DISTANCE EDUCATION STUDIES OF FIRAT UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT
Distance Education is offered by a number of educational institutions and universities using modern and contemporary information technological tools. Some of these universities offer online courses without obeying the rules of the educational technology methods where these programs have the target to earn financial support from the students and distribute diploma without providing adequate teaching.

To conduct distance education, a local television broadcasting institution was established at Firat University in 1991. Later, a distance education center was created for providing a qualified synchronous and asynchronous distance education.

In this study the pilot distance studies of Firat University will be discussed. The weaknesses and distinguished sides of the distance education at Firat University will be investigated. Finally some recommendations in the sense of distance education are offered.

Keywords
Distance Education, Expanded Learning, Firat University.

1. INTRODUCTION
The expanded learning is another teaching method which is offered by a number of educational institutions in the world. Educational technology has developed very quickly in the last few decades. After foundation of the internet, web based distance education has often applied for lifelong education. Time and place independencies of the web based distance education are the most attractive part for the adults who do not have opportunities to continue traditional classes.

The quality of some of the expanded learning is questionable because the tools that are used do not have differences from the books. In other words, the course material prepared for the distance education is only an electronic copy of the book. However, to attract students, multimedia specifications should be added into the online course materials.

In the rest of this paper, the distance education studies and related tools are investigated for Firat University.

2. NATIONAL INFORMATICS COMMITTEE
Between 1999 and 2002, a National Informatics Committee was established by the Higher Education Council of Turkey. The aims of the committee were;

- To deploy distance education to whole country,
- To establish an academic and educational relationships between Higher Institutions in Turkey,
- To evaluate and accredit the courses that are submitted to the committee,
To organize quality and flexible distance education events offered by different educational institutions.

3. THE TYPES OF DISTANCE EDUCATION AT FIRAT UNIVERSITY

Firat University was one of the first eight universities in Turkey which used EARN (Europe Academic Research Network) network system in 1988. The first attempt of distance education had begun in 1990 via e-mail. Some of the faculty used e-mail facilities between USA and Turkey to supervise and complete the master thesis of their students. At that time, a number of master students completed their thesis using EARN opportunities (İsbir, E., G.; Varol, A., 1997).

A project numbered FÜNAF 56 and titled “Steering a Satellite Dish Using Microcomputers and Broadcasting TV Programs” was proposed to the Research Fund of Firat University on March 25, 1991 which resulted in the first university local television in Turkey (Varol, A.; Kunç, Ş., 1993). The second distance education experiences of Firat University began using this local television institution (Figure 1). Some certificate programs were offered as a live or as a re-diffusion program on TV to the citizens of Elazig. This kind of distance education could be counted as one way communication technique. However, people could connect to the television studios using public phone systems and could ask their questions to the faculty. The people who followed these computer literacy, computer skills and database management related courses on TV attended the final exams at the university. After passing the written and applied exams, the students earned a certificate that can be used to find a computer related job on official institutions.

Firat University met with Internet because of a project titled “The Internet Connection of Firat University and Establishing Web Pages of the University” that is submitted to the Research Fund of Firat University (FÜNAF 183) in 1995 (Varol, A., 1996). Because of this project the web page of the university was prepared and published in the internet. The connection was on leased line, which yielded to have very slow internet speed and not flexible software support.

3.1 Robotics Course at a Distance

In 2001 and 2002, a web based distance education course named Robotics was prepared and offered to the students of two different universities. Some students of Kahramanmaras Sutcu Imam and Sakarya University
took robotics course via Internet (Varol, A., 2003). The course materials were prepared using Firat University’s television facilities. The videos of the course were established by Firat TV studios. The animations and simulations of the course were developed using up-to-date software.

The robotics course that prepared at Firat University was one of the first sixth courses that were accredited by the National Informatics Committee of Higher Education Council (Varol, A., 2002). The content of the course was in the field of applied sciences. Therefore it was questionable whether a technical course can be taught as a web based distance education or not?

The robotics course material was prepared using different animation and simulation software. The specifications of the multimedia, such as animation and simulation, were used in robotics course to eliminate the difficulties of the technical subjects. In addition, the course was taught at the universities (Kahramanmaras Sutcu Imam and Sakarya Universities) face to face to students during two weeks time period using portable robotics sets to teach the applied contents of the course. The students who followed the theoretical contents via internet could mount the robot sets easily (Figure 2). The faculty who was responsible to teach the robotics course supervised the applications of the robot sets during the two weeks lasted education.

The exams were divided into two parts. One of them was online exams on theoretical subjects. The main server was located at Firat University. There were established smart IT classes at the Kahramanmaras Sutcu Imam and Sakarya Universities. During the exams the students used the IT classes and these classes were observed by cameras. The smart classes could be followed by the faculty at Firat University where the main server was located. In addition, a research assistant was ready in the smart classes as proctor. The type of the exams was multiple choices. Although the questions were same for all students, the hierarchy of the questions and choices were randomly distributed for each user. Therefore, possibility of plagiarism is decreased. The exams were conducted at the same time and after a certain time of period the system closed the questions that were being asked, and provide the exam result to the student. However, during the exam period there were occasional internet connection speed problems between the host and computers in the IT smart classes.

The second part of the exams was applied at the target institution face to face. The students mounted robots using Lego parts and wrote necessary coding for automation systems. After completing the theoretical and applied parts of the exams successfully, the students passed from this course.
3.2 Distance Education Centre of Firat University

In 2002, a Distance Education Center was established at Firat University to create distance education opportunities for the students in the regional universities which did not have enough faculties. Only a few faculty members at Firat University prepared their courses online at that time, since the faculty did not have any special advantages with holding their courses in the internet. At the end, because of lack of the numbers of online courses, this central unit could not expand distance education courses.

Firat TV can be considered as part of the Distance Education Center. Firat TV has broadcasted cultural, social and educational programs since 1991. All symposiums and conferences that organized by Firat University have broadcasted live to Elazig via Firat TV. The audience of the television sometimes asked their questions directly to the panel managers.

4. LAW ON THE ESTABLISHMENT OF RADIO AND TELEVISION ENTERPRISES AND THEIR BROADCASTS

The Firat TV is a legal university television broadcasting system which was powered with the Law (3984) on the Establishment of Radio and Television Enterprises and Their Broadcasts. According to the article 24 of this law “Communication High Council may approve the plans as prepared or may ask for the necessary amendments. National, regional and local frequencies and channels shall be allocated with free of charge to the radios and televisions of the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation, Meteorology Radio broadcasting under the structure of General Directorate of Meteorological Affairs, Police Radio broadcasting under the structure of General Directorate of Security and local frequencies and channels shall be allocated with free of charge to the Communications Faculties which have radio and television departments (Law 3984, 1994)”. Firat University has used this right to continue broadcasting its programs.

Firat TV has been broadcasting its programs for more than 19 years. However, a new draft law was prepared to change the Law (3984) on the Establishment of Radio and Television Enterprises and Their Broadcasts. This new draft law will cancel the broadcasting rights of the universities. This is the violating of the rights that was granted before.

5. TELEVISION AND RADIO INSTITUTIONS OF THE UNIVERSITIES IN TURKEY

There are four university television institutions which broadcast their programs to the local areas. Firat University’s television was established in 1991. In 1998, Selcuk University has begun its distance education programs using television facilities. In 2002, Erciyes University has begun distance education using TV opportunities. Ataturk University is the fourth university which has television institution that broadcast educational programs.

Also, there are a number of universities which broadcast radio programs. Because of the newly introduced draft law, the voices of these institutions will be silenced. A good amount of investigations have been done to establish television and radio institutions. If these new law put into action, all investigation, counted millions of dollars, will sweep into trash. Moreover, some universities have trained students in the field of Journalism at School of Communication. The studios of the television and radio institutions are the physical application locations for the students, where the students were able to apply their theoretical knowledge. The stopping of the broadcasting opportunities of these schools has a meaning of obstructing the distance education developments in the country.
6. CONCLUSIONS

Firat University has conducted pilot studies for distance education using its own television broadcasting, video conferencing and web based facilities. However, the development of distance education at the university could not be developed enough, because of low interest level from the faculty.

The online course materials in Turkey should be evaluated as a book, and a copyright fee should be allocated to the authors to increase the number of the distance education materials.

The Distance Education Center of Firat University should be renovated. Moreover, this center should help to faculty by preparing the course materials.

A new draft law is prepared by the Turkish Radio and Television Supreme Council. This draft law will be sent to the Turkish National Assembly soon. But if this law accepted by the parliaments, the way of the distance education in Turkey will be choked. Therefore, the existing of the sentences “…and local frequencies and channels shall be allocated with free of charge to the Communications Faculties which have radio and television departments” of the Law (3984) on the Establishment of Radio and Television Enterprises and Their Broadcasts should be protected by this new law, too.

7. REFERENCES

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