



Open and Distance Learning Vision of Higher Education Institutions in Turkey: Implications for Leadership

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigated the open and distance learning vision of higher education institutions in Turkey and revealed several implications for leadership. Considering the potential overlap between vision and mission statements, both of the statements used by 82 units within higher education institutions were qualitatively investigated through content analysis. The findings first revealed that the vision statements of the units cover all system levels from technology to the broader socioeconomic context. Improving quality is the most underlined statement, followed by becoming a leading institution and enabling equity and access. On the other hand, it was observed that there is an overlap between their vision and mission statements, and many of the academic units use similar statements. Based on these findings, several implications were reported for effective leadership in open and distance learning. Although this study encompassed only the context of a specific country, it provided implications for leadership in various contexts.

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Change and sustainability in higher education are only possible through effective leadership. This notion was underlined in almost every definition of leadership in both open and distance education and other fields. As an example, Beaudoin (2003) defines leadership in distance education as follows: “...a set of attitudes and behaviors that create conditions for innovative change, that enable individuals and organizations to share a vision and move in its direction, and that contribute to the management and operationalization of ideas” (para 3). Based on this definition, leaders have a different role than managers in terms of change, encouragement of followers, and operationalization of conceptual ideas via a shared vision. In this sense, they have a unique role in developing a long-run vision of digital education beyond the emergency online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic (Laufer et al., 2021). Beaudoin (2019) argued that open and distance education requires transformational leadership. Irlbeck (2002) likewise claimed that a visionary transformational leadership model is a necessity for open and distance education to satisfy the desired change. Nworie (2012) characterized transformational leaders as the ones motivating their followers through their vision and underlines vision as the quality of transformational leadership. One of the first steps of transformational leadership in the distance and blended learning is to improve awareness of the opportunities provided by distance and blended learning and to collaboratively document these opportunities for policy (Garrison & Vaughan, 2013). A collaboratively created vision of open and distance learning is then a base for enhancing awareness as a beginning point and transformation. It can be, therefore, concluded that vision is a critical function of transformational leadership in open and distance education.

Vision is a commonly highlighted leadership instrument as a base for change and innovation (e.g. Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Schroeder & Cook, 2019; Simonson et al., 2015). It is also denoted as a fundamental leadership function by scholars in other fields (e.g. Haque et al., 2016; Kantabutra & Avery, 2010; Moyer, 2019). Despite its key role in leadership and change, it is an underestimated issue in both research and practice of open and distance education (Simonson et al., 2015) as well as in other fields (Allison, 2017). Simonson et al. (2015) argued that visioning, as a leadership competency, has been the most overlooked dimension of the change process in distance education. Paul (2014) similarly noted that the value of strategic planning, based on the vision of an institution, is a most neglected management instrument in online learning. In addition, as a macro-level research direction in open and distance education, Zawacki-Richter et al. (2020) suggest the ongoing investigation of national policies and how open and distance education evolves in various national contexts. Vision statements might show long-term goals, institutional interests, motivational factors, and the future of an institution and context (Kantabutra & Avery, 2010). For this reason, the nationwide investigation of the open and distance education vision would provide valuable insights into the implications for leadership in addition to national policies and how open and distance education is expected to evolve. On the other hand, the investigation of the policy about the future of the field would enable us to have a perspective of its potential development (Makoe, 2018).

It could be thus, inferred that there is a need for more research on the influence of vision and leadership on open and distance education policy and practices. Considering the possible confusion and overlap between vision and mission statements (Allison, 2017; Kantabutra & Avery, 2010; Raynor, 1998), the current study focused both on the vision and mission statements of the universities to have an in-depth understanding of their open and distance education vision. Specifically, this study aimed to qualitatively investigate the vision and mission statements of the universities in Turkey and to provide implications for leadership in open and distance education.

VISION AND LEADERSHIP

Almost every study on organizational vision and mission statements underlines them as the base for the achievement of future strategic goals through creating, managing, and communicating their strategic planning. Moyer (2019) views these statements as the organizations' conceptual frameworks, produced and shared by leaders in collaboration with stakeholders. Several studies also highlight that vision statements are the determinants of organizational performance (Kantabutra & Avery, 2010; Moyer, 2019). Considering that there is an increasing focus on performance in the universities and, performance assessment is a

primary concern for university administrations (Song, 2021), the impact of these statements on the organizational performance of the universities must also be a current research issue. In spite of this key role, the power of the vision statement is underestimated by the organizations (Raynor, 1998), probably owing to the confusion about their meanings (Allison, 2017; Kantabutra & Avery, 2010; Khalifa, 2011; Raynor, 1998). This confusion can be observed both in the definitions of the scholars and the statements by the organizations.

The scholars variously defined these statements and specified their characteristics (e.g. Bolland, 2017; Kantabutra & Avery, 2010; Moye, 2019). However, vision is commonly adopted as a desired future state of an organization (Allison, 2017; Bolland, 2017; Raynor, 1998) while a mission is assumed as the current role of an organization in a broader context (Moye, 2019; Raynor, 1998). This confusion resulted in the overlap among the vision, mission, and values statements of the organizations (Khalifa, 2012). This means that an organization's vision or mission statement might contain both its vision and mission as well as the adhered values. While some scholars briefly defined a vision statement as only the future state of an organization (Allison, 2017; Bolland, 2017; Raynor, 1998), others defined it as a more comprehensive statement. For instance, Bolland (2017) distinctively defined vision statements for public organizations as the future state of an organization indicating the funding sources to be allocated. In an attempt to differentiate vision from other statements, Kantabutra and Avery (2010, pp. 43–44) listed the contents that might be included in a vision statement as follows: *“a prime goal to be achieved”, “all organizational interests”, “a source of motivation for employees”, “a long-term perspective for the organization”, and “the future environment in which it will function”*. As consistent with this characterization, both the vision and mission statements included in this study have demonstrated these listed contents.

Kantabutra and Avery (2010) further stated that the content of a vision might vary relying on the leader and the context. Although it depends on leaders, it is at the same time, a significant leadership tool to improve organizational performance if it is collaboratively developed and supported by all stakeholders (Haque et al., 2016; Kantabutra & Avery, 2010; Moye, 2019). The value of a vision in organizational performance lies behind that it enables organizations to have the readiness for change (Haque et al., 2016). This sort of readiness is also a requisite for open and distance education considering its rapidly evolving nature.

VISION AND LEADERSHIP IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Vision statements are commonly viewed as a leadership and management instrument needed to be stated in strategic planning in open and distance education. Dede (1994) noted that the main difference between managers and leaders is the leaders' vision. Satyanarayana and Meduri (2007) additionally underlined that one of the most challenging aspects of leadership is to create and share a vision that is capable of replacing traditional models of education. Similarly, Beaudoin (2003) differentiated managers and leaders by underlying leaders' role of sharing a vision and taking action based on its direction as well as other attitudes and behaviors. He, however, noted that distance education managers must be adopted as leaders. For this reason, the top managers of the open and distance education units within the universities in this study were assumed as the leaders.

Nworie (2012) pointed out vision as one of the qualities of leaders in open and distance education. Likewise, Beaudoin (2003) claimed that vision is an essential characteristic of leadership in distance education. Nevertheless, articulating a vision is inadequate for effective leadership. What is desired is a collaboratively created, shared, and supported vision by the stakeholders of open and distance education (Beaudoin, 2003; Holt et al., 2013; Holt et al., 2014; Kara & Yildirim, 2020; 2022). Besides, the vision of distance education organizations should be proactive and viable for its operationalization as well as improvement and agility (Olcott, 2020). Simonson et al. (2015) defined visioning as a leader competency in distance education. Their visioning definition included articulating and sharing the vision of open and distance education. Burnette (2015) stated that a shared vision is a way of overcoming resistance to online education as it denotes organizational and individual benefits as well as future directions. In the same vein, Beaudoin (2019) argued that innovation is only possible through transformational leadership. He also defined transformational leaders as the ones supporting others to be aware of the benefits of innovation. Communicating vision with stakeholders is an instrument for the

acquisition of this sort of awareness and a function of transformational leadership (Simonson et al., 2015).

Visionary transformational leadership is also underlined by Irlbeck (2002) as a necessity to achieve the desired change in open and distance education. Cleveland-Innes (2012) stated that the leadership for the institutional transformation to individualized education is rooted in the collectively articulated vision. Workman and Cleveland-Innes (2012) also denoted vision as a key to the realization of useful change. Clearly defined and communicated vision is also useful for advocating change in open and distance education (Beaudoin, 2019; Garrison & Vaughan, 2013; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Schroeder & Cook, 2019). Holt et al. (2013) additionally characterized shared vision as a requirement for quality management in open and distance education and stated that a lack of clearly defined vision is a deficiency of leadership. Holt et al. (2014) underlined collaboratively articulated and shared vision as a characteristic of leadership as it helps leaders operationalize the strategic goals of open and distance education institutions. In a recent study by Kara and Yildirim (2020), the shared vision was illustrated as a leadership element affecting faculty performance in distance education. Unshared vision by stakeholders, on the other hand, is shown as a deficiency in improving faculty performance in distance education (Kara & Yildirim, 2022).

VISION STATEMENTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN TURKEY

Although the number of higher education institutions in Turkey has dramatically increased in the last two decades (HEC, 2020), a few studies investigated the vision statements of Turkish universities. In a prior study, Özdem (2011) investigated the vision and mission statements under four categories: education, research, community service, and training a qualified workforce. He found that the vision statements mostly underlined their aims related to research while the mission statements mostly underlined training a qualified workforce for the development of the country. The study also noted that the universities generally used similar statements. In another study, Efe and Ozer (2015) indicated that both the vision and mission statements of the universities highlighted their legitimacy and meeting the demands of the higher education market. They similarly noted that the universities used similar vision and mission statements. Finally, a recent study by Kuzu (2020) revealed that the vision and mission statements of Turkish universities mainly included the themes of becoming a leader and a prestigious university in the world, internationalization, innovativeness, entrepreneurship, quality, and competence.

METHOD

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The higher education institutions in Turkey are bounded by the legislation of the Higher Education Council and the higher education law. The open education programs are offered by the “open education” and “open and distance education” faculties while online distance education programs are generally offered by the traditional vocational and graduate schools with the management and coordination of the distance education centers or units within the universities. Besides, there were vocational schools of distance education offering online distance education programs. There were two “open education” faculties and two “open and distance education” faculties as of October 2020. Distance education programs typically include associate degree and master’s degree programs while open education programs typically include associate and bachelor’s degree programs. Online distance education generally has a dual administrative structure: distance education administration and school administration, while online distance education offered by the vocational schools of distance education and open education have a single administrative structure: school or faculty administration. Vocational schools of distance education and the distance education centers within the universities are managed by the directors while the faculties are managed by the deans. Both the directors and deans are adopted as the leaders and the vision statements of these academic units were assumed as the open and distance learning vision of higher education institutions in the present study.

The data used in this study are the vision and mission statements of the academic units within public and private universities offering open and distance education programs in Turkey. The list of the academic units of open and distance education within the universities was obtained from the Higher Education Information Management System, offered as open by the HEC (2020). The list showed that there are a total of 139 academic units in 137 universities as of May 2020. The list included two open education faculty, one open and distance education faculty, four distance education vocational schools, and 132 practice and research centers for distance education. The centers used various names such as “open and distance education”, “distance education”, or “open and distance learning” centers. However, the majority of the universities used “distance education practice and research center”. 15 of these centers were established in 2020 after the universities moved to emergency remote teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic. 82 vision and mission statements of these units were available on their official websites or in the documents about their strategic planning. Thus, a total of 82 vision and mission statements were included in the analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

The collected data were analyzed through qualitative content analysis. The data analysis was conducted in three stages, as Creswell (2007) suggested: (1) organizing the data, (2) reducing the data in the form of codes, and (3) representing the data through a table and discussing the findings. Firstly, the retrieved vision and mission statements were separately collected in two files with the names of the units and universities. Their names, however, were kept anonymous in the report by labeling the units from U1 to U82. Secondly, the vision and mission statements were iteratively analyzed and coded through the constant comparison strategy. The emerged codes were numerously compared with each other and categorized. The emerged codes and categories were labeled based on both the data and the conceptual model of distance education with a systems view proposed by Moore and Kearsley (2012). This conceptual model of distance education provides a useful framework to understand and interpret a distance education system at both institutional and national levels. According to the model (Moore & Kearsley, 2012), a distance education system includes subsystems such as technology, course design, and management while these subsystems are influenced by wider national factors such as economy, sociology, culture, and history. Therefore, this conceptual model and systems view of distance education were adopted to conceptualize and categorize the findings obtained from the vision and mission statements. The findings were labeled and categorized from micro levels (technology, teaching/learning, and learners) and organizational levels (management and leadership, scholarship, and quality and effectiveness) to national levels (higher education system and socioeconomic system and politics).

The findings were presented in a table (Table 1) including the categories, codes, and frequencies and, in a figure (Figure 1) demonstrating the codes and categories from micro to macro levels. The trustworthiness of the findings was provided by using the guidelines of Lincoln and Guba (1985) such as peer debriefing, in-depth depictions of the codes, the context with the direct quotations from the statements, and the researcher’s reflection.

FINDINGS

The findings obtained from the content analysis revealed the open and distance education vision of the universities in Turkey. The extracted themes were labeled, from the micro to macro level, as shown in both Table 1 and Figure 1. The first concept most frequently underlined in the Technology category is the use of current technology. This concept was used both as a means (e.g. “by using current technology” [U6], “by taking rapidly changing technological conditions into consideration” [U16]) and aim in the vision statements (e.g. “to become a center using the cutting-edge technology” [U58], “to become a center ...monitoring innovations in technology” [U73]). The use of current technology was also frequently stated in the mission statements. The example mission statements are as follows: “By using novel and innovative technologies...” (U1, U21), “... providing current technological infrastructure and systems” (U15), and “...by using contemporary information and communication technology” (U22, U30). The universities also underlined the effective and efficient use of technology in the vision statements. The

majority of them used this concept as a means to improve quality (e.g. *“to improve the quality of education by effectively using distance education technologies...”* [U11, U12, U46, U55]). Other vision statements included efficient use of technology (*“by effectively and efficiently using distance education technologies”* [U15], *“efficiently using the existing technologies”* [U23]). The mission statements also covered the effective and efficient use of technology as an input factor (*“...by using distance education technologies in the most efficient and effective way”* [U18]).

CATEGORY	CONCEPT	F (VISION)	F (MISSION)
Technology	Use of current technology	18	13
	Effective and efficient use of technology	9	6
	Establishment and management of technological infrastructure	6	25
	Digital transformation	4	9
Teaching and Learning	Improvement of learning opportunities	15	13
	Contemporary education	11	12
Learners	Qualified graduates	6	30
	Learner satisfaction and development	6	1
	Increased number of learners and programs	4	–
Management and Leadership	Contemporary management	22	23
	Collaboration with stakeholders	20	21
	Change and sustainability	18	5
	Establishment and management of administrative infrastructure	8	38
	Satisfaction and professional development of staff	5	–
	Other responsibilities required by the legislation	–	3
Scholarship	Scholarship in open and distance learning	14	24
Quality and Effectiveness	Improving quality	51	30
	Improving effectiveness	11	10
Higher Education System	Becoming a leading institution in open and distance learning	32	4
	Enabling equity and access to higher education	29	25
	Becoming a prestigious institution in open and distance learning	26	–
	Life-long and ubiquitous learning opportunities for all	22	16
	Improvement of distance education culture	2	1
Socioeconomic System and Politics	Social and economic development of the country	17	11
	Adherence to global/national values	9	7

Table 1 Open and Distance Learning Vision and Mission of Higher Education in Turkey.

Although the establishment and management of technological infrastructure is a fundamental mission of the open and distance education units within the universities, they also stated it in their vision as an input factor. In the vision statements, the concept encompassed revising the system by following technological development (U18), the establishment of physical and technological infrastructure (U37), and technological infrastructure support (U70). This concept is one of the most stated ones in the mission statements in the form of providing (U1), establishing, and managing technological infrastructure (U5), creating technological environments (U6), and offering technological infrastructure support (U14). An example statement from the mission statements is as follows: *“...to create the physical and technological environment facilitating students, academics, and administrative staff’s access to information, their communication and interaction”* (U7, U40, U45, U69). The final concept in the technology

theme is digital transformation, which means the transformation of traditional courses into digital environments. A few of the universities stated it in their vision statements by either explicitly stating “digital transformation” (U4) or transforming educational activities online (U9, U70), or transforming the university into an e-university (U76). In the mission statements, this concept was similarly stated in the form of adapting face-to-face courses online (U18), and e-learning support for face-to-face courses (“to support formal [face-to-face] education process in our university” [U61]).

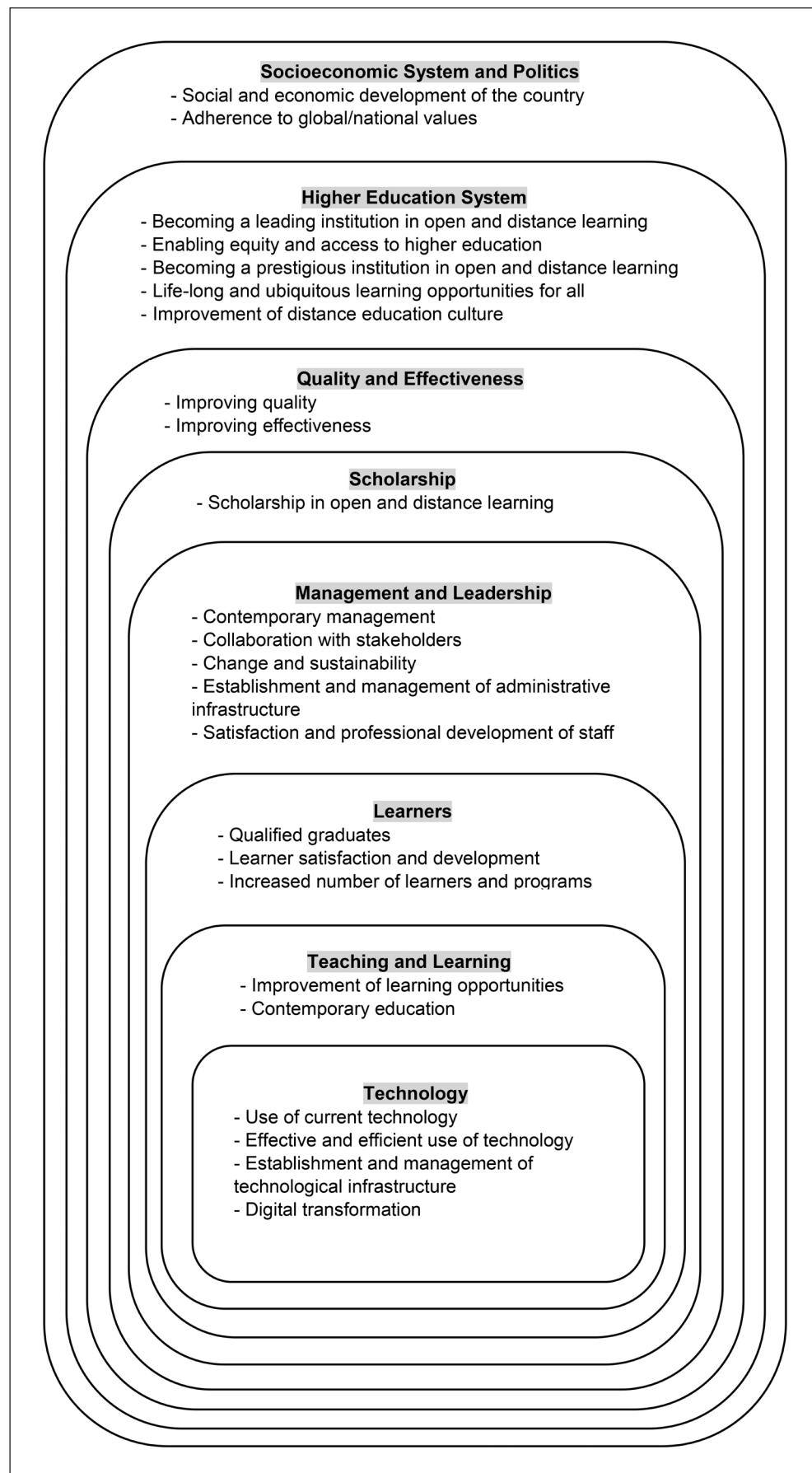


Figure 1 Open and Distance Learning Vision of Higher Education Institutions in Turkey.

The second category that emerged from the vision statements is teaching and learning, which covers the improvement of learning opportunities and contemporary education. The former includes meeting learners' needs and individualization (*"to become a center ...adopting meeting individuals' educational needs as a principle"* [U27, U44, U54, U77]) and developing learning materials in a dynamic form (*"to become a center ...developing the contents of the distance courses in a dynamic form"* [U17, U19, U24, U53, U58]). The second concept includes offering contemporary education (e.g. *"to become a center ...offering contemporary education and training"* [U1]) or the use of current approaches and methods in education (e.g. *"by using contemporary approaches, methods, and technologies"* [U5]). The same concepts were also observed in the mission statements. Improving learning opportunities included such statements as dynamic courses (U17, U44, U53, U58), meeting learners' needs (U22, U30), and creating opportunities for individual learning (U76). An example statement in the mission statements for contemporary education is as follows: *"...by using contemporary educational methods in addition to academic knowledge"* (U74).

The third category is learners, encompassing learner-specific aims. The first one is to offer education for qualified graduates. While some of them specifically stated the expected qualifications (e.g. *"to become a center ...educating individuals who are productive, entrepreneur, leader, an expert in their field"* [U34]), others only stated qualified graduates (e.g. *"to become a leading center ...educating qualified human resources"* [U62]). Qualified graduates are also one of the most stated concepts in the mission statements. Similarly, some of the universities stated the qualifications of graduates (e.g. U2) while others only stated qualified graduates or their development (U8). An example is as follows: *"our center setting learner satisfaction and their personal development as a principle"* (U11, U15, U22, U30, U46, U79). The final learner-specific aim in the vision statements is about the quantitative development, increasing the number of learners and programs: *"to increase the number of students ...by using distance education method and tools"* (U20).

The fourth category is management and leadership. The most underlined concept in this category is to have contemporary management, including both the management approach and the work environment. The mostly used statements for this concept include *"to become a center ...having participatory and sharing perspective based on teamwork"* (U11, U46, U79) and *"to become a center ...open to innovations, participatory, and internationally competitive"* (U27, U44, U48, U54, U77). Similar statements were also included in the mission statements (e.g. U7, U40, U45, U69). Although *"collaboration with stakeholders"* and *"change and sustainability"* are also included as part of contemporary management in both vision and mission statements, they were classified as separate concepts as many of the universities specifically underlined them. Collaboration with the national and international stakeholders was specifically underlined more (*"...in collaboration with national and international stakeholders..."* [e.g. U5]) in addition to collaboration with institutional departments (e.g. U1).

As another contemporary management concept, change and sustainability were highlighted in the vision statements more than in the mission statements. While some of them used both change and sustainability (*"to become a leading center having a sustainable educational system, open to innovations."* [U27, U44, U48, U54, U77]), others used either change (*"to become an educational institution open to change and development"* [U36]) or sustainability (*"to become a leading center having a sustainable educational system"* [U54]). As the establishment and management of administrative structure are a fundamental mission of the open and distance education units within the universities, this concept was the most frequently stated one in the mission statements. This concept covers the establishment of administrative infrastructure (*"...establishing distance education infrastructure for the faculty members and students of our university"* [U25]), support structures (e.g. *"...offering support to the stakeholders from the pedagogical, technological, and material development aspects."* [U70]), and solving currently faced problems (*"...to solve any kind of possible problem during the adaptationto distance education"* [U18]). A few of the universities also specified the professional development and satisfaction of their staff (*"...setting satisfaction and personal development of staff and students as the principle"* [U11, U46, U79]). The final concept extracted only from the mission statements is other responsibilities required by the legislation (*"to monitor all legislation in action about distance education"* [U47]).

Contribution to the knowledge base through research emerged as a different category and was labeled as the scholarship in open and distance learning. This concept covered research, development, and policymaking in the field of open and distance learning (“...by contributing knowledge generation through theoretical and applied studies in the field of distance education [U7, U40]). It was also observed that this concept was commonly stated in both vision and mission statements.

The sixth and most commonly underlined category in the vision and mission statements is quality and effectiveness. Of all the concepts, improving quality was the most commonly stated vision. The quality includes accessing quality standards (e.g. U3, U10, U37), offering quality programs (e.g. U8, U30, U40), and quality improvement (e.g. U11, U12, U55). An example statement is as follows: “to improve quality of education by effectively using distance education technologies” (U42). Besides, some of the universities also focused on the effectiveness of education (“to improve the effectiveness of education by using contemporary information and communication technologies” [U54, U77]).

The seventh category is about the higher education system. They mostly used the statements of leading (e.g. U69) and leader (e.g. U58) while some of them used pioneering (e.g. U2), having a key role in the field (e.g. U76), having a say in the field (e.g. U20), and shaping the future of the field (U38). A few of them also stated this concept in their mission statements. The second concept is enabling equity and access to higher education. Some of them underlined learner access to knowledge (“to deliver the knowledge and experience of U32 to larger audiences” [U32]) while others highlighted equality of opportunities (“to offer individuals with equal opportunities for education” [U6]). Becoming a prestigious university is another concept stated as prestigious (U26), favorite (U36), the best (U3), excellence (U80), referenced (U38), and becoming a role model (U59) in the vision statements. Besides, offering life-long learning opportunities was one of the most underlined concepts in both the vision and mission statements. Some of the universities also stated ubiquitous learning together (e.g. U42, U55). Two universities additionally aimed to improve distance education culture at both institutional and national levels (“...aims to contribute to the development of distance education culture at the highest level” [U2]) while one university stated this aim in the mission statement (“to enhance e-learning culture” [U6]).

The final category, socioeconomic system and politics, included the concepts at the national and global levels. The first one extracted from both the vision and mission statements is to make contributions to the social and economic development of the country. The concept includes socio-economic development (e.g. U21, U37), offering solutions to social and educational problems, making policies (e.g. U7, U40, U45, U69), and development of digital citizenship in the information society (U32, U43). The final concept is adherence to global/national values. Many of them underlined their respect for global values as a principle (e.g. U1, U11, U78) while some of them stated those values as education rights of individuals, equality, and respect for human rights (e.g. U7, U40, U45).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to investigate the open and distance education vision of higher education institutions in Turkey. Firstly, the vision of the universities demonstrated that they are interested in all elements of the open and distance education system such as technology, teaching and learning, higher education system, and the broader social and economic context, in conjunction with the systems view of Moore and Kearsley (2012). As also consistent with the conceptualization of Kantabutra and Avery (2010), the contents of the vision statements included a wide variety of issues such as main goals (e.g. social and economic development of the country), a future perspective of the organization (e.g. becoming a leading institution in open and distance education), and institutional interests (e.g. collaboration with stakeholders).

Secondly, the concepts that emerged from the vision statements reflect the vision of the Universities in Turkey. Similar to the findings of the prior studies on the vision of the universities in Turkey (Efe & Ozer, 2015; Kuzu, 2020; Özdem, 2011), this study revealed that open and distance education units are interested in similar issues with their universities. The most frequently mentioned concepts in the vision statements are likewise obtained as quality,

becoming a leading and prestigious institution, collaboration with stakeholders, change, and scholarship. As different from the vision statements of the universities, they frequently included the concepts specific to open and distance education such as access to higher education, use of current technology, and improved learning opportunities including life-long and ubiquitous learning.

Thirdly, the findings indicated that there is confusion between the vision and mission statements of the academic units as pointed out by several scholars in other fields (e.g. Allison, 2017; Kantabutra & Avery, 2010; Raynor, 1998). Although the frequency of the underlined concepts might vary for some concepts depending on the vision and mission such as long-term goals and establishment of technological infrastructure, the majority of the concepts are similar in both vision and mission statements (e.g. technology usage, improving learning opportunities, and quality). The overlap between the vision and mission statements due to the confusion about their meanings and functions (Khalifa, 2011; Khalifa, 2012) was similarly observed in the open and distance education field. In this sense, the leaders are required to clearly define their concepts of vision and mission so as to benefit from their functions.

Finally, it was observed that many of the academic units used similar vision and mission statements. Even many of them used identical statements (e.g. U11, U12, U46, and U55). This finding is consistent with the prior studies investigating the vision statements of Turkish universities (Efe & Ozer, 2015; Özdem, 2011). Considering that vision and mission statements are required to be articulated based on an institution's context and leader characteristics (Kantabutra & Avery, 2010), it could be argued that the vision statements of these units likely underestimate their own context and leadership characteristics. The use of a similar or identical vision statement by both an inexperienced (e.g. U7) and an experienced institution (e.g. U6) makes their readiness or advocacy for change very challenging (Beaudoin, 2019; Haque et al., 2016; Schroeder & Cook, 2019). It can also be inferred that the value of a vision statement and strategic planning in open and distance education, as underlined by Paul (2014) and Simonson et al. (2015), was probably underestimated by many of the academic units in this context.

The study also has several recommendations for future research. Firstly, the findings of this study are specific to the context of Turkey. Future cross-cultural studies might be conducted to compare and contrast how open and distance education evolve in diverse contexts and how they envision the future of open and distance education. Secondly, the findings were obtained only from the vision and mission statements of the academic units. Future studies might conduct qualitative studies with the participation of the leaders to reveal their conceptions of vision and mission, the role of vision in their leadership practices, and how it influences their strategic planning and decision-making. Finally, it is highly desired in the field to identify the roles and competencies of the leaders, including distributed leadership, specific to open and distance education, and the role of vision in these roles and competencies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

The findings of the current study have revealed several implications for leadership in open and distance education. Each of them was briefly discussed as follows:

- The leaders of open and distance education first need to have a clear definition of a vision statement, considering the commonly experienced confusion about its meaning and function by both scholars and organizations (Allison, 2017; Khalifa, 2011; Raynor, 1998). This means that they need to make a decision on the content, role, and function of their vision. A vision might either include a future state and aims or other contents such as motivational sources, future environment, and other organizational interests (Kantabutra & Avery, 2010). A definition that suits best the leadership approach and the context is required to be defined.
- Whatever content a vision statement includes, it is required to be realistic in the long run. In other sayings, the vision statement must be feasible even though it is a dream of an institution. This is only possible through the articulation of a vision statement in collaboration with stakeholders based on the institutional context and the leadership approach. The vision statement of a specific institution may not always be feasible for

other organizations. For this reason, the institutions and leaders should create their own original vision statements in collaboration with stakeholders, instead of adopting others' as frequently observed in this study.

- As open and distance education vision was used as a base for strategic planning (Schroeder & Cook, 2019), the use of similar or identical statements, as observed in this study, implies that the academic units or institutions likely overlook the value of a vision in strategic planning for development and change. For this reason, the leader of open and distance education is in charge of taking institutional vision into consideration during strategic planning.
- Similar to the previous implication, the use of similar or identical vision statements also shows that the role of stakeholders during the articulation of a vision statement is likewise underestimated. Stakeholders' contribution to vision development is critical for leaders to get support from the followers; to help them aware of the strategic goals of the unit by sharing and communicating it; to motivate them to achieve the desired goals, and so on.
- Simonson et al. (2015) underline visioning as a leadership competency, based on expertise in distance education. Beaudoin (2019), on the other hand, argues that leaders need not have expertise in the field, but they need to be aware of the potential of open and distance education. For this reason, it could be advocated that the reason for the deficiencies in visioning as a leadership competency would be the lack of leaders' expertise in or, at least, awareness of the field. Thus, the administrators of open and distance education, also taking the role of leadership (Beaudoin, 2003), are required to have awareness of, and preferably expertise in the field. This sort of expertise is also required to have a strong research base, which is a necessity to improve practices and is denoted as a critical leadership element (Kara & Yildirim, 2020; 2022). In this regard, the open and distance education community is required to identify the roles and competencies of open and distance education leaders as clearly identified for instructors.
- The leaders are finally required to address all system levels of open and distance education in their vision and mission statements as observed in this study (the systems from technology to the broader socio-economic context of a country). This sort of leadership approach might also address micro, meso, and macro levels, as categorized by Zawacki-Richter and Anderson (2014), and would enable them to provide a systemic improvement in open and distance education.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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