

**Examining the Factors
Contributing to Student Dropout
in Open and Distance Education**

M.A Thesis

Sevgi ELİBOL

Eskisehir, 2024

**EXAMINING THE FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO STUDENT DROPOUT IN
OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION**

Sevgi ELİBOL

M.A THESIS

Department of Distance Education

Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Aras BOZKURT

Eskisehir

Anadolu University

Institution of Graduate Schools

January 2024

*This study received funding within the scope of Project No 2208E119 approved by the
Commission of Scientific Research Projects (BAP).*

JÜRİ VE ENSTİTÜ ONAYI

Sevgi ELİBOL'ın "Açık ve Uzaktan Öğrenme Programlarında Öğrenenlerin Sistemden Ayrılma Sebeplerinin İncelenmesi" başlıklı tezi **26 Ocak 2024** tarihinde, aşağıdaki jüri tarafından Lisansüstü Eğitim-Öğretim ve Sınav Yönetmeliğinin ilgili maddeleri uyarınca toplanan **Uzaktan Eğitim Anabilim Dalı Uzaktan Eğitim programında, yüksek lisans tezi** olarak değerlendirilerek kabul edilmiştir.

Üye (Tez Danışmanı) : **Doç. Dr. Aras BOZKURT**

Üye : **Dr.Öğr.Üy. Erdem ERDOĞDU**

Üye : **Dr.Öğr.Üy. Ayşe YILMAZ**

Prof. Dr. Saime ÖNCE
Anadolu Üniversitesi
Lisansüstü Eğitim Enstitüsü Müdürü

ABSTRACT

EXAMINING THE FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO STUDENT DROPOUT IN OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

Sevgi ELİBOL

Department of Distance Education

Anadolu University, Institution of Graduate Schools, January 2024

Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Aras BOZKURT

Student dropout remains a significant concern despite the growing corpus of literature on the subject. Through an in-depth examination of the lived experiences of those who have dropped out from distance education programs, this phenomenological study aims to reveal the factors that contribute to students' decision to leave. In this study, semi structured interviews were utilized to uncover the nuanced, personal, and complex factors and thematic data analysis technique was applied to analyze the data. The research group consists of 15 individuals who once enrolled in an open and distance education program but dropped out between the years 2019 and 2022. Based on the findings derived from participants' responses to the first interview question aiming to reveal the underlying reasons that contribute to participants' dropping out, most frequently addressed factors were assessment, course and study materials, life circumstances, enrollment policies and procedures, motivation and goal commitment, course difficulty, self-regulation, pandemic, tuition fee, other academic pursuits, trust and credibility, course design, course satisfaction, infrastructure and accessibility, communication channels and interaction and socialization. Participants' responses to the second interview question, which aims to bring the emotional outcomes of their decisions into light, revealed such emotional outcomes as indifference, sadness, relief, disappointment, being deceived, and awareness. Based on the findings, meticulously documented lived experiences of the participants were discussed by revisiting the literature, a set of recommendations were made and some implications for future studies were noted.

Keywords: Attrition, Distance education, Dropout, Online learning, Open and distance education, Retention.

ÖZET

AÇIK VE UZAKTAN ÖĞRENME SÜREÇLERİNDE ÖĞRENCİLERİN SİSTEMDEN AYRILMA SEBEPLERİNİN İNCELENMESİ

Sevgi ELİBOL

Uzaktan Eğitim Anabilim Dalı

Anadolu Üniversitesi, Lisansüstü Eğitim Enstitüsü, Ocak, 2024

Danışman: Doç. Dr. Aras BOZKURT

Öğrenenlerin sistemden ayrılması, konuyla ilgili artan literatüre rağmen önemli bir endişe kaynağı olmaya devam etmektedir. Bu fenomenolojik çalışma, uzaktan eğitim programlarından ayrılanları yaşadıkları deneyimleri derinlemesine inceleyerek öğrenenlerin ayrılma kararına etki eden faktörleri ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu faktörleri ortaya çıkarmak için yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelerden yararlanılmış, verileri analiz etmek içinse tematik veri analizi tekniği uygulanmıştır. Araştırma grubu, daha önce bir açık ve uzaktan eğitim programına kaydolmuş ancak 2019-2022 yılları arasında programdan ayrılmış 15 kişiden oluşmaktadır. Katılımcıların okulu bırakmalarının altında yatan nedenleri ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlayan ilk görüşme sorusuna verilen yanıtlardan elde edilen bulgulara göre, en sık değinilen faktörler ölçme ve değerlendirme, ders materyalleri, yaşam koşulları, kayıt politikaları ve prosedürleri, motivasyon ve hedefe odaklılık, derslerin zorluğu, öz disiplin, pandemi, harç ücreti, diğer akademik uğraşlar, güven ve inandırıcılık, ders tasarımı, ders memnuniyeti, altyapı ve erişilebilirlik, iletişim kanalları ve etkileşim ve sosyalleşme olmuştur. Katılımcıların ayrılma kararlarının duygusal sonuçlarını ortaya koymayı amaçlayan ikinci görüşme sorusuna verilen yanıtlardan elde edilen bulgular, kayıtsızlık, üzüntü, rahatlama, hayal kırıklığı, kandırılmışlık ve farkındalık gibi duygusal sonuçları ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bulgulara dayanarak, katılımcıların deneyimleri geçmiş literatür ışığında tartışılmış ve bazı öneriler sunulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yıpranma, Uzaktan eğitim, Okul terki, Çevrimiçi öğrenme, Açık ve uzaktan eğitim, Devamlılık.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude for supporting me throughout this process. The completion of this thesis would have been impossible without their support and guidance.

At its core, I want to sincerely and deeply thank my supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Aras BOZKURT, for his tireless guidance, insightful feedback, never-ending encouragement, and unwavering faith in me. Your supervision has not only shaped this work but also impacted my professional development as a researcher. I am fortunate to have shared this academic journey with you. You are my inspiration in every sense.

I extend my sincere thanks to the committee members, Asst. Prof. Erdem ERDOĞDU and Asst. Prof. Ayşe YILMAZ for their insightful remarks and priceless feedback which enriched the quality of this work. I am also indebted to Assoc. Prof. Hakan ALTINPULLUK for his great support and help during this demanding process.

I cannot forget, of course, my friends and colleagues who entirely supported me from the very beginning and all the participants who generously shared their time and volunteered to participate in this study. I am truly thankful to them for their great contribution to my study. As I have this opportunity, I also wish to thank my dearest friend Sehla ERTAN for being the best study buddy and helping me during this process in any way she can.

My deepest gratitude goes to my parents, Ayşe ŞAHİN and Mustafa ŞAHİN, my beloved sisters, Nazan ŞAHİN GÜRSEL and Nuray KORKMAZ, my brothers-in-law, Güney GÜRSEL and Sultan KORKMAZ, and finally my lovely niece and nephews, Elçin Eslem GÜRSEL, Konuralp Tuğrul GÜRSEL and Sarp Eren KORKMAZ for their firm trust and unconditional love. Without their constant support and love, I would not have become the person I am now. *Anneciğim, babacığım, sevgili ablalarım, saygıdeğer eşleri (abilerim) ve biricik yeğenlerim; bana verdiğiniz emekler ve sonsuz sevginiz için size minnettarım. Ben bugün ne başarabiliyorsam hepsi sizin sayenizde. İyi ki varsınız ve iyi ki benim ailemsiniz.*

Last yet not least, I truly do not know how to thank my husband Halil ELİBOL, whose presence and company I consider a blessing. I can never find the right words to thank him for his endless love, support and patience which have been my pillars of strength. I am deeply

grateful for all the sacrifices you made. I wouldn't have been able to finish this study if it hadn't been for your belief in my abilities and comforting presence during stressful times.

To my beloved;

Cette réussite est autant la tienne que la mienne et je t'en suis reconnaissante. Derrière chaque mot que j'écris et chaque pas que je fais, il y a ton amour et ton soutien.

I dedicate this work to you, and to our unborn child who is awaiting for the right time to arrive.

DECLARATION OF COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL PRINCIPLES AND RULES

I hereby declare that this study is my own unique work; that I have conducted my research in accordance with scientific ethical principles and guidelines at every stage, including planning, gathering data, analyzing, and presenting information; that I have cited references for all data and information obtained for this study and have included these references in the bibliography; that this study has been checked for plagiarism using Anadolu University's "scientific plagiarism detection program" and that it is free of plagiarism. I hereby declare that if at any point a circumstance is found to be in contradiction with this statement I made about my study, I accept all ethical and legal consequences.

Sevgi ELİBOL

TABLE OF CONTENTS

COVER PAGE	i
FINAL APPROVAL FOR THESIS	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
ÖZET	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
DECLARATION OF COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL PRINCIPLES AND RULES	vii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	viii
LIST OF TABLES	xii
LIST OF FIGURES	xiii
1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1. Statement of the Problem	1
1.2. Purpose of the Study and Research Questions	3
1.3. Significance of the Study	4
1.4. Limitations	5
1.5. Assumptions	5
1.6. Definitions of Terms	5
1.6.1. Distance education	6
1.6.2. Open and distance learning	6
1.6.3. Dropout	6
1.6.4. Retention	6
1.6.5. Attrition	6
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	7

2.1. Theoretical Framework.....	7
2.1.1. The undergraduate dropout process model	7
2.1.2. The institutional departure model.....	8
2.1.3. The student attrition model	10
2.1.4. The non-traditional undergraduate student attrition model.....	11
2.1.5. A longitudinal-process model of drop-out from distance education.....	12
2.1.6. The composite persistence model	13
2.1.7. The revised model of dropouts from distance learning in organizations....	14
2.1.8. The proposed new model of voluntary dropout decision.....	16
2.2. Related Studies on Dropout Factors	17
2.2.1. Student related factors.....	17
<i>2.2.1.1. Educational background.....</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>2.2.1.2. Self-regulation and self-efficacy</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>2.2.1.3. Motivation and satisfaction</i>	<i>19</i>
2.2.2. Institutional factors.....	19
<i>2.2.2.1. Course design.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>2.2.2.2. Orientation</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>2.2.2.3. Faculty interaction and support.....</i>	<i>20</i>
2.2.3. Environmental factors	20
<i>2.2.3.1. Obligations.....</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>2.2.3.2. Family support.....</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>2.2.3.3. Cultural context</i>	<i>21</i>
3. METHODOLOGY.....	22
3.1. Research Design.....	22
3.2. The Role of the Researcher	23
3.3. Research Group	23
3.4. Research Context.....	24
3.5. Data Collection Instruments	25

3.6. Data Collection Procedures	25
3.7. Data Analysis	26
3.8. Validity and Reliability.....	27
4. FINDINGS.....	28
4.1. Reasons	28
4.1.1. Assessment.....	29
4.1.2. Course and study materials.....	31
4.1.3. Life circumstances	32
4.1.4 Enrollment policies and procedures.....	33
4.1.5 Motivation and goal commitment	34
4.1.6. Course difficulty	34
4.1.7 Self-regulation.....	35
4.1.8. Pandemic.....	36
4.1.9. Tuition fee.....	36
4.1.10. Other academic pursuits.....	37
4.1.11. Trust and credibility.....	38
4.1.12. Course design	38
4.1.13. Course satisfaction.....	39
4.1.14. Infrastructure and accessibility.....	40
4.1.15. Communication channels	40
4.1.16. Interaction and socialization	41
4.2. Emotional Outcomes	41
4.2.1. Indifference	42
4.2.2. Sadness	43
4.2.3. Relief.....	43
4.2.4. Disappointment.....	44
4.2.5. A Sense of being deceived	44
4.2.6. Awareness	44
5. CONCLUSION, DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS	45

5.1. Conclusion.....	45
5.2. Discussion.....	46
5.2.1. Reasons.....	46
5.2.2. Emotional Outcomes.....	54
5.3. Suggestions.....	56
5.3.1. Implications for stakeholders	56
5.3.2. Implications for potential students.....	58
5.3.3. Implications for further studies.....	58
REFERENCES.....	60
APPENDIX	
CURRICULUM VITAE	

LIST OF TABLES

	<u>Page</u>
Table 3.1. Participant list.....	24

LIST OF FIGURES

	<u>Page</u>
Figure 2.1. The undergraduate dropout process model.....	8
Figure 2.2. The institutional departure model.....	9
Figure 2.3. The student attrition model.....	10
Figure 2.4. The non-traditional undergraduate student attrition model.....	11
Figure 2.5. A longitudinal-process model of drop-out from distance education.....	12
Figure 2.6. The composite persistence model.....	14
Figure 2.7. The revised model of dropouts from distance learning in organizations.....	15
Figure 2.8. The proposed new model of voluntary dropout decision.....	17
Figure 4.1. An overview of all the codes and themes.....	28
Figure 4.2. Frequencies of the codes emerged under the theme ‘Reasons’.....	29
Figure 4.3. Frequencies of the codes emerged under the theme ‘Emotional Outcomes’	42

1. INTRODUCTION

Within the broad realm of academic research, this chapter embarks on a journey to investigate and contribute to the understanding of factors affecting student dropout in distance education environments. Aiming to serve as a gateway, this chapter unveils the boundaries of existing knowledge, the nature of the problem, the purpose and significance of the study, a delineation of research questions, inherent limitations, foundational assumptions and definitions of terms.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Education has always been considered the primary tool that provides citizens with an economic, social, and personal well-being in a society. In the era of advanced technology and information, continued education or lifelong learning has become a paramount need for everyone (Backes, 1997). As a result, colleges and universities all over the world have started to offer distance education courses that reach across geographic boundaries (Sherritt, 1996) to those who have job or family commitments, and still wish to pursue their educational goals.

Distance education has revolutionized learning by removing boundaries for anyone willing to study without physical presence in the classroom since its emergence in the 1880s (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Its popularity lies in, including but not limited to, its ability to provide individuals who wish to pursue professional development with an opportunity of lifelong learning at their own pace without interfering in their full-time job or family commitments. Furthermore, the flexibility it offers serves as an attractive invitation for learners to enroll in online courses (Lee & Choi, 2011). Due to its flexible nature, distance education has been viewed as the key to providing learning situations for those who hold more responsibilities other than being a student. (Brindley, 1987)

Technology, beyond any doubt, has paved the way for distance education thanks to its undeniable ability to reach millions of students in a quicker and more resourceful way. It offers a perpetual interaction and a fruitful collaboration among students who are at different locations, which later enables them to build a learning community (An & Kim, 2006). What's more, such mediums as blended-learning (Hummel, 2006), e-learning (Fox & Mackeogh,

2003) and mobile learning (Traxler, 2007) have recently contributed significantly to the vast growing popularity of distance education. The advances in learning resources based on computer technologies have also facilitated the shift in learning environments from teacher-centered to student-centered since students have quit their passive roles and become active participants of the learning process (Bozkurt, 2017, p.117).

However, despite the growing demand on distance learning, institutions suffer low retention rates within their distance learning environments (Kember, 1995; Muljana & Luo, 2019; Radovan, 2019), which has become a major interest of distance education researchers. An ever-increasing dropout rate may seriously impede the pool of qualified people from diverse backgrounds that could contribute to the society's growth and progress. Therefore, the question why students don't persist despite the advantages and convenience digital technologies have brought has been an ongoing challenge for educational stakeholders, as well.

In order to fully understand the problem and what may lie behind it, the term 'dropout' needs to be clarified. In the field of distance education, various definitions of dropout which have been provided by many authors (Dupin-Bryant, 2004; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Kaplan et al., 1997; Levy, 2007; Moore et al., 2003; Morris et al., 2005; Pierrakeas et al., 2004; Shin & Kim, 1999; Tinto, 1975) can be found. When all definitions are examined, one can conclude that a precise definition is not possible since what dropout means largely depends on the characteristics of each program. Dropout, as employed in the present study, refers to the students who either did not pay the tuition fee for four consecutive semesters or voluntarily left the system.

Although dropouts are of major concern to any kind of education, the dropout rate in distance education is much higher than in traditional education (Gaytan, 2015; Keegan, 1996; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Morgan & Tam, 1999; Okur et al., 2019; Pierrakeas et.al, 2004; Radovan, 2019; Terry, 2001). Many institutions offering distance education have less than a quarter of the graduation rates of conventional institutions and Simpson (2013) defines this problem as 'distance education deficit'.

The target population of distance education are mostly adults who are employed and taking care of their families and this type of medium is able to fulfill their needs because of the convenience, flexibility and adaptability it provides (Holmberg, 1989, p.12).

Furthermore, as Knowles (1980) suggests in his theory of adult education, adults tend to take control over their learning or have a say in the decisions made for them. This being the case, distance education could be thought to greatly assist adults who are well-suited to the very nature of distance education where students are mostly expected to take responsibility for their own learning. However, although distance education has eliminated traditional barriers to adult participation, the results of this kind of education delivery don't seem to be as successful as hoped (Brindley, 1987).

Many colleges and universities all around the world offering distance education have been suffering student dropout at alarming rates, and the institutions in Turkey are no exception. The issue of dropout is well illustrated when the current statistics given by Anadolu University (<http://www.anadolu.edu.tr>), one of the world's largest distance-teaching universities, are examined. The current number of the students enrolled in Anadolu University Open Education Faculty is 2.400.449. However, only 1.145.603 of these students, which is nearly half of the total number, seem to be active (Anadolu University, 2023). With this in mind, it could be stated that dropout students pose a great risk to such a giga university (Bozkurt, 2019a) whose mission is to meet the expectations of all kinds of learners and grow its target audience every year. As distance education programs continue to grow and become more mainstream all over the world, a continued attention to dropouts will never cease.

1.2. Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Built on past research, the major focus of this study is to examine the factors which might relate to students' decisions to drop out from open and distance education programs and gain a better insight into students' perceptions of their current academic setting. Therefore, this study seeks to address the following question:

1. What are the factors affecting student dropout in open and distance education programs?

1.3. Significance of the Study

Despite its distinctive feature of providing educational opportunities to a relatively higher number of learners from any social, academic or economic background, one major challenge that continues to loom large in the context of distance education is the issue of dropout. Since high rates of dropout can be linked to a variety of issues such as deficiencies in program quality (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Perry et. al., 2008) or lack of learner engagement and motivation (Chyung, 2001; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Osborn, 2001; Parker, 2003), understanding the possible reasons for dropout has been a prerequisite for not only institutions, but also educational stakeholders (Bağrıacık Yılmaz & Karataş, 2022; Yılmaz, 2020) policy makers and potential students.

To date, much research has been carried out on determining factors leading to dropout or reasons for persistence in distance education. However, few researchers have addressed the issue through the eyes of students in depth. Whether or not to persist in distance education is a complex decision as it involves several factors which are both interrelated and particular to the individual's context (Morgan & Tam, 1999). Besides, some of the factors may be shaped by the cultural environment and educational context, so there is a need for examining each factor in its own context. A thorough examination of the catalyst behind students' decision to drop out might at least alleviate if not eliminate the probable negative consequences for students or institutions. Only when remarkable insights into the reasons for dropout are gained that distance education institutions can formulate successful strategies to anticipate and reduce attrition rates and maintain enrollment (Willging & Johnson, 2019). If institutions aim to influence students' decisions whether to persist and increase the likelihood of their persistence, they need to relate to students' perceptions which have a profound role in shaping their actions and, therefore, their decisions (Tinto, 2017). Since dropout rates might also be viewed as one of the measures of the effectiveness of an online program and student completion rates can give an idea of how high the program quality is (Gabrielle, 2001), there is a strong need for student-centric studies that can shed light on individuals' own stories and experiences in their own voice and, therefore, provide a more authentic and nuanced insight.

In addition to contributing to the existing body of literature on student dropout in distance education, by giving voice to the silenced narratives of those who have left distance education, this study is expected to hold substantial implications for educational practitioners, administrators, policymakers, technology developers and course designers involved in distance education. From a practical standpoint, the results of this study could aid aforementioned stakeholders in the development of empirically supported policies that take into account the particular requirements and difficulties faced by students in online learning environments.

1.4. Limitations

The study group is limited to 15 students who were enrolled in an open and distance education program but dropped out between the years 2019 and 2022. The research data is limited to the findings obtained from semi-structured interview questions. The study involves participants who dropped out during or after Covid19 period, which might have affected their decision.

1.5. Assumptions

This study was conducted in the light of the following assumptions:

- The answers given throughout the interview reflect the sincere thoughts of the participants.
- The institutional sources used provide accurate and valid information.

1.6. Definitions of Terms

Following are definitions of selected terms to be used in this study:

1.6.1. Distance education

Distance education refers to “teaching and planned learning in which teaching normally occurs in a different place from learning, requiring communication through technologies as well as special institutional organization” (Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p. 2).

1.6.2. Open and distance learning

The term open and distance learning refers to “both the fact that all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in time and space from the learner, and that the mission aims to include greater dimensions of openness and flexibility, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other elements of structure” (UNESCO, 2002, p. 8).

1.6.3. Dropout

Dropout refers to those who permanently leave the institution in which they are registered and never receive a degree from it.

1.6.4. Retention

Retention refers to “students’ continuing their education into the following year and seeing it through to completion” (Mason & Matas, 2015, p. 49).

1.6.5. Attrition

Attrition refers to the circumstance in which "a student: 1) is offered admission but does not report to school; 2) accepts admission and begins attending but drops out right after admission; and 3) drops out in the middle of the course" (Ramist, 1981, p. 4).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The central focus of early studies on student dropout was on the individual students' physiological attributes such as their aptitude, personality and motivation (Tinto, 1993) or personal shortcomings (Habley et al., 2012; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1993). Therefore, these studies were classified as psychological studies (Tinto, 1993: 2006). However, since the innovative trends rooted in the field in the 1970s, further theoretical models and studies trying to explain the phenomenon from psychological, environmental, sociological, economic and organizational perspectives have been developed (Habley et al., 2012; Tinto, 1993).

2.1.1. The undergraduate dropout process model

Spady (1970)'s approach to student dropout is theoretically grounded in Durkheim (1951)'s theory of suicide which was defined by Durkheim (1951) as the process when an individual fails to sufficiently integrate into society. As for Durkheim (1951), people lacking sufficient moral (value) integration and collective affiliation have a greater potential to commit suicide. Since Spady (1970) draws a similarity between college and society in that both are social systems with their own social structures and values, he maintains that the factors leading individuals to suicide may bear a resemblance to those affecting students' decision to drop out.

What Spady (1970) refers to in his research as "poor integration" is associated with insufficient compliance with the shared value system of the college collectivity as well as inadequate interactions with other students, which, as he assumes, would result in their feeling less engaged and committed to the social system and therefore leaving.

However, Spady (1970) also points out that college environments are made up of not only social but also academic systems. In this case, a student's successful integration into one of those systems doesn't necessarily mean he/she will definitely persist. In other words, a student may sufficiently fit into the social structure yet fail to do so in academic domains of the college, or vice versa. Spady (1970) later claims that existing studies lack an analytical-

explanatory category and pursues the matter by analyzing the nature of the interactions that students have with their academic institutions.

Assuming that the result of this interaction dictates how well integrated students are into their academic and social systems and, in turn, how persistent they are, Spady (1970) carried out a longitudinal study through whose results his initial theoretical model underwent a slight change.

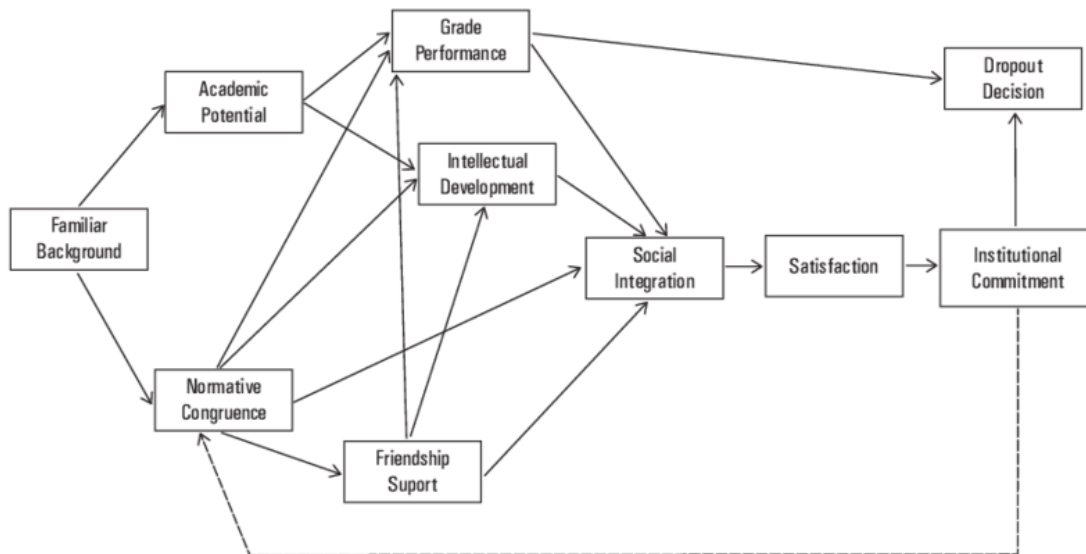


Figure 2.1. *The undergraduate dropout process model (Spady, 1970: 1971)*

2.1.2. The institutional departure model

Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure (1975: 1993), for which Spady (1970)'s model served as a launching point, is another theoretical view based on Durkheim (1951)'s theory of suicide. After it was put forward in 1975, the model went through some modifications as a result of further studies until 1993. According to this model, students' persistence depends on their success or failure in handling the process of passage- a term he adopts from social anthropologist van Gennep (1960) and which means transmission of relationships between groups- into the community of the institution.

Tinto (1975) emphasizes that every student is already a member of a community, namely their family, high school or vice versa, before they enroll in a college and they go through a process in which they need to abandon their previous communities since they differ

in values, norms and behaviour from their new academic communities. If the students could successfully acquire the norms and values of the new college community during the transmission, they are thought to have appropriately integrated into the new community. In other words, Tinto (1975) links persistence largely to students' social and academic integration into the college environments. While the former depends on both the interaction among peers and the interaction with the faculty, the latter is mostly determined by the students' academic performance.

According to this model, students' individual characteristics, previous experiences and level of commitment may play a vital role in their decision to persist. Tinto (1975) points out that every student entering a college has some goals and commitments which are determined by their family, skills and abilities and educational background. As experience grows, their level of initial goals and commitments is expected to transform and their ultimate level of goals and commitments may have an influence on their decision to persist.

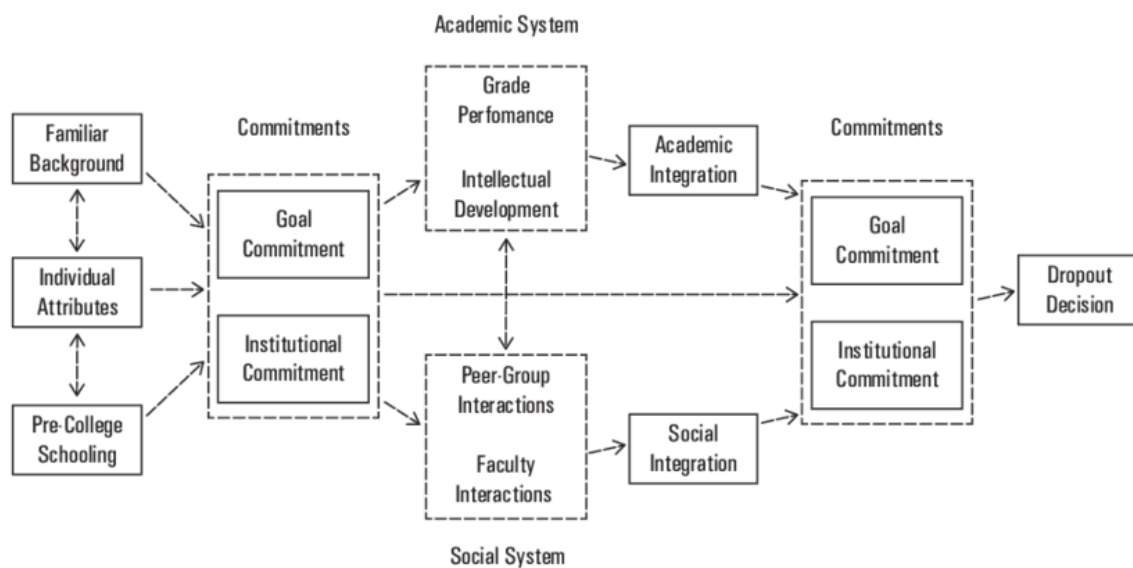


Figure 2.2. *The institutional departure model (Tinto, 1975: 1993)*

2.1.3. The student attrition model

While earlier predictive models, namely Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975)'s, were chiefly based on classical social theories focusing on the integration into academic and social realms of college, Bean (1980) adopted the concept of 'turnover' what Price (1977) defines as "the degree of individual movement across the membership boundary of a social system" (p. 4).

Bean claims that the process of dropping out from college and employee turnover in work organizations are akin to each other. The 'pay' variable which Price (1977) lists as a crucial factor resulting in employee turnover is replaced by student GPA, development, institutional quality and practical value in this model.

Contrary to Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975)'s consensus on the significance of differentiating dismissal from voluntary dropout, Bean (1980) maintains that students that are dismissed from college should be included in a conceptual model since they also represent the failure of socialization. Hence, Bean (1980)'s model doesn't focus on the term 'dropout' itself but rather a 'dropout syndrome'.

This model, on the other hand, bears a close resemblance to 'The Institutional Departure Model' of Tinto (1975) in that the influence of family background, individual differences, initial goals, grade performance, intellectual development, goal commitment and institutional commitment on dropout decision. Although Bean (1980)'s model is considerably in line with Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975)'s hypotheses which highlight the significance of structural and social integration as well as academic performance in student withdrawal, Bean maintains that the social environment is shaped by students themselves.

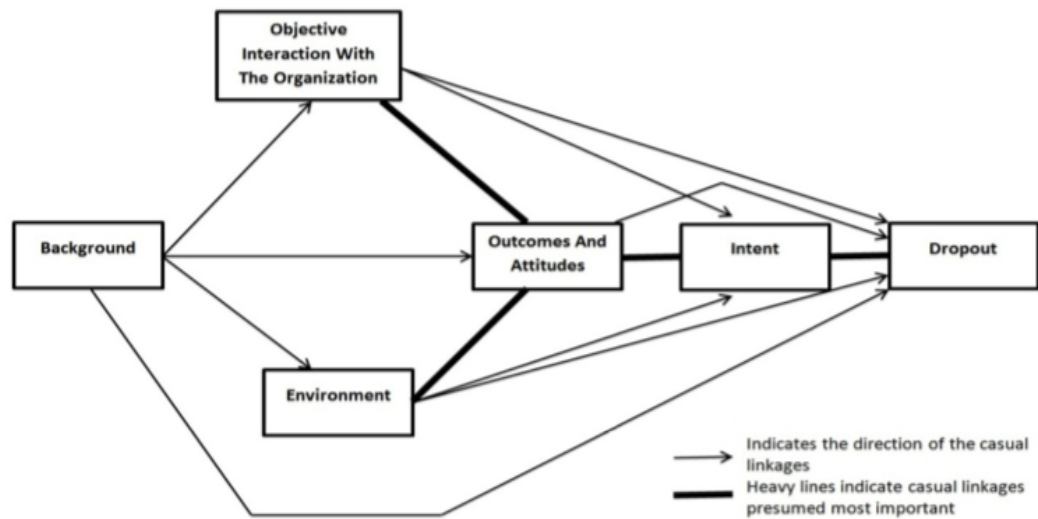


Figure 2.3. *The student attrition model (Bean, 1980: 1982)*

2.1.4. The non-traditional undergraduate student attrition model

Bean and Metzner (1985) find earlier hypotheses regarding student attrition questionable since they fail to take the experiences of non-traditional undergraduate students into account. Therefore, in this model, Bean and Metzner (1985) seek to address the reasons why the non-traditional commuter students drop out. Bean and Metzner (1985) claim that the social integration within the educational environment, which is accepted as a determinant factor for student attrition in the previous models, doesn't have much bearing on non-traditional students. On the contrary, environmental factors, namely family commitments, influence their decision to drop out.

According to Bean and Metzner (1985), nontraditional students are those who don't live in a college residence, allocate less time on academic integration and socialization and are older than 24 and therefore more independent. In this case, nontraditional students are not much affected by socialization variables mentioned in earlier studies since their commute may impede their integration or they may be more self-controlled as a result of their maturity.

The factors affecting student attrition were examined at academic, environmental and social-psychological levels in this model. Bean and Metzner (1985, p. 530) assume that "factors external to the institution may be important, as they impact both attitudes and decisions of the student during his/ her stay in the institution".

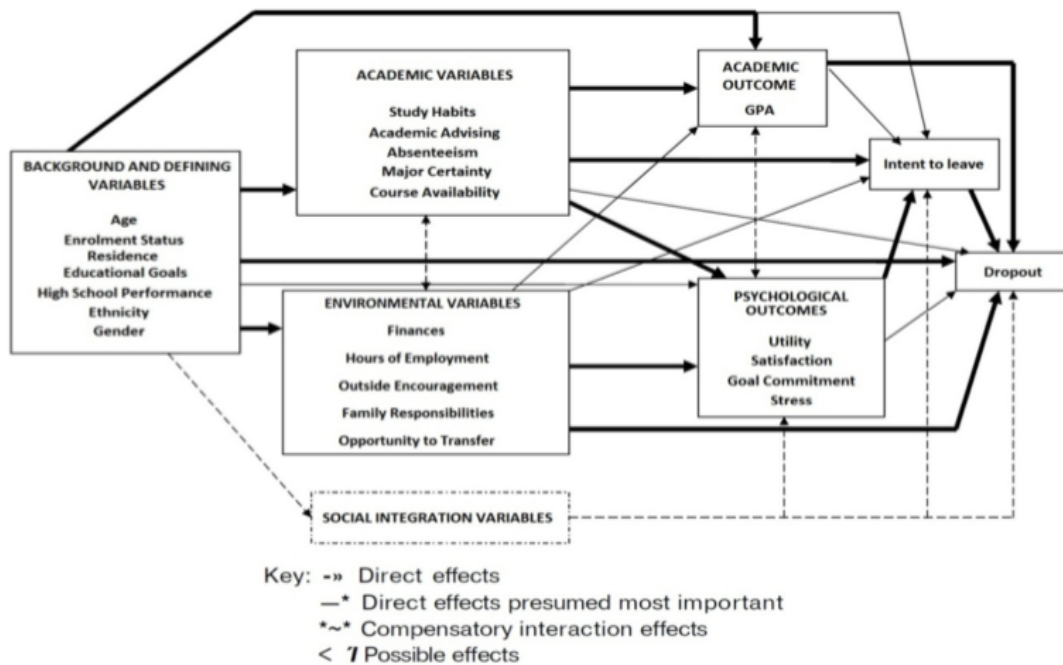


Figure 2.4. *The non-traditional undergraduate student attrition model (Bean & Metzner, 1985)*

2.1.5. A longitudinal-process model of drop-out from distance education

Background variables that were found nearly in all previous models are also involved in the genesis of Kember (1989)'s longitudinal-process model of drop-out from distance education. Yet Kember (1989) highlights the significance of an effective tailoring and elaboration of these variables in order to fully address distance education. Contrary to Bean and Metzner (1985) whose definition of nontraditional students include students enrolled for face-to-face classes, Kember (1989) thinks that this definition leaves distance education students out since their primary means of instruction is the package of study materials. Moreover, as mentioned by Kember (1989), earlier models attempting to explain the phenomenon in terms of student interaction and integration depend too heavily on student-student and student-faculty interactions.

According to Kember (1989), background variables such as individual situation and family life could take on greater significance in the context of distance education.

Furthermore, the employment situation is directly linked to external students' decision to drop out. Kember (1989) also challenges Tinto (1975) on the grounds that although his model shows a significant correlation between pre-schooling and full-time students' success, there isn't enough evidence regarding mature external students. According to Kember (1989), this raises many questions since the population of distance education is mostly made up of part-time and mature students studying at a distance.

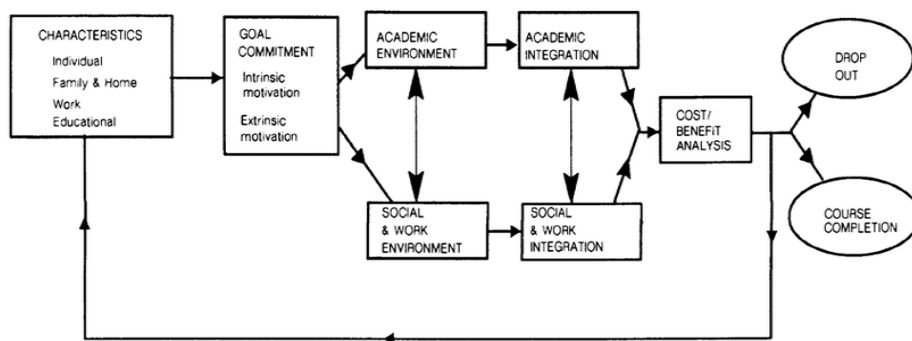


Figure 2.5. *A longitudinal-process model of drop-out from distance education (Kember, 1989)*

Kember (1989) notes that his model is longitudinal, so each component in the model is interrelated.

2.1.6. The composite persistence model

Rovai (2003)'s steps to explain student attrition proceed very much in the same way as Tinto (1975) and Bean and Metzner (1985). Although Rovai (2003)'s composite persistence model could be considered as a rich synthesis of these two models, Rovai (2003) claims that neither of them is well suited to the case of nontraditional older students. According to Rovai (2003), nontraditional students form a prominent part distance education population; therefore, persistence models that are to be developed need to address both traditional and nontraditional students.

In this model, the factors leading to student attrition are depicted under two categories: Pre-admission and post admission. The former explores student characteristics which were

already examined in earlier studies and student skills, while the latter outlines other variables influencing students' decision to drop out under two different sub-categories- external and internal. Although both sub-categories bear traces of earlier models, Rovai (2003) added five additional variables to the internal factors in an attempt to address online students' specific needs. These factors are as follows; "(i) clarity of online programs (ii) self-esteem (iii) identification with school (iv) interpersonal relationships (v) accessibility to services" (Rovai, 2003, p. 14).

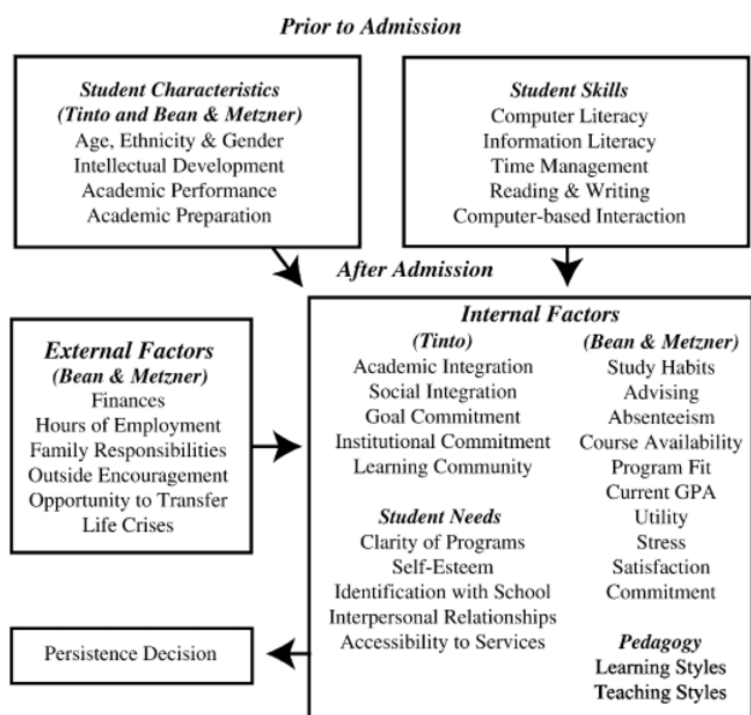


Figure 2.6. *The composite persistence model (Rovai, 2003)*

Rovai (2003) highlights that both categories in this model are in continuous interaction and together play a crucial role in students' decision to drop out.

2.1.7. The revised model of dropouts from distance learning in organizations

In a relatively recent study, Park (2007) proposed a revised model of dropouts which is theoretically grounded in Rovai (2003)'s composite persistence model. However, despite

the considerable body of literature to illustrate the significance of four factors in Rovai (2003)'s model, Park (2007) claimed that the composite persistence model should be revised and some of the variables, namely learner skills, should be omitted since their significance hadn't been adequately proven.

In this model, Park (2007) modifies the external factors category of Rovai (2003) and introduces a 'during' section. Upon assuming that some factors can affect student decisions not only during but also before the course, Park (2007) notes that some variables should be moved between the two categories.

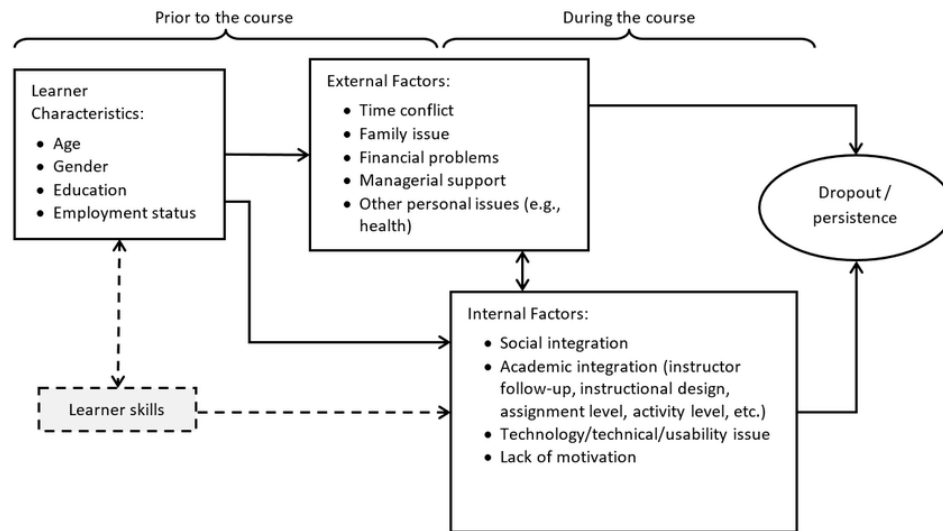


Figure 2.7. *The revised model of dropouts from distance learning in organizations (Park, 2007)*

Park (2007) states that external factors and internal factors tend to be interrelated and interact with each other. For instance, some of the external factors could be alleviated through the implementation of the right course design and technology. Unlike what was previously reported by Rovai (2003), Park (2007) maintains that internal factors aren't the only ones that have direct influence on persistence decisions. According to this model, external factors can't be considered 'indirect' since they are the major reasons why adult online learners drop out. Therefore, Park (2007) added a direct line from external factors to dropout while developing this model.

2.1.8. The proposed new model of voluntary dropout decision

Although Kerby (2015) considers earlier models to be useful tools for developing and implementing proper dropout programs, she maintains that recent research in the field lacks adequate emphasis on 1) primary paradigms 2) the contribution of external variables. According to Kerby (2015), who also built her predictive model of dropout on past models developed by Spady (1970), Tinto (1975) and Bean (1980), earlier models are effective in anticipating dropouts in general; however, they fail to take national and educational climate which could have a negative influence on students and the diversity of the student body into account. This is why in this model Kerby (2015) includes national and educational climate as external variables and points out a causal relationship between external and precollege factors. As for Kerby (2015), the political, economic, or social state can directly influence the environmental factors, sociocultural factors, and individual educational/career goals.

Another variable on which Kerby (2015) lays a special emphasis in this model is the sense of place. Kerby (2015) suggests academic success and persistence in higher education can be ensured by the social realms of the institution and students can develop a sense of place as they interact with the institutional climate and culture.

The primary difference between Kerby (2015)'s model and the previous models is that the factors affecting dropout are considered to be complex, context-dependent and in a constant state of flux in this proposed new model of dropout. Kerby (2015) highlights that since institutions have no control over external and precollege factors, dropout programs need to intervene in internal factors in such a way that they can meet the changing needs of the institution and the students enrolled. And they need to be flexible enough to do so. Kerby (2015) thinks this model contributes to the responsiveness of dropout programs in the aforementioned challenge.

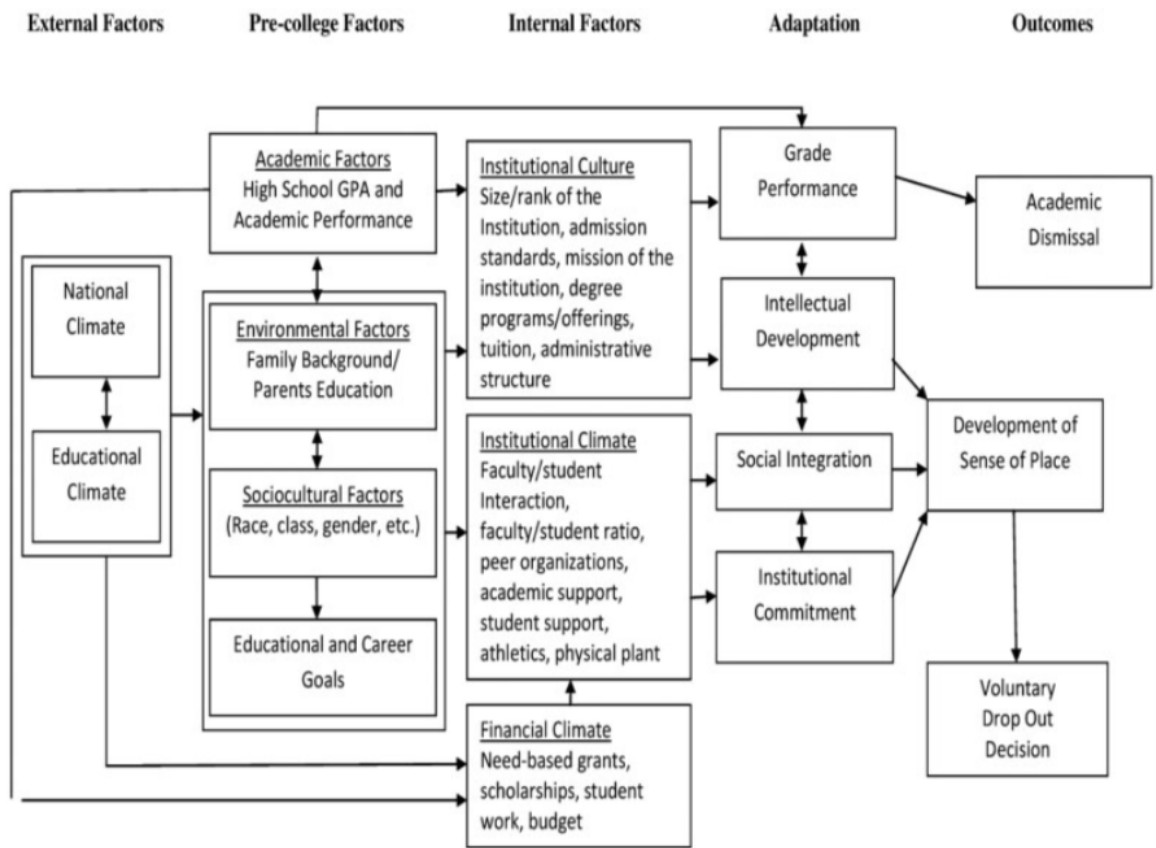


Figure 2.8. *The proposed new model of voluntary dropout decision (Kerby, 2015)*

2.2. Related Studies on Dropout Factors

2.2.1. Student related factors

2.2.1.1. Educational background

Regardless of the quality of their performance in such experiences, students having previous experiences in accordance with the contents of an online course are more likely to be persistent participants in the process (Lee & Choi, 2011). In his groundbreaking study, Levy (2007) traces dropout reasons on academic grounds and points out that students who are at a lower college status and further from graduation are more likely to drop out from the program. Osborn (2001) also draws a connection between background experiences of the distance learners and their tendency to drop out and further argues that learners who haven't previously enrolled in an online course have little guidance in assessing their skills and

expectations. Another quantitative correlational study analyzing pre-entry variables related to course completion and noncompletion in university online distance education courses is Dupin-Bryant (2004)'s. Findings of the study support that previous involvement in academic programs leads to an evolving student perception that shapes persistence. Cheung and Kan (2002) also noted that previous experience in the relevant field could be linked to dropout rates. Another work conducted by Xenos et al. (2002) examined the previous academic and professional experience of 1,230 students in Informatics courses and demonstrated a significant correlation between low dropout rates and previous involvement in the field.

2.2.1.2. Self-regulation and self-efficacy

Given that distance education requires learners' competency in technology and managing their own learning process to a certain extent by its nature, management skills and computer skills have been held responsible for student retention. A preliminary example of how time management skills could lead to dropout rates was carried out by Shin and Kim (1999). The evidence from this study indicated that learners who could estimate the time and effort required for the course, manage their time effectively and balance multiple workloads were among completers of the program. Pierrakeas et al. (2004) quantitatively examined the relationship between time management and dropout rates and stated that learners' underestimation of the actual time they have available for studying or unforeseen changes in their daily life could directly affect their ability to continue with their studies. In her analysis, Bawa (2016), also implied that the misconceptions learners have about the workload lead to high attrition rates in online environments. Parker (1999) describes internal locus of control as an indicator of self-efficacy and self-directiveness and relates it to a student's success in distance education. Morris et al. (2005) also employed a quantitative study with a larger group of students which made it more apparent that internal locus of control could be a positive indicator of successful completion of online courses. Holder (2007) drew out attention to self-efficacy and time and study management skills of learners prone to persist in his seminal work. Ivankova and Stick (2007) were also among those who supported that self-efficacy could make learners more responsible for acquiring knowledge and greatly contribute to completing the program requirements.

2.2.1.3. Motivation and satisfaction

Motivation and satisfaction have received much attention in researchers' attempt to explain dropout on student related grounds. In contradiction with earlier findings of Parker (1999)'s study, Levy (2007) found that students' decisions to drop out of online courses are unaffected by their academic locus of control. Nonetheless, the study revealed that satisfaction with e-learning is a key indicator in students' persistence, which was also proven by Moore et al. (2003). In his study, Tinto (2017) describes the motivation, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, as a fundamental aspect for students' decision to persist since it is directly linked to not only students' self-efficacy but also their sense of belonging to the program/institution. It was also claimed by Osborn (2001) and later by Parker (2003) that at-risk students seem to have lower motivation.

2.2.2. Institutional factors

2.2.2.1. Course design

According to Lee and Choi (2011) factors related to course design and implementation, as well as institutional support, occupy 20% of all the factors leading learners to drop out. One of these factors could be introduced as curriculum or program level of difficulty, which could be an influential determinant of student persistence. Students tend to drop out when the curriculum or program is considered easier or much more difficult than expected, as reported by Boston et al. (2011). The quality of a program as a factor in determining student retention was evident in Ivankova and Stick (2007)'s study. The findings of their study implied that well-structured courses with relevant course content contributed considerably to students' persistence. In their more recent analysis, Gunduz and Karaman (2020) also classified the type of education, course content, and test environment as significant factors.

2.2.2.2. Orientation

Clay et al. (2009) extended the discussion by putting emphasis on orientation. It was obvious from their findings that students who found course navigation challenging showed a

tendency to dropout. They stated that after implementing an orientation program which involved consulting with an expert before enrolment and taking an online orientation regarding course components, students were given a second chance to consider whether they were suited to the online learning environment or not. Cheung and Kan (2002), in their study that explores the effects of providing face-to-face tutorial sessions as an optional instructional support for online students on their dropout rates, also found out that students attending the sessions receiving both emotional and academic support were more persistent in online courses. Furthermore, Dupin-Bryant (2004) suggests that student orientation programs aiming to introduce the necessary skills students may need throughout an online program may contribute to their persistence.

2.2.2.3. Faculty interaction and support

An outstanding example of how vital consistent faculty contact could be for successful online courses is Bocchi et al. (2004)'s study. They stated that "faculty members must establish a rapport and a conversation with students by meeting them at orientation or by contacting them via phone or email at the start of the term" (Bocchi et al., 2004, p. 252). Another in-depth study focusing on continuous assistance, support and encouragement from the institution was conducted by Ivankova and Stick (2007). Although Ivankova and Stick (2007)'s mixed-method study does not appear to corroborate any meaningful relationship between institutional support and student persistence; they noted that non-persistent students reported they got less support throughout the program.

2.2.3. Environmental factors

2.2.3.1. Obligations

After a series of studies which were conducted by Thompson (1999), Houle (2004), Harlow (2006), and Porta-Merida (2009) but haven't escaped criticism, Lint (2013) also examined Kember (1989)'s model to test its theoretical underpinnings. In her study, Lint (2013) listed such obligations as work or family as instrumental factors which interfere in students' persisting with their studies. Pierrakeas et al. (2004) also highlights that the inability

to balance academic and professional obligations and the underestimation of time to allocate for academic workload may raise the likelihood to drop out. Moreover, in their quantitative-descriptive study, Packham et al. (2004) describe successful students as those who properly integrate the program requirements with their work and family commitments.

2.2.3.2. Family support

Park and Choi (2009) examined the distinction between persistent learners and dropouts in terms of external factors such as family support and their findings pointed out statistical differences implying family support could be a determinant factor. Hart (2012) also highlighted in her review that the presence of family support and persistence are directly proportional, which means an increase in family support can increase the possibility of persistence or vice versa. Furthermore, according to another study carried out by Willging and Johnson (2009), work and family-related issues are among the reasons why students withdraw from the program. Osborn (2001) had already asserted a difference between persistent and non-persistent students by stating that persistent students were encouraged by their family in an earlier study.

2.2.3.3. Cultural context

Bozkurt and Akbulut (2019) extended the phenomenon by outlining a strong link between cultural context and dropout patterns in their groundbreaking mixed-method study based on Hall (1998)'s Cultural Communication Model. Their findings noted that cultural contexts alongside other factors could also affect learners' dropout patterns as well as providing some implications that policymakers should be mindful of. For instance, considering that online distance education accommodates more international and culturally-diverse learners in the same learning environment, there is a need to develop a culturally relevant curriculum to ensure to welcome learners from different cultural backgrounds.

3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of students who once enrolled at an open and distance education program but somehow dropped out. This chapter describes the research design and setting. A description of the participants, research context, the data collection instruments, and data analysis procedures is presented. Finally, the chapter concludes with the procedures to address credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the study. Ethical considerations are also identified and addressed in this chapter.

3.1. Research Design

The underlying reason behind the investigation in this study is to describe and interpret the experiences of a group of students experiencing the phenomenon of dropout in open and distance education context. The study basically aims to gain insights into their experiences and provide some implications for educational stakeholders. This problem-centered perspective which has a phenomenological nature requires a qualitative research approach that is uniquely positioned to help understand the experiences of others to gain new insights about a particular phenomenon. Therefore, in this study, phenomenology was employed to support this very inquiry.

Phenomenology emphasizes the common experiences of a group of individuals and tries to reveal a theoretical explanation of a process or action rather than only describing a certain phenomenon (Creswell, 2020). Phenomenological studies do not provide definitive and generalizable results; however, they do help to examine and better understand the phenomenon under investigation. While van Manen (2014) argues that the overall purpose of phenomenology is human experience, Wilson (2015) points out that the distinctive feature of phenomenology is its ability to help understand those experiences in depth. Creswell (2020) states that phenomenological research design can provide researchers with a basis for describing lived experiences. Yıldırım and Şimşek (2013) claim that phenomenology enables researchers to focus on the phenomena in a detailed and deeper way, as well as providing a basis for studies that aim to investigate the phenomena everyone might encounter in daily life but cannot fully comprehend. Dropout can also be viewed as a phenomenon which we

are familiar with in our daily life but don't have in-depth knowledge about its causes. For this reason, phenomenological design which provides an in-depth research opportunity, was used to better understand events, phenomena and experiences.

3.2. The Role of the Researcher

In 2020, when the researcher enrolled in Anadolu University to pursue a master's degree in Department of Distance Education after 9 years of work experience in the same university, she had her first experience with the field. Holding a degree in language teaching, the researcher drew upon her academic training with the interdisciplinary insights that enrich the process. During her master's program, the researcher completed a course on qualitative research methods and carried out a number of qualitative investigations. During his graduate studies, she also took part in numerous European Union projects related to open and distance learning.

The researcher was prompted to conduct this study by the feedback she got from the students taking exams and the proctors in the cities she was occasionally sent as a university representative for the open education system tests. Also, a co-authoring publication with her supervisor on the very subject matter and intercultural collaborations with field experts shaped and inspired this scholarly inquiry.

3.3. Research Group

The participants of this study consist of students who once enrolled in an open and distance education program but dropped out between the years 2019 and 2022. However, only 15 students were interviewed since the sample size recommendation for phenomenological studies is 5 to 25 participants (Creswell, 2020). Participation was on a voluntary basis and participants had the right to withdraw at any time if they are not comfortable with the study.

Table 3.1. Participant list

	Gender	Age	Year	Semester	Highest Degree completed	Name of the Program	Previous experience in distance education	Marital status	Number of kids
P1	F	26	2022	3	Associate	Health Management	yes	married	none
P2	F	35	2022	5	Postgraduate	Law	no	married	1
P3	F	28	2022	1	Undergraduate	Management Information Systems	no	single	none
P4	F	20	2022	3	High school	Management Information Systems	yes	single	none
P5	M	32	2022	3	High school	Home Management	yes	single	none
P6	M	31	2022	2	Undergraduate	Web Design	yes	single	none
P7	F	56	2022	1	Undergraduate	Business Administration	no	married	1
P8	M	38	2022	9	High school	Electrical Energy Transmission and Distribution	yes	single	none
P9	M	20	2022	2	High school	Information Technologies	no	single	none
P10	M	21	2021	2	High school	Agriculture	yes	single	none
P11	F	24	2021	4	Undergraduate	Radio, Television and Cinema	yes	single	none
P12	F	41	2019	2	Associate	Web Design	yes	married	3+
P13	F	23	2021	5	Undergraduate	Human Resources Management	yes	single	none
P14	M	23	2022	7	Undergraduate	Management Information Systems	no	single	none
P15	M	51	2022	2	Undergraduate	Web Design	no	married	1

To form the research group, convenience sampling, which is a form of nonrandom sampling in which study participants are selected for inclusion based on practical factors such as ease of accessibility, close proximity, availability at a specific time, or willingness to participate (Dornyei, 2007) was employed. As a reflection of the diversity present in distance education environments, the participants of the study are drawn from different ages ranging from 20 to 56. The research group aims to achieve gender balance ensuring a gender-neutral viewpoint and an equal representation of men and women. Participants also encompass diverse educational backgrounds since this particular demographic variable facilitates the identification of patterns or challenges that are unique to individuals with diverse levels of prior educational experience. Participants were chosen from different programs since different academic programs might involve varied obstacles, structures, and requirements. Rather than focusing merely on a single program, including participants from various programs allows for a more comprehensive representation of experiences and perspectives.

3.4. Research Context

The context of this research is the Open Education Faculty of a state university in Turkey which provides instruction to students who were enrolled on- and off-campus and operates as a dual-mode university. With a focus on reducing the information gap and digital divide, the institution provides comprehensive learning materials, diverse programs, and support services, an e-campus platform and a mobile application which provides digital

course contents and synchronous classes. Considering the vast body of students, the institution uses proctored exams utilizing summative assessment techniques at designated exam centers. However, during Covid19, due to the restrictions, the exams were conducted online.

3.5. Data Collection Instruments

Cresswell (2020) states that the most appropriate data collection tool for phenomenological research design is interviews. Furthermore, Moustakas (1994) emphasizes the importance of using interactive and informal interviews in this qualitative research design. Semi-structured interviews, including open-ended questions, allow participants to describe their experiences in depth (Fraenkel et al., 2012) as well as framing them so that they do not go off topic. Moreover, semi-structured interviews can help researchers- if need be- to modify their research questions throughout their studies while maintaining their track. Based on the considerations about the aforementioned aspects, the primary data collection instrument for this study is a pre-survey (See Appendix 1) aiming to gather demographic variables and help choose the participants and semi-structured interviews whose questions were tailored to capture the lived experiences and perceptions of participants and explore the multifaceted aspects of student dropout in distance education. Both pre-survey questions and semi-structured interview questions were developed upon reviewing earlier studies on the phenomenon. In order to ensure the content validity, interview questions were first subjected to expert review and then took their final form in line with the suggestions made. A pilot test is carried out with a small number of participants before the interviews are implemented on a large scale to evaluate the efficacy, relevance, and clarity of the interview procedure. Final arrangements were made based on the feedback.

3.6. Data Collection Procedures

Before conducting the interviews with the participants, ethics approval was obtained. After that, a request was submitted to the institution in order to obtain access to the list of dropouts. Because it is illegal for the institution to give out the contact information of its

students, they had to get in touch with the students by sending the survey to its dropout students via a text message. The data gathered through the survey provided a list of dropout students who participated in the study and gave all the necessary information about themselves. After the participants were chosen, they received an e-mail to ascertain the most convenient time and mode of participation- in person or virtual. The interviews were conducted and recorded online via Zoom® conference program as they preferred. The purpose of the research was clearly explained to the participants and the participants were asked to verbally express their consent before starting the interviews. The participants were also informed that even if they started the interview, they could feel free to quit if they felt uncomfortable. In addition, the participants were told that the interviews would only be used to answer the research question, the real names of the participants wouldn't be used or shared anywhere else, the data obtained would be analyzed only within this study and wouldn't be shared with any other third parties or institutions. The interviews lasted approximately 20-30 minutes and were recorded with the permission of the participants. MAXQDA® program was used for the transcription of the interviews and all the voice interviews were transcribed through this program. The researcher also asked the participants some additional questions during the interviews. The purpose of these questions is to provide the best understanding of experiences. According to Bliss (2016), the researcher should be flexible during the interview and be able to ask different questions according to the answers given by the participants.

3.7. Data Analysis

One of the most important stages of a research designed within the framework of a qualitative research method is the stage in which data analysis is carried out. In this research, thematic data analysis technique was applied. Semi-structured interviews were transcribed by the MAXQDA® transcription program, and then the data were subjected to thematic analysis. In the first stage, each response was given equal importance using the horizontalization technique, and then only the relevant statements were listed. The researcher read and analyzed all transcriptions of 15 interviews in detail. In the second stage, semantic units related to the dropout phenomenon were created for thematization purposes.

At this stage, important, relevant and invariant information about the experienced phenomenon is revealed (Moustakas, 1994). In the next stage, the unchanging contents that form the core of the lived experience are grouped under main themes. The researcher compared the similarities and differences of the themes obtained with relevant studies in the literature in order to ensure accuracy. In the last stage, the researcher analyzed the experience within the framework of each participant's statements and the themes formed. At this stage, the individual expression of the researcher comes into question (Cilesiz, 2009).

3.8. Validity and Reliability

In this study, Miles and Huberman's (1994) inter-coder agreement formula was used to ensure the external validity and internal consistency of the data. The formula is given by $\Delta = \frac{C}{C + \delta} \times 100$ where Δ is the reliability co-efficient, C is the number of topics/terms on which there is consensus, and δ is the number of topics/terms on which there is no consensus. It is expected that the consensus among coders should be at least 80% (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

To increase the objectivity of the study, the second coding was conducted by an academic who is an expert in the field of open and distance education and has experience in qualitative data analysis with MaxQDA. After coding the two randomly selected interview forms, the researcher and the other coder evaluated the consistency between the analyses using Miles and Huberman's (1994) coding reliability formula (agreement/agreement + disagreement) x 100 and the agreement coefficient of the semi-structured student interview form was found to be %89. These results were considered reliable for the study.

In addition to ensuring the external reliability of the qualitative data set, it is also important to ensure internal reliability. Le Compte and Goetz (1982) suggest that the use of direct quotations from the data obtained in the research with a descriptive approach will increase the internal reliability of the qualitative data of the research. In line with this suggestion, direct quotations were made from the data set to ensure the internal reliability of the qualitative data.

4. FINDINGS

In this chapter, the findings obtained from the semi-structured interview questions within the scope of this phenomenological research will be presented. A thorough analysis of these results will be given systemically under broad themes, each shedding light on different aspects that may contribute to the phenomenon of student dropouts. Figure 4.1 provides an overall presentation of the codes emerged through the analysis of the two interview questions. In the subsequent sections, participants' responses to the interview questions and the codes that emerged from the analysis of these responses will be discussed separately.

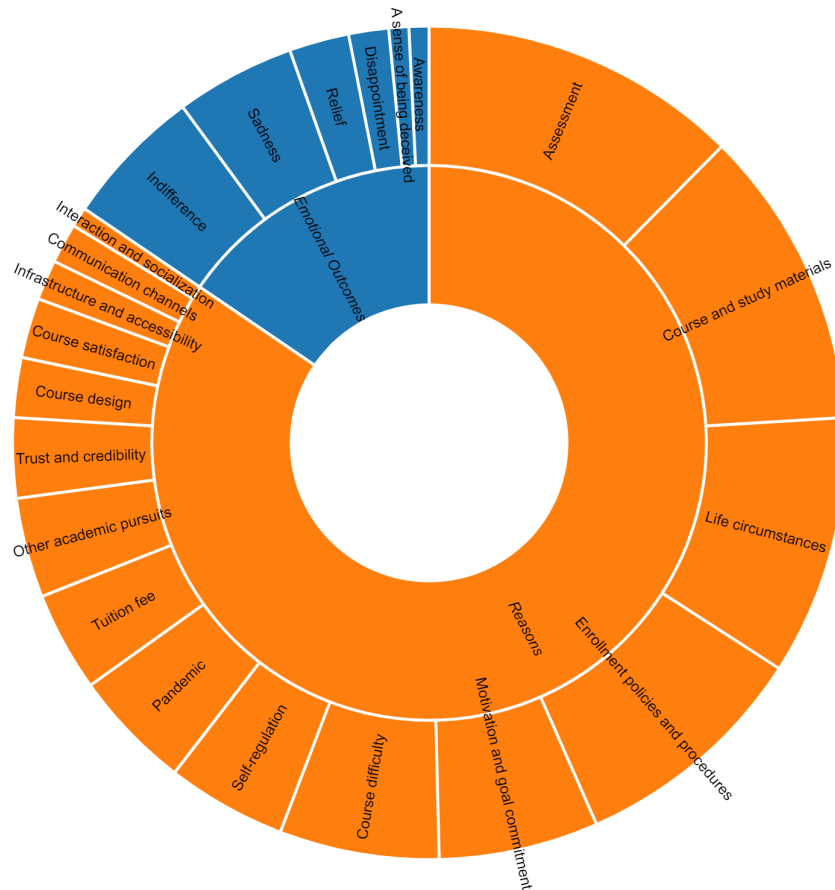


Figure 4.1. *An overview of all the codes and themes*

4.1. Reasons

This section will delve into the codes identified by analyzing the answers to the first question of the interview which looks at both personal contextual aspects that affected

participants’ decision to drop out. Upon thorough analysis and interpretation of the data, several prominent codes regarding the causes of dropouts emerged, illuminating the unique experiences, and challenges faced by participants of the study. By presenting these codes and providing supportive statements, this section seeks to provide valuable insights for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers in relevant fields. Figure 4.1. lists the codes that were discovered during analysis. A visual representation of the themes and codes is also provided in Figure 4.1.

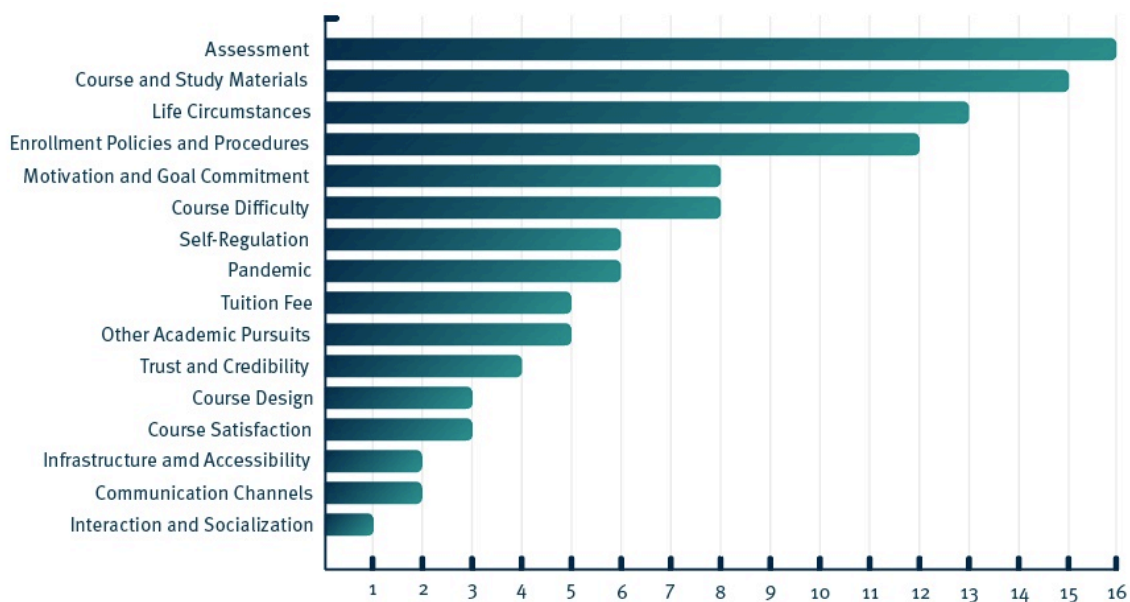


Figure 4.2. *Frequencies of the codes emerged under the theme ‘Reasons’.*

4.1.1. Assessment

The findings from the interviews demonstrate that there is a significant relationship between assessment and dropout rates in distance learning. Most participants stated that even if they believed they were studying sufficiently, they still failed or didn't receive high marks. One of the participants expresses this issue as follows:

“Even though I put in a lot of time studying, I failed these classes since the questions in the exam had nothing to do with what I had studied.” (P2)

Some participants often reported feeling overwhelmed by subjects that required a lot of memorizing while studying for the exams and this pressure translated into a decision to discontinue their studies. The following describes a sample participant view:

“I struggled with memorization-intensive subjects while I studied for the exam. I didn't achieve the high grades I wanted. I barely passed all my classes.” (P3)

Exam difficulty and the location of exam centers were other issues raised in the interviews. Some participants stated that the exams were excessively challenging and they were adversely affected by this situation. They claimed that tests in other fields of study or modes of education are simpler and expressed their belief that this scenario is unjust. Participants also complained about the lack of a proper organization of the exam centers since the centers were either too far or they had to go to a different center for each session. The following are some examples representing views of the participants:

“I studied in the same department in formal education. The exams here are twice as difficult as those in formal education.” (P6)

“Only one of my ten tests would be in a close by place. Every exam I took was at a school at least two hours away from my house. Because we were not allowed to bring phones to the exams, I occasionally had trouble finding an address. Additionally, I sometimes needed to change buildings between sessions.” (P6)

Another issue brought up by the participants was the lack of alignment and coherence in the assessment process. Some participants acknowledged a notable gap between study materials and exam questions and they reported that the exam questions were unfamiliar or unrelated to what they had studied. The following are sample remarks:

“I study on the e-campus platform. The example questions provided there and the questions I answered throughout the exam had quite different degrees of difficulty.” (P6)

“None of the questions from the published questions booklet provided for our study are included in the exam.” (P12)

4.1.2. Course and study materials

According to the participants interviewed, course and study materials also had a significant impact on their decisions to drop out. Most participants complained that the materials used were irrelevant, unengaging and insufficient. They reported that the materials failed to properly prepare them for the exams and they found it challenging to grasp the subject matter when using those materials. There were also some participants stating that the materials predominantly supported learning by memorization and didn't accommodate different types of learning. Following are a few examples of the viewpoints:

“The assessment and the study materials don't line up. Furthermore, they do not adequately get us ready for the tests.” (P2)

“My expectations weren't entirely met by the course materials. It could have been better to provide a little more interactive content. Simply providing the books and the materials and testing the students was not a practice I liked. The exams were challenging for me because the study materials were inadequate. I believe that someone with no prior knowledge of the topic might find it challenging.” (P4)

“Unfortunately, the excessive repetition of the topic and the information overload were the worst aspects of the program. Also, memorization was quite difficult. As a result, I lost my enthusiasm. I felt as if I was on an endless road.” (P13)

4.1.3. Life circumstances

Participants claimed that they were significantly influenced by various aspects of daily life including diverse personal and professional conditions. Some stated that personal circumstances, such as health concerns, obligations to family members, and changes in family structure (such as marriage or the birth of children) presented challenges for them and they were compelled to drop out. Others reported that their study routines were hindered by professional obligations such as work schedule or workload. There were also some participants who couldn't balance their work and education since they were unable to finance their studies and had to support their families financially. The followings are sample remarks:

“I got married while I was a student, and I now have a kid who is two years old. While I was studying, I felt like I was neglecting my daughter. My professional life was likewise incredibly hectic. I also had to focus on my PhD studies and learn English for PhD.” (P2)

“My family's income was not very high while I was in school. I consequently had to work. When I started to work, I was worn out physically and mentally. I had other things I needed to spend time on as well. Family time, for example, was something I yearned for. I used to finish work at 17:30 and make it home by 19:00 since my house was far away. I didn't have much time to study after having dinner and spending some time with my family.” (P9)

“My father was unable to work at the time due to a health issue. I had recently received my university degree, was enrolled in this program, and resided in a different city. My father was unable to send money, therefore I had to work to cover my expenses. When I found a job, they told me they had an agreement with ISKUR and my first three salaries were going to be covered by ISKUR. But ISKUR had to reduce my income by 50% because I was a student and it was against the legislation. As a result, I left school because I didn't want my pay to decrease.” (P13)

4.1.4 Enrollment policies and procedures

The difficulties they encountered during the enrollment was another concern raised by the participants. While some participants noted that the enrollment process wasn't easy-to-navigate, others voiced their discontent with the policy which prohibits simultaneous enrollment in two departments or charges them an additional fee if they are pursuing a master's degree. Some views are described as below:

“Because I was told that I couldn't study in two departments at the same time, I canceled my registration. I attended live classes and examinations as much as possible when I was a student in this program, and I was quite satisfied with it. If the system allowed me to enroll in two departments, I would want to complete both.” (P1)

“I had a problem during registration. The registration system seemed too complicated to me. We had to choose a department in the registration form and I thought I had to choose the department I graduated from and did accordingly. After registration, I realized that I was on the wrong course. Then I called the Help Desk and they told me that I had to go to the office and have my registration deleted, and then I could register again if I wanted. I did what they said, but they charged a new fee for the new registration. I asked whether the previous fee could be transferred for the new department. But they told me that the tuition fees were sent to the departments and now I had to pay a new fee for the new department. I was very upset that I could not get a refund for a service I did not receive, and I did not register again.” (P7)

“I started my master's degree at that time, and because I was studying open education, I had to pay an additional cost. This happens when you enroll in two universities. Since I did not want to pay this fee, I deleted my registration.” (P11)

“I had to cancel my registration to be able to apply for a master's degree. Actually, I just had one lesson left and was almost done. I must take all the

previous lessons again if I reapply now. It's unfair. I wish we could continue from where we left.” (P14)

4.1.5 Motivation and goal commitment

Motivation and goal commitment which are significant determinants in dropout rates from distance education were also brought up by the participants during the interviews. Some participants reported that they either lacked a high degree of self-motivation and discipline or lost it during the process. They also noted that they were demotivated because they couldn't get any immediate feedback and lacked a structured environment. Some viewpoints expressed by participants are as follows:

“Since I was already enrolled in another department, I lacked the drive to finish this one.” (P9)

“It has been 20 years since the last time I was a student and I feel I can't keep up with the current trends. Also, I felt I was a little late for what I wanted to achieve. If I had started 20 years ago, I could be an authority in the field now. I knew I was late and there were a lot of successful people, so I lost my interest in completing the program.” (P15)

4.1.6. Course difficulty

The participants also claimed that the course materials were exceedingly difficult to comprehend on their own and keep up with the pace. The situation was exacerbated, as they noted, by the fact that they were left without immediate support or assistance when navigating through complex programs. The following are sample remarks:

“I found the course material to be overly challenging.” (P6)

“The course was not as easy as I anticipated. I found that I had to put in a lot of effort to complete it.” (P11)

“I was a student in web design. After I started, I discovered that the course I enrolled in to pick up a new skill in retirement was rather challenging academically. The course required so much technical knowledge that I couldn’t learn on my own. It was too difficult for me.” (P15)

4.1.7 Self-regulation

Another concern raised by the participants was the lack of self-regulation. They stated that maintaining the discipline was a constant battle for them, which resulted in procrastination and poor management of study routines and, therefore, exam failure. Some participants also claimed that they weren’t cut out for this type of education whose self-directed nature entails self-regulatory skills and effective time management. The following describe some sample participant views:

“I used to begin my exam preparation only a few days beforehand. There would have been no problems if I had studied a month earlier and properly utilized my time. I always had trouble since I was a procrastinator.” (P2)

“As a result of my lack of discipline and diligence as a student, I put off taking several of my classes until last year. In the end, the number of lessons and the tasks I had to accomplish were too much for me to handle. (P11)

“I am a type of student who prefers one-on-one instruction and I wasn’t comfortable with this style of education.” (P15)

4.1.8. Pandemic

Some participants stated that they were adversely affected by the shifts which were made with the advent of the pandemic in 2020. While fully switching to online learning became a motive for one participant, another stated she left because she found online exams far more difficult. There were also others who noted that after everything went back to normal, they failed to strike a balance between distance education and other academic pursuits which either ceased or switched to online during Covid-19. The following are sample views:

“The examinations being online during the Covid-19 process was a huge bonus for me. When everything went back to normal, I decided to drop out.” (P3)

“The pandemic was in full swing, so rather than staying home and doing nothing, I chose to enroll in an online education course. However, when schools were reopened, I couldn’t balance studying in both departments.” (P4)

“The pandemic broke out while I was studying in this program, and I believe that this is when the exam system changed and got harder. I had previously studied in a different department at this university and the exams were far easier before they were given online.” (P11)

4.1.9. Tuition fee

Participants also cited the tuition fee as a reason for their decision to drop out. Most participants claimed that they didn’t have enough facilities, resources, and direct interaction with teachers as they had in traditional education, and it was unfair to charge that much for such type of education. The following are sample remarks:

“The tuition fee is rather expensive. It doesn't, in my opinion, provide a thorough course curriculum. You are simply passing a few exams to complete the program

and receive your degree. They don't offer you the materials that are included in traditional courses. Since I didn't want to pay this much only to take some exams, I dropped.” (P2)

“These days, all the materials are digital. You no longer receive printed materials. we're merely taking a few exams. Considering that I received nothing in return, this amount was obviously excessive.” (P6)

4.1.10. Other academic pursuits

Another reason given by the participants as to why they dropped out was the presence of other academic pursuits. For some participants, balancing distance education with ongoing academic studies was overwhelming. They noted that engaging in multiple studies simultaneously was too demanding for them since it required multiple sets of assignments or exams. Some sample views are described as below:

“I registered for this program when I was a student in English Preparatory School and there were no issues back then. However, once I started attending my respective program at university, I couldn't handle the workload for both programs. My priority was to graduate from my own department, so I decided to quit.” (P4)

“I was a resident student at another university at that time and I had to focus on my studies. I was unable to put in the necessary study time to finish this program or perform well on the exams.” (P11)

“When I was studying in this program, I was doing an editorial course in another university, and I also started to take violin classes. I describe those times as a retired man's journey of self-discovery. To better understand myself, I tried a variety of things and somehow this program kept the lowest spot on the rankings.” (P15)

4.1.11. Trust and credibility

Credibility of the institution was put forward by the participants as another concern. Some participants alleged that the university deliberately misaligned the course materials and exams in order to keep the students enrolled in the system for a longer period of time, which brought about negative impressions. It was also stated by some participants that limited selection of courses, unsupportive administration, and inefficient online platforms raised questions about the institution's credibility and led them to drop out. The following describes a sample participant view:

“I assume it was done for financial gain. They provide us with some questions that could get us prepared for the exams but the questions they give don’t relate to the exams. When we sit for the exam, we face entirely different questions. I think they do it for us to fail and study longer.” (P12)

4.1.12. Course design

Some participants also expressed their dissatisfaction with the course design. They claimed that they didn’t feel engaged since the courses were poorly structured and lacked interactivity. Additionally, they reported that the courses didn’t accommodate different learning styles. Some sample views are as follows:

“I left the system for several reasons, including the fact that the classes are a little demanding and that not every course is offered every semester.” (P3)

“There were certain lessons that I thought were ridiculous. For instance, you were supposed to memorize the material in a lesson where we learned about Excel. Memorizing felt like a waste of time to me; such things should be practiced.” (P4)

4.1.13. Course satisfaction

There were also some participants who voiced their dissatisfaction with the course itself. While some noted that they disengaged from the course because they didn't see future value from the course, others stated they didn't find the course meaningful since it didn't connect to their goals and interests. The following are sample remarks:

“I was studying in the agriculture department and I thought that this field was promising in Turkey. But after enrolling in the department, I discovered that the course was not for me and that it was challenging, so I dropped out. I am presently enrolled in another department at your school, which means I have no complaints about the school. I simply wasn't satisfied with the department.”
(P10)

“Studying media communications was a lot of fun. The content was really enjoyable. I was learning everything with a lot of enthusiasm. However, sociology never experienced it that way.” (P11)

“I thought this department could contribute to my personal growth and academic skills but it was never that way. When I realized that, I lost my interest in it.”
(P13)

“My dream department was actually something else. I wished to study child development. I canceled my existing registration and enrolled in this department at a different university since I was ineligible to study in this department through lateral transfer at your university. I simply left your school for that reason.”
(P12)

4.1.14. Infrastructure and accessibility

Some participants claimed that they didn't have a reliable internet connection and often experienced difficulties managing the online aspect of distance education. One of the participants expresses this as follows:

“My internet was poor and even freezing while I was taking live classes. I was therefore unable to effectively participate in the live classes.” (P9)

4.1.15. Communication channels

A few participants complained about the lack of reliable, accessible, and user-friendly communication channels. Since distance education is primarily conducted remotely, the absence of such communication channels like emails, discussion forums, video conferencing, and social platforms, they noted, exacerbated their sense of isolation. One of the participants also addressed the problem of insufficient cybersecurity protocols. Even if this situation wasn't caused by the institution, the lack of necessary communication channels paved the way for it. This participant's educational journey was interrupted because she experienced such issues as data breaches, identity theft, and malware attacks through some unofficial communication platforms. The following describes her experience:

“In the learning platform, they posted some links to WhatsApp groups. In order to stay updated on news, projects, etc., I have joined some of these groups. However, since the groups were open to anyone, even people who weren't students joined them, and as a result, they acquired my phone number. They shared very disturbing things in these groups. Some of them even called and harassed me. I don't know if the groups were set up by the students, or teachers but it got out of control. They later set up a Discord group. My account was also stolen there by someone using a fake link. (P4)”

4.1.16. Interaction and socialization

Another factor brought up by some participants was the absence of interaction. They stated that they felt disconnected, disengaged and less motivated due to inadequate opportunities for real-time interaction. The participants noted that they sought interaction with both educators and their peers since the first could help them better understand the subject matter and the latter could allow them to develop social connections and engage in collaborative learning experiences. The following is a sample view:

“I didn't interact with any single person. Since I didn't collaborate with a lecturer or any other students in the same department, I suppose I felt a little isolated. At that point, leaving made more sense.” (P2)

4.2. Emotional Outcomes

This section will go deeper into the codes identified by analyzing the answers to the second question of the interview which looks at a complex range of feelings experienced by participants after they dropped out. In order to present their emotional experiences in a more nuanced manner, this section will also include illustrative quotes from participants. The findings of this section are expected to provide insightful direction for future interventions and research projects that aim to promote positive emotional climates. Figure 4.2. lists the codes that were discovered during analysis. A visual representation of the themes and codes is also provided in Figure 4.2.

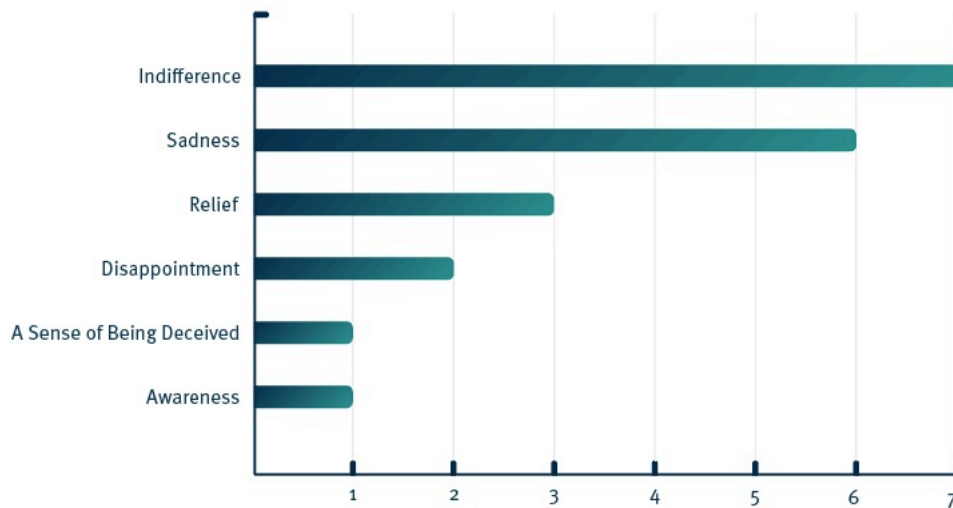


Figure 4.3. *Frequencies of the codes emerged under the theme ‘Emotional Outcomes’.*

It is clear from Figure 4.2. that while some participants shared experiences of negative emotions, such as sadness, disappointment and a sense of being deceived, others reported such feelings as relief, indifference or awareness after they dropped out. It can be seen that, compared to other codes, ‘indifference’ and ‘sadness’ are the most frequently addressed feelings of all. The others can be ranked from the most frequent to the least as relief, disappointment, a sense of being deceived and awareness.

4.2.1. Indifference

The majority of participants described how they felt after dropping out as being "indifferent," depending on their unique circumstances, reasons for dropping out, and level of personal resiliency. The following are sample remarks:

“So actually doing nothing felt weird, but I didn't feel too bad about it.” (P9)

“I wasn't really upset. I quit that department and switched to another. I went on with my life.” (P10)

“I didn't feel anything. Because when I left school, I was enrolled in another university and I focused on my studies there.” (P12)

4.2.2. Sadness

The second most prevalent emotion participants expressed was sadness. The participants often linked their sadness to unfulfilled expectations and a sense of personal failure. Some participants express this as follows:

“I had a strong desire for and enjoyed studying in that department. Sincerely, I wanted to acquire this degree and was disappointed when I couldn't. I was also rather upset. Graduating from this program has been a goal of mine since high school. I would like to do it, even if it were to be at a different university someday. When my child is a little older, perhaps. I have other priorities now, such as my child and my career, though.” (P2)

“I was depressed because my second term had just ended. In all honesty, I am a little sad because I quit the program after completing half of it. My efforts seem to have been in vain.” (P6)

4.2.3. Relief

Some participants reported experiencing relief after dropping out since their educational journey was giving them a lot of stress and anxiety and they were struggling academically. Some sample views are as follows:

“Being released from responsibilities caused a small amount of relief. Exams, projects or studying itself all felt like a burden to me. When I left the program, I felt relieved.” (P3)

“It was the day before the final exams and I hadn't studied enough. I made my decision and dropped out exactly on that day and I felt so relieved.” (P4)

“In fact, I was on the verge of completing the course. I had only 4 or 5 exams left. To be honest, I had cheated a bit by then. Exams were online because of the pandemic, making it incredibly simple to cheat. Then, one day, I gave it some thought. I didn't think what I did was just or moral. I thought it would be unfair to a student who hadn't been cheating. I quit so that I wouldn't feel guilty anymore.” (P5)

4.2.4. Disappointment

Another feeling emerged during the interviews was the disappointment. Some participants reported feeling disappointed after they dropped out because they failed to complete something they set out to achieve. They also expressed their feelings of fear or uncertainty regarding the future.

“I stepped into a void after dropping out. It was extremely important for me to finish this program. I had it as a life goal. I don't know what to do now.” (P15)

4.2.5. A Sense of being deceived

Following her dropping out, one participant stated her sense of being cheated because she was unable to get a refund. She claimed that this left her with the feeling that the institution didn't value her feedback and disregarded her request, which made her lose faith in the institution. This participant expresses this as follows:

“I was sorry. I lost faith in the institution because I had to leave the school after enrolling and was unable to acquire a refund for a service I had not received. I didn't want to register with the institution once more because of this.” (P7)

4.2.6. Awareness

Another participant reported becoming more aware of her interests after studying at a department for a while and gaining more knowledge in this field. Reflecting upon her own

experience, she claimed she could adapt her academic and career path based on the awareness she gained.

“There was nothing to feel. But it was good to realize that I didn't like the department I was studying at. I'm planning to study at a different department now. I believe I am now more aware of what my interests are.” (P11)

5. CONCLUSION, DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

5.1. Conclusion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to deeply explore and understand the factors leading to the dropout from distance education from the lived experiences of those who have discontinued their studies. By adopting a qualitative research design rooted in phenomenological principles, this study aimed to delve beyond surface-level data and uncover the nuanced, personal, and complex factors contributing to student dropout.

Given the complex and multifaceted nature of this phenomenon, this study was guided by the following key question:

2. What are the factors affecting student dropout in open and distance education programs?

In order to address the issue at hand, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview questions were open-ended, non-directive and experience centered. Some follow-up questions were also prepared to help participants elaborate on their comments. As a result of the data obtained from the semi structured interviews, 2 themes and 22 sub-themes which align closely with several common themes mentioned in previous studies were identified.

Based on the findings derived from participants' responses to the first interview question, 16 sub-themes emerged (Assessment, course and study materials, life circumstances, enrollment policies and procedures, motivation and goal commitment, course difficulty, self-regulation, pandemic, tuition fee, other academic pursuits, trust and credibility, course design, course satisfaction, infrastructure and accessibility, communication channels and interaction and socialization). These sub-themes were discussed in terms of assessment, quality of course materials, flexibility, interaction, transactional distance, pandemic, sense of community, digital divide and system quality.

Based on the data derived from the responses to the second question, 6 sub-themes which are indifference, sadness, relief, disappointment, being deceived, awareness emerged. These emotional outcomes were discussed referring to possible underlying reasons.

5.2. Discussion

This section marks a transition from the meticulously documented lived experiences of the participants to engage in a wider conversation by revisiting the literature in the light of our findings. Upon bridging the gap between lived experiences and theoretical background, this chapter seeks to provide a unique perspective that echoes, challenges, or elaborates pre-existing studies, theories, and conceptual frameworks. In the previous chapter, the findings were discussed in two sections based on the interview questions. The discussions will be held accordingly.

5.2.1. Reasons

According to the findings, assessment emerged as one of the most frequently addressed sub-themes during the interviews and equally significant was the role of course and study materials. Participants often reported their dissatisfaction with the assessment and study materials, which, they alleged, played an important role in shaping their dropout behavior. In terms of assessment, the findings revealed that participants were mostly dissatisfied with the misalignment between what is tested (assessments) and what is taught (study materials). Misalignment may result in several undesirable outcomes, including student dropout. Students may lose interest and motivation if they believe the materials they were studying on have no bearing on how well they perform on exams, which might lead to poorer overall performance, dissatisfaction with the educational experience and, eventually, higher dropout rates since satisfaction and persistence have a strong correlation (Bean, 1980; Tinto, 1993). Misalignment may also contribute to high anxiety levels and a feeling of being overwhelmed, as students might not be aware of what to anticipate or how to properly prepare for the tests. Students may perceive assessments and the educational process as unfair or unpredictable if they believe they are being assessed on skills or content that are not included in their course

materials. When they believe their grades don't fairly reflect their learning, their trust in the educational system and their desire to continue their studies appear to decline. On the other hand, alignment between study materials and tests may contribute to higher levels of self-efficacy or greater confidence in their ability to succeed, which is crucial in the self-directed nature of distance education. Students could be more inclined to remain diligent with their studies when they believe they can master the material and perform well on exams (Erdoğan, 2007).

Another issue raised by the participants about the assessment was the location of the exam buildings. Some pointed out that they were either too far from where they live or they had to change buildings after some sessions. Considering the exam rules stating that personal items or belongings such as coins, car keys, credit cards, mobile phones, etc. cannot be brought to the exam center, the distance of the exam center can create serious problems in terms of transportation. The difficulty or ease of access to the exam buildings has an impact on students' perception towards distance education (Usta & Hakan, 2018; Maral 2022) and might therefore affect their decision to leave. This finding also justifies that an open education system can adopt reliable online exams so that they can offer the flexibility not only in delivering learning content but also providing exams. Many participants also noted that the exam system, in which incorrect answers negate correct answers, doesn't sit well with them. This dissatisfaction might stem from their concerns that they might fail the course or receive their diploma later than expected (Maral, 2022). There were also some participants voicing their discontent with the summative assessment. They reported that when they are subjected to this type of assessment, they leave everything until the last minute and it therefore becomes more challenging to memorize everything just before the exams. In this case, summative assessments together with the insufficient self-efficacy skills (Holder, 2007; Kemp, 2002; Pajares & Miller, 1994) of the participants, as they reported, might have played an important role in their decision to drop out. It wouldn't be wrong to say that students aren't fond of one-size-fits-all approach when they are being tested, however it would be unfair to put the blame on the institutions for introducing that kind of an assessment. In Turkish Higher Education context, such decisions are made by the Council of Higher Education to provide a more standardized education and large-scale assessments.

Equally important factor emerged in the findings was the participants' complaints about the quality of course materials. In a distance learning setting, the use of non-interactive course materials has the potential to raise the dropout rate of students for several reasons. Interactive course materials and design can foster student motivation, participation and satisfaction (Chyung et al., 1999). Students who are exposed to non-interactive materials may become disengaged or feel detached from the course, which could end in higher dropout rates. Non-interactive materials might give rise to a passive learning environment where students merely receive information. In a passive learning setting, where students do not engage with the content or put concepts into practice might lose their interest and decide to drop out. Previous research has also indicated that low motivation and dissatisfaction contribute to dropout rates in the context of distance education (Gabrielle, 2003; Hart, 2002; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Keller, 2010a, 2010b; Levy, 2007; Moore et al., 2003; Müller, 2008; Osborn, 2001; Park & Choi, 2009; Parker, 2003; Simpson, 2008; Uçar & Kumtepe, 2020).

It was clear in the findings that some participants weren't satisfied by the quality of course materials and attributed this to their dropout behaviour. However, a thorough examination at the available resources and platforms offered by the institutions raises a question: Do the students really utilize the system to its full potential? In a previous study, it was revealed by the administrators that students often lament the lack of variety and quality in the resources available, but they hardly check the materials available on the platform (Yılmaz, 2020). That the students aren't satisfied with the materials despite the abundance of resources offered by institutions could be explained by students' lack of awareness.

The findings also revealed that participants subjected to adverse environmental conditions, such as health concerns, family responsibilities, excessive workload, financial difficulties and the lack of family support, had no choice but to drop out. Without question, distance education gave students the flexibility to study anytime-anywhere flexibility and the opportunity to actively participate in the process by selecting and prioritizing the courses that appeal to them and managing their own learning. (Turan et al. 2022, p14). However, because of its flexible nature, distance education isn't without its challenges. It might leave students with little structure. Some participants highlighted that without set timetables and routines, they found it difficult to efficiently manage their time, which ended up with procrastination and academic regress. Flexibility requires learners to be self-motivated and disciplined in

managing their own learning process. If the students can manage their time effectively, have strong study habits, and can stay focused on assignments, they are more likely to persist than those who can't (Holder, 2007). However, some students might have trouble staying on track without the external supervision which is often present in a traditional classroom setting. Also, the blending of work or study and personal life might run the risk of instilling an "always-on" mentality that could make it difficult to unwind. As long as they are well-prepared and supported for this mode of delivery, students may benefit from the flexibility of distance learning (Veletsianos & Houlden, 2019, p. 460). Imagine distance education programs as an open buffet. Similar to an open buffet offering a large selection of dishes, open and distance education provides learners with a diverse range of courses, programs, and learning materials to choose from. When someone is introduced to the system for the first time, they may have numerous questions about what to eat, how to eat, and which one to eat first. For individuals who are self-aware, flexibility can be a boon, but for others who are not, it can be a burden.

One may argue that the flexibility distance education has provided breaks down geographical barriers and made education accessible to a wide range of learners, free of charge, and without strict entry requirements (Koçdar et al., 2023) However, the openness and flexibility of distance education programs is a double-edged sword. Certain distance education programs may allow students to enroll in courses without the prerequisite knowledge. Having the prerequisite knowledge is like having a solid foundation which supports the entire structure of your learning experience. However, according to the findings, some participants perceived this process as a quick glance at the program and weren't fully prepared for the program they had enrolled in. As a result, they preferred to leave after a while either because the department did not meet their expectations or because they were not as successful as they thought they would be. Here's another instance when consciousness and awareness come into play.

An additional discovery of the study was the lack of interaction, which was evident in many of the sub-themes such as motivation and goal commitment, course satisfaction, and enrollment policies and procedures. The lack of interaction with both teachers and the institution – and even with peers- seems to have influenced participants' decision to drop out. Earlier studies also indicate that students tend to hold negative perceptions towards distance

education when there is inadequate communication and interaction (Berber, vd., 2022; Birişçi, 2013; Ergün & Veyis, 2023; Kaleli & Güven, 2015; Maral, 2022; Mukhtar, vd., 2020; Özgöl, vd., 2017; Tekedere, vd., 2022; Yıldız, 2016). During the interviews, many participants voiced their demand for (more) live (synchronous) lessons, possibly because they want greater opportunities to interact. The perceived lack of interaction among participants could be explained by the 'transactional distance'. The term "transactional distance" describes the communicative and psychological space that exists between students and teachers in distance education (Moore, 1980). Moore (1980) assumes that an over-structured course and transactional distance are in inverse proportion to each other since the former leads to a reduction of dialogue and, consequently, an increase in the latter. One can say that when transactional distance is high, students can experience greater autonomy. While this might benefit independent learners who enjoy self-paced study, it might pose a risk for those who rely heavily on teacher direction and peer interaction. Excessive independence can isolate distant learners from peers, instructors, and the educational institution, which can result in their procrastination, and eventually dropping out (Lim, 2016). On the other hand, in a rigid form of distance education where students have very little flexibility or autonomy in their learning, learners may still feel overwhelmed and discouraged and might drop out since the target population of distance education is mainly working adults.

The findings also reveal that the pandemic played an important role in the participants' decision to leave. Due to Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19) outbreak in 2019, Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) was employed as a temporary shift of instructional delivery as a result of lockdown measures and social distancing protocols (Bozkurt, 2020). This global crisis and obligatory transition also affected students enrolled in open and distance education programs in Turkey since the examination had been carried out face-to-face even if the mode of delivery was basically online. According to the findings, online examinations (found favor among) were the reason why some participants registered for distance education programs in the first place thinking online exams could be easier to pass. However, when things returned to normal and the exams were once more conducted face-to-face, the students responded to this by dropping out.

During Covid 19, the ERT which was considered as a survival reflex (Jandrić et al., 2021) opened up some space for distance education studies. The current profile of distance

education students are mostly those who work longer hours and more responsibilities compared to the past. During Covid 19, many employees transitioned to remote work arrangements to comply with social distancing measures and they found themselves with more flexible schedules. This newfound flexibility made it easier for them to allocate time for distance education. However, when everything once again went back to normal and the flexibility in their workplace disappeared, they might have decided to drop out.

The findings also reveal a strong need for socializing and forming a sense of community. Certain participants conveyed their discontent with the lack of social platforms citing it as a source of loneliness. While online learning offers various advantages such as flexibility, accessibility, and personalization, it might often lack the traditional and social structure of a physical classroom. Due to its social nature, the traditional educational paradigm is essentially social, giving students numerous chances to interact. However, given the psychological and emotional barrier caused by the physical distance between students, distance learning can frequently feel isolated. Since such isolation tends to diminish the sense of community, higher dropout rates may also be attributed to the physical isolation of students in distance education programs (Rovai, 2002). In his theory that the students will be more satisfied and, therefore, more likely to persist if they feel involved and form relationships with other members of the learning community, Tinto (1994) highlighted the significance of community in lowering dropout rates. However, students frequently erroneously confuse open and distance education with face-to-face education. Comparing these two can pose several challenges and limitations due to the inherent differences between these two modes of instructional delivery. They both serve distinct audiences and cater to diverse learning needs and comparing these two approaches without taking into account the distinct circumstances and demographics of the learners involved might result in incorrect assumptions.

Several individuals also mentioned that they joined unofficial communities in online platforms to feel less isolated, follow the announcements and access some materials, which later put their security at risk. In the context of distance education, such platforms as online forums (Biriya & Thomas, 2014), social networking sites (Bozkurt et al., 2017) or online discussion boards (Kilinc & Altinpulluk, 2021; Loncar et al., 2014; So, 2009) where students can interact and gain a stronger sense of social presence (Dang & Robertson, 2010; Swan,

2002) emerge as powerful catalysts for enriching the distance learning experience. When the students lack such appropriate tools or platforms to interact or meaningfully socialize, they might become a part of unofficial communities which later pose a risk to their cyber security.

There were also a few participants who reported experiencing difficulty in maintaining a stable Internet connection and using digital platforms effectively. Utilizing digital platforms, distance learning has revolutionized how knowledge is transmitted while providing students with ease and flexibility that were not previously possible. By enabling students to learn at anytime and anywhere, this paradigm change has a tremendous positive impact on the democratization of education. This opportunity, however, also raises a critical issue known as the "Digital Divide," since many people around the world still lack the means to engage in online learning environments. Digital divide refers to the gap between individuals who have real access to information and communication technologies and make efficient use of them and those who don't (Bagchi, 2005) and as the gap between those who have access to information and those who don't increases, so does the digital divide (Bozkurt, 2017). Today more and more learning is being offered online under the assumption that everyone has a reliable and high-capacity Internet connection, despite the fact that there are still some individuals who lack access (Hillier, 2018) and therefore equal educational opportunities (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Whereas geographical barriers, socio-economic and socio-cultural disparities once posed the largest barrier to equity in education, nowadays technology access and competency stand in the way (Sezgin, & Fırat, 2020).

Moreover, from the findings it was clear that while some students had little trouble navigating the virtual corridors of the online environment, others were frustrated by bugs, slow internet speeds, and compatibility problems. Technological infrastructure is the invisible force that connects students and educators across vast distances and the ability to seamlessly access learning materials and the efficiency of the technological and organizational structures together form the backbone of distance education. The inadequacy of technological infrastructure in distance education is one of the most important limitations of this type of delivery since it might affect the motivation of both students and teachers as well as the continuity of education (Birişçi, 2013; Erturgut, 2008; Kaleli & Güven, 2015; Yıldız, 2016). Therefore, it is a must to ensure an equitable and frustration-free learning environment for learners so that they can channel their energy into the educational

experience. There were also a few participants reporting their dissatisfaction with the interface which they perceived confusing especially when enrolling. This led them, as they reported, to make some mistakes and eventually enroll in the wrong program. Confusing interfaces might cause learners to be dissatisfied with the program (Hamutoğlu vd., 2019). Another issue raised in the interviews was the participants' perceptions of the quality and credibility of distance education programs. Despite the convenience and accessibility that it offers, distance learning faces certain quality and image-related challenges that can impact how it is perceived by students, educators, and society. These challenges are important to address in order to improve student motivation, and institutional credibility and public perception. Institutional trust and reliability is among the factors that influence the quality of an e-learning environment. (Jung, 2011; Jung, 2012) and the importance of quality in distance education cannot be overstated, as it is not only a desirable attribute but also a cornerstone for unlocking the true potential of online learning experiences. However, some people enroll in a distance education program with the sole intent of evading military service, career advancement or simply get a degree. This notion might be a potential obstacle to the recognition and acceptance of distance education programs since it might imply that acquiring a diploma is of higher significance than the quality of educational journey. And there are also some participants who claimed to have enrolled in remote education programs with biases about the credibility of distance education programs. The emergence of this perception might largely be influenced by the belief that the system is established for commercial gain in the first place and the institutions take no measures to ensure quality. (Maral, 2022). It could be true that quality has a bearing on students' perceptions. But this begs a question. When institutions strive to provide top-notch education, students face significant challenges and they may feel overwhelmed or discouraged by the workload or academic expectations. Enrolling in an easier program might offer them a sense of immediate success and accomplishment, as they may perceive it as more attainable or less demanding. In this case, dropout rates shouldn't be attributed to the quality of a program. As was stated before, some students prioritize obtaining a diploma or degree with the least amount of effort or difficulty. Given this, does granting more credentials imply providing a higher quality of education? Completing a program does not necessarily mean that it is good. Completion rates are just one of the many criteria that affect a program's quality and efficacy. Although

program success can be measured by completion rates, these metrics do not give a complete view of the program's total impact or quality.

Another interesting finding was the decision of some students to drop out of educational programs due to the cheating behavior of their peers in online exams during Covid 19. Some students hold strong ethical values and a commitment to academic integrity and witnessing their peers engaging in cheating practices can create a moral dilemma for them. The perception that other students are unfairly benefiting from dishonest methods can lead to a sense that the educational environment is no longer equitable and reliable. This might erode the trust they place in the educational system and affect their overall perception of the learning environment. Institutional trust represents a key factor in an online distance learning environment (Sousa et. al., 2006) and establishing trust is essential for online student retention (O'Brien & Renner, 2002).

One last issue emerged in the findings was the participants' disapproval over the expensive fees. The amount of program fees that are a substantial challenge can put a heavy budgetary burden on students, which might cause stress and raise the risk of dropping out. Some individuals with low incomes may be dropping out of the system due to their inability to pay tuition fees, while others with high incomes may be doing so because they can pay the fees with ease and therefore it becomes worthless. Moreover, some students evaluate the perceived value of their educational investment and if the program fees are not compatible with the perceived benefits or financial difficulties surpass the expected advantages, they might be more likely to give up on their education. In this case, one can say that setting a high enough price that will both retain those who can pay it in the system and not compel those who cannot is a challenging task.

5.2.2. Emotional Outcomes

The empirical journey undertaken to address the second research question which aims to capture a comprehensive understanding of the emotional aftermath of student dropout revealed an array of insights into key the emotional challenges of those who decided to drop out from online learning environments. The findings which uncovered a range of emotional outcomes, from relief and liberation to sadness, disappointment, awareness and indifference

were not monolithic; rather, they exhibited nuances shaped by diverse factors such as individual circumstances, program structures, and the quality of support systems. Therefore, they together form a complex narrative that resists simple categorizations.

Indifference was the most frequently addressed emotional reaction emerged during the qualitative data analysis process. This can be explained by the concept of perceived value—the subjective assessment of the benefits, relevance, and satisfaction that learners derive from their educational endeavors. The apathy experienced by the participants might be stemming either from their own evaluation or from the image system displays. Students, as consumers, might place a certain value on education (Stafford 1994). If they don't perceive the system as a pragmatic (Kember, 2000) and valuable asset, losing it might translate as none to them.

The relief participants experienced can be attributed to a unique set of stressors (Simpson, 2012) such as technological issues, difficulty in managing coursework, struggles with self-discipline, a sense of isolation or overwhelming external pressures. Students might feel relieved after they drop out knowing that they won't grapple with heightened levels of anxiety, frustration, and a sense of failure anymore.

Other notable and prevalent emotions that appear in those who disengage from their academic endeavors are sadness and disappointment. These emotional responses might stem from a profound sense of loss, not only in terms of educational opportunities but also in the perceived failure to meet personal and societal expectations. As dropouts struggle with the consequences of their decision, a sense of alienation from academic or personal goals, failed hopes, a loss of social connections, a diminished sense of belonging may exacerbate such emotions.

Upon leaving the program, some participants also claimed to have developed new awareness. Although dropping out is not a desirable outcome, the disengagement from a distance education program can contribute to a questioning of one's academic identity, a clarification of goals, recognition of one's strengths and weaknesses and an exploration of alternative paths. Therefore, this process might have resonated as echoes of unique insights and self-reflection for some participants.

A lack of trust that students have in the educational institution, its policies, and its ability to support their academic journey can contribute significantly to student disengagement and, ultimately, dropout. One participant claimed that she lost trust in the

institution and dropped out when she had a miscommunication issue and her problem remained unsolved, which later gave her the impression that she was deceived. Effective communication and transparency could be vital for fostering trust between students and institutions. If students feel uninformed about policies, procedures, or changes within the institution, or if they perceive biases and unfair treatment, this can erode their trust. A responsive and proactive approach to addressing issues may also foster a sense of reliability and support.

5.3. Suggestions

This study presents a set of recommendations derived from the findings and insights gained through this research. These recommendations are expected to guide interested parties involving educators, policymakers, and institutions in taking actions to mitigate the challenges and foster student retention and success in distance education programs.

5.3.1. Implications for stakeholders

- Institutions should ensure that course materials and assessment procedures are strongly aligned if they aim to promote a positive learning environment and lower the risk of student dropout. This alignment could be evaluated on a regular basis requesting feedback from students which is first-hand information about what is working well and what needs improvement.
- More consideration should go into assigning the exam venues because the transportation and challenging logistics become a burden on people who live at a considerable distance or need to change buildings between sessions. In this case, proctored online exams could be offered. This would also help prevent cheating and ensure trust.
- Students should be given weekly assessments such as portfolios or projects to increase their engagement with the course and the online environment. Besides, diverse assessment techniques might accommodate different learning styles.

- The materials used should be more interactive and up-to-date materials with more practical, real-world examples in order to help students feel less disconnected and transfer what they learn to their daily lives and future careers.
- In order to promote positive faculty-student relationships, the institutions should offer clear communication and quick response to student inquiries.
- There should be more live lessons where students can interact with instructors, feel less disconnected and become a part of a social community.
- Institutions and instructors should offer opportunities for online communities since it isn't naturally available in online learning environments. By providing some online discussion forums or platforms where students can engage in social interaction, the socialization needs can be met.
- The requirements, expectations, and assessment criteria for each course should be clearly explained to students at the beginning in order to allay their worries, reduce confusion and prevent students from perceiving this opportunity as a quick glance at the program.
- Institutions should convey their educational value clearly and fulfill what they propose. Since students are outcomes-oriented and pragmatic by nature, if they perceive their education as a worthwhile investment considering the cost, time, and effort, they might exhibit greater persistence.
- The institutions should invest in learning management systems (LMS) that are easy-to-navigate, fast and intuitive in order to reduce technological barriers and improve the overall user experience for students.
- Enrollment policies and procedures should be revised and updated to better serve students.
- Institutions should regularly evaluate their policies and procedures to identify any areas that could be improved or modified.
- Students could be provided with some scholarships and disadvantaged students may be exempted from tuition fees in order to make education more accessible and reduce financial stress.

- Proactive support climates should be established in order to mitigate the possible emotional consequences.

5.3.2. Implications for potential students

- It is important for students to be well aware of why they are enrolled in a distance education program in the first place, how dedicated they are to achieving this goal, and whether or not they are sufficiently informed about the department in which they are enrolled.
- Students should be fully mindful of how open and distance education differs from traditional education, as well as the prerequisites for each mode of delivery.
- Students should be knowledgeable of the study characteristics needed for distant learning and capable of planning their study routines appropriately by taking into account their unique traits.

5.3.3. Implications for further studies

- In the pre-survey developed to identify the research group, there was no item on whether dropout students used the system to its full capacity. The existence of such an item is crucial in determining whether the students who found the resources insufficient were those who utilized the system well or those who were unable to use it. It is therefore advisable to incorporate this item in future research.
- Emotional outcomes experienced by students who gave up on their distance education endeavors are frequently overshadowed by the emphasis on reasons and therefore have remained relatively unexplored. That's why more studies that address the psychological aftermath of student dropout are needed.

All in all, distance education should be viewed as an ecosystem itself and like any natural ecosystem, distance learning has a dynamic, interconnected network. Therefore, it is necessary to employ an all-encompassing framework that encapsulates all the interconnections within this educational environment in order to comprehend the complex

relationships among its stakeholders. This ecosystem is more than just a collection of its distinct components; rather, it is a dynamic organism that is always adapting to suit the evolving needs of students.

REFERENCES

- An, H., & Kim, S. (2009). The Benefits and Limitations of Online Group Work in a Teacher Education Program. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 17(2), 2465-2472. *Waynesville, NC USA: Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education*. Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/22803/>.
- Anadolu University. (2023). Anadolu at a Glance. Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://www.anadolu.edu.tr/en/about-anadolu-1/about-anadolu/anadolu-at-a-glance>.
- Backes, C. E. (1997). The Do's and Don'ts of Working with Adult Learners. *Adult Learning*, 8(3), 29-31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104515959700800314>.
- Bagchi, K. (2005). Factors Contributing to Global Digital Divide: Some Empirical Results. *Journal of Global Information Technology Management*, 8 (3), 47-65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1097198X.2005.10856402>.
- Bağrıacık Yılmaz, A., & Karataş, S. (2022). Why do open and distance education students drop out? Views from various stakeholders. *International journal of educational technology in higher education*, 19(1), 28. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-022-00333-x>.
- Bawa, P. (2016). Retention in Online Courses: Exploring Issues and Solutions—A Literature Review. *SAGE Open*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015621777>
- Bean, J. (1980). Dropouts and turnover: The synthesis and test of a causal model of student attrition. *Research in Higher Education*, 12(2), 155-187. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF00976194>.
- Bean, J., & Metzner, B. (1985). A Conceptual Model of Non-traditional Undergraduate Student Attrition. *Review of educational research*, 55(4), 485-540. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/00346543055004485>.
- Berber, Ş., Akca, M. & Tepe Küçüköğlü, M. (2022). Yükseköğretime Covid-19 Bulaşınca: Salgın Sürecinde Öğrenci ve Akademisyenlerin Uzaktan Eğitim Faaliyetlerine İlişkin Deneyimleri Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme. *Yükseköğretim Dergisi*, 12(1), 102-121. <https://doi.org/10.2399/yod.21.816132>.
- Birişçi, S. (2013). Video konferans tabanlı uzaktan eğitime ilişkin öğrenci tutumları ve görüşleri. *Journal of Instructional Technologies & Teacher Education*, 1, 24-40.

Retrieved December 13, 2023 from
<https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/jitte/issue/25080/264691>.

- Biriyai, A. H., & Thomas, E. V. (2014). Online discussion forum: A tool for effective student-teacher interaction. *International Journal of Applied Science-Research and Review*, 1(3), 111-116. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2525047>.
- Bliss, L. A. (2016). Phenomenological Research: Inquiry to Understand the Meanings of People's Experiences. *International Journal of Adult Vocational Education and Technology (IJAVET)*, 7(3), 14-26. <http://doi.org/10.4018/IJAVET.2016070102>.
- Bocchi, J., Eastman, J. K., & Swift, C. O. (2004). Retaining the online learner: Profile of students in an online MBA program and implications for teaching them. *Journal of Education for Business*, 79(4), 245–253. <https://doi.org/10.3200/joeb.79.4.245-253>.
- Boston, W. E., Ice, P., & Gibson, A. M. (2011). Comprehensive assessment of student retention in online learning environments. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 14(1). <https://www.learntechlib.org/noaccess/35779/>.
- Bozkurt, A. (2019a). The historical development and adaptation of open universities in Turkish context: Case of Anadolu University as a giga university. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 20(4). <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v20i4.4086>.
- Bozkurt, A. (2017). Türkiye’de uzaktan eğitimin dünü, bugünü ve yarını. *Açıköğretim Uygulamaları ve Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 3(2), 85-124. Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/403827>.
- Bozkurt, A. (2017). Açık ve uzaktan öğrenme kapsamında dijital bölünme. In T. V. Yüzer (Ed.), *Açık ve Uzaktan Öğrenmede Bireysel Farklılıklar. Eskişehir:Anadolu Üniversitesi Yayınlar*,. (23-46).
- Bozkurt, A., & Akbulut, Y. (2019). Dropout patterns and cultural context in online networked learning spaces. *Open Praxis*, 11(1), 41–54. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.234278052445935>.
- Bozkurt, A., Karadeniz, A. & Koçdar, S. (2017). Social Networking Sites as Communication, Interaction, and Learning Environments: Perceptions and Preferences of Distance Education Students. *Journal of Learning for Development*. 4. <https://doi.org/10.56059/jl4d.v4i3.215>.

- Bozkurt, A., & Sharma, R. C. (2020). Emergency remote teaching in a time of global crisis due to CoronaVirus pandemic. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, 15(1), p. 3 i-vi. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3778083>.
- Brindley, J. E. (1987). Attrition and completion in distance education: The student's perspective. (Master's thesis). Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://open.library.ubc.ca/media/stream/pdf/831/1.0054214/2>.
- Bawa, P. (2016). Retention in Online Courses: Exploring Issues and Solutions- A Literature Review. *Sage Open*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015621777>.
- Cheung, L. L. W., & Kan, A. C. N. (2002). Evaluation of factors related to student performance in a distance-learning business communication course. *Journal of Education for Business*, 77(5), 257–263. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08832320209599674>.
- Chyung, Y., Winiecki, D., & Fenner, J. A. (1999). Evaluation of effective interventions to solve the dropout problem in adult distance education. *Proceedings of EdMedia*, (pp. 5155). Seattle, WA. Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/17397/>.
- Cilesiz, S. (2009). Educational Computer Use in Leisure Contexts: A Phenomenological Study of Adolescents' Experiences at Internet Cafés. *American Educational Research Journal*, 46(1), 232-274. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831208323938>.
- Clay, M. N., Rowland, S., & Packard, A. (2009). Improving undergraduate online retention through gated advisement and redundant communication. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 10(1), 93–102. <https://doi.org/10.2190/CS.10.1.g>.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2020). *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dang, T. T., & Robertson, M. (2010). Impacts of learning management system on learner autonomy in EFL learning. *International Education Studies*, 3(3), 3-11. P.8. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v3n3p3>.
- Dornyei, Z. (2007). *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Dupin-Bryant, P. A. (2004). Pre-entry variables related to retention in online distance education. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 18(4), 199-206.. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15389286ajde1804_2.
- Durkheim, E. (1951). *Suicide* (J. A. Spaulding & G. Simpson, Trans.). Glencoe: The Free Press.
- Erdođdu, E. (2007). *Öğretmenlerin demografik özellikleri, öz-yeterlik algıları ve deneyimleri ile çevrim-içi yetiştirme etkinliklerini tamamlama oranları arasındaki ilişki : Samsun ili örneđi*. (Master's thesis). Anadolu Üniversitesi, Sosyal bilimler Enstitüsü, Eskişehir.
- Ergün, M., & Veyis, F. (2023). Türk Dili Ve Edebiyatı Öğretmeni Adaylarının Uzaktan Eğitimde Öğretim Süreci, Ölçme Deđerlendirme Uygulamaları Ve Kaynaklara Ulaşım İmkânları Hakkındaki Görüşleri Üzerine Bir İnceleme. *İnsan Hakları Eğitim Ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi (İEKD)*, 1(2), 98-121. Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/ihevkad/issue/80767/1374882>.
- Erturgut, R. (2008). İnternet temelli uzaktan eğitimin örgütsel, sosyal, pedagojik ve teknolojik bileşenleri. *Bilişim Teknolojileri Dergisi*, 1(2), 79-85. Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/gazibtd/issue/6613/87877>.
- Fox, S., & Mackeogh, K. (2003). Can eLearning Promote Higher-order Learning Without Tutor Overload? *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning*, 18(2), 121-134. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680510307410>.
- Fraenkel, J. R., Wallen, N. E., & Hyun, H. H. (2012). *How to design and evaluate research in education* (8th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Gabrielle, D.M. (2001). Distance Learning: An Examination of Perceived Effectiveness and Student Satisfaction in Higher Education. In J. Price, D. Willis, N. Davis & J. Willis (Eds.), *Proceedings of SITE 2001--Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference* (pp. 183-188). Norfolk, VA: Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE). Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/16673/>.
- Gabrielle, D. (2003). The effects of technology-mediated instructional strategies on motivation, performance, and self-directed learning (Unpublished dissertation). Florida: Florida State University. Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://diginole.lib.fsu.edu/islandora/object/fsu%3A182576>.

- Gaytan, J. (2015). Comparing faculty and learner perceptions regarding factors that affect learner retention in online education. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 29(1), 56–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08923647.2015.994365>.
- Gunduz, M., & Karaman, S. (2020). Open Education Faculty and Distance Education Students' Dropout Reasons: the Case of a Turkish State University. *Open Praxis*, 12(1), 7-25. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.12.1.970>.
- Habley, W. R., Bloom, J. L., & Robbins, S. (2012). *Increasing persistence: Research-based strategies for college student success* (1st ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Hall, E. T. (1998). The power of hidden differences. In M. J. Bennett (Ed.), *Basic concepts of intercultural communication: Selected readings* (pp. 53–67). Intercultural Press.
- Hamutoğlu, N. B., Gültekin, G. S., & Savaşçı, M. (2019). Öğretmen adaylarının uzaktan eğitime yönelik görüşleri: Açıköğretim uygulamaları. *Yükseköğretim Dergisi*, 9(1), 19-28. <https://doi.org/10.2399/yod.18.023>.
- Harlow, J. E. (2006). *Social integration, motivational orientation, and self-regulated learning strategies of online versus face-to-face theological seminary biblical language students* (Unpublished Dissertation). Greensboro, NC: The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/umi-uncg-1109.pdf>.
- Hart, C. (2012). Factors associated with student persistence in an online program of study: A review of the literature. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 11(1), 19-42. Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://www.learntechlib.org/p/87889/>.
- Hillier, M. (2018). Bridging the digital divide with off-line e-learning. *Distance Education*, 39(1), 110-121. P.118 <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2017.1418627>.
- Holder, B. (2007). An investigation of hope, academics, environment, and motivation as predictors of persistence in higher education online programs. *Internet and Higher Education*, 10(4), 245–260. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2007.08.002>.
- Holmberg, B. (1989). *Theory and practice of distance education*. Routledge.
- Houle, B. J. (2004). *Adult student persistence in Web-based education* (Unpublished Dissertation), New York: New York University. Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/adult-student-persistence-web-based-education/docview/305166111/se-2?accountid=7181>.

- Hummel, H. G. K. (2006). Feedback Model to Support Designers of Blended-Learning Courses. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 7(3). Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/379/748>.
- Ivankova, N. V., & Stick, S. L. (2007). Students' persistence in a distributed doctoral program in educational leadership in higher education: A mixed methods study. *Research in Higher Education*, 48(1), 93–135. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-006-9025-4>.
- Jandrić, P., Bozkurt, A., McKee, M., & Hayes, S. (2021). Teaching in the Age of Covid-19 - A Longitudinal Study. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 3(3), 743-770. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-021-00252-6>.
- Jung, I. (2011). The dimensions of e-learning quality: From the learner's perspective. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 59(4), 445-464. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-010-9171-4>.
- Jung, I. (2012). Asian learners' perception of quality in distance education and gender differences. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 13(2) <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v13i2.1159>.
- Kaleli, Y. G., & Güven, B. (2015). Öğretmen adaylarının uzaktan eğitime yönelik algılarının metaforlar yoluyla belirlenmesi. *Turkish Journal of Computer and Mathematics Education*, 6, 299-322. <https://doi.org/10.16949/turcomat.75936>.
- Kaplan, D. S., Peck, B. M., & Kaplan, H. B. (1997). Decomposing the academic failure–dropout relationship: A longitudinal analysis. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 90(6), 331–343. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220671.1997.10544591>.
- Keegan, D. (1996). *Foundations of Distance Education* (3rd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315004822>.
- Keller, J. M. (2010a). *Motivational design for learning and performance: The ARCS model approach*. New York, NY: Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-1250-3>.
- Keller, J. M. (2010b). Five fundamental requirements for motivation and volition. *Revista Inter Ação*, 35(2), 305-322. <https://doi.org/10.5216/ia.v35i2.12668>.
- Kember, D. (1989). A Longitudinal-Process Model of Drop-Out from Distance Education. *Journal of Higher Education*, 60(3), 278-301. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1982251>.

- Kember, D. (1995). *Open learning for adults: A model of student progress*. New Jersey: Educational Technology.
- Kember, D. (2000). Misconceptions about the learning approaches, motivation and study practices of Asian students. *Higher Education*, 40(1), 99- 121. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1004036826490>.
- Kemp, W. C. (2002). Persistence of adult learners in distance education. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 16(2), 65-81. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15389286AJDE1602_2.
- Kerby, M. B. (2015). Toward a New Predictive Model of Student Retention in Higher Education: An Application of Classical Sociological Theory. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 17(2), 138–161. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025115578229>.
- Kilinc, H., & Altinpulluk, H. (2021). Discussion Forums as a Learning Material in Higher Education Institutions. *International Journal of Higher Education Pedagogies*, 2(1), 1–9. P.7. <https://doi.org/10.33422/ijhep.v2i1.25>.
- Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall/Cambridge.
- Koçdar, S., Bozkurt, A., Uçar, H., Karadeniz, A., Erdoğan, E., & Naidu, S. (2023). Openness in education as a living idea: A longitudinal investigation of its growth and development. *Distance Education*, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2023.2268321>.
- LeCompte, M. D., & Goetz, J. P. (1982). Problems of reliability and validity in ethnographic research. *Review of Educational Research*, 52(1), 31-60. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543052001031>.
- Lee, Y., & Choi, J. (2011). A review of online course dropout research: implications for practice and future research. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 59(5), 593–618. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-010-9177-y>.
- Levy, Y. (2007). Comparing dropouts and persistence in e-learning courses. *Computers & Education*, 48(2), 185–204. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.COMPEDU.2004.12.004>.

- Lim, J. M. (2016). Predicting successful completion using student delay indicators in undergraduate self-paced online courses. *Distance Education*, 37, 317–332. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2016.1233050>.
- Lint, A. H. (2013). E-Learning Student Perceptions on Scholarly Persistence in the 21st Century with Social Media in Higher Education. *Creative Education*, 4(11), 718-725. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2013.411102>.
- Loncar, M., Barrett, N. E., & Liu, G. Z. (2014). Towards the refinement of forum and asynchronous online discussion in educational contexts worldwide: Trends and investigative approaches within a dominant research paradigm. *Computers & Education*, 73, 93-110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2013.12.007>.
- Maral, M. (2022). Yükseköğretimde Açıköğretim Sisteminin Kalitesine Yönelik İnceleme: Karma Yöntem Araştırması. *International Journal of Management and Administration*, 6(11), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.29064/ijma.1007570>.
- Mason, S., & Matas, C. (2015). Teacher Attrition and Retention Research in Australia: Towards a New Theoretical Framework. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(40). <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2015v40n11.3>.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded Sourcebook*. (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Moore, M. G. (1980). Independent study. In R. D. Boyd & J. W. Apps (Eds.), *Redefining the discipline of adult education* (pp. 16–31). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Moore, K., Bartkovich, J., Fetzner, M., & Ison, S. (2003). Success in cyberspace: Student retention in online courses. *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*, 10(2), 2-26. Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED472473>.
- Moore, M. G., & Kearsley, G. (2012). *Distance Education: A System View of Online Learning* (3rd ed.). Belmont, California: Wadsworth.
- Morgan, C. K., & Tam, M. (1999). Unravelling the complexities of distance education student attrition. *Distance education*, 20(1), 96-108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158791990200108>.

- Morris, L. V., Wu, S.-S., & Finnegan, C. L. (2005). Predicting Retention in Online General Education Courses. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 19(1), 23-36. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15389286ajde1901_3.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mukhtar, K., Javed, K., Arooj, M., & Sethi, A. (2020). Advantages, limitations and recommendations for online learning during COVID-19 pandemic era. *Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences*, 36 (COVID19-4), 27-31. <https://doi.org/10.12669/pjms.36.COVID19-S4.2785>.
- Muljana, P. S., & Luo, T. (2019). Factors contributing to learner retention in online learning and recommended strategies for improvement: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Information Technology Education: Research*, 18, 19–57. <https://doi.org/10.28945/4182>.
- Müller, T. (2008). Persistence of women in online degree-completion programs. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 9(2), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v9i2.455>.
- O'Brien, B. (2002). Online Student Retention: Can It Be Done?. In P. Barker & S. Rebelsky (Eds.), *Proceedings of ED-MEDIA 2002-World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia & Telecommunications* (pp. 1479-1483). Denver, Colorado, USA: Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE). Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/9973/>.
- Okur, M. R., Paşaoğlu Baş, D., & Uça Güneş, E. P. (2019). Açık ve Uzaktan Öğrenmede Öğrenimi Bırakma Sebeplerinin İncelenmesi. *Yükseköğretim Ve Bilim Dergisi*(2), 225-235. <https://doi.org/10.14527/9786257052016.18>.
- Osborn, V. (2001). Identifying at-risk students in videoconferencing and web-based distance education. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 15(1), 41–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08923640109527073>.
- Özgöl, M., Sarıkaya, İ., & Öztürk, M. (2017). Örgün eğitimde uzaktan eğitim uygulamalarına ilişkin öğrenci ve öğretim elemanı değerlendirmeleri. *Yükseköğretim ve Bilim Dergisi*, 7(2), 234-304. Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/higheredusci/issue/61493/918176>.

- Packham, G., Jones, P., Miller, C., & Thomas, B. (2004). E-learning and retention: Key factors influencing student withdrawal. *Education + Training*, 46(6/7), 335-342. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00400910410555240>.
- Pajares, F., & Miller, M. D. (1994). Role of self-efficacy and self-concept beliefs in mathematical problem solving: A path analysis. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 86(2), 193–203. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.86.2.193>.
- Park, J.-H. (2007). Factors Related to Learner Dropout in Online Learning. (Online Submission). Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED504556.pdf>
- Park, J. H., & Choi, H. J. (2009). Factors Influencing Adult Learners' Decision to Drop Out or Persist in Online Learning. *Journal of Educational Technology & Society*, 12(4), 207–217. Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/jeductechsoci.12.4.207>.
- Parker, A. (1999). A study of variables that predict dropout from distance education. *International Journal of Educational Technology*, 1(2), 1–10. Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://ascilite.org/archived-journals/ijet/v1n2/parker/>.
- Parker, A. (2003). Identifying predictors of academic persistence in distance education. *United States Distance Learning Association Journal*, 17(1), 55–62. Retrieved December 13, 2023 from http://www.usdla.org/html/journal/JAN03_issue/article06.html.
- Perry, B., Bowman, J., Care, D., Edwards, M., & Park, C. (2008). Why Do Students Withdraw from Online Graduate Nursing and Health Studies Education? *The Journal of Educators Online*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.9743/jeo.2008.1.2>.
- Pierrakeas, C., Xeno, M., Panagiotakopoulos, C., & Vergidis, D. (2004). A comparative study of dropout rates and causes for two different distance education courses. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 5(2). <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v5i2.183>.
- Porta-Merida, S. (2009). Online learning success: Underlying constructs affecting student attrition. Ph.D. thesis, Lynn University. Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://www.learntechlib.org/p/117510/>.
- Price, J. (1977). *The study of turnover*. Iowa State University Press.

- Radovan, M. (2019). Should I stay, or Should I go? Revisiting Learner retention models in distance education. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 20(3), 29–40. <https://doi.org/10.17718/tojde.598211>.
- Ramist, L. (1981). College Student Attrition and Retention. College Board Report No. 81-1.
- Rovai, A. P. (2002). Building sense of community at a distance. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 3(1), 74-85. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v3i1.79>.
- Rovai, A. P. (2003). In search of higher persistence rates in distance education online programs. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 6(1), 1-16. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s1096-7516\(02\)00158-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1096-7516(02)00158-6).
- Sezgin, S., & Fırat, M. (2020). Covid-19 pandemisinde uzaktan eğitime geçiş ve dijital uçurum tehlikesi. *Açıköğretim Uygulamaları Ve Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 6(4), 37-54.p.47 Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/auad/issue/57638/767299>.
- Sherritt, C. A. (1996). A Fundamental Problem with Distance Programs in Higher Education. Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED389906.pdf>
- Shin, N., & Kim, J. (1999). An exploration of learner progress and drop-out in Korea National Open University. *Distance Education*, 20(1), 81–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158791990200107>.
- Simpson, O. (2008). Motivating learners in open and distance learning: Do we need a new theory of learner support? *Open Learning*, 23(3), 159–170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680510802419979>.
- Simpson, O. (2013). Student retention in distance education: Are we failing our students? *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning*, 28, 105-119. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680513.2013.847363>.
- Simpson, O. (2012). *Supporting Students for Success in Online and Distance Education*. Third Edition (3rd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203095737>.
- So, H. J. (2009). When groups decide to use asynchronous online discussions: collaborative learning and social presence under a voluntary participation structure. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 25(2), 143-160. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2729.2008.00293.x>.

- Sousa, S., Lamas, D., & Hudson, B. (2006). Understanding Learners' Trust within an Online Distance Learning Context. In *IADIS International Conference E-Society, Dublin*. P.27
- Spady, W. (1970). Dropouts from higher education: An interdisciplinary review and synthesis. *Interchange*, 1(1), 64-85. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF02214313>.
- Swan, K. (2002). Building learning communities in online courses: The importance of interaction. *Education, Communications & Information*, 2(1), 23-49. P.42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1463631022000005016>.
- Tekedere, H., Şahin, S., & Göker, H. (2022). Covid-19 sürecinde yükseköğretimde çevrim içi uzaktan eğitim öğrenci deneyimlerinin incelenmesi. *Gazi Üniversitesi Gazi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi*, 42(1), 123-166. <https://doi.org/10.17152/gefad.871254>.
- Terry, N. (2001). Assessing Enrollment and Attrition Rates for the Online MBA. *T.H.E. Journal*, 28(7), 64-68. Retrieved December 13, 2023 from <https://www.learntechlib.org/p/94140/>.
- Thompson, E. (1999). Can the distance education student progress (DESP) inventory be used as a tool to predict attrition in distance education? *Higher Education Research & Development*, 18(1), 77-84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0729436990180106>.
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89–125. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1170024>.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Tinto, V. (1994). Building learning communities for new college students (with Goodsell Love, A., & Russo, P.). A publication of the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.
- Tinto, V. (2006). Research and practice of student retention: What next? *Journal of College Student Retention : Research, Theory & Practice*, 8(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.2190/4YNU-4TMB-22DJ-AN4W>.
- Tinto, V. (2017). Through the Eyes of Students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 19(3), 254-269. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025115621917>.

- Traxler, J. (2007). Defining, Discussing and Evaluating Mobile Learning: The Moving Finger Writes and Having Writ... *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 8(2), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v8i2.346>.
- Turan, Z., Kucuk, S., & Cilligol Karabey, S. (2022). The university students' self-regulated effort, flexibility and satisfaction in distance education. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 19(1), 35-35. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-022-00342-w>.
- Uçar, H., & Kumtepe, A. T. (2020). Effects of the ARCS-V-based motivational strategies on online learners' academic performance, motivation, volition, and course interest. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 36(3), 335-349. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcal.12404>.
- UNESCO (2002). *Open and distance learning: Trends, policy and strategy consideration*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Usta, İ., & Hakan, A. (2018). Açıköğretim fakültesi sosyal bilimler önlisans programının öğrenci görüşlerine göre değerlendirilmesi. *Ahi Evran Üniversitesi Kırşehir Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi*, 19(3), 2168-2178. <https://doi.org/10.29299/kefad.2018.19.03.010>.
- van Gennep, A. (1960). *The Rites of Passage* (M. Vizedine & G. Caffee, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- van Manen, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of practice: Meaning-giving methods in phenomenological research and writing*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Veletsianos, G., & Houlden, S. (2019). An analysis of flexible learning and flexibility over the last 40 years of distance education. *Distance Education*, 40(4), 454-468. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2019.1681893>.
- Xenos, M., Pierrakeas, C., & Pintelas, P. (2002). A survey on student dropout rates and dropout causes concerning the students in the Course of Informatics of the Hellenic Open University. *Computers & Education*, 39(4), 361-377. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0360-1315\(02\)00072-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0360-1315(02)00072-6).
- Willging, P. A., & Johnson, S. D. (2009). Factors that Influence Students' Decision to Dropout of Online Courses. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 8(4). <http://dx.doi.org/10.24059/olj.v8i4.1814>

- Wilson, A. (2015). A guide to phenomenological research. *Nursing standard* (Royal College of Nursing (Great Britain) : 1987). 29(34), 38–43. doi: [10.7748/ns.29.34.38.e8821](https://doi.org/10.7748/ns.29.34.38.e8821).
- Yıldırım, A., & Şimşek, H. (2013). *Sosyal bilimlerde nitel araştırma yöntemleri* (6. Baskı). Ankara: Seçkin Yayıncılık.
- Yıldız, S. (2016). Pedagojik formasyon eğitimi alan öğrencilerin uzaktan eğitime yönelik tutumları. *Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 16, 301-329. <https://doi.org/10.11616/basbed.vi.455852>
- Yılmaz, A. (2020). *Açık ve uzaktan eğitim öğrencilerinin öğrenimi bırakma ve öğrenime devam nedenlerinin incelenmesi*. (Ph.D. thesis). Gazi Üniversitesi, Eğitim Bilimleri Enstitüsü, Ankara.
- Yüksel, P. & Yıldırım, S. (2015). Theoretical Frameworks, Methods, and Procedures for Conducting Phenomenological Studies in Educational Settings. *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, 6(1), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.17569/tojqi.59813>.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX-1. Pre-Survey

Dear participant,

I would like to invite you to participate in this research project which aims to examine the factors which might relate to students' decisions to drop out from open and distance learning systems and gain a better insight into students' perceptions of their current academic setting. This would involve you completing an online interview form which is expected to take about 10-20 minutes to complete. If you consent to participate, confidentiality of your responses is meticulously assured. The information provided will be used merely for the purpose of this research project and only aggregated results will be reported in academic publications. No other parties than researchers of this study will have access to the information you provide. Your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw consent at any time and to withdraw any unprocessed data you have previously supplied. Upon completion of the research, all responses will be anonymized and be securely stored.

This project has received IRB approval by Anadolu University Institution of Social Sciences Ethics Committee.

We greatly value your co-operation. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Name and Surname: ()

E-mail: ()

Phone number: ()

Gender:

() Female

() Male

() Prefer not to respond

Highest degree completed:

() High school

() Undergraduate

() Associate

() Graduate

Name of the program: ()

Type of enrollment:

- Higher Education Institutions Exam Vertical Transfer
 Second university Undergraduate Transfer

Have you had previous experience of open and distance learning?

- Yes No

What is your current status in the program you were last enrolled in?

- I deregistered
 I am registered but I do not plan to continue
 I am registered, maybe I can continue my education

In which year did you leave the distance education program you were enrolled in?

- 2022 2018 2014
 2021 2017 2013
 2020 2016 Before 2012
 2019 2015

How old were you when you dropped out from the program? ()

What was your marital status when you dropped out from the program?

- Married Single

What was the number of children you had when you dropped out from the program?

- None 1 2 3 and more

Which semester were you at when you dropped out from the program?

- 1st 4th 7th
 2nd 5th 8th
 3rd 6th 9th or more

What were your reasons for leaving the program? (You can select more than one option)

- I did not have enough motivation to complete the program.
 I did not get enough support from my family.
 I had too many responsibilities at work.
 I did not have enough time to study.
 My family obligations prevented me from studying.
 I did not have enough technical equipment.

- The study materials didn't suit my learning style.
- The program content did not meet my expectations.
- The program was very difficult.
- My time management was bad.
- I did not have the habit of studying.
- I encountered health problems.
- Student support services were inadequate.
- I had difficulty in paying the tuition.
- I could not adapt to the program.
- I had difficulty using the digital platforms where course content was presented.
- I did not like the course design.
- I did not have enough interaction with the instructors.
- I did not interact with other students enrolled in the program.
- I did not have enough interaction with the institution.
- I found the learning content insufficient.

Other reasons :

Would you like to participate in the individual interview, which is planned to be held following this stage and is expected to last 20-30 minutes?

- Yes No

APPENDIX-2. Interview Questions

Interviewer (I): I am lecturer Sevgi Elibol. We are conducting this interview as part of the research project we are conducting with Associate Professor Aras Bozkurt to examine the factors which might relate to students' decisions to drop out from open and distance learning systems and gain a better insight into students' perceptions of their current academic setting. This would involve you answering two interview questions. Today is January 6, 2023, and it is 10:04 a.m. Our interview will be recorded from start to finish. If you consent to participate, confidentiality of your responses is meticulously assured. The information provided will be used merely for the purpose of this research project and only aggregated results will be reported in academic publications. No other parties than researchers of this study will have access to the information you provide. Your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw consent at any time and to withdraw any unprocessed data you have previously supplied. Upon completion of this interview, all your responses will be anonymized and be securely stored. This project has received IRB approval. Are you participating in this interview voluntarily?

Participant(P): _____

I: Thank you. If you feel ready, we can start with our first question.

P: _____

I: What did you go through from the time you enrolled in the program until you decided to leave the program? In your own words, could you please describe your experiences in detail?

P: _____

I: Thank you very much for your valuable opinions. Would you mind providing further information about that?

P: _____

I: I see, thank you. Are there any other points you would like to mention?

P: _____

I: There comes our second question then. How did you feel after dropping out of the system?

P: _____

I: Are there any other points you would like to mention?

P: _____

I: Thank you very much for your valuable contributions. This is the end of our interview. We greatly value your cooperation. Thank you for your time and consideration.

APPENDIX-3. Content Analysis Process- Participants' Comments

Content analysis process- Participants' Comments	
P6: ... <i>I usually use the e-campus platform for studying. The sample study questions given there and the questions asked in the exam were very different in difficulty.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reasons (Theme) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Assessment (Code)
P2: ... <i>I was studying a few days before the exam. I mean, in fact, if I started studying before the last month or so, if I managed the time well, there would be no problem. I was having trouble in the exams because I was studying at the last minute.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reasons (Theme) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Self-Regulation (Code)
P14: ... <i>I was going to apply for a master's degree. When applying for a master's degree, I was told that I should not be enrolled in any undergraduate program at any university. So, I had to deregister from the program.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reasons (Theme) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Enrollment policies and procedures (Code)
P11: ... <i>At that time, I was writing my thesis and I had to devote all my energy to that. For this reason, I was unable to give the open education courses sufficient weight.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reasons (Theme) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Other academic pursuits (Code)
P9: ... <i>Because I was working, I was very tired when I came home from work. It took me an hour and a half to get home from work. After eating dinner and chatting with my family, I had no time to study.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reasons (Theme) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Life circumstances (Code)
P3: ... <i>Being enrolled in a program was a big responsibility for me, so I felt relieved when I deregistered.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional Outcomes (Theme) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Relief (Code)

<p>P10: ...I didn't get too upset. I left that program. I got enrolled in a new program. I moved on.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional Outcomes (Theme) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Indifference (Code)
<p>P15: ...<i>I felt I fell into the void, that much is clear. For me, it was a very important objective. The fact that I was unable to proceed disappointed me.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional Outcomes (Theme) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Disappointment (Code)
<p>P1: ...<i>To be honest, I was very upset because I had canceled my registration because I could not be enrolled in two departments at the same time and I had to postpone my dreams because of a problem that was not caused by me.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional Outcomes (Theme) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sadness (Code)

Evrak Kayıt Tarihi: 08.11.2021

Protokol No: 211846

Tarih: 30.11.2021



ANADOLU ÜNİVERSİTESİ
SOSYAL VE BEŞERÎ BİLİMLER BİLİMSEL ARAŞTIRMA VE YAYIN ETİĞİ KURULU
KARAR BELGESİ

ÇALIŞMANIN TÜRÜ:	BAP Projesi-Yüksek Lisans Tez Çalışması
KONU:	Sosyal Bilimler
BAŞLIK:	Uzaktan Eğitimde Öğrenenlerin Sistemden Ayrılma Sebeplerinin İncelenmesi"
PROJE/TEZ YÜRÜTÜCÜSÜ:	Doç. Dr. Aras BOZKURT
TEZ YAZARI:	Sevgi ELİBOL
ALT KOMİSYON GÖRÜŞÜ:	-
KARAR:	Olumlu
Prof. Dr. Saime ÖNCE (Başkan-İkt. ve İdari Bil. Fak.)	
Prof. Dr. M. Erkan ÜYÜMEZ (Başkan Yardımcısı -İkt. ve İdari Bil. Fak.)	Prof. Dr. Fatime GÜNEŞ (Edebiyat Fak.)
Prof. Dr. Yıldız UZUNER (Eğitim Fak.)	Prof. Dr. İbrahim Cemil ULUKAN (Açıköğretim Fak.)
Prof. Dr. Handan DEVECİ (Eğitim Fak.)	Prof. Dr. Erkan YÜKSEL (İletişim Bil. Fak.)