Examining the Factors in Lifelong Open and Distance Learning: Case of Eskisehir

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Abstract

The current study will provide information on the existing literature and discuss the results of a quantitative survey study that examined the possible uses of ODL means. Data is randomly drawn from the participants who currently enroll in public education courses provided by the Ministry of Education and the local Municipalities in Eskisehir, Turkey. Based on the data from a sample of 324 participants, results are expected to provide new insight for students who strive to be lifelong learners and public institutions that try to reach a larger body of learners. Results depict that lifelong untraditional learners are welcoming the possibility of utilizing ODL means for the courses they are taking face-to-face. Factors that affect individuals' acceptance of ODL, such as age, gender, level of education, and prior learning experiences will be discussed to provide information to policy maker who design such programs.

1. Introduction

Based on the recent and rapid changes and possibilities in information and communication technologies (ICT), Open and Distance Learning (ODL) provides a range of effective, efficient, engaging, and enduring learning opportunities to everyone. Learners all around the world are able to access information eliminating the physical and psychological limitations among learners, learning sources, and learning environments. By the year 2014, around 48% of the higher education population in Turkey is enrolled in a distance education system. In addition to the traditional open education resources such as printed materials and radio-television broadcasts, students are able to access latest information and communication technologies (ICT) that provide various services including e-Book, e-Television, e-Exam, e-Drill and Practice, and Videoconferences. However, the numbers are bleak considering the use of distance education means in institutionalized official lifelong learning services available for the general public. Public institutions deliver their educational programs mostly through traditional face-to-face instructions.

Lifelong learning is described as all purposeful learning activity, whether formal or informal, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence [1]. While it acknowledges the importance of lifelong learning for improving employability and adaptability, it considers lifelong learning to be essential for personal fulfilment outside the labor market as well. In other words, the aim is to allow individuals to contribute to knowledge community and to better control their lives in the society by participating actively all stages of economic and social life. Considering the type of education, lifelong education is generally classified in four major categories: adult education, professional education, perpetual education and based on self-motivation. Life-long learning is seen as a perpetual and planned activity which support individuals' and community's professional and social achievement by providing opportunities to gain skills, knowledge, and sensibility in various areas.

Life-long learning has been accepted as a fundamental element of European Higher Education since Prague Council of Minister in 2001. Prague manifesto point out that the strategies of life-long learning in a society and knowledge-based economy is required to cope with the competitive environment, utilize new technologies, social harmony, and improve the quality of life for all. Due to changing demographic structure of Europe, the significance of lifelong education is emphasized in all aspects of the Bologna Process. In the Prague Council of Ministers, the objectives of lifelong learning are predicted to fulfill the following provisions [2]:

- widening access to higher education;
- creating more flexible, student-centered modes of delivery;
- improving the recognition of prior learning, including non-formal and informal learning;
- developing national qualifications frameworks;
- improving cooperation with employers, especially in the development of educational programs;

In the current study, we examined the possible uses of distance education means in order to reach a larger population to deliver lifelong learning opportunities.

2. Purpose and the Context of the Study

The purpose of this study is to portray the current clients of community education and to examine their views about lifelong learning and open and distance learning means. Data is randomly drawn from the participants who currently enroll in community education courses provided by the Ministry of Education and the local Municipalities in Eskisehir, Turkey.

3. Research Method

In this section, we discuss the participants, instrument, and methods of data analyses utilized in the study. The study was designed as a descriptive-based survey research. As a first stage of the process, a number of face to face meetings were conducted with the senior executives (e.g., principals and vice principals, managers) and trainers of the community education centers and the related programs in the city. These interviews informed us about how these centers work, what they are currently doing, what kind of courses they offer, what the general learner profile looks like and what kind of job opportunities are available after completing programs. After transcribing and analyzing the qualitative data, a survey instrument was developed by the team of the project including content experts of the field of distance education and adult learning to examine participants' views about community education and lifelong learning.

The team established content validity and wording clarity processes to ensure that the instrument had an appropriate sample of items to represent the construct of interest. The instrument consists of 19 items, including demographic questions, the training-related questions and distance learning mediums-related items. The six demographic questions were asked to demonstrate trainees' general characteristics including age, gender, education and socioeconomic status. Community education related questions were asked to assess trainees' expectations and opinions on courses and how frequently they need to participate in such programs. We also asked to participants whether they prefer such courses via distance education means (online, TVs, radio, etc.).

The paper-pencil form of the instrument was applied to all volunteer trainees thru the supervision of the three centers in two districts. Surveys were face-to-face administered to roughly 2.000 eligible current program participants and of 367 responded to the survey. We achieved an acceptable response rate - about 20%.Trainees' responses were descriptively analyzed and tabulated in three main sections as general characteristics of learners, course related expectations and perceptions/prefences about distance education.

4. Results and Conclusion

4.1. Lifelong Learners' Characteristics

The data consists of 367 completed response sets and some missing values were observed on the variables in the survey. Frequency distributions of the learner's characteristics related variables were presented in the Table 1. More than 60% of the learners currently registered to the courses in the lifelong learning centers in District I and the most of the trainees (86%) were woman.

Table 1. Trainees' characteristics

Variables		Frequency (n)	Valid Percent (%)
Districts (n=367)	District I (Odunpazari)	248	68
	District II (Tepebasi)	119	32
Gender (n=341)	Woman	292	86
	Man	49	14
Marital Status (n=348)	Married	217	62
	Single	131	38
Educational Status (n=353)	Illiterate	1	0.3
	Primary	26	7.2
	Secondary	37	10.5
	High school	145	41
	Higher education	144	41
Occupation (n=358)	Unemployed	94	26.5
	Worker	9	2.5
	Civil servant	11	3
	Self-employment	114	32
	Student	57	16
	Retired	73	20
Age (n=343)	<=20	27	8
	21-30	96	28
	31-40	68	20
	41-50	73	21
	51-60	66	19
	60 >	13	4

The most of the participants (62%) were married. Only one person was illiterate and participated in an arts and crafts course. More than 80% of the learners in the dataset had a high school degree or more. Only 18% of the respondents hold a lower degree than high school. Most of the respondents were self-employed (32%), followed by unemployed (26.5%), retired (20%) and students (16%). By comparison, nearly half of the unemployed participants were housewives, only 5% of the participants serve as worker or civil servant. Age distribution of the trainees indicates that the number of respondents is highest in the age group of 21-30 (28%) followed by 41-50 (21%), 31-40 (20%) and 51-60 (19%). In all other groups, it is less than 15 per cent. The results also revealed that employment status is related to lower socioeconomic status among respondents. These results show that more educated people prefer to attend lifelong learning activities as more than 80% of the participants had a secondary degree or more. People who have less than a high school diploma is overwhelmingly underrepresented in the sample as he same group only consists of around 35% of the population in the city. Therefore we can argue that the institutions and policy makers should allocate more resources to attract less-educated crowds to lifelong learning programs.

4.2. Learners' expectations about lifelong education
Main motivation of respondents for choosing to engage in community education programs were reported as self-improvement (82%), being certified (71%), getting a profession (69%), engaging in leisure activities (63%), making new friends (43%) and engaging in hobbies (41%). Almost half of respondents (45%) stated that they learned about these courses from a close friend/relative and others (38%) learned these events from directly community education centers. The rest of them reported that they informed about these courses from traditional media materials (3%) and the internet (12%). At this point, we can conclude that either ministry of education or municipality do not have enough PR activities for such training programs. Half of the respondents enrolled in community education programs more than once. Indeed, 64 per cent of them participated in two or more courses. Almost all of the participants (96%) were satisfied with the courses and reported that they definitely recommended them to their friends.

4.3. Learners' preferences of ODL
Trainees responded that they mostly preferred computer-based education if community education programs are offered through various open and distance learning mediums. Approximately 20% of

them stated that they could take such training via smart phone and 15% of them preferred TV option for training. As can be seen from Figure 1, none of the participant picked radio as a learning medium comparing to others.
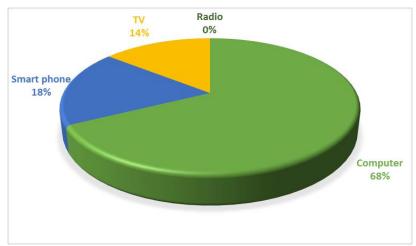

Fig.1. Trainees' preferences for ODL

Lifelong learning, as an essential aspect of the European Higher Education Area, is indispensable to face the challenges of competitiveness, social cohesion, and equality. Distance education and ICT can help reaching these goals in a more effective and efficient way by providing various opportunities for learners to reach programs. Policy makers should focus on allocating resources in educating public in distance education and integrating new technologies in lifelong education programs.

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