

Anadolu University Open Education Faculty  
40th anniversary

Webinar - April 27, 2022  
06:00 Vancouver - 16:00 Eskisehir

***'Quality and effectiveness in Open and Distance Learning:  
Applying the Lessons of the Past to Ensure a Bright Future'***

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**Introduction**

Good afternoon to you all. I am talking to you from Vancouver, Canada, where it is six o'clock in the morning and the day is just dawning.

TITLE

It is a pleasure to join you for this webinar in a series to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Anadolu University's Open Education System. 40 years is a tremendous achievement. In those four decades you have enriched the lives of tens of thousands of people, and I congratulate you.

I am very proud of my association with Anadolu University.

MEGA-US

I first discovered your university in the early 1990s, when I was writing my book *Mega-universities and Knowledge Media: Technology Strategies for Higher Education*. In that book I identified Anadolu University as one of the world's eleven mega-universities - a new word that I invented for distance teaching universities enrolling over 100,000 students. In 1998 I was honoured to be invited to Eskisehir to receive an honorary doctorate from Anadolu University. Later that year the UK Open University awarded an honorary doctorate to your distinguished former rector, Professor Yilmaz Buyukersen.

TITLE

I am, therefore, very pleased to take part in the celebrations of the 40th anniversary of Anadolu University's remarkable Open Education System by offering this webinar. My title today is *'Quality and effectiveness in Open and Distance Learning: Applying the Lessons of the Past to Ensure a Bright Future'*.

The covid pandemic has been a turning point for all universities and for our societies generally. Here in Vancouver, I am the Chancellor of a small business school, the Acsenda School of Management. Last month I joined Acsenda's president and vice-president academic to present a paper to the Asia-Pacific Association for International Education. Our title was: *'Never the Same Again'*.

As that title implied, we believe that the Acsenda School of Management will never go back to operating in quite the same way that it did before the pandemic hit. Before the pandemic all our courses were taught face-to-face in classrooms. Now, as restrictions ease, we are 90%

back in the classrooms. But I don't think we shall ever reach 100% again because we have discovered the advantages of distance teaching.

I imagine that your Open Education System continued functioning somewhat normally during the pandemic, and I look forward to hearing more about how it affected you at Anadolu University. I wonder if covid-19 stimulated more collaboration between you and the other Turkish universities as they turned to emergency remote teaching.

EMT - ODL

In much of the world - and I expect in Turkey too - the pandemic disrupted the usual teaching methods. Instead of bringing students to their classrooms and lecture halls the campus universities had to reach out to them using various forms of what I call 'Emergency Remote Teaching'. Some also called this distance learning, but as I shall make clear, distance learning, or open and distance learning (ODL) as it is often called, is a richer activity than emergency remote teaching.

Saying this is not to criticise the remarkable efforts that the other universities made to keep their shows on the road and continue to teach students. Many universities around the world had to move their activities off campus in the space of little more than a weekend, and it is quite remarkable how teachers and students adapted and made the best of it.

But if these other Turkish universities plan continue with some level of remote teaching as the pandemic wanes, they need to develop a richer appreciation of the range of open and distance learning and the opportunities it presents. They need to study how you operate in Anadolu's Open Education System. This will make teaching in the campus universities more interesting, more effective, and more cost-effective.

PLAN SIX ASPECTS

The title of this talk is *'Quality and effectiveness in Open and Distance Learning: Applying the Lessons of the Past to Ensure a Bright Future'*. I shall explore six aspects of distance learning to demonstrate its scope and variety, showing how those who had to switch quickly to emergency remote teaching inevitably missed out on some of the opportunities of ODL.

Because your Open Education System is based on open and distance learning, nothing that I shall say will be new to you. But sometimes it is good to go back to basics and reflect on the fundamentals.

### **1. Distance learning: a long history**

My first point is to encourage you to treasure the long history of distance learning. I do not need to describe this to you, and not only because you have conducted distance education at Anadolu for forty years. You will not make the common mistake of thinking that distance learning began with the arrival of the Internet in the late 20th century.

ORIGINS TURKEY

It goes back much further than that. In fact, distance education began nearly 2000 years ago in what is now Turkey. The Christian apostle Saint Paul, who was born in Tarsus, developed

a highly successful method of teaching at a distance. He wrote letters - called epistles - to the infant Christian churches around the Mediterranean.

#### EPHESUS, COLOSSAE, GALATIA

Some of his most famous letters were addressed to groups in cities and regions of Turkey. I think of Ephesus and Colossae and, of course of Galatia, which was the former name for what are now the provinces of Eskisehir and Ankara.

Paul's letters were studied and discussed by the priests and the people in these communities. This system of teaching and learning at a distance was an important element in the growth of the Christian church over the next two thousand years. You could say that St. Paul was not only the pioneer of distance education, but also probably its most successful practitioner of all time. The subsequent history of distance education is the story of the integration of various new technologies over the next two millennia: printing, postal services, radio, TV, computers and now the Internet.

### **2. Distance education = material for teaching plus interaction for learning**

My second point is that good distance education has two key elements: good teaching materials that students can work with on their own, and group discussions where they can explore points of difficulty with a tutor and each other. These were the two components of St. Paul's distance education system and putting together an effective blend of these two types of activity is still the key to successful distance learning today.

#### INDEPENDENCE & INTERACTION

In a paper that I published back in the 1970s I called this 'Independence and Interaction: Getting the Mixture Right'. It made the point that distance education requires the student to do some learning independently, using the learning materials, but also to promote success, to interact with others to clear up points of difficulty and enrich understanding.

A mistake that we made during the pandemic, particularly in places like Canada with a rich telecommunications infrastructure, was to assume that live lectures over the internet were effective distance education. As the months went by, at our Acsenda School of Management and elsewhere, instructors started adding asynchronous activities that students could do in their own time. Further development of such activities must be an important part of the future because students need to be able to work on materials independently.

### **3. Get the material to the students**

#### MATERIAL TO STUDENTS

My third point is to stress the importance of getting learning materials to the students. As the pandemic continued in Vancouver, we noticed that the performance of our Acsenda students steadily improved from what it had been before covid-19. This was a surprise, but the students explained that as we made more text and video materials available to them, they were able to review them on their own and go over difficult concepts several times. The mistake we made in the early days was to assume that the live lectures on Zoom were enough. It was the ability of students to access them again that made the difference.

As I just noted, the history of distance education is the story of adding new technologies that make materials distribution easier. St. Paul sent out his letters to Ephesus, Colossae and Galatia with couriers on donkeys and camels.

#### ANADOLU MEDIA

Then came printing, railways, postal services and now the Internet, making distribution of study materials today instantaneous and almost cost free. Looking at your website I am very impressed by the variety of services and options that you offer to your Open Education System students.

#### **4. Economy of scale and quality of scale**

##### ECONOMY/QUALITY OF SCALE

Point 4 is that one of the great assets of distance learning is that it can be conducted at scale. Anadolu University is a wonderful example of that. In the 1990s I coined the term 'mega-university' to designate distance teaching universities with over 100,000 students. Indeed, it was in writing my book 'Mega-universities and Knowledge Media: Technology Strategies for Higher Education', that I first got to know Anadolu University.

These mega-universities, of which there are now some fifty around the world, are making an important contribution to expanding access to higher education and the achievement of the United Nations' Sustainable Development goals for 2030. I do not have to remind you that the demand for higher education in much of the world remains huge. Good distance education at scale can help to satisfy that demand.

I make two points about operating at scale. First, when you are producing something - and learning materials are no exception - it is helpful to have economies of scale. The great economist Adam Smith identified this as one of the key advances of the industrial revolution of the 18th century. The economists among you may have studied his account of the example of the pin factory. Making one pin is expensive, but by the time you have manufactured 10,000 the unit cost is much less. That is equally true of making books.

Just as important for distance education is what I call quality of scale. If you are designing courses to reach large numbers of students, you can afford to make the investment to make them excellent. It was clear that the almost instant success of the UK Open University, when it launched in 1971 with a first cohort of 25,000 students, was due to the quality of its teaching materials: the high quality that scale made possible.

That was a challenge for campus universities that had to switch suddenly to remote teaching during the pandemic. They are used to offering courses to hundreds of students rather than tens of thousands of students, so they did not have economies of scale in producing learning materials.

##### OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

But Open Educational Resources have now created new opportunities. When I was at UNESCO and, later, the Commonwealth of Learning I became active in the Open Education Resources movement. This began 20 years ago but has developed surely and steadily over the

years. It means that there is now an abundance of excellent learning material freely available on the Web that any university can adapt and incorporate in its courses.

The mistake that some academics made was to think that it was shameful to use teaching material that they had not developed themselves. But this is a silly attitude. When you are doing research, you don't feel that you must repeat all the previous research that you reference in your work. The same applies to teaching. It is no service to your students to reinvent a wheel that is functioning perfectly well as an Open Educational Resource (OER). I hope that Anadolu University is making some of its teaching material available as Open Educational Resources and I would be interested to know whether other Turkish universities are making use of some of Anadolu's resources.

## **5. Reaching ordinary people**

### ORDINARY PEOPLE

My fifth point is that an essential mission of distance education is to bring education to ordinary people. When I went to university 60 years ago, higher education was an elite occupation. No longer. Most countries aspire to have most of their citizens receive post-secondary education because its benefits to individuals and to countries are increasingly clear.

That is why some large distance teaching institutions are called 'open universities'. Each is open in a slightly different way, but the general idea is to reduce barriers to study - and even more importantly, barriers to successful study.

### 4 OPENS

The UK Open University shocked the academic establishment by removing all pre-requisites for entry. The gamble paid off. Tens of thousands of people, who had not done well in school, came back later to the Open University as adults and succeeded brilliantly. You must have thousands of similar stories at Anadolu University.

The mistake that campus universities made in moving into emergency remote teaching during the pandemic was to ignore this ideal of distance learning and focus only on their existing students, who had all jumped through the hoops of secondary education that were pre-requisites for enrolling in a university.

Moving into the post-pandemic era gives us an opportunity to rethink this. I suspect that the shake-up of the pandemic may have made governments and universities more open to the ideal of openness. The pandemic made us realise that many things that were previously thought to be impossible were, in fact, not only possible but desirable.

## **6. Teamwork**

### PERRY

From the moment of its creation half-a-century ago, the UK Open University made a big splash in the academic world by innovating in many ways, such as open admission, the use of TV and radio, and the assignment each student to a tutor. But when people asked Walter

Perry, the university's founding vice-chancellor, what he considered its major innovation to be, he replied that it was developing courses in teams.

Economies of scale made it possible to invest heavily in course production and putting together teams of academics and other specialists to develop each course created the quality of scale that I mentioned earlier. In most of its courses the Open University did not simply inject the old academic orthodoxy into a new teaching system. It recast the thinking about the topic for a new era. That was why the UK Open University attracted the admiration of the other UK universities long before it convinced governments and industry that it was not a radical and dangerous development.

Against this background it was a pleasure for me to observe that during the pandemic our academic staff at the Acsenda School of Management worked together more intensively than they had before: teaching each other how to use new technologies and sharing techniques that had proved successful for them. I wonder if Turkish universities had a similar experience.

#### PRIVATE & PUBLIC

I conclude that a mistake that many universities made before the pandemic was to regard teaching as a rather private activity in which each instructor operated solo in designing, teaching, and assessing each course. If the pandemic has shown us that teaching should be a more public activity in which we work together with our colleagues for benefit of our students, then it will leave a very positive legacy.

#### GOOD AND BAD

The experience of living through the covid-19 pandemic will have changed higher education in ways that we shall only discover fully in the years to come. For now I simply say that there are good and bad legacies.

The good is that millions more students and teachers will have experience of distance learning. That may be helpful to Anadolu University.

But the bad legacy is that the emergency remote teaching carried out by the campus universities took the OPEN out of OPEN and Distance Learning, since they did not try to reach beyond the students they were reaching already. That gives you at the Anadolu Open Education System the duty to continue the fight for openness in higher education: for the removal of barriers to entering university and for the removal of barriers that impede student success. I wish you well in that great endeavour.

#### THANK YOU

Thank you for your attention. It has been a pleasure to be in touch with Anadolu University again. You are doing great work. I look forward to discussing these six points with you.