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An Evaluation of the Distance Education Centers' Curriculum in Esfahan Secondary Schools from the Viewpoint of the Students in School Year of 2011-12

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Abstract

This study aims to evaluate the curriculum of distance education centers in Esfahan secondary schools (high schools) from the viewpoint of the students themselves, in the school year of 2011-12. In this study, design quality of curriculum materials, the quality of the new techniques of learning and the quality of education and administration have been evaluated. The research method has been descriptive survey. Study's population was 11928 students of distance education centers in Esfahan, in school year of 2011-12. Study's sample, which was determined based on cochran's formula, consist of 240 students who were studying in Esfahan's distance education centers in 2011-12 school year. These students were selected based on their gender and region and through stratified random sampling method. In this research, data collection was done by a survey questionnaire, as research tool, and then they were analyzed. Similarly, descriptive and inferential methods were used for statistical analysis of the data obtained from the questionnaires. The main findings of the research are as follows: based on weighted average of the questions and the inferential results of quality, the quality of curriculum and materials design, educational issues, administration (time and place of the classes, educational expenses and related laws) and the educational programs of distance education centers in Esfahan high schools in 2011-12 school year are indicated to be higher than average while the quality of the new educational technologies are lower than average.

Keywords: distance education, evaluation, curriculum, secondary education, distance education centers

Introduction

The issue of education has long been considered as one of the most important issues which has always preoccupied human beings. Distance education is a learning method in which the learner has no physical presence in the classroom. The main difference of distance

education compared with other forms of education is the distance between the learner, teachers and educational institution (Jalali, 2002). Distance education is conducted through media. Educational media and "ICT" (Information & Communication Technology) play an important role in this kind of education. The distance problem in communication has been so much resolved through Information & Communication Technology; therefore, in the field of distance education, competition on the international level has been in line with the globalization plans of many countries (Al hosseini, 2005). Distance education, as an educational method, began its career as a necessity to remove geographical barriers and, the age and gender restrictions of learners in the educational environments. Historical studies suggest that this phenomenon was first used in the field of religious educations by the priests and religious missionaries. In 1836, the University of Hawaii was one of the first universities which used correspondence education. The first steps for distance education in America were taken in 1870s. The United Kingdom Open University founded in 1969 led to establishment of distance education universities in several countries especially European and Asian countries. In Iran, Abu Reihan Biruni University, founded in 1971, for the first time set up distance education through correspondence education. Azad University in Iran was established in 1973. In 1994, the supreme Council of Cultural Revolution required Ministry of Education to establish an institution for distance and semi-distance educations and in 1996 the statute of this institution was approved by the above mentioned Council. Finally, the institution of distance education was founded and launched in 2003. This institution in the school year of 2005-2006 attracted the qualified students in 15 provinces and in 2007 was extended to all provinces (Khaleghi, 2006).

According to Willis (2007), in the last 25 years the growing of distance education has been far faster than other forms of education. From the factors affecting the development of this type of education, economic benefits, flexibility and eliminating distance can be counted. In distance education, for educational services, there is no need for physical structures. Likewise, teachers will have more time and therefore more people can be trained. In America, more than 80 percent of schools and colleges in their syllabus offer some courses through web, 68 percent of the 12-K7 schools have some of their topics on the web, and more than 50 percent of large companies use the web to do some of their educational activities (Lynch, 2004).

Etezadi (2009), in his research, "problems of distance education centers from the perspective of high school teachers and students," referring to the researches of Alharthi (2003), Ellsworth (2000), Almogbel (2002), Allison (2002), Hassan zadeh (2002), and Bakideh & Rostami nejad (2007), concluded that in this kind of education limited access to information technology and lack of briefings should be considered and people's information and culture should be improved. Also, from the viewpoint of the students the levels of educational, financial, administrative and external problems in the error level of (p≤0.05) were more than average while teachers believed that only educational problems were more than average. Talebzadeh and Hosseini (2007), have carried out a research entitled, "The effectiveness of distance education centers and their educational programs and curricula in the secondary education courses". According to the results, the effectiveness of distance

education in terms of resources and facilities, satisfaction and needs of the students, flexibility in educational methods, promoting the use of ICT, influence on the students' level of self-educating, and so forth to a considerable extent has been satisfactory.

Taghvaei (2006), in his study, "the barriers of distance and virtual education from the perspective of secondary schools' principals in Tehran," identifies three barriers that are: equipments with the highest level of inhibition, financial factors and finally the human factors. In Hosseini's study (2006), "the effectiveness of the distance educational centers' educational programs and curricula in the country's secondary school in 2005-2006 school year," these results were found: in terms of resources and structure, the effectiveness of distance education on the country's educational system has been almost 90 percent and the overall efficiency of it has been about 99 percent.

Talebzadeh and Hosseni (2007), have evaluated "distance education as a new approach in Iran's educational system" and found out that the effectiveness of the distance education centers' enforcement in the school year of 2005-2006 has been satisfactory. However, this effectiveness in these centers' first year of establishment has been associated with some restrictions. In the implementation of the approved programs of the institution, owing to the administrators' lack of familiarity, provinces and school districts have not been completely successful in achieving the goals; however, supervision, control and improving the people's culture will result to the elimination of the above mentioned defects.

Zhao et al (2009), in their study evaluated the students' ability in relationship with the new technologies and found out that the students' high ability has been due to their understanding of the tools and technologies. Similarly, a significant relation was observed between the students' capability in lessons and their using of Internet.

Pina (2008), in his study about the factors influencing the popularity of distance education, enumerates thirty effective factors in promoting and developing distance education. Factors such as: access to technologies especially online library, applying instructional design principles and the politics for establishing distance education, and finally secured funding and high-level management information.

Jamtsho et al (2007), carried out a research about improving the quality of distance education through identifying problems, and observed that most of the students (87%) do not have enough access to the information and communication technology services. 43 percent of the students reported that they had interactions with other students during the program and only 35 percent of the students said that they have had easy access to computer.

Simpson's study (2006), about the selection of the courses showed that all methods introduced to select courses, either in terms of cost or appropriate course introducing have problems.

McLinden et al (2006), studied the problems of distance education. Their findings showed that at the beginning of the program, students are reluctant to participate in distance education programs; but after entering into the course, students will increase interest.

Armstrong et al (2003), regarding the activities of teachers and students in teaching and learning in distance education conducted a research and referred to two issues: 1) formal aspects (time management) and 2) educational aspects (independent study). They also observed that students encounter different issues when applying methods.

According to the initial establishment of such centers in America, Canada and some European countries, these countries' experiences can be used in order to increase the effectiveness of these centers and evaluate their standardization. One of the standards that were set by North America's Department of Education in October 2001 is called, "politics, standards and guidelines for distance education". The most important of these standards are as follows: 1) curriculum design; 2) educational new technologies; 3) factors related to education such as teachers' syllabus (lesson plans); 4) administrative matters such as the time and place of the classes, educational costs and laws related to distance education. These standards will be used in the present study. They have been also used by Sadrian (2010) and Kana'ani (2011).

Based on what was said, distance education in curricula of Iran has dedicated an appropriate place to itself; in this regard, this study is going to evaluate the curricula of distance education centers in secondary schools. By and large, it can de said that the main purpose of this study is to evaluate the curriculum of distance education centers in Esfahan high schools from the viewpoint of the students, in the school year of 2011-12. To achieve this goal, the following questions were designed and investigated (all questions are evaluated from the students' point of view in the school year of 2011-12).

From the perspective of the students in the school year of 2011-12, how much is the quality of the materials and curriculum design in the secondary distance education centers in Esfahan?

How much is the quality of educational technologies used in distance education centers of Esfahan secondary schools?

How much is the quality of issues related to education in the secondary distance education centers in Esfahan?

How much is the quality of administration (time and place of the classes, educational expenses and related laws) in distance education centers in Esfahan secondary schools?

How much is the quality of educational programs in these distance education centers?

Methodology

The present research is a descriptive- survey. The study is a survey, since is going to examine the learners' opinion; and it is descriptive because after collecting the data it will evaluate the curriculum of distance education centers in Esfahan secondary schools. The study's aim has been to investigate the students' opinion about the curricula, in Esfahan distance education centers.

2.1. Study's population, sample and the methods of sampling

The study's population consisted of 11,928 students who were studying in distance education centers in Esfahan secondary schools in the school year of 2011-12. The study's sample using the formula of $n = \dfrac{(\dfrac{N \times Z^2 \frac{\alpha}{2} \times \sigma^2}{\varepsilon^2 (N-1) + Z^2 \frac{\alpha}{2} \times \sigma^2})}{}$, was estimated as 240 people. In this formula n is the estimation of the sample, α is the error level that is considered as 5 percent, z is the value of the standard normal probability that at the confidence level of 95% is equal to 1.96, σ is the estimated standard deviation that is equal to 0.667 and ε is the desired probable accuracy which is equal to 0.0835. Students from the six regions were selected as random regular, commensurate with the size and from the secondary distance education centers in Esfahan. It is worth noting that the sample in each region was selected based on the general number of the students and their gender, and questionnaires were randomly answered by the students. Students in each region were selected based on a muster (list of the names) and by drawing.

Table 1: the sample of the students in Esfahan secondary distance education centers

gender	Region 1	Region 2	Region 3	Region 4	Region 5	Region 6	Total
Male	11	13	49	31	44	5	153
Female	7	10	31	5	29	5	87
Total	18	23	80	36	73	10	240

2.2. Tool for data collecting, its features, validity and reliability

The data collecting tool in this study has been questionnaire. The questions in this questionnaire were adapted and designed from Sadrian's (2010) validity and reliability questionnaire. The reliability of the questionnaire was reported by Sadrian as 0.936. It is noteworthy that Sadrian's questionnaire was prepared based on NADE-TDEC model (2001) and then through evaluation of content and formal validity and using experts opinions was localized and updated and was arranged by using five-point Likert spectra. The reliability of the questionnaire was reported by Kanaani (2011) as 0.882. For the first question of the study, seven sub-questions (1 to 7) were designed, for the study's second question there were thirteen sub-questions (from 8 to 20), for the third question there were twelve sub-

questions (from 21 to 32), for the fourth question there were eight sub-questions (from 33 to 40), and for the fifth question of the study, forty sub-questions (from 1 to 40). In addition, such variables as, gender, age, educational level, and the region were examined as the demographic variables.

To determine the questionnaire's content and formal validity, after designing, developing and setting the initial questionnaire and considering the opinions of the supervisor, the adviser and a few experts, again its content and formal validity was corrected and confirmed through applying the comments and suggestions of some experienced principals and teachers.

2.3.Methods of data analysis

To answer the research questions and according to the nature, purpose and type of the obtained data measurement scale, appropriate statistical tests in descriptive and inferential levels were used. In descriptive analysis of the data obtained from the questionnaire, after presenting the frequency of obtained responses, using the numerical values given to the frequencies the mean of the responses was calculated and then the appropriate descriptive statistics such as proportion, percentage, classification, tables and graphs and agreement tables were used to describe the results preliminary. While, in inferential analysis of the data, at first, by using kolmogorov - smirnov test, the normal distribution of the scores were examined and given the fact that distribution of the scores was normal, appropriate parametric statistical tests such as single-sample t-test and t-test were used for two-level variables and ANOVA (analysis of variance) test was used for multi-level variables. The statistical operation was performed by SPSS and EXCEL software.

Results

In this part the collected data, based on the research questions, will be analyzed.

3.1. The first research question: From the perspective of the students in the school year of 2011-12, how much is the quality of the materials and curriculum design in the secondary distance education centers in Esfahan?

In order to answer this question there are seven sub-questions in the questionnaire. Descriptive and then inferential results are given in following.

Table 2: evaluation of the answers to the research questions

questions	evaluation	Very low	low	middle	high	Very high	average
The first question(quality of the materials and curriculum design)	frequency	2	67	90	58	23	**3.14**
	percentage	0.8	27.9	37.5	24.2	9.6	
2nd question (the quality of educational technologies)	frequency	9	81	86	45	19	**2.92**
	percentage	3.8	33.8	35.8	18.8	7.9	
3rd question (the quality of issues related to education)	frequency	3	61	86	65	25	**3.20**
	percentage	1.3	25.4	35.8	27.1	10.4	
Fourth question (the quality of administration)	frequency	3	58	88	66	25	**3.21**
	percentage	1.3	24.2	36.7	27.5	10.4	
Fifth question (the quality of educational programs)	frequency	5	68	87	57	23	**3.10**
	percentage	2.1	28.3	36.3	23.8	9.6	

According to the results of this table, 28.7 percent of the respondents believe that the quality of the materials and curriculum design in Esfahan secondary distance education centers in school year of 2011-12 has been low and very low. 37.5 percent say it is average and 33.8 percent believe the quality has been high and very high.

Inferential results

Table 3: the results of the single-sample t-test, comparison between average and hypothetical average (m=3) in research questions

research questions	hypothetical average	average	Standard deviation	t	df	Significance
The first question	3	3.14	0.535	3.979	239	<0.0005
The 2nd question	3	2.92	0.417	-2.810	239	<0.003
The 3rd question	3	3.20	0.414	7.563	239	<0.0005
The 4th question	3	3.21	0.447	7.420	239	<0.0005
The 5th question	3	3.10	0.298	5.347	239	<0.0005

According to the results in table 3, the level of significance is <0.0005 and as it is less than 0.01, thus the observed difference at the confidence level of 99% is statistically significance. In other words, the respondents believe that the quality of the materials and curriculum design in Esfahan secondary distance education centers in school year of 2011-12 has been higher than average.

The second research question: How much is the quality of educational technologies used in distance education centers of Esfahan secondary schools in school year of 2011-12? To answer this question, 13 sub-questions were put in the questionnaire. Descriptive and then inferential results are given in following.

Descriptive results: according to the results given in table 2, 37.6 percent of the respondents believe that the quality of educational technologies used in distance education centers of Esfahan secondary schools in school year of 2011-12 has been low and very low, 35.8 percent believe that their quality has been average and 26.7 percent say the quality has been high and very high.

Inferential results: based on the results in table 3, the level of significance is <0.0005 and as it is less than 0.01, thus the observed difference at the confidence level of 99% is statistically significance. In other words, the respondents believe that the quality of educational technologies used in Esfahan secondary distance education centers in school year of 2011-12 has been less than average.

The third research question: How much is the quality of issues related to education in the secondary distance education centers in Esfahan in school year of 2011-12? There are 12 sub-questions in the questionnaire in order to answer this question. Descriptive and then inferential results are given in following.

Descriptive results: based on the results in table 2, 26.7 percent of the respondents believe that the quality of issues related to education in the secondary distance education centers in Esfahan in the school year of 2011-12, has been low and very low. 35.8 percent believe that their quality has been average and 37.5 percent say the quality has been high and very high.

Inferential results: according to the results in table 3, the level of significance is <0.0005 and as it is less than 0.01, therefore the observed difference at the confidence level of 99% is statistically significance. In other words, the respondents believe that the quality of issues related to education in Esfahan secondary distance education centers has been much higher than average.

The fourth research question: from the viewpoint of the students, how much is the quality of administration (time and place of the classes, educational expenses and related laws) in distance education centers in Esfahan secondary schools in the school year of 2011-12? In order to answer this question, 8 sub-questions are put in the questionnaire. Descriptive and then inferential results are given in following.

Descriptive results: based on the results given in table 2, 25.5 percent of the respondents believe that the quality of administration in Esfahan secondary distance education centers in the school year of 2011-12 has been low and very low. 36.7 percent believe it is average and 37.9 percent believe the quality is high and very high.

Inferential results: according to the results given in table 3, the level of significance is <0.0005 and as it is less than 0.05, therefore the observed difference at the confidence level of 95% is statistically significance. In other words, the respondents believe that the quality of administration in Esfahan secondary distance education centers in the school year of 2011-12 has been higher than average.

The fifth research question: How much is the quality of educational programs in Esfahan secondary distance education centers in the school year of 2011-12? In order to answer this question, 40 sub-questions are put in the questionnaire. Descriptive and then inferential results are given in following.

Descriptive results: based on the results given in table 2, 30.4 percent of the respondents believe that the quality of educational programs in Esfahan secondary distance education centers in the school year of 2011-12 has been low and very low. 36.3 percent believe that the quality of educational programs is average and 33.4 percent of the students believe the quality is high and very high.

Inferential results: based on the results given in table 3, the level of significance is <0.0005 and as it is less than 0.01, therefore the observed difference at the confidence level of 99% is statistically significance. In other words, the respondents believe that the quality of

educational programs in Esfahan secondary distance education centers has been higher than average.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the data obtained from the questionnaire, the researcher decided to evaluate the curriculum of distance education in Esfahan secondary schools. Therefore, for this purpose, five questions were designed to evaluate the quality of the materials and curriculum design, educational technologies used in distance education, issues related to education, administration of distance education centers and educational programs. The summary of the research's results are given in table 4.

Table 4: weighted average (mean) and quality of the research questions

question	weighted average	quality
4. the quality of administration	3.21	Higher than average
3. the quality of issues related to education	3.20	Higher than average
1. the quality of the materials and curriculum design	3.14	Higher than average
5. the quality of educational programs	3.10	Higher than average
2. the quality of educational technologies used in distance education	2.92	Lower than average

The weighted averages of the questions in order are as: 3.21, 3.20, 3.14, 3.10 and 2.92. Administration (time and place of the classes, educational expenses and related laws) dedicated the highest average to itself and perhaps the reason is that it is more tangible for the learners, and therefore they can conveniently investigate and comment on such matters. The lowest weighted average was dedicated to the educational technologies used in distance education. Maybe the reason is that these newly established centers are not properly equipped with new technologies. Considering this issue, authorities should focus on these centers in order to equip them with new technologies and encourage the teachers to use these new technologies in teaching.

Regarding the first research question, it is worth noting that a higher than average quality for the materials and curriculum design in Esfahan distance education centers, from the students' viewpoint, is somewhat satisfactory. This is attested by the little difference between the hypothetical average (3) and the obtained average (3.14). By analyzing the sub-questions of this question it is arguable that administrators should try to make the course offer on CD and promote the use of e-books. The administrators also should try that the content provided for the learners be related to their previous experiences, and their

future needs should also be considered. Another important point is that, by taking into account the cultural diversity of the learners, the provided content should be tried to be consistent with the students' real life. The last point to be considered is that the teachers should be encouraged to use new methods of learning and bring the learners to real-life stories.

The above mentioned results, from this perspective that the offered educational materials and curriculum are in line with the learners' real needs, are somewhat in agreement with the research of Talebzadeh and Hosseini (2007). While, they are quite in agreement with the researches of Sadrian (2010) and Kana'ani (2011).

Regarding the second research question, it should be mentioned that a lower than average quality for the educational technologies used in Esfahan distance education centers, is not satisfactory. This idea is attested by the results of t-test and the obtained mean. Maybe it can be claimed that this weakness is due to these centers being newly established. Another reason for this weakness is the involvement of such organizations as Telecommunications in providing facilities such as broadband Internet and accessible Internet for people. Finally, in researcher's opinion, the people's culture should be improved so that they can use these new technologies functionally. The results of this study, given the fact that learners do not have sufficient access to ICT and Internet services, are in line with the results of such researchers as Jamtsho et al (2007), Chizari (2002), Sadrian (2010), Kana'ani (2011), Etezadi (2009), Aghakasiri (2007), Taghvaei (2006), and Esfijani (2002). However, the study's results are not in line with the results of McLinden et al (2006), since in McLinden's study the learners use information technologies properly and have no problem in using these technologies.

About the third research question it is noteworthy that a higher than average quality for the issues related to education in Esfahan secondary distance education centers, from the students' viewpoint, is somewhat satisfactory. The little difference between the hypothetical average (3) and the obtained average (3.20) attests this idea. Regarding the results and analyzing the sub-questions of this question it seems that distance education centers and their administrators should have their eyes for focusing towards equipping the libraries of these centers and developing the learners' access to libraries. In addition, the pretty high weighted average for the sub-question related to the "teachers' interest in working in educational centers" shows the learners' having trust to teachers, but with regard to other sub-questions it seems that teachers should use more of the syllabus and show more ambition in holding remedial classes. Teachers in addition to considering a variety of teaching methods should also consider a variation in distance education programs. The last point is related to educational planners: in this question also the role of in-service training for the teachers is greatly highlighted and the planners have to design educational contents in such a way that further exposes the role of learning groups. The above results are somewhat in line with the results in Hosseini's research (2006), especially in parts related to learning groups and teaching methods of the teachers. In both researches the idea is that the administrators of distance education centers should focus their attention

on the learning groups. However, the results of the study are quite in agreement with Sadrian (2010) and Kana'ani's (2011) researches.

With regard to the fourth research question it should be noted that a higher than average quality for the administration (time and place of the classes, educational expenses and related laws) in Esfahan secondary distance education centers is somewhat satisfactory in the learners' opinion. This is attested by the little difference between the hypothetical average (3) and the obtained average (3.21). A supposed reason for this question's high weighted average is that all the considered sub-questions in this option (administration) have been tangible and palpable for the learners. The learners may not understand the philosophy of the questions associated to educational content, the quality of educational materials, etc, but since the questions in this category are a survey of their satisfaction, the learners have responded them easily. The results of this study on the learners' satisfaction are largely in agreement with the results of Bakideh & Rostami (2007), Sadrian (2010) and Kana'ani (2011), while, in terms of remedial classes' time are not in line with Aghakasiri's (2007) results.

Regarding the fifth research question it is worth noting that a higher than average quality for educational programs in Esfahan secondary distance education centers, in the learners' opinion, is somewhat satisfactory. This is attested by the little difference between the hypothetical average (3) and the obtained average (3.10). The reasons for this are the same factors mentioned for the first to fourth questions. Anyway, this educational method is a new method in Iran and comparing it with other countries that are using it for years can influence our expectations. The results of the present study have been quite in agreement with the results of Kana'ani (2011), Sadrian (2010), Etezadi (2009), Pina (2008), Jamtsho et al (2007) and Heineman (2003). However, they have been somewhat in agreement with the results of Alipoor (2007), Talebzadeh and Hosseini (2007), Aghakasiri (2007), Taghvaei (2006), Esfijani (2002), Hosseini (2006), Bakideh and Rostami (2007), and have been in disagreement with some results of Aghakasiri (2007) and McLinden et al (2006). The current study was done based on the studies which had been conducted in this field and given the nature of the study, in some cases, the results were in line and in other cases the results were not in line with previous ones. Also, in some cases, owing to various issues such as the country's culture, comparison is not relevant which was explained in previous section. Altogether and in brief, the quality of educational programs and curriculum in Esfahan secondary distance education centers is not very satisfactory.

Practical Recommendations

Based on the results of the study the following recommendations are suggested:

The quality of the materials and curriculum design

1.   When designing materials and curriculum, more attentions should be paid to the learners' needs.

2. The content of the courses should be close to the real life experiences of the learners.
3. Educational materials need to be consistent with the learners' cultural diversities

The quality of educational new technologies

1. Such technologies as, free E-mail services, chat rooms, weblogs, LAN (Local Area Networks) and forums have to be set up both for teachers and learners and they should be encouraged to be connected with each other so that using new technologies will become prevalent in society.
2. Sites should be set up for online registration and test results also should be announced via Web.
3. Arrangements for the assignments can be provided through the Internet

The quality of issues related to education

1. More facilities would be provided for the learners so that they can use further library resources. Even using new technologies the authorities would be able to provide the learners with the virtual and electronic library resources.
2. Educational administrators are supposed to give variety to methods of e-learning
3. Remedial programs in the form of correspondence or online should be provided for the learners.

The quality of administration

1. More information should be provided for the learners and their families in conjunction with the rules and regulations of the distance education centers. For this purpose, the national and local media such as radio, television and even local newspapers can be used.
2. Distance education centers would use the learners' feedback to determine the time of counseling classes.
3. In order to help the learners to afford educational expenses, distance education centers would consider such schemes as lending to learners. Also, fees have to be consistent with the provided facilities and trainings.

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Practical suggestions