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Open Education Faculty and Distance Education Students' Dropout Reasons: the Case of a Turkish State University

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate open education faculty and distance education students' dropout reasons. By implementing the use of a case study as a qualitative research method, this study investigated why students dropped out for their distance education programs. The study group was composed of 25 students who had dropped out of distance education and open education faculty programmes. The study group was formed by using a stratified random sampling method. The research included a data collection tool based on a semi-structured interview form that was generated on the basis of interviews with experts and an evaluation of theories, models, and studies concerning dropout. The data from the interviews were analyzed through content analysis and involved distinguishing between codes, categories, and themes. This study found the following main factors as responsible for students dropping out of these programmes: students' difficulty in paying the tuition fees, their maladjustment to the form of education offered on the Internet, their need for printed books, and technical problems encountered in examinations. Students' lack of personal career objectives and their worries about failure were also among the most important factors that increased the possibility of dropping out. Additional reasons for dropping out included issues related to environmental circumstances and conditions as well as individual responsibilities. In conclusion, it was found that programmes and other environmental factors were influential in instances of dropout.

Keywords: dropout, distance education, open education faculty, higher education

Introduction

Currently, the widespread use of the Internet and online tools in educational environments has increased the prevalence of online education. In particular, adults prefer online distance education because they value their time and place importance on independent learning activities (Lim, 2001). It is evident that distance education provides students with the advantage of lifelong learning. In the most general definition, distance education is defined as planned teaching and learning activities through communication channels within an institutional organization regardless of time and place (Moore & Kearsley, 2011). Open education is very similar to distance education and supports lifelong learning independent of time and space. However, there are difficulties as well as the advantages of both open and distance education. These difficulties can cause problems for students in online open and distance learning programs, some of which compel them to drop out (Park & Choi, 2009). Because of these high drop-out rates, it is particularly important to ensure that the student is kept in the system (De Paepe, Zhu & DePryck, 2018). Educators target high attendance and low drop-out rates as indicators of the success of the program. Therefore, there is a need to focus on school dropout factors in online distance education.

Dropout in Open and Distance Education

Although there are various definitions of what it means to drop out, it is generally understood to be a complete departure from school for individual or social reasons (Garrison, 1987). Although dropout

can take place at every level of education, dropout in online distance education has attracted more attention because of of the different educational structure that it provides.

The dropout rate in open and distance education is an important indicator in revealing the problems of the education system (Graeff-Martins et al., 2006; Willging & Johnson, 2009). However, many countries are increasing their efforts to prevent drop-out rates within their schools (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). Because of the increase in the number of online programs, high dropout rates comprise a serious issue that needs to be solved to ensure the vitality of online learning among adults (Park & Choi, 2009).

Studies focusing on the reasons for adult dropout in online learning show that adult students' decision to leave distance education are affected by many factors: academic locus of control (Lee, Choi & Kim, 2013), face-to-face interaction request (Willging & Johnson, 2009; Lee & Choi; 2011; Drouin, 2008), family responsibilities (Thistoll & Yates, 2016), family and workplace support (Park & Choi, 2009), academic failure (Holder, 2007; Choi & Park, 2018; Paechter, Maier & Macher, 2010), business life (Lee & Choi, 2011), time conflicts (Lim, 2016), monetary problems (Yukselturk & Inan, 2006), academic encouragement (Heyman, 2010), and lack of motivation (Thistoll & Yates, 2016).

In the literature, there are various studies about the reasons that students leave school in online distance education applications. Research that aims to examine the implications of leaving school in Turkey, however, is extremely limited. For this reason, there is a need for studies investigating the reasons for the dropout factors in distance education programs in Turkey. Yukselturk, Ozekes and Turel (2014) attempted to estimate the level of dropout in online programs through data mining. Their results demonstrated that self-efficacy of online technologies, readiness to learn online, and previous online experience were the most important factors in predicting school dropout. Bozkurt and Akbulut (2019) examined the cultural context and school dropout behaviors with a mixed-method approach that used the social network analysis and bi-directional comparisons (culture and drop-out). Yukselturk and Inan (2006) examined the factors affecting the dropout of students in an online certificate program. The results of this study showed that the most important factors affecting school dropout included not having enough time to study, personal problems, and economic program. This study found that students from higher cultural contexts had a greater tendency to leave school than students from lower cultural contexts. Because open and distance education is provided through online platforms, the responsibility of learning falls largely upon the learner; thus, the cost is high at the beginning of these differences. These differences make it difficult for open and distance education students to adapt themselves to the open and distance education system. Therefore, this increases the likelihood that they will not complete their education.

This study presents important factors related to school dropout in open and distance education in Turkey such as cultural, political, and socio-economic differences. By determining the factors that cause the distance education students to drop out, schools can considerably contribute to the development of education policies concerning online education. As a result, they can then create preventive programs.

This study aims to reveal why open education faculty and distance education students drop out of their programmes. In line with this general purpose, it seeks answers to the following questions:

- What are the school and programme-related factors causing open education and distance education students to drop out?
- What are the social environment-related factors causing open education and distance education students to drop out?
- What are the factors related to personality-traits that cause open education and distance education students to drop out?

Method

Research Model

This study employs the case study model, a qualitative research method. A case study is an approach in which a researcher analyzes one or more restricted cases in depth and describes the cases and the themes dependent on the cases (Creswell, 2007). Because of this, case study was preferred for this research, which analyzes the reasons for dropping out.

Study Group

The study group was composed of 25 students who dropped out of open education faculty and distance education programmes of Ataturk University. The study group was set up by using a stratified random sampling method. Each programme (department) constituted a stratum. For the approximately 1,000 students who had dropped out of a programme, we first prepared a list of names and contact information as well as the departments from which the students had dropped out. Using this list, a greater number of students from the stratum (programme) having many students and smaller number of students from the stratum (programme) having few students was included in the sample in proportion with the number of students dropping out of the programmes.

Participants included in the study group were distributed according to age, gender, marital status, and the length of time they remained in the programmes (Table 1).

Table 1: Study group characteristics

Age	Number of participants
20-30	15
30-40	5
40-50	5
Gender	
Male	13
Female	12
Marital status	
Married	10
Single	15
Length of time they stayed in the programme	
0-2 months	4
2- 4 months	2
4-6 months	7
6-8 months	7
8-10 months	5
Total	**25**

As is evident from Table 1, 60% of the participants are in the 20-30 age range, 52% are male, 48% are female, and 60% are single. It also apparent that a greater number of participants remained in the programmes between 6 and 8 months than for other time frames.

The distribution of the study group according to the programmes is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Distribution of the Study Group according to the Programmes

Units	Type of Programmes	Number of participants	Participants
Open Education Faculty	Undergraduate completion	6	P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P7
Open Education Faculty	Undergraduate programme	5	P11, P16, P17, P21, P23
Centre for Distance Education	Undergraduate completion	4	P18, P19, P20, P22
Open Education Faculty	Associate degree	4	P4, P8, P15, P24
Centre for Distance Education	Associate degree	2	P13, P25
Open Education Faculty	Undergraduate programme	2	P12, P14
Open Education Faculty	Associate degree	1	P10
Open Education Faculty	Undergraduate programme	1	P9
Total		**25**	

Ataturk University started to recruit students through distance education in 2009 with the Distance Nursing Undergraduate Completion Program. Afterwards, they accepted students to the undergraduate completion (*Theology, Midwifery, Perfusion*) and non-thesis master's degree programs in different fields (*Business Administration, Occupational Health and Safety, Education Management, Marketing*). The faculty members conduct their courses in virtual classrooms and share reading texts and video course records with the students. Course content in the Centre for Distance Education is broadcast by a learning management system for 14 weeks. Courses are taught live online by relevant instructors throughout the semester. In addition, exams are conducted over the Internet. Finally, graduates of distance education programs are entitled to receive the diploma of the faculties with which they are affiliated.

Ataturk University Open Education Faculty was established in 2010. The programs within the Open Education Faculty consist of associate, undergraduate, and undergraduate completion levels. The Associate degree programs include: Open Education Faculty; Emergency and Disaster Management, Justice, Banking and Insurance, Information Management, Computer Programming, Office Management and Executive Assistance, Call Center Services, Child Development, Foreign Trade, Real Estate and Real Estate Management, Photography and Cameraman, Public Relations and Publicity, Theology, Occupational Health and Safety, Business Management, Laboratory and Veterinary Health, Logistics, Private Security and Protection, Radio and Television Programming, Advertising, Health Institutions Management, Civil Air Transportation Management, Social Services, Medical Documentation and Secretarial, Tourism and Hotel Management, Tourism and Travel Services, New Media and Journalism, and Local Governments. The undergraduate programs include: Public Relations and Publicity, Business, Public Administration, Advertising, Health Management, Social Work, and Sociology. The undergraduate completion programs include: Emergency and Disaster Management, Occupational Health and Safety, Health Management, and Social Work. Course content for courses in Open Education Faculty is broadcast by a learning management system for

14 weeks each semester in the form of units. Lesson videos are integrated into the course content and presented to students. Students who graduate from a program conducted within the Open Education Faculty are entitled to receive the Open Education Faculty diploma.

Although the distance education center and Open Education Faculty are similar in terms of their operational structure, they have some administrative differences. The distance education center conducts each program jointly with the faculties to which it is affiliated. Therefore, a person who has graduated from any distance education program is entitled to receive a diploma from the faculty (e.g., nursing undergraduate completion program student). However, the Open Education Faculty has an autonomous structure. By purchasing services from faculty members of different faculties, they form the content of the courses within their own structure. Therefore, a person who has graduated from an open education program receives a diploma from the Open Education Faculty.

The Tool and Process of Data Collection

The data were collected on the basis of interviews, a qualitative research method. Specifically, we employed a semi-structured interview form. Table 3 provides the interview questions used in this study. In preparing the interview questions, we considered issues such as relevance to the purpose of the study, suitability of the questions for participants, and intelligibility of the questions. To construct the form, we examined theories, models, and studies about dropping out. Additionally, we consulted six experts from relevant domains. The first draft of the interview form was used to complete a pilot application on the phone with five participants. The final interview form was composed based upon expert opinion.

Table 3: Interview Questions

	Why did you leave your department?
1.	What do you think are the other reasons that led you to leave your department?
2.	Was there any situation about the school and the program that caused you to drop out? Can you share with us?
3.	Was there any situation about the social environment that caused you to drop out of school? Can you share with us?
4.	Was there anything different about yourself that made you drop out of school? Can you share with us?
5.	Is there any other reason you'd like to share with us?

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through content analysis. In line with the purpose of the study, the data were divided into conceptually meaningful codes, and thus a list of codes was prepared. The codes were analyzed and brought together, and then the codes with common features were categorized and placed into the theme groups determined in the literature. In qualitative studies, it is important to describe the criteria of persuasiveness, transmissibility, consistency, and approvability as well as precautions for these criteria (Cresswell, 2007). Therefore, two experts examined the analysis of the data and their opinions were included within this study. Additionally, participants volunteered to be included within this research. To achieve transmissibility, we included a justification of the method used in the study as well as an explanation of the properties of the study group, the way the study group was selected, and the processes of collecting and analyzing the data. For consistency, all the interviews were recorded and the experts were asked to check them. For approvability, all

the raw data and codes were stored; in this way, they can be examined when it is necessary. Two researchers jointly analyzed the study data. The results of the analysis were checked by two field experts outside the authors.

Findings

In accordance with the purpose of the study, we distinguised between various factors that have an effect on dropout rates: school and programme-related factors, social environment-related factors, and personal traits-related factors. The frequencies and percentages for the themes are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Factors Causing Students to Drop out of School in Open education and in Distance Education

Factors	f	%
School and Programme-related	86	66.15
Social environment-related	29	22.30
Personal traits-related	15	11.53
Total	**130**	**100**

As shown in Table 4, it is clear that the factors causing students to drop out of school are primarily school and programme-related factors (66.14%). This is followed by social-environment-related factors (22.30%), and finally personal traits-related factors (11.53%). The reason for having a larger number of frequencies (130) than the number of participants was the fact that more than one reason was stated by each participant for dropping out.

School and Programme-related Factors

The school and programme-related reasons for dropping out of school are divided into three groups of factors. These are related to type of education, course content, and test environment and conditions. The frequencies and percentages for school and programme-related factors for dropping out of school in open education and distance education are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: School and Programme-related Factors

Factors	f	%
Factors stemming from the type of education	41	47.67
Factors stemming from course content	23	26.74
Factors stemming from test environment and conditions	22	25.58
Total	**86**	**100**

According to Table 5, the highest rate of factors relate to the type of education (47.67%), whereas the lowest rate of factors are those stemming from test environment and conditions (25.58%). The factors and sub-factors stemming from school and programme-related factors cause students to drop out of open education and distance education.

Factors Stemming from the Type of Education

The highest rate of the school and programme -related factors stems from the type and structure of education (47.67%). The factors emerging in this category are tuition fees, face-to-face lesson support, institutional support, level of interaction, and dependency on technical infrastructure. Table 6 shows the frequencies and percentages for these factors.

Table 6: Factors stemming from the Type of Education

Factors	f	%
Tuition fees	15	36.58
Face-to-face lesson support	12	29.26
Expectation for institutional support	8	19.51
Levels of interaction	3	7.31
Dependency on technical infrastructure	3	7.31
Total	**41**	**100**

   As Table 6 makes clear, tuition fees account for the highest factor causing students to drop out of open education faculty and of distance education (36.58%). The lowest rates are in levels of interaction and and in dependency on technical infrastructure (7.31%). Face-to-face lesson support in distance education (29.26 %) and providing institutional support in distance education (19.51%) are also factors that have high rates.

Tuition fees. It was found that the perception about tuition fees as the cause of dropping out derives from worrying about failure, not being able to graduate within the normal duration of education, and having to repeat a semester or year. In addition to this, there is a belief that the programme will not contribute to the student in the short term; therefore, students may feel that online education is not worth what it costs. In particular, there is a belief that distance education should be less expensive. It was found that this belief stemmed from the thought that factors that conventionally contribute to the cost of education were not present in online courses. For example, there were no physical textbooks or face-to-face lessons. A participant expressed their concerns in this manner:

   "I paid 1,250 Turkish Liras at a time; it was difficult for me to pay it. I thought about how I would afford it, so I had to drop out." (P11)

Face-to-face lesson support. It was found that the need for face-to-face teaching by the instructor of a course in a real classroom environment was influential in decisions to drop out of school. Additionally, some of the participants stated that they did not see themselves as a part of education because face-to-face teaching was not used. One participant viewed it in this way:

   "I wouldn't think of drop out if the lessons were held in a classroom setting." (P19)

Expectations for institutional support. Students who take classses in distance education for the first time and cannot overcome the problem of adjustment expect academic and technical support.

Failure to meet these expectations for support is another cause for dropping out. One participant described it in this way:

> *"We did not know anything. We wanted to ask something. It was difficult to reach the university on the phone. I had to quit because I did not have answers to my questions rapidly."* (P24)

Levels of interaction. Having interaction with teachers and other students is perceived as being included in a social environment in distance education. However, inadequate levels of interaction plays a role in students' decision to drop out of school. A participant explained:

> *"Eye contact, a crowded classroom is very important to me. Such a thing was not available. As soon as I learnt that the lessons would be on the internet, on the computer, I said to the teacher I would give up. I wanted to attend formal education and to be a student again. I did not want to study at home. For this reason, I quitted."* (P12)

Dependency on technical infrastructure. Distance education requires a certain level of technical equipment and must meet certain conditions. Failure to meet the need for the technical infrastructure required for both participation in live online lessons and the ability to view the lessons also influenced decisions to drop out. One participant spoke to the significance of these aspects:

> *"There is no internet when electricity is a failure. We can't enter online classes. In my opinion, lessons are recorded on the computer but it is not a good thing to study on the internet."* (P24)

Thus, it is clear that teaching lessons on the Internet, perceptions about the price of education, and the need for face-to-face lesson support were remarkable factors on students' decision to drop out of school. Additionally, expectations for institutional support, the importance of the levels of interaction in online education, and the necessity of technical infrastructure were also identified as reasons for dropping out of open education and distance education programs. It is important to note that being accustomed to traditional, face-to-face instruction makes it difficult to adapt to the structure of online education.

Factors Stemming from Course Content

Factors related to course content were also identified as causes for school dropout. Emerging factors in this category include: the need for printed books, access to supplementary resources, the perception that course content was intensive, and presentation periods. The frequencies and percentages for the factors are shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Course Content-related Factors

Factors	f	%
Need for printed books	14	60.86
Need for supplementary materials	4	17.39
Belief that course content is intensive	3	13.04
Presentation periods of course content	2	8.69
Total	**23**	**100**

Accordingly, it was found that the need for a printed book containing the course content had the highest rate (60.86%). This was followed by the desire for supporting the course content with supplementary materials (17.39%), the belief that course content was intensive (13.04%), and the presentation periods of course content (8.69%). The factors related to course content are described below in the order of percentages with support from participants' views.

Need for Printed Course books. The analyses demonstrated that the need for printed course books was a reason for school dropouts. The participants said that they had studied the subjects in printed course books in their earlier school life and that this made it more difficult to read course content on the computer. They stated that they needed a course book due to its portability and accessibility.

The participants associated their need for a printed book with their previous study habits. They said that it would be more efficient and more motivating for them to study with a printed book by using meta-cognitive study skills (especially note-taking, underlining, etc.) and that they obtained the printouts for course content for this reason. They also said that this would require additional effort and cost. A participant expressed the following view:

> "*It is essential that we have a book, because we are used to having a book. We want to underline sentences while reading, we want to take notes and to highlight the important parts. We remember better in this way. I had difficulty and I could not continue.*" (P17)

Need for Supplementary Materials. The need for supporting course content with supplementary materials was found to be a cause for school dropouts. Accordingly, two main reasons influenced the expectations for supplementary materials. Because of their previous study habits, a printed book would meet psychological needs. Additionally, students wanted to have a resource that was practical and concise, thus enabling them to study in a shorter time and achieve greater success on exams. Yet, it was also apparent that the students believed that course materials should include topics from different perspectives in addition to being exam-oriented. The participants pointed out that they needed additional resources to facilitate the process of studying and that lecture notes became a great burden to them in the absence of supplementary materials.

Belief that course content is intensive. When studying a lesson, it is necessary to have course content that facilitates comprehension and contains concise knowledge. This need stems from the desire to better understand a course, to more effectively prepare for an exam, to preserve the integrity of a subject, and to achieve greater success on an exam. However, the perception that course content is intensive in terms of quality and quantity is also influential in decisions to leave school. A participant described it in this way:

> "*Subjects should have been brief in distance education. We should have understood easily. We had 600 page lecture notes. It was difficult.*" (P8).

Presentation Periods of Course Content. The analyses showed that broadcasting course content weekly made it difficult to set up connections between subjects and that it negatively affected the process of studying. The thought of failure to use study time effectively and efficiently also influenced decisions to drop out of school. A participant explained it as follows:

> "*We should have the whole book instead of having weekly booklets. It would be more advantageous to study a book from the beginning to the end instead of studying separately every week.*" (P2).

Providing printed material of course content, supporting students with supplementary materials, achieving a certain quality of course content, and sharing content in an accessible manner all had an effect on open education and distance education students' decisions to drop out.

Factors Stemming from Test Environment and Conditions

The analyses showed that test environments and conditions could also be influential in students' decision to drop out of open education and distance education. In particular, students' perceptions about online tests and associated technical problems were influential in their decision to give up education. Reaching the test centre in centrally administered examinations and perceptions that test questions were difficult also emerged as causes for school dropouts. Frequencies and percentages for factors stemming from test environment and conditions are shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Factors Stemming from Test Environment and Conditions

Factors	f	%
Technical problems	8	36.36
Perceptions about the test administered on the internet	6	27.27
Reaching the test centres	4	18.18
Perceptions that test questions are difficult	4	18.18
Total	**22**	**100**

According to Table 8, technical problems stemming from test environment and conditions accounted for the highest influence (36.36%) in students' decisions to drop out of open education and distance education. This factor was followed by perceptions about the test administered on the Internet in open education and in distance education (27.27%), reaching the test centres (18.18%), and perceptions about the test questions (18.18%).

Technical Problems. Technical problems encountered in tests administered on the Internet can occasionally cause stress and tension. This was of particular concern for students who took an exam on the Internet for the first time and worried about failure. These were both influential factors in their decisions to drop out of school. According to one participant:

> " I had difficulty taking exams online. We could not open the web site during the day. I did not want to deal with. That's why I dropped out."(P20)

Perceptions about the test administered on the Internet. The analyses showed that the level of safety in online examinations should be more prominent. Participants stressed that the examination was not fair and that the scores they received were not an indicator of success. Thus, they stated that these factors were influential in their decisions to drop out. One participant described it in the following manner:

> "I studied hard for the exams and I passed, but some students cheated in the exams. This is unfair-which disturbed me. So I dropped out." (P21)

Remoteness to the test center. Students living in cities other than exam centers travel to the cities where the final and make-up exams are administered. In addition to the stress and anxiety

associated with taking exams, the process of traveling to exam centers influenced students' decisions to drop out. One participant explained the effects of this factor:

> *"Test center was not available in the place where I lived. I had nobody to look after my child. I had to drop out because it was difficult for me to go."* (P24)

Perceptions that test questions are difficult. Students emphasized that the test questions were irrelevant to course content, that the questions required knowledge, and that they contained long and difficult texts. The analyses demonstrated that taking exams for more than one course at a time resulted in ineffective use of time, having difficulty in understanding and answering questions, increased worry about failure, and loss of self-confidence. A participant viewed it as the following:

> *"The lessons were based on memorization and questions were asked in detail. That's why I dropped out."* (P11)

Technical problems encountered in addition to perceptions about the tests may be influential in students' decisions to drop out of school. Moreover, students felt that taking exams in another city forced them to sacrifice responsibilities at work and at home. Additionally, the perception of difficult test questions was also influential.

Social Environment-related Factors

According to the data, 22.3% of the factors causing school dropout in open education and in distance education were social environment-related factors. We analyzed social environment-related factors under two main categories: environmental circumstances and conditions and occupational and household responsibilities. The frequencies and percentages for the factors are shown in Table 9.

Table 9: Social Environment-related Factors

Factors	f	%
Environmental circumstances and conditions	19	65.51
Individual responsibilities	10	34.48
Total	**29**	**100**

Environmental circumstances and conditions accounted for a 65.51% dropout rate while the rate of those who dropped out of school because they did not think they could cope with increasing environmental responsibilities was 34.48%. Below, we consider participants' view of the factors and sub-factors related to the social environment that influence dropout rates in open education and in distance education.

Factors Stemming from Environmental Circumstances and Conditions

Factors stemming from environmental circumstances and conditions emerge as causes for school dropout rates in open education and distance education. Technical inadequacies and the effects of supportive social environments are considered important in distance education; thus, the absence of those circumstances and conditions can lead to decisions to dropping out of school. The frequencies and percentages for the factors were calculated from frequencies (19) and percentages

(65.51%) of factors stemming from environmental circumstances and conditions. These factors are shown in Table 10.

Table 10: Factors stemming from environmental circumstances and conditions

Factors	f	%
Technical inadequacies	7	36.84
Supportive environments	7	36.84
Need for financial support	5	26.31
Total	**29**	**100**

According to Table 10, 36.84% of dropouts decided to leave school due to inconvenient technical conditions whereas 36.84% decided to leave because their expectations for physical and psychological support had not been met. Additionally, 26.31% dropped out of open education and distance education since they did not have financial support. Below, we describe dropout factors stemming from environmental circumstances and conditions and include support from participants' views.

Technical inadequacies. The analyses demonstrated that the participants had the perception that regular Internet access should be available in order to follow lessons taught on the Internet. In particular, students in rural areas with no computer and limited access to the Internet had to move to a place where they could reach the content broadcast and the activities on the Internet. Therefore, these diffculties were also influential in decisions to leave school. According to one participant:

> *"I needed the internet. Because of my job, I couldn't find the internet everywhere. That's why I dropped out."* (P5)

Supportive environments. It was clear that students expected support from their family and friends in terms of psychological relief and appropriate environments for studying, especially because self-study is important in open and distance education. The participants stated that they needed help from friends who attended the same department in the subjects that they did not understand. When they had difficulties and could not find such support, they dropped out. As one participant put it:

> *"I needed help to study my lessons. It was easy for other friends. They helped each other. I am a nurse in a school. I have nobody in my immediate environment since I study alone in the school. When I had difficulty I phoned and said that I would quit my education."* (P18)

Need for financial support. Lack of financial options can also cause students to drop out. If students do not work and if their education costs are met by a relative, they might decide to drop out in order to save money. Some of the participants viewed this situation in the following manner:

> *"My son was doing a course and my daughter was a student at the same time. I had difficulty in financing the costs. That was one of the reasons."* (P18)

> *"I did not have a job. My family financed my costs in the first semester. They would borrow in the second semester. I had to quit because they would not be able to pay back the loan."* (P21)

Factors Stemming from Individual Responsibilities

Work conditions and household responsibilites can cause dropouts in open education and distance education. This factor emerged because of a failure in time management. The frequencies and percentages associated with individual responsibilities are shown in Table 11.

Table 11: Factors stemming from too many responsibilities

Factors	f	%
Working conditions	5	50.00
Household responsibilities	5	50.00
Total	**10**	**100**

   According to Table 11, in relation to individual responsibilities, responsibilities related to working conditions and household responsibilities are influential in students' dropout decisions in open education and distance education. These factors are described below and supported by participants' views.

Working conditions. Factors stemming from working conditions were found to be influential in students' decisions to leave school. Stress at work, harsh working conditions, physical and psychological fatigue, and worries about not being able to meet course requirements due to excessive responsibilities are influential in school dropout decisions. A participant explained it in this way:

> *"I had heavy burden in my job due to my position. Sometimes, I did not go home for a week. I did not have time to study. Therefore, I droppoed out."* (P5)

Household responsibilities. They were also found to be influential in school dropout decisions. Some of the participants emphasized that they had too many responsibilities in their family. They said that they had difficulty in meeting the requirements for education along with their household responsibilities. They also said that they did not have balance between their responsibilities and they decided to drop out for this reason. In particular, married women with children stated that they did not have opportunities or time to study while they were looking after their children and fulfilling their responsibilities. The participants said that their responsibilities outside school (housekeeping, looking after children, etc.) and extreme tiredness resulted in a lack of desire to study. A participant expressed the following view:

> "*The most important reason was not being able to study. I am a married woman. I have two children. For this reason I did not have opportunity to study regularly. I decided to quit.*" (P11).

   Worries caused by technical inadequacies which are not thought to be resolved in a short time are influential in school dropout decisions in open education and distance education. Additionally, students who could not study on their own in online education expected psychological and academic support from their environment. The analyses revealed that individuals who relied upon others financially also ended their education.

Personal Trait-related Factors

Some of the factors causing students to drop out of school in open education and in distance education can stem from students' personal traits. Accordingly, the following factors were identified as significant factors that relate to personal traits: success at a course, unfamiliarity with online lessons, career expectations, and computer skills. The frequencies and percentages of personal trait-related factors are shown in Table 12.

Table 12: Personal Trait-related Factors

Factors	f	%
Success at a course	5	33.33
Unfamiliarity with online education	4	26.66
Career expectations	3	20.00
Computer skills	3	20.00
Total	**15**	**100**

As is clear from Table 11, the leading factors causing school dropouts in open education and in distance education are success at a course (33.33%) and unfamiliarity with online education (26.66%). These are followed by low career expectations and inadequate computer skills (20%). Factors stemming from individuals' personal traits causing school dropouts are described below and supported with participants' views as well as frequencies and percentages

Success at a course. Success at a course is an important factor in influencing continuity of education. The analyses demonstrated that low success at courses, failing a course, and repeating a semester caused loss of self-confidence and motivation. These factors even caused perceptions that failure could not be compensated. Such experiences are also influential in students' decisions to drop out of distance education. According to one participant's view:

> "I had a very low score on the test. After that, I was depressed. I never wanted to study anymore. That's why I dropped out." (P9)

Unfamiliarity with online education. The analyses performed in this study demonstrated that the prevalence of traditional educational methods caused negative perceptions about education through the Internet. It became apparent that adaptation problems emerged particularly within individuals who were receiving an online education for the first time and did not have adequate knowledge and background about the process. It was found that this situation resulted in stress and failure, thus affecting decisions to drop out. As one participant explained:

> "I couldn't feel that I was a students because I have not had online courses before. People are always asking questions such as 'what will I do?' or 'how will it happen?'. They don't know what to do since they experience such thing for the first time." (P16)

Career expectations. The analyses conducted indicated that many of the problems encountered in distance education caused inconveniences for individuals that were influential in decisions to drop out of school. A participant described this in the following manner:

> "I didn't need to attend classes because I have a profession. That's why I dropped out." (P3)

Computer skills. It was evident that computer skills and levels of literacy were important in online education. The loss of self-confidence related to a lack of such skills was influential in school dropout decisions. A participant explained the effect of this particular factor:

> *"I even didn't know how to use a computer fully. I had a tablet computer for the first time. I had difficulty. There were also other things but this was the main reason for me."* (P21)

The in-depth analyses performed showed that students' low career expectations and academic failure in the process of education resulted in both loss of motivation and tension. Students who had taken courses in distance education believed that the academic failure they experienced would be continuous; therefore, they lost their self-confidence. Additionally, having low levels of computer skills was also influential in students' decisions to drop out. The frequencies and percentages of factors causing students' to drop out of school in open education and in distance education are shown in Table 13.

Table 13: Reasons for Dropping out of School in Open and Distance Education

Factors			f	%
School and programme-related factors	Factors stemming from the type of education	Tuition fees	15	11.54
		Face-to-face lesson support	12	9.23
		Expectations for institutional support	8	6.15
		Levels of interaction	3	2.31
		Dependency on technical infrastructure	3	2.31
	Factors stemming from course content	Need for printed course books	14	10.77
		Need for supplementary materials	4	3.08
		Belief that course content is intensive	3	2.31
		Presentation periods of course content	2	1.54
	Factors stemming from test environment and conditions	Technical problems	8	6.15
		Perceptions about the test administered on the Internet	6	4.62
		Reaching the test centers	4	3.08
		Perceptions that test questions are difficult	4	3.08
Social environment-related factors	Factors stemming from environmental circumstances and conditions	Technical inadequacies	7	5.38
		Supportive environments	7	5.38
		Need for financial support	5	3.85
	Factors stemming from responsibilities	Working conditions	5	3.85
		Household responsibilities	5	3.85
Personal trait-related factors	Factors stemming from students' personal traits	Success at a course	5	3.85
		Unfamiliarity with online education	4	3.08
		Career expectations	3	2.31
		Computer skills	3	2.31
Total			**130**	**100**

Accordingly, factors stemming from school and programme to personal traits and the envrionment all have an influence on school dropout decisions.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study has attempted to reveal factors stemming from school and programmes, ranging from the environment to students' personal traits, that influenced students' decisions to drop out of school in open education and distance education. Yet, the conclusions obtained in this study and in other studies in the literature have shown that no single factor in isolation is sufficient for understanding school dropout reasons. Thus, the effects of more than one factor on dropout decisions in distance education could be analyzed in different studies. This study had certain limitations; the group consisted of 25 participants and data collection was restricted to one university. Prospective studies could work with a larger sample. The findings for the factors that influenced students' decisions to drop out of open education and distance education are shown in Figure 1.
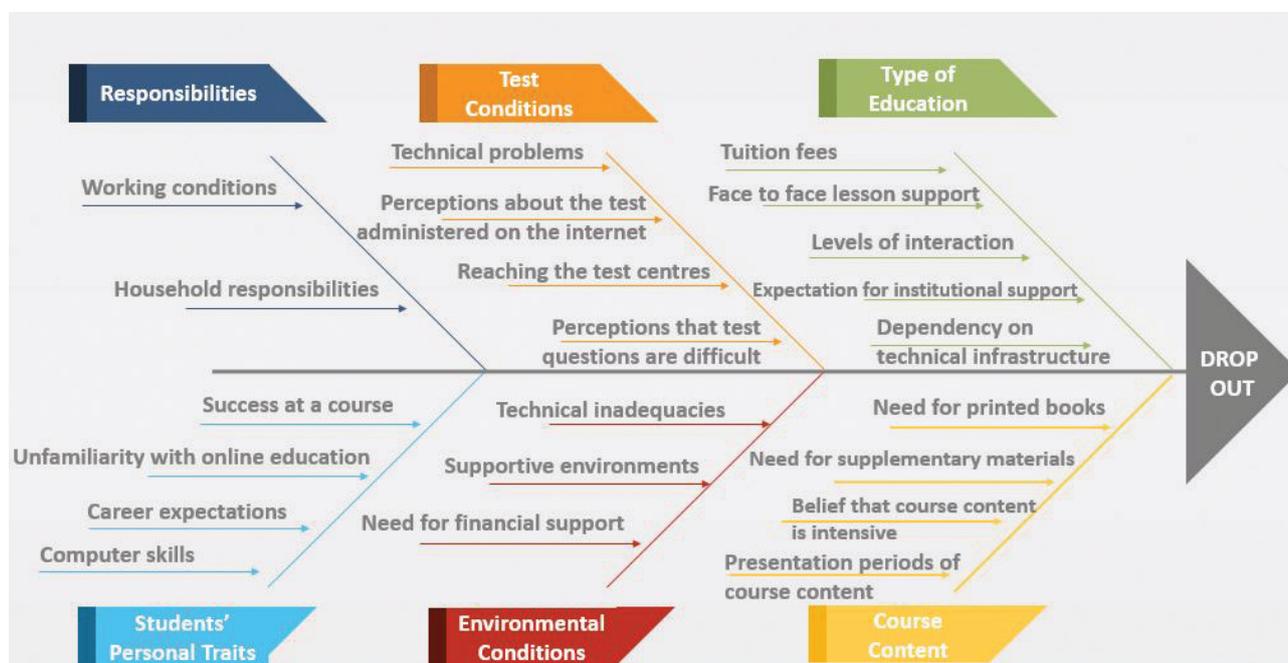

Figure 1: Factors influential in open education and distance education students' decisions to drop out of school.

According to the results of this study, there is a concern that advanced payment of the program fees will be more difficult for the personal budget and that the payments will continue in the case of extending the school. The existence of payment anxiety in students shows that students believe that they cannot complete their education in distance education. However, it is stated that there is an imbalance between the perceived quality of education and wages in distance education; thus, this indicates a low level of readiness for distance education.

There are perceptions and expectations in distance education that lessons will be supported by face-to-face teaching in a real classroom environment. In particular, the expectation of educator-student interaction is prominent. This can be explained with the fact that distance education students wish to have the feelings of being a student and being committed to school. Drouin (2008) also stresses that students' insufficient interactions with teachers and with other students can cause

students to feel isolated. This causes them to move away from the lesson-based environment and to drop out of school. It is evident that expectations for systematic institutional support are important because the institution and students are physically separated.

Printed course materials are needed in distance education. The need stems from easy acccess and portability while studying and from students' desire to sustain their study habits (such as note-taking, underlining and other habits). This situation is associated with students' wish to learn more easily in a shorter time. Thistoll and Yates (2016), on the other hand, analyzed the effects of course content broadcast in distance education, teachers and teaching materials, and interaction design on satisfaction. Ultimately, they revealed the positive effects of the teaching design model on motivation.

This study also obtained significant findings on students' reasons for dropping out of open education and distance education due to environmental factors. Another important result obtained was that students need emotional and financial support from their families, friends, employers, and colleagues. They also need a convenient study environment. These findings were similar to the ones obtained in other studies (Castles, 2004; Holder, 2007; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Morris Finnegan, & Wu, 2005; Osborn, 2001; Park & Choi, 2009; Thistoll & Yates, 2016). This situation results from the direct effect of distance education on self-study by providing education independent from time and place. Park and Choi (2009) stress that several students decide to drop out because the social environment cannot provide sufficient support. Other factors influencing students' decisions to drop out inlcude: students' or their families' low levels of income (Hupfeld, 2010), lacking family support for students' education (Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005), and students' obligations to take on adult roles, such as a parent or employee (Hupfeld, 2010).

Household responsibilities comprise another environmental factor that is influential in school dropout decisions. Students with intensive labor environments and with work responsibilities have the tendency to quit their education since they cannot meet the course requirements. In particular, family responsibilities (Thistoll & Yates, 2016), family and workplace support (Park & Choi, 2009), work experience (Lee & Choi, 2011), time conflicts (Lim, 2016), and monetary problems (Yukselturk & Inan, 2006) all have an effect on decisions about leaving school. This situation can be associated with an increase in students' levels of stress and fatigue because they have to work; this can further contribute to a decline in their motivation and, as a result, cause them to be distracted from their education. Castles (2004) and Müller (2008) also emphasize that the ability to balance multiple responsibilities is an important factor in school dropout decisions.

When students who are registered in distance education courses for the first time fail one or several courses, they believe that the failure will continue in the future; thus, they experience a lack of self-confidence. Cheung and Kan (2002), Dupin-Bryant (2004), and Osborn (2001) also suggested that the number of previous successful experiences in distance education courses was an important factor in determining school dropout decisions. This situation can be explained with the fact that the students taking courses in distance education for the first time have difficulty in adapting to a new method of education. Levy (2007) also concludes that students with less experience have a greater tendency to drop out than those who have more experience. Individuals who have not previously taken a course in distance education have high levels of anxiety when they face a method of teaching that is unfamiliar to them. This might be associated with the fact that students are more inclined to participate in education that is conducted in traditional methods, especially when they have not yet adjusted to distance education. Students often drop out because of their beliefs that completing the programme will not benefit them and that their achievements will actually be lower than their expectation. Students with no academic or professional career expectations tend to drop out of school when they encounter situations that they perceive as having a negative effect on their lives.

Recommendations

Distance education has high dropout rates, both in Turkey and across the world. As such, this form of education should be re-examined and strategies should be developed to reduce school dropout rates in distance education. Students who have academic adaptation problems in their educational life prior to university and who take courses in distance education for the first time could be monitored more closely. Those students could be offered orientation programmes, technical support, and seminars. Prior to students' university entrance, databases about students' academic skills, focus of control and motivation levels, personal traits, and current experiences could be formed. Interactive, interesting, and effective course content to facilitate individual study could be created. In order to raise the levels of interaction in distance education, those students could participate in various components such as chats, discussion boards, special messaging, or face-to-face contact. Students who need printed books could be given resources and support with an additional price at registration. Consultancy services could be offered to determine students' environmental problems and to help them to solve those problems.

This study has several limitations. The sample of the study is limited to 25 people. With a larger sample size, future research can provide a broader picture of the factors that lead to dropout in online distance education. In addition, theses can be written on this subject. Each of the identified factors can be dealt with separately and solutions can be developed. Objective and direct measures are needed for further speculations.

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