Reflections and Transformations in an Open University

Cengiz Hakan Aydin, Hasan UÇAR, Serpil Koçdar, Recep Okur, Deniz Taşci, & Aras Bozkurt

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Although Anadolu University is a dual mode higher education institution, it has been acting as an open university since 1982 and offering quality undergraduate education to millions in Turkiye. In 2023-2024 Fall semester, over a million students registered to its traditional distance education programs. Over four decades many changes and advances have happened nationwide and globally. Anadolu has been in a constant transformation mode since the beginning. This paper aims to summarize the major transformations the institution experienced as well as reflections of the stakeholders concerning these transformations.

Introduction

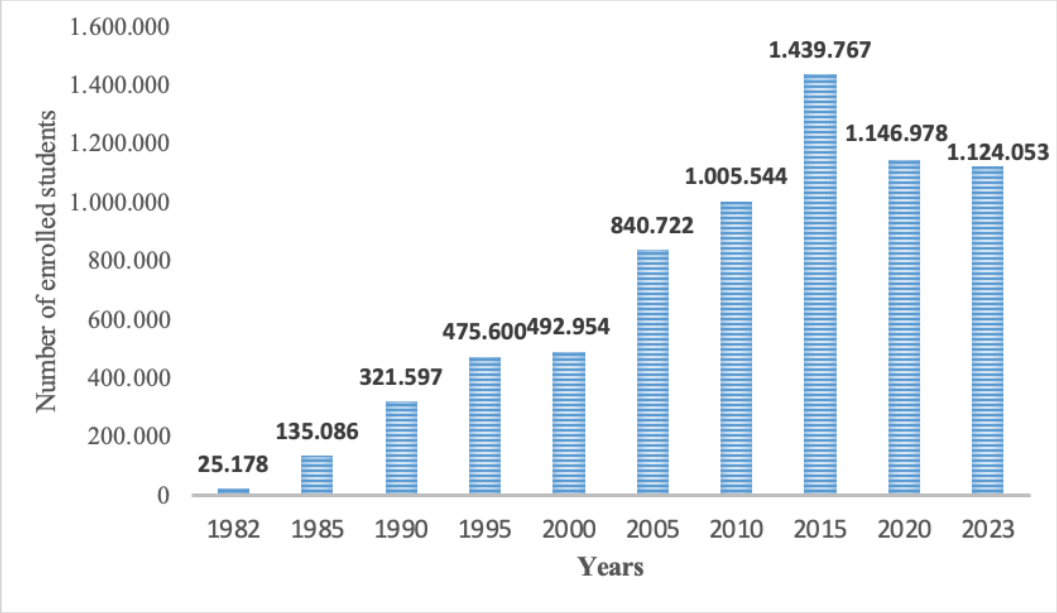
Anadolu University's open education system stands as a pioneering and innovative approach to higher education in Turkiye. With a rich history dating back to 1982, this system has been a trailblazer in providing accessible and flexible learning opportunities to a diverse range of students. Anadolu University has consistently adapted to the changing educational landscape by leveraging technology to deliver high-quality courses and programs, ensuring that education knows no boundaries. This system epitomizes the university's commitment to democratizing education and fostering lifelong learning. The following sections of the paper report the transformations in its learners, learner support systems, assessment strategies, human resources development, research and development, and informal and non-formal learning opportunities.

Learner Demographics

Open and distance learning in Turkiye dates back to the early years of the nation, but no initiative has been sustainable until the establishment of Anadolu University’s open education system in 1982. It was initiated to meet the increasing demand for higher education (HE). During the 1970s and early 1980s, there was a big shortage of seats in higher education institutions while the demand was skyrocketing. So, it was a “necessity” during the early years, and mainly traditional students (high school graduates) were enrolling in the programs.

Figure 1

Number of student enrollment between 1982-2023 at Anadolu University Open Education System



Over time, the number of HE institutions has increased rapidly, and so many traditional students have had changes to enroll in traditional face-to-face degree programs. While the number of traditional students in Anadolu's open education system has started to drop, the number of non-traditional students (aged 24 and more years) increased substantially. The rise of reskilling and upskilling needs fostered this change. So, open education has transformed into a "convenience" from a "necessity" in the country. To date, nearly 4.1 million students have graduated from the open education system. Figure 1 reveals the changes in enrollment at Anadolu University.

In terms of gender, the percentage of female students was quite low during the first years but boosted especially during the mid-2000s. Although this increase in female student numbers has been constant, the percentage of male students (approximately 5.1%) is still slightly higher than that of females (approximately 4.9%).

Learner Support

Learner support systems are vital for the success of open and distance learning institutions (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). These systems encompass pedagogical, administrative, technical, and social aspects (Berge, 1995). Services related to course content fall under pedagogical support; services concerning registration processes, administrative tasks, study schedules, and organization pertain to administrative support; services aimed at resolving learners' issues with software and hardware constitute technical support; and services related to enhancing interpersonal relationships, group dynamics, and non-academic interactions among learners and between learners and educators can be considered within the scope of social support. The digital transformation of the learner support systems within the Anadolu University Open Education System provides pedagogical, social, administrative, and technical support for its learners.

Traditional support tools like SMS messages are still widely used to keep learners updated on important developments and deadlines. Radio A programs continue to provide information about the Open Education System. Official social media accounts on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and others have become common tools for administrative and technical support. Students receive information through posts and can seek answers to related questions. The latest innovation is the introduction of chatbot technology, launched on the website in November 2022. The chatbot has significantly reduced the volume of telephone calls and the use of the Question Tracking System, demonstrating its effectiveness in support services.

Assessment

In 1982, Anadolu University decided to use centralized exams for assessing the students' learning, or achievement. Until 2010, the system had only one semester, lasting 28 weeks. So, in each semester, two mid-term exams and a final exam were organized throughout the country as well as in Europe. After 2010, Anadolu adopted a two- semester structure, like traditional HE institutions, and since then, has been organizing only one mid-term and one final exam in each semester. Over the last five years, Anadolu has also started to offer short-term summer semesters. The same exam organization (one mid-term and one final) is also adapted for the summer semester, too.

Due to the large scale, multiple-choice questions had to be used in the exams. Beginning in 2018, in some of the courses in which there are fewer students enrolled, open-ended questions were added to exams. However, due to the scale, the number of courses that included open-ended questions for assessment could not be increased.

Until the late 1990s, Anadolu collaborated with the national testing agency (Student Selection and Placement Centre, OSYM) to organize the exams. Later, the university established its own testing center and specialized in administering large-scale national and international exams. Today, Anadolu uses approximately 3000 buildings (usually lecture halls in local HE institutions and schools) and 300000 staff (academics, teachers, safeguards, transporters, etc.) in 111 centers (cities) to administer one of its centralized exams for nearly 700 courses. Each exam is organized in three sessions during a weekend (Saturday morning afternoon, and Sunday morning), and nearly 2 million question booklets and answer sheets are used.

During the pandemic period, Anadolu had to transform all of its exams into online exams. One of the major steps of this transformation was to develop an exam software that could handle 1 million students. It was created and used in different ways. Early implementations were a bit problematic in terms of student misbehavior (cheating) but agile decisions taken and a series of security measures, such as water marks, screen lacks, etc. adapted solve this problem in a large extent. This period has been very informative about organizing online exams. As a result, Anadolu has transformed its in-person exams for international students into online proctoring exams. Today, the university organizes synchronous online exams for its students who live in 6 different time zones. An AI-based proctoring exam system was adopted in collaboration with a private local company for these exams. During the COVID-10 pandemic, Anadolu also provided exam services to those who could not come to exam centers.

Human Resources Development

Every organization should consider skilling, reskilling, and upskilling their human resources. Skilling is, in general, different than others more related to pre-recruitment. However, Anadolu, right after establishing its open education system in 1982, has built a system to train its current and future human resources. Four academic departments were founded under the Open Education Faculty to offer face-to-face 4 years long degree programs based on the contemporary needs of the system. The Radio and Television Department focused on training staff and academicians for education radio and television, the Educational Communications and Planning Department to train instructional designers, the Publishing Department targeted to train staff for the publishing house of the university, and the Communication Arts Department intended to train people who will work on public relations concerning the open and distance learning. Many staff currently working in Anadolu's open educational system graduated from these undergraduate programs.

Until 2006, no formal human resources implementation was initiated, but only informal (on-the-job) training was provided to newcomer staff. In 2006 a master's program on distance education was established under the Social Sciences Institute of Anadolu for mainly train quality academicians in the field of open and distance learning. Later in 2010, a PhD program on distance education was also built to serve the same purpose. And finally in 2014, a completely online master's level program on distance education was established to train practitioners in the field. Mainly this program accepts students from other institutions.

Research Tendencies

Anadolu University in Turkey has played a central role in shaping the research agenda for ODL within the Turkish context. There are some earlier attempts to understand and gain more insights regarding the research tendencies in distance education and open and distance learning in Turkish Higher education. Nevertheless, these previous investigations (Aydin et al., 2020; Bozkurt et al., 2019) provide only a partial perspective. In a study by Bozkurt et al. (2015b), an uneven distribution of research areas was observed in doctoral theses spanning the years 1986 to 2014. Predominantly, research areas like instructional design, distance education systems and institutions, education technology, and learner characteristics received most of the attention.

More recently, Bozkurt et al. (2022) examined doctoral dissertations in the Turkish higher education context with a specific focus on distance education. The findings of Bozkurt et al.'s study can be concentrated into three meta-themes. Accordingly, these are:

- The use of (online) technologies and implementation of educational technologies,
- Increasing efforts on learning processes as a focal point on learners,
- The pursuit of methodological perfection rather than exploring the field with a critical perspective and theoretically forged practices.

Non-formal and Informal Learning

The open education system of Anadolu does not only provide formal education but also many non-formal and informal learning opportunities to millions. Starting in 1982, Anadolu aired educational television and radio programs to all. Especially television programs via one of the Turkish Radio and Television Agency channels (TRT4) were reached all around the country. This channel was not targeting solely education, but Anadolu's success in its educational programs fostered a transformation, and the channel was changed to an education channel, later entitled TRTOkul (TRT School). Those broadcast TV programs helped many people learn different topics. So, it was a non-formal learning opportunity provided by Anadolu. Unfortunately, later in 2014 Anadolu stopped airing its programs due to financial reasons. In terms of informal learning, Anadolu has initiated a number of projects, including YunusEmre OpenCourseware, AnaPOD Open Podcasting, AKADEMA MOOCs, Digital Course Platform, OpenScience, OpenLibrary, and similar projects. Among these, the AKADEMA MOOCs platform continues to offer open courses (currently 135) to thousands of people, and the Digital Course Platform still receives millions of hits every year.

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