



## Opinions of graduate students about distance education in the period of Covid-19 pandemic

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### Abstract

Graduate Schools provide formal education. Their functions for providing students with scientific research methods, technics and procedures are of great importance for the scientific developments and discoveries globally. However, because of the COVID-19 virus emerged from the Republic of China in 2019, schools and universities across the world had to switch their educational practices to distance education. Likewise, Graduate Schools switched to distance education in practice. The advancement of technology gives the opportunity to continue education by distance education method during the pandemic period. In the research, it was aimed to analyze the results in detail by obtaining the opinions of the students about the implementations of distance education (their efficiency, application). The study adopted general survey model based on qualitative data. The participants were composed of 15 graduate students, and they were selected via convenience sampling model. The data were collected using a semi-structured Google interview form, and analyzed via coding model of the qualitative data analysis. The results showed that students faced internet access problems, they had difficulties understanding the system offered by their university. Some of the courses were offered synchronously but many others asynchronously. In the study it was recommended that necessary infrastructure should be set up and update should constantly be conducted for any possible similar pandemics in the future.

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## 1. Introduction

With the development of technology and the various opportunities and conveniences it offers, the use of distance education is becoming widespread. The most valid opportunity offered by distance education is that it provides people the opportunity to continue their education in different places. The disappearance of time and space constraints makes it inevitable to evaluate it as an important alternative by educational institutions (Karakuş, 2020).

The emergence of the Corona virus, which has influenced the world, has brought many precautions, the main of which is the protection of social distance and isolation. The education sector was more affected by many sectors in this process. At this point, the most valid method for continuing education with the closure of educational institutions has been distance education (Telli, 2020). In emergency situations where public health is threatened, individuals may feel insecurity, confusion, emotional isolation and labeling. On the other hand, economic losses, business and school closures, insufficient medical resources, and health, trust, and welfare may affect societies. Inadequate distribution of needs or not being adequately informed also brings problems for both society and the individual during this period. With most of the time spent at home, creating routines and maintaining the old system as much as possible will make the pandemic period more comfortable (Pfefferbaum, 2020).

Graduate education institutions usually offer formal education. This is an important factor in conducting accurate scientific research. Due to coronavirus disease (Covid 19) in the Republic of China in 2019, many schools and universities around the world had to switch to distance learning. The long term pandemic period will limit students' learning opportunities due to various limitations. Moreover, the time spent learning will be influenced in this period (Flaxman, 2020). Postgraduate educational institutions have also actively switched to distance learning. Technological progress offers the possibility to continue the distance learning method during the pandemic. The aim of the research is to analyze the results in detail, taking into account students' views on the use of distance learning (efficiency, practice).

The main research question is: ***What are the views of graduate students about distance education during the pandemic period?***

The sub research questions are:

1. What are the views of graduate science and education students?
2. What are the expectations of students about two different universities giving asynchronous and synchronous education?

### 1.1. Distance Education

Education is one of the main factors of a social development. Countries have invested in education every period and these investments are parallel to the increasing population, which brings issues with it. One of the important issue is to address the need for education within the scope of lifelong education. Communities must keep up with all these developments quickly. While undeveloped countries are seeking financially appropriate methods in this case, developed countries focus on increasing the education level of the country by focusing more on lifelong learning (İşman, 2011).

Distance education refers to education with physical distance between the person who teaches and the person who learns. When we look at the history, it is seen that this education was even implemented in the 19th century. Further more distance education was wildly used in 1920s. Today, the main difference in distance education is the use of a large technology framework, in this framework, intensive learning and teaching plan is applied.

While distance education removes the boundaries, it emphasizes development of technology in education. Eliminating all kinds of boundaries makes it an important part of lifelong learning (Adıyaman, 2002).

#### 1.1.1. Definition of Distance Education:

Distance education is a method that is usually managed from an education center, intended for people to self-educate, in which content is prepared for learners and supported by various tools and environments. Distance education, which does not require being in a physical learning environment, can also be carried out in the form of watching the recorded lessons as well as the students and teachers can attend the lesson at the same time (Bakioğlu & Can, 2012).

#### 1.1.2. Positive Aspects of Distance Education:

If we summarize the positive aspects of distance education, it can be listed as follows:

- It is less costly in financial terms.
- It will provide gain in terms of time
- It is advantageous in the use of space
- The number of students and teachers to be reached can be much higher than normal
- Provides the opportunity to attend or continue education for the disabled or those who cannot leave their homes for various reasons
- Increases efficiency in education
- Appealing to the eyesight and hearing senses and providing many design possibilities for this has positive effects on learning.
- Provides an environment where sharing is easier and more

- There is no restriction in terms of time and place during the training, it continues without interruption

- The progress of the student can be followed during the learning

Mutual or one-way communication continues uninterruptedly during the training (Bakioğlu and Can, 2012)

### 1.1.3. Limitations of Distance Education:

According to the average among OECD countries, every 15 year old student receives 0.8 computers for educational purposes. The computer-student ratio is above 1.25 in Austria, Iceland, New Zealand, UK and USA. However, in our country there is one or less computers per four students (0.25) (OECD, 2018). This inability of every student to reach the computer is one of the most technologically important limitations of distance education.

The use of information technologies plays a key role in distance education (Vladescu, 2016). Therefore, another limitation is that teachers are not ready to use information technologies. 50+ teacher ratio in Turkey is 6.3%. This is an indication that it is below the OECD average and has a young teacher staff. However, although teachers are young, only 71% of them feel ready to use information technologies. It is generally considered that the training received on this issue is incomplete (OECD, 2019).

The lack of eye contact between the teacher and the learner during the distance education constitutes the most important social limitation of distance education. Lack of opportunities to solve problems occurring during learning at the moment may also cause problems in distance education. Students and teachers cannot expect that someone will assist in resolving the problem encountered in such situations.

Lack of independent study skills of student will make distance education difficult. These people may have difficulty attending classes voluntarily in accordance with a plan. The number of students may be higher in distance education, in this case it may results communication-related problems during the course. Another limitation of distance education is that infrastructure is costly (Dinçer, 2016).

### Distance Education Asynchronously and Synchronously

The distance education is divided into two as synchronous and asynchronous, it is seen that synchronous education is more advantageous in terms of getting immediate feedback from students and this affects the academic success of students positively. The use of body language, intonation, and facial expressions are the main reasons for the high impact of synchronous education because student motivation is kept high. Besides its positive effects, synchronous education also has its negative aspects. Especially negative situations related to internet connection are the leading ones. Quality disorders in audio and video images are among the most common complaints of people using this type of

platform. Communication in writing instead of audio and video is a way of synchronous education, but it is understood that it is not very successful. Especially the use of keyboards prevented students from attending the lessons effectively.

On the other hand the advantages of realizing e-learning asynchronously is that there are fewer difficulties with internet use. Especially, the fact that the video dimensions are reduced prevents the internet to slow down (Şenkal, 2012).

## 2. Pandemic:

Pandemics caused by influenza have been seen since the 16th century. In the 20th century, there were three influenza pandemics, mainly mortality caused by the Spanish flu. The effect of pandemic on society varies depending on the infectiousness of the virus. Immune status of individuals in society also varies according to contact and interpersonal characteristics. It comes with economic losses and difficulties. The pandemic affecting the ordinary life of society is a very critical process for states. This causes absenteeism in educational institutions and many business areas (T. C. Ministry of Health, 2019).

### 1.2. . Pandemic and Emotional Well-being:

The Covid-19 outbreak poses a serious health hazard to the world. In this case, governments implement policies involving quarantine and social distance. Along with these new policies, problems can also arise that affect mental health. One of the most important factors to influence daily emotional fitness is the biological clock. Routines and predictable daily programs keep the body clock running regularly so the immune system can be kept strong. Disruption of routines during pandemic can cause people to have mental health problems. (ISBD, 2020).

## **2. Method**

### 2.1. Research Model

In this study, the thoughts and opinions of the students attending postgraduate courses through distance education during the pandemic period received with general survey model in this study because of the Covid-19, which is frequently used in social sciences (Karakaya, 2012). In order to the research to be conducted according to the survey model, it must have a sample representing the universe, the data must be systematically recorded and statistically analyzed via a standard data collection tool. In addition, the general characteristics of the data should be explained (De Vaus, 1991). For this reason, in order to get the opinions of the graduate students who are studying with distance education, in line with their own experience, the study was conducted through

the interview form approach, which is one of the qualitative data collection techniques. The obtained data were coded by coding technique. In addition, document analysis techniques were used (Gürer, 2016).

## 2.2. Research Group

The research was carried out with 15 graduate students enrolled in two state universities, which were selected by convenience sampling method among those who attended synchronous and asynchronous education in the spring semester of the 2019-2020 academic year, convenience sampling method can be defined as the researcher's orientation from the target universe to the easiest items that can be reached while creating the sample (Patton, 2005).

## 2.3. Data Collection Tools and the Analysis of the Data

An open-ended interview method was applied to reveal the views of graduate students on distance education in the pandemic period. With this method, the previously determined interview questions were added in order to make the interview more detailed in line with the answers from the students (Gürer, 2016). Especially, due to the pandemic, a Google form was used as a collection tool and the questionnaire link created was delivered to participant students. The data were collected in late April 2020 and covers the beginning period of distance education. The data were analyzed via qualitative data analysis methods based on coding.

| Theme<br>(Categories) | Codes | n | % |
|-----------------------|-------|---|---|
|-----------------------|-------|---|---|

## 3. Results

This section detailed and give opinions of the graduate students. Data is coded according to the answers. Opinions of graduate students on distance education application are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Opinions of graduate students regarding distance education application

|   |   |   |     |
|---|---|---|-----|
| How do you evaluate the distance education application? | Successful(S2,S5,S6,S8,S10,S12,S13,S15,S16) | 9 | %60 |
|   | Unsuccessful (S3,S4,S14)                    | 3 | %20 |
|   | Undecided (S11, S7, S9)                     | 3 | %20 |

When it is analyzed, it can be seen that graduate students find the distance education application to be 60% successful. Other choices are 20% unsuccessful and 20% undecided. One-to-one quotes from students' opinions are presented below.

“Successful” (S2)

"I think it is not a suitable method for engineering education." (S3)

"It may be a temporary solution but it is not a very necessary." (S4)

"It has been successfully implemented." (S5)

“My education continues successfully. I am satisfied with distance education. ” (S6)

“So so” (S7)

“I think it is a useful application.” (S8)

"I am not using distance education because I am a nominal student." (S9)

“I find it successful” (S10)

“We have to” (S11)

“A good measure against the COVID-19. I find it positive to suspend normal education. ” (S12)

“Very successful in the current situation” (S13)

“It is not very good, it should be worked on and developed” (S14)

“I think it's useful. The beneficial aspects of distance education are the opportunity to listen to the lessons again and to communicate with the lecturers easily. ” (S15)

"I find it useful." (S16)

Table 2. What are the situations you encounter regarding distance education?

| Theme<br>(Categories)  | Codes  | n | %     |
|--|--|---|-------|
| What are the situations you encounter with distance education? | I did not encounter any negative situation (S2,S15,S5,S6, S8,S11, S12,S13) | 8 | %53,3 |
|  | Technical problems (S4, S14)   | 2 | %13.3 |
|  | Communication is limited (S7, S10, S16)                                    | 3 | %20   |

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I don't use(S3, S9)

2 %13,3

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The opinions of graduate students about the situations you encounter regarding distance education are presented in Table 2. As it is seen that the situations encountered in distance education do not encounter a negative situation at the rate of 53.3% at most. Other opinions include the limited communication at 20%, technical problems at 13.3% and not at 13.3%, respectively. One-to-one quotes from students' opinions are presented below.

"I have not seen any yet (S2)

"I could not use education effectively." (S3)

"Some videos do not open" (S4)

"I have not encountered an individual negative situation." (S5)

"I have not encountered any negative situation." (S6)

"Lecturers do not make necessary announcements, there is no interest" (S7)

"The option to replay doesn't seem to work. " (S8)

"I am not using distance education because I am not a nominal student." (S9)

"Failure to ask questions in classes that are not synchronous" (S10)

"I did not encounter any negative situation." (S11)

"I have not encountered a negative situation." (S12)

"Since it is a form of education that we have not experienced before, I can say that I had some difficulty in adapting. but it's good to take advantage of technology's blessings. " (S13)

"I don't find distance learning useful. Sound and distress are also problems with the image. And all the homework loads on the student. In applied classes, the student is insufficient on his own. " (S14)

"I didn't encounter any problems or situations." (S15)

"Not getting feedback" (S16)

Table 3. What are your expectations from this application?

| Theme<br>(Categories)                             | Codes   | n | %    |
|---|---|---|------|
| What are your expectations from this application? | No difference than formal education (S2,S7,S9, S11,S13,S16) | 6 | 40   |
|   | Supporting the participation of students(S5, S6, S15)       | 3 | 20   |
|   | To be understandable(S10)                                   |   |      |
|   | To be temporary(S3)   | 1 | 6.6  |
|   | No expectations (S4,S14)                                    | 1 | 6.6  |
|   | Sınavların uzaktan yapılması ve tolerans (S8, S12)          | 2 | 13.4 |
|   |   | 2 | 13.4 |

Opinions of graduate students regarding their expectations from this application are presented in Table 3. When it is analyzed, it is seen that the opinions of graduate students regarding their expectations from this practice are mostly in the form of not looking for formal education at the rate of 40%. Other opinions include supporting of students' participation with %20, exams being conducted remotely and tolerance students answers, 13.4% indicating that they do not have expectations, 6.6% lecturers will be with being 13.4% understandable, and 6.6% this should be temporary. One-to-one quotes from students' opinions are presented below.

“I hope it will be similar with normal education” (S2)

"I hope it will be temporary" (S3)

"None" (S4)

"The system should further support student participation." (S4)

"I expect that there will be applications for increasing student participation and application on the system." (S5)

"Distance education should be like normal education" (S6)

"My expectation is that the lecturers should behave more understanding about the projects. Especially when it comes to exam time. We are not in normal days. However, we have assignments and project load." (S7)

"The lecturers and the students must be in interaction. Lectures must be live. Asynchronous course videos are already available everywhere on the internet." (S8)

"Being clearly detailed" (S9)

"Being effective" (S10)

"If the midterm and final exams are required to be done by distance education, they should be easy." (S11)

"Normal visa and final exams should not held during this process." (S12)

"To complete the interrupted training activities" (S13)

"I have no expectations" (S14)

"To be able to follow the lessons closely in this process." (S15)

"To prevent children from leaving education, to provide uninterrupted education." (S16)

The opinions of graduate students about continuing education in the pandemic period are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. What are your opinions about continuing education during the pandemic period?

| Themes<br>(Categories)  | Codes   | n | %    |
|---|---|---|------|
| What are your opinions about continuing education during the pandemic period? | I find it correct (S2-S4-S5-S6-S10-S11-S15-S16) | 8 | 53.3 |
|   | I find it incorrect (S3-S9-S12-S13-S14)         | 5 | 33.3 |
|   | Undecided(S7-S8)                                | 2 | 13.3 |

When Table 4 is analyzed, it is found that graduate students continue the education at most 53.3%. Other opinions were found to be 33.3% wrong and 13.3% unstable, respectively. One-to-one quotes from students' opinions are presented below.

“It is normal to continue” (S2)

"I think it would be more appropriate to break education." (S3)

“The effect on the midterm evaluation can be reduced and only completed with the final.” (S4)

“I think distance learning is a good practice.” (S5)

“I am definitely not in favor of normal education so that the virus does not spread. I support distance education because a person can make tens of people sick. ” (S6)

“If there is no proper education, there is no science, in short nothing happens” (S7)

"There is no problem for now, but I hope that students will not experience a situation that will suffer in the future." (S8)

“Distance education in this period is inefficient. I think that education should not be continued. ” (S9)

“It should definitely not continue, distance education should open it.” (S10)

"Absolutely I agree. It is the best step to evaluate this process in this way. ” (S11)

“Education can be interrupted until the process is over.” (S12)

“The lectures in the form of distance education may be considered successful, but the assignments given during the pandemic may not suit the pandemic situation. You have

to go out on the streets for the necessary research, but this is not suitable for the pandemic.” (S13)

“I find it wrong, the disease process is more important as the health lessons are not held for a while, I think nothing will be lost” (S14)

“I think continuing is a good practice. It is a good situation for the students not to stay away from the lessons in this process.” (S15)

"I find it useful to keep lectures running." (S16)

#### **4. Discussion**

University departments providing education through distance education centers were limited and insufficient in Turkey. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic that appeared on March 11, 2020 in Turkey, it was started to be applied throughout the country and at all educational level of in the spring semester of the 2019-2020 academic year. In this study, which was carried out in order to evaluate the views of two different institute students attending synchronous and asynchronous distance education, which was started to replace traditional / face-to-face education at university level, the opinions of participants about synchronous / asynchronous distance education were tried to be determined. This research was done through the interview form created in google forms due to the limitations of the pandemic period. In the findings obtained, it was concluded that students found the use of distance education successful and correct during the pandemic period. The basic expectation of students is that education is not different from formal education in this period. They consider this situation as a temporary process and describe it as a method of distance education applied in this process.

The vast majority of graduate students are adequately equipped to participate in synchronous / asynchronous education, and the higher education institution provides students with a free mobile internet package for access to classes. They are more advantageous than undergraduate students due to the low number of courses for undergraduate students. However, the most important problem faced by students about this process is the internet access problems that are always encountered in distance education. This situation sometimes causes students to have poor connection quality or issues due to the system. Another concern of the students is the exams that will come with the continuation of this process. They expect the exams to be more tolerant in this temporary process.

## 5. Conclusions

The pandemic required urgent establishing or strengthening of universities' distance education infrastructures. On one hand, some universities had to give asynchronous education due to lack of infrastructure. On the other hand, the full efficiency could not be obtained due to the unprepared catch of many academicians of the universities that can provide synchronous courses. Universities are required to train faculty members for distance education. In addition, despite the possibility of a second or third wave in the pandemic, it is of great importance to provide these training promptly to establish / keep the necessary infrastructure and update constantly to provide synchronous lectures. Thus, it is thought that the technical problems experienced can be prevented.

This study provides details obtained at the beginning of the pandemic period. This will be changed in the continuation of this process. Therefore, it can be researched again at the end of the semester and in the end of pandemic period. In the light of students' experiences, information that can enlighten us about the results of transition to distance education in such situations can be obtained.

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