



# “Nothing replaces meeting my students at class”: Analysing academics’ views regarding distance education

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## Abstract

Distance education, also called distance learning, e-learning, and online learning, is a practice of teaching and learning in which teachers and learners are not in a closed class or room in person, but where education takes place through various new-media technologies and all parties (student–teacher, teacher–teacher, student–student) are able to communicate, interact and exchange information and emotions. Being on the agenda of educational science for a long time now and gaining further importance during COVID-19 lockdowns, both advantages (e.g., reducing social anxiety, and a flexible schedule) and disadvantages (lack of social interactivity, and miscommunication) of distance education are highly debated in the related literature. Therefore, this study, through a qualitative method (i.e., a case study design and semi-structured interviews), aims to analyse the opinions and experiences of academics regarding distance education and its applications. The participants consist of 36 lecturers working at 16 different Turkish universities selected by the purposeful sampling method (i.e., typical case sampling). The results suggest that the participants still have doubts about online distance education, and they mention both ups (ease of connection, and cost-effectiveness) and downs (lack of self-motivation, socialization, and the sense of isolation) of it. Nonetheless, none of the academics thinks distance education will replace an in-person learning environment in the near future. Thus, this study presents a general illustration of distance education

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activities through the views of Turkish academics and gives recommendations for future digital/distance/online learning activities and functionalities.

**Keywords** Distance education · Academic motivation · Social connection · Turkey

## 1 Introduction

As a result of the progress in information and communication technologies, educational environments appear in different forms and all related activities are applied via diverse activities today. In particular, because of the widespread use of internet platforms by individuals of all ages, educational performances and training are carried out through different learning channels and/or courses. Being one of the primary samples of these platforms, distance education seems to influence individuals to acquire information which in the end makes them independent of time and place (Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2020).

Distance education is an education system in which an effective method is followed in reaching and transporting information resources, technology is used in the most possible beneficial way, and the learner and the teacher are independent of place and time (Gülнар, 2008). In other words, distance education is a learning and teaching process in which individuals who teach and receive education are in different places, which is made possible by communicating via the current technology (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). “The introduction of innovative methods in natural sciences teaching allows for changing radically the approaches to the educational process. The broad introduction of innovations is facilitated by the rapid development of information and communication technologies, which creates new educational opportunities. The use of computer technologies enhances the educational process, provides new ways of acquiring information, and provides testing for new ideas and projects (Syvvi et al., 2020).”

Distance education is not a concept or educational opportunity that has just entered our lives. Distance education is a set of new platforms where education was given through letters many years ago, and this education kept the way it is with the introduction of radio and television. It “is the individual process of gaining knowledge, abilities, skills and ways of personal cognitive activity, occurring mainly at the mediated interaction of the participants of the training process, being distant from one another, in the specialized environment, functioning based on modern psychological-pedagogical and information-communication technologies (Syvvi et al., 2020).” Then, with the development of computer and internet technologies, its widespread use all over the world has increased and keeps growing (Clark, 2020). From this point of view, we can say that distance education has the ability to transform educational environments into more active and user-oriented environments by making use of informatics and internet opportunities as similarly stated by Schott et al., (2003, p.2):

Websupported instruction is becoming more commonplace in today's colleges and universities. Distance education continues to expand because of the growth of the Internet, increased capability and flexibility of webbased tools, increased proficiency in basic Internet skills, and shrinking barriers with respect to accessing and using the Internet. Distance education methods include those that permit any education received by a student to occur when the teacher and the student are separated by location and/or time. Distance education relies on the students' abilities to be selfdirected and internally motivated. This type of education is particularly appealing to students whose lifestyle (time and distance constraints) does not allow them to take advantage of traditional classroom methods. To optimize methods of delivering instructional programs, a need exists to examine continually technologically mediated delivery strategies, which is to say, how can teaching be improved through the use of technology? Web course tools (e.g., static and dynamic Web pages, threaded discussion groups, email, chat, instant messaging, streaming media/video, animations, application sharing, IP audio/video conferencing) are being adopted and used increasingly by teachers to optimize the delivery of instructional material.

Distance education has objectives such as creating new educational environments, integrating individuals' work-life with educational environments, making lifelong learning effective, and integrating information technologies into the education and training process (Cavanaugh, 2001). Yet for distance education to be as effective as possible all parts should be able to use and develop new ways of teaching (lecturers) and learning (students). The faculty should have the skills to merge technologies to deliver instructions and manage electronic course materials and alternate forms of assessments. Hence, distance education can be considered an alternative learning environment for individuals who cannot be in the classroom environment due to illnesses, time, family situations, and geographical distance. The main reason for this is that distance education has a flexible structure, and it eliminates the time and place limits, reduces the costs of educational materials used in education, and offers equal opportunities to everyone (Arat & Bakan, 2014; Ferdousi, 2010; Khan & Williams, 2006; Traxler, 2018; Uşun, 2006). Considering these positive aspects of distance education, education was implemented for a long time through distance education environments during the Covid-19 epidemic period in Turkey as well as all over most of the world.

Current technologies direct learning and teaching practices with the convenience they provide (Syvyi et al., 2022). It can be said that distance education and distance education environments are the strongest examples of this. It emerges as a planned learning and teaching process for individuals who receive education and training in distance education environments by communicating with different technologies and in different places (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Thus, with distance education, individuals can receive education at their own learning pace, without being tied to any place and time, and in other words, they can improve themselves. Especially with today's technologies, it is possible to create synchronous and asynchronous learning networks in distance education, and this result is seen as an important advantage of distance education (Beldarrain, 2006). In addition, with distance education, students can spend more time together, especially on homework that they can carry

out together, and they also have the opportunity to work with other students (King, 2002). In addition to these advantages and opportunities offered by distance education to learners, an important point to be considered is the importance of face-to-face communication between the learner and the teacher in educational environments.

Especially in situations such as reductions in face-to-face communication and interaction with distance education (Altun Ekiz, 2020), inability to access distance education resources equally (Sezgin & Firat, 2020), and distance education environments creating opportunities for distraction (Elcil & Şahiner, 2014). It is also seen as a negative aspect of distance education. From all these perspectives, all individuals want to be in person in the educational environment while learning something new or adding new information to what they have learned, and they think that it may be more beneficial to make eye contact with the teacher. For this reason, distance education is not an alternative to face-to-face education, but rather an environment that supports face-to-face education. For example, with distance education environments, students can reinforce the new information they have learned as a result of face-to-face education with distance education and make their learning more permanent. In other words, distance education has purposes such as providing lifelong learning and integrating information technologies into the education and training process (Cavanaugh, 2001).

During the epidemic period, individuals of all ages, for one reason or another, participated in distance education environments from both computers and smartphones and continued their education. This epidemic period has shown us once again how important distance education is. Especially in distance education environments, where many technical opportunities can be used together and effectively through developing communication technologies, courses can be conducted both online and offline, and student–student and teacher–student interaction can be realized (Seaman et al., 2018). Another important point here is that distance education environments are effective as well because multimedia elements such as video, sound, and animation used in a well-designed distance education environment allow students with different learning styles to benefit from the course materials at the highest level (Yıldırım et al., 2014). Developing the course content for these environments and creating appropriate materials for the environment is a situation that should be paid attention to by the instructors who conduct their courses in distance education environments. If course materials suitable for the environment are not developed, students who use distance education environments may move away from distance education environments. For this reason, the thoughts of individuals who use distance education environments and who teach or receive education in these environments are important (Richter & Anderson, 2014).

There are some studies in the literature about the views of learners regarding distance education via online learning environments. Yılmaz et al. (2021) examined the views of preschool teacher candidates about distance music education practices during the pandemic period. The pre-service teachers who participated in the research expressed their views on saving time and space as the positive aspects of distance education. However, they also dwelled on the negative aspects such as the inadequacy of mutual communication in the distance education process, the lack of infrastructure in practice, and the limited time of the lesson.

Üçer (2020) conducted research on the distance education tools used by university students within the scope of distance education and their evaluation of this education process during the quarantine process in Turkey due to the pandemic. As a result of this research, it was revealed that students generally enjoyed using the digital tools they used within the scope of distance education during the pandemic process, and they communicated easily with their teachers. They liked the ease and comfort of using these tools as they provided satisfaction in terms of the comfort they offered. Wang et al. (2021) investigated online medical education in China and wanted to find out the main challenges of online medical education and possible solutions. At the end of the research, it was seen that most of the students who participated in this online medical education were satisfied with the education they received. It has been stated that not only students but also teachers were satisfied with this online environment. At the same time, opinions were expressed on the need to diversify online training in different ways. In addition, there are studies in the literature that indicate that distance education is effective (Allen et al., 2010; Nayir & Aksoy, 2020; Horspol & Lange, 2012; DeNeui & Dodge, 2006), as well as studies that indicate some of the disadvantages of distance education. (Asmara, 2020; Dias et al., 2020; Erkoca, 2021; Mehrotra et al., 2001; Mohan et al., 2020; Yılmaz et al., 2020).

These studies show that the use of distance education environments is now a reality of modern times. Especially the Covid-19 epidemic and the related quarantine times suggested how important distance education was (Geçer & Bağcı, 2022). Therefore, both educators and students should know and/or improve their skills and information regarding distance education and be able to meaningfully make use of technological devices through which they will be delivering online classes (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). It may be argued that this has swiftly become the urgent need in the area, which makes the current study a significant contribution. In addition, the current study, unlike most of the previous studies, aims to examine *educators' ideas* about distance education via online environments, their attitudes towards distance education and the difficulties they encounter while using these environments through a qualitative approach. This qualitative nature enabled the researchers to have an in-depth understanding of the phenomena in a specific context. In this way, more effective, and useful distance education environments can be designed for the future, and appropriate in-service training may be offered for the teachers. Accordingly, the research question of this study is:

1) How do the lecturers and/or instructors view distance education via online learning environments?

## 2 Method

### 2.1 Ethical statement

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were under the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with

the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Before the semi-structured interviews, the participants were informed about the details of the study and consent forms were obtained from them.

## 2.2 Research model

This research was carried out with the case study pattern, which is one of the qualitative research methods. The case study is a research method that tries to explain an existing situation or examine the communication between the factors affecting change and development in more detail and also analyse these factors and show the development within different processes (Best & Kahn, 2017). In other words, a case study is used to investigate a phenomenon that occurs through a social structure, group, institution, and organization, make explanations about the purpose and examine the situation and events in depth (Büyüköztürk et al., 2017; McMillan, 2000). Considering the goals of this study, the purpose is not to offer direct implications or make generalizations for other contexts as there are significant differences between countries, indeed even in the same country, in terms of infrastructure, education system, learner and teacher qualifications and tendencies and so on. Hence, the qualitative design is better as it provides a rich account from a more limited context to represent it. On the other hand, still the findings of this study will offer implications for the world as well since the world has become more and more global, and more importantly, the world went through a serious vital issue, the COVID pandemic, simultaneously almost in every country. Therefore, the experiences in this pandemic and the globalized technological and education systems may enable the current study to offer some implications for other similar contexts throughout the world. In this sense, this study aims to account for a case in an in-depth manner; however, due to the nature of the phenomena, the study still has the potential to offer insights for a broader context especially considering the expected rise of integration of online components into traditional teaching, which is a finding of this study too as will be discussed in the following sub-sections. Accordingly, the case here is the experiences of academicians (i.e., Turkish academicians during the pandemic), and the study tried to understand this phenomenon in this case via a qualitative analysis of the interviews.

## 2.3 Working group/participants

The study group of the research consisted of 36 lecturers working at 16 universities in Turkey. They were selected by the purposeful sampling method, which is used in qualitative research, in accordance with the principle of voluntariness. In the purposive sampling method, an in-depth research is carried out by selecting information-rich situations depending on the purpose of the research (Büyüköztürk et al., 2017). Out of purposive sampling methods, typical case sampling was used as the researchers wanted to study the phenomenon via typical/average academicians at universities without looking for extreme cases or critical

cases. In addition, before the data collection forms were applied, preliminary short introductory meetings were held with the lecturers, and the purpose and contributions of the study were explained.

## 2.4 Data collection tool

The data were collected through a semi-structured interview form created by the researchers in line with expert opinions. The semi-structured interview is a useful method that can be used in the process of obtaining data to test a certain hypothesis in the mind (Şahin, 2015). To ensure reliability and content validity, prior to the creation of the semi-structured interview form, the literature on distance education and studies in the field were examined in detail, and the main themes and issues were identified. Then, the preliminary version of the interview questions was prepared. There were 10 questions to get the opinions of the instructors about the distance education environments. After that, these questions were sent to three experts (academicians holding a PhD degree) in the field of education to obtain their ideas about the questions. The experts confirmed the questions and suggested that they have reliability and content validity considering the focus of the study. After taking their opinions and opinions, the pre-interview form was prepared for piloting, and a preliminary interview was held with two different instructors. After the preliminary interviews, only some minor problems were observed (i.e., some grammatical issues or lexical/syntactic ambiguity), and the interview form was finalized accordingly. In addition, before the data were collected, the purpose of the study was explained to the participants and their

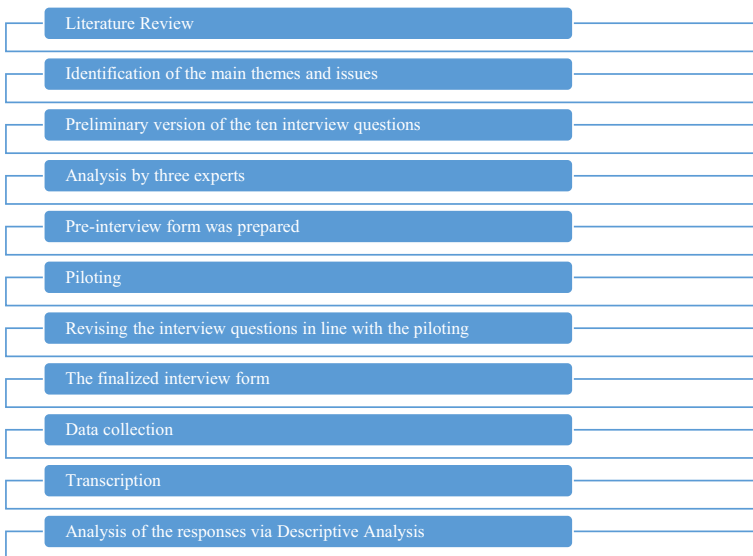


Fig. 1 The development and implementation of the methodology

consent was taken. The interviews took around 15–30 min with each lecturer. The data collection was carried out by the researchers. The responses were transcribed and analysed questions by question as suggested in Descriptive Analysis conventions. All the researchers of the study checked the analysis to ensure inter-rater reliability and validity of the results (Fig. 1).

Here are the ten questions, which were followed expanded by “Why/Why not” and “Could you please explain”, used in the study:

1. Do you think online education is easy to access and satisfactory?
2. What are its easy and difficult aspects when compared to face-to-face teaching?
3. Could you please explain your online teaching style? For example, do you give breaks?
4. Do you think that education will evolve into technology more?
5. If the infrastructure and opportunities are provided, would you like to teach all your courses online?
6. Do you think that everybody can benefit from online education equally?
7. Do you think that what students learn online is the same as what they learn in face-to-face education?
8. Do you think that your students participate in lessons and do assignments at sufficient levels?
9. How have you undertaken your exams or how are you doing in undertaking them? Do you think that the way you have undertaken or will undertake the exams is satisfactory?
10. Do you think that the current applications will change "the working hours" concept?

The following figure summarizes and represents the steps of the research methodology explained above.

## 2.5 Data analyses

The data were analysed through *descriptive analysis* as this study focuses on the concepts (e.g., distance education, and its benefits and disadvantages) identified beforehand. Each of the ten questions in the interview was analysed one by one. In Descriptive Analysis, the data is analysed according to some pre-defined themes (i.e., distance education), and the results are presented according to the research questions. Direct quotations from the participants are also used while presenting the findings. In this way, the findings are provided systematically with direct evidence from the data. Accordingly, the data were analysed one by one and the results were formed via Descriptive Analysis. To ensure reliability, the findings from the data were checked by the two co-authors as well. It was concluded that the interviews and their tentative findings were coherent. This study sometimes synthesized the findings with word clouds as well to visualize the results, which may make it easier for the readers to see and follow the main findings.

### 3 Findings

This study aims to investigate how lecturers and instructors view distance education via online learning environments. The ten interview questions were analysed via Descriptive Analysis, and the findings were summarized below considering each question. In each question, first, the views of the participants were presented, and then, they were analysed and synthesized by the researchers.

1. Do you think online education is easy to access and satisfactory? Could you please explain in detail?

The analysis of the responses to the first question showed that two-thirds of the participants thought that online education is accessible. On the other hand, much fewer participants found online education satisfactory. Only 8 participants found it satisfactory, and 3 participants found it satisfactory at a medium level. The most common reasons for finding online education accessible were that it allowed contacting students more easily and taught more students. It was also thought to be quicker and the opportunity to rewatch the lessons was very significant for access. On the other hand, some significant issues were underlined as being unsatisfactory. The most common problem was technology, facility, and internet problems. To explain, around half of the participants thought that online education was not satisfactory due to internet problems, students' lack of devices, or internet quotas. They complained that the internet might disconnect, or students might lack even a smartphone or internet quotas to attend the lessons. Some of them lacked microphones or cameras as well, which decreased their participation. P12 summarizes the general findings in this question by saying: "I think that online education seems to be accessible; however, it is very problematic in places where there are internet problems". These problems, especially communication cut-offs also decreased students' motivation. A few participants also complained about not being able to control students and lack of non-verbal communication. Finally, a few of the participants underlined the fact that some students and teachers lacked technological skills for pedagogy (i.e., as a part of TPACK) (Koehler & Mischra, 2008). For example, P33 suggests: "Here, we see that the youth is immersed into technology; however, they are a bit foreign to the educational uses of it". This comment shows that although students are digital natives, they may not have TPACK by which they can use technology for learning and teaching purposes specifically. As a result, the fact that digital natives know how to use technology does not mean that they can use it for pedagogic purposes.

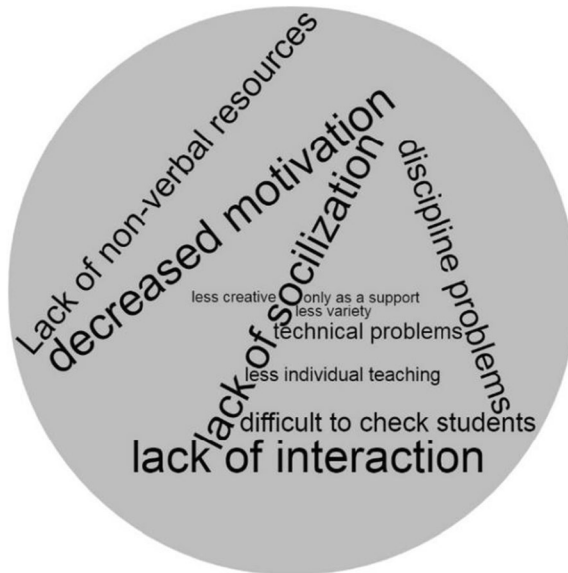
2. What are its easy and difficult aspects when compared to face-to-face teaching? Could you please explain in detail?

The analysis suggested that the most common benefit of online education was saving time, money, and place. Around half of the participants mentioned that online education saved much time for teachers and students alike as there was no need to commute for education. This also saved money, and institutions needed

fewer classrooms and other physical facilities. This can be seen in P6's quotation: "Accessibility, and time management via quick and easy connection are the beneficial aspects". The other common ease of online education was accessibility. Around a quarter of the participants stated that they could easily contact and connect with students and that it was possible to teach more students at one go in online education. Some other less frequent benefits were mentioned as home comfort, rewatching ability, and having better technological equipment as participants found using their laptops much better than smartboards.

On the other hand, many more difficulties were mentioned about online education in contrast to its benefits. The most common problems, mentioned by two-thirds of the participants, were lack of interaction and socialization. Participants thought that online education limits having an interactive lesson in which students can participate, discuss, ask questions, and get instant feedback. These aspects were not possible in most online lessons. This also led to less effective lessons, which was another very common difficulty for the participants. The other common problems, mentioned by around one-third of the participants, were technical problems and students' and sometimes teachers' decreased motivation. The participants stated that it was difficult to teach online due to the internet, facility, and technical problems. Students also lacked motivation as they were not in a real classroom, and they could not really associate with teachers and other students. Facility and internet problems were mentioned as factors that gave way to less motivation as well. To exemplify, P13 suggests: "When there is a problem on the internet or system, both the teachers and students are helpless, and this decreases the motivation of everybody". There were also fewer common difficulties. For example, controlling students and ensuring discipline was more difficult, and online education was not really appropriate for applied fields. The lack of non-verbal resources was also mentioned occasionally. A few participants also mentioned that it was difficult to spare time for individual students, teaching was less creative and there was less variety. Finally, a few participants suggested that online teaching could only be used for supporting face-to-face teaching. The word clouds of the findings were presented below.

### Word clouds of the problems in online education:



3. Could you please explain your online teaching style? For example, do you give breaks? Could you please explain in detail?

The analysis showed that according to the participants' views, the most common practices were ensuring discussion and interaction as much as possible (mentioned by slightly more than half of the participants) and using materials such as PDFs, PPTs, and notes (mentioned by around one-third of the participants). To exemplify the general practices of the participants, P12 mentioned that she greeted students verbally and orally and resorted to naming. She also suggested that she ensured students' participation by having them answer questions. Other practices mentioned by a few participants were greeting the students at the beginning of lessons, having casual chats with them, and using naming as a strategy. These three practices are about the social and psychological aspects that teachers utilize to probably motivate and engage students. One final interesting observation mentioned by two participants was that they talked much more about online teaching.

As for giving a break, most of the participants gave breaks, while one-third of them did not give any breaks or did so only occasionally. The ones who gave a break mostly justified this by stating that this was essential for increasing students' motivation and avoiding making them too tired. On the other hand, giving a break, of course, depends on the duration of the lessons. Some participants stated that they did not give any breaks as the lesson was only around 1 h. They argued that they already had a limited amount of time, and one of them suggested that when he gave a break, people lost interest and even left the lesson.

4. Do you think that education will evolve into technology more? Could you please explain by providing the reasons?

The analysis showed that according to the participants' views, education would benefit from technology more in the future. Only 4 participants thought that there would be no changes. Hence, this shows that most lecturers and instructors expect more technology in education in the future. They justify their expectation for the following reasons: saves time/place/money (5 participants), technology will develop and digitalization will increase (5 participants), accessible (3 people), and the pandemic will quicken this process (3 participants). As for the reasons for saying no to this question, the most common problems (mentioned by one-third of the participants) were mentioned as the lack of social interaction, psychological aspects, emotions, and non-verbal communication. As P27 says: "We should not have online education as the base because it is not a platform that can have students acquire the affective skills." Infrastructure problems followed this issue as a problem. A few participants also mentioned that education was not qualified via technology or online teaching. A few others also mentioned that lecturers and instructors did not have self-satisfaction and demonstrating to students was difficult, which, according to them, were barriers to online teaching.

Another interesting finding from this question was that, although most of the participants agreed with this question, slightly more than half of them also believed that online teaching would not replace face-to-face teaching as it was not "the base", and it could be used for some aspects only. So, this may indicate that most participants agreed that online teaching and technology would have a more place in education; however, it would be more like support and an addition to face-to-face education.

#### **Word clouds of the reasons why education will evolve into technology more:**



5. If the infrastructure and opportunities are provided, would you like to teach all your courses online? Why or why not?

This question investigated whether the participant would like to teach all their courses online and the reasons for their choice. The analysis showed that only 4 participants wanted to teach exclusively online. Around half of the participants rejected the idea, and the other half said that they might choose to teach online sometimes. The ones who said yes justified their choice by mentioning that online teaching saved time and money. Still, they underlined the importance of a stable connection and device. For example, P18 says: "If the infrastructure of online education is provided as good as face-to-face education, yes. I would never prefer to teach in the current situation". So, it may be suggested here that more participants would be willing to teach online if connection and infrastructure issues had been solved. As for those who are against it, they primarily thought that communication and interaction were limited in online teaching. As P29 suggests: "Absolutely no. As I cannot form an interactive communication, I always prefer face-to-face education." Some participants also suggested that it was difficult to do a demonstration and that it was not creative. Also, they argued that online teaching was not effective and that there were many technical and facility problems. A few others also mentioned a lack of effective aspects and classroom management. As for those who preferred to use it sometimes, they strikingly underlined the same theme: yes, they would use it, but only for knowledge level and basic topics and as a support. The reason was that application was not possible in online teaching.

6. Do you think that everybody can benefit from online education equally? Could you please explain by mentioning the reasons?

The analysis suggested that three-quarters of the participants stated that students could not benefit from online education at equal levels. Only 7 participants thought that it was equal or similar to equal. The ones who disagreed mostly suggested that the biggest problem was the facility issues. They suggested that many students lacked a qualified internet connection, a device, or an environment suitable for effective online teaching. Some students could not afford to buy internet packages, or their smartphones or tablet might be inappropriate for online streaming. Another problem raised was technical competence, and some of the participants implied it by referring to digital literacy and TPACK. To exemplify, P30 argues: "I think that every student cannot make use of online education in the same way and level because some students have difficulties in the use of technology in addition to internet and device problems." So, this quotation clearly demonstrates participants' general views by referring to not only facility problems but also the significance of digital literacy and TPACK. Namely, even if facility problems are solved, this does not necessarily mean that students can benefit from online education equally due to differences in digital literacy levels.

### Word clouds of why everybody cannot benefit from online education equally:



7. Do you think that what students learn online is the same as what they learn in face-to-face education? Why or why not?

The answers showed that around half of the participants disagreed with this idea. Slightly less than one-third agreed, and the others thought it depended. The ones who disagreed mainly suggested that online teaching was not appropriate for demonstration and lacked communication. They further added that technology and facility problems were major concerns, and online teaching was not individual/creative. Hence, they thought online learning was not the same. Rather, it was generally worse. On the other hand, some participants thought it was the same by underlining the opportunities online teaching offered such as being able to watch videos again and again. Also, students could find all the lesson notes and documents. Therefore, it must have been the same or very similar. Finally, some participants suggested that it depended. Their answers showed that it was the same when the course was usually theoretical or at a knowledge level dealing with basic topics. Namely, they thought that learning could be the same when online was used for theoretical or basic level topics as support. To exemplify, P10 says: "Yes, (it is the same) in non-interactive lessons". This shows that from their perspective online teaching is associated with theoretical and one-way teaching that does not require much discussion.

8. Do you think that your students participate in lessons and do assignments at sufficient levels? Could you please explain the reasons?

The analysis suggested that the participants were generally not happy with participation and assignment completion rates and that the participants mainly preferred face-to-face education. The results showed that students did assignments relatively more than their participation in lessons. Only a quarter of the participants were happy with students' participation while the rest said that students usually did not participate, or they sometimes participated in the lessons. As for assignments, there was an equal distribution for them: around one-third of the participants indicated that students did assignments, one-third said they did so sometimes, and one-third suggested that students did not do assignments. As a reason, 5 participants argued that students did not participate or do assignments due to the internet and facility problems. 4 participants suggested that they were undergoing changing and unexpected situations. Hence, students had difficulty adapting. 3 participants explained that students did not do assignments and participate regularly as there was no compulsory attendance, and it was also difficult to check students and their assignments in online education. One another interesting finding is that some participants mentioned the effect of time as well. They commented that students' participation and assignment completion rates decreased over time as time passed throughout the semester.

#### **Word clouds of the reasons why students do not do assignments:**



9. How have you undertaken your exams or how are you doing in undertaking them? Do you think that the way you have undertaken or will undertake the exams is satisfactory? Could you please explain the reasons?

When the practices about exams were analysed, it was seen that around half of the participants gave assignments as assessments. Around a quarter of them were assigned reports, reflection papers, and projects which required criticality and application. So, generally, the participants chose assignments and discussion papers rather than exams. On the other hand, only 6 participants suggested that they did or were going to do online exams, and a few of them suggested using multiple-choice questions. As for satisfactoriness, around half of the participants were not happy, and they mentioned cheating and ineffectiveness as the reasons. These participants believed that cheating was a major issue and tried to take some precautions. These included imposing a strict time limit, doing oral exams, uploading exam questions in jpeg format, and asking students to handwrite their responses on a paper and upload it to the system. The ones who were happy with the current situation did not provide any clear reasons.

10. Do you think that the current applications will change "the working hours" concept? Could you please explain the reasons?

The analysis showed that slightly more than half of the participants agreed with this suggestion while slightly less than half disagreed. Therefore, the participants seemed to think in opposing ways, and there were no consensus and tendencies on this issue. As for the reasons for their idea, they were quite diverse and individual. No response recurred except for the idea that online teaching saved time and place, which was mentioned by 4 participants, as lessons could be undertaken outside of working hours or at weekends. When the further reasons for agreeing with the idea that it was going to change, one participant suggested that traffic congestion could be less when there were no fixed working hours. One insightful response was: "It was seen that most can be done online.", which was mentioned by P4. This underlines the fact that experiencing and seeing that working out of the working hours is possible has reshaped people's approach to this issue. Another participant also suggested that working hours were going to change as the focus would be on the work done rather than the sheer number of working hours. Another participant suggested that as online teaching was going to replace face-to-face teaching in the future, working hours would eventually change as well. Finally, flexibility was mentioned as an advantage of changing the working hours concept. Going beyond fixed hours can offer flexibility for teachers and students.

As for the reasons of those who disagreed, they suggested that abolishing working hours was going to be ineffective as institutions assess time management. Another participant suggested: "No because people around me really do not like the idea. They do not want to be bothered by work-related issues for 24 h". This shows that some participants might see it as a challenge to their individual lives beyond their work. Another participant mentioned some real concerns. Overall, the participant

suggested that it is difficult to change due to the education system, the attitudes of people and lecturers, and infrastructure problems.

## 4 Discussion

One of the main purposes of this study was to understand Turkish academics' perceptions regarding distance education via online learning. Qualitative research methods used in this research helped us gain insights into distance education. While there are a few other studies that study the value and efficiency of online education, especially through the views of students, this study has a unique position for being able to reflect interpretations of the faculty from different universities and backgrounds in Turkey. Furthermore, since the pandemic (COVID-19) forced institutions, organisations, and educational professionals to have a deeper understanding and skills of e-learning techniques and methods, this study will give further visions about the application and development of online teaching and learning practices.

While delivering online education and discussing it, the participants expressed both positive and negative experiences and approaches although their experiences tended to be more negative regarding the future of online education and its functionality for a better cultural and informative education system. The flexibility of class participation time and self-regulated study, the cost-effectiveness of e-learning and teaching, a multi-task and video course layout, easy connection, and access to the online class without any travel and congestion hassle were some of the positive approaches indicated by the participants. However, inactive class participation, lack of feedback while communicating with students, unavailability of technical support needed, a sense of isolation and less social interaction, and poorly designed and copied homework were the negative sides of online education raised by the academics.

These outcomes were supported by studies that were reviewed in this study and some others that were not mentioned above (Burns, 2011; Croft et al., 2010; Kvashko et al., 2020). Flexibility and accessibility were mentioned as strong points of distance education. In parallel with the participants' statements, some researchers found similar negative aspects of e-teaching and learning such as communications failure between students and the instructors, delay in responding to the lecturers and the lack of a sense of community and group dynamics in students which in the long run made students more addicted to the technological devices and caused an illusion of occupational and/or educational self-efficacy (Qayyum & Richter, 2018; Stewart et al, 2020).

When participants were asked to evaluate the overall quality of distance education, despite some fluctuating differences, their answers were generally moderate. These balanced and cautious views suggest that the lecturers were not that satisfied and pleased with the education they were delivering through technological communication tools. The responsibility they felt and their expectation to teach students in a more professional and practical set-up might be the reason they do not feel pleased with the way of teaching they are performing.

Participants in this study seemed to feel disappointed, and isolated because there was a lack of feedback from the students which also caused their motivation reduced. When the lecturers could not check if the students understood the course content; the level of confusion, self-inefficacy, and apprehension about the future of distance education increased, which was supported by studies such as Yilmaz et al. (2021). When the instructional methods were only through a kind of monologue but not dialogue and even sometimes reading the presentation slides, they thought students' learning was not going to be effective as they only were or pretended to be online without showing any kind of contribution. Moreover, because the academics did not want to push the students to turn on their cameras due to privacy concerns, they could not contact the students as needed.

The central concern of this paper is to examine university lecturers' experiences in Turkey regarding online/distance education which is also sometimes called hybrid because it includes both distance and in-class teaching and learning. Our findings identify several concerns raised by faculty participating in this study: such as the low engagement of students and a certain loss of love in the teaching profession. They also stated that both teachers and students should develop skills for this new online and hybrid education such as learning quickness, collaboration, discipline, communication, and self-regulation.

Different from the previous studies, this article suggests that in ensuring the quality of online/distance education, the instructor/lecturers play a key role. This is not only because the teacher carries the burden of all teaching activities and directly faces the students and sometimes answers the parents although not usually at the university level, but also because more responsibility has been put on his/her shoulder. Therefore, the quality of online education is not only an issue which should be handled by the lecturers but a collaborative action model including the administrators and students should be developed. For academics, this model could be structured and improved through sufficient support from the university managers involving training, economic support, and occupational promotion. For students, on the other hand, providing equipped facilities, uploading learning materials, giving technical support when they are in need and empowering internet access and other infrastructure for online education should be considered to improve the quality of distance teaching and learning. Finally, it may be suggested here that, in line with Wang et al. (2021), there is a need for diversifying online teaching content and practices in different ways. In the findings of this study, it is seen that distance education via online platforms is usually not regarded as satisfactory, especially from a pedagogic perspective.

## 5 Conclusion

Along with the accelerating technological and new media development, the coronavirus pandemic also caused online education to be on the agenda of education at all levels more intensely. Therefore, studies regarding distance education should be examined within a broader context and in a multidisciplinary way. The role of policymakers, investment

and infrastructure, governmental encouragement and funding, the tiresome activities, and teachers' technological and computational capabilities are essential for the triumph of online education during the pandemic as well. Accordingly, some of the findings that have some potential implications for the field have been discussed below.

### **5.1 Implications for practice**

This study has aimed to contribute to the distance education literature. It provides valuable information from lecturers and instructors that can shed light on the future of online learning and helps policymakers and administrators in providing more effective techniques and infrastructure for online education. It is central for educational institutions and sectors to carefully consider lecturers' and students' attitudes towards online teaching and learning practices. While students should be able to access educational materials and online platforms with equal and non-discriminatory opportunities, lecturers and instructors on the other hand should have technical and economic support when they are in need. Furthermore, to decrease the vulnerabilities such as online burnout, zoom dysmorphia and techno-phobia due to long hours of technology exposure, instructors/tutors should also receive psychological support. As for the parents, they should be able to have educational, economic, social, and psychological support, which will help them develop better communication and relationship with their children and learn how to motivate better those who are taking online education in the family.

Researchers across many disciplines are nowadays studying how online education could be developed and practised in a better way. Hence, the results of this study may help educational professionals and the official organizations in a country, specifically in Turkey, to better understand the links between educational institutions, their instructors and how online facilities are used for educational activities. Furthermore, the discoveries will also be allowing all parts of education, including teachers, students, and official bodies to develop strategies focusing on the promotion of online resources that can help learners to engage more with online education processes. While face-to-face education still seems to be preferred by academics, here universities and other educational institutions should have separate and stronger IT departments to improve digital technologies which will decrease the negative impacts of distance education both for students and teachers, especially with regard to 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills such as TPACK and digital literacy.

### **5.2 Strengths and limitations**

The current research has two main strengths. First, the data collection held between January 1<sup>st</sup> and February 31<sup>st</sup>, 2022, was closely monitored. Because it was just in the process of the post-covid era, the data collection procedure allowed us to timely examine how lecturers were approaching online education and how they engaged with novel online learning procedures. Second, interviewing 36 lecturers from 16 different universities with various socioeconomic backgrounds in Turkey helped us

to comment on the daily understanding and application of distance education more accurately.

Yet, there are several limitations of this study which need to be addressed. Without any doubt if a different sampling technique had been chosen and if it had been comparative research that evaluates students' and lecturers' views, the results could be different and more applicable. Therefore, future research could be done with a group of students and lecturers using a larger sample size, including more universities and colleges. Future research should also consider investigating other aspects that can give deeper insights into the future of online education.

**Data availability** The data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Declarations

**Disclosure** No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**Conflicts of interest** We confirm that there is no conflict of interest associated with this publication.

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