

Turkey: Distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic

ESPN Flash Report 2021/53

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JULY 2021



Description

The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs has prepared three draft laws to continue the pension system reform set out in the government's 2018 Policy Statement. The proposals are based on the work of the Commission for Fair Pensions and on an analysis made by the OECD. They have been criticised for not taking sufficiently into account the long-term financial sustainability of pensions. The upcoming parliamentary elections in early October 2021 are an added complication, making approval in Parliament unlikely. The pension reform would then have to wait for the next government.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020, Turkey has closed down schools several times, using hybrid (partially online) classes for primary, middle, and high school students (around 15 million in total). Similarly, universities, serving nearly 8 million students, suspended face-to-face teaching, only allowing hybrid gatherings for activities such as clinical medicine courses. Pre-school facilities, serving around 1.5 million children, have functioned from time to time, depending on the intensity of the pandemic, provided they followed strict measures against the disease. Universities and schools were therefore forced to switch to online learning and home schooling for a period of almost 1.5 years.

Although the government provided a total of 500,000 tablets to children, it seems that this was far too few to meet the demand. Furthermore, the capacity for concurrent use of the IT education platform for primary, middle, and high schools is limited to 1 million users, but will be increased to 5 million by 2023 with support from the World Bank (World Bank, 2020). The Minister of National Education declared, at the opening of the education year 2020-2021, that 1.5 million children were unable to access the online system (Atalay, 2020).

At university level, the Higher Education Board (the official entity supervising higher education) started intensive programmes for academics and students, and over 10,000 academic

staff from 54 universities have taken courses in digital course material preparation. The Board also established an "Online Educational Commission", which not only prepared a roadmap for the 2021 academic year but also provided a platform providing tutoring assistance for academics who needed support around online education (Saraç, 2021).



Outlook and commentary

In 2019, just before the pandemic, the OECD carried out school education surveys (OECD, 2019). The results show that teachers' ability to perform ICT-based teaching, the preparedness of school leadership for ICT-based teaching, collaboration among partners on the subject and availability of resources allocated to ICT and preparedness of schools and students for ICT-based learning are quite good in Turkey – at or above the OECD average. By contrast, students' home environments were worse for online learning, prior to the crisis, than the OECD average.

The evaluation, after 16 months, of distance learning in Turkey for primary, middle, and high school students reveals significant problems of access to online learning and deterioration of education quality. Most of these problems seem to be directly related to a lack of economic means to purchase equipment (tablet, TV, etc.) and/or a reliable internet service. Therefore, children from poor families have experienced difficulties

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joining the online system (see, e.g., Ruhavioğlu, 2020).

Surveys conducted at the Middle East Technical University (one of the top public universities) in December 2020 also underlined the prevalence of accessibility problems among students: of the 4,500 students interviewed, 37% indicated that they lacked proper hardware to access the online system and 65% expressed concern that they would experience accessibility problems (Keleş, 2020).

Apart from the accessibility problem, there are fears that the quality of education has deteriorated. For example, Alan (2021) carried out qualitative research (in-depth interviews) among a study group of 24 early childhood educators selected via a maximum variation sampling method. The study suggests that early childhood educators need to improve their technological skills, to have more interactive resources at their disposal, be able to make use of an educational platform specifically designed for early childhood, be provided with the resources to serve families, and receive support for their psychological well-being.

The divide between poor and wealthy families in terms of the capacity to provide the necessary home environment for online learning seems to be replicated among schools: the quality of distance learning provided by private schools is higher than that

provided by public schools (Elbeyli, 2020).

The same deterioration in quality is observed in higher education. A survey conducted in 2021 among academic staff and students by the Higher Education Board (2021) shows the following results: 63% of the academic staff stated that there was a decrease in student participation in the class and 39% stated that their academic activities and research were affected negatively. As far as communication with students is concerned, 50% of the academic staff had more difficulty while 27% stated there was no change and 23% found communication easier. 52% of the students and 51% of the academics believed that student learning and the benefits they received from online courses were not satisfactory in terms of quality and efficacy.

University courses that included a laboratory component were largely unable to conduct live experiments; a similar situation occurred at medical schools, fine arts and sports faculties - all with a deteriorating effect on the quality of education in these fields.

Finally, there are sporadic observations that more and more poor families are having to send their children to work to be able to survive the harsh economic conditions under the pandemic, and this has a strong negative impact on their education (Evrensel, 2020).

Further reading

Alan, Ü. (2021). [Distance Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Turkey: Identifying the Needs of Early Childhood Educators](#). Early Childhood Education Journal.

Atalay, F. (30 August 2020). [Milli Eğitim Bakanı Ziya Selçuk: 15 milyon çocuk eğitime erişemiyor](#). Cumhuriyet.

Elbeyli (8 April 2020). [Özel okullar uzaktan eğitimde ayrıcalıklı mı?](#)

Evrensel (9 September 2020). [Yoksulun çocuğu eğitimden uzak. Telif edilemez kayıplar yaşanmasın diye önlem şart!](#) Evrensel Newspaper.

Higher Education Board (2021). [Pandemi sürecinde online eğitimin verimliliğine ilişkin öğretim elemanı anket raporu](#)

Keleş, A. (23 December 2020) [ODTÜ'de Uzaktan Eğitim nasıl Geçiyor?](#) Medium.

OECD (2019). [School Education during COVID-10: Were teachers and students ready? Country Report: Turkey](#)

Ruhavioğlu, R. (2 October 2020). [Uzaktan Eğitime Uzak Kalan Çocuklar Ne Olacak?](#) Sivil Sayfalar.

Saraç, Y. (3 March 2021) [The impact of online education during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Turkish higher education](#)

World Bank (25 June 2020). [Responding to Covid-19 and Looking Beyond: Turkey Invests in Safer Schooling and Distance Education with World Bank Support](#)

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Quoting this report: Adaman, F. and Erus, B. (2021). *Turkey: Distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic*, ESPN Flash Report 2021/53, European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Brussels: European Commission.