

Dropout in Open and Distance Learning: Active and Passive Learners

Muhammet Recep OKUR

Anadolu University, Turkey

Anadolu University, Yunus Emre Campus,

Open Education Faculty, Distance Education Department

mrokur@gmail.com

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Abstract

One of the issues in the field of open and distance learning has been the dropout rate. However, due to the flexible nature of open and distance learning, a great deal of studies that focused on dropout rate was criticized. This paper intended to elaborate the dropout issue by using the Anadolu University's distance education system as a case. One of the important points that this paper focuses on the concepts 'active learner' and 'passive learner' that usually do not seem in face-to-face settings.

Introduction

Open and distance learning is a structure based on self-learning and leaving the responsibility of learning to the individual to a large extent (Holmberg, 2005). Learners are responsible for their own learning experiences. They may encounter different challenges during the learning process and may have to drop out. Dropout is an important problem in terms of open and distance learning.

In the literature, there are many definitions regarding dropout. The students, who prefer other educational institutions, leave their institutions or end their educations due to economic, social or family-related reasons while their educations are still continuing, are defined as dropout students (Chen, 2008). According to Cheung and Kan (2002), the students, who drop out, are defined as the individuals who officially leave the school, leave without informing the school or cannot continue to a department during a term. According to another definition, the dropout students are the ones who voluntarily leave the department after paying the tuition fee and completing add/drop procedure (Kaplan, Peck and Kaplan, 1997). Although it is known that learners are willingly enrolled in open and distance learning, the dropout rate is higher compared to traditional education (Moore and Kearsley, 2005). When the literature is examined, the dropout rates in open and distance learning programs are between 25% and 40% (Lee and Choi, 2011). In this field, a great number of studies have been conducted on the reasons of dropout rather than identifying who are the dropout students. In the literature, a different definition for Dropout was made and "theoretical break" was used. This definition is based on the probability of students not continuing a specific academic programme following several consecutive semesters of "theoretical break", and is highly adaptable to institutions offering distance education with no permanence requirements, that is ones offering the possibility of taking breaks (Grau-Valldosera & Minguillón, 2014).

However, there are the concepts of 'active learner' and 'passive learner' which are used in open and distance education systems but not used for face-to-face education. In the institutions providing education through open education, it can be stated that the concepts of active and passive learner should be discussed together with the concept of dropout.

Open education is used for the practices that provide large masses with the opportunity of internet-supported and relatively low-cost education (Aydm, 2011). In the broadest sense, open university refers to the elimination of all possible political and practical obstacles to reach learning resources. It is an instructional approach that does not have a time and space limitation, is based on self-learning of learners, is supported by open sources, and in which the support of instructors is obtained when needed (Distance Education Dictionary, 2019). In Turkey, Anadolu University is among the mega universities in terms of the

number of open education students. An important problem of distance education institutions is dropout. Examining the number of dropout students in open education faculties in Turkey in terms of dropout will shed light on the subject of active-passive learners of open universities. In this research, the status of active and passive learners receiving open education in Turkey was examined within the scope of dropout.

Open Education Enrollment Types

In this section, how students are admitted to open education faculties in the Turkish higher education system was examined before addressing the definition of the concepts of active learner and passive learner. According to the data of September 2019, there are totally 207 universities in Turkey. 129 of them are state universities while 78 of them are foundation universities (Higher Education Information Management System, 2019a). Three of these universities incorporate open education faculties. In the higher education system, there are different types of enrollment for the candidates who want to enroll in open education faculties. These types can be listed as SSPS (Student Selection and Placement System) new student enrollment, vertical transfer, lateral transfer, second university and degree completion.

The most known way to receive education in the higher education system in Turkey is the Central Placement Examination. Candidates are required to take transition to higher education examination conducted by the Center of Assessment Selection and Placement (CoASP). A similar situation is in effect for both face-to-face and open education. Student quotas of open education faculties are determined by the Council of Higher Education (CoHE).

According to the examination conducted by CoASP, the candidates, who have graduated or will graduate from at least a high school or an equivalent school, need to take the Higher Education Institutions Examination in order to gain the right to new enrollment (CoASP, 2018). For the candidates taking the examination and receiving the required score for making a selection among the associate degree and undergraduate programs, the department and program lists of the open education faculties are published and selection procedures are followed. According to the results of the placement to be performed by CoASP within the quotas specified by CoHE, the right to new enrollment is gained. Following the placement, enrollment procedures are completed within the announced dates. Additional placement procedures are applied for the candidates who cannot be placed in any program in line with the available quotas. Similarly, the selection and placement results are announced, and the new enrollment process is completed.

Another method to gain the right to studentship in open education faculties is the enrollment through vertical transfer. Candidates, who want to continue their undergraduate education after graduating from Vocational Schools and Open Education Faculty associate degree programs, can enroll through vertical transfer. Candidates are required to take the Vertical Transfer Examination conducted by CoASP. After the examination, selection and placement procedures are applied as in the Higher Education Institutions Examination.

In the enrollment through lateral transfer, transition to open education associate and undergraduate degree programs from formal programs can be performed within the framework of certain legislations and codes of practice between associate and undergraduate degree programs in higher education institutions.

Enrollment within the scope of second university is for the graduates of any higher education program and students who are still receiving education. Within the scope of second university, students who have graduated from or are studying in an undergraduate program can enroll in associate degree or undergraduate programs, and students who have graduated from or are studying in an associate degree program can only enroll in associate degree programs. Enrollments to open education undergraduate completion programs are carried out by the Council of Higher Education (CoHE, 2018) through central placement.

The Concepts of Active and Passive Learner

In this section, the concepts of "active learner" and "passive learner" used for open universities are discussed. These concepts are not generally used for face-to-face education In Turkey, the students, who

have an enrollment in the open education system and perform course enrollment in the relevant education term, are called "active learners". Those, who do not perform course enrollment in the relevant term despite of having an enrollment and do not have the right to studentship, are called "passive learners".

Termination of the education by students is only possible with disenrollment according to the higher education legislation in Turkey. Disenrollment is only related to the student's own request (petition), disciplinary action or period of study. The periods of education are clearly stated in the Law No. 2547. The 44th clause of the Law No. 2547 is as follows (Legislation Information System, 1981, pp. 5370–1). “Students, except for one-year foreign language preparatory class, by starting from the term in which the courses related to the enrolled program are provided and regardless of whether they have enrolled for each term, have to complete the two-year associate degree programs in maximum four years, four-year undergraduate programs in maximum seven years, five-year undergraduate programs in maximum eight years and six-year undergraduate programs in maximum nine years. The maximum period of the preparatory education is two years.”

In the related law, the section related to the exmatriculation of students is as follows (Legislation Information System, 1981, pp. 5370-1). “Students will not be exmatriculated due to non-payment of the contribution or tuition fee within the maximum periods. However, exmatriculation of students can be performed due to the decision of the authorized boards of the university and the approval of the Council of Higher Education because of non-payment of tuition fees and non-renewal of enrollment for four consecutive years.”

In the last sentence of the clause c and paragraph 3 of the article 44, it is stated that “Open education students are not limited to these periods provided that they benefit from their studentship rights”. Regarding the legal basis, the disenrollment or exmatriculation process of the students is not performed by the institution.

By force of legal obligations, universities do not perform disenrollment process. If the student does not voluntarily disenroll, his studentship continues. This approach is very attractive for learners. They can continue their education as an "active learner" at any time they reenroll for any term. It can be stated that it is a model applied in the context of the openness philosophy. However, this process increases the number of the student group called "passive learner".

Traditional universities continue to transform some of their face-to-face courses into a form of distance education. There are also higher education programs where all courses are performed distantly. However, an important problem of distance education is the high dropout rates. At this point, open universities can be addressed differently from the traditional universities. In Turkey, Anadolu University is among the mega universities in terms of the number of open education students. Examining the number of dropout students of open education faculties within the scope of dropout will shed light on the subject of “active learners” and “passive learners” of open universities.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to reveal the status of open education active and passive learners within the scope of dropout in open and distance learning. In this research, the answers of the following questions were searched for.

1. What is the rate of the number of open education students to the total number of higher education students?
2. What is the change in the total number of open education students by years?
3. What is the change in the number of active and passive open education learners by years?
4. What is the change in the number of new enrollment students in open education by years?

Method

This study is a descriptive research designed according to screening model. Since the status of open education active and passive learners were tried to be analyzed in this research, descriptive screening model

was used. Screening models are research approaches that aim to describe a situation existing in the past or still as the way it exists. In this research, the numbers of open education active and passive learners and their changes by years were examined within the scope of dropout.

In order to observe the changes in the numbers of students in the higher education system, the data in the Higher Education Information Management System of the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) were used. The data obtained are limited to the data reached between 2014-2015 academic year and 2018-2019 academic year.

In the research, the data included in the CoHE Higher Education Information Management System (Higher Education Information Management System, 2019b) and the page of Anadolu University Student Numbers (Anadolu University, 2019). The numbers of active and passive open education learners were reached from the university web page. The obtained data were analyzed and presented in tables.

The numbers of Open Education students between the 2014-2015 and 2018-2019 academic years were converted to table format. Graphs were used to emphasize the change in the number of students by years. In the analysis of the data, numbers and percentages were used and visuality was enabled. The change in the number of active learners, change in the number of passive learners, change in the total number of students and change in the number of new enrollment students were summarized in tables and graphs. The changes in the number of open education students were analyzed by years and findings were created.

Findings

In the numerical change in the open education faculties of Turkey, the number of new enrollment students is an important factor. In each academic year, new students are accepted based on different enrollment types. The total number of the new enrollment students between 2015-2018 are given in Table 1 by years (Okur, 2019).

Table 1. The Number of new students enrolled between 2015-2018 to Open Education Faculties

2015	520.907
2016	585.484
2017	486.939
2018	512.817

According to the data obtained, it is seen that approximately 520 thousand students enrolled to open education faculties between 2015-2018 every year. The concept of New Enrollment is used for all students who enroll for the first time within the scope of new enrollment, vertical transfer, lateral transfer, second university and degree completion.

In Turkey, the total student number of face-to-face and open education faculties enrolled in the higher education system at associate and undergraduate degree is 7.250.129 by July (Higher Education Information Management System, 2019b). The total numbers of open education active-passive learners of universities and their rates by the numbers of students in higher education are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Percentage of Open Education Students by the Number of Students in Higher Education

Total Number of Students in Higher Education	7.250.129
Total Number of Students in Open Education Faculties	3.889.506
Rate by the Number of Students in Higher Education	53.64%

The numbers in the table include the total number of active and passive learners of universities. The students, who have an enrollment in the open education system and make course enrollment in the

relevant education term, are called "active learners". Those, who do not enroll in any course in the relevant term even though they have an enrollment and do not have the right to studentship, are called "passive learners". By force of the relevant law, the enrollments of students are not deleted due to their education periods. In Turkey, there are 3.889.506 open education students enrolled in the higher education system (Higher Education Information Management System, 2019b). The total rate of the open education faculty students by September 2019 constitutes 53.64% of the higher education system in Turkey.

Only the numbers of students are included in the Higher Education Information Management System. Active or passive information of open education students is not included. The numbers of active and passive learners can only be learned through the corporate websites of the universities. It was determined that only the numerical data of Anadolu University Open Education System students were shared among the universities having open education faculties. The number of passive learners enrolled in the Anadolu University open education system is 2.464.412 by March 2019 (Anadolu University, 2019). In Figure 1, the distribution of Anadolu University Open Education System students by active-passive years is visually summarized.

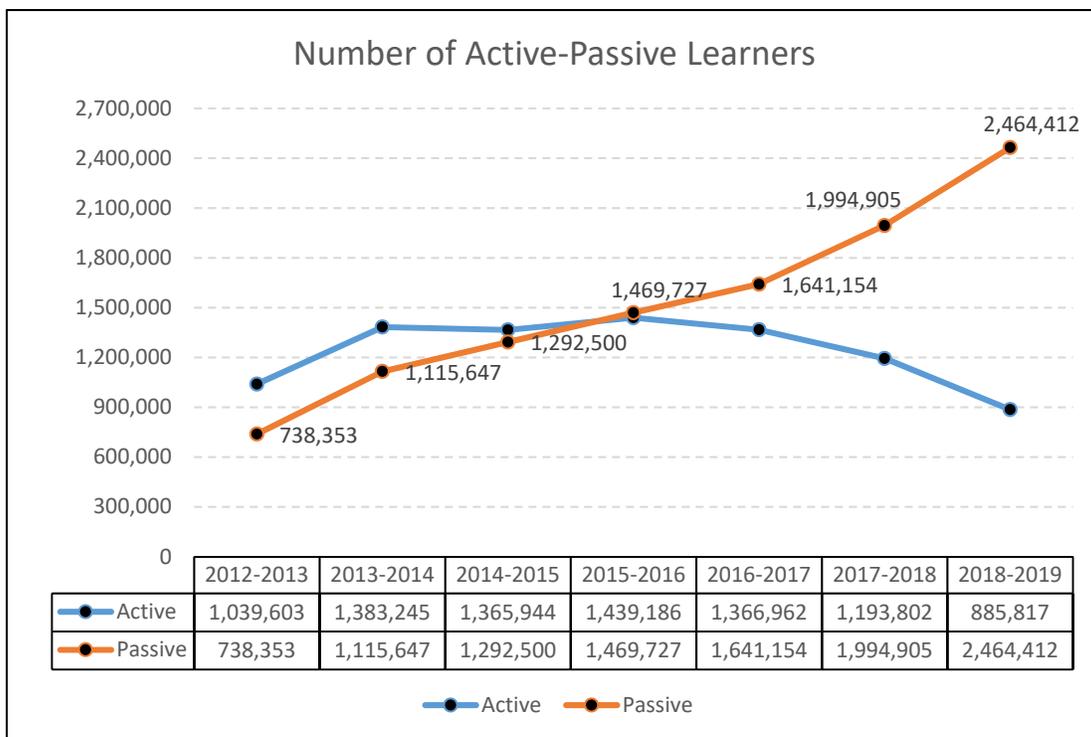


Figure 1. Distribution of the numbers of active-passive learners in open education system by years

In the light of the data obtained, it is seen that the open education passive learner rate in Turkey has a tendency to continuously increase by years. This is seen as an important and significant problem that needs to be addressed. It is clear that the reasons of students for being passive should be examined in institutional terms.

Enrollment through Second University provides the candidate students with the opportunity to enroll in the open education faculty without examination. The graduates of any higher education program and students who are still studying can enroll in open education within the scope of Second University without taking any examination. It is a very important and attractive enrollment type within the scope of lifelong learning. Table 3 shows the number of new enrollment students according to the second university enrollment type by years (Open Education Faculty, 2019).

When Table 1 and Table 3 analyzed together, it is seen that the majority of the students who newly enrolled to higher education system in Turkey are included within the scope of second university. Second

university is a type of enrollment that provides lifelong learning for individuals graduating from any higher education program. When Table 3 is examined, it is seen that student interest has increased in this context.

Table 3. The numbers of students enrolled within the scope of Second University between 2015-2018

2015	135.429
2016	136.121
2017	180.996
2018	224.859

Conclusion

In Turkey, students are admitted to the open education system at higher education level under different enrollment types. Particularly in the context of lifelong learning, it is seen that enrollment within the scope of second university is prominent. According to Table 1, every year approximately 520 thousand new students enroll in open education faculties. However, as seen in Figure 1, there is an increase in the numbers of passive learners in the face of these high new enrollment figures. Dropout is an important problem of the distance education system.

Mega universities have large rates in terms of student numbers. In these structures, which offer a mass education, passive status of students is a situation that needs to be considered. A passive learner can become an active learner by enrolling again in the relevant term. This procedure is very simple. It is a structure that is very appropriate to the philosophy of openness. Therefore, passive learners in open universities need to be handled differently from dropout in distance education practices. Regaining dropout students is relatively difficult compared to passive learners. However, open universities can develop ways to regain by making strategic moves on passive learners. It can be stated that with different studies, the reasons for being a passive learner should be determined and solutions should be developed in this regard.

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