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MA Yekta Saraç 18 April 2020

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As of today, 7.9 million students in Turkey study at a total of 207 universities. The rate of access to higher education in Turkey is high. For this reason, it ranks second in the European Higher Education Area after Russia for access. The Turkish Council of Higher Education (YÖK) is the constitutional governing body responsible for strategic planning for and coordinating, supervising and monitoring of all universities in Turkey.

About one month before the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey, the international relations department of the council examined how the pandemic had affected universities in the countries where it was present.

Currently, the department examines and reports on how official authorities and successful universities in countries in Europe, America and the Far East have reacted to the pandemic. This preparation in many European countries and Turkey has enabled them to make faster decisions than many universities in the United States and to regulate for various scenarios.

These are some of the steps that Turkey has taken so far. On 6 March 2020, when no cases had yet been announced in the country, a continuous and direct line of communication was established between Higher Education Board Members and university rectors under the presidency of the Council of Higher Education.

Creating a roadmap

The transition to online education was initiated. Two years ago, YÖK started intensive programmes for academics and students through the 'Digital Transformation Project at Universities'.

With the aim of increasing social justice, 6,000 lecturers from 16 universities in economically underdeveloped regions took preparation courses in digital course material preparation, and a digital competency course was put on the curriculum of more than 50,000 students for credit.

YÖK has been establishing distance education centres (UZEM) at universities in recent years and providing staffing. Having such centres at 128 universities facilitated the process of transition to online education.

Also, before any decisions had been taken in Turkey about the response to COVID-19, an 'online educational commission' was established at the Council of Higher Education, composed of online educators, educational technology experts and computer and software experts. This commission prepared a roadmap.

The commission also provides a platform for tutoring assistance for academics who need support around online education.

In order to avoid higher education being disrupted and the academic calendar being interrupted, universities have been required to go online during the pandemic and YÖK has requested relevant infrastructure and human resources information from universities.

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were put in touch with universities that were more experienced, which helped them to strengthen their infrastructure.

Open course material

The **YÖK Courses Programme** was also created. This resource is a combination of entertainment and academic material. Through this platform, open course resources such as books, lecture notes and videos were submitted to universities needing digital course materials. Now, there are more than 2,000 open course materials from Turkey's leading universities. Any student who wishes to can download these materials for free.

Due to the difficulties many academics face with regard to distance learning and content preparation in the digital environment, the course "Introduction to Digital Education Environments" has been launched online.

It was decided that universities could use distance learning methods synchronously or asynchronously for all courses which form part of their formal education programmes for the spring semester of the 2019-20 academic year.

Universities, deans and academics are planning to prepare theoretical lessons for all levels of their academic programmes through distance learning and intensive academic calendars for applied lessons in August and September. However, there is a lot of flexibility in the higher education system, so dates can be changed.

It was also decided by the competent boards of higher education institutions that exams and the evaluation of students could still be conducted online in line with legal principles, bearing in mind the expected learning outcomes of programmes and any conflicts that might occur, and this decision was conveyed to the universities.

In addition, it was decided that proficiency exams for postgraduate programmes, meetings of thesis monitoring committees and thesis defences could also be held in the digital environment, provided that the necessary infrastructure was established and that the examination process was recorded and could be audited.

Universities were also asked to consider the status of students with disabilities with regard to distance education. Special arrangements will also be made regarding healthcare professionals. The central university exam, which is taken by about 2.5 million students, has been postponed.

Finding solutions

Although some students living in rural areas have had problems accessing the system due to problems with internet connections and facilities, local municipalities and authorities are trying to find solutions to the problem. Otherwise, the online education system is working appropriately.

In Turkey, the central administration of higher education under YÖK makes it possible for solutions to be put forward to common problems before there is any confusion at the national level. For us the most important issue in this process is to try to proactively come up with solutions for the new situations we find ourselves in and to reduce uncertainty.

Though campuses are physically closed, online education allows us to stay connected with students and academics. Along with our university leaders and our board members, we will keep working to produce innovative solutions in order to develop much more effective online classes and we hope very much to return to in-class teaching activities soon.

Professor MA Yekta Saraç is the president of the Turkish Council of Higher Education (YÖK) and has held this position since 2014. He has been working in YÖK as a member, board member and vice president since 2005. He is also a professor of Turkish language and literature at Istanbul University.

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