

Chapter 14

The Socio–Cultural Dimensions of E–Learning in Turkish Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Any individual is in constant communication with the society and cultural environment surrounding him/her. An active and productive interaction between the individual and society is attained through the studies in the field of education. At a time when information and technology is of paramount importance, education is not only limited to providing jobs for the young. The current circumstances have destined education to be multidimensional in such a way that individuals can strengthen their personality traits (Gulsecen & Alaca, 2004). Cultural factors such as individual beliefs, value systems, and attitudes towards information sharing play a significant role in adoption of technology. In addition, social factors predispose students to the use of e-learning. Factors like infrastructure and underdevelopment of society sometimes hinder e-learning. According to some research, instructional design strategies must consider cultural differences and their effect to promote successful e-training experiences. In Turkey, distance education projects have recently been carried out in several educational institutions, most of which are at the higher education level, and they do not provide educational access to learners in elementary and secondary schools. In this chapter, the authors identify those social and cultural factors that aid or impede e-learning in higher education institutions in Turkey.

INTRODUCTION

Distance learning is a type of education which has an interdisciplinary collaboration with technology, pedagogy, cognitive sciences and andragogy, and

which focuses on designing and using effective educational systems in order to deliver educational and tuitionary utility to the learners who are physically absent from where the education is given. “E-learning” and its synonym “web based

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learning” are both considered as distance learning practices. In order to implement distance learning and e-learning effectively in an institution, it is important to ascertain the existing barriers to and possible motivators of e-learning adoption.

The contemporary Turkish Education system was established in 1924 after Atatürk set up new secular schools. The Economist Intelligence Unit (Economist Intelligence Unit in cooperation with IBM Corporation, 2007) state that as far as Turkey’s e-readiness is concerned, Turkey appears to be almost ready internationally. In their survey in 2007 on the e-readiness of 69 countries, Turkey was ranked 42nd for that year and 45th for 2006. A recent study by Aydin and Tasci (2005) reported that universities are ready for the adoption of e-learning in terms of skills and expertise.

However, the adoption of e-learning in Turkish universities by the teaching staff and students is still at an early stage, the on-line teaching and learning practice is still rather ad hoc and the level of integration between on-line teaching technologies and teaching and learning practice is still rather fragmented and low.

As a developing country, Turkey has experienced problems in the national higher education system. The fact that the country has had a population increase relatively very high as compared to the European Union, which Turkey aspires to integrate, and a young population, led to serious problems in education, but the development of higher education has been one of the most significant objectives of the state. At this juncture, Open Education Faculty (OEF), which provides services in higher education through distance learning, has assumed a significant role. It was established in the 1982–1983 education year, and constitutes one of the critical factors of the process in higher education in Turkey after 1980. The first private university in Turkey, Bilkent University was founded in 1984. Furthermore, in 1980 the Higher Education Council known as YOK (Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu), was established, as it was written in the council’s history document,

in order to solve the problem of coordination which had appeared in the 60s -70s and to prevent the negative effects of other social problems on higher education. As can be seen, all of these complementary moves, coincide with the first half of the 1980s. This period was the time when the state started to reduce all public expenditures. The main clues about distance learning in Turkey lie in the structuring of OEF. In order to spot such clues, in addition to discussing distance learning theoretically, studying the history and foundation dynamics of OEF, which is the leading institution of the Turkish experience in terms of educational and social aspects, is essential for understanding the role OEF plays in Turkish higher education system (Karatas & Karatas, 2011).

As it was stated in (Kollias, 2007), given the growing offer of (and demand for) on line courses to international audiences of adult learners, the need to include a socio-cultural “angle” in the pedagogic design and implementation of on line courses, programmes and contents has today become something of an imperative.

Hofstede (1991) described culture as “... the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another. It is a collective phenomenon, because it is at least partly shared with people who live or lived within the same social environment, which is where it was learned. Culture is learned, not inherited. It derives from one’s social environment, not from one’s genes.” and continues “Cultural differences manifest themselves in several ways - symbols, heroes, rituals, and values.” ...” The core of culture is formed by values. Values are broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs over others. Values are feelings with an arrow to it: they have a plus and a minus side.” Depending on these factors Hofstede (1991) classified layers of culture as:

- A national level according to one’s country (or countries for people who migrated during their lifetime);

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