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Experiences of University Students' Distance Education Process

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ABSTRACT

Distance education has indeed seen widespread adoption, especially after the COVID-19 outbreak and in response to natural disasters like earthquakes. The aim of this study is to contribute, especially in the field of distance education, by revealing the views of university students. The qualitative research method of phenomenological research design was used in the study. The sample group consists of 15 (9 female, 6 male) undergraduate university students. A maximum diversity sampling method was used in purposeful sampling to establish the study sample. The data was collected through individual interviews with 15 students using a semi-structured interview form created by the researchers. The data were analysed using MAXQDA. As a result of the content analysis, the following main themes were identified: "aims regarding university education", "factors affecting academic motivation", "similarities and differences between distance education and face to face education", "experienced difficulties regarding the distance education process" and "recommendations for increasing the efficiency of distance education". Based on the research findings, it is thought that determining the positive and negative aspects of the distance education process will contribute to distance education applications. The results of the study can be evaluated by lecturers, researchers, and practitioners.

Keywords:

Experiences of university students, distance education process, COVID-19, academic motivation

1. Introduction

In Turkey, the first case of the disease, which was named COVID-19, was detected on March 11, 2020. In the following days, the number of cases increased in Turkey, as it did in many other countries. Since the disease also caused death, the outbreak evolved into an unprecedented crisis in a very short time and affected all areas of life (Turkish Ministry of Health, 2020). Thus, radical changes took place in education. In order to protect public health and slow down the spread of the disease, the distance education process began instead of face-to-face education. Universities made rapid attempts to adapt their infrastructure systems to meet the needs of this process (YÖK, 2020). Although lessons started in a short time, since the process was very novel, many deficiencies and unknowns emerged in terms of infrastructure, educators, and students. Individuals did not know how to participate in this process or what kind of process they should follow (Eken et al., 2020).

Prior to the pandemic, studies investigating distance education processes were not common in Turkey. With the rise of the pandemic, a quick move was made to an distance education process. Interest in this process has increased in Turkey, as it has globally (Eken et al., 2020). It is pleasing to see that recent studies conducted in Turkey are contributing to the literature on the opinions of educators about the distance education process, the effectiveness of the process, and its advantages and disadvantages (Avcı & Akdeniz, 2021; Çakın & Külekçi-Akyavuz, 2020; Görgülü-Arı & Hayır-Kanat, 2020; Koçyiğit-Özyiğit & Erkan-Atık, 2021; Külekçi-Akyavuz & Çakın, 2020).

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Among the advantages of the distance education process compared to face-to-face education are: the possibility to participate in education from any location without any space limitation by removing the distances; no time limitation in asynchronous education processes; the lesson can be received at any time; flexibility and spatial comfort; easy access once the necessary infrastructure is provided; and providing students with the opportunity to learn independently and individually (İşman, 2011). However, in addition to these advantages, there are also disadvantages, such as internet and technological problems that may occur (Watermeyer et al., 2022), connection problems that may occur (Lundberg & Stigmar, 2022; Taylor et al., 2022), and problems that may be due to the infrastructure systems of the universities (Eken et al., 2020; İşman, 2011).

To determine how the distance education process was implemented during the pandemic, where distance education became a necessity, and to address the related experiences, it will shed light on the aspects that were lacking. Based on this need, this study aims to examine the opinions and evaluation of undergraduate students about the distance education process. For this purpose, the participating students were asked eight questions during the individual interviews. The spread of distance education in education with the pandemic has made studies that reveal the views of students who have experienced the process directly a necessity. The results obtained from the study will help educators and students plan and conduct the distance education process more effectively in the transition to distance education due to pandemics and natural disasters. It is thought that this study will contribute to the creation of effective education policies due to the need for information in this field with the spread of distance education.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Model

The study used the phenomenological research design. Phenomenological research design is used to conduct studies concerning phenomena that exist but are not known in depth (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). In this design, the aim was to reveal the perceptions and experiences of individuals concerning a phenomenon (Creswell, 2017). The main data collection tool in the phenomenological research design is the interview technique (Büyüköztürk et al., 2021). As long and multiple interviews are conducted in such studies, it is ideal to keep the number of samples to a limited number (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018).

2.2. Research Sample

The study sample consisted of 15 (9 female, 6 male) undergraduate university students from 9 different state universities in Turkey who experienced the distance education process. In order to be able to participate in the study, they were required to volunteer to share their experiences. The maximum diversity sampling method was used to select the students for interviews to ensure participants were of a variety of characteristics, such as department and age. The ages of the participants ranged between 18 and 23 years. Three of the participants were first-year students, two were second-year students, three were third-year students, and seven were fourth-year students. While some of the students had experience in attending face-to-face lessons during their university education, others did not.

2.3. Data Collection Tools and Procedure

The data for the study was obtained by means of a semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers. In the process of developing the semi-structured form, the relevant literature was reviewed, and the researchers discussed it among themselves. This form included general information about the interview, a variety of questions to gather personal information about the participants, and eight questions about the participants' experiences with the online process. Participants were informed that their personal information would remain confidential. The online platform Zoom and the telephone were used as interview tools. The interviews were conducted with the participation of two people: the first researcher and the student. In total, 15 interviews were conducted, with one interview with each of the participants. Each of the interviews lasted approximately 15-30 minutes. With the consent of the participants, the interviews of 11 participants were video recorded, and 4 participants were audio recorded. The interviews were conducted with the help of a semi-structured interview form. At the beginning, after briefly introducing the researchers, information about the research was given and explained that the research was conducted to ascertain the experiences of university students during the COVID-19 distance education process. Following this information, questions were directed to the participants, asking their age, university, department, and grade level. After the questions

regarding personal information, the part of the interview concerning their experiences with the online process started. A total of 8 questions were asked to students, such as "What is your purpose of studying at university?" In cases where participants could not answer the question, additional support questions, such as "What are your expectations?", were asked of the participants. Alternative and supporting questions were determined for each separate question. The information obtained in the interviews was transcribed by the researchers through the video and audio recordings and made ready for analysis. After the interviews were analysed, the recordings were deleted.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using MAXQDA 2022 software (VERBI GmbH, Berlin, Germany). In this study, the Graneheim and Lundman seven-step method approach was adopted via content analysis for the data analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Interviews with the participants were analyzed by means of content analysis (Büyüköztürk et al., 2021). Content analysis aims to conceptualise the data and reveal the themes that may describe the phenomena; the results are descriptive (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). Coding was carried out separately by both researchers, and then the codes and themes identified were compared. The codes and themes on which the researchers agreed and disagreed were determined (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). The consistency between the coding by the researchers and the raw data was checked using the degree of semantic similarity and categorical classification (semantic validity) between the coding units, and the consistency between the two codings was found to be 0.87. According to Kirilenko and Stepchenkova (2016), a high level of coherence in the coding of research findings by different researchers ensures the repeatability of the coding, providing evidence for validity. In addition, direct quotations are included in the content analysis, and detailed quotations are available if necessary (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). For this reason, the opinions of the participants were frequently included in the findings section of the research study.

2.5. Ethical

The study was approved by the Akdeniz University Ethical Board prior to data collection (Report Number: 2021G056).

3. Findings

Individual interviews with the students were analyzed by means of content analysis, and the findings based on the opinions of university students about their COVID-19 distance education experiences are presented. As a result of the content analysis, main themes emerged from the related code groups, considering the similarities and differences. Through a process of brainstorming and reflection, the authors agreed on five main themes with three double subthemes. These main themes, subthemes, codes, and the frequency of mention of the codes are presented in Figure 1 and Table 1. The five main themes were: "aims regarding university education", "factors affecting academic motivation", "similarities and differences between distance education and face-to-face education", "experienced difficulties regarding the distance education process" and "recommendations for increasing the efficiency of distance education". A word cloud depicting the codes of experiences of university students during the COVID-19 distance education process is presented in Figure 2.

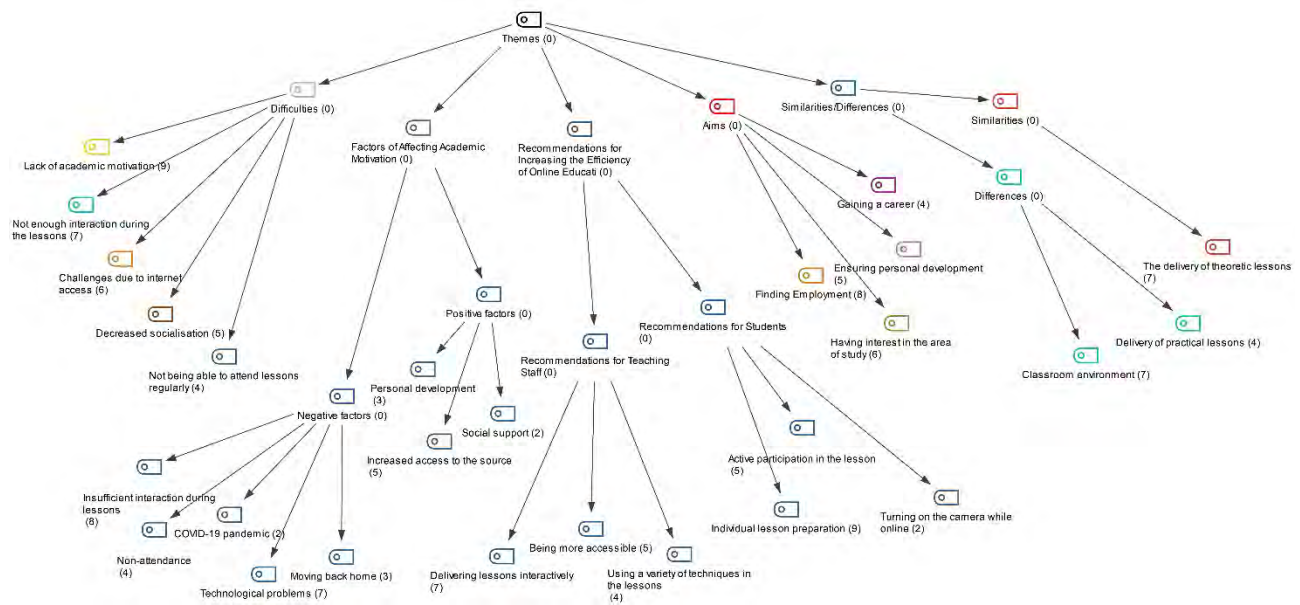


Figure 1. Experiences of University Students' Distance Education Process

Table 3. Themes, Sub-Themes, and Codes

Theme	Sub-Theme	Code		
Aims regarding university education		Finding employment (8)		
		Having interest in the area of study (6)		
		Ensuring personal development (5)		
		Gaining a career (4)		
Factors affecting academic motivation	Positive factors	Increased access to resources (5)		
		Personal development (3)		
	Negative factors	Social support (2)		
		Insufficient interaction during lessons (8)		
Similarities and differences between distance education and face-to-face education	Similarities	Technological problems (7)		
	Differences	Non-attendance (4)		
			Moving back home (3)	
			COVID-19 pandemic (2)	
Experienced difficulties regarding the distance education process	Similarities	The delivery of the theoretical lessons (7)		
		Differences	Classroom environment (7)	
				Delivery of applied lessons (4)
				Lack of academic motivation (9)
Recommendations for increasing the efficiency of distance education	Recommendations for Students	Not enough interaction during the lessons (7)		
			Challenges due to internet access (6)	
			Decreased socialization (5)	
	Recommendations for Teaching Staff	Not being able to attend lessons regularly (4)		
			Individual lesson preparation (9)	
			Active participation in the lesson (5)	
	Turning on the camera while online (2)			
	Delivering lessons interactively (7)			
	Being more accessible (5)			
	Using a variety of techniques in the lessons (4)			

3.1. Theme 1: Aims Regarding University Education

When the codes belonging to this main theme of aims regarding university education are analyzed, it is seen that the aims of the participants related to their university education are finding employment, having interest in the area of study, ensuring personal development, gaining a career, and acquiring a diploma. According to the theoretical basis of academic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Vallerand et al., 1992), it is seen that students tend to have an intrinsic motivation regarding the aims of university education.

3.2. Theme 2: Factors Affecting Academic Motivation

When the factors affecting academic motivation were examined, it can be seen that this main theme has two sub-themes: positive and negative factors. Factors that positively affect students' academic motivation in the distance education process: Increased access to resources, personal development, and social support. Factors that negatively affect students' academic motivation in the distance education process are: Insufficient interaction during lessons, technological problems, non-attendance, moving back home, and the COVID-19 pandemic. When the codes related to the main theme above are examined, it is seen that the students experienced some positive changes during the online process. Some examples of student statements are given below.

"Previously, the lecturers were not sharing the slides with us, but now they share them. We have access to the resource." (P2)

"When you miss a lesson in face-to-face education, you don't get the chance to listen to that lesson, or you get the notes from someone, but only as much as they themselves have understood the lesson. But in distance education, even if you miss the lesson, you can open it and watch it as if you were in the lesson at the time." (P8)

According to the similar statements of P2, P8 and other participants, the differences in the distance education process compared to face-to-face education are the opportunity to listen to the lesson again and access to the source. Since the lectures are recorded in the distance education process, students state that they can repeat the parts they do not understand during the lecture and better understand them. The distance education process is efficient for theoretical lessons. The reason is that lessons can be recorded and watched again. The sharing of course materials by the teaching staff in the distance education process is more productive, according to the participants.

"I tried to take an interest in a variety of other things. Together with the pandemic, I started doing sports at home. Previously, I did not have such a habit. In the last few years, especially since I entered the Faculty of Medicine, I have read the most books I have read so far. I am trying to learn German. These are some of the small targets I have set myself." (P11)

The statement of P11 emphasizes doing sports, reading books, and learning a new language as personal development tools that positively affect academic motivation.

Some examples of negatively affect students' academic motivation in the distance education process are given below.

"I turn on my camera, but when my classmates do not, then I feel as if I am having a conversation with the lecturer by myself, I cannot see the rest of the class. The teacher does not perceive if we have understood or not. Everyone acts as if they understand, and I cannot say they don't, even if it is something very simple. Face-to-face, the teacher would understand our facial expressions. The lecturer would ask, "Shall I explain it again?". My motivation has decreased. During the pandemic, my brother was hospitalized; we had health-related issues, and I was negatively affected." (P1)

"We could not create a good communication line with my teachers. It was better when we were communicating face-to-face. When I had a question, of course I could ask it during the lesson, but it was not the same as if it were in face-to-face education." (P14)

When the example statements above are analyzed, it is seen that P1 and P14 prefer the communication style of the classroom environment in face-to-face education compared to distance education. They stated the following as the reasons for this: Not having the feeling of being in a classroom environment because students do not turn on their cameras during online lessons, lecturers' inability to realize whether students understand, students' hesitation to express that they did not understand the topic or to ask questions, and decreased communication. It was also observed that the situation of family members contracting COVID-19 made the process difficult.

"The most difficulty I experienced was regarding motivation. I could not concentrate while at home." (P7)

"I was most affected due to being at home. I have a sibling, and he was also receiving distance education. We had difficulties finding rooms. We have only one computer. Sometimes he wants to use it, and so do I; we coincide at

the same time periods. This is causing problems for us. Also, as we are at home, we also have responsibilities in the house, and this creates problems. When we are at school, we are focused on one thing, and we can concentrate on the objective.” (P8)

Analysis of the sample statements above showed that moving back home causes difficulties for distance education. The conflict between the responsibilities of being a student and the responsibilities within the family and limited resources can negatively affect academic motivation.

3.3. Theme 3: Similarities and Differences Between Distance Education and Face-To-Face Education

The responses of the students show that there are similarities and differences between the distance education process and the face-to-face education process. According to the opinions of the participants, the similarities between distance and face-to-face education relate to the delivery of the theoretical lessons taught. The differences between the two education processes are the classroom environment and the delivery of the applied lessons taught. Some examples of the statements of some participants are given below.

“The traditional method is the similar; the teacher lectures, and students are not active.” (P10)

According to the statement in P10, the similarity of both education processes is the way the theoretical lessons are taught. It is stated that theoretical lessons are handled in a traditional way in both processes.

“We are not in a classroom; we are not together. The students cannot chat amongst themselves as before; we cannot be together side by side as we were before.” (P1)

“We e-mail the lecturers. We can see that they have read it or that they have not answered. We cannot ask questions of the teachers as before. This is one of the problems I am experiencing. For example, when I do not understand, I cannot interrupt the lesson to ask. The teacher always sets a time limit. And when I re-watch the lesson, I cannot ask a question to the teacher.” (P2)

An analysis of the above statements shows that the participants experience the biggest difference in terms of a classroom environment during the distance education process, and these differences are considered negative. Participants state that they can ask questions of the lecturer as they wish during a face-to-face lesson delivery, but they cannot do this in the distance education process. It is considered that the lecturer is more accessible in face-to-face education, but it is difficult to reach the lecturer in the distance education process. Although it does not have a direct effect on the lessons, it is understood that the participants are more satisfied with being together with their lecturers and friends in the face-to-face education process. In the distance education process, on the other hand, they state that this communication decreases and that the process is less productive because they are not physically together.



Figure 2. Word Clouds of the Distance Education Process

3.4. Theme 4: Experienced Difficulties Regarding the Distance Education Process

The main theme of experienced difficulties regarding the distance education process is remarkable, as most of the participants shared common opinions. The opinions of some students on this theme are as follows.

“We participate less in the online lessons; there is more piling up, and I had difficulties becoming more motivated. As there is no compulsory attendance, I could miss the lessons.” (P2)

According to the participant statements, it is understood that students do not attend the lessons because there is no attendance obligation and the lessons are recorded. As a result of lower participation in the lessons, there is a lack of academic motivation, and, as a result of the lack of academic motivation, there is less participation in the lessons, causing a vicious circle.

“The teacher is always lecturing; I cannot ask the questions I have; I cannot be active. There are a lot of students, and there is limited time. I was not interactive enough for me, it was a difficult period.” (P10)

“There is a social environment at school, but here, unfortunately, there is no social network. I can only socialize with my closest friends.” (P14)

According to statements P10 and P14, distance education has meant a decrease in social environment, classroom interaction, and participation in the lesson.

“The faculty of medicine has a higher amount of practical learning needs in the education process in comparison to other faculties. The transition to distance education did not give me the opportunity to come face-to-face with patients and to practice skills.” (P11)

According to the statements of P11, the distance education process is not productive for the practical lessons. Since practice is required in applied lessons, the online process is not efficient.

"In the region where I live, there is no internet infrastructure, so I could not subscribe to an internet provider. I really made efforts; I spoke with many service providers, including mobile phone and computer service providers, but I just could not get a subscription." (P9)

"I had difficulties with the infrastructure, the system that was used by the university for the distance education process. The university was not successful in this; they could not be sufficiently ready, the system crashed very often, and we could not attend the lessons. Also, the connection problems, that is the problems of the internet." (P13)

An analysis of the sample statements above show that the participants had problems with the internet. It is seen that the inadequacies of the internet connection and the distance education systems of universities hinder the education process.

3.5. Theme 5: Recommendations for Increasing The Efficiency of Distance Education

The last theme of the study is recommendations for increasing the efficiency of distance education. This main theme has two sub-themes: recommendations for students and recommendations for teaching staff. Some examples of participant statements are given below.

"I recommend students participate in the lessons, to be more active, and to read the literature as much as possible." (P2)

"I recommend students participate in lessons and then re-watch the lesson for reinforcement." (P5)

According to the similar statements of P2, P5, and other participants, they suggest that students should attend the lessons, study, do research, and watch the lesson recording after attending the lessons.

"By not turning on the camera during the lesson, it shows the level of student indifference towards the lesson. While I am sitting attentively with my laptop in front of me, my fellow student is lying in bed listening to the lesson, but then saying distance education is not efficient doesn't sound rational to me." (P4)

When the above statement of P4 is analyzed, it is seen that gaining efficient benefit in the distance education process depends on the students themselves. Students can focus on what can change within themselves or their environment and take responsibility for their own behaviors in the distance education process.

"When we send messages to the lecturers, it would be better if at least some of them responded and answered our questions. Besides this, the lessons could be more interactive. That is, there could be more question and answers, etc." (P2)

"If they assigned research homework or if we had to take a quiz now and again, it would be more productive because we would feel the need to study." (P15)

When the statements above are analyzed, the participants suggest that students should participate more in the lessons, study, and focus on self-development. They suggest that the lecturers should use different techniques in the delivery of the lesson, make the lessons more interactive, and try to make the course more productive. Some examples of participant statements are given below.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

As a result of the content analysis, the following main themes were identified: "aims regarding university education", "factors affecting academic motivation", "similarities and differences between distance education and face-to-face education", "experienced difficulties regarding the distance education process" and "recommendations for increasing the efficiency of distance education".

This research study gained information on student experiences by ascertaining their opinions of the distance education process during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar studies are also found in the literature (Arslan, 2021; Çiçek et al., 2020; Genç et al., 2020; Ghoreyshi, 2022; Günal, 2022; Er-Türküresin, 2020; Hidayat et al., 2022; Kaysi, 2020; Nikolopoulou, 2022; Özer, 2022; Tuzcuoğlu, 2022). Arslan (2021), Genç et al. (2020), Ghoreyshi (2022), Günal (2022), Er-Türküresin (2020), Hidayat et al. (2022), Nikolopoulou (2022), and Tuzcuoğlu (2022) examined the experiences of students about the distance education process during the COVID-19 pandemic. Tuzcuoğlu (2022) examined the opinions of academicians about the distance education

process. Çiçek et al. (2020) and Kaysi (2020) researched the distance education process during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Özer's (2022) research and in this study, it is seen that the students gave similar answers. Students find it useful that the distance education process is independent of time and place. However, the decrease in social interaction is not beneficial for students. Reasons of reduced social interaction are decreased interaction of students with friends and teaching staff outside the classroom (lesson breaks, post-lesson interaction, etc.) and decreased social activities outside the classroom. Also, the results of the study conducted by Keskin and Özer-Kaya (2020) and this research study obtained similar findings. According to the students' opinions, distance education can be more efficient in terms of theoretical lessons than applied course lessons, while applied courses are more efficient with face-to-face education.

There is some consistency but also differences between the findings of the Genç et al. (2020) study and the findings of this study. In both studies, a portion of the students stated that they found it beneficial for the lessons to be recorded and for the materials to be accessible. In both studies, some of the students found family factors, prolonged exposure to technology, problems related to the COVID-19 pandemic, internet and technological problems, and uniformity in lecturing to be disadvantageous. However, while graduate students stated that their communication with their lecturers increased, undergraduate students stated that their communication with their lecturers decreased. The reason for this may be that graduate students are fewer in number than undergraduate students.

In the research of Nikolopoulou (2022), which aimed to learn the opinions of the students on the distance education process, it was seen that there were similar results with this research study. While it is seen that the convenience of time and space is one of the benefits of the distance education process, the decrease in interaction with the lecturer, the decrease in social interaction, the inability of the students to participate actively in the lessons, the inefficiency of the applied courses, and the technological problems have been found to be the disadvantages of the distance education process. Students cannot take an active part in the lesson; students are not given enough time to ask questions during the lesson; the delivery of the lesson is given by the lecturer; students cannot exchange ideas with each other as in face-to-face education; distance education is ineffective for the teaching of practical courses and lessons.

Distance education has indeed seen widespread adoption, especially after the COVID-19 outbreak and in response to natural disasters like earthquakes. It has become an essential component of the education system and is now commonly employed alongside traditional face-to-face education. For this reason, factors such as improving the technological infrastructure, providing internet access to students and lecturers, continuing training and support for distance education, planning lessons in ways that prevent too long exposure to technology, bringing limitations to lesson non-attendance, sharing course materials, and integrating online applications with face-to-face practices will contribute to a more efficient distance education process.

The results of this study have demonstrated that the following main themes were identified: "aims regarding university education", "factors affecting academic motivation", "similarities and differences between distance education and face-to-face education", "experienced difficulties regarding the distance education process" and "recommendations for increasing the efficiency of distance education". According to this result, this study helped to understand how university students view their distance education process.

5. Recommendations

The sample was composed of relatively few university students. It is difficult to generalize the findings obtained in these studies since it is often not possible to include the number and level of individuals in the sample that can represent the universe in qualitative research. In future studies, they can be carried out with different and larger sample groups. The combination of distance education and face-to-face teaching is more productive for the education process. The positive aspects of online and face-to-face methods can be utilized by using online and face-to-face teaching in combination. Also, if internet and technological problems can be solved, the efficiency of students in distance education can increase.

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