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Research Article

**Critical Discourse Analysis of Distance Higher Education in Turkish Higher
Education Policy Documents^a**

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Abstract

This study examines the distance higher education related policy strategies of the Turkish state. Using critical discourse analysis, based on Norman Fairclough's work, the aim is to analyse the discourses used within policy-related documents and government reports regarding the role and significance of distance education in the Turkish higher education system. In order to achieve this objective, certain key documents including annual activity reports, national youth and education policy documents, and strategic plans produced by the Ministry of National Education and Higher Education Council have been analyzed. Basic findings reveal that in the dominant discourses regarding distance education in the Turkish higher education system, the policy makers seem to have very little interest in distance education as a strategic tool. The superficiality and indifference towards the open university system in the analysed documents may come to mean that the policies and envisaged programmes are far away from any solid theoretical background in how distance education may contribute to social inclusion and the development of the society through higher education of masses. Thus, this study can conclude that achieving social justice in distance education in Türkiye requires a devoted understanding of its contributions to inclusion of all kinds of lifelong learners with diverse needs.

Keywords: distance education, distance higher education, open and distance learning, management of distance higher education, critical discourse analysis

JEL Codes: I23,I24,I28

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Araştırma Makalesi

**Türkiye Yükseköğretim Politikalarında Uzaktan Eğitimin Eleştirel Söylem
Analizi ^a**

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Öz

Bu çalışma, eleştirel söylem analizi (ESA) çerçevesi aracılığıyla Türk yükseköğretim politika belgelerinde uzaktan yükseköğretimle ilgili söylemleri incelemektedir. Araştırma, uzaktan eğitimin nasıl algılandığını ve bu algılardan dile yansıyan güç dinamiklerini ortaya koymaktadır. Eğitim anlayışının demokrasiyi teşvik etme ve kişisel gelişimi sağlama amacından, ekonomik verimlilik ve istihdam edilebilirlik odaklı neoliberal politikalara kaydığı bir dönemde, temel bulgular, uzaktan eğitimin önemli rolüne karşı politika yapımcıların ilgisizliği, sosyal adalete katkılarının yeterince takdir edilmemesi ve pandemi sonrası "yeni normal"de ikincil bir konuma düşürülmesini vurgulamaktadır. Çalışma, Yükseköğretim Kurulu ve Cumhurbaşkanlığı gibi kurumların hükümet raporları ve politika belgelerini analiz etmek için Fairclough'un çalışmalarına dayanan bir eleştirel söylem analizi yöntemi kullanmaktadır. Resmi anlatılarda uzaktan eğitime istisnai ve acil durum önlemi gibi bir konum yüklendiğini ortaya koyan bu çalışma, uzaktan eğitimin kapsayıcı ve adil bir yükseköğretim sisteminin hayati bir bileşeni olarak tanınması gerektiğini savunmaktadır. Türkiye'de yükseköğretimde sosyal adaletin sağlanmasının, çeşitli ihtiyaçlara sahip her türden yaşam boyu öğrenenin katılımına yönelik katkılarının özverili bir şekilde anlaşılmasını gerektirdiği sonucuna varılabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: uzaktan eğitim, açık ve uzaktan öğrenme, uzaktan yükseköğretim, uzaktan yükseköğretimin yönetimi, eleştirel söylem analizi

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Introduction

Distance education

Distance education has developed throughout a long history and variety of social and political pressures, though recently been more popularly discussed both because of halts to conventional education due to emergencies and crises and the growth of the Internet based communication technologies.

As forms and varieties of distance education are seen across diverse educational levels and contexts, it may be challenging to come up with a clear definition. However, it would be easier to define it by focusing on the distinguishing characteristics it carries from conventional education. First, the teacher and the learner are separated; and second, it is based on certain media to unite the teacher and the learner (Moore, 1990; Keegan, 2003). There is teaching and learning taking place in distance education as well, but teaching and learning activities are mediated through an instructional technology and still preplanned through institutional instructional design and production processes (Peters, 2007). In the same way, students attending the open university have the flexibility to access their courses from any location at a time that suits them best and is suitable, for the course requirements. They can actively participate in class discussions on a basis or at three times, per week (Harasim, 2000).

Higher education literature has long perceived distance education as a second-rate, exceptional and non-conventional form of education (Rumble, 2001). Thus, distance education did not receive the attention it deserves from higher education researchers as it was considered to be lacking interaction (Lee, 2018). Nowadays, however, in the realm of education research there has been a conversation surrounding the impact of open and distance education, on reshaping the landscape of higher education and redefining how knowledge is imparted and recognized, particularly in the post pandemic era. Although distance education is gaining recognition for its role in driving innovation, in education it is essential to delve into how it is perceived and integrated into educational policy decisions. In an era when open education papers discussing social justice issues are hard to find (Lambert, 2018), it might be crucial to analyze how policy discusses the relationship between open education and social justice.

Although today mostly taken as an apparatus of the neoliberal lifelong learning discourse, distance higher education, especially in earlier European Union policy documents, was discussed in terms of a common assumption of the belief in democracy and the role of education as a keystone of democracy; and thus the fulfillment of a person encompasses their being, including their personality the intricate ways they express themselves and their different roles – as an individual, within a family and community as a citizen and contributor as an innovator of methods and, as an imaginative thinker (Hinzen, Slowey & Khau, 2024). Today, however, in line with neoliberal economic policies for which employability is the focus, lifelong learning is welcomed and embraced wholeheartedly by educational policy makers around the world. In the same way, the discourse of higher education seems to have shifted to learning to be productive and employable (Jessop, 2018). Driven by the changing needs of the labor market and the rise of academic capitalism (Jessop, 2018), higher education discourse has shifted from fostering well-rounded individuals to prioritizing employability (Biesta, 2009). This trend has also influenced distance higher education.

According to Dutton, Dutton, and Perry (2002), the ideal online learner is one who has a well-developed academic self-concept, is highly proficient in the use of online learning

technologies, especially communication and collaborative technologies, understands social interaction and collaborative learning, has well developed interpersonal and communication skills, and is self-directed. Recent research challenges the notion of a homogenous "digital native" learner. Distance learners exhibit a wider range of digital skills and engagement than previously assumed (Czerniewicz, 2018; Beetham, 2016).

The perceived virtue of open education acts as a discursive shield, protecting it from critical examination of its assumptions. These assumptions, especially those suggesting that open education will inevitably drive progress (or that being open inherently means being inclusive), are so deeply ingrained in the movement that critiques are often seen as outdated, unduly cynical, or entirely ignored (Watters, 2017). Critical voices are frequently dismissed as naysayers, as the perceived virtue of open education leaves little room for challenge and interrogation (Bayne, 2015). Critical conversations, often viewed as detractors, are frequently shut down (Gourlay, 2015).

Integrating considerations of social justice within the broader context of field-wide discourse is crucial because the rhetoric surrounding educational technology and research has tangible impacts on the lived experiences of students and faculty. In academic discussions, language is not neutral; it is imbued with issues of power, privilege, ideology, and politics. Moreover, what is said about digital technology also influences the ongoing educational conditions in terms of the knowledge, social relations, and social identities that surround them (Selwyn, 2011).

Given these developments and discussions, there is a need to analyse their influence on the discourses of distance education in the Turkish policy context. Studying the connections between the national level and the supranational level involves examining the discourses themselves to track changes over time and uncover both intended and unintended outcomes of different perspectives on distance learning in higher education. This research focuses on analyzing the distance education policies of Türkiye through discourse analysis following Norman Fairclough's approach. The goal is to investigate the narratives in policy documents and governmental reports concerning the role of distance education in Türkiye's higher education system. To accomplish this, various important documents such as reports, national policies on youth and education and strategic plans from the Ministry of National Education and Higher Education Council have been carefully reviewed.

This research holds importance because there hasn't been any exploration so far into discussions about the discourses of distance higher education in Türkiye. While discourse analysis so far has focused on policy documents like reports, there may be a need for additional investigation to reveal the underlying motives of governments concerning distance learning at the university level using less formal data such as social media feeds. It could also be valuable to examine the perspectives and interpretations of students, within the university system to understand how their conversations differ from those found in policies.

Research Method

Critical Discourse Analysis

This research utilizes critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a technique for examining text. Critical discourse analysis is a technique employed in many fields of social science such as educational studies to investigate the connections between language (text) and society (context). According to discourse analysis language serves not as a means of expression but as a way of action and identity formation (Fairclough, 2000; Gee, 2010). Critical discourse

analysis (CDA) is suggested as a research method that could disrupt the narratives deeply rooted in educational policy priorities (Liasidou, 2008). By critically examining the underlying power structures and ideologies embedded within educational policies, CDA empowers researchers and educators to challenge the status quo and work towards more equitable and inclusive educational practices.

Discourse theorists argue that meaning is not simply given but is socially constructed across a number of institutional sites and practices. Discourse theory focuses on the dynamics of power, in determining who has the authority to speak and control over what topics are included or excluded from discussion. In discourse theory conversations are seen as battlegrounds where various factions fight for dominance through informal means (English, 2003). From this perspective, written and oral verbal materials serve as a basis for supporting assertions about societal frameworks, connections and activities (Saarinen, 2008). The primary goal of CDA is to uncover the acknowledgments that evolve within these intricate social dynamics until they are widely accepted by the society (van Dijk, 1995). Academic language is coded as being political and situated, not apolitical but instead saturated with power/privilege/ideology/politics, and the ways of talking about digital technology serve to create or reinforce existing educational realities of what our interactions are like with others and how we see ourselves in society (Selwyn et al., 2015). Dominant narratives and unchecked assumptions have the potential to recreate institutional and social hierarchies through the perhaps unwitting erasure or invalidation of the experiences of students and elites, whose experiences are deemed marginal or irrelevant (Gourlay, 2017).

The primary emphasis of this study revolves around the concept of ‘power relations’ (Fairclough, 2003; Foucault, Rabinow & Hurley, 1997, Van Dijk, 2009) found in policy documents through critical discourse analysis. When analyzing policy texts it is important to note that the focus is not on the execution of the policies themselves but rather on highlighting which policy issues and objectives are prioritized and which ones are overlooked. Through discourse analysis we gain insights into the construction and visibility of policy processes their evolution, as the underlying values and power dynamics, at play (Saarinen, 2008). The significance of the linguistic utterances of the policy texts is that discourse is actualized by the punches taken over language (Fairclough, 2000).

In effect, the work of policymaking and social conflict is much more about representation and subjectivity. They include manufacturing & consuming these texts, owning & policing them; the right to name, to interpret, to picture and describe. They are subjective in the sense that they depict how one is being named, positioned, desired, described, and in which language texts terms of reference (Luke, 2018). Therefore, it is helpful to reveal the ways in which the less dominant discourses are influenced by the imposition of new dominant ones. For example “new global economy” discourse that involves competition and meritocracy as fundamental elements (Fairclough, 2012, p. 130) emanates from one sphere of discourse to another. Herein, matters relating to human rights, democracy and social justice are reduced to the demands of a neo-liberal discourse founded in market imperatives (Barton & Slee, 1999; Bottery, 2000).

According to Fairclough (2000), CDA aims to make a case about changing social conditions for the better. Thus, it aims not only to identify ‘social wrongs’, but also understand how and why they emerge in different social spheres (Fairclough, 2003). Mulderrig (2011) highlights that policy rhetoric has historically crafted a “discursive representation of social identity and social action’ (p. 562) by textually ‘manufacturing consent’ to certain forms of educational governance.

In this realm, this paper explores how higher education policy documents articulate the politics of open higher education. Using critical discourse analysis, based on Norman Fairclough's work, the aim is to analyse the discourses used within policy-related documents and government reports regarding the role and significance of distance education in the Turkish higher education system. Thirteen key texts and speeches were selected for analysis on the basis of the author's focused searching and reading to locate the discourses of policy makers on open higher education. The aim was to locate a sample of influential texts which shaped the post-pandemic normalisation period, and could then be analysed for their major interests, social justice or otherwise.

In order to achieve this objective, thirteen key documents including annual activity reports, national education policy documents, and speeches of key policy makers such as Higher Education Council and the Presidency have been analyzed from January 2021 to December 2022. No prior research has looked into higher education policies with an aim to reveal and deconstruct the meanings attached to distance education. Using critical discourse analysis, this study aims to arouse an interest in the contributions of distance higher education to social justice.

Norman Fairclough's (2000) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) involves several key steps:

1. Text Analysis (Description): Examining the linguistic features of the text, including vocabulary, grammar, and textual structures.
2. Processing Analysis (Interpretation): Understanding how the text fits within the discourse processes, including the production and consumption of the text.
3. Social Analysis (Explanation): Exploring the broader social context, including the power relations and ideologies that influence and are influenced by the text.

Findings

Analysis of verbal and written data reflected on the interrelation between the separate coded themes and how understandings of distance higher education on the policy documents are linked to the wider context of the HEI system in Türkiye, as well as the broader understanding of distance higher education.

The findings reveal three major discussion points regarding what the language of policy documents and speeches say, and what power relations are masked by these discourses:

- Indifference to the open higher education reality despite the large portion it bears in the Turkish higher education system
- Negligence of the contributions of the system to inclusion in higher education and thus to social justice and democracy
- No permanent and valuable place for distance education in regular universities in the new normal, only for emergency cases.

In all the documents, reports and speeches related to higher education and quality in higher education, there is almost no mention of distance higher education or its rate in the overall number of students enrolled. Notably, data on open education enrollment is absent from official statistics and reports. This omission, alongside the rapid expansion of foundation

universities (known for higher costs), suggests a policy bias towards traditional in-person models.

As it has become easier to access higher education, the number of institutions has also increased rapidly. The number of students from different socio-economic backgrounds has increased along with the number of foundation universities. (Higher Education Council University Monitoring and Evaluation Report, 2022)

Access to higher education has become easier both by the growing number of newly opened universities and also thanks to four open education faculties in four major universities in Türkiye, one of them being both a leader in student numbers and a pioneer. There is no mention of distance higher education despite the high rate of students in the overall higher education statistics. Open education system has had a vital role in increasing access to higher education in Türkiye. Speaking of access and not mentioning it may be a deliberate choice to reflect indifference or bias of policymakers towards distance higher education.

An important observation in the statistics on quotas and admissions is the rising number of students retaking exams, switching majors, withdrawing from courses, and enrolling in second degree programs. This trend highlights an increasing diversity in student profiles and demands within higher education. While in general analysis of student enrollment data reveals increasing diversity in higher education, this data overlooks the significant contributions of the open education system.

The number of students from “different socio-economic backgrounds” is vague but still an attempt to reflect inclusion. One may think students from lower socio-economic backgrounds will be mentioned to emphasize that it has become more easily accessible to the economically disadvantaged. However, the focus with different backgrounds is on the rich, not the poor, as the increase in the number of foundation universities is emphasized in this sentence, whose costs for the students are much higher than those of regular universities.

The social benefits of the massive open higher education system in Türkiye such as helping democracy prosper through increased education levels or increasing inclusion of socially disadvantaged groups into higher education are not valued enough in discourses of policy makers. The aspect of education related to democracy and social justice, with the aim of empowering individuals to live more democratically justly and inclusively with others often goes unnoticed or undervalued.

It is expected that emergency distance education is different from conventional preplanned distance education. (Higher Education Council, The New Normal Report, 2022)

The word ‘*expected*’ implies that the fact that emergency distance education is different is natural and acceptable, which conveys the message to the audience that these differences are inevitable and need to be tolerated. The discrepancy emphasized by using the two terms ‘*Emergency Distance Education*’ and ‘*Conventional Preplanned Distance Education*’ together further stresses that they are and they should be different from each other. ‘Emergency’ reminds the audience of an inadequately planned fast process, whereas ‘conventional preplanned distance’ is presented as a more prepared and organized process. The statement reinforces the normative expectation that distance education may only be superior and ideal in the event that it is preplanned, which is the case for all kinds of educational activities. The use of the phrase “emergency distance learning” implies that it is inherently inferior to “traditional pre-planned distance learning”, reinforcing the idea that distance learning is only acceptable in unplanned

situations. This can lead to the perception that distance education is a temporary and second-class solution. The statement has the power to determine the norms and standards of distance education as it is the discourse of a formal institution which has a binding effect on higher education policies and implementations.

The experience of distance education is valuable indeed, but, it is obvious that it cannot replace face to face instruction. (Erdoğan, R. T. (2021, October 05). 2021-2022 Yükseköğretim Akademik Yıl Açılış Töreni'nde Yaptıkları Konuşma [Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the 2021-2022 Academic Year of Higher Education]. Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı [Presidency of the Turkish Republic] <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/130788/2021-2022-yuksekogretim-akademik-yil-acilis-toreni-nde-yaptiklari-konusma>)

The feeling of emergency was what was found in other speeches of key policy makers such as in a speech of The President of the Higher Education Council of Türkiye in the academic year opening ceremony of the 2021-2022 academic year.

In the “new normal” period, higher education institutions are expected to continue with face to face instruction as much as possible. (Özvar, E. (2021, October 05). 2021-2022 Yükseköğretim Akademik Yıl Açılış Töreninde Yaptıkları Konuşma [Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the 2021-2022 Academic Year of Higher Education]. Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Yükseköğretim Kurulu Başkanlığı [Presidency of the Turkish Republic Higher Education Council] https://basin.yok.gov.tr/InternetHaberleriBelgeleri/%C4%B0nternet%20Haber%20Belgeleri/2021/285_erol_ozvar_akademik_acilista_konustu.pdf

Here the Turkish expression translated as “as much as possible” is actually “mümkün mertebe”, whose meaning is quite lost in the author’s translation because the Turkish version has a very strong “emergency” connotation. This statement sets a clear expectation that traditional, in-person instruction should be prioritized as educational institutions navigate the post-pandemic landscape. It implies a preference for physical classrooms over online or hybrid models, suggesting that face-to-face interaction is seen as the gold standard for effective teaching and learning. This preference may be rooted in the belief that in-person instruction facilitates better engagement, interaction, and learning outcomes compared to remote or online alternatives. The directive nature of the statement may reflect broader power structures within the education system, where higher authorities dictate the modes of instruction. The statement may not account for the varied access to face-to-face education, potentially disadvantaging those who benefit from the flexibility of online learning. The critical discourse analysis reveals that the statement by the head of HEC emphasizes a return to traditional methods, potentially reinforcing existing power structures and normalcy, which raises questions about the adaptability of higher education to new modes of learning and broader implications for access, equity, and innovation in the post pandemic era.

All in all, the results indicate that within the discussions on distance learning in universities, policymakers appear to show minimal concern for distance education as a strategic asset towards social justice. The lack of depth and apathy toward the university system in the reviewed materials suggests that the policies and planned initiatives may lack a theoretical foundation, on how distance education can promote social integration and societal advancement through widespread higher education.

Discussion, Implications and Conclusion

The introduction of computer communications in the mid-20th century was a pivotal moment that initiated widespread transformations across various social and economic domains. This era of technological innovation was quickly embraced by educators who saw its potential to revolutionize teaching practices. According to Harasim (2000), the revolution in computer communications during this period had far-reaching effects on all aspects of society and the economy. Educators were quick to incorporate these advancements, leading to the creation of new educational opportunities and learning models that continue to impact both education and society today. The proactive engagement of educators with these technologies facilitated the emergence of innovative educational approaches that have progressively influenced the field.

In recent years, the adoption of the Internet as an instructional medium by many open universities has become increasingly prevalent. However, despite the widespread integration of digital platforms for educational purposes, these institutions often struggle to implement significant changes in their underlying pedagogical principles. Lee (2018) observes that "many open universities have adopted the Internet as an instructional medium without managing to bring about radical changes in their pedagogical principles." This suggests that while the technological infrastructure has advanced, the foundational approaches to teaching and learning have not undergone a corresponding transformation. The same holds true for the Turkish context. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the perspective on distance education in Türkiye's higher education policies has significantly shifted. The increased reliance on digital learning platforms during the pandemic has accelerated the integration of technology in education. This shift has led to enhanced investment in digital infrastructure but with a focus on their power to marketise the reputation of programs and universities more than their power to increase redistributive justice through the inclusion of low-income or other disadvantaged groups.

This phenomenon highlights a critical gap between technological adoption and pedagogical innovation. Open universities, which have historically been at the forefront of providing accessible education, have embraced online platforms to reach a broader audience. Nevertheless, the shift to digital learning environments necessitates more than just the use of new tools; it requires a fundamental rethinking of educational strategies to fully leverage the potential of these technologies.

The persistence of traditional teaching methods within an online framework can limit the effectiveness of digital education. For instance, merely transferring lecture-based content to an online format without reimagining interactive and participatory elements may not fully engage students or enhance their learning experiences. Thus, there is a pressing need for open universities to critically evaluate and redesign their pedagogical approaches to align with the dynamic capabilities of the Internet.

In essence, the integration of the Internet into educational practices by open universities represents a significant step towards modernizing education. However, as Lee (2018) points out, the true potential of this technological adoption can only be realized through a concurrent evolution in pedagogical principles. By addressing this challenge, open universities can ensure that their instructional methods are as innovative as the digital platforms they employ, ultimately providing a more enriched and effective learning experience for their students.

It is crucial that the development of virtual universities does not lead to their perception as a second rate option for learning and earning a diploma. Harasim (2000) emphasizes that "the virtual university should not be developed as a 'second class' or 'last resort' learning

opportunity." This statement underscores the importance of ensuring that online education is regarded with the same level of credibility and respect as traditional, in-person education. To achieve this, virtual universities must strive to offer high-quality education that meets or exceeds the standards set by conventional institutions. This involves investing in robust technological infrastructure, providing comprehensive support services for students, and developing engaging, interactive curricula that leverage the unique advantages of the online environment. By doing so, virtual universities can ensure that their programs are not only accessible but also highly effective and respected.

From a social justice perspective, it is essential that distance higher education possesses certain key attributes to ensure equitable access and success for all students. Firstly, the admission process should prioritize the needs of students rather than their financial capacity. This means that students should be admitted to programs based on their educational requirements and potential rather than their ability to pay tuition fees. Besides, the approach to social justice should not be limited to making opportunity more equally available, but also to make achievement more equally accessible (Tait & O'Rourke, 2014).

In addition, the curricula should be meticulously designed to align with the practical skills and knowledge necessary for students to succeed in various aspects of their lives. This includes their personal development, family responsibilities, and economic activities. By doing so, educational programs will be more relevant and beneficial to students' real-world needs. There must also be a strong institutional commitment to student success. This commitment should be reflected in the provision of a huge variety of support services which cater for the diverse needs of the student body. Such support services could include academic advising, mental health counseling, career services, and tutoring, all offered on a differentiated basis to ensure that each student receives the help they need to succeed.

It is essential to ensure that the qualifications awarded by distance higher education institutions are both valid and credible. This involves maintaining high standards of academic integrity and ensuring that qualifications are recognized and valued by society. The acceptance and value of these qualifications are important for graduates to gain employment and advance in their careers. Distance higher education, when viewed through the lens of social justice, must focus on need-based admission policies, relevant and practical curricula, comprehensive support services, and the credibility and societal acceptance of its qualifications (Tait & O'Rourke, 2014).

Distance learners constitute a distinctly different group within the higher education framework. These learners are typically older than the traditional on-campus undergraduate and graduate students and possess educational needs that diverge significantly from those of their younger counterparts. Their integration into the higher education system is crucial, not only from a social justice and equity perspective but also in terms of promoting lifelong learning. By catering to the educational requirements of this diverse group, higher education institutions play a vital role in fostering an inclusive and equitable society.

The development of distance higher education practices in Türkiye has followed a unique historical pathway, influenced by the country's specific social, economic, and cultural contexts. These practices have evolved to meet the distinctive needs of Turkish society. However, current trends indicate that distance higher education is now being influenced by external pressures advocating for a 'paradigm shift.' Although such shifts often stem from international standards and global trends, in this case it is believed that they are rooted in local

policy needs and prejudices. As a result, in the discourse of education policy there exists a web of power dynamics where distance learning is often viewed as an anomaly.

Furthermore, higher education institutions, especially those offering distance education, are frequently portrayed as passive recipients of various transition processes. These include the 'new normalization' process, which involves adjustments made in response to global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and the internationalization process, which seeks to align educational practices with global standards and foster international collaborations. In this narrative, institutions are often seen as reactive entities rather than proactive agents shaping the course of these transitions.

Recognizing the specific needs of distance learners and understanding the historical context of distance education practices in Türkiye highlight the necessity for higher education institutions to be proactive in addressing these paradigm shifts. They must strive to find a balance between adapting to external influences and preserving the unique qualities that meet the specific needs of their student populations.

In conclusion, the inclusion of distance learners in higher education is vital for advancing social justice, equity, and lifelong learning. Distance higher education practices in Türkiye, contrary to historical context, are now facing external pressures which enforce policies viewing learners as passive entities, underscoring the need for a more active and context-sensitive approach in managing higher education.

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The author declared that the ethical rules for research and publication followed while preparing the article.

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