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Distance Learners' Dropout Behaviors: The Case of Anadolu University Open Education Faculty

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Abstract: Within the scope of this study, it is aimed to examine the dropout status of learners enrolled in Anadolu University Open Education Faculty during the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 academic years. For this purpose, a descriptive research method was used to describe the current situation. The findings obtained within the scope of this studywere examined; It provides information about variables such as enrollment type, program type, education period in which they dropped out their education, gender, and the exam centers they are affiliated with. According to this, the dropout behavior of the learners who enrolled in the open education faculty with the higher education institutions exam is higher than the others. Another result is that the dropout learners are mostly enrolled in the business program. This situation is followed by the Political Science and Public Administration, Paralegal Studies, Theology, Social Services, International Relations, Sociology and Economics Programs. One of the striking results of the study is that the number of dropout learners is higher in the spring semester within all variables. In addition, males exhibited more dropout behaviors than females. Based on findings, suggestions for reducing dropout rates of education are listed.

Keywords: open and distance learning, dropout, completion rate, course retention, Anadolu University

Highlights

What is already known about this topic:
- It is accepted that the rate of dropout is an important indicator of educational status and is an important indicator to reveal the problems of the education system.
- Dropout of education occurs at every step of education. However, it is more particularly at the higher education level.
- Despite increasing attention by policymakers, dropout of education is still a global problem in education.

What this paper contributes:
- This study reveals the characteristics of learners who dropout at Anadolu University Open Education Faculty.
- This study offers suggestions for institutions to reduce the dropout rate.

Implications for theory, practice, and/or policy:
- An institutional support system can be established to identify these learners who tend to dropout and provide the necessary support for learners.
- Learners may be allowed to transition between departments within certain limits.

Introduction

Different research methods have revealed the reasons for the dropout of education in open and distance learning. However, on the other hand, it is very important for institutions that carry out open and distance learning activities to know the reasons for learners to dropout of education and take necessary measures (Bozkurt & Akbulut, 2019; Lee & Choi, 2011; Schmitt et al. 2020). In this context, knowing the characteristics of the learners who dropout of education is seen as another important point to carry out

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the necessary studies to reduce the dropout rate (Lee & Choi, 2011). In this way, the characteristics of learners who dropout of education can be determined, and different strategies can be implemented for learners with these characteristics. Thus, it may be possible for institutions to develop methods to reduce the number of learners who dropout of education. From this point of view, this study aims to examine the characteristics of learners who dropped out of education in 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 academic terms within Anadolu University Open Education Faculty in terms of various variables.

The research questions determined for this purpose are as follows:

Learners who dropped out of education at Anadolu University Open Education Faculty in the fall and spring semesters of 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 academic years;

- registration method,
- type of program,
- education period in which they dropout of education,
- gender and,
- the exam centers they are affiliated with,

How does it differ in terms of these variables?

Literature Review

Although the education process creates qualified human resources, many learners dropout their education every year for some reason (Utami et al., 2020). There are many definitions in the literature regarding dropout of education. There are three basic types: taking a break from the learning life, leaving the educational institution, and leaving the system. Learners who returned quickly are defined as learners who took a break. Learners who prefer other educational institutions while their education continues, leave the institution, terminate their education due to economic, social, or family reasons are defined as those who leave the system (Chen, 2008).

It is accepted that the rate of dropout is an important indicator of educational status and is an important indicator to reveal the problems of the education system (Graeff-Martins et al., 2006; Schmitt et al., 2020), and it is seen that many countries are trying to prevent dropout with increasing effort (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; De Vasconcellos et al. 2020). Individuals who dropout of education lead to negative events affecting the society and the individual in the short and long term, such as losing a qualified workforce, needing someone economically, and acting against the law (Schargel & Smink, 2014). Frequently, the main cause for a learner to dropout is related to the last crucial event, which precedes and leads to the dropout itself. Meanwhile, school dropout is a complex and gradual process that begins long before a learner stops attendance (Cabus & De Witte, 2016). However, dropout of education means not benefiting from the economic, social, and social benefits that education will bring to the individual. Individuals who dropped out of education are much more likely to tend to illegal jobs, deal with health problems and be economically dependent on others than graduates (Ibrahim & van der Heijden, 2019; Rumberger, 2001). In this context, minimizing the dropout rate is of great importance for both individuals and societies.

Dropout of education occurs at every step of education (Utami et al., 2020). However, it is particularly at the higher education level (Waren, 2020). In addition, dropout of open and distance learning attracts more attention (Radovan, 2019). Although it is known that those who enroll in open and distance learning voluntarily enroll, the dropout rate is higher than in traditional education (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). The highest rates of university dropout have been observed in the first year. Indeed, this period is considered a critical period because academic and social integration are important factors against learner dropout at universities (Tinto, 1993; Waren, 2020). Despite increasing attention by policymakers, dropout of education is still a global problem in the field of education (Schmitt et al., 2020). The negative

consequences of dropout of the educational system is considerable, for the individuals and the affected institutions, which imply high costs for both society and the dropout s themselves who quit school (Hippel & Hofflinger, 2021; Maczo & Molnar, 2020). When the literature is examined, it is seen that the rate of dropout of open and distance learning programs is between 25% and 40% (De Vasconcellos et al. 2020; Lee & Choi, 2011). Meister (2002) states that 70% of adult learners enrolled in open and distance learning does not complete their education. As in all educational settings, increasing dropout rates in open and distance learning is considered a concern for educators (Lee & Choi, 2011; Utami et al., 2020).

There are studies in the related literature about the causes of dropout behaviors of learners. According to these studies, one of the most important reasons for dropout behavior is an academic adaptation problem (Bezerra & Silva, 2017; Bülbül, 2012). At this stage, it is observed that learners cannot adequately respond to what is asked of them in learning environments (Bezerra & Silva, 2017). One of the factors causing dropout is dissatisfaction with education-training processes (Bülbül, 2012). Another reason for learners' dropout behaviors is social adaptation (Wang et al., 2019). According to Wang et al. (2019), learners with social adaptation problems do not communicate and interact sufficiently with other learners and instructors. The fact that learners do not have enough employment opportunities in their departments is also one of the important reasons for dropout behavior (Utami et al., 2020). According to Utami et al. (2020), other reasons for dropout behavior are financial difficulties and family reasons. To solve all these problems, it can be stated that support units should work actively to prevent learners from experiencing academic adaptation problems (Bülbül, 2012; Narayanasamy & Elçi, 2020). Creating environments that will allow learners to communicate and interact is also seen as a factor preventing dropout behavior (Utami et al., 2020). In addition, it is among the solutions that institutions continue their academic support after graduation and offer opportunities for employment to learners (Lemoine et al. 2019). To prevent dropout behavior, families also need to take responsibility. At this point, it is an important element to support learners, both materially and spiritually (Van & Thi, 2021).

Considering the variables related to the research questions determined within the scope of the study, no study was found in the relevant literature that examined the dropout behavior and the variables of registration method, type of program, education period and the exam centers together. However, some studies have been conducted on the relationship between dropout behavior and gender. Accordingly, some studies conclude that men tend to show more dropout behavior than women (Almås et al., 2016; Alspaugh, 2000; Stearns & Glennie, 2006). In addition to this, studies have also concluded that dropout behavior is more common in women (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Jadidi et al. 2018; Yasin & Aslam, 2018). Therefore, it is not possible to say that there is a consensus on gender.

Methodology

Research Method

In this research, the descriptive research method was used as it aims to present the existing situation as it is. A descriptive research method is a research approach that aims to describe a situation that existed in the past or that still exists (Lans & van der Voordt, 2002). In this context, it was ensured that the dropout behaviors of learners studying at Anadolu University Open Education Faculty were revealed and presented in terms of variables such as registration method, type of program, education period, gender, the exam centers.

Participants

Within the scope of this study, it was ensured that among the learners who studied at Anadolu University Open Education Faculty in 2018-2019 and 2019-2020, those who showed dropout behavior were examined according to the determining variables. The learners who showed dropout behavior were obtained through the system records kept by Anadolu University's open education faculty.

In the Anadolu University, a mega university in terms of the number of learners, learners who enroll in the relevant semester is defined as "active learners," Those who do not enroll are defined as "passive

learners". Passive learners can continue their education as active learners by renewing their Fall or Spring semesters registration. The participants in this study are passive learners who take a break from their education for a certain period rather than leave the system completely. Therefore, in this study, the learners referred to as dropout constitute the passive learner's group in the open education faculty.

Data Collection Process and Data Analysis

The data obtained within the scope of the study were collected from learners who were included in Anadolu University Open Education Faculty and dropped out of education in 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 academic years. In this context, the distribution of the learners who dropped out in terms of registration method, type of program, education period in which they dropped out of education, gender, and the exam centers they were affiliated with was analyzed. A semester credit system is applied in Anadolu University Open Education Faculty. Therefore, the learners' data are calculated according to the learners renewed in the Fall and Spring semesters. Within Anadolu University Open Education Faculty, there are about 1.2 million active and 2.4 million passive learners as of November 2020 (Anadolu University, 2020). In the data analysis, the number of learners per semester was examined. An approach to the sum of the Fall and Spring learner numbers will create a recurring learner number and cause a statistical error. For this reason, all statistics in this study were analyzed periodically.

In the process of data analysis, a descriptive analysis technique was used. Descriptive analysis is defined as an analysis technique that includes the steps of processing data, defining the findings, and interpreting the identified findings depending on a predetermined framework (Lawless & Heymann, 2010). Finally, the findings obtained after the descriptive analysis were presented by visualizing.

Limitations of The Study

This work; In terms of participants, it is limited to learners within Anadolu University Open Education Faculty, Turkey. In addition, in terms of subject and scope, it is limited to learners who exhibit dropout behavior. Finally, it is limited to the descriptive research method.

Findings

Findings in the context of registration method

Within the scope of the study, firstly, how the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 academic semesters change in the context of registration method of learners who dropped out in the fall and spring semesters were examined. The findings obtained in this context are shown in figure 1 and 2. When Figure 1. and Figure 2. are examined, it is seen that the learners who dropped out of education consisted of those who registered with the Higher Education Institutions Examination (HEIE) at the most in both terms. It is seen that the learners who dropped out the most after HEIE were those who enrolled within the scope of the second university. Apart from these, it is seen that the number of learners in the vertical transfer group is close to the second university. Apart from these three main groups, learners who dropped out of education are enrolled in the Education Associate Degree Program, Undergraduate Completion, Undergraduate Transfer, and Foreign Student Examination. The number of learners in this group is quite low compared to the other three groups.
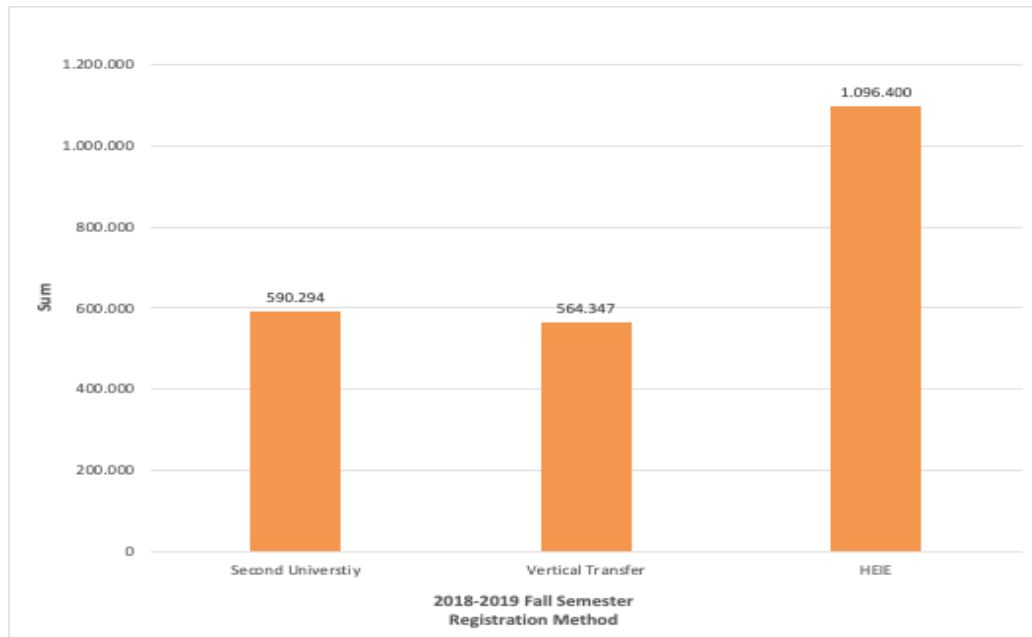
Figure 1. Examination of learners who dropped out in the 2018-2019 fall semester in the context of registration method
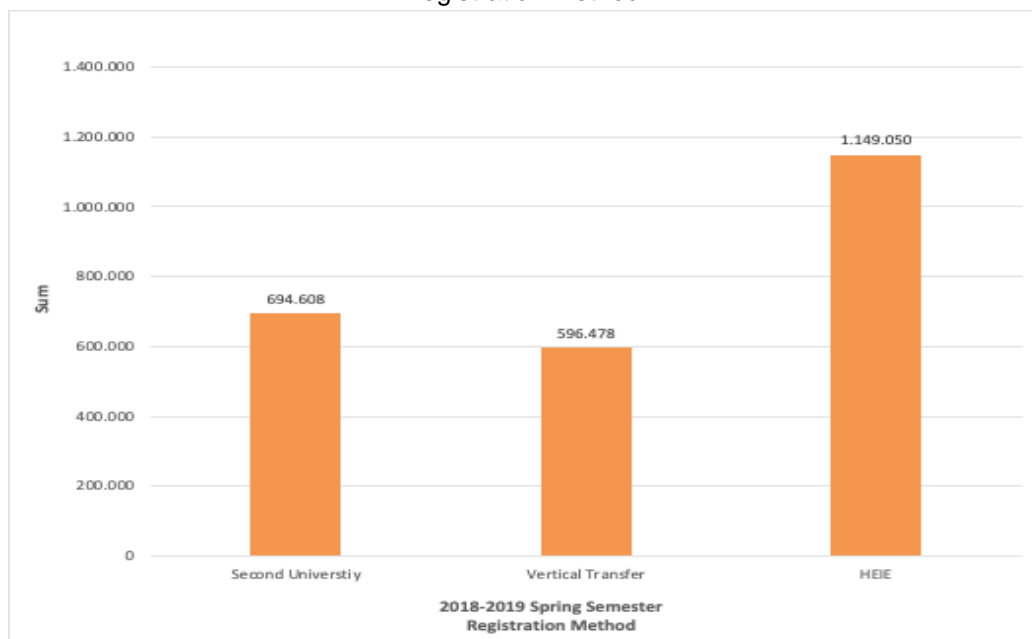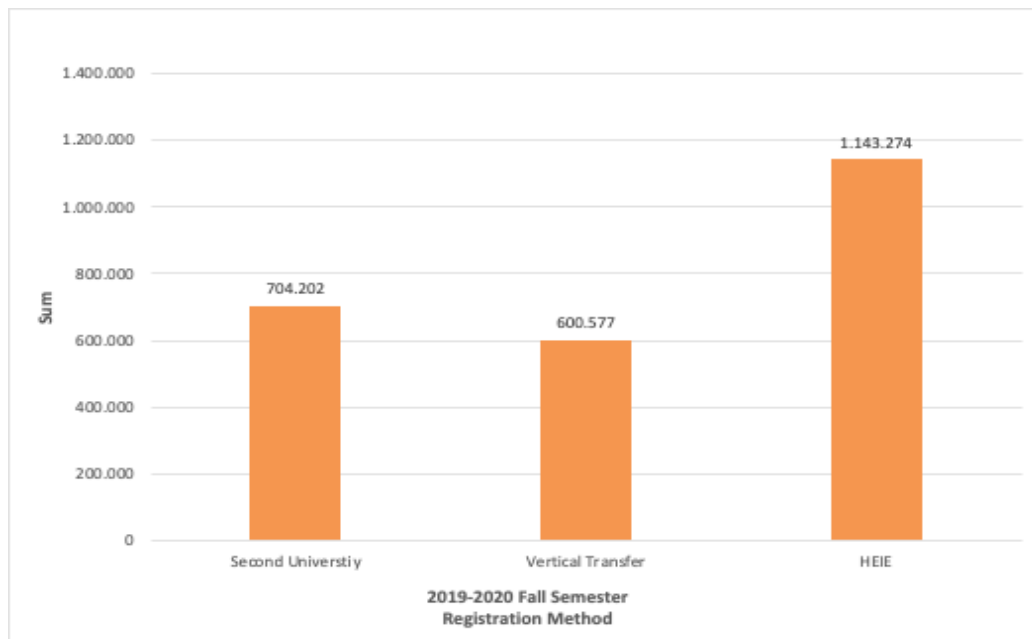

Figure 2. Examination of learners who dropped out in the 2018-2019 spring semester in the context of registration method

When examining the 2019-2020 academic year in terms of registration method, it is seen that there is a similar ranking. Accordingly, it is seen that the learners who dropped out the most were in the group who enrolled with HEIE in both terms. On the other hand, it can be said that the number of learners who have dropped out of education in both terms of vertical transfer and enrollment in the second university is close to each other. It is also noteworthy that the number of learners who dropped out of education in the spring semester in both academic years is higher.

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Figure 3. Examination of learners who dropped out in the 2019-2020 fall semester in the context of registration method
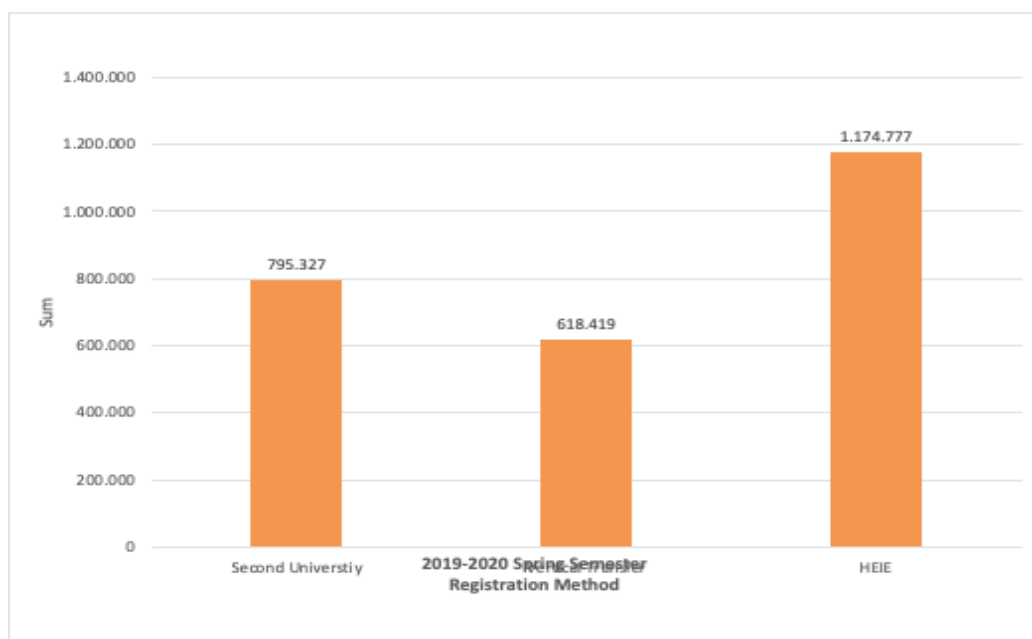

Figure 4. Examination of learners who dropped out in the 2019-2020 spring semester in the context of registration method

Findings in the context of the type of program

Within the scope of the second research question determined in the study, it was examined how the learners who dropped out of education in the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 academic terms differ in the context of the program they enrolled in. The findings obtained in this direction show that the learners who dropped out in both semesters of the 2018-2019 academic year were mostly those enrolled in the Business Administration Program. Business Administration Program respectively; Political Science and Public Administration, Paralegal Studies, Theology, Social Services, International Relations, Sociology and Economics Programs are followed. The only difference is that the number of learners enrolled in

the sociology program in the spring semester is slightly higher than the number of learners enrolled in the economics program. Figure 5 and Figure 6 show how learners who dropped out in both semesters of the 2018-2019 academic year changed in the context of the program they enrolled in.
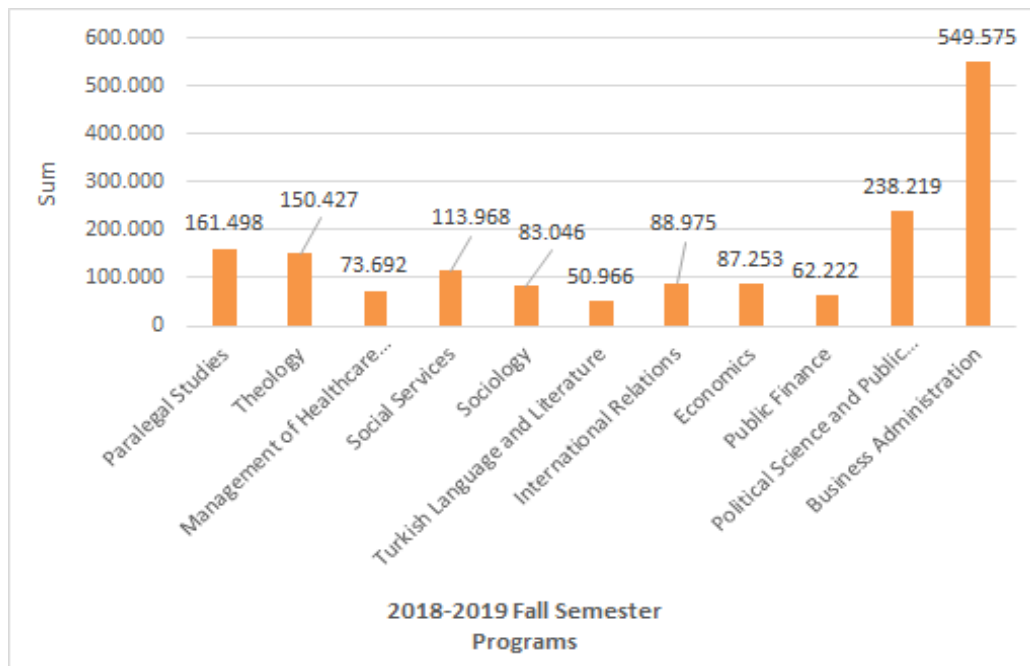

Figure 5. Analysis of the learners who dropped out in the 2018-2019 fall semester in the context of the type of program
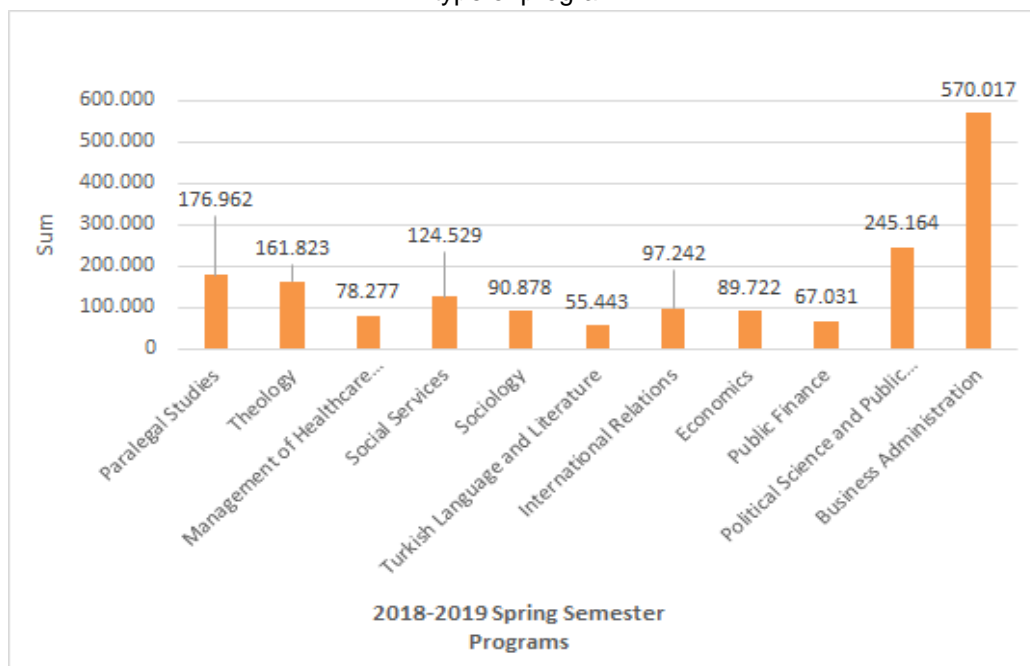

Figure 6. Analysis of the learners who dropped out in the 2018-2019 fall semester in the context of the type of program

When examining the 2019-2020 academic year in the context of the type of program in which the learners who dropped out are registered, it is seen that the Business Administration Program is again in the first place. Then, the Business Administration Program in the relevant academic year, respectively; Political Science and Public Administration, Paralegal Studies, Theology, Social Services, International Relations, Sociology and Economics Programs are followed. However, it was observed that the number

of learners who dropped out in the spring semester increased in all programs. Therefore, statistics for the 2019-2020 academic year are shown in Figure 7 and Figure 8.
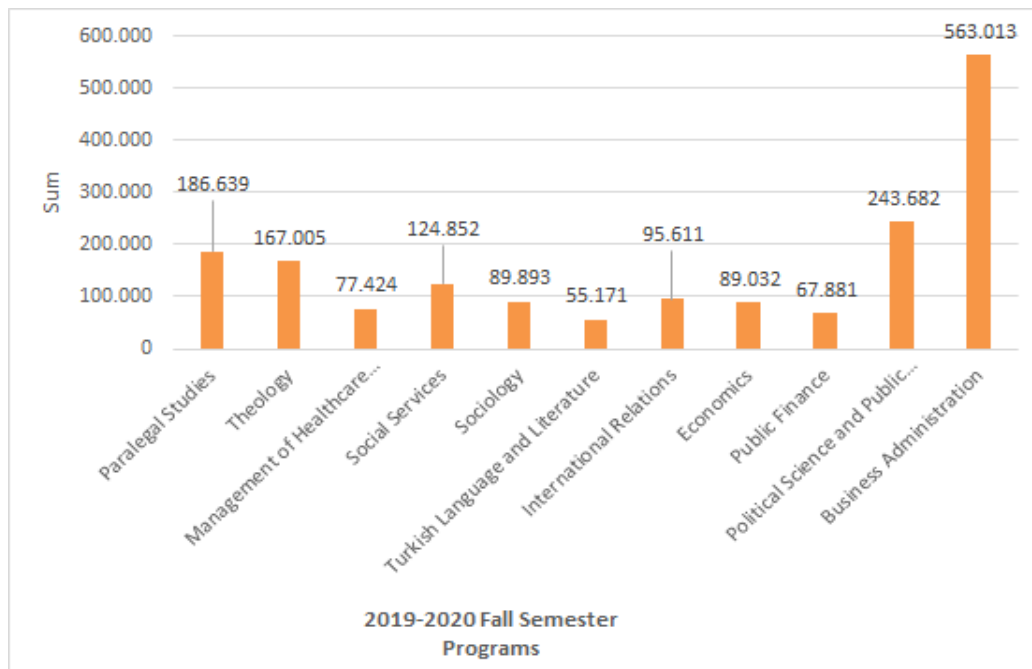

Figure 7. Analysis of the learners who dropped out in the 2019-2020 fall semester in the context of the type of program
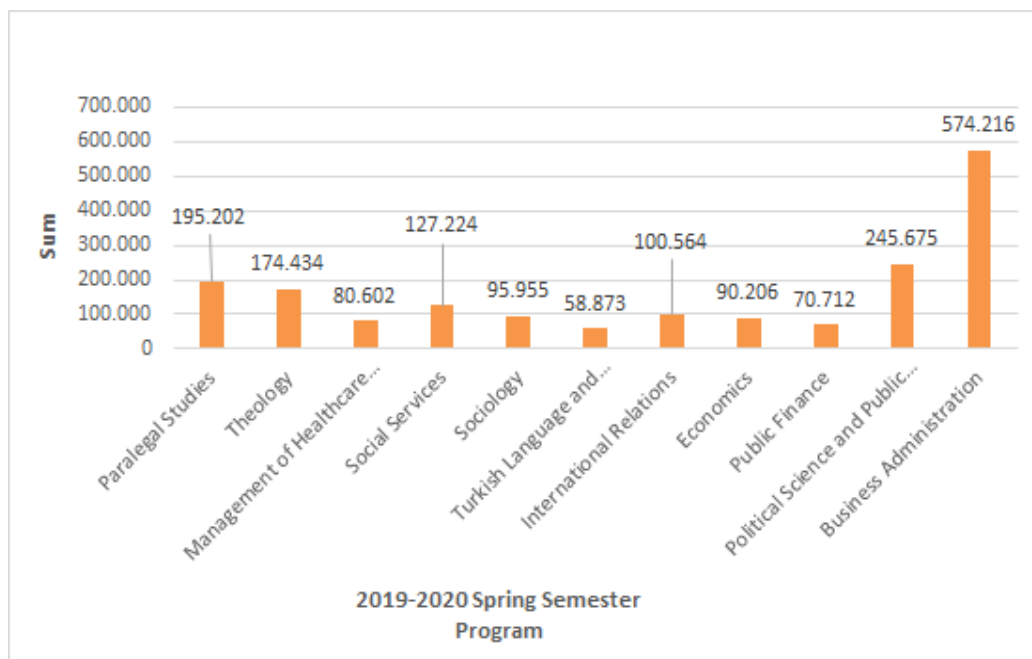

Figure 8. Analysis of the learners who dropped out in the 2019-2020 spring semester in the context of the type of program

Findings in the context of education period in which learners dropout of education

The third research question determined within the scope of the study was on how the number of learners who re-registration among those who dropped out changed according to the periods. As a result of the examination in this context, the number of re-registration learners among those who dropped out of education in the 2018-2019 academic year was 166,256 in the fall, while the number of learners who

re-registration in the spring semester was 100,812. Therefore, it is seen that more learners enroll in the fall semester. This situation can be considered as that learners have the right to register in the fall semester but not in the spring semester. From this point of view, it can be stated that the enrollment periods of learners should be facilitated in open and distance learning processes in which the flexible learning vision is adopted. The number of learners who re-registration in the 2018-2019 academic year is shown in Figure 9.
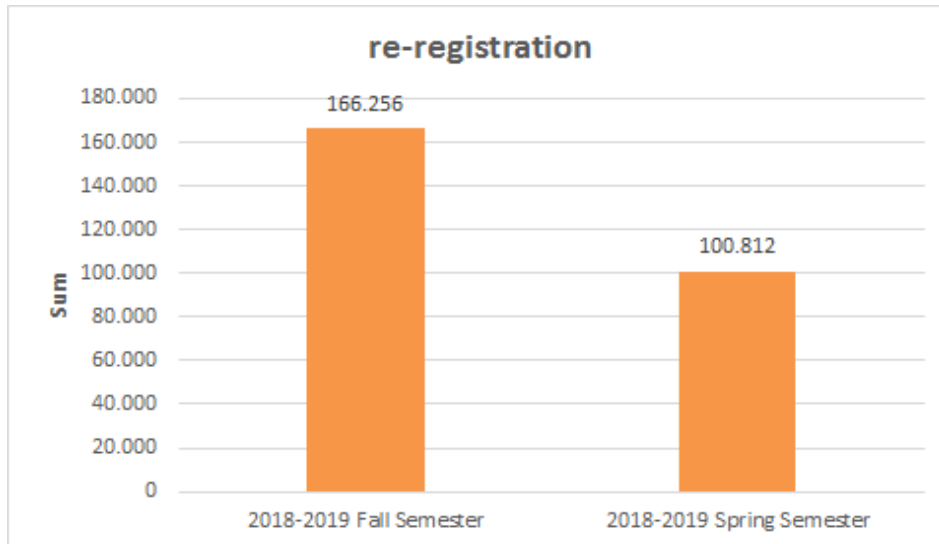

Figure 9. Number of learners who re-registration in the 2018-2019 academic year

In the 2019-2020 academic year, the number of re-registered learners was higher in the fall semester, similar to the 2018-2019 academic year. The number of learners who re-registration in the 2019-2020 academic year is shown in Figure 10.
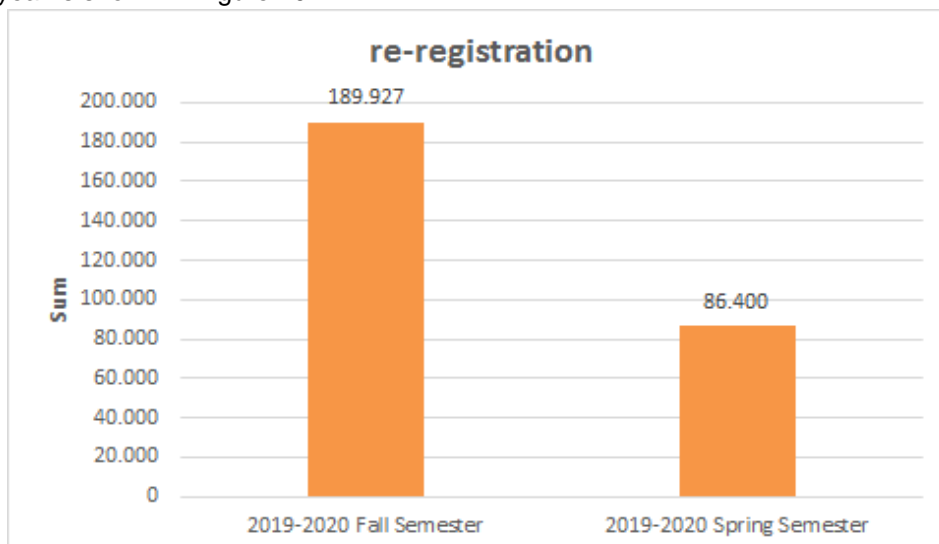

Figure 10. Number of learners who re-registration in the 2019-2020 academic year

Findings in the context of learners' gender

Another variable examined within the scope of the study was the gender of the learners who dropped out of education. In this context, the distribution of learners who dropped out of education in the 2018-2019 academic year by gender was analyzed at the first stage. At this point, the number of female learners who dropped out in the fall semester of the relevant academic year was 1,082,814, while the number of male learners was 1,190,862. The distribution of learners who dropped out in the 2018-2019

fall academic year by gender is shown in Figure 11. In the spring semester of the 2018-2019 academic year, the number of female learners dropout was 1,169,810, while the number of male learners was 1,293,723. The distribution by gender of learners who dropped out in the 2018-2019 spring school year is shown in Figure 12.
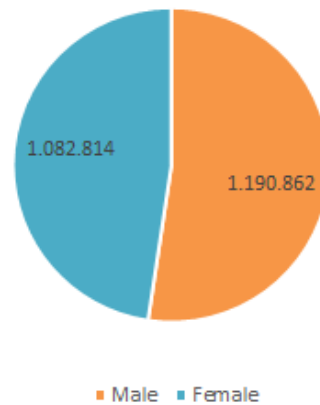

Figure 11. Distribution of learners who dropped out of education in 2018-2019 fall semester by gender
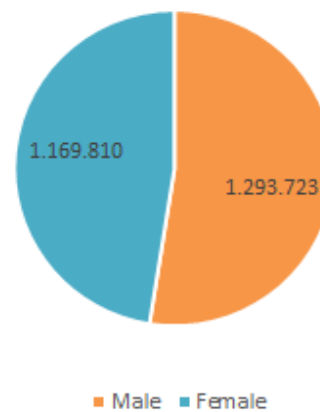

Figure 12. Distribution of learners who dropped out of education in 2018-2019 spring semester by gender

 When we look at the 2019-2020 academic year, it is seen that the number of female learners who dropped out of education in the fall semester was 1,171,794, and the number of male learners was 1,300,063. When we look at the spring term, it is seen that the number of female learners who dropped out of education is 1,233,262, and the number of male learners is 1,379,804. In this context, it can be stated that there are more male learners than female learners who dropped out of education in both academic years. The distribution of learners who dropped out of their education in the 2019-2020 fall and spring academic year by gender is shown in figure 13 and figure 14.
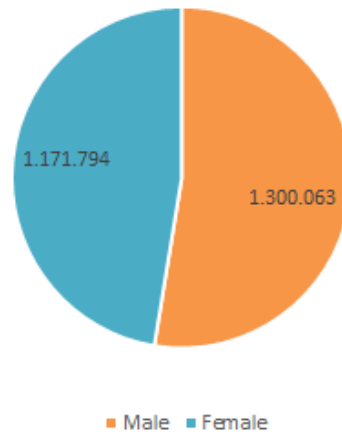
Male **Female**

Figure 13. Distribution of learners who dropped out of education in the 2019-2020 fall academic year by gender
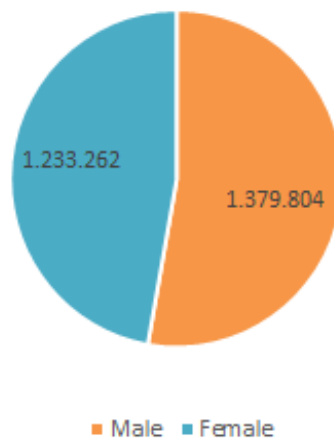

Male **Female**

Figure 14. Distribution of learners who dropped out of education in the 2019-2020 spring school year by gender

Findings in the context of the exam centers

The last research question determined within the scope of the study was aimed at examining the learners who dropped of education in the relevant periods within the scope of the exam centers they are affiliated with. In this context, provinces with more than one exam center were included in the analysis. Within the examination's scope, it was observed that the learners who dropped out of education in the 2018-2019 academic year were mostly in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir provinces in both terms. These provinces are respectively followed by Bursa, Antalya, Adana, and Kocaeli. At this point, it can be stated that the findings obtained are directly proportional to the population of the cities. Examination of learners who dropped out in the fall and spring semesters of the 2018-2019 academic year within the scope of the exam center is shown in Figure 15 and Figure 16.
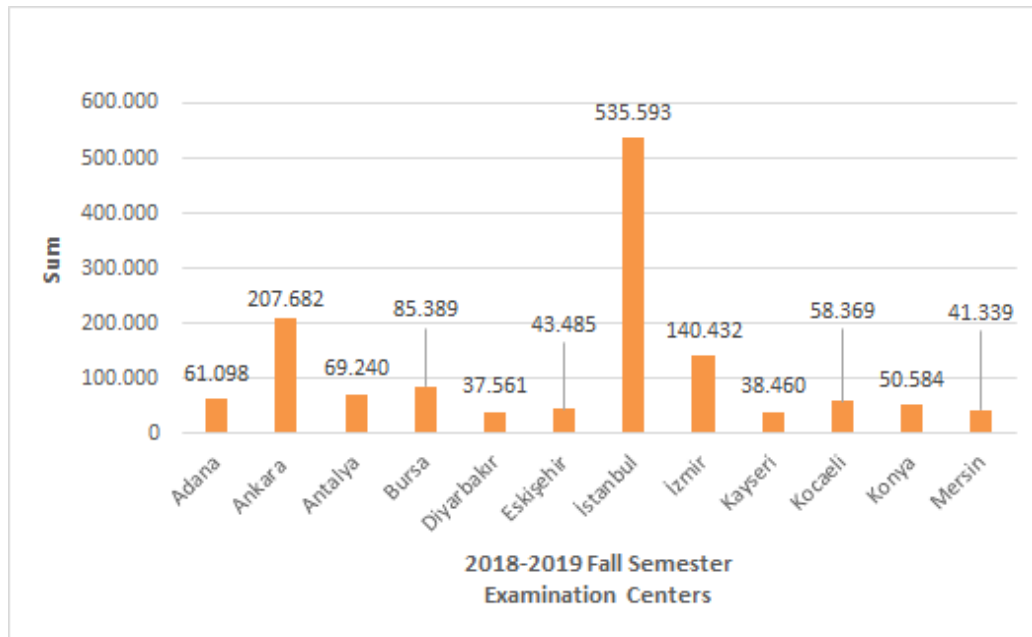
Figure 15. Examination of learners who dropped out in the 2018-2019 fall semester within the scope of the exam center
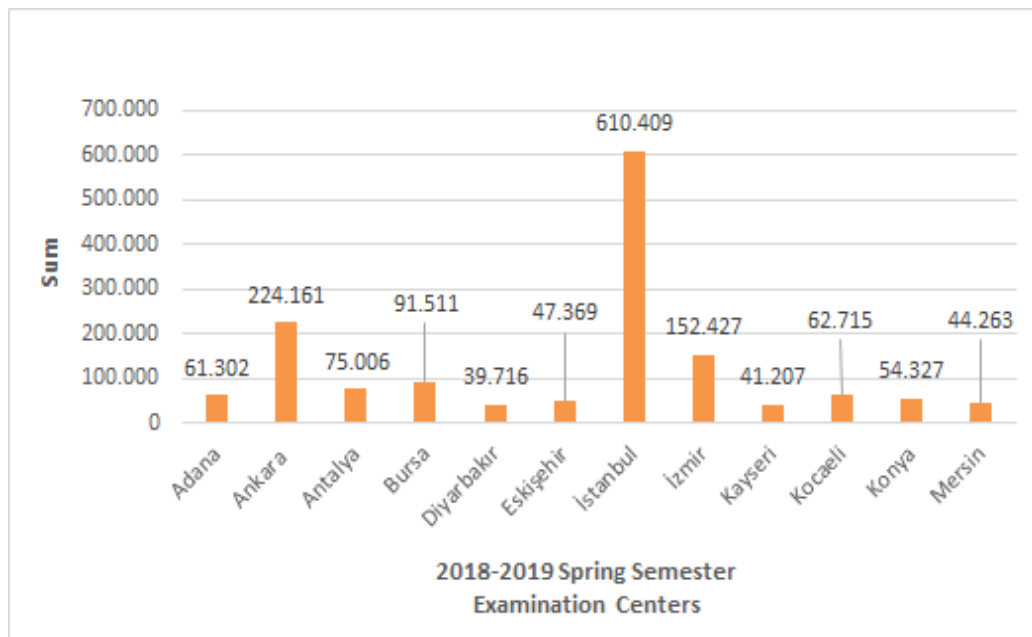

Figure 16. Examination of learners who dropped out in the 2018-2019 spring semester within the scope of the exam center

When we look at both semesters of the 2019-2020 academic year, it is seen that the learners who dropped out of education are mostly registered in the exam centers in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir provinces. These provinces are respectively followed by Bursa, Antalya, Adana, and Kocaeli. In this context, it can be said that the same results were achieved with the 2018-2019 academic year. Therefore, the examination of learners who dropped out in both semesters of the 2019-2020 academic year within the scope of the exam center is shown in Figure 17 and Figure 18.
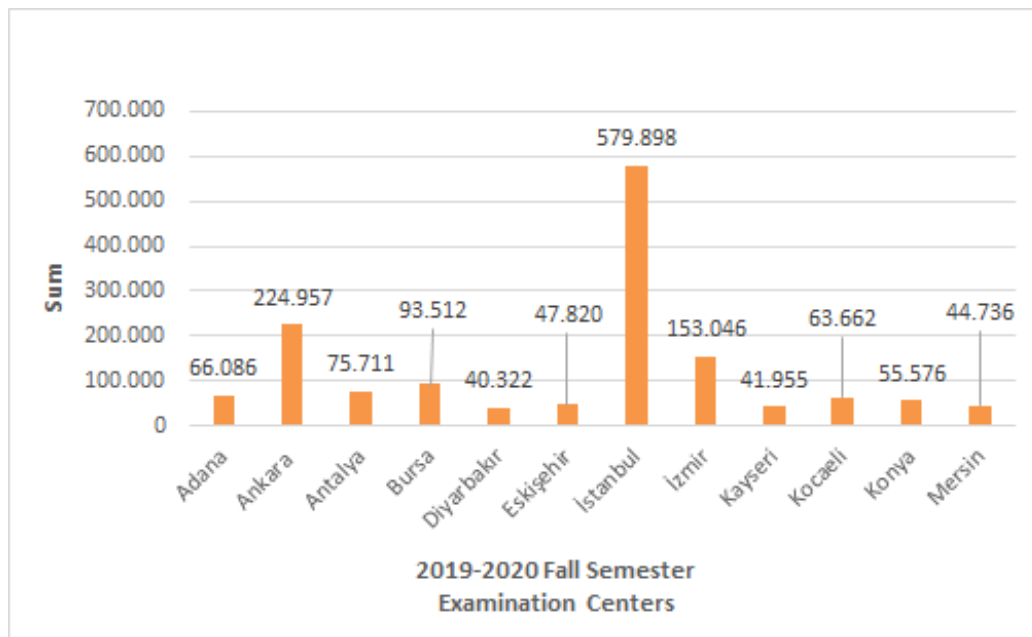
Figure 17. Examination of learners who dropped out in the 2019-2020 fall semester within the scope of the exam center
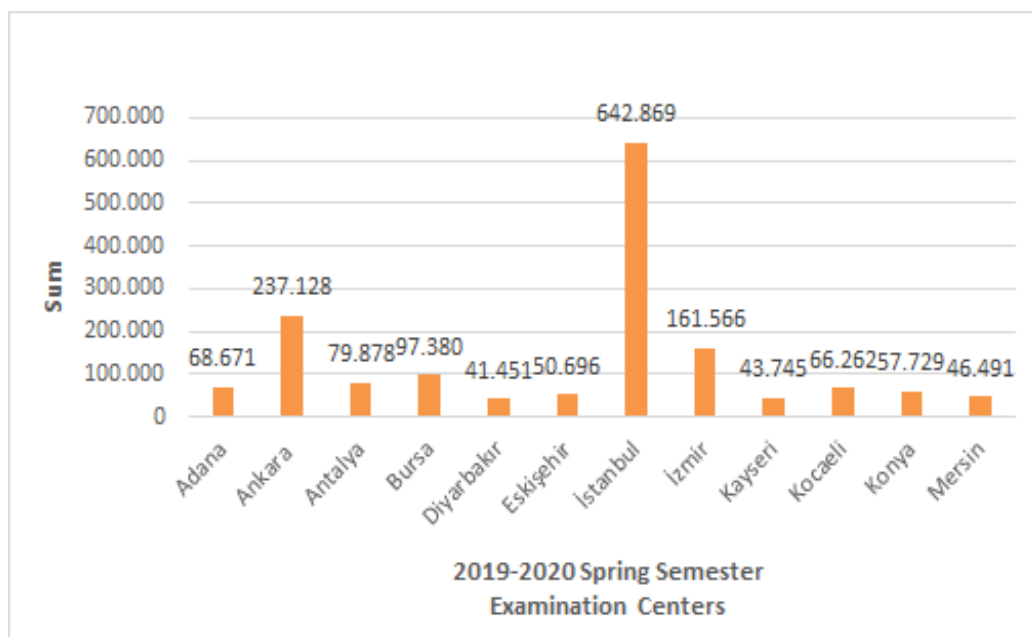

Figure 18. Examination of learners who dropped out in the 2019-2020 spring semester within the scope of the exam center

Discussions, Conclusion, and Suggestions

Within the scope of this study, the dropout status of learners enrolled in Anadolu University Open Education Faculty, the third-largest university in the world in terms of the number of learners (Anadolu University, 2020), was examined in terms of various variables. The first result reached in this direction is that the dropout behavior of the learners who enrolled in the open education faculty with the higher education institutions exam (HEIE) is higher than the others. This situation can be explained by the high number of learners enrolled with HEIE. On the other hand, it can be said that the number of dropout learners who enrolled through the second university and vertical transfer exam are also close to each other and high. BTherefore, it can be stated that the learners' not being aware of open and distance

learning systems, winning another university, thinking that they will not get much reaction from their environment when they dropout of education in the open and distance learning system are among the reasons for this situation. In line with this result, Özaydın Özkara (2018) emphasizes that learners who dropped out of education in open and distance learning processes are unaware of the system, enrolled in another school, and are not reacted by families.

Another result reached within the scope of the study is that the learners who dropout of education are mostly those enrolled in the business program. This situation is followed by the Political Science and Public Administration, Paralegal Studies, Theology, Social Services, International Relations, Sociology and Economics Programs. In this context, one of the most important factors can be shown as the high number of learners enrolled in these programs. Another factor may be that the course designs and teaching techniques applied in the programs do not appeal to the learners. This result is similar to the result obtained in the studies conducted by Lee and Choi (2011) and De Vasconcellos et al. (2020).
In the context of the program type, one of the reasons learners dropped out of education may be the fear of employability when they graduate. In the study conducted by Özaydın Özkara (2018) on this subject, it was stated that the learners who participated in the study dropped out of education due to their reservations about employment.

One of the striking results of the study is that the number of learners who dropped out of education is higher in the spring semester within all variables. This situation is indicated in the graphics in the findings section of the study. At this point, it can be said that some of the learners involved in the fall semester do not attend the spring semester due to various reasons. After a while, the dropout behavior of learners may indicate their dissatisfaction with the programs (Utami et al., 2020). In this context, it can be stated that flexibility must be put into practice due to the nature of open and distance learning. For this reason, transitions between departments/programs can be achieved within certain rules in the system. In this way, learners can continue their education activities in another program they see fit, instead of falling into a passive position.

Another result reached within the scope of the study is that there are more male learners who dropout than female learners. At this point, it can be said that the structural properties theory has been put to work. According to this theory, demographic and structural characteristics such as being a member of an ethnic group, being a minority, gender, and being at a low socio-economic level have a direct effect on the decision to dropout of education due to low academic achievement (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Ibrahim & van der Heijden, 2019). However, there are also studies stating that the gender factor does not affect dropout (Koedel, 2008; Sprauve, 2015). Therefore, we cannot say there is a consensus on this issue.

Based on the findings of this study, which is limited to the learners who dropped out of Anadolu University Open Education Faculty in the academic years of 2018-2019 and 2019-2020, the following suggestions are listed:

- Given that the learners involved in open and distance learning processes for the first time are close to dropout, orientation programs and technical support can be provided to these learners.
- Learners who decide to dropout of education may be asked by the institutions to fill in a form to indicate their reasons for dropout. The data to be obtained from this form should be analyzed by the institutional support system. In this way, it can be concluded whether the learners who dropped out of education are due to the reasons arising from the system or their reasons.

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