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Article

An Investigation of Drop-out in Open and Distance Education

Sinan Aydin¹

Aylin Öztürk¹

Gamze Tuna Büyükköse¹

Fikret Er¹

Harun Sönmez¹

¹Anadolu University, Turkey

Abstract

This study aims to investigate the reasons for learners to drop-out of Open Education System of Anadolu University, Turkey, between 2012-2015. This study uses an exploratory sequential mixed method. The general structure is divided into two phases. In the first phase, the data is collected by semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The results of those interviews are used to design the second phase of the study. According to knowledge gained from the interviews, the reasons of students to drop-out of the Open Education System is organized into categories such as personal, system-related, and environmental. The second phase of the study consists of collecting data via a questionnaire that is created by the knowledge gained in the first phase of the study and from the similar studies in literature. 14,972 learners who had dropped out from the Open Education System, Anadolu University answered the online questionnaire. Some of the results for learners to drop-out might be: unsatisfactory results in exams, lack of knowledge about the open education system, time management issues, unsuitability of the registered program, interference of daily life routines on studies, and some personal problems. Determining the reasons of drop-out of the system and act making the necessary arrangements and updates, may be useful for having a more quality learning experience. Thus, the rates of open and distance learners to drop-out of the system might be reduced.

Keywords

Open and Distance Learning • Drop-out • Retention • Exploratory Sequential Mixed Method • Reasons for drop-out

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Correspondence to Sinan Aydin, Anadolu University, Open Education Faculty, 26470, Eskisehir, Turkey. Email: snaydin@anadolu.edu.tr

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There has been an increase on demand for open and distance learning where a learner may get a knowledge/degree independent of time, location and other restrictions which may be faced in traditional on campus education systems. Also, there has been an increase in lifelong learning tendencies of the societies around the world since the 2000s. Therefore, there is noticeable increase in the number of learners enrolled into open and distance learning systems. Some studies show that, even though there is an increase in the number of learners registering to open and distance education programs, there is a limited number of learners who were able complete the registered program in open and distance education (Levy, 2007). Drop-out of the system may be defined as a situation where learners either drop-out of the system totally before completing their learning process due to various reasons or become passive without interacting with the system but stay as a student. It is shown that rate of drop-out in open and distance learning systems are higher than drop-out in conventional learning environments (Boston & Ice, 2011; Patterson & McFadden, 2009; Rovai, 2003; Willging & Johnson, 2004). Several studies suggest that this situation poses a great problem to open and distance education institutions (Boston, Ice, & Gibson, 2011; Cohen, 2017; Park & Choi, 2009; Rostaminezhad, Mozayani, Norozi, & Iziy, 2013; Simpson, 2013).

Some of the studies state that drop-out of the system may be used as a measure of the effectiveness of open and distance learning programs (Rovai, 2003; Willging & Johnson, 2004) and it may depend on variables such as motivation (Frankola, 2001), adaptation to the system, congruence of expectations and interests. At the beginning of the open and distance education era, drop-out of the system was used to be considered as the problem of learners; however, it has been accepted as a problem concerning both learners and institutions since the 2000s (Tinto, 2006). Learners who drop-out of the system generally create wasted energy for both learners and institutions in terms of the lost time, labour and money (Willing & Johnson, 2004). To act against drop-out of the system, which may be defined as a complex and multipronged problem (Grau-Valldosera & Minguillón, 2014), institutions are required to determine the reasons for learners to drop-out of the system (Tinto, 2006).

It is important for institutions to discover the reasons for drop-out and eventually identify learners who may drop-out of the system, which in turn may contribute to overall success and continuity of open and distance education programs. Additionally, differences in social, cultural and educational systems between different countries cause studies on drop-out school to be specific to the system. This study using exploratory sequential mixed methods examines the reasons for learners to drop-out of Anadolu University Open Education System.

Anadolu University, via its Open Education System, is an institution that enables many learners, who are unable to receive proper higher education due to various reasons, to receive university education and adopts a lifelong learning for all needed. It is expected that the results given in this study will help to improve the Open Education System in Anadolu University and guide the other institutions offering open and distance education programs towards better learning environments for all.

Literature Review

Rate of drop-out of open and distance learning system is generally higher than drop-out of a usual in-campus learning environment (Berge & Huang, 2004; Levy, 2007). To decrease the rate of drop-out of the system, it is imperative to learn the reasons of drop-out. Park and Choi (2009), in their study to examine main factors that may affect the decision of learners to drop-out or continue to online learning, found that satisfaction, relevance, family support, and institutional support perceptions of learners were statistically significant reasons to make the decision of drop-out or not. Street (2010) focuses on internal factors and external factors, by examining factors that would affect the decision of learners to drop-out of the open and

distance learning. The author determined that internal factors like self-efficacy, self-determination, autonomy and time management, and external factors like family, organizational and technical support and course affected the decision of drop-out. Lee, Choi, and Kim (2013) show that learners attending online courses and drop-out of the system differentiated in terms of support from family and business, academic locus of control, academic self-efficacy, time and environment management skills, and metacognitive self-regulation skills. Yukselturk, Ozekes, and Türel (2014) indicate that the most important variables to be used in estimating learners who would drop-out of the system are online technologies self-efficacy, online learning readiness, and previous online experience.

The study investigating the continuity of adult learners in distance education by Kemp (2002) focuses on the relationships between persistence, life events, external commitments, and resiliency regarding the decision of continuity. In the study, it is shown that while there is no statistically significant correlation between life events and gender, there is a statistically significant correlation for work commitment, which is given as among external commitments. Additionally, there is a statistically significant relationship between resilience attitudes and continuity. In their study, Berge and Huang (2004) suggest a model for keeping learners in the system by considering personal, circumstantial, and institutional factors, which are effective on drop-out of the system. In the study of Willging and Johnson (2004), it is indicated that main reasons of drop-out of online learning are given as personal, work-related, program-related, and technology-related. In the study by Doherty (2006), student demographics, student learning styles, course communication, and external factors are examined in line of learners' drop-out of the system. The author combines these factors and indicates that the most important reasons of drop-out of the system are time management and procrastination. Additionally, the study states that feedback from the instructor could be effective on decreasing the rate of drop-out of the system. In the study examining the role of interaction in drop-out, Croxton (2014) indicates that learner-instructor interaction has a great effect on drop-out. Ashby (2004) indicates that distance learners in Open University expressed the most important reasons of drop-out of the system as follows: "I fell behind with my course work", "General personal/family or employment responsibilities", "Increase in personal/family or employment responsibilities".

Lee and Choi (2011) categorize the reasons for learners' decision whether they should drop-out of the system. They show that studies in literature concerning the decision of drop-out of the system mainly mentioned student-related reasons. Environmental factors follow this with 25% and course/program-related factors with 20%. Also, explaining the processes of deciding to drop-out of the system is important for determining the scope of the subject.

There are extensive theoretical studies trying to explain learners' processes of drop-out of the system (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kember, 1995; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975). Kember (1995) states that the first study on this subject is carried out by Spady (1970). Studies on drop-out of school are based on the Theory of Suicide developed by Durkheim (Kember, 1995). In this theory, suicidal behaviours of individuals who fail in social adaptation are associated with drop-out of school (Woodley, Lange, & Tanewski, 2001).

Another commonly accepted model, that is based on Durkheim's Theory of Suicide and the study of Van Gannep about Rites of Passage, is developed by Tinto (1975). In Tinto's model, continuity is accepted as a harmony between motivation and academic talents of individuals, and academic and social features of institutions. According to Tinto (1975), drop-out of school may be accepted as a longitudinal process of interaction between individual, academic, and social systems. The first stage of this model, which could be used in both face-to-face and distance learning areas, examines the characteristics of learners before they enter in the system; the second stage examines commitment problems caused by both personal and institutional perspectives; and the third stage examines academic and social integration (McGivney, 2009).

Tinto (2006) emphasizes the necessity for institutions to understand why learners drop-out and determine the things to be done for keeping learners in the system and making them succeed to act.

Another model developed by Bean and Metzner (1985), aimed at keeping learners in the system, is based on four variables (such as, background and defining the high school performance and educational goals, academic performance, environmental, and social integration variables). Billings (1988) added the variables of family and employment to the models of Tinto and Bean. In Billings model, continuity is accepted in relation to the intention of completing the program. Kember (1995) focused on adult learners in distance learning and developed a new model for distance learning environments based on Tinto's model. In his cyclical model, Kember (1995) also included out-of-university factors in continuity of learners. The model of Persistence for Online Education, suggested by McGivney (2009), contains four independent variables (such as background characteristics, academic integration, social encouragement, and functional navigation), and one dependent variable, persistence of learners. This model, unlike others, measures not only the perception of learners, but also their behaviours (McGivney, 2009).

Studies in the literature are conducted in campus-based face-to-face education and these models are adapted into distance education. This study evaluates the variables in these models based on cultural differences and investigates the reasons for learners to drop out of open and distance learning systems. In literature, there is a limited number of studies exploring learners' views on their own reasons for dropping out of the system. However, some studies, generally quantitative in nature, aim at determining the variables causing the drop-outs. The previous studies in the literature primarily investigate the drop-out reasons for small numbers of learners in a single course. This study, on the other hand, seeks to investigate the drop-out reasons for a large number of students in an open and distance education system. The learners in the study are enrolled in various programs and has taken different courses in respective programs. This research study differs from the previous research in terms of the magnitude and characteristics of its participant sample, its cultural context, and in that it investigates the drop-out reasons from the whole open and distance learning rather than a single course.

Learners enrolled in open and distance learning systems are increasing rapidly, whereas learners who complete the system is lower than expected in general. This, in turn, results in loss of time, labour, and money in open and distance learning institutions where high rate of drop-out is realised. To reduce this loss and use institutional resources more effectively, it is required to investigate the main reasons for learners to drop-out of the system. The main objective of this study is to properly identify the reasons for learners to drop-out of Anadolu University Open Education System.

Method

Participants

The population of the study consists of approximately 935,000 learners who have dropped out from Anadolu University Open Education System between 2012-2015. Learners, who are classified as drop-out of the system, are identified using the following statements (Grau-Valldosera & Minguillón, 2014): i) learners who disenroll and completely leave the system; ii) learners who disenroll from the present program to transfer to another program in the system; iii) passive learners who do not reenrol.

In order to create a representative sample of the population, the participants' general diversity is also investigated. Reenrolment patterns of all learners who had dropped out from the system are formed before determining the participants to be sampled randomly. Reenrolments are made based on semesters in Anadolu University Open Education System. Nine different reenrolment patterns were formed by examining semester-based enrolment status of the learners. Reenrolment patterns are given in Table 1.

Table 1. *Reenrolment patterns*

Reenrolment Pattern	Percentage	Definiton
P1	 27.84%	Enrolled in the first semester and dropped out the second semester
P2	 22.54%	Enrolled in the first two semesters and dropped out the third semester
P3	 7.94%	Enrolled in the first three semesters and dropout the fourth semester
P4	 8.74%	Enrolled in the first four semesters and dropped out the fifth semester
P5	 2.59%	Enrolled in the first five semesters and dropped out the sixth semester
P6	 2.86%	Enrolled in the first six semesters and dropped out the seventh semester
P7	 0.53%	Enrolled in the first seven semesters and dropped out the eighth semester
P8	0.02%	Enrolled in the first eight semesters and dropped out the ninth semester
Pn	 26.94%	Irregular enrollment

In the first phase of the study convenience sampling is used (Patton, 2002). Ninety-eight learners with different characteristics (gender, age, occupation, training program, frequency of the exams taken and their general point average) are identified in Eskişehir, Turkey. They are contacted via phone calls and invited to face-to-face meetings, but only 7 of these learners were able to come to the meeting. The rest respectfully refused the invitation because of time restrictions, which is considered a natural outcome since the learners in open education have to share their daily routines with educational responsibilities. The characteristics of these learners are given in Table 2.

Table 2. *Characteristics of the participants*

Participants	Merve	Arda	Deniz	Aslı	Bilge	Serap	Kemal
Age	23	28	37	46	52	55	55
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Female	Female	Female	Male
Marital Status	Single	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married
Occupation	Unemployed	Independent Business	Civil Servant	Civil Servant	Pensionary	Pensionary but still working	Pensionary but still working
Training Program	Jurisprudence	Electric Power Generation, Transmission, Distribution	Turkish Language and Literature	Sociology	Photography and Camera Operation	Turkish Language and Literature	Electric Power Generation, Transmission, Distribution
Enrolment year	2013	2011	2014	2012	2014	2015	2015
Status of Learner	Passive	Passive	Passive	Disenrollment	Passive	Passive	Passive
Types of Passiveness	P4	P2	P3	P6	P2	P1	P1
Enrolment Type	OSYS*	OSYS*	Second University	OSYS*	Second University	Second University	Second University

Note: *OSYS: The general name of the placement system according to the choice and preferences of the students to be taken into the undergraduate and associate degree programs in Turkey is the Student Selection and Placement System (OSYS, 2017).

In the second phase of the study, 289,570 learners were invited to participate the online questionnaire voluntarily. 14,972 learners agreed voluntarily to participate and filled-out the questionnaire. Demographics of these participants are shown in Figure 1. As it can be seen in Figure 1, 44.60% of the participants are 28 years of age or older. Approximately 45% of the participants are married.

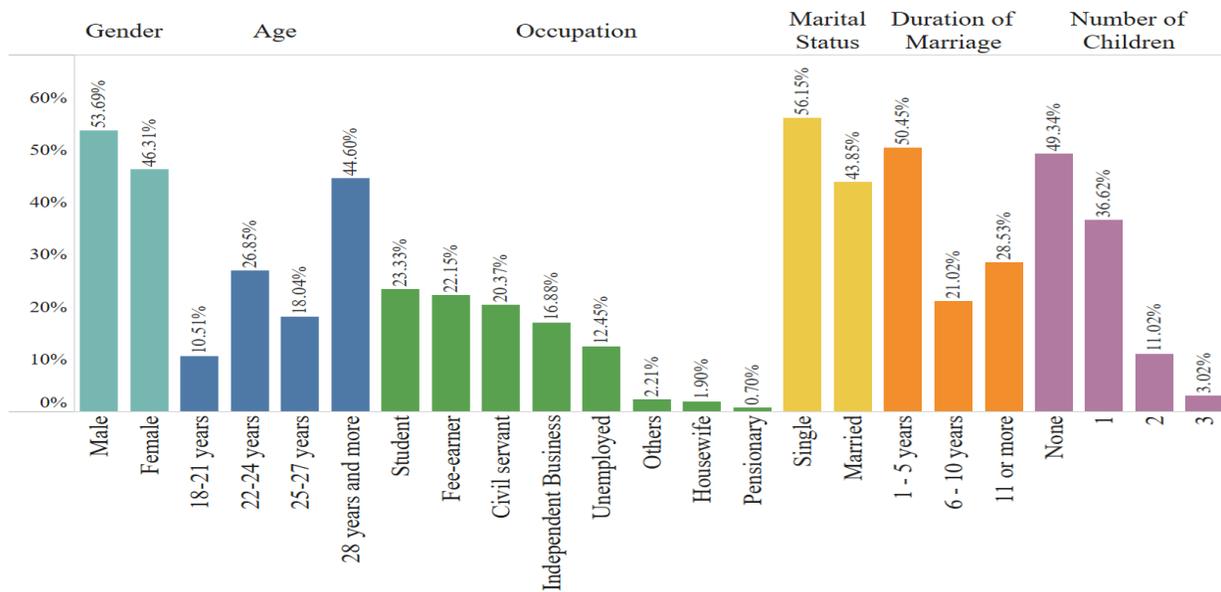


Figure 1. Demographic characteristics of the learners who filled out the questionnaire

Figure 2 shows the type of learners' enrolment in the Open Education System and whether they are active or passive students. Figure shows that 47% of the participants were initially enrolled for a second diploma. The percentage of learners staying in the system for first two terms then drop-out was approximately 28%.

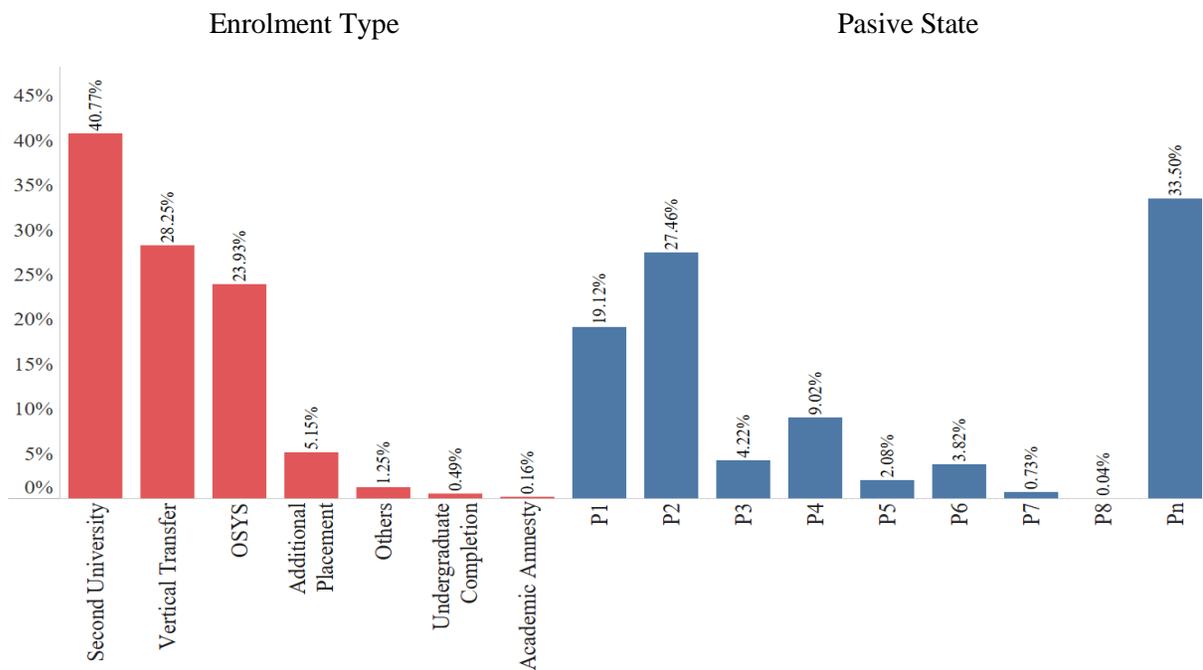


Figure 2. Types of enrolment and passiveness of the learners who filled out the questionnaire

Instruments

Data were collected via an online questionnaire developed by the authors (the link to the questionnaire: <http://ects.aof.anadolu.edu.tr/dropout.aspx?KN=1000>). Questionnaire items were formed depending on the literature, as well as the codes and themes obtained from the first phase of this study. Initially, the following seven questions were asked: reasons to prefer Open Education System, marital status, number of children, study habits, duration of study, reasons for drop-out/timeout from the Open Education System, and levels of agreement with some opinions regarding the Open Education System. After these questions, 78 questions about open education were given. A link of the questionnaire was e-mailed to the learners and the data were collected for 6 months between December 2016 and June 2017. The reliability of the answers given to the online questionnaire is measured by Cronbach's alpha, which is .86. Therefore, the Cronbach's alpha shows that the answers given to the online questionnaire are reliable.

Design and procedure

This study is designed via the exploratory sequential mixed method. In exploratory sequential mixed method, study starts with the exploration of the qualitative data followed by using the findings from the first phase in a quantitative study in the second phase, and finally all the results are interpreted (Creswell, 2013). In the first phase, authors prepared a semi-structured interview form and the data are collected with 7 previously dropped-out learners.

Permissions were obtained from the institution before the interviews and the learners were informed that participation would be voluntary, their full names would not be mentioned in the study. Following the approval form signed by participants, the interviews were recorded. At the beginning of the interview, the participant was informed about the study objective and content of the study. Interviews were conducted in a meeting hall of the institution with the participation of two authors. Interviews took 30-55 minutes and sound was recorded via smart phones and tablet computers. Sound recordings were transcribed. The results of those interviews are used to design the second phase of the study. According to knowledge gained from the interviews, the reasons of students to drop-out of the Open Education System are organized into categories such as personal, system-related, and environmental. The second phase of the study consists of collecting data via a questionnaire that is created by the knowledge gained in the first phase of the study and from the similar studies in literature. All the results are given in detail in the following sections of this paper.

Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis is conducted by using semi-structured interview technique as it would provide an opportunity for obtaining realistic and profound knowledge concerning the subject (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). DeMarrais (2004, p. 55) defines interview as "a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study". Glesne (2011) defines it as an interaction that blows away words. The face-to-face interviews are used to gain more in-depth information about the learners' daily lives and find out what their first intention to study in open education was, what aspects of the open education was perceived good or bad and frustrating. Codes and themes are obtained by conducting an inductive analysis. Then relations between codes and themes are determined, arranged and interpreted parallel to the objectives of our study. After completing the coding process, another expert evaluated all the data. Because of this evaluation, some codes obtained regarding drop-out of the system were considered an agreement, whereas different codes were considered a disagreement. Researchers discussed about different codes and received expert opinion from an academician at Anadolu University Open Education Faculty whenever they had a contradiction. Reliability of data analysis was calculated as

suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). Reliability in this setting is calculated by the ratio of number of agreements to the total of agreements and disagreements. Using the ratio, the reliability between the coders is determined as 90%. To analyse data, NVivo and SPSS 23 are used.

Results

In the first phase of the study, the data were collected and analysed by conducting semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Using the results from the interviews, reasons for learners to drop-out of the system were separated into themes like personal, system-related and environmental reasons. *Personal reasons* are shown in Table 3. Financial worries, career goals, health problems, struggling in distance learning, unsuitability of the program, old age, and time management are personal reasons that have a great effect on drop-out of the system.

Table 3. *Distributions and intensities of codes and sub-codes in the theme of personal reasons*

Main Theme	Codes and Sub-Codes	References	
		f	%
Personal Reasons	Economic Reasons	3	3
	Reasons Related to Career Goals	12	10
	Loss of External Motivation	3	3
	Nonconcurrence with Career Goals	3	3
	Goal of Formal Program	3	3
	Transfer to a Formal Program	3	3
	Health Problems	5	4
	Struggling in Distance Learning	5	4
	Unsuitability of the Program	4	3
	Old Age	2	2
	Reasons Related to Time Management	12	10
	Lack of Time to Study	8	7
	Missing the Exam Date	4	3
	Codes Total References	43	37

Some of the reasons given by the participants included health problems faced in work and home, daily business stress to drop-out of the system. Middle-aged and older learners stated that they had a difficulty in distance learning processes and needed the learner-instructor interaction. Bilge and Serap expressed that self-study and learning at an old age were more difficult. Bilge expressed this situation as follows “Probably due to not being a young person anymore, I frequently forgot what I was reading and went to beginning over and over” ... “Open Education System has nothing to do with being easy. It is just difficult”. Whereas Serap expressed her thoughts as “...it is naturally not so easy to go back to become a student at this age...”. Arda and Aslı emphasized the effect of high tuition fees on their reenrolments.

Learners’ transfer to or desire of transferring to a formal program affected their decision about drop-out of the Open Education System. Aslı who was a learner with a high-grade point average stated that she had a disenrollment because she had transferred to Sociology program in the formal system. Merve, on the other hand, indicated that she had preferred the Open Education System for transferring to a formal program. Merve expressed her thoughts as “Since I did not have high grade points, I have come here to at least do something. What I wanted was nursing”, and added, “I am preparing for the university exam once again as there will be no transfer”. Merve stated that she was going to a preparatory school for university and thus,

had no time and expressed one of the reasons of drop-out of the system as “I left as it would be difficult to manage both Open Education System and university preparation”. Arda indicated that the program did not compromise with his career goals using the following statement “As my primary training is electricity, I had chosen the department of Electric Power Generation, Transmission and Distribution. But I thought that I would have no option after graduation” and believed that this condition had affected his decision of drop-out using the following statement “I thought that it would add nothing to me in terms of career, so I just left ...”. Arda stated that he had failed on the choice of program using the following statement “If I had actually studied Radio and Television instead of Electric Power Generation, Transmission and Distribution, I would not have left school. I would finish it”. Bilge, on the other hand, indicated that she had second thoughts about continuing and had no career expectations as she was already retired using the following statement “Overall, I will not have a profession. I will not do anything... Sometimes I just wish to continue, sometimes I give it up”. Kemal stated that he had chosen the Electric Power Generation, Transmission and Distribution program for a commercial enterprise. However, he could not continue his education due to an external loss of motivation related to environmental reasons.

Table 4. *Distributions and intensities of codes and sub-codes in the theme of system-related reasons*

Main theme	Codes and sub-codes	References	
		f	%
System-Related Reasons	Reasons Related to Lack of Knowledge	17	15
	Failure of Access to Information about Course Exemption	2	2
	Lack of Knowledge regarding Course Selection	2	2
	Lack of Knowledge regarding Employment Opportunities	1	1
	Lack of Knowledge regarding Learning Resources	4	3
	Lack of Knowledge regarding Programs	1	1
	Lack of Knowledge regarding the System	7	6
	Alteration of Evaluation System	2	2
	Reasons Related to the Need for Support	5	4
	Reasons Related to Program	30	26
	Course-Based Problems	5	4
	Need for Applying Course Contents	4	3
	High Number of Semester Courses	3	3
	Insufficiency of Content	1	1
	Insufficiency of Employment Opportunities	5	4
	Intensity of Program Content	10	9
	Failure of Program to Meet Expectations	1	1
Difficulty of Courses in the Program	1	1	
	Codes Total References	54	47

Examining the reasons related to time management, Deniz stated “Yes, I used to have a problem with time management... I left school as I thought that it was no longer possible for me to continue”. Whereas Bilge stated “As we did it in a very short time, I found it a bit difficult. I mean it is hard to do it in such a short time when you have other responsibilities... Because I just disconnect with the outer world. I spare less time for kids. You know, I begin avoiding cooking whenever I must do it. I mean that’s how I

spend a whole year”. It is seen that the reasons related to time management are affected by family and working life. Female learners laid a greater emphasis on this condition.

Table 4 shows the *System-Related Reasons* for drop-out of the system. It is seen that *System-Related Reasons* consisting of reasons related to lack of knowledge, alteration of evaluation system, need for support, and program have a great effect on drop-out of the system.

It was determined that one of the most important elements affecting the decision of learners to drop-out of the system was lack of knowledge regarding the system. Bilge stated that there was a lack of knowledge regarding course selection asking the following questions “I wonder if I can enrol next year. I don’t know if I have that right... If I do, is it possible that I take three courses instead of six?” Serap, on the other hand, indicated that she had a lack of knowledge regarding course exemption using the following statement “What really challenges me in this system is that, for instance, I believed that I would exempt from some courses... but I couldn’t find or reach detailed information in the system”. Bilge and Kemal indicated that they did not have much information about learning resources in the online learning environment, whereas Merve stated that she had no information about programs in the Open Education System. Bilge, Merve, and Kemal all expressed that they had lack of knowledge regarding the system. Bilge stated “Do I have the right to continue the second semester before even finishing the first one?”, Merve: “For how long could I obtain leave of absence?”, and Kemal “I may change my department and continue in another department, though I am not sure if I really have that chance”.

Examining the reasons related to evaluation system, learners indicated that it had become harder for them to pass courses due to the alteration of evaluation system. Regarding this reason, Deniz stated “To speak specific to the program, I failed Ottoman Turkish course last year... I would have continued if only there had been no Ottoman Turkish... Honestly, alteration of evaluation system had a great effect on that”. Also, indicated that it had become harder for her to pass courses after the relative evaluation system and she had had to drop-out of the system due to a course that she could not pass.

Regarding the need for support in the Open Education System, Bilge stated that she had a problem with studying on her own and needed a support of face-to-face learning to determine working methods and important points concerning the courses. Serap indicated that she forgot exam dates due to her work and needed a reminder support using the following statement “I think it may be very useful to remind exams one week before”. Kemal also indicated that he could use being informed via short messages and e-mails.

Examining the reasons related to program, it was seen that there was an unconformity with learners’ expectations and the program content. Regarding the program content, Arda stated “It is an easy department. I mean I can teach the courses even now. That’s why I had found it a little easy. That’s why I had left school”, because he had received a similar training before. However, Bilge mentioned the intensity of the program content and high number of courses using the following statement “Because the books are so intense, so dense. You should read 6-7 books in a month. On top of that, you must keep everything you read in mind... You kind of have to memorize all names, all characters, everything about the subject that might be asked, which I find a little difficult”. In addition to this, Bilge stated that she had a problem with courses that required practice and could not understand the subjects only by using the books, as follows “For instance, there are Photoshop in the courses, which I have never seen before because it is a little different in our department. I mean you study it. However, supposing that I had a camera in my hand and asked my husband which button I should press and what to do. Because studying is not enough. Some things just need practice. That’s how I think”. Deniz indicated that she had a course-related problem and a difficulty in Ottoman Turkish and her failure in that course had affected her decision to drop-out. Arda stated that the program had not met his expectations and scarce employment opportunities of his department had a great

effect on his decision to drop-out using the following statement “I thought that graduating from the department would not open any gates for me anywhere. So, I figured I didn’t need that diploma... We can only work in the central here. It has scarce employment opportunities. I mean they have very low rates of recruitment in the central. That’s why I had left”.

Environmental Reasons that are effective on drop-out of the system are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. *Distributions and intensities of codes and sub-codes in the theme of environmental reasons*

Main theme	Codes and sub-codes	References	
		f	%
Environmental Reasons	Family-School Conflict	9	8
	Effect of Environment	2	2
	Work-School Conflict	5	4
	Increase of Work Load	3	3
	Codes Total References	19	16

In *Environmental Reasons*, it was seen that business and family life influenced continuing education. Female learners particularly emphasized this condition. Bilge stated “It was difficult for me to manage kids and home at the same time. I think it is a little difficult for women, because men are just luckier. I have no idea how working women handle this. I had difficulty even though I was at home. Can’t think about working women”. Serap explained it with reasons related to business and family using the following statement “We have many concerns, many things in our mind. Because we have kids”. Similarly, Ashi indicated that environmental reasons affected drop-out as follows “Because you need to spare certain time for working. I tell my son and daughter stuff like ‘leave me alone, I am studying, go and do it yourself’. I mean such things make it even more difficult unless you create your own space. Like I said, the factor of that environmental pressure should also be considered... When relative and primary relations are given too much prominence, we kind of begin to postpone our objectives”. Deniz told that working hours were not clear and her job required her to also work at home and stated “The basic reason for me is actually the recent increase of my work load... I left school because I thought that I couldn’t handle them both”, which clarified the effect of the situation on her decision to drop-out of the system. Serap stated “Business life is so aggressive that I missed the dates of first exams”, which emphasized how the intensity in business life disabled her to take exams.

Results also show that 60.3% of learners indicated that they studied regularly. Examining the weekly studying hours of learners, 88.7% of learners regularly studied for about 5 hours. Examining studying hours of learners before exams, 48.5% of learners indicated that they studied for 1-5 hours before exams, whereas 88.4% for about 10 hours.

The reasons to drop-out of the Open Education System are classified into 5 main categories. In each category, there are different questions to further investigate the reasons of drop-out. Results of the first category, *Job related problems* are shown in Table 6. According to results, the top reason in this category is “I have a very busy work life” and the second reason to follow is “I couldn’t find enough time to study for exams because of work”. Looking at the first 4 reasons in this table, time management becomes important. Therefore, these learners might gain lots of benefits from effective time management which might give the learners a chance to turn back to their education.

Table 6. *Distribution of the opinions on Job related problems*

	Agree %	Undecisive %	Disagree %
I have a very busy work life	90.7	3.9	5.4
I couldn't find enough time to study for exams because of work	82.6	6.7	10.7
The things I need to do at work prevent me to spare time for my education	81.3	8.5	10.3
Due to the increase at job related responsibilities, I could not spare time for my education	67.8	10.7	21.5
My weekly working hours is too much	62.4	13.0	24.6
My work-related travels prevent me to complete exams	32.6	14.5	52.9
I had to leave or break my studies due to change of job	26.1	13.3	60.6
I suffer from money problems since I left my job	22.7	13.0	64.3
My supervisors at work did not approve my educational studies	10.1	12.7	77.1

Results of the second category *Family related problems* are shown in Table 7. The top reason in this category is “Because of the things I need to do when I come home, I am forced to postpone my educational responsibilities”. Second category with a percentage of 51.1 goes “Family conflicts are restricting my capacity to complete my educational duties”. Third category is “I hindered my education since I need to spend more time with my children” with 45.1%. Looking at all the results from Table 7, it can be said that, before committing to an Open Education programme, consulting with family members might be helpful for a learner to finish the programme successfully.

Table 7. *Distribution of the opinions on Family related problems*

	Agree %	Undecisive%	Disagree %
Because of the things I need to do when I come to home, I am forced to postpone my educational responsibilities	57.1	10.4	32.6
Family conflicts are restricting my capacity to complete my educational duties	51.1	12.0	36.9
I hindered my education since I need to spend more time with my children	45.1	15.4	39.5
I decided to leave since I had a child	45.0	13.3	41.7
The time I spare for education get in the way of the time I need to spend with my family	37.9	17.1	45.0
Expectations of my spouse or my family stand in my educational studies	31.1	14.0	54.9
I have nobody to babysit my children therefore I had to leave from my education	30.0	15.5	54.5
I had to leave or break of my studies because of the change in my marital status (marriage, divorce, etc.)	27.9	12.9	59.2

In Table 8, the opinions towards expectations from the *Enrolled Programme* are given. The highest support is given to “Programme did not satisfy my expectations” with 67.5%. The second is “The contents of the courses were too much” with 65.1% and the third opinion is “I think that the programme content does not contribute to my well-being” with 62.5%. An overall analysis from the table show that, to be successful, the learners should learn about the programmes before the enrolment and make their final decision carefully about the subject they are going to study.

Table 8. *Expectations from the Enrolled Programme*

	Agree %	Undecisive %	Disagree %
Programme did not satisfy my expectations	67.5	17.4	15.1
The contents of the courses were too much	65.1	13.1	21.7
I think that the programme content does not contribute to my well-being	62.5	16.0	21.5
I had difficulty to learn and remember the subjects in the courses	58.3	13.3	28.4
There were too many courses to enrol for one term	52.9	16.7	30.4
I noticed that the programme target was not suitable to my career goals	48.3	22.1	29.6
I could not fit into the programme	44.4	20.8	34.9
I thought that I will not be able to get a job after graduation	42.7	24.4	32.9
I left because there was no practice in courses	37.4	23.4	39.2
I left because the programme was not face-to-face education	33.4	21.5	45.1
Course materials were not up-to-date	26.8	42.0	31.2

In Table 9, answers to some of the *Personal Reasons* to drop-out of the Open Education System are given. The top opinion supported by learners, with 50.7%, is “I was not able to utilize my time effectively for studies, so I have left”. The second opinion is “I have left since I had difficulties on learning process” and the percentage for this opinion is 38.7%. If the table is analysed in general, it looks like the time management aspect of the Open Education and the loneliness felt by learners during Open Education plays important role in drop-out. Nowadays, almost all the open and distance education programmes offer e-learning materials for the learners such as live and recorded e-seminars, live class on the evenings, chat-rooms on certain social network sites. Therefore, it may be said that learners should learn about what is offered by the Open Education System that they are planning to start and see if these facilities will give them the will of education and learning.

Table 9. *Distribution of the opinions on Personal Reasons*

	Agree %	Undecisive %	Disagree %
I was not able to utilize my time effectively for studies, so I have left	50.7	13.0	36.2
I have left since I had difficulties on learning process	38.7	14.0	47.3
There was no guidance on my learning process, so I have left	31.3	17.4	51.3
I have a disability that prevents my education	27.2	12.4	60.4
I start my studies in such an enthusiasm but get bored quickly	26.9	14.5	58.6
I had difficulty to understand and remember the things I was reading so I have left	26.7	13.6	59.6

Table 10 shows the *Exam Related Reasons* for drop-out. The top reason given by learners to drop-out in this category is “I was not successful at exams”, a percentage of 67.5%. The second problem raised by learners is “In an exam session, there were too many courses”. It is not too difficult to see that these two problems are related to each other. It looks like learners are trying to finish the programme as soon as possible, but in fact the Open Education System gives them the flexibility of learning independent of time and place. Therefore, if the learners organize the number of courses to take in each semester, they might have more time to study for each course, hence the success in the exam. A better planning of the education programme might help them to improve the results on exam. So, this might reduce the probability of drop-out of the system for an individual learner.

Table 10. *Distribution of the opinions on Exam related problems*

	Agree %	Undecisive %	Disagree %
I was not successful on exams	67.5	8.2	24.3
In an exam session, there were too many courses	45.7	15.9	38.4
The accessibility/transportation to the exam buildings were not suitable to my daily life routine	45.4	13.7	40.9
The exam dates were not suitable to my daily life routine	34.3	15.6	50.0

Also, results indicate some other reasons to drop-out of the Open Education System. The highest percentage is given to “I have left because I think that the amount of money I pay is too much” with 41%. The percentage of the other two reasons is too low. Probably the categories that are given above already covered all the reasons to drop-out in Open Education System. If we look at the top reason, one might say that an individual should consider his/her financial state before becoming a learner in Open Education System.

Discussion

This exploratory sequential mixed method study aimed to reveal the reasons for learners to drop-out of the Open Education System between 2012-2015. Statements of seven learners were analysed for obtaining profound information about the reasons of drop-out of the system. From the analysis of interviews, reasons for learners to drop-out of the Open Education System were determined as personal, system-related, and environmental. In the second phase of the study, a questionnaire was prepared for determining the reasons of drop-out of the system. Analysing the questionnaire results, it was seen that majority of learners studied regularly. Majority of learners indicated that their weekly studying hours and studying hours before exams varied between 1-5 hours.

Personal reasons causing learners to drop-out of the system were determined as financial worries, reasons related to career goals, health problems, struggling in distance learning, unsuitable choice of program, advancing age, and reasons related to time management. Especially middle-aged and older learners stated that they struggled in distance learning processes and needed a learner-instructor interaction. Croxton (2014) and Tinto (1975) also indicated that learner-instructor interaction affected the decision on drop-out. In addition, Doherty (2006) indicated that feedback given by instructor might be effective on decreasing the rate of drop-out of the system. In this context, it may be stated that it is necessary to broaden the scope of support services offered in the Open Education System and create an interactive learning environment to increase both the sense of belonging and motivation of learners. Learners’ belief that they had not chosen an appropriate program for their interests or their desire of transferring to a formal program also affected their decision of drop-out of the system.

Majority of learners in the Open Education System are older than 28 years and employed (Anadolu University Student Statistics, 2016), which may cause them to fail in to spare enough time for studying and have a problem in time management. It was determined that majority of learners were unable to use their study time efficiently and had a difficulty in the process of learning. In their study, Street (2010) and Doherty (2006) indicated that one of the most important reasons of drop-out of the system was time management. Similarly, Lee et al. (2013) stated that there was a difference between time management skills of learners who continued and did not continue their education. It was seen that increasing responsibilities in business and family life affected reasons related to time management. Female learners particularly emphasized this condition. It was determined that learners had to postpone their education due to their responsibilities at home and problems in their family and failed in sparing enough time for studying as they needed to spend

more time with their kids. In this context, it may be useful to provide consultancy service to learners with their families. Similarly, family-school conflict, work-school conflict and increase of work load were also indicated among environmental factors causing learners to drop-out of the system. Examining environmental reasons, it was determined that business and family life affected continuing education. In her study, Ashby (2004) indicated that two of the most important reasons for learners to drop-out of the system were general personal/family or employment responsibilities and increase in personal/family or employment responsibilities. Lee et al. (2013), Park and Choi (2009), and Street (2010) stated that family support, work support and institutional support were effective on drop-out of the system. A great majority of learners indicated that they could not prepare for exams due to their intensive business life and thus, could not take exams. It is seen that learners have a difficulty in handling business and education life together and a problem with time management. In this context, bringing a flexibility in the system in line with learners' needs and providing support for learners regarding efficient time management may contribute to decreasing their rates of drop-out of the system.

Another reason for learners to drop-out of the Open Education System is system-related reasons. One of the most important factors affecting the decision of learners to drop-out of the system is lack of knowledge regarding the system. Learners indicated that they had lack of knowledge regarding course selection, course exemption, employment opportunities, learning resources, and program contents. Official website of Open Education System offers relevant information and guide to learners. However, it is required to diversify communication channels and types of content presentation to remove learners lack of knowledge. For that purpose, use of social media tools and message applications may be more effective considering new generation learners. Giving learners detailed information about program contents and employment opportunities after graduation and introducing the program before enrolment may contribute to decreasing the rates of drop-out of the system due to false choice of program. Alteration of evaluation system and success of learners also affected learners to drop-out of the system. In the models they developed, Bean and Metzner (1985), Kember (1995), and Tinto (1975) indicated that success of learners affected their decision of drop-out of the system. Many learners drop-out of the system due to their failure in courses also in the Open Education System. Thus, it is important for institutions to determine the courses that many learners fail based on department and examine the origin of this problem.

Examining the reasons related to program, they were determined as intensive program content, high number of semester courses, need for practical courses, failure of program to meet expectations, and scarce employment opportunities. Similarly, Street (2010) stated that course-related factors were effective on drop-out of the system. It is easy for learners to start open and distance learning institutions, but it is hard to graduate. For learners to succeed, they need to study regularly and on their own. Street (2010) indicated that self-efficacy, self-determination, and autonomy features of learners affected their decision of drop-out of the system. Unless learners have the habit of studying regularly, they may have a difficulty in open and distance learning systems, which may cause them to drop-out of the system. Thus, it will be useful for open and distance education institutions to make orientation for learners regarding support services given, study methods and programs, and constantly interact with learners.

Conducting studies and researches on drop-out of the system, which is a multidimensional concept and is affected by several factors, may prevent the loss of time, labour, and money in open and distance learning institutions where thousands of learners receive education. Moreover, determining the reasons of drop-out of the system and acting, making necessary arrangements and updates may pave the way for having more quality learning experiences. Thus, the rates of open and distance learners to drop-out of the system may be reduced.

So, the most important factor for dropouts is their exam scores. The second important factor is the number of courses taken by students. In open education, it is possible for students to take as many courses as possible until they reach a limit of 45 credits (which usually translates to 6 or 7 different courses). When students register to a programme, there is always an excitement for starting education and it is very easy to underestimate how much study they need to do in order to pass a course. Therefore, learners tend to take as many courses as possible at the start of the term, and once they start studying, then it becomes clear that passing a course is not an easy and needs a lot of attention. The learners should be warned that even though they can reach to 45 credits in a term, it is not wise to do this unless they are extremely sure that they can spare enough time for educational purposes. During the interview with the students at the beginning of the study, the most common reason given was that they were not expecting how much work needs to be done in order to pass courses. They were surprised to see on average 250 pages of course books to study.

The overall structure of this study is descriptive in nature. Even though, the drop-out problem in open and distance education is studied extensively and the results show a similar pattern. By choosing a very large sample, this study attempts to discover new perspectives for the drop-out problem in terms of Turkish learners. The main aim of Anadolu University when it was founded was to give an opportunity to those in need of university education in 1982, and the technology was not as advanced as today. There are many countries in the world still struggling with the technological advancements and trying to reach those people who live especially rural and hard to reach places.

The descriptive nature of the study allows the researchers to see a general picture of drop-out in Anadolu University Open Education System. The main aim is to identify most common drop-out issues and try to create early warning systems integrated into the learning environments. Anadolu University provides its students many learning materials to support learning. An early warning system integrated to this learning environment will help both the open and distance education institutions predict potential dropouts and assist learners to develop educational strategies for a more successful academic life.

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