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A Proposal for Policy Framework and Emergency Action Plan after Covid-19 for Distance Education Practices in Higher Education

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Abstract: This study aimed to investigate distance education practices in higher education during the pandemic, focusing on lived experiences, and proposing a policy decision framework for future distance education in similar conditions. Additionally, the study aimed to establish a design framework for an Emergency Action Plan for similar crisis periods. In the study, a case study was used to provide a detailed examination of the current situation's characteristics. The study group consisted of 63 administrators from 34 universities who actively participated in decision-making during the pandemic. Data were collected through 11 online focus group interviews, and the Miles-Huberman Model was used for analysis. The study proposed a policy decision framework for distance education in the post-pandemic period, consisting of 11 headings such as blended learning, open course materials, and Distance Education Center structuring. Additionally, the study presented an emergency action plan framework consisting of six components, including keeping the technological infrastructure working and supporting face-to-face courses with distance education. This study provides valuable insights for universities in preparing for potential crises and improving their distance education practices.

Keywords: distance education, open and distance learning, emergency remote teaching, policy framework, emergency action plan

Highlights

What is already known about this topic:

- Higher education institutions were caught unprepared for the uninterrupted conduct of educational activities during the pandemic.
- Although distance education is an alternative, "Emergency Remote Education" is necessity.
- During the pandemic, examining the current situation and preparing a roadmap or guideline is necessary to ensure that higher education activities can be carried out with minimal disruption in times of crisis.

What this paper contributes:

- The study presents a policy framework for distance education, consisting of 11 topics such as blended learning, open course materials and Distance Education Center structuring.
- The study presents a distance education emergency action plan with six components, including keeping technological infrastructure up and running and supporting face-to-face courses through distance learning.
- The study emphasizes the importance of support, accreditation, and sharing course materials in distance education practices, suggesting policies to facilitate these aspects.

Implications for theory, practice and/or policy:

- Policies should align face-to-face programs with distance education principles, e.g., by minimizing the number of courses and enhancing extracurricular activities.
- Conduct studies to concretize the practices specified in the policy framework in line with international approaches.
- Implementation of applications such as "joint programs," "common material pool," and "common systems" to ensure cooperation between universities in distance education.



Introduction

The COVID-19 epidemic, described as a pandemic by the World Health Organization, has harmed all areas of life globally. To prevent the spread of the virus, workplaces and factories where human-to-human contact is possible were shut down, and international transportation was limited. In addition, face-to-face education activities have been suspended in around 191 countries worldwide. This has affected approximately two billion students and 63 million teachers, including 16 million primary and secondary school students and 7.5 million higher education students in Türkiye alone (Telli & Altun, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

With the onset of the global pandemic, higher education institutions have implemented emergency remote teaching (ERT) practices (Akyıldız & Yurtbakan, 2021). These institutions have made necessary infrastructure arrangements to prepare for this while informing students and instructors about the process (Kayalı, 2022; Kraft et al., 2021). These measures aim to prevent the spread of the epidemic while ensuring that education continues with minimal disruption (Pınar & Dönel-Akgül, 2020; Wotto, 2020). To achieve this goal, many countries have turned to distance education solutions and implemented strategies to mitigate the impact of the pandemic (Başaran et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2020). For instance, Italy established an information portal focused on distance education and has already seen 2,000 teachers participate in webinars since the program's inception (Kottasová & Isaac, 2020). In the United States, Washington University was among the first to transition its courses to online platforms, enabling its 50,000 students to continue their studies uninterrupted. Similarly, in England, despite initially intending to open universities as usual, the rapid spread of the epidemic has necessitated prioritizing distance education as a solution. Furthermore, disadvantaged students were provided with device support, and grant assistance was extended to institutions for establishing digital education platforms (Department for Education, 2020, 2021). Finally, in Türkiye, following the emergence of the Covid-19 outbreak in March 2020, new regulations were implemented in the field of education in accordance with the decisions taken by the Ministry of National Education (MNE) and the Council of Higher Education (CHE). Face-to-face education in Turkish universities was suspended in March 2020 but was resumed on March 23, 2020, with the implementation of distance education in a digital environment. This decision was taken to ensure the continuity of educational activities and to maintain a unified approach towards the situation (CHE, 2020).

As in other countries, CHE has taken various measures to facilitate the transition to distance education during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Akyıldız & Yurtbakan, 2021). These measures include establishing an open courseware platform, developing an assessment and evaluation framework, and publishing guidelines for conducting applied courses (Kayalı, 2022). To meet the needs of universities with inadequate technical infrastructure, CHE has collaborated with other universities with sufficient resources and has provided technical support and guidance services to students and instructors through extracurricular activities (CHE, 2021). Technical support services were offered through various channels, including information sessions, promotion of synchronous and asynchronous platforms, and a support line. Guidance support services included online psychological counselling, scientific meetings, sports and cultural activities, and student-counsellor communication channels (Yavuz et al., 2020). Also, distance education was conducted using the Learning Management Systems that universities had in place before the outbreak and virtual classroom platforms provided by universities or accessed by instructors. Midterm exams were conducted in the form of homework, projects, and online interviews, while final exams were held online by CHE's decisions (Can, 2020).

The transition to ERT during the pandemic has led to various institutional and individual challenges in implementing distance education (Bulusan et al., 2022; Daniel, 2020). Some of these challenges include interruptions in institutional services due to infrastructure deficiencies (Yan et al., 2021), instructors lacking the necessary skills to teach in online environments (Wong et al., 2023), and many students lacking essential skills for distance learning, such as independent study and self-regulation (Al Lily et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2020). Therefore, it is recommended that countries better understand the

potential of digital learning solutions and work to bring communities, homes, and schools together to explore new interventions that reduce students' workload and provide them with more autonomy. This can help mitigate the busy school schedules that students are accustomed to and address the challenges students and instructors face during distance education (Kayalı, 2022; OECD, 2020).

During the pandemic, many instructors and students heavily utilized distance teaching and learning tools, gaining new experiences and skills (Karip, 2020; Trust & Whalen, 2021). As such, emergency applications can be viewed as a technology transition and acceptance process in instructional technologies. During this period, the experiences gained in technical, pedagogical, content, human resources, and support dimensions are crucial in guiding distance education practices. Examining the current situation during the pandemic and determining a roadmap or guidelines for carrying out higher education activities with minimal disruption during future crisis periods such as epidemics, natural disasters, and war (Al Mazrooei et al., 2022). This situation seems inevitable (Bozkurt, 2020a; Naidu, 2020; Telli & Altun, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). Thus, it can be ensured that a new plan that can be more effective in coping with similar crisis periods, different from the current education planning, and flexible, including distance education practices, can be put forward. Although distance education is an alternative for students, ERT is a necessity, and this situation should be approached with different priorities and strategies should be used (Bojović et al., 2020; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Also, it is essential to plan steps that meet the needs of stakeholders and offer the best options suitable for their capacity and abilities in such difficult situations. From an institutional perspective, a roadmap based on evidence-based scientific data has emerged for the compulsory changes to be made in higher education after the distance education applications during the pandemic, which is expected to guide short-term arrangements. Furthermore, universities are expected to trigger and guide innovative practices that will give them a competitive advantage in online learning after the pandemic and contribute to establishing distance education activities within universities and related units. Accordingly, the study aims to determine managers' experiences within the scope of education and training activities carried out during the pandemic and provide a policy decision framework proposal for the new period of distance education according to the emerging conditions. Additionally, the study aims to establish a design framework for an Emergency Action Plan (EAP) for similar crisis periods. In this direction, the following research questions are addressed.

RQ1. What should be the post-pandemic distance education policy framework in higher education?

RQ2. What should be the design framework of the post-pandemic distance education EAP in higher education?

Methodology

This study used an exploratory case study to examine the current situation's characteristics thoroughly. Exploratory case study is a research method conducted to better understand and deeply learn about a situation. Such studies are typically used to examine a specific event or phenomenon in detail, to gain insights, and to understand complex or uncertain situations (Yin, 2013). This method was used in the study because it was aimed to determine in depth the experiences of administrators regarding distance education during the pandemic period. Different elements related to a situation are examined in their natural settings through an integrative interpretation, focusing on the factors' interactions with the relevant problem. The results obtained regarding a situation are expected to provide an example and experience for understanding similar problems (Yin, 1984).

Participants

The study group for this research consists of 63 instructors from 34 different universities, who were reached through maximum diversity and criterion sampling methods. It was considered a criterion that the instructors in the study group are managers who have taken an active role during the ERT period

and have been affected by the decisions, plans, and expectations for the following periods. Additionally, attention was paid to the fact that these individuals had practical experience in the field, had conducted distance education studies, and had middle and senior management experience. The 63 identified individuals were divided into 11 focus groups in this context. Diversity was ensured by ensuring that each group consisted of people with academic, practical, managerial, and different experiences (distance education, instructional technologies, and educational sciences). The participants and their distribution of tasks are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Participants



As shown in Figure 1, the study group comprises 63 individuals, including 1 Rector, 9 Vice-Rectors, 3 Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Managers, 22 Distance Education Center (DEC) Managers, 17 expert instructors in distance education, and 11 others. To ensure diversity among these participants, who have various university duties and responsibilities, the same questions were asked during focus group interviews to collect data on their perspectives.

Data Collecting Process

The data obtained in the study were collected through focus group interviews at the workshop called "Open and Distance Education Policies in Higher Education after the Pandemic". This workshop was held to create the policy framework for post-pandemic teaching practices. 63 instructors divided into 11 different groups participated in the interviews. After the information meeting was held online, a chairperson and a rapporteur were appointed to each group. Then, each group was asked to go to their rooms online using the Breakout Room feature, answer three questions, and discuss and discuss independently within the group. At the end of the focus group discussions, which lasted a total of 40 minutes in a single session, concrete policy suggestions were presented to the other groups by the moderators.

Figure 2. A screenshot for focus group interviews

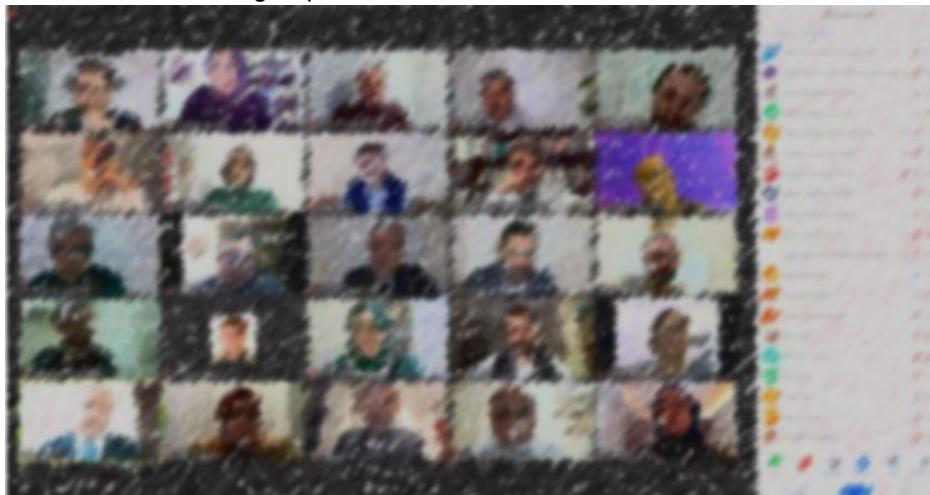


Figure 2 displays a screenshot taken from one of the focus group meetings. A semi-structured interview form was used in these interviews. Experts and pilot interviews examined the interview form consisting of three questions were conducted. After the language checks, the form took its final form. The interview questions are as follows.

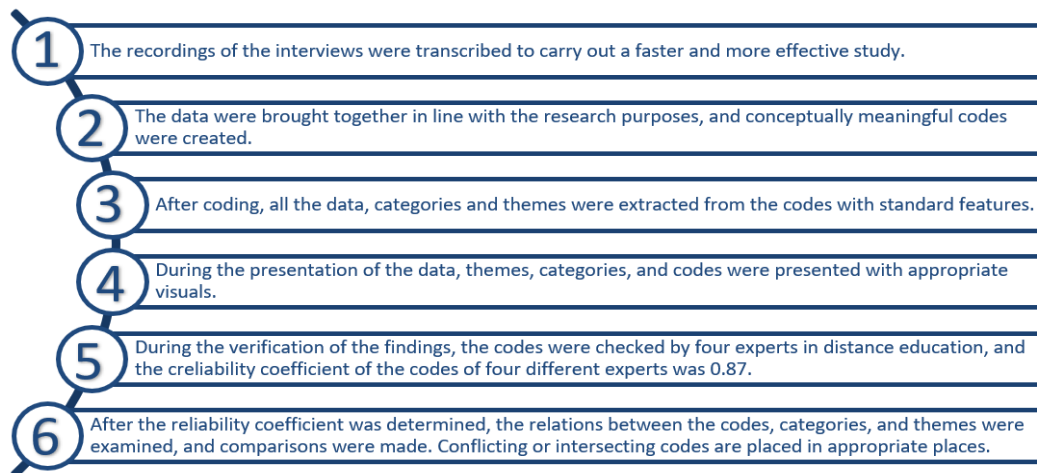
1. What should the vision of the CHE's distance education encompass in the new era?
2. What should universities' objectives regarding distance education be in the upcoming term? What steps should be taken into account?
3. What elements should be incorporated into the ERT action plan during a pandemic resurgence?

The focus group interviews were conducted online, and the sessions were recorded for analysis. The written and audio recordings obtained from the focus group interviews constituted the data for the study.

Data Analysis

The study used the Miles-Huberman model for data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 2015). This model was used because it involves establishing the relationships between events in a certain systematic way and aims to explain the causes of social phenomena. The need to carry out the analysis meticulously in a certain systematic way while determining the ERT action plan and policy framework has led to the use of this analysis. According to this model, data analysis includes three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The procedures followed by the authors during data analysis are illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Data analysis



As seen in Figure 3, the interviews were first recorded. The records were then converted into meaningful codes. These codes were then grouped according to their characteristics and transformed into categories and themes. The analysis result obtained was checked by 4 different people. Codes with disagreement were re-examined. The inter-coder reliability coefficient was calculated as 0.87. According to the coding audit that gives internal consistency, it is expected that the consensus between coders should be at least 80% (Miles & Huberman, 2015; Patton, 2002). Therefore, we can say that inter-coder reliability is at an acceptable level.

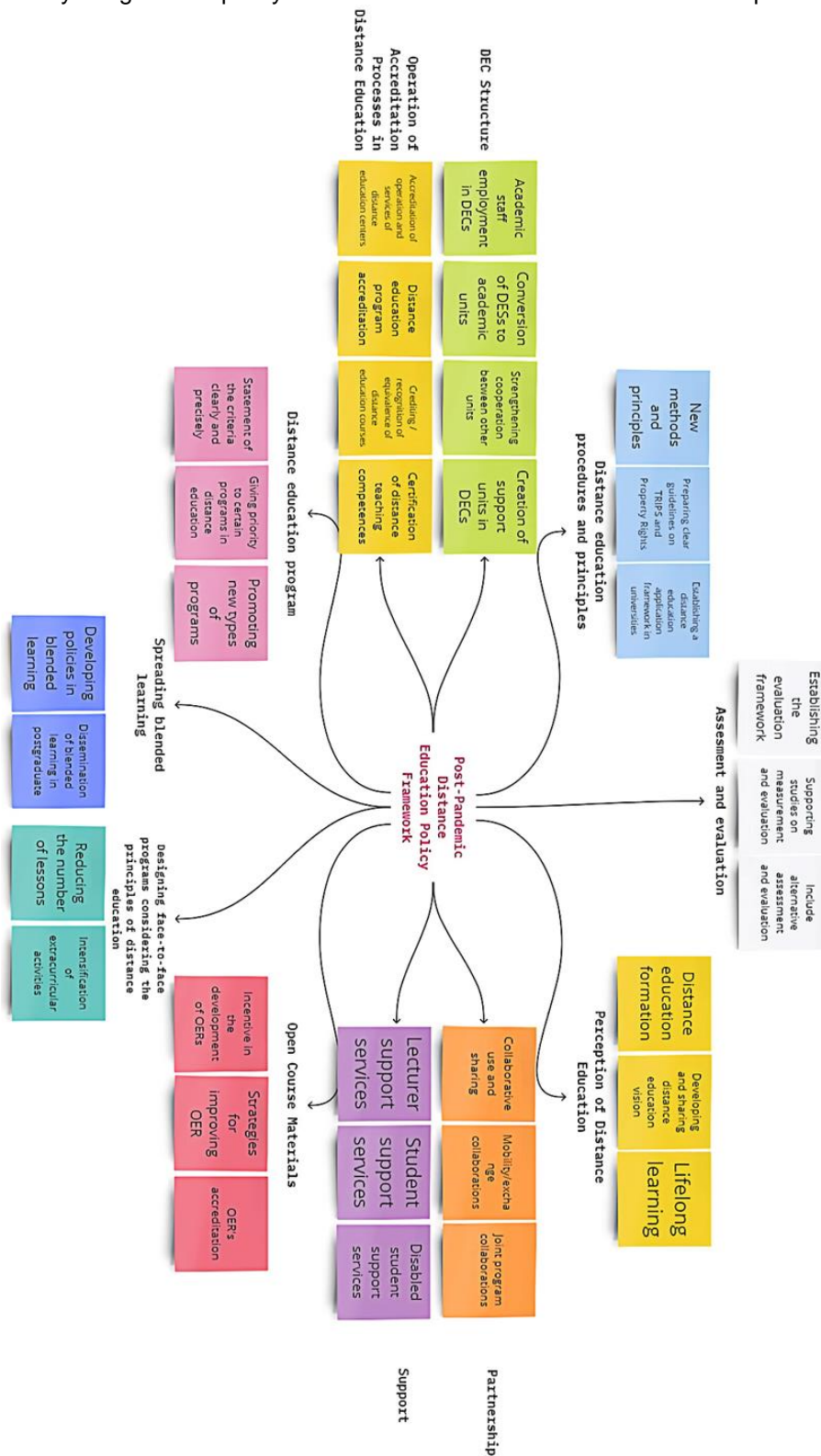
Findings

In this section, the data collected within the framework of the research questions were analyzed, and the findings were presented. The results were developed within the scope of the policy framework related to distance education practices after the pandemic, and the potential design framework of the EAP was presented under two headings.

RQ1. Distance Education Policy Framework in Higher Education

The workshop "Open and Distance Education Policies for Post-Pandemic Higher Education" was conducted to create the policy framework for post-pandemic teaching practices. In this context, the analysis of participants' opinions and the policy framework regarding post-pandemic distance education practices are presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Summary image of the policy framework on distance education after the pandemic



In Figure 4, the policy framework for post-pandemic distance education has been categorized under 11 headings. These are discussed in detail below and explained by participant statements.

1-Perception of Distance Education

The study highlights the need to improve the perception of distance education and avoid seeing it as unstructured applications during the pandemic. It is recommended that universities develop a vision for distance education and work towards promoting lifelong learning and distance education practices to understand that distance teaching is a speciality. The study also emphasizes the necessity of taking distance education courses after graduation and encourages instructors to participate in such programs. Additionally, individualized teaching is emphasized, and adaptive learning environments should be utilized to achieve this goal. Sample participant statements for these items are as follows.

“The philosophy of lifelong learning in distance education should be a policy.”

“Distance education activities can be accredited by using distance education formation as a condition for appointment and promotion or scoring.”

The administrators stated that distance education should be perceived as a discipline for crisis periods and for spreading it with a lifelong learning philosophy. It is necessary to encourage instructors by making it compulsory to teach assignment and promotion criteria in this way.

2-Partnership

It has been suggested that universities should be encouraged to adopt "joint programs," "common material pool," and "common systems" to foster cooperation in distance education. Additionally, it is important to develop effective and innovative distance education/blended learning models at the national and international levels by facilitating course and instructor exchanges. In this regard, collaboration can be achieved through joint R&D projects, software and content development, and sharing best practices for inter-institutional infrastructure. It is emphasized that academic staff should collaborate and establish national and international cooperative program collaborations, including course mobility between universities. Below are some statements from participants regarding these suggestions.

“Internationalization should be encouraged. Both courses should be given at universities in Türkiye with which universities have agreements abroad, and universities in Türkiye should be able to count the courses of students who have taken the courses of accredited programs remotely.”

“By changing the structure of DECAs, it can be ensured that several DECAs can unite and run joint programs and common areas with distance education.”

It was emphasized that the institutions that met with distance education during the pandemic would contribute to their development by cooperating with the institutions that specialized in this field. The institutions that cannot open programs alone can open joint programs together. Those students and instructors can take/give distance courses at home / abroad with various protocols.

3-Support

It is important to provide training and certification for instructors on teaching methods and techniques, digital content development, measurement and evaluation, digital literacy, and the nature of distance education. Additionally, it is crucial to diversify technical, academic, psychological, and socio-cultural supports and create separate unit-based support services to aid students. It has been noted that the support training provided to instructors should be repeated at certain intervals. There should be specific activities and office hours between students and instructors for socio-cultural support services. Providing

infrastructure, devices, and multimedia material support for disadvantaged students is also essential. Below are some statements from participants regarding these suggestions.

“Various support materials and services must be restructured for our students with disabilities.”

“Universities should prepare surveys to reveal their needs and expectations for partners.”

It was stated that carrying out various support activities for the technical problems that the instructors, students, and staff may encounter during the process, realizing socio-cultural activities to minimize the adverse effects of the pandemic, and implementing practices for disadvantaged individuals.

4-Open Course Materials

The study emphasized that the instructors should be institutionally encouraged within the criteria for preparing open course materials. At the same time, it was stated that the systems on which the prepared open course materials will be uploaded should be integrated (cooperative), and the open courses can be accredited. It is emphasized that creating digital course material pools is very important. It has been stated that these resources, which provide access regardless of time and place, allow access to the course they want online, whenever they want and provide equality of opportunity in distance education. In addition, it was emphasized that different classes should be opened under a single structure called open courses. Studies should be carried out to determine the quality standards for this. Sample participant statements for these items are as follows.

“Universities need to make the best course materials shareable.”

“It is necessary to determine the criteria for open courses. The evaluation criteria should be determined if a common platform is to be used.”

It was stated that open course materials, which administrators see as equal opportunity in education, should be supported by universities and offered to the service of society. In addition, it was emphasized that the criteria for open course materials should be determined, and common platforms should be established.

5-Designing Face-to-Face Programs Considering the Principles of Distance Education

The importance of designing face-to-face programs in accordance with the nature of distance education, especially by reducing the number of courses and intensifying extracurricular activities, was emphasized. Sample participant statements regarding this situation are as follows.

“To focus on the work and be more useful, DEC administrators should reduce the number of courses.”

“The structure of the courses should be arranged in accordance with the nature of distance education.”

It has been stated that the high course load of DEC administrators will hinder their managerial activities. In addition, it is understood from the participants' statements that the measurement and evaluation activities in face-to-face education processes are unsuitable for distance education. Therefore, they should be arranged in accordance with the nature of distance education.

6-Spreading Blended Learning

Within the study, it has come to the fore that there are steps to be taken to spread blended teaching practices after the pandemic. In facilitating the transition to blended education by supporting courses with distance education technologies to disseminate blended learning practices, teaching staff should be encouraged to adopt and use blended education and be included in assignment and promotion

criteria. Depending on the student's option, specific courses should be offered remotely or face-to-face. Sample participant statements for these items are as follows.

“The lessons suitable for the blended learning method should be determined, and the principles should be put forward. Students should be able to choose lessons with the blended-distance teaching method according to the preferences of the students who make their course selections.”

In general, it is stated that necessary studies should be carried out on the conduct of lessons with blended learning. The instructors should be informed about this subject, and the principles should be established by determining the courses to be conducted in this way according to the structure of the course.

7-Distance Education Program

The study obtained several findings related to opening distance education programs. It was emphasized that postgraduate distance education programs should be opened, particularly in social needs and specialization. These programs should be prioritized at the international level to train technical personnel and promote cooperation between universities for course exchange. However, to ensure a healthy program opening process, it is stated that it is essential to determine the criteria for infrastructure standards, content standards, and monitoring activities and to define them clearly. Sample participant statements regarding these items are provided below.

“Graduate programs should be opened. When opening these programs, the opinion of the distance education commission should be sought, and criteria that may be critical in distance education should be added to the conditions of opening the program.”

In general, it has been stated that there is a need for graduate programs in distance education that are suitable for social needs and that the necessary criteria should be integrated into the face-to-face program opening processes by carrying out the process in coordination with the distance education commission for these programs to be opened.

8-Distance Education Procedures and Principles

The study highlights the need for restructuring CHE's procedures and principles framework. It is recommended that the definitions of current practices and principles be clarified and detailed descriptions of institutional competencies (academic, pedagogical, and technical) and individual stakeholder roles and responsibilities be determined. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of universities establishing their practice principles to provide clear guidance on using distance education systems, protecting personal data during live lessons, and compliance with intellectual property rights. Attention should also be paid to copyright violations against instructors and students within the Personal Data Protection Law (PDPL) scope. Sample participant statements for these items are as follows.

“CHE should determine the procedures and principles for all partners with clear criteria.”

“Within the scope of PDPL, students enter the system by committing. This should be prevented (Information law should be considered).”

It was generally stated that policymakers and the processes should determine the procedures and principles in distance education. In addition, it was emphasized that instructors and students should be informed about copyright violations.

9-Operation of Accreditation Processes in Distance Education

Some suggestions have been proposed to improve the quality of distance education accreditation processes. These include operating accreditation processes at the centre, program, and course levels and requiring institutions to monitor quality management processes. Another suggestion is to encourage students to take courses from different universities and establish credit transfer mechanisms based on course accreditations. Additionally, it was recommended that quality standards and criteria for DEC be determined, requirements for opening programs in distance education be established, and MOOC accreditation be linked to the European Credit Transfer System. Finally, a credit system should be introduced for qualified courses in the CHE Course Platform. Below are some statements from participants regarding these suggestions.

“Distance education programs must be accredited. The Higher Education Quality Board should guide the accreditation.”

The managers, who expressed the necessity of starting the accreditation process in distance education, emphasized that it must undergo a comprehensive quality process. Managers also need DEC to undergo an organizational-level accreditation process.

10-DEC Structure

To improve the structure of DEC, it is suggested that these institutions be transformed into academic units similar to institutes that provide opportunities for conducting research and development studies, training human resources, and serving as a resource for the wider community. Hiring academic staff and establishing coordination between the units with the distance education commission/coordination boards is also recommended. Strategies should be developed to increase the quantity and quality of human resources primarily. Participants have noted that by transforming DEC into academic units, they can better train human resources and support the mission of conducting R&D studies. Below are some participant statements regarding these suggestions.

“DEC structuring should be given importance and supported at the point of human resources.”
“Collaboration between DEC should be encouraged.”

The administrators stated that higher education institutions caught unprepared during the pandemic faced problems arising from insufficient personnel. In addition, it was emphasized that the inexperienced institutions in distance education would cooperate with other institutions with experience in this field and that the orientation of the process would be overcome positively.

11-Assessment and Evaluation

It is necessary to focus on process evaluations for measuring and evaluating practice in university distance education. In addition, the necessity of creating and sharing an assessment-evaluation framework, which includes dimensions such as online exam rules and evaluation of practice skills, was emphasized in assessment methods. It has been proposed to establish an evaluation framework by developing observable, trackable, and reportable measurement-evaluation and process-based implementation policies on a university or unit basis. Sample participant statements for these items are as follows.

“For the measurement-evaluation processes to be carried out healthily, from an institutional point of view, customized, observable, trackable and reportable measurement-evaluation process-oriented implementation policies should be developed for each academic unit.”

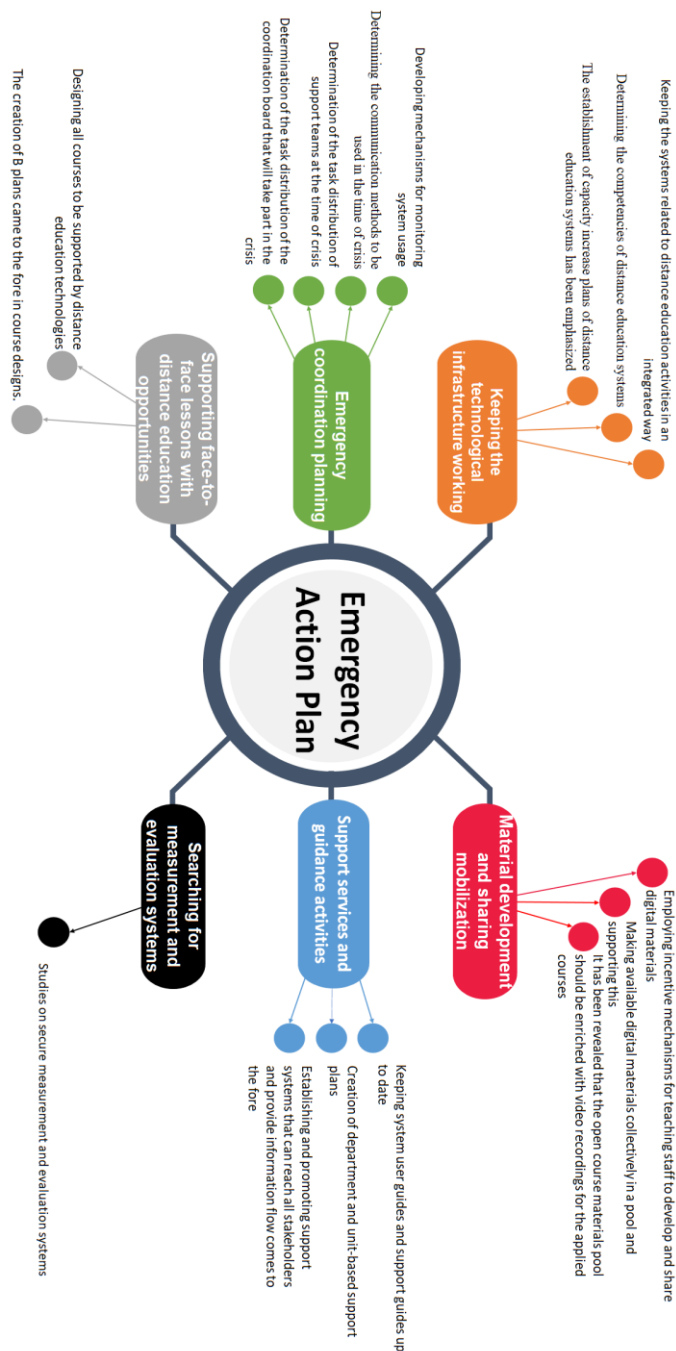
The difficulty of exam security in distance education has highlighted the need for improvements in the process. Due to the nature of distance education through which face-to-face measurement and

evaluation are impossible, no practical solution can be applied in all courses and eliminate all anxieties, so studies in this direction should be increased.

RQ2. Distance Education EAP in Higher Education

Another research question of the study is to determine the design framework for the EAP. Interviews were held within the workshop held for this purpose. In the interviews, opinions were presented on the scope of distance education in higher education after the pandemic and the suggestions regarding the steps to be taken in distance education. In Figure 5, the EAP design framework has been proposed to continue education through distance education without interruption in times of crisis such as the pandemic.

Figure 5. Summary Image of the EAP Framework on Distance Education



1-Keeping the Technological Infrastructure Working

Keeping the technological infrastructure for creating EAPs in distance education is the first of the dimensions. In this context,

- Keeping the systems related to distance education activities in an integrated way
- Determining the competencies of distance education systems
- The establishment of capacity increase plans for distance education systems has been emphasized

It has emerged as a standard view that distance education should be active in times of crisis, such as pandemics, infrastructure works should be accelerated to have systems ready in emergency transitions, and existing infrastructure should be improved. In this context, it has come to the fore that development activities should be carried out by determining the infrastructure competence in distance education.

2-Material Development and Sharing Mobilization

Another suggestion is material development and sharing mobilization for creating EAPs in distance education. In this context,

- Employing incentive mechanisms for teaching staff to develop and share digital materials
- Making available digital materials collectively in a pool and supporting this
- It has been revealed that the open course materials pool should be enriched with video recordings for the applied courses

In similar periods, suggestions have emerged to encourage instructors to share the materials used in the lessons on the distance education system, share the digital materials used in the lessons in the open course material pool, and take and share video recordings for applied lessons.

3-Support Services and Guidance Activities

Another suggestion was preparing support services and guidance activities to create distance education EAPs. In this context,

- Keeping system user guides and support guides up to date
- Creation of department and unit-based support plans
- Establishing and promoting support systems that can reach all stakeholders and provide information flow comes to the fore.

In similar crisis periods, it is necessary to establish department and unit-based support mechanisms to carry out the process effectively. In addition, suggestions have come to the fore to ensure a rapid transition to extraordinary situations by creating guides, guides, and support systems to ensure the continuous and correct flow of information.

4-Searching for Measurement and Evaluation Systems

The other dimension in preparing EAPs for distance education is searching for an assessment and evaluation system. In this dimension, the necessity of conducting studies on safe measurement-evaluation has been expressed. Measurement and evaluation practices in distance education should be planned in times of crisis, and alternative assessment and evaluation methods should be used. Lastly, it has come to the fore that the frameworks for make-up exams should be determined in advance, and regulations should support safe exam practices.

5-Supporting Face-to-Face Lessons with Distance Education Opportunities

Another suggestion for creating EAPs in distance education is to support face-to-face courses with distance education opportunities. In this context,

- Designing all courses to be supported by distance education technologies
- The creation of B plans came to the fore in course designs.

It was emphasized that instructors and students should be prepared pedagogically for distance education in times of crisis, such as the pandemic. Distance education should be expanded as a method and adopted by institutions. In addition, it was stated that alternative plans should be made to design the courses in accordance with distance education, and the course designs should be activated quickly in these periods.

6-Emergency Coordination Planning

Emergency coordination planning for creating EAPs in distance education is another dimension that must be organized in advance. In this context,

- Developing mechanisms for monitoring system usage
- Determination of the task distribution of the coordination board that will take part in the crisis
- Determining the communication methods to be used in a time of crisis
- Determination of the task distribution of support teams at the time of crisis

For various reasons (epidemic, fire, flood, earthquake), it is stated that distance education coordination studies should be carried out to avoid disruption of educational activities. In addition, the importance of pre-planning for determining the duties of the persons to be assigned by establishing crisis coordination units, determining the communication channels to be established and identifying the persons who will provide support was emphasized.

Discussions and Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate distance education practices in higher education during the pandemic period, focusing on lived experiences and proposing a policy decision framework for future distance education in similar conditions. Additionally, the study aimed to establish a design framework for an EAP for similar crisis periods. The framework, developed within the scope of the study, includes 11 dimensions and focuses on macro-scale components such as the structure of distance education courses, accreditation, and credit transfer mechanisms. The administrators emphasized the importance of support, accreditation, and sharing of course materials. The suggestions gathered from participants' experiences during the pandemic are utilized to create an EAP design framework for future crisis periods.

Upon a close examination of the policy framework, it can be argued that more effective practices are aimed at mitigating issues such as the limitations of measurement and evaluation (Avcı & Akdeniz, 2021; Bozkurt, 2020a), insufficient infrastructure and personnel (Karip, 2020; Samad, 2021), dearth of digital materials (Nisiforou et al., 2021; Rahiem, 2020), and weaknesses in monitoring and evaluating the process of program opening (Özarslan & Ozan, 2014). Furthermore, it is crucial to design in-class and extracurricular curricula and activities that align with distance education's nature to avert course delivery challenges (Bozkurt, 2020b; Varma & Jafri, 2020). Policies such as accreditation processes and establishing standards for developing distance education programs can be regarded as an indispensable aspect of distance education, especially during a pandemic. This transformation can be perceived as an endeavor to implement quality practices (Murphy, 2020; Petillion & McNeil, 2020).

Suggestions for open course materials (Wetzler, 2020) and credit transfer can be elucidated to capture distance education trends (Skiba, 2013) offering distance education flexibility at the national and international levels. Blended learning supported by distance education technologies is seen as a viable solution for dealing with education disruptions in similar crisis periods (Boyчук et al., 2022; Varma & Jafri, 2020). It is noted that most students participating in distance education activities during the pandemic possess adequate knowledge about using the Internet but lack general familiarity with online learning (Samad, 2021). This situation indicates that both students and instructors require support activities (Bao, 2020). Nevertheless, using digital data raises ethical concerns, including protecting personal data and intellectual property rights concerning how the generated digital data and course materials are utilized within the ethical framework (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Storey & Tebes, 2008). Lastly, it is emphasized that design principles should be utilized with equal opportunity in education, considering the needs of students with special needs/disadvantages (Bozkurt, 2020a; Firat & Koyuncu, 2022).

The study's second research question proposed an EAP framework consisting of six dimensions: maintaining technological infrastructure, emergency coordination planning, mobilizing material development and sharing, supporting face-to-face courses with distance education opportunities, preparing support services and guidance, and developing a measurement and evaluation system. In this context, ensuring that the technological infrastructure is operational, integrating the systems related to distance education activities, determining the competencies of distance education systems, and creating capacity increase plans for distance education systems are important considerations. Developing infrastructure for possible emergencies (Naidu, 2020) and emphasizing integrations that facilitate the transition in times of crisis aligns (Kayalı, 2022) with the pre-planning principle of crisis management (Jamal & Abu Bakar, 2015). Furthermore, an EAP was suggested to be developed for unexpected situations (Er Türküresin, 2020; Pusey & Nanni, 2021). In this regard, it was emphasized that during a sudden transfer of courses to the online environment in times of crisis, computer servers may not be prepared for too many users and may experience frequent interruptions (Lorente et al., 2020). Therefore, higher education institutions should have B or C plans (Bao, 2020). In times of crisis, it is necessary to have a distance education EAP at hand (Holzweiss et al., 2020; Üstün & Özberk, 2021).

To establish a material development and sharing campaign, it is important to encourage instructors to share the digital materials used in their classes with students through the system. Furthermore, it has been suggested that digital materials utilized in courses should be shared in an open course material repository, and that video recordings of applied courses (such as workshop studies and laboratory lessons) should be produced and shared. Duman (2020) notes that the need for planning in this area may be attributed to the lack of digital materials, challenges in procuring materials during the pandemic, and the fact that inexperienced instructors primarily used open course materials in their course designs during this period (Kurşun et al., 2014). Additionally, face-to-face courses should be supported with distance education opportunities during similar crisis periods, and B plans should be developed for course designs. Leveraging the positive impact of online activities in the adaptation process to distance education (Whalen, 2020) is essential to reducing the initial panic and anxiety experienced during crisis periods (Ahmed et al., 2020).

Support services and guide preparations are essential to creating EAP in distance education. To this end, it is crucial to keep the system user manuals and support guides up to date, develop department and unit-based support plans, and create and promote support systems that can reach all stakeholders (including instructors, students, administrators, administrative staff, parents, etc.), and ensure a smooth flow of information (Can, 2020; Yavuz et al., 2020). Furthermore, exploring assessment and evaluation systems to create EAP in distance education is recommended. In this context, measurement and evaluation systems should be developed, and research should be conducted on this subject (Kayalı, 2022; St-Onge et al., 2021). Hebebcı et al. (2020) indicated that distance measurement and evaluation are the most significant challenges during this period.

Suggestions

The research created the policy framework to meet the needs and expectations of post-pandemic teaching practices and the EAP design framework. In this context, various suggestions for the future are presented below to prevent disruptions that may occur during crisis periods such as pandemics.

- It is recommended to carry out support services for students during the distance education process and ensure their traceability.
- It is recommended to continue support activity practices in distance education after the pandemic.
- To ensure cooperation between universities in distance education, it is recommended to implement practices such as "joint programs", "common material pool" and "common systems".
- In informing and guiding activities for faculty members, it is recommended to carry out guidance and support activities on course design in distance education, measurement and evaluation methods, intellectual property rights, operation of open education resources and openness movement.
- It is recommended to use incentive mechanisms for faculty members to disseminate blended learning.
- It is recommended to identify students' internet access, hardware and working environment facilities at the point of access to distance education and to carry out studies to improve them.
- It is recommended to investigate the contributions of factors such as active participation in live lessons, system access, tendency to work on course notes and materials, and participation levels in online activities by conducting research that correlates students' self-regulation skills in the learning process.
- It is recommended to examine the reflections of the gains, habits, and skills of the pandemic period on face-to-face activities to be carried out after the pandemic.
- It is recommended to research to concretize the practices specified within the policy framework in line with international approaches.
- It is recommended that distance education EAP be carried out and shared by different institutions and researchers.

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Conflict of Interest

All authors played an active role and contributed to every stage of the study.

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