleges and private sector are the groups to contact.

Requirements

Requirements of management, learners, private sector and other colleges should shape the changing decisions.

Developments

Developments in technology, research methods, and employment trends should be in consideration.

Interactions

The learners stressed the necessary interaction when making decisions related to courses. Face-to-face meetings, learner-management collaboration, instructor-management collaboration and a committee consisting of management and instructors related to this field- giving or not giving courses- were alternatives.

Evaluation Results

Problems met and actual end-of-period learning outcomes should be evaluated.

Coordination among Stakeholders

Stakeholders can refer to learners, instructors, field experts, institutional management and private sector. According to the data analysis, coordination was discussed in two points of view. Learners mentioned sort of coordination and subjects to coordinate on.

Sort of Coordination

Sort of coordination changed according to learners. Although some of them mentioned only particular coordination among learner-management or instructor-instructor or learner-instructor about particular subjects, most of them expressed an overall coordination among instructors, learners, management and even maybe experts from private sectors periodically. While most of the learners emphasized the meetings done face-to-face, one of them stated an online platform can be used.

Subjects to Coordinate on

Subjects to coordinate on can be listed as following: any change about the program; new technologies, new applications, other colleges' applications; plans for next learning periods; determining the course contents; discussing the problems, good and bad experiences in order to redevelop the program; making plans considering learner needs; how distance education could be applied; solving the problems met in courses; preparing exams; making projects with private sector; sharing knowledge among learners upon their areas of expertise; sharing experiences; application suggestions; exchange of ideas among learners; establishing a committee for meeting the distance education expert demand of all sectors from one organization.

Future Plans

Future plans in graduate programs in distance education field changed specifically in a wide range, still, they can be collected in four main themes: course design, support services, improvement of distance education field, needs of individuals and society.

Course Design

Four of the learners saw the existence of at least one distance course as a necessity. One of them expressed all courses should be online and in open course format, so as to facilitate learning process for learners having geographical handicaps. Other learners had different reasons for demanding online courses. One of them thought it was necessary in order to catch contemporary, another one mentioned it was necessary because the program aims to train distance education experts, and being a distance education expert implies having experience as learners in online environments. One of the learners told she had a dream of a graduate program in distance education field that

contains purely online and taught-in-English courses, therefore course exchanges and collaborations with other colleges could be possible in an international level.

The learners stated that interactive learning environments should be selected for delivering courses and Web 2.0 technologies (blogs, wikis, forums, social networking sites, etc.) can be utilized to accomplish this. There was also a suggestion for Web 2.0 courses and Web 2.0 projects done by the participation of learners and instructors, in future plans. In addition, virtual 3-D environments, games and applications of artificial intelligence were seen as issues to be surely considered.

Support Services

There should be support services to help learners using different learning environments and instructors play an important role in this situation.

Improvement of Distance Education Field

Some of the future plans that learners mentioned were related to improvement of the field. According to learners; considering there would be an increase in the demand for distance education experts in the future, the number of learners and instructors should be raised. Studies for applying distance education in different fields like engineering and medical science should be done. Structuring the program according to the developments in information and communication technologies should be the vision of the program. Gaining instant feedback about the problems that learners meet in learning process and evaluating them would contribute to future plans. Learners' needs, learners' profiles, learners' opinions could shape the future plans. Branching should be provided. There should be a master program without thesis for who wants to study projects predominantly.

Needs of Individuals and Society

One of the learners expressed new generations should be examined in terms of their behavior styles, learning styles, interests, motivation styles, and trends and then decide what to do, because they would be the learners of tomorrow. Needs of individuals and society should be considered in future plans.

Properties and Quality of Education

Learners' opinions about the properties and quality of the education can be classified into six categories: accreditation, considering learning experiences, preparatory for work, technology-supported, learning design, support-services.

Accreditation

Learners indicate that quality of the courses and contents should be in universal level, and so collaboration with other universities could be possible. Variety of learners should be provided. Some of them had a point of view as the learner satisfaction is the indicator of quality and therefore learners' evaluations are important. One of them stated that if the learners' needs are met and the learners are satisfied with the efficiency and the effectiveness of the program, it can be said that the program is of good quality. Another one said if learners are comfortable with the program -if they communicate with the instructors whenever they want, if they can study the subjects they want, if they are supported and not frustrated in learning process- then there is quality.

Considering Learning Experiences

Learners in graduate programs in distance education field are various with different backgrounds. One of the learners touched this point and talked about the necessity of theoretical courses to balance the learners' background.

Preparatory for Work

Learners will design learning environments, distance education systems in their working lives, therefore the education should provide practicing. Institution should be equipped well in terms of software and hardware for this. Besides being able to use evolving technologies, learners should be trained to develop critical thinking skills, competence with the interaction of education, communication and technology in distance education systems.

Technology-supported

Education should be technology-supported in order to increase the quality level.

Learning Design

Learners' profiles and goals about working in private sector or making an academic career can be considered in design phase and when determining learners' requirements. Fundamentals of learning and communication sciences should take place. Again, learners mentioned that program should be in blended or distance format. Contents and implementation should make learners be active, question and research.

Support-services

Academic, technical and learner support-services should be provided.

Applications in Implementation of the Program

According to the data analysis, learners agreed there should be different applications from traditional face-to-face education. The data implied network-based learning applications.

Network-based Learning

Learners emphasized interaction and communication dimension and suggested network-based learning applications. There were suggestions for online or blended, interactive, flexible, learner-centered, constructivist, interdisciplinary, project-based, supporting individual learning, productive, practical, multimedia-supported environments. Web 2.0 technologies, e-learning and mobile learning, IPTV, IP phone, podcasting and screen casting applications, virtual reality, games, simulations… etc. were mentioned to be evaluated to use.

7. Conclusion and Suggestions

To meet the individuals' education needs using distance education becomes prevalent. Besides higher education, private sector organizations prefer in-service training with distance education method. Online certificate programs provide flexible learning. Along with the developments in technology, educational applications develop and distance education improves. Nevertheless, the need for distance education experts and training efforts to train them become important. Graduate programs can be developed to meet this demand. Then the problem is how to structure the program. Experienced learners' opinions can be useful and the findings of this study leads to following conclusions.

The courses and the contents should be shaped according to technological and theoretical developments. Distance education is a broad, interdisciplinary field, and learners have different backgrounds and different goals for future so structure of the courses and contents should get on with these.

It is right to make changing decisions related to courses according to the developments, requirements and evaluation results, in a collaborative way with stakeholders.

Coordination is an important point affecting other components in structuring. Periodic meetings concerning anything about the program will be useful as well as meetings for specific purposes. Participants can be determined according to order of the day. Face-to-face or online meetings can be designed due to conditions.

Again, future plans should reflect the new technologies in designing learning environments. Learners' expectations show that they want to have the similar challenges and opportunities with distance learners, so distance courses using various technologies and environments can be designed and delivered in open course format. Support-services should be developed. Future generations and needs should be taken into consideration.

Quality is another important point. Accreditation studies, redeveloping the program according to experiences, training learners for work; using new technologies, developing support-services will provide a high quality.

Today, people learn in a more interactive, constructivist, collaborative way just as network-based learning applications were emphasized by learners. This kind of programs should follow the technology and provide learners the most up-to-date learning environments and applications.

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