Distance Education in Turkey

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INTRODUCTION

Distance education is the educational process in which the instructor and learner are physically separated, and interaction between them is conducted through technology. Distance education is neither a recent nor a new phenomenon. It has a long tradition. However, the development and adoption of sophisticated communication technologies often creates that impression (McGorry, 2003).

Distance education has a strong background in Turkey and is recognized as a method of learning for all levels of education except primary (years one to five). On the other hand, distance education has been centralized and controlled by the state. The Ministry of National Education (MONE) is responsible for all distance learning activities from kindergarten to the secondary level. The Higher Education Council is responsible for distance learning implementation in universities.

Recent statistics show that the demand for post-secondary education in Turkey is rising. Admission to higher education is centralized and based on nationwide examinations administered by the Student Selection and Placement Centre every year. Every year, approximately 1.5 million students enter the examination and nearly 420,000 of these students are placed into a higher education program (including the Open Education Faculty, OEF). In fact, in the 2001 to 2002 education year, the number of students at the secondary school level reached 2.24 million. This shows that the demand for postsecondary education will rise in the near future. However, it is not possible to double the capacity of the universities in a traditional sense. Therefore, it is expected that distance education will be thought of as one of the solutions to redress the balance. However, awareness about distance education based on the Internet is limited.

On the other hand, distance learning is being used increasingly as a mechanism for professional development. There is a growing private sector offering special IT courses via the Internet. Other courses are related to project and time management, language teaching, and as preparation for the university entrance examination.

MINISTRY OF NATIONAL EDUCATION

MONE has been providing distance education since 1992. The Open High School started with 45,000 students (Yazici, Altas, & Demiray, 2001). In 2002, the total number of students reached 552,760. The aim of the Open High School is to provide an opportunity to people who for various reasons could not complete high school. The curriculum and diploma degree are the same as for conventional high school students. Half of the students are older than 25. More than half of them are working. The Open Vocational and Technical School was established in 1995. The school has both distance and face-to-face education modes. Face to-face instruction occurs in the local vocational schools, mainly for laboratory (hands-on) activities.

In 1997, Turkey began to implement 8-year compulsory education through parliamentary approval of a law for basic education. Before 1997, compulsory basic education was limited to five years. Parallel with the new structure, the Open Primary School for grades six through eight of basic education has been established to give a chance to students to continue their secondary education. Open primary schools are for people older than 15 who have already completed 5 years of former primary school, the first part of basic education.

Delivery technologies are mainly printed materials (books), television programs, radio programs, teletext, VCDs, audiocassettes, and videocassettes. TRT (Turkish Radio Television) is the institution responsible for broadcasting the educational programs. MONE has developed a Web site mainly for announcements and information. The Directorate of Educational Technologies of MONE is responsible for the educational materials. Examinations are held in conventional ways in each province. The preparation of the tests and their evaluation are carried out by a central group in the Directorate of Educational Technologies.

HIGHER EDUCATION

In accordance with the Higher Education Act issued in 1981, Anatolian University was authorized to provide distance education in Turkey on a national scale. In 1982, the Open Education Faculty in Anatolian University started to admit students (Ozkul, 2001). Legally, there is no difference between the open education and conventional diploma degrees. There are no age restrictions. The Open Education Faculty enrolls nearly 300,000 students annually. The average age of the students is 24. About 70% of the students have a full-time job and 8% are part-time workers.

The degrees offered by the Open Education Faculty are in management, economics, preschool teaching, English teaching, home economics, public relations, secretarial studies, banking and insurance, overseas trade, health administration, tourism and hotel management, accounting, religious studies, agriculture, veterinary science, nursing, elementary school teaching to complete the BA degree, and information management with the cooperation of Microsoft.

Preparation of all teaching materials including television programs is an in-house activity. The interaction is provided by the OEF offices in the provinces by Internet (very limited) and mail services.

Middle East Technical University has two organizations offering distance learning. The Continuing Education Centre (SEM) is the first organization in Turkey to implement distance education by using the Internet. The name of the educational platform is IDE-A (Internet-Based Education-Asynchronous). The centre offers a 9-month certificate program on information technology. The total number of students over the past years has been 550. The instructors are from the Department of Computer Engineering, where the teaching materials are prepared. The materials are delivered via the Internet. Every two months, the students come to the university for face-to-face instruction and for examinations. The main interaction is online discussions or chat rooms via the Internet. The other organization is the Informatics Institute, opened by the Council of Ministers. Informatics Online is an online graduate program, accepted by the Higher Education Council as a regular master-of-science program (without thesis) like other graduate programs. The program is conducted mainly in an asynchronous manner. Collaboration among students and instructors is carried out by using both asynchronous (e.g., e-mail, forums/discussion lists) and synchronous (e.g., chat, whiteboard) tools. Web-based material enriched with interactive animations, simulations, and exercises is the basic course content.

Sakarya University has started an online 2-years pre-BA program on computer programming, information management, and management. The model is Internet-based and asynchronous. They also offer on-campus distance education courses such as mechanics, history, chip design, and folkloric studies. Sakarya University has an agreement with IBM Lotus, which is providing the Internet platform called LearningSpace.

Istanbul Technical University offers online, on-campus calculus and computer courses by the Centre of Virtual Education under the Informatics Institute. Firat University in Elazığ broadcasts educational programs by Firat RTV. Ahmet Yesevi University, a joint organization between the Republic of Turkey and Kazakhstan, was founded in 1992 in Turkistan. The diploma degrees are equivalent to those of the other universities in Turkey and Kazakhstan. Ahmet Yesevi University offers distance learning via the Internet. The language of instruction is Turkish. The courses are management (graduate and postgraduate), management information systems (graduate and postgraduate), computer engineering (graduate and postgraduate), and computer programming (two years, pre-BSc). Bilkent University has a communications office in New York City, equipped with interactive videoconferencing capabilities. A number of courses are delivered through this office via satellite connection. The courses that are offered live from New York via satellite are economics and public administration. Istanbul Bilgi University is offering an e-MBA, an online master's program in business administration.

THE PRIVATE INITIATIVES

There are numerous companies offering online courses, like Cisco Networking, Microsoft, and Oracle. There is a high demand for IT courses since IT is known as a growing sector in Turkey. In addition, there are a few companies working as content providers. One of them is Enocta, which is a joint company of Ernst & Young, Probil and Avez, and AB Learning. GANTEK in Ankara is another content- and learning-management system provider that has an agreement with Middle East Technical University-Preparatory School. The

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