UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT BLENDED EDUCATION:
A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

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Abstract
In information age of 21st century, adapting developing technologies and serving better education service for students from varying countries with different personal characteristics have become much more difficult for universities. The age where traditional student-instructor interaction is called passive education brought forward new approach called as "blended education" which is a part of distance education and combination of face-to-face education & online courses. Considering support on distance education by 80% of universities in Turkey, the positive and negative ways and perspectives of students to this system will be understood better. This study is conducted to 10 undergraduate students of blended education in Sakarya University. As a result of in-depth interview with students, their perspectives on blended education are analyzed by qualitative method. With its uncommon Turkish literature on blended education, this study is expected to be loadstar for other studies.

Keywords: Distance education, blended education, higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Rapid changes brought by the transition to the global information society, gave rise to a number of fundamental changes in all areas of life. Such as; new information technologies, learning organizations, rising values and etc.. According to Fındıkçı (1988) by the information changes and new perspectives; personal, corporate and social transformations has accelerated too. To keep up with these transformations is only possible with the educational environment that adapts to the era.

Education in information society should not be considered as a closed system that it was defined before. It should be considered as a dynamic system which can develop new approaches and can apply these approaches to the life. According to Drucker (1992), the concept of "completed education" do not included in the information society. In this context rising education paradigm opposes idea of performing education only in the environment within the certain limits. Moreover, teaching and learning is no longer leave its institutionalized form and take non-institutionalized form (Şimşek, 1997; Aktaran:Parlar, 2012).

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Increasing importance of implementing the learning everywhere and every time has brought a new educational approach. This new approach named as a "Distance education", defined as a technology-driven online training system by leaving traditional teacher-student relationship. Also, detailed definition of distance education is; delivering education to the students by the help of satellite, video, audio, graph, computer, multimedia technology (United States Distance Learning Association, 2004). Education concept that is mentioned above is only covers higher education institutions; such a system of education has not yet implemented primary and secondary schools. Considering the population which can receive traditional higher education in the world, it is seen that the ratio is almost %17 (Irvine, 2003; Aktaran: Van Hook, 2005). For the various reasons individuals cannot reach higher education. So that; distance education helps individuals to reach higher education and importance of it increase day by day.

By explaining the phenomenon of distance education, classifications are made depending on place and time variables. The first of this classifications is traditional education system which is made face to face. Second is, education which is made at different time in same place. The practices carried out in training centers are not included in this classification. Third is, education which is made different time and different place. The aim of this type of education is asynchronous distance learning by eliminating the borders completely. It is known as distance education in the literature. Last one is, blended education which is performed at same time and different places. Blended education is usually performed by the help of technology (virtual classroom, video conference and etc.). These are synchronous educations. The scope of this study constitutes blended education. Blended education is also known as mixed or hybrid education in the international sources.

Even if different definitions is made by different authors about blended education (Troha, 2002; Aworuwa,2004; Allen & Seaman, 2007; Picciano, 2009), basicly it is a form of combining traditional education system and information and communication technologies. Blended education includes some learning models which can be regulated according to the shape and speed of the individual learning. Each individual's learning style and speed of learning is different. That's why, traditional education which made face to face or distance education (online) is not enough alone. So that importance of blended education has increased recently. Singh (2003) revealed that by blended education, more effective education environment has been occurred. Nevertheless the acquisition of this efficiency and effectiveness is possible by adaptation and understanding of participants to this system. Otherwise, there will be hitches in the process and planned positive developments will create a potential threat.

Transition process to the distance education has started between 1927-1960 years in or country by the way of communication. Nowadays distance education applications are available in the universities at the rate of %80. Especially for the new universities distance education has become a tool of competition and importance of this concept has been increasing day by day.

The aim of this study, evaluation of general opinion of students about this program whom is studying blended education at Sakarya University. For this purpose, comprehensive interviews were conducted with 10 students who are studying blended education in different departments. The interview touched upon issues such as; satisfaction of students from blended education, awareness level, expectations of students from the future and situations that they feel themselves advantageous and disadvantageous.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON BLENDED EDUCATION

Some changes in education concept have occurred with the wide spreading technology. Traditional approach in face-to-face education has yielded to technology integrated new educational models. Blended education concept that examined in this study is one new educational trend, and described in different ways by different researchers. Driscoll (2002) has described this concept as using varying methods in order to reach educational goals, but Garrison and Kanuka (2004) have stated as the blending classroom learning with online experiences. Although these descriptions are quite different, generally accepted definition of blended education is using face-to-face and online educational materials in order to complete one another (Graham et al., 2013). Figure 1 will provide more explanatory information on blended education with other educational methods:
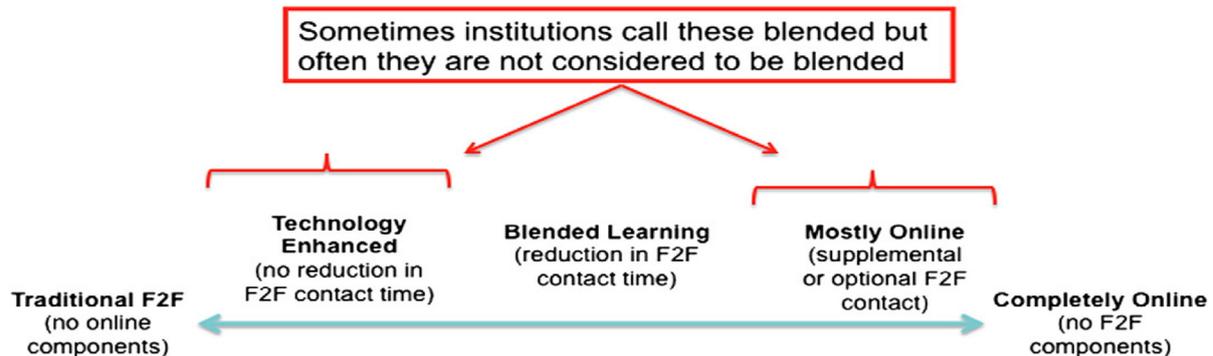
Figure 1: Educational Methods used in Higher Education (Graham, Woodfield, & Harrison, 2013)

Despite its simple and limpid definition, there are many debates on planning, implementing and acceptance of blended education. Although three application method (skill based, attitude/behavior based, and talent based) of Valiathan (2002) or hypothesis of Graham (2006) that claims the applicability of blended education to different educational levels were providing outline to practitioners for blended education planning, Halverson et al. (2014) have pointed out the ongoing serious disagreements in 41% of the studies on blended education in last decade about how education models, strategies, implements, environment and education context should be. Thus, all strategical plans have to be carried out in order to apply blended education in any course (Mortera-Gutiérrez, 2006; Sharpe et al., 2006).

Researchers described the significance of blended education by emphasizing the removal of geographical and situational borders and thus increase in learning quality with increasing interaction between lecturer and students (Bates, 2000; Garrison & Anderson, 2003). The studies applied in Tennessee and Stanford Universities are also supporting this thought with findings about positive effects of blended education on learning outcomes (Boyle et al., 2003)

Little, Passmore and Schullo (2006) tried to measure the perception of people in their study to investigate efficiency of virtual classes. The feedbacks from students revealed that education and communication levels increased due to hand lifting, voting and simultaneous class participation in synchronous class environments. Rovai and Jordan (2004) have claimed that blended education system with technological opportunities can provide sense of reality and so sense of belonging to both class and friends. With its elasticity (Macedo-Rouet et al., 2009; Porter, 2014) and cost saving (Dziuban et al., 2006), blended education has become more preferable than traditional education methods.

In 2014, Giannousi and her colleagues have chosen 60 students as a sample for their experimental study. Students were split into two groups; first group has taken 12 weeks face-to-face education, while second group was having 7 weeks face-to-face education and 6 weeks online courses. The provided course material and content are intended to be similar as possible for both two groups. At the end of course, students successes are evaluated by "knowledge test" derived from literature. Although there were obstacles in online education due to technical issues, second group is concluded more successful from the result of analyses. The most crucial reason for this result is that increasing opportunities in taking responsibilities have led students in second group to have increasing self-sufficiency and to become active learner. The findings of Di Napoli (2004) are also coinciding with our results.

In recent years, the scope of blended education researches has changed from student dimension to instructive and corporate dimensions. Moreover, the reasons behind the failure of blended education implements despite the positive feedback from students are tried to be determined. In one thesis (Mackinven, 2015) blended education is examined its student, instructive and corporate dimensions, extensive research is applied via both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interview) techniques. In this study similar with other studies, both student and instructors are satisfied with student centered education system where responsibility is transferred from instructor to student. In corporate adaptation, there are serious lacks despite willingness. According to "blended learning adoption framework" suggested by Graham et al. (2013), the requirements of

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stage 1 (awareness/exploration) and stage 2 (adoption/early implementation) are provided by university, necessary structuring and strategies have not been preferred level yet. Another study (Tshabalala et al., 2014) is claiming that the insufficiency of possibilities provided by institution (lack of policy, lack of personnel training, obstacles about computer connections, etc.) decreases the likelihood of success of blended education. Today, many educational institutions show a tendency to give a place to blended education in strategic plans (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Garrison & Vaughan, 2007).

Almost all studies mentioned above are showing positive ways of blended education, there are studies in the literature highlighting also negative ways. Koppelman and Vraklen (2008) have stated that student do not feel "real" due to technical failures. This finding is supported by also other studies (Gillies, 2008; Karal et al., 2011). This isolation feel poses problems like decrease in success, "attrition", instructional ineffectiveness and dissatisfaction with the learning experience (Park & Choi, 2009). Face-to face communication seems like motivating factor by many students, some complains about decrease in the attention due to feeling of stress (Karal et al., 2011). Lee and Lee have mentioned about negative attitudes of students against blended education because of insufficient encouragement. Furthermore, Reeves (2003) has stated that blended education is considered as negative due to higher work load than traditional methods.

METHODOLOGY

When examining the literature, there is not found such a subject which is studied at Sakarya University about blended education. That's why, it is thought by authors that blended education should be handled detailed. In this study, the interview technique is decided as a qualitative research analysis method, because Creswell (2011) is defending an opinion that one who wants to go deep research on a specific subject should benefit from one of qualitative research methods. Furthermore, another reason is that in this method researchers have a possibility to involve in research process (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006).

There are different types of interviews. Interview used in this study can be an example of both group interviews and individual interviews. First of all pilot study have been performed with 3 student to control the intelligibility of questions. Then, individual interviews have been realized with 10 student and it is tried to be find out personal opinions of students about blended education.

The Study Group

When determining the participants, all samples are tried to be taken into account which show all different situations existing in the universe. Rather than making generalization, the aim of this study is revealing common ideas of participants. To achieve this goal, maximum variety sampling has been used in this study. To identify it more explicitly, not only students who is studying same department but also students from different departments have been selected for interviews. In this context, interviews have been performed with 10 students from different departments such as finance, international trade, human resources management (HRM) and etc.. General information about participants have been situated on Table 1.

Table1: Information of Participants

Participant No	Gender	Age	Grade	Interview Duration	Department
1	Woman	26	2	17.09	HRM
2	Man	23	4	10.13	International Trade
3	Woman	21	4	08.06	International Trade
4	Woman	22	4	08.45	International Trade
5	Man	21	4	10.16	International Trade
6	Man	20	3	09.05	Finance
7	Woman	21	3	16.09	HRM
8	Woman	22	4	09.10	International Trade
9	Man	21	3	05.48	Finance
10	Man	24	3	08.23	Finance

Data Collection
While preparing the form which is used as a data collection tool, literature has been examined about blended education. Most of the studies tried to touch upon the subject from the perspective of both student and technical perspective of online courses. This study focused on students. In addition to the literature review, pilot study has been performed with 10 students and then it has been tried to decide which questions should be asked to the participants. Finally, 10 questions have been selected and asked to 10 students. All participants have been informed about the aim of study and it has been allowed by the authors to make audio recording. Questions are as follows:

Question 1. What it comes first to your mind when you think blended education?
Question 2. Did you have any information about content of blended education before you select the program?
Question 3. Why did you prefer blended education?
Question 4. What is the advantages and disadvantages of blended education?
Question 5. Do you prefer again the same blended education program if you have second chance **Question 6.** Which type of courses following courses are more effective, online courses or face to face courses?
Question 7. Which types of courses are more suitable for blended education?
Question 8. Have you had any problems during the online courses? If yes, what are they?
Question 9. Did your expectations before you select the program and current situation match each other?
Question 10. Do you think, students who are studying formal education are more advantageous than you while applying for work?

First three the question focuses on the general opinions of students about blended education. Following four questions is asked in order to learn their views on the content of blended education. Question 8 is about technical problems and last two questions is asked to learn future expectations of students.

RESULTS

Data which is obtained from the participants have been analyzed in this part of study. The results concerning about the study has been collected in 4 groups. These groups are related with general opinions, the content of education, technical problems and expectations. Every answer given by the participants has not been included to the study. Only more explanatory answers have been included to be clearer.

General Opinions of Participants about Blended Education
Responses of participants to the question of "What it comes first to your mind when you think blended education?" (Question 1):

-- *When I heard blended education for the first time, I thought that I can participate the courses both with day time education students and evening education students. I thought that if I do not attend the day time education I can attend the courses at evening education. (P8)*
-- *I have known al little information before I came to courses. First think that come to my mind that we would get a few course as an online. I did not like this style of education but I had to select blended education. (P3)*
-- *Main definition of blended education is, girls and boys got education together. I think they chose the wrong name for this type of training. It is a good system for students who have already a job. We don't have to come to school during five days. (P2)*
-- *The first thing that came to mind is not to go to school, lack of courses, excessive tuition fees. (P1)*
-- *Leisureliness (P9).*

Responses to the questions which are about content of education and why did they choose this program. (Question 2-3).

-- *I could not get good grades from the university exams because of graduating from vocational high school. Achieves scores of blended education was lower. So that I chose this program. (P2)*
-- *I had already a job so that I chose blended education. I thought that courses would only be online but I learned that I had to go to school two days a week. In addition I had to come to some courses weekdays and I had to quit work. (P1)*

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-- My score was low and I wanted to evaluate myself by participating other trainings. I could participate the courses also with day time education students and it was an advantage for me. (P4)
-- I have already a job and I wanted to study in Sakarya. I thought that I will join the courses only as an online but I felt happy when I learned that the courses would also be face to face. (P5)
-- I did not choose day time education and evening education. I only chose blended education. Even if I had high scores, in order to find another job I chose this program. (P7)

Content of Blended Education

Advantages and disadvantages of blended education according to participants (Question 4):
-- The biggest advantage that we have is online education. There is not any advantage of blended education except online courses. We have no right to get the state scholarship, we have no right to go Erasmus, we cannot benefit from state dormitory and these are disadvantage for us. (P2)
-- We save the time but I feel alone. My other friends who study blended education have already a job and I cannot meet them. I have difficulty to make friends. (P1)
-- I am satisfied, videos and lecture notes are on the system but tuitions are too much. (P3)
-- I want to work in public sector so that I will study other courses in weekdays. I will evaluate myself. Documents that we have are enough to pass these courses but face to face courses are very limited. (P6)
-- We spend very few times in university and we don't know teachers very well. It is disadvantage for us. We only come to school in Friday and Saturday and our sense of faithfulness to the school declining. (P7)

Responses to the question of "Do you prefer again the same blended education program if you have second chance?" (Question 5)

-- No, I never want to study blended education again. If I had already a job it would be nice. But it will not help me. (P2)
-- No. I chose because I am working but I prefer to leave the job. (P3)
-- When someone asks my department I say blended education. But no one understands and they underestimate my department. Just because people behave like this I do not choose blended education again. (P5)
-- If I knew that the courses are performed only in two days I would not chose blended education. (P6)
-- I would never choose because I feel myself less effective than day time education students. They have to come to school every day but I sometimes do not come to school during one month. (P4)
-- Even if success level of my friends who study at the same classroom with me is low, I have higher scores than them. Because I participate the courses also with day time education students. (P7)

Opinions about face to face courses and online courses (Question 6-7): Most of the students prefer online courses for qualitative subjects and face to face courses for quantitative subjects. Responses to the question of "which courses are more effective?" are as follows:

-- Of course face to face courses are more effective. We have difficulty to adapt online courses because we face some technical problems. (P4)
-- Because of the advantage of asking questions to the teacher easily, online courses are more effective. (P5)
-- We don't have enough communication with teacher and other students in online courses. (P6)
-- Face to face courses are more effective because I can communicate with teacher easily but it is a good thing to watch the courses again and again as an online. (P2)
-- Online courses can be watch again and again but teacher cannot explain the subject ten times. Online courses can be sometimes weak in respect of asking questions. (P7)

Technical Problems

-- The time of lectures can be changed by lecturers and We cannot be informed. Normally lecture times are determined but lecturers sometimes change it. (P2)
-- I always have connection problems. (P1)
-- Because of technical problems the courses always start late. (P3)
-- The sound of teacher's microphone and image quality is not very good. Attendance is very low. (P6)

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-- I live in dormitory so that I have connection problems frequently. (P8)

Expectations

Responses to the question of "Did your expectations before you select the program and current situation match each other?" (Question 9)

-- I expect equal proceeding, but it did not. Courses that day time education students and blended education students study are different from each other. We participate the courses which is irrelevant with our department. (P2)

-- I have associate degree from human resource management. Students were not active in my old school. But the situation is different here. Students are very active. I came to school only two days and I cannot meet with day time education students. I feel unhappy. I did not think like this before coming the university. (P1)

-- I was expecting it to be different that the lecturer's approach to us. They sometimes behave like " I don't have to tell you detailed, study before coming to classroom." (P3)

-- I started with a lot of dreams but I am disappointed. Neither my work life nor my school life is not like I dreamed. (P5)

-- I thought the courses would be more attentive but it was not. I think blended education will be removed in future. (P6)

-- I have never regretted because I chose my program deliberately but I feel bad because my class's success level is low. (P7)

Responses to the question of "Do you think, students who are studying formal education are more advantageous then you while applying for work?" (Question 10):

-- When I graduate from this department name of blended education program will be written in my diploma. This is not problem for employers but if they know content and simplicity of courses they do not hire us. (P2)

-- If employer knew that I graduate from blended education program it will be disadvantage for me. Because day time education students are more active than us and I jealous of them. (P1)

-- I do not think like this. I think I am more advantageous from day time education students. Because I can both study and can get public sector experience. (P10)

-- Kind of education do not make people more advantageous or disadvantageous. I think that more you improve, more advantageous you become. (P3)

-- If blended education is written on our diploma employers would not want to hire us. Employers cannot know our education style if we don't say. (P4)

-- Since it is not fully developed system, it is more disadvantageous in our country (P5).

-- I am not telling people that I am studying blended education. I am telling that I am studying day time education (-smiles-), I will also not mention about this situation in job application, because it will be disadvantageous for me (P6).

-- It will be deterrent factor if "blended education" is written on my diploma. I do not want to be evaluated as one of Open University students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In today's technology area, having computers and smart phones of all most all students caused increase in digital divide among youth. Unlike traditional methods, technology-based applications like e-health, e-commerce and e-government have necessitated the changes in education. This process has started with changes in distance education, and continued with blended education that is huddling e-learning and face-to-face education together. There are literature espousing the positive effects of online learning methods with traditional education in many areas from medical to physical training and sport (Scherl et al., 2012; Leong et al., 2012; Maloney et al., 2013; Stanescu et al., 2014). According to some studies, blended education does not always have to provide advantages. For instance, Vaughan and Garrison (2005) have concluded their study with no evidence proving positive effects of blending education on students' cognitive presences. Park and Choi (2009) stated that negative prejudice of students on system results as refusal of usage of system.

In this study, students' comments are stated as the most significant factor of blended education. In-depth interview is conducted to 10 students from varying departments and results are showing that all participants except P7 are dissatisfied with blended education. The causes behind this situations are high tuition fee, nonuse of opportunities provided by government and university (scholarship, Erasmus, loan etc.), indignity of lecturers and other reasons. Furthermore, the obstacles in using online course portal are accepted as the negative factor on students' choice of blended education by Wai and Seng (2015) similarly with literature.

In almost all interviews, participants used "nice though" expression, but only P7 answered "do you choose blended education once more?" question as yes. General perception is that blended education suits for employed individuals and makes individuals feel deficient. Although according to Ilgaz (2014) the question-answer issue in online courses is solved by instant answering technique, the expected utility could not be taken from questions in written form according to our participants. Besides all these negativity, participants stated that they are pleased with time and place-free online courses and more time spared for themselves.

First blended education students have been admitted since 2008 in Sakarya University, but today many blended education program are decided to be closed. There may be many reasons lying under this situation, yet the most significant reason is unwillingness of lecturers for all day courses. The real cause of failure of this system is direct application of blended education without waiting adaptation of all components of university (Deveci, 2015). Since only the perspective of students is stated in this study, these conclusions are lying on students' comments. In further studies, the comments of lecturers and university administration can be researched for more detailed information about blended education.

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