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EVALUATION OF DISTANCE HIGHER EDUCATION PRACTICES IN TURKEY: THE DEVELOPMENT OF ASSOCIATE DEGREE AND UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the year 2000, the number of higher education institutions offering open and distance education in Turkey has been increasing, and many universities have been offering associate degree and undergraduate education by open and distance education method. Recent legislative arrangements divided distance education into two modes. While many higher education institutions that meet the required criteria are categorized as "distance education", three universities among them offer "open education" with more emphasis on mass teaching. This study assesses the development of distance learning on the basis of programs offered in the last ten years by focusing on the place of distance education programs among all the other university programs, the applications of higher education institutions to associate degree and undergraduate degree programs, the quota restrictions on the programs and on the number of enrollments, and the program diversity and progress. For this purpose, all distance education programs implemented by the universities since 1996 are explored and analysed as they are presented in the guidebooks Council of Higher Education published on web sites, and in the web pages of the related universities. The results show that higher education institutions involved in distance education cannot continue their programs because of quota restrictions and the number of students enrolled. It is important to review

the issues related to organizational, managerial, financial and other legislation, as well as the quota and enrolment problems for the development of distance education programs.

Keywords

Distance Education Programs, Distance Education in Turkey, Development of Distance Education, Quota Practices in Distance Education

1. Introduction

The history of open education practices in Turkey goes a long way back, however, from 1982 to 2000, only one university (Anadolu University) was granted the authority to apply diploma programs through the open education method in the higher education system. For many years, this university alone was implementing open education practices, and thus it was considered to be among the mega universities in the world, with its more than a million students. After the legal legislation in 2000, despite many shortcomings, some other universities have started to offer associate degree and undergraduate diploma programs. However, universities except Anadolu University were not allowed to offer open education: They were allowed to open programs only under the name "distance education". This made "open education" and "distance education" two different forms of teaching in terms of higher education institutions. Distance learning is based on synchronous lectures, where the number of students that can be registered in classes and programs are limited (quota application). In distance learning, information and communication technologies are used intensively and educational practices are formed accordingly.

In the early years when higher education institutions opened programs, higher quota rates were allowed by the Higher Education Council, i.e. the highest decision-making institution in Turkish higher education. This encouraged not only the present higher education institutions to open new programs, but also the new institutions to enter into the field. Distance education grew and spread throughout the country both in terms of associate degrees and undergraduate programs, however it is in decline since 2011 and 2012. From these years on, the programs have been closing in a very short time, especially due to large quota restrictions and lack of long-term planning by the institutions. Although many other factors might be in effect, the external factor of quota restrictions, and internal factors such as the location of the programs within the organization of higher education institutions, and the lack of program diversity are considered to be the reasons of this decline. In this study, the effects of these factors on distance education diploma programs are analyzed.

In the text, the first calendar year of the related academic year is given. For example, the academic year 2011-2012 is written as 2011.

2. Method

This paper is a descriptive study. The data were collected through one of the qualitative data collection techniques, i.e. document review. For this purpose, the following sources between the year 2000 and 2016 were scanned: All the publications and web sites of the Council of Higher Education; Higher Education Programs guides; the Center of Measurement, Selection and Placement quotas; the web pages of higher education institutions, higher education institutions, programs, teaching units to which the programs belong, quotas and records. The collected data are presented and interpreted in tables.

3. Literature

The increasing use of information and communication technologies has transformed teaching and learning at all levels of higher education systems, and has led quality enhancements. Traditional forms of teaching and learning are increasingly converted to online and virtual environments (Buttar, 2015). Higher education institutions which offer distance education must make important changes in teaching methods and use of resources. E-learning becomes essentially related to some technical procedures and structural mechanisms that any educational platform is based on (Laadem, 2017). Rather than face to face learning, education today mostly employs online learning (Mutawa, 2017).

This requires decision-makers to think carefully. Especially, the policy makers at both institutional and governmental levels have to consider not only how they will introduce distance education, but also why they will do so. Moore and Kearsley (2012) list the reasons why institutions are encouraged to start distance education as follows:

- Increasing access to learning and training as a matter of equity,
- Providing opportunities for updating skills of the workforce,
- Improving the cost effectiveness of educational resources,
- Improving the quality of existing educational structures,
- Enhancing the capacity of the educational system,
- Balancing inequalities between age groups,
- Delivering educational campaigns to specific target audience,
- Providing emergency training for key target groups,
- Expanding the capacity for education in new subject areas,

- Offering combination of education with work and family life, and
- Adding an institutional dimension to the educational experience.

Although this list may be extended, the motives listed above are enough to explain the growing interest of institutions in distance education. Moreover, this interest will continue to increase. These factors may lead institutions to step in quickly with a great enthusiasm. Accordingly, Holmberg (1995) characterizes distance education practices with the trial and error approach, which is the least valid theoretical base (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012). Many institutions consider their existing traditional education accumulations to be sufficient for offering distance education, and they do not focus on long-term planning in the field. These institutions are the candidates of failure. Distance education represents a teaching method that goes far beyond the transformation of a successful traditional face-to-face classroom environment into online courses. Whilst many governments in developing countries stepped up opportunities for access to higher education through non-traditional form such as distance education or e-learning, many of these new courses were undermined because of their poor quality. This resulted in high levels of dropout and/or failure to achieve broad participation (which is one of the primary goals of a program) (Liyaganawardena, 2014).

Pina (2008) argues that decisions are usually not taken into account in broad institutional framework. Some institutions which wish to meet requests for Internet-based courses make informed decisions to serve students as soon as possible, and that planning comes afterwards. Distance education programs and similar innovations are thus unable to become fully institutionalized within their own organization because of the failure of the majority of them. Discontents in distance education programs prevent them from becoming a "normal" and internal part of the institution, without their "special project" status. Berge and Muilenburg (2000) identified 64 obstacles in distance learning through a large-scale survey study, and they argue that the five strongest obstacles among them are related to organizational culture. These are as follows;

- Organizational resistance to change,
- Lack of shared vision for distance education in the organization,
- Lack of strategic planning for distance education,
- Slow pace of implementation, and
- Difficulty keeping up with technological changes.

Gellman-Danley and Fetzner (1998) refer to seven critical areas in the policy development for distance education institutions: Academic, fiscal, geographic, governance,

labor-management, legal, and student support. Simonson, Smaldino and Zvacek (2015) state that the distance education policies of institutions should cover the following areas: Governance and administration of the distance education/online learning program; academic policies; quality control; faculty-related issues; student-related policies; fiscal issues; legal issues; library policy; and policy on acceptable use of IT resources.

As it can be seen in the references above, there are a number of important factors that need to be taken into consideration when developing and implementing distance education programs. Distance education is a different type of education than traditional education. This difference should be taken into account especially by traditional education providers. Otherwise, the application will not go beyond trying. The number of enrolled students can also be added to the factors and obstacles that need to be taken into consideration. If sufficient numbers of students register, the programs can survive. At this point, numerical restrictions for distance education within national education policies are an important constraint to be considered. In Turkey, the major restriction in this area is the application of quota restrictions for distance education. Restricting quota is a deterrent at the beginning of the development of programs. In the following sections of the study, the development of distance education programs in Turkey, quota constraints, the locations of programs within organizational structures and program diversity are examined.

4. Distance Education in Turkey

Distance education in higher education in Turkey started in 2003. Mersin University and Sakarya University launched four and five associate degree programs respectively. From this date on, many universities have shown interest in this new field. The development of distance education programs is examined below in the context of associate degree and undergraduate programs.

4.1 Development of Distance Education Associate Programs

Distance education associate degree programs have been offered in higher education institutions in Turkey since 2003. Especially since 2008, the number of associate degree programs has increased significantly every year.

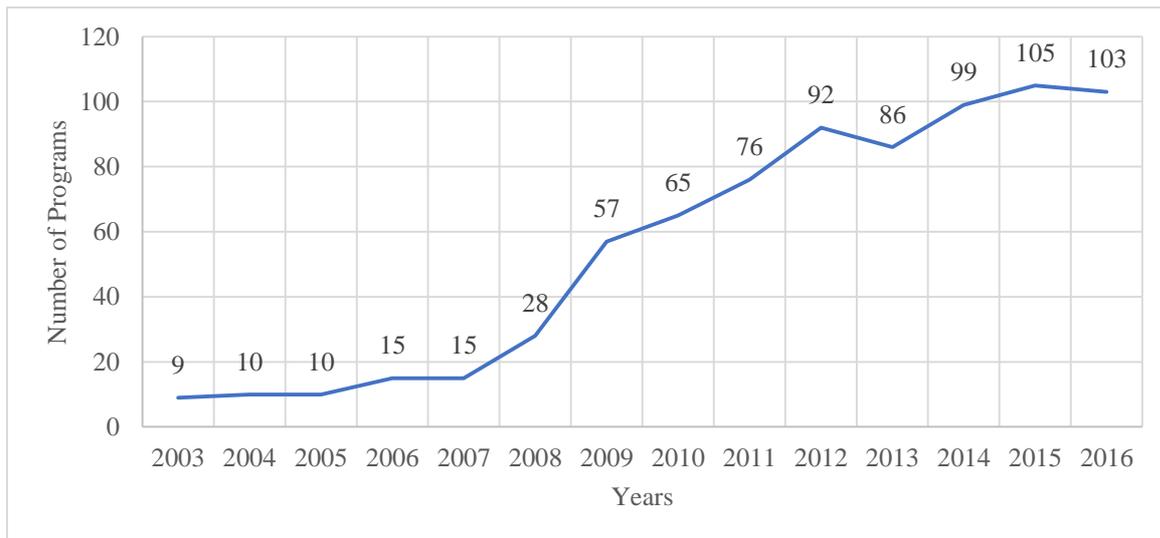


Figure 1: *The Development of the Number of Associate Degree Programs*

Source: *Derived from the Measurement, Selection and Placement System Guidelines for Higher Education Programs and Quotas 1996-2016.*

Rapid increases in distance education associate degree programs, especially since 2008, can be seen in Figure 1. The reason for this increase is the fact that new universities enter the field and open programs. As can be seen in Figure 2, the number of universities offering these programs were five in 2007, and 11 in 2008. This rapid increase continued until 2012. In 2013, the rate of increase ceased. The number of universities offering distance education associate degree programs decreased in 2016 compared to 2015.

Another significant point not seen in these figures is that 52 different universities opened distance education associate degree programs in Turkey over these years. However, 20 universities completely closed their programs, and withdrew from the field. Above mentioned 20 universities ended these programs within an average of three years. In 2016, there were 32 universities that offered associate degree programs. In 2016, 52 of 185 universities in Turkey, had distance education associate degree programs, but only 32 of them are still active.

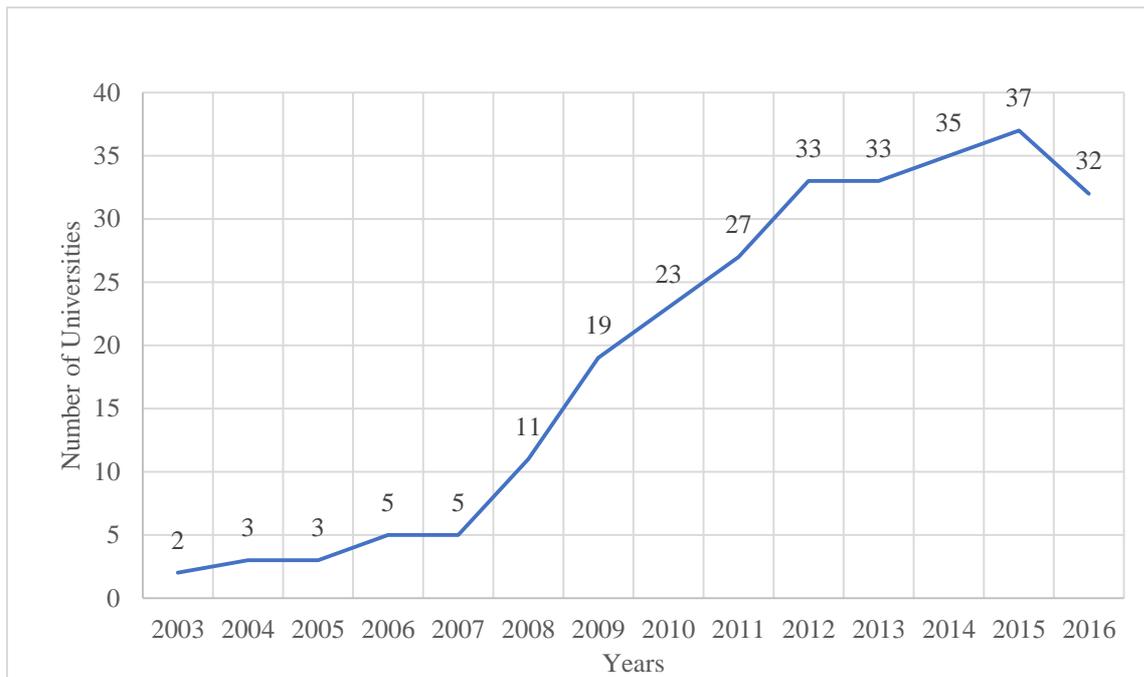


Figure 2: Number of Universities Offering Associate Degree Programs in Distance Education by Years

Source: Derived from the Measurement, Selection and Placement System Guidelines for Higher Education Programs and Quotas 1996-2016.

Many factors can affect the decisions of the universities to close their programs. The quota restrictions for the programs are among these factors. The Council of Higher Education determines how many students will be placed in higher education programs in Turkey; in other words, The Council of Higher Education determines the quota rates to be applied to the programs. As can be seen in Figure 3, in parallel with the increasing number of higher education institutions and the increasing number of programs until 2009, the quotas were increased. However, after that year, while the number of higher education institutions and the number of programs offered continued to increase, the quotas decreased dramatically. Although the number of higher education institutions that offered associate degree programs in 2010 increased from 19 to 23, and the number of programs increased from 57 to 65, the quota rates granted to the programs dropped from 15.110 to 8.415. This means a decrease of 45% approximately. In other words, the quota of distance education associates degree programs decreased by half compared to the previous year. Despite this unfavorable development, the number of programs and institutions continued to increase until 2015, as seen in Figures 3 and 4 above. The quota increase, however, has not been realized in accordance with it. In other words, quota ratios continued to narrow over the years. For example, while 57 associate programs in 19 higher education institutions were given 15,110

quotas in 2009, 103 associate programs in 32 higher education institutions were assigned a quota of 10.617 in 2016. In other words, compared to 2009, while the number of delivering higher education institutions increased by 13 and the number of programs increased by 46, but quotas decreased by 45%.

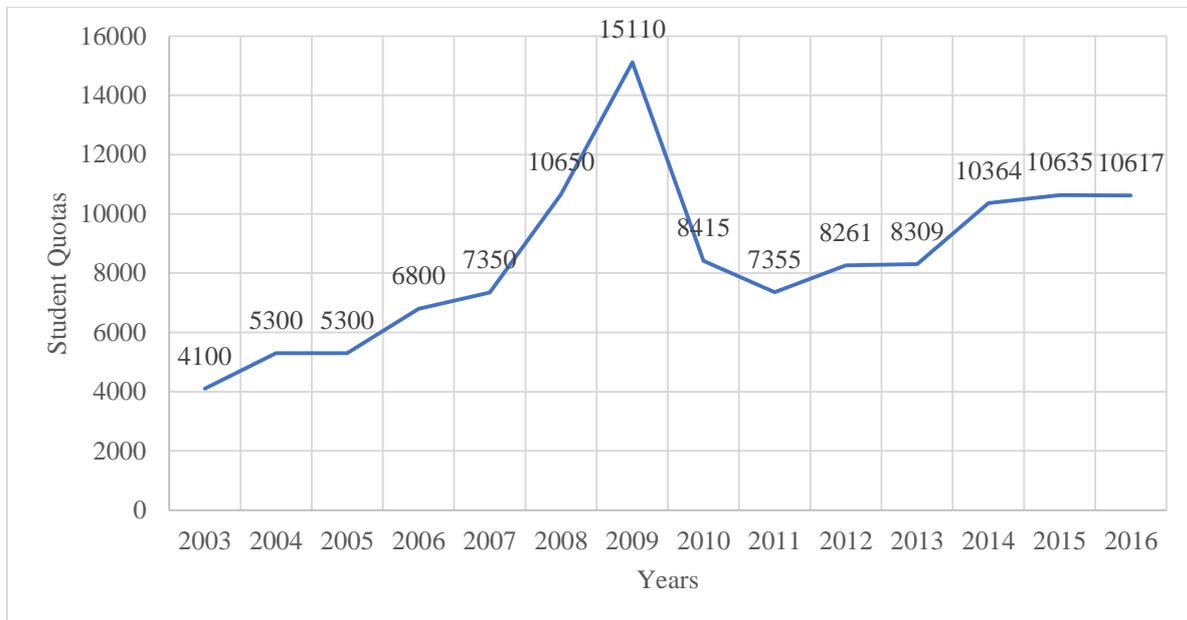


Figure 3: *Quota Restrictions Applied to Associate Degree Programs*

Source: *Derived from the Measurement, Selection and Placement System Guidelines for Higher Education Programs and Quotas 1996-2016.*

This also affected the number of students enrolled in the programs. Evaluation is not possible because only data on the enrolled students in the last two years are available. However, considering that 6.348 students in 2015 and 7.243 students in 2016 were enrolled in all programs, enrollment rates can be estimated as 61% and 68% according to the quota (Associate Programs Map, 2015-2016). If these enrollment rates are generalized to all years, it can be estimated that 30% of the students do not register in programs.

Another issue explored in the development of distance education programs is the provision of program diversity and organizational structures within higher education institutions. In 2016, 219 different associate degree programs within traditional education system in Turkey were offered. There were 38 different programs with distance education method. Considering that 38 programs were conducted by 32 different higher education institutions, it can be said that many programs were repeated in different institutions, thus program diversity was not sufficient.

The teaching units programs were opened differed in higher education institutions. 52 higher education institutions opened distance education programs in three different teaching units. These were already existing "Vocational Schools", "Faculties" and "Distance Education Vocational Schools" established for distance education.

In Turkey, Vocational Schools offer two-year associate degree education. Associate degree programs are offered mostly in the Vocational Schools. By 2016, 48 of the 52 higher education institutions that offered associate degree programs with distance education method offered these programs within the Vocational School. These Vocational Schools also continued face-to-face education while carrying out distance learning programs. In other words, they became dual-teaching schools.

Two higher education institutions established "Distance Education Vocational School" to offer associate degree programs. However, one of them, namely, Usak University, started a distance learning program in Distance Education Vocational School in 2009, and added a program in 2012. In 2013, however, both programs were closed and distance teaching was stopped.

In two universities, distance education associate degree programs were opened within the faculty.

The fact that associate degree programs are mostly opened in existing vocational school may also indicate that these institutions consider distance education as a continuation of traditional education. From an organizational point of view, this can be seen as a problem of continuing distance education programs, and can cause many higher education institutions to withdraw from the field or to reduce the number of programs. This is because distance learning has its own unique sub-systems and understandings.

4.2. Development of Undergraduate Programs in Distance Education

In Turkey, higher education institutions started to offer undergraduate distance education programs in 2009. Undergraduate distance education started with 6 programs at a university, and one program at another in 2009. The number of programs increased rapidly next year. Higher education institutions began to enter the field quickly, but it did not last long: This momentum stopped in a few years, and the tendency to close programs followed.

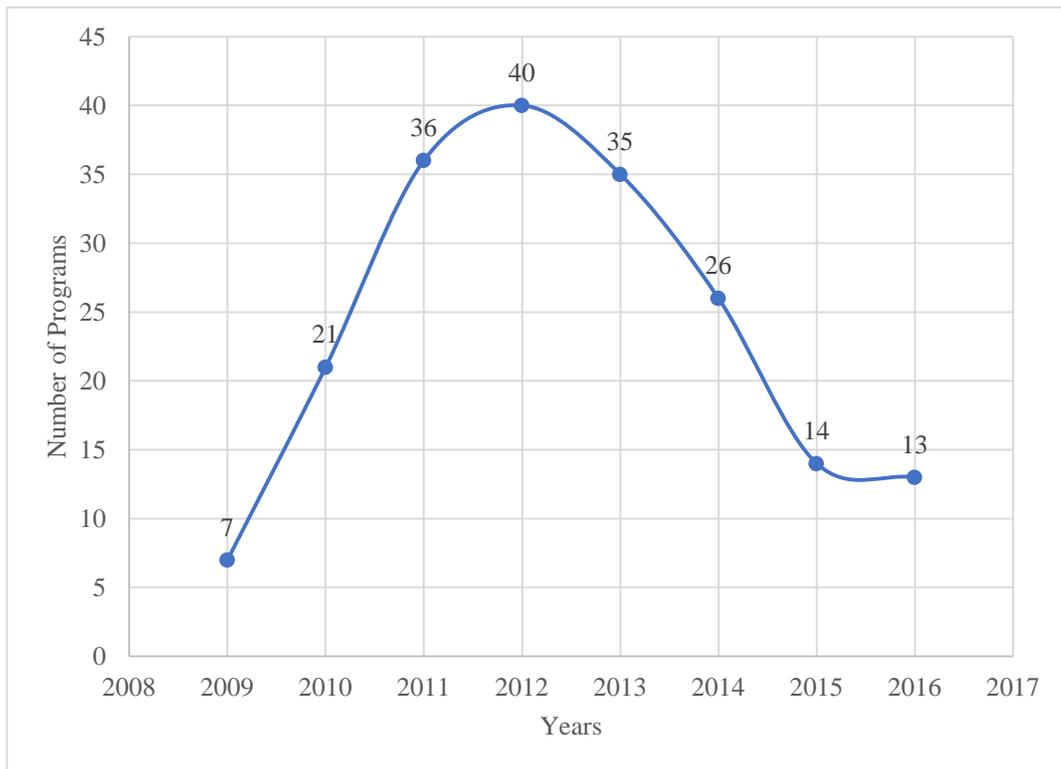


Figure 4: *The Development of the Number of Undergraduate Programs*

Source: *Derived from the Measurement, Selection and Placement System Guidelines for Higher Education Programs and Quotas 1996-2016.*

As can be seen in Figure 4, the number of programs that reached 40 in a significant increase over the first four years started to decline rapidly afterwards. In other words, existing programs started to be closed by higher education institutions. This decline continued every year and, dropped down to 13 in 2016. Of course, many of the higher education institutions new in the field of distance education also withdrew from the field.

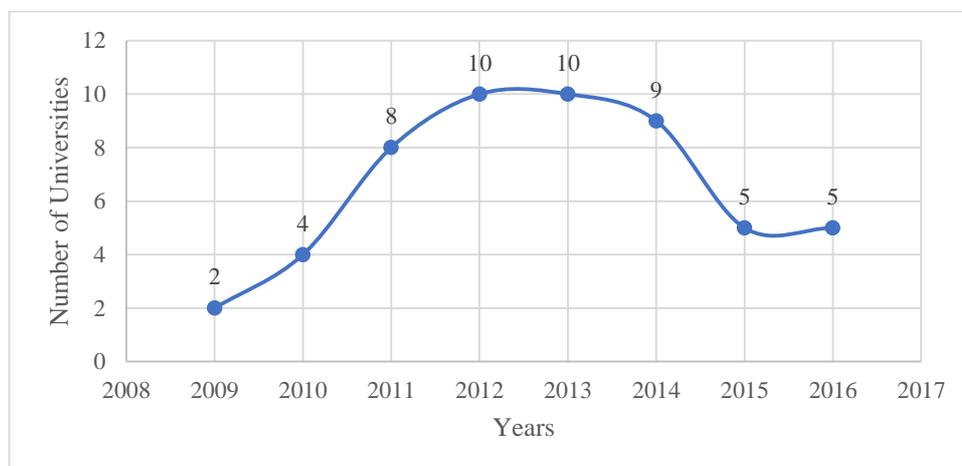


Figure 5: *Number of Universities Offering Undergraduate Programs in Distance Education by Years*

Source: *Derived from the Measurement, Selection and Placement System Guidelines for Higher Education Programs and Quotas 1996-2016.*

The number of higher education institutions increased every year until 2012, and decreased after that. In addition, five higher education institutions closed some of their programs in 2016, while teaching continued. On the other hand, eight of the 13 undergraduate programs at five higher education institutions were offered by only one university. An important feature of Istanbul University, which has eight undergraduate programs, is that it also offers mass open education. Istanbul University has the advantage of transferring the experience gained from the open education to distance education. Similar to distance education associate degree programs in higher education institutions, the tendency to close programs and to withdraw from distance education in undergraduate programs can be attributed largely to high quota restrictions.

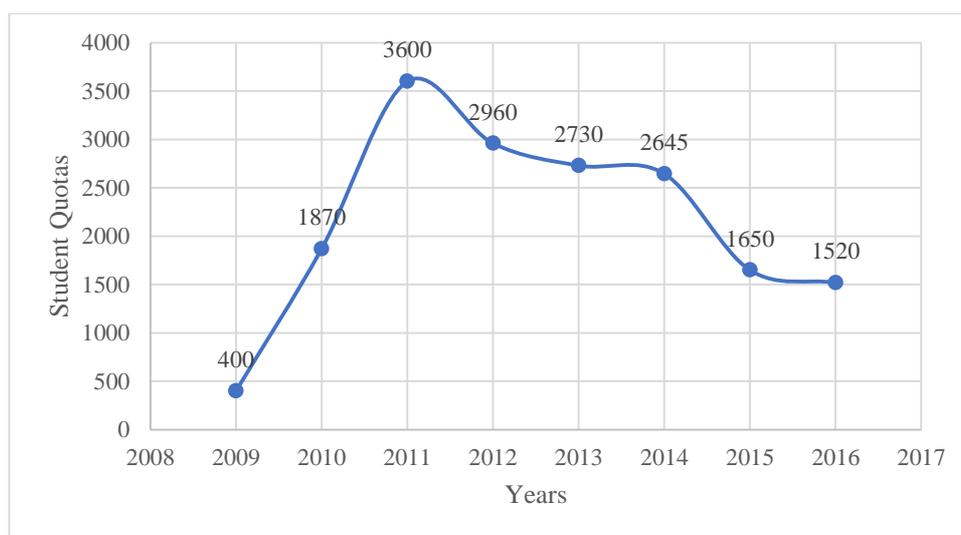


Figure 6: *Quota Restrictions Applied to Associate Degree Programs*

Source: *Derived from the Measurement, Selection and Placement System Guidelines for Higher Education Programs and Quotas 1996-2016.*

As can be seen in Figures 4, 5, and 6, decreasing quota rates by years result in a decrease in the number of programs, and the number of higher education institutions. In addition, quotas are not evenly distributed among programs. For example, in Istanbul University in 2016, each of the 8 programs had 150 quotas, while the other five programs in the four universities had 30, 60, 100, 100 and 30 student quotas. These quota limits are extremely inadequate for programs to sustain. From a different point of view, while Istanbul

University received 1,200 (about 80%) of the total quota of 1520 for distance education undergraduate programs in 2016, the other four universities shared the rest of the quota, which were 320.

Not all of the quotas assigned to universities and programs guarantee enrollment of the same numbers. The total number of enrollments for all distance education undergraduate degree programs in 2015 was 1067 and 1090 in 2016. These figures show that 70% of the quotas were registered, with a loss of about 30% (Undergraduate Programs Map, 2015-2016). These numbers indicate the difficulty of continuing undergraduate programs, as they are in associate degree programs. This difficulty is much sharper in undergraduate programs than it is in associate degree programs.

It is not difficult to see that the number of distance education degree programs is very low when compared to face-to-face education programs in Turkey. The number of face-to-face undergraduate programs in Turkey in 2016 was 427. Again, in 2016, 11 different undergraduate programs were offered by distance education. In 2012, when the number of programs was at its highest point, i.e. 40, 23 different undergraduate programs were offered with distance education method. Unfortunately, quota restrictions and subsequent closure of programs, and the withdrawal of universities reduced the variety of undergraduate degree programs offered in distance education.

All distance education undergraduate programs were opened by existing faculties, and offered conventional education in higher education institutions. The faculty that already used to have the programs, tended to open the distance education version of them. For example, the economics programs were opened by faculties of economics, and engineering programs were opened by the engineering faculties. This made a university that opens two programs have distance education in two different faculties. At this point, managerial and organizational troubles that resulted from the lack of management from a single center emerged.

5. Conclusion

Higher education institutions started to open distance education diploma programs after two different types of teaching were accepted as "open education" and "distance education" in Turkey. Distance education emphasizes the use of information and communication technologies and synchronized course presentations, while open education emphasizes more on mass education. The process started with the opening of distance education associate degree programs in 2003, and accelerated with the opening of

undergraduate programs since 2009. Among the 175 higher education institutions in the higher education system in Turkey, 55 higher education institutions opened distance education programs during those years.

Associate degree programs were opened in 52 of these, fourteen of the 52 higher education institutions also opened undergraduate programs and three higher education institutions opened only undergraduate programs. In other words, until 2016, associate degree programs in 52 higher education institutions, and undergraduate programs in 17 higher education institutions were offered. As of 2016, 32 higher education institutions were continuing with associate education, and five with undergraduate education.

In the process, it is seen that associate degree education in 20 higher education institutions and undergraduate education in 12 higher education institutions were terminated. The obvious result is that interest of higher education institutions in distance education is in decline, and thus many withdrew from the field of distance education in both associate and undergraduate programs. There may be a variety of reasons for this, and it should be investigated in detail. The internal causes identified in the present study can be listed as follows: The institutions could not constitute organizational structures related to distance education, and provide program diversity. Distance education is different from traditional education. It has sub-systems, such as specific preparation, planning, cost structure, units, and employees. Without taking these into account, failure is inevitable in considering the distance education as an extension of traditional teaching, and applying it immediately. Practically, programs at stake were opened in traditional faculties or vocational school of higher education institutions. In the development and maintenance of programs, it is important to have units and personnel dedicated to distance education, and to include their organization within the institution.

Problems may be various. However, the most obvious problem in Turkey is the high quota restrictions applied to distance education programs. Certain number of students is needed to sustain the programs. The less the number of students enrolled is, the less the benefit gained for the effort. This certainly leads to the termination of programs. As mentioned by Vasilevska *et.al.* (2017), demand for distance learning programs is already low compared to traditional education. Besides, high quota restrictions in both undergraduate and associate degree programs mean that they cannot reach the number of students that ensure the continuity of the programs. Moreover, the problem became aggravated by constantly narrowing quotas for many years. In Turkey, the quota of students in the university system in 2016 was 1,064,740. It is extremely inadequate that only 12.137 of these were reserved for

the distance education. This was a major obstacle for the development of distance education in the country.

In many countries, open education is carried out by a large-scale national higher education institution, which provides teaching services to very large number of students. In Turkey, three large higher education institutions that offer open education fulfill this function. It is understandable to allow institutions outside these to offer teaching services under certain restrictions in terms of national policies. However, even with restrictions, the educational programs offered should be allowed to reach student numbers that allow them to continue their assets. Otherwise, serious damage will continue for both students and institutions.

This study examines the development of Turkish higher education system in terms of distance education programs within its own conditions over the years. This development has been evaluated in terms of student quota restrictions, enrolment numbers, program numbers and university numbers. In addition to this, financial, organizational, managerial and legislative issues should also be examined and evaluated as a whole in order to contribute to the development of evaluation programs.

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