Analysis of Lifelong Adult Education Through Open and Distance Learning

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Abstract

Learning is a lifelong endeavor that shape human beings' quality of life. It is considered as one of the key skills of the 21st century that individuals should be able to learn, un-learn, and re-learn not only in schools but also throughout their lives. Lifelong learning thus is the voluntary and self-directed effort of improving individual or professional skills. Within the scope of European Union Lisbon Strategy, lifelong learning is emphasized as one of the significant contributors for efficient implementation of the European Employment Strategy (EES). The current study, attempted to explore the trends in the field and the expectations of general public from the official lifelong educations institutions. The sample is drawn randomly from a metropolitan mid-eastern city in Turkey. Employing a mixed-method research approach, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative measures, researchers investigated, particularly, the potential of distance education means in delivering lifelong learning needs to the public. Based on the data from 613 participants, the paper discusses the participants' needs, their understanding of distance education, and recommendations for policy makers to reach a larger population with the possibility of various distance education media.

1. Introduction

Although concept of Lifelong Learning was introduced in Denmark as early as in 1971, for many years, there has been serious debate on the conceptualization and operationalization of lifelong learning and those arguments viewed as the main cause for the limited implementation of the concept. However, Bagnall (1990) has usefully highlighted and offered four major functions for the notion of lifelong learning: (1) the preparation of individuals for the management of their adult lives; (2) the distribution of education throughout an individual' s lifespan; (3) the educative function of the whole of one' s life experience; and (4) the identification of education with the whole of life. The concept of lifelong learning can be defined as "all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective" (Commission of the European Communities, 2001). It commonly refers to all learning activities that take place after the completion of formal education in schools. Active citizenship and self-improvement, competitiveness and employability appear within the philosophical background of lifelong learning (Ireland Ministry of Education and Science, 2000). This philosophical structure comes into existence through the need of learning by the people of any educational level in the society.

Lifelong learning is a fact primarily coming into picture due to the need of labor market and personal determination (Chapman & Aspin, 1997). Considering the situation in Turkey, the purpose seems to be more aimed at employment than brush up. Although there are several reasons creating need for the lifelong learning, it has three main functions in general (Commission of the European Communities, 2006):

(i) Lifelong learning for economic growth;
(ii) Lifelong learning for personal development and self-actualization;
(iii) Lifelong learning for social inclusion, democratic understanding and act.

The history of the concept reaches back to mid-19th century in the western world. During that era, the technique of providing education through mail was developed for the people willing to have education

who did not have means to reach it otherwise. It was a significant opportunity for the disabled, women who were not allowed to have education, people who were not able to go to school due to their work and people who don't have school in their area. Similar needs were met in the 20th century in the forms of of art education centers, vocational and technical education centers, vocational programs of diverse public and private organizations. Those adult education organizations provided significant alternatives to structured conventional education based in school (Edwards & Usher, 2001; Faris, 2004).

During the late 20th century, most of the leading universities began to extend their conventional programs based on degree-credit in a way to involve a large adult population. Some of the new programs were based on credit whereas the others were designed as credit-free. Among the organizational mechanisms this new educational programs took base from are "Additional Programs", "Adult and Continuing Education Units", "Professional Expertise Training Schools", "Manager Education Programs" and "Distance Education Units". Variety of these programs and their distinctive practices reveal themselves as entirely new organizations within the conventional system (Duke, 1999; Faris, 2004). Lifelong learning institutions in Turkey can be classified in this main approach despite they carry on their practices under different names.

Historically, lifelong learning institutions in Turkey started with the main purpose of providing basic reading and writing skills during the early years of the republic. The European Commission's 2001 plan of action was revised in 2009, and adopted as the current implementation strategy known as the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET 2020). It sets four objectives for lifelong learning in Europe: (1) Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality; (2) improving the quality and efficiency of education and training; (3) promoting equity, social cohesion, and active citizenship; and (4) enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training. Within this scope, emerging Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) provide significant opportunities to meet the objectives of equity, efficiency, and innovation. In its Position Paper on Education Post-2015, UNESCO highlights the important role of ICT and proposes that flexible lifelong learning opportunities should be provided through formal, non-formal and informal pathways, including by harnessing the potential of ICTs to create a new culture of learning (UNESCO, 2014). UNESCO values the role of ICTs in providing universal access to education, equity in education, quality learning and teaching as well as teachers' professional development. If policies, technologies and capacities allow, education management, governance and administration can also be improved by means of ICTs

2. Purpose and the Context of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine public understanding of lifelong learning programs and their views on open and distance learning means as a possibility of receiving such programs. Data is randomly drawn from the residents in Eskisehir, Turkey.

3. Research Method

The study was designed as a descriptive survey research. A survey instrument was developed by the research team by utilizing content experts of distance education and adult learning to examine participants' views about lifelong learning and distance education.

Content validity and wording clarity were obtained by ensuring that the instrument had an appropriate sample of items to represent the construct of interest. The instrument consisted of 18 items, including demographic questions. The six demographic questions were asked to demonstrate participants' general characteristics including age, gender, education and socioeconomic status. Lifelong education related questions were asked to assess participants' expectations and opinions on lifelong education community programs and whether they would prefer to take some courses via distance education means (online, TVs, radio, etc.).

Utilizing a stratified sampling method, the paper-pencil form of the instrument was applied to 600 participants in the city of Eskisehir. Gender and educational status were the two main factors in defining strata as we aimed to ensure that the final sample mimicked the population of the city on those two variable that are thought to be significant in an individual's response regarding the lifelong learning opportunities. Surveys were administered face-to-face and a total of 600 participants were

included in the final sample. Participants' responses were descriptively analyzed and tabulated in three main sections as general characteristics of learners, course related expectations and perceptions/preferences about distance education.

4. Results and Conclusion

4.1. Participants' Characteristics

The data set consists of 600 completed response sets and very few missing values were observed. Frequency distributions of the learner's characteristics related variables were presented in the Table 1. Participants were drawn from eight large districts of the city and they were almost equally male (n=299) and female (n=301).

Table 1. Participants' characteristics

Variables		Frequency (n)	Valid Percent (%)
Districts (n=600)	Cankaya	86	14
	Camlica	49	8
	Emek	90	15
	Yenibaglar	60	10
	Uluonder	90	15
	Sirintepe	90	15
	Gokmeydan	60	10
	Visnelik	75	12
Gender (n=600)	Woman	301	50
	Man	299	50
Marital Status (n=594)	Married	351	60
	Single	243	40
Educational Status (n=600)	Illiterate	7	1
	Literate w/n certificate	57	10
	Primary	173	29
	Secondary	178	30
	High school	119	20
	Higher education	68	10
Occupation (n=600)	Unemployed	152	26
	Worker	87	14
	Civil servant	17	3
	Self-employment	134	22
	Student	89	15
	Retired	75	12
	Other	46	8
Age (n=600)	<=20	45	8
	21-30	156	26
	31-40	113	19
	41-50	93	15
	51-60	92	15
	60 >	101	17

Most of the participants (60%) were married and seven respondents were illiterate. Only 30% of the participants in the dataset had a high school degree or more. Almost half of the respondents were either unemployed (26%) or self-employed (22%), followed by students (15%) and workers (14%). Age distribution of the trainees indicated that the number of respondents is highest in the age group of 21-30 (26%) followed by 31-40 (19%) and over 60 (17%).

4.2. Participants' expectations about lifelong education

Eighty per cent of the respondents were aware of community education programs that were free of charge for residents and 20% of them had no knowledge about these courses. Among them, only 23% of the respondents were already enrolled in such courses. Only 50% of participants reported that they were aware of the process to apply to a lifelong learning community center while 61% stated that they did not know the location of the centers. This finding illustrated the need for a better publicity in informing public regarding the available offering of lifelong learning opportunities. Utilizing social media may help reaching a larger population and interacting with them about future planning of lifelong learning community centers.

About 55% (n=325) of the participants stated that they want to take part in lifelong learning activities offered by the Ministry of Education or the municipality. Participants also reported that self-improvement was the first motivation for them to enroll a program (see Figure 1).
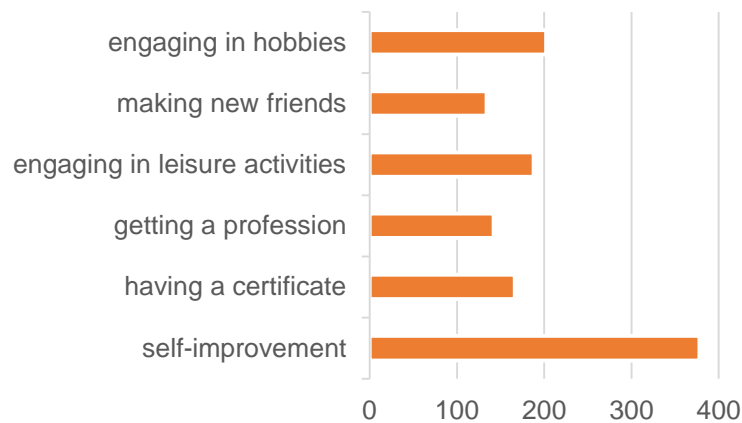

Fig.1. Reasons for participation in community education parograms

The reasons of respondents for engaging in community education programs were declared as self-improvement (63%), being certified (28%), getting a profession (24%), engaging in leisure activities (31%), making new friends (22%) and engaging in hobbies (34%).

Participants who have not attended to a program already reported that the main reason for not being a part of lifelong learning programs so far was lack of time (49%), followed by lack of information (29%), health/disability issues (16%), lack of job connections (8%), and lack of interesting programs (6%).

Again, in relation with the first finding above, we can argue that the public needs to be informed about the available programs and their requirements.

4.3. Learners' preferences of ODL

The distribution of technology ownership is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Participants' technology ownership

Technology	Frequency (n)	Valid Percent (%)
Internet	443	74
Laptop	321	54
Smart Phone	299	50
Desktop Computer	298	50
Tablet	154	26
Smart TV	115	19

As can be seen in the table, it can be argued that technology ownership opens up possibilities of offering lifelong learning programs through distance means as the findings illustrates adequate readiness for distance education. Complete with the following finding, policy makers are suggested to consider distance education as a possibility to provide programs to larger numbers of participants. When asked about the possibility of taking courses through ICT, 64% (n=332) of the participants

reported that they would and only 36% declared that they would not. Therefore, we can conclude that the readiness of the people in the city is at a desired level in terms of both the technology ownership and the perception of distance means.

Furthermore, participants were asked about their preference in taking courses of lifelong learning programs (see Figure 3). A great majority of them reported that they would prefer traditional face-to-face instruction (n=507). However 148 participants reported that they would like to take courses through a computer/laptop. Other means of distance education like books (n=69), TV (n=61), smart phones (n=40), and radio (n=28) were also mentioned as possibilities of receiving lifelong education programs.
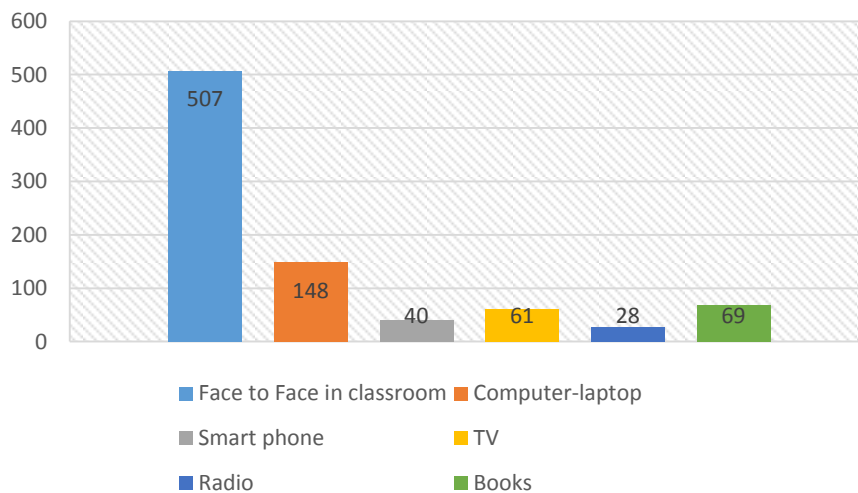

Fig.3. Trainees' preferences for ODL

This finding shows that although participants were open to the idea of receiving instruction face-to-face in class method was the most popular choice. This may be used in designing future distance programs. For instance, synchronous and asynchronous instructor-led programs may be used in introductory programs in transition to more complex applications of other distance education possibilities.

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