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Marina - McISAAC
Karen L. Murphy L. Murphy
Ugur Demiray, Anadolu University

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Examining distance education in Turkey

Marina Stock McIsaac
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This article describes the distance education program at Anadolu University in Turkey and compares its problems and solutions with similar distance education programs in other Asian countries. A brief history is presented, enrollment figures are given and future directions are described. Conclusions suggest that open education is accomplishing the goals of the country's 1981 reforms and can continue to be helpful in the country's quest for modernization.

Turkey has the unique geographic position of straddling two continents. With one foot resting in Europe (Istanbul and Thrace) and the other firmly planted in Asia (Anatolia), modern Turkey is in a good position to learn from the successes and failures of its neighbors. Since 1923, when Atatürk founded the Turkish Republic, Turkey has used the European model for its economic, political and educational development while maintaining its cultural ties with the East. Many Turkish art forms — shadow theater, music, dance and literature — have their roots in Asia. Similar to its Asian neighbors, Turkey, with a large population of over 50 million people, is a developing country. It continues to be plagued by high levels of unemployment and low levels of education.

Institutions of higher education in Turkey have traditionally modeled their programs after their British, German and American counterparts. However the educational problems facing Turkey more closely resemble those of their Asian rather than their European neighbors.

BACKGROUND

The 1970s were years of unrest and civil disturbance in Turkey. Political elements at the extreme left and right waged open conflict on the streets. Unemployment was high and inflation was over 100%. During this period the universities became centers of agitation. Students demanded better education and better jobs. One project was developed in an attempt to solve some of the educational problems. This pilot project explored one new educational technology, educational television, to provide increased opportunities for students in higher education.
In 1974 Turkey's first educational television project was undertaken at the Eskişehir Academy of Economic and Commercial Sciences. The success of the Academy's first small closed-circuit educational project marked the introduction of technologies used for educational purposes. The students and faculty who participated in this project formed the nucleus of technical expertise in television, and it was their knowledge which was to lay the foundation for future distance education program activities (Eskişehir Academy of Economic and Commercial Science, 1974).

Shortly after this, (1975-1978) an experimental distance education program was undertaken by the Ministry of Education. This program was coordinated by the Institute for Diffusion of Higher Education, Yağın Egitim (referred to as YAY-KUR), and utilized both print and television. The latter was developed by the film, radio and television center of the Ministry of Education (FRTM). This attempt at distance education was not a success because it was hastily conceived and never integrated into the total educational system. It is not within the scope of this paper to document the reasons for the failure of the 1979 Distance Learning experiment. Political conflicts, lack of careful planning, organizational confusion, and over-emphasis on vocational education 'led the institution into a stagnation and later into a failure' (Özdil, 1979).

In 1978 Yılmaz Büyükerşen, then President of the Eskişehir Academy of Economics and Commercial Science, prepared a report which had far reaching effects (Büyükerşen, 1978). He proposed that his Academy, which was later to become Anadolu University, be the center for a program of distance education in Turkey. The program was to be based on the British Open University model and was to be called open education. At that time the Eskişehir Academy had the only fully developed media and broadcasting capability other than Turkish Radio and Television, the state controlled television facility. In addition Büyükerşen had coordinated visits for three years (1977-1979) of a team of educational technologists from around the world to help develop a model of open education for Turkey. During this period, marked by student protests and civil unrest, the number of student applicants for traditional university spaces increased to ten times the number of available places (Özdil, 1979:2).

One solution to the growing economic and social turmoil of the late 1970s came in the form of the fourth Five-Year Development Plan (1979-1983) which required that an educational system be designed so as to eliminate inequalities in educational opportunity. This plan stressed the need to increase the opportunity for nonformal education and emphasized the importance of providing distance learning opportunities for all people. This included particularly students who failed to win places
at conventional universities as well as those who for economic, geographic or other reasons could not study on university campuses. It was felt that distance education would not only benefit the students themselves but, in a larger sense, would help to eliminate the student unrest and civil disobedience which had marked the 1970s (Kennedy, 1982:4).

By September 1980 the civil disobedience became so extreme that the Turkish Parliament was unable to implement legislation, and the military wing of the government was called in to restore law and order. By 1982 a new constitution and new Higher Education Acts were accepted. As a result a Council for Higher Education, (YÖK), was created and given the authority by the Constitution of the Republic to regulate all higher education. This government body was empowered to 'plan, organize, administer and supervise the education provided by institutions of higher education'. In addition it was granted constitutional immunity which gave it an extremely powerful position. (Karagözoglu, 1986:4).

One activity of YÖK was to announce to universities that they could develop open education programs. It was only after this that the Büyükersen Report was implemented. By that time, as a result of higher education reforms, the Academy had officially become Anadolu University, or the University of Anatolia.

ANADOLU UNIVERSITY

Anadolu University coordinates the Turkish open education program. The university is located in Eskişehir, a city of approximately 500,000 located in Western Anatolia between Ankara and Istanbul. The university is not presently a distance teaching university, but it is a university with a distance teaching department called the Open Education Faculty.

The present University began in 1958 as the Eskişehir Academy of Economics and Commercial Science. In 1979 a Faculty of Communication was established. Then in 1981, as a result of educational changes brought about by the Council of Higher Education, the Academy formally became Anadolu University. The original Faculty of Communication was integrated into the new Open Faculty. Before the 1982 educational reforms there were 19 universities, 19 academies and 7 polytechnic institutions in Turkey (ÜSYM, 1982:33). After the reform some academies such as Eskişehir's combined with universities and the total number of universities grew to 27. In 1987 two more were added. One, Bilkent, was the first private Turkish university to be established.

The Open Education Faculty at Anadolu University has been operating officially as an open education program since late 1982. One of its
missions has been to increase the availability of higher education to those for whom further education was not available before. In 1981, before the Open Education Faculty began, there were only 56,000 university spaces for the 515,000 students who applied (ÜSYM, 1980:2). By 1985, as a result of the open education program, the number of available student spaces had doubled. The program has continued to grow since it inception. Following are student enrollment figures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students enrolled in business administration and economics</th>
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<td>The main emphasis of the open education program is to provide diplomas for students in business administration and economics.</td>
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<tr>
<td>total students</td>
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<tr>
<td>1982-83</td>
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<td>1986-87</td>
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Source: (ÜSYM, 1982-1987)

Of the original 29,749 students enrolled in 1982-83, there were 9,600 who remained in the program. Of that number 4,658 were graduated in the first graduation ceremony in October, 1987. Although the drop-out rate seems high for this first class, it is not known how many merely dropped back a year or more to complete their degree.

STUDENT PROFILE

Last year’s statistics indicate that 5.4% of students enrolled in Business and Economics live in cities, 27% live in towns, and 19% live in villages. Eighty-five percent are single and only 15% are married. Just over half, (58%) are employed. Forty-six percent of students’ fathers finished 5th grade and 6% earned postsecondary degrees. Thirty-three percent of the mothers finished 5th grade and less than 1% earned postsecondary degrees. One third of the students are female. Suggestions have been made regarding the potential of the open education program to improve the ratio of women who receive a higher education (McIsaac & Koymen, 1987).

COURSES

Two degree programs are offered through the Open Education Faculty. Students can obtain degrees in Business Administration or Economics.
Courses last for an entire year and are taught using texts and supplementary television and radio programs. Courses include introductory and advanced studies in Business and Economics, Turkish History, English as a Second Language — as well as advanced courses in computers, advertising, taxation, organizational behavior and investment. There are diploma courses which enable primary school teachers to upgrade their skills. Students in degree programs are taught in Turkish and are offered up to 8 courses a year. There is also a weekly program of English instruction.

MEDIA AND METHODS

The primary medium of instruction is printed material. These materials are mailed by surface post. Supplementary materials which are also mailed to students contain information regarding examinations, the monthly newspaper *Anadolu*, and other supplementary study materials as needed.

Printed materials are supplemented by more than 200 regular television and radio broadcasts per year. These television programs are aired over the one government operated television channel which is available throughout Turkey. There is a new second channel — which is not available for educational programming and which presently serves only the principal cities. Students watch television courses at home. Programs are aired daily from 5-7 p.m. on weekdays and 8-10 a.m. on week-ends.

In addition to printed materials and television programs, a third important component of instruction is provided by Academic Service Centers. These centers, at 18 university locations, provide face-to-face lectures at the end of the day, usually from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. to supplement the printed materials and television programs for students enrolled in open education courses. Students who would like to ask questions or hear supplementary lectures are encouraged to attend academic service centers where a university lecturer is available to help them. Approximately 80% of the students enrolled in open education courses make use of these academic service centers. It is planned to have such service centers in as many of the 67 provinces in Turkey as possible.

STUDENT CENTERS

Although students study primarily at home, there are 20 student centers located in 18 cities throughout Turkey and in Lefkosa, Cyprus. Student centers are usually in cities or large population centers. At the centers students can receive help, advice and course related materials.

A current project is to install video libraries in student centers so that students who miss a particular television lesson can review the program at one of the centers on videotape. A trial at one center in Konya has led
to a pilot project in 5 centers to determine whether the installation of video libraries will be useful and cost effective. Ideally academic service centers, student centers and video centers would be located together.

There are now three pillars of foundations for the open education program and a fourth is being considered. The three cornerstones; academic services, print materials and television form the basis for open education. It is hoped that in the near future a fourth essential component can be added. This would consist of student service centers which would distribute individual units of instruction to students. The units would allow a greater degree of self-paced learning than is currently available in materials designed for traditional lecture. These print materials, videocassettes, and learner-paced tutorial units would be available from video libraries in student centers throughout Turkey. In this way open education could truly meet the needs of students to study where and when they like.

The main administrative center, Merkez Burosu, is in Eskişehir where files are maintained for all students. This center organizes activities of the 20 other student centers and processes student files and grades. Examinations, which are administered by an office of the Higher Education Council (ÖYSM), are taken by all students throughout Turkey at the same time. The tests are optically scanned by computer at ÖYSM. Results are sent to students by post.

ADDITIONAL OPEN EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Besides the regular degree programs, there are two additional projects in open education which originate at Anadolu University. First the 'Primary School Teacher Training Project' started in 1986 with 46,000 teachers enrolled. It currently serves a total of 130,000 primary school teachers taking courses via print and television. This is a program which the Open Education Faculty is implementing for the Ministry of Education. Primary school teachers enroll to obtain diplomas. They may receive their license and also raise their retirement benefits for social security. In addition, as recipients of the diploma, they are then entitled to enroll at the University for a degree if they choose.

The second special project of the open education faculty is 'Training Turks in Germany'. This project was begun in 1986 in Germany, using the facilities and resources of Anadolu University. The program expects its first enrollment in Fall 1987. It is designed to serve the families of over 2 million Turks who are workers in Germany. Unemployment is presently high in Germany and many Turkish workers are encouraged to return to Turkey. This project represents a joint effort between the Turkish and German governments to 're-acculture' expatriate Turks to their language and culture. The advance planning is directed toward lycee students, university students and teachers in training.
PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Because of the speed with which open education was conceived and implemented there have been problems not unlike those faced by other developing countries. In a brief five years' time the program was planned, implemented and now serves a total of over 200,000 students in various courses. The single greatest obstacle to full implementation of open education in Turkey is lack of resources. At present television programming, which supplements printed materials, is limited to a few hours a week on the single government television channel which is broadcast throughout Turkey. Plans are underway to develop new channels for broadcasting and perhaps to have one dedicated to educational programs. A third link channel is being proposed which would originate from Anadolu University and would allow educational programs to be transmitted directly to Turkish Radio and Television for broadcast across Turkey.

A further solution to the problem of limited access to television programming is the proposed plan to create video centers available throughout the country. A pilot project has already begun to determine whether such centers will help to alleviate existing problems.

There are other innovations which have proved successful here. The British instructional packages 'Follow Me' and 'Follow Through' have given 50 million viewers access to beginning and intermediate English instruction. Early in 1987 Anadolu University was one of the first universities in Turkey to join the European Academic Research Network (EARN) and now offers scholars daily access by telecommunication to other universities around the world. The university maintains the only major television production facility in Turkey outside Turkish Radio and Television, which is operated by the government. The university also generates outside income by providing computer, photography, graphics and television services on a contract basis to business members in the community and throughout Turkey.

CONCLUSIONS

In the past five years the Open Education program at Anadolu University has already more than doubled the number of students in Turkey who now have access to higher education. Although there are no current plans to increase the number of students enrolled, the quality of programs is constantly being improved. From its early skeptical reception in 1982, open education is achieving a position of respectability in Turkish higher education. The success of the present project is most certainly tied to the efforts of one man, a man of vision, Yılmaz Büyükerşen. Dr. Büyükerşen, rector of Anadolu University, is supported by his vice rector and dean of the open education faculty, Dr. Semih Büker who assists with the
direction and leadership essential for a project of this size to succeed. Imaginative leadership in a favourable political environment has led to the ambitious implementation of the educational reforms of 1981. Results have produced the first three open education programs in Turkey. The first course of study, degree programs in Business Administration and Economics, has paved the way for other applications. With over 100,000 students enrolled in this program, open education is proving successful because technologies such as computerized examinations and television programs make this type of mass education possible.

A second application, the Primary School Teacher Training Project, also enrolls over 100,000 teachers throughout Turkey and is proving successful in providing inservice training. The third application, Training Turks in Germany, began operation in 1987. Despite the budgetary restrictions which confront all developing countries, Turkey is seeking new ways to use available technology in the most cost effective way. The venture is both exciting and challenging.

References


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