STUDENT OPINIOINS ABOUT ELECTIVE COURSES IN CHANGING EDUCATION: THE EXAMPLE OF KOCAELI UNIVERSITY FACULTY OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

Bologna Process, which aims to make higher education institutions comparable with each other without changing their peculiarities, has been experienced at universities. This process includes reconstruction and quality in education. This study aims to determine the student preferences related to out-of-field elective courses that will enrich students' occupational and personal development and to state the reasons for their preferences. An online questionnaire was prepared and the students were asked to complete this questionnaire. The findings of this study suggest that candidate teachers need elective courses in the fields of art, first aid and health knowledge, information and communication technologies, communication skills, psychology and sports during their occupational and personal development processes.

Key Words: The process of restructuring education and quality, elective courses, candidate teachers.

INTRODUCTION

21st century has brought change and transformation in many different fields, mainly science and technology. Higher education institutions, one of the most important and influential components in the education system, has also experienced this process of change. Bologna Process, which includes *Reconstruction and Quality Process in Education*, aims to make higher education institutions comparable with each other without changing their peculiarities. The main purpose of this process is to educate individuals who are able to make sense of what they learn, to be able to conduct research, to think, to produce new pieces of knowledge and to use them to solve problems rather than the ones who memorize what is given to them. In accordance with this purpose, in different faculties, students are expected to improve themselves with the help of not only major field courses but also out-of-field elective courses. Kocaeli University is also one of the universities included in this process. The aim of this study, which is about the minor field elective courses in the process of reconstruction in education at Kocaeli University, is to discern the attitudes and expectations of students of Faculty of Education related to elective courses and to describe the incentives behind these attitudes and expectations. As they are the first group of students that were affected by this Bologna Process, freshmen at Kocaeli University Faculty of Education were given an online questionnaire and the data of this research were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. In the subsequent parts of this research, some information will be given about the process of reconstruction and quality in education; the methodology of the research, data collection and data analysis processes, findings and interpretations and finally conclusions and suggestions will be explained.

The Process Of Reconstruction And Quality In Education

This century has included many social, cultural, and political changes in societies. Reconstruction in education has also taken place with these changes. According to Erçetin (2001), these changes have an influence on educational institutions as "they have an obligation to educate more qualified individuals who are open to universal values, who are able to contribute to the the production of knowledge and to use the knowledge creatively". In this sense, it is known that this kind of changing processes take place in the primary school and secondary school level. In addition, higher education institutions have also started to take part in this type of change. *" (…) educational institutions have a tendency to reconstruct their system of education to be able to make their programmes more compatible with the changing needs and expectations and social changes. In this case, it is apparent that all the countries in the world regardless of their level of development, increasing the quality in education has been an important issue.*" (Özden, 1999; Karslı, Yıldız, Akgün ve Cerit, 2001). For this reason, in the research related to educational institutions and the quality of education (Sezal ve Erkan, 1997; Sözer, 1991; Güven, 2001), teacher quality and teacher education programmes have had priorities and it deals with the new missions and responsibilities given to teachers by the process of development and change.

It is seen that new courses such as methodology, teaching practicum, school experience have started to take part in teacher education programmes in order to support field education in faculties of education (YÖK, 1998). In addition to these courses, in order to train teachers multidimensionally, students have started to take some elective courses from different faculties/departments. In this context, the decisions about the elective courses are important for students to think about which elective courses will be beneficial for them and for teachers to determine the elective courses for students to choose.

The Purpose Of The Study

The aim of this study is to discern the preferences of students of Kocaeli University Faculty of Education related to the out-of-field elective courses that might foster occupational and personal development and to find out the reasons behind these preferences.

Limitations Of The Study

This study is limited with the answers given to open ended questions by the students of Kocaeli University Faculty of Education, Departments of English Language Teaching, Turkish Language Teaching, Primary Scool Science Education, Mathematics Education, Pre-School Teaching and Educational Sciences Department and

Psychological Counselling and Guidance in the spring term of 2011-2012 academic year. 403 students were given the questionnaire in this study and all of the questionnaires were evaluated.

METHODOLOGY

The Model of the Study
In this study, which aimed to determine the preferences of students of Kocaeli University Faculty of Education related to the out-of-field elective courses that might foster occupational and personal development and to find out the reasons behind these preferences, screening model was used.

The Sample and the Universe of the Study
The universe of this study consists of 526 freshmen that attend Kocaeli University Faculty of Education, Departments of English Language Teaching, Turkish Language Teaching, Primary Scool Science Education, Mathematics Education, Pre-School Teaching and Educational Sciences Department and Psychological Counselling and Guidance in the spring term of 2011-2012 academic year. The sample of the study, on the other hand, is composed of 403 students that take part in this study voluntarily.

Data Collection Instrument
A questionnaire, which aims to determine the preferences of students of Kocaeli University Faculty of Education related to the out-of-field elective courses that might foster occupational and personal development and to find out the reasons behind these preferences, was developed by the researchers and used in this study. The questionnaire was given to students online and the participants answered the questions in the questionnaire under the researchers' supervision.

The questionnaire consists of 2 parts: in the first part, there are questions related to students' departments, year of education and whether they are morning or evening students; in the second part, there are questions related to students' preferences of out-of-field elective courses. In the second part, the participants were asked two main questions: The first one is a multiple choice question that is formed by the opinions of both the researchers and 54 students and this question makes it possible to choose one or more alternatives among some categories. Moreover, the choice of "other" was added to the alternatives with the idea that some students might have different opinions. The second question is an open ended question that asks for the students' reasons for choosing the categories of elective courses. For the validity of the draft questionnaire, the opinions of 5 lecturers from different programmes of faculty of education and for the spelling and grammar of the questionnaire, the opinions of a linguist were taken into consideration and the final version of the questionnaire was formed in accordance with these opinions.

For the reliability of the questionnaire, the answers given to the open ended questions by the students were analyzed by the experts from 3 different fields and the items that led to "agreement" and "disagreement" were determined. For the degree of reliability of this questionnaire, the formula suggested by Miles & Huberman (1994) was used. According to this formula:**P** (Percentage of. Agreement)=[**Na** (Agreement) / **Na** (Agreement) + **Nd** (Disagreement) x. 100. As a result of the calculation, the value that is found is P=0.90 and this questionnaire is regarded as reliable.

The Analysis Of Data
The data collected online as a part of this study consist of both qualitative and quantitative data. For the analysis of quantitative data, frequency and percentage; for the analysis of qualitative data, QSR Nvivo 9.0 programme was used. In this analysis, the codes were formed as free codes. The elective course categories determined by the researchers previously were discerned as themes and free codes were associated with these themes. Three researchers identified the suitability of the codes and themes and they also identified the distribution of student opinions according to the codes and themes. The appropriacy of codes was determined with the help of comparisons and 37 codes were chosen to be used in this study.

In the analysis of qualitative data, as the students stated opinions that suited different themes, there are differences in the number of student opinions might differ from each other. In the presentation of codes and

themes after the analysis of qualitative data, models were used and they were presented with some quotations directly taken from the student opinions.

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

The Number of Students according to their Programmes and the Sessions They Attend which are Day and Evening
The numbers and percentages of students according to their programmes and the sessions they attend which are day and evening were given in Table 1. According to Table 1, the number of students taking part in this study is 403, which includes 284 regular students and 119 evening students. As there are only day students in the programmes of Pre-Schhol Teaching, Turkish Language Education and Psychological Counselling and Guidance, all of the participants from these departments are regular students.

Table 1: The Distribution of Students according to their Departments and the Sessions They Attend which are Day and Evening.

	Day Students	Evening Students	TOTAL
Primary School Teaching	50	46	96
Mathematics Education	59	34	93
Science Education	46	17	63
Pre-School Education	48	-	48
English Language Teaching	26	22	48
Turkish Language Teaching	6	-	6
Psychological Counselling and Guidance	49	-	49
TOTAL	**284**	**119**	**403**

The opinions of students related to their preferences were given in Table 2. According to the data presented, the the elective course preferences of 403 students were given in the column "General", the opinions of 193 students from the departments of Primary School Teaching, Pre-School Teaching and Psychological Counselling and Guidance were given in the column "Verbal Departments", the opinions of 156 students from Science Education and Mathematics Education were given in the column "Numerical Departments" and the opinions of 54 students from the departments of English Language Teaching and Turkish Language Teaching were given in the column "Language Teaching Departments".

According to the data presented in Table 2, freshmen are mainly interested in elective courses related to art (76 %). The other preferences are respectively courses related to first aid and health knowledge (49 %), courses related to information and communication technologies (49 %), courses related to improving communication skills (48 %), and psychology courses (47 %). Generally, the opinions of students from verbal, numerical and language teaching departments related to elective courses are alike and elective courses related to information technologies are one of the courses that are preferred less than the other courses by the students of verbal departments (18 %). Moreover, it is apparent that students from language teaching departments do not prefer elective courses related to first aid and health knowledge (11%) when compared with the students of other departments. As previously stated, the category of "other" was also added to the categories of elective courses with the idea that they might have different opinions. However, the number of students choosing this category is very few (3), for this reason, it was not taken into account in the process of analysis.

Table 2: The Distribution of Students' Elective Course Preferences

Elective course categories	General (403 students)		Verbal departments (primary school teaching, pre-school teaching & psychological counselling and guidance) (193 students)		Numerical Departments (science teaching, mathematics teaching) (156 students)		Language teaching departments (Turkish and English Language Teaching) (54 students)	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Art courses	307	76%	97	50%	77	40%	28	52%
First aid and health knowledge	196	49%	72	37%	56	29%	6	11%
Information and communication technologies	196	49%	34	18%	69	36%	12	22%
Communication skills courses	194	48%	76	39%	42	22%	17	31%
Psychology courses	189	47%	87	45%	38	20%	13	24%
Sports courses	123	31%	35	18%	31	16%	13	24%
Philosophy courses	61	15%	19	10%	10	5%	11	20%
Law courses	52	13%	16	8%	15	8%	3	6%
Disaster management courses	30	7%	6	3%	10	5%	2	4%
Anthropology courses	26	6%	8	4%	5	3%	4	7%

Codes and Themes Showing the Reasons for Students' Elective Course Preferences
The models showing the reasons for course preferences according to the sequence shown in Table 2 are given in Figure 1.a, 1.b, 1.c, 1.d, 1.e and 1.f.

The results of the qualitative data match up with the results of the quantitative data. The students state that they want to take art courses, first aid courses, computer technology and usage courses, communication skills courses, psychology courses and sports courses as out-of-field elective courses. Figure 1 shows the distribution of codes related to the reasons for these preferences. According to this figure, personal development, teaching profession, professional development, matching students' areas of interest, being interesting are influential in students' elective course preferences. Students want to take these courses because first of all, they believe that these courses will contribute to their personal development, secondly, they think that these courses will be beneficial for their Professional development and finally, they think these courses are suitable for their areas of interest.

Some of the students' written opinions are given below so as to exemplify different course themes. In these example quotations, students' use of language remained the same and the researchers did not make any corrections of grammar. A participant from the Department of Pre-School Education stated that "… art-based elective courses as I thought that they might be helpful when I need to devise art-based activities in the classroom"; a participant from Turkish Language Teaching Department stated for the courses related to information and communication technologies that "…to be able to benefit from these technologies more when I become a teacher"; a participant from the Department of Psychological Counselling and Guidance stated that "I wanted to take psychology courses as I thought that they would be important to understand the human psychology and do occupational practice better accordingly"; a participant from the Department of Pre-School Teaching stated that "We need to work with children of 0-6 ages so we need to master the topic of psychology". In all these comments, the students stated the reasons why they preferred and they mainly emphasized the professional development dimension.

a. The most frequently stated reasons for the art lessons.

b. The most frequently stated reasons for the first-aid and health information lessons.

c. The most frequently stated reasons for the information and communication lessons.

d. The most frequently stated reasons for the lessons about communication skills.

e. The most frequently stated reasons for the psychology lessons.

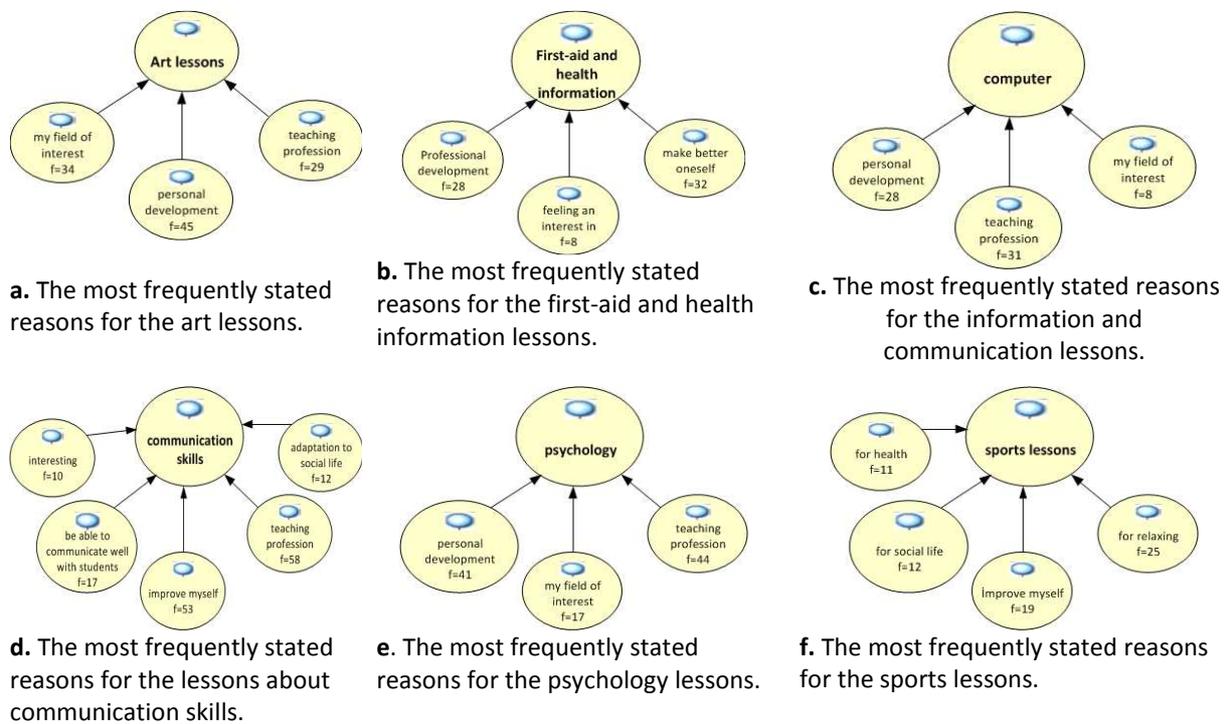**f.** The most frequently stated reasons for the sports lessons.

Figure 1: The Distribution of students' reasons for elective course preferences according to codes and themes.

On the other hand, a participant from the Department of Psychological Counselling and Guidance stated that "I want to improve myself about first aid and health issues and they will be necessary till the end of our lives. I want to help if someone has a traffic accident."; a participant from the Department of English Language Teaching stated that "I want to improve myself with technology-based courses as technology has become an indispensable part of our lives."; a participant from Science Education Department, considering sports-based elective courses, stated that "I believe we cannot educate ourselves well in terms of the knowledge of the world as our field courses keep our minds and they are stressful." In all these comments, students emphasized the contribution of elective courses to personal development.

A participant from the English Language Teaching Department mentioned psychology courses and stated that "I want to have more information about these issues because everyone needs some information about them."; a participant from Mathematics Teaching Department stated that "I would choose cports based courses as I like sports and I want to improve my abilities.". In all these comments, students mentioned the suitability of the elective courses for areas of their interests and their fields.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

According to the findings of this study, which aimed to to discern the preferences of students of Kocaeli University Faculty of Education related to the out-of-field elective courses that might foster occupational and personal development and to find out the reasons behind these preferences, it was found out that students, who were grouped in the categories of verbal, numerical and language teaching, want to take elective courses related to art most. In addition to the art courses, they want to have elective courses related to first aid and health issues, information and communication technologies, improving communication skills, pscyhology and sports, respectively.

When the reasons behind these preferences were analyzed, it was observed that the students used some phrases like "that will contribute to our professional development", "that will contribute to our personal development". In the art-based courses, "personal development" and "areas of interest" were emphasized; in the courses related to first aid and health issues "self-improvement and professional development" were emphasized; in the courses related to psychology and communication skills "teaching profession and personal development" were emphasized; in the sports-based courses, "relaxation" and "self-improvement" were emphasized."

Identifying the participant students viewpoints about elective courses until the end of their university education with their reasons and making necessary comparisons might be helpful in enriching the content of out-of-field elective courses and in increasing the variety of courses.

It is apparent that students' ability to prefer elective courses in terms of their needs and interests will have a positive effect on their academic achievement. Moreoever, when they are able to choose courses which are suitable for their wishes and interests will contribute positively to their characteristic traits such as motivation and self-efficacy. Since motivation stems from an individual's personal, social, educational and occupational needs, it turns into intrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation is closely related to academic achievement. It is stated in literature that the students having intrinsic motivation find classes more enjoyable (Schunk, Pintrich and Meece, 2008) and their level of learning and achievement increases (Gottfield, 1990; Lepper, et al., 2005).

According to Tebassam & Grainger (2002), there is also a positive relationship between the level of academic acheievement and self-efficacy perception, which is defined as the individual's perceiving herself/himself as efficient and his/her belief in coping with the possible issues that he/she might encounter in future (Bandura, 1999). Bandura (1999) states that self-efficacy beliefs have an influence on an individual's feelings, opinions motivation and attitudes. The expectations about self-efficacy also have an influence on what kind of an activity a person will take part in, how much effort he/she is going to supply and how long this effrt will continue (Tipton & Worthington, 1984).

In this sense, it is clear that the elective courses that will be determined within the scope of the students' interests, wishes and abilities will contribute to their self-efficacy perceptions. Motivation, as well as self-efficacy perception, affects whether an individual will continue that activity of not (Ormrod, 2008). Focusing on the student tendencies before deciding on out-of-field elective courses in the higher education institutions might be beneficial when the better level of achievement and efficiency of students who are motivated and who have higher self-efficacy levels are taken into consideration.

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