




Dropout from Higher Education in Turkey: A Qualitative Study

Türkiye’de Yükseköğretimde Okul Terki: Nitel Bir Çalışma

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Özet

Bu çalışmada yükseköğretimde lisans düzeyinde okulu terk eden bireylerin bakış açısından, okulu terk etme kararında etkili olan etkenler ve bu etkenler arası ilişkinin belirlenmesi amaçlanmıştır. Çalışmada nitel araştırma yaklaşımlarından olgubilim deseni kullanılmıştır. Çalışma grubu yükseköğretimde okul terki tecrübesine sahip 19 katılımcıdan oluşmuştur. Çalışmanın verileri, yüz yüze görüşme tekniği ile araştırmacılar tarafından geliştirilen yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelerle toplanmıştır. Toplanan veriler, başlıca örüntüleri belirleme, kodlama ve kategorilere ayırma işlemlerini kapsayan içerik analizi tekniği ile analiz edilmiştir. Analiz sonucunda mezun olunan ortaöğretim türü, yükseköğrenim görme nedenleri, mesleki uygunluk düzeyi, seçim yapmada özerk olamama, anne-babanın eğitim seviyesi ve lisans yerleştirme sınav puanı gibi konuların katılımcıların üniversite bölüm tercihini etkileyebildiği tespit edilmiştir. Okul terki kararında etkili olan yükseköğrenim süreçleri ise sosyal uyum, akademik süreçler, örgütsel süreçler ve maddi imkansızlıklardan oluştuğu belirtilebilir. Katılımcıların terk kararı vermesinde ise, akademik başarısızlık, mezuniyet sonucunda edinilecek mesleğin kişisel özelliklerine uygunluğunun değerlendirilmesi, evlilik ve mezuniyet sonrası iş olanaklarının etkili olabildiği görülmektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Yükseköğretim politikaları, yükseköğretimde okul terki, yükseköğretime katılım.

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine the factors which affect the decision to drop out at undergraduate level from the point of view of the individuals who dropped out from higher education. In this study, phenomenological research design, which is one of the qualitative research approaches, was used. The study group consisted of nineteen participants with dropout experience in higher education. The study data were collected using semi-structured interviews, and analyzed using the content analysis method. The findings of the study show that pre-college experiences affecting dropout, based on the type of graduated high school, the reasons for leaving university education, the level of vocational maturity, the lack of autonomy in department choice, parental education level and university entrance examination scores may have affected the department choice of the participants. The problems experienced during the college study leading to dropout are related to social adjustment, academic factors, organizational factors and financial difficulties. According to the participants' statements, the final dropout decision was made as a result of academic failure, evaluation of appropriateness of vocational choice, marriage, or employment opportunities after graduation.

Keywords: College dropout, higher education participation, higher education policies.

The success of undergraduate students in achieving their career goals is considered as one of the basic objectives of universities and the most important performance indicator of higher education systems. Therefore, in order to decrease dropout, which is defined as leaving higher education for any reason before graduation, it is necessary to develop policies to facilitate access and participation in education by improving the quality of higher education systems (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). A review of the literature on dropout shows that there are academic, individ-

ual, economic and familial factors contributing to a student's decision to drop out. Several researchers have indicated academic adjustment (Tinto, 1993; Yorke & Longden, 2008), and academic expectations (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004) as the determinant of students' decisions to drop out. Similarly, low academic adjustment and expectation in their early evaluations, as a source of stress and dissatisfaction, increase students' disconnection from their classmates, courses and institutions (Braxton et. al., 2004). Students' prior academic histories and their department choices are some other

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This study has been developed from the doctoral dissertation conducted by Assist. Prof. Dr. Fatma Uslu Gülşen at the Institute of Educational Sciences of Eskişehir Osmangazi University, under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Ayhan Aydın and co-supervision of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sıdıka Gizir.

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important indicators for dropout. According to Tinto (2015), students with higher grades have higher rates of graduation, especially if they start their first-choice or in a prestigious department or university, are more likely to complete their courses. This not being the case, they will have less commitment to academic activities which lead to academic dissatisfaction (Lassibille & Gomez, 2008).

A number of individual variables, such as sex or age, also have a relationship to dropout. For instance, male students spend less time on academic activities, which seems to increase their dropout rate, whereas female students who dropout tend to exhibit more difficulties with social integration (Tinto, 2015). In addition to academic and individual variables, socio-economic variables, such as family socio-economic status and part-time working may be also related to dropout, as it is more frequent in students from more disadvantaged socio-cultural backgrounds (Tinto, 1993). According to Yorke and Longden (2008) students who come from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds have poor study skills and this negatively affects their academic achievement which increases the risk of dropout. Related to family socio-economic status, providing financial support to a student for living expenses may be a protecting factor against dropout.

Theoretical Models on Dropout from Higher Education

In the literature, each of the aforementioned factors or variables or a certain combination of them, have been considered as a main factor by various models to explain dropout. The sociological model focuses on the harmony with the student's environment; a direct relationship between academic performance and dropout (Spady, 1970). In addition to the sociological model, the student integration model also explains the factors in dropout. This model regards integration to the university environment as an important indicator of organizational commitment (Tinto, 1975). In the model, universities are divided into two basic systems as social and academic. Students' experience in academic and social systems affects their academic and social integration, which shapes their goals and institutional commitment for graduation. Negative experiences in academic and social systems lead to dropout, by weakening the students' goals and organizational commitment. Another most commonly discussed model in the literature is the conceptual model which addresses the longitudinal factors in dropout (Bean, 1980). Unlike the student integration model, it examines environmental factors out of school, such as finance and the opportunity to transfer.

The very definition of the term 'dropout' is controversial. In the literature, dropout is reviewed in three ways; disenrollment, institutional departure and system departure. The defini-

tion of dropout is more complex as there are different definitions; the most common being its consideration as transferring to a different university (Aina, 2013). According to Pascarella and Terenzini (1979), not enrolling in the same institution for a period or one year can be defined as disenrollment, leaving the institution without returning as institutional departure and leaving higher education without returning as system departure. While the student who leaves an institution may transfer to another institution, the student who leaves higher education ends her/his school life. In this study, taking our lead from these authors, dropout is considered as system departure, and individuals who left their department and universities permanently are included in the sample.

From whatever perspective it is taken, college dropout is an important educational problem in all developed or developing countries, and can be considered a different problem than the other educational stages in an educational system (Tinto, 2015). Depending on the individual characteristic and social outcomes of university education, not being able to complete education can bring about negative consequences, not only for individuals, but also for societies. For this reason, college dropout can be regarded as a problem different from other educational stages. Specifically, it may be proposed that the number of the students who continue and complete their education successfully is considered to be one of the main performance indicators of a higher education system. Therefore, there is a need to improve educational policies, such as increasing participation in higher education, providing access, and continuing education and preventing dropout to improve the quality of the higher education system (Quinn, 2013).

Dropout from Higher Education in Turkey

Higher Education System constitutes an important part of the Turkish education system with more than seven million students. Within the Turkish education system, the only way to get a place at university is through the Higher Education Examination Undergraduate Placement Examination (YKS). The examination consists of three rounds a Basic Proficiency Test (TYT), an Area Qualification Test (AYT), and a Foreign Language Test (YDT). Candidates in the central placement ARE placed by the Measuring Selection and Placement Center (ÖSYM) into higher education programs based on their scores, program-related preferences and the quotas and conditions of these programs (Eurydice, 2020). The Turkish universities' education system is based on the rule of successful completion of an academic year for passing students to the next year. The system is rather inflexible, and offers few possibilities for inter-departmental transfers. When the dropout phenomenon in the



Turkish context is examined, it is remarkable that millions of students enter into a fierce competition to study in higher education. According to OSYM, a total of 2,381,412 candidates took the university exam in 2018, of which 397,614 were individuals who had already registered in a higher education institution. This data shows that there are thousands of individuals who are not satisfied with their department or the university in which they find themselves, and want to change it. These candidates may be regarded as students who want to leave their department or university. In addition to this, when the limited number of dropout studies in higher education in Turkey is reviewed, it is determined that the studies mainly report students who are already attending higher education or who had returned to school through student amnesty (Aypay, Çekiç, & Boyacı, 2012; Bülbül, 2012). For instance, in Bülbül's study, the study group includes students who have returned to higher education within the scope of the amnesty in 2008 in Turkey, it is noted that the students left university because of social adaptation problems. In addition, most of the students participating in the study stated that they had negative views on the possibilities and the quality of the education they had received. According to the results of Aypay et al.'s study, students in Turkey mostly leave higher education because of placement in a program they do not want to study at, or dissatisfaction with the academic and social environment.

In the dropout literature, there have been no studies taking organizational, individual, academic and social factors together from a broad perspective. Studying with limited variables and sample groups can lead to an ignorance of problems arising from the basic structure of the higher education system. The current study discusses the main determinants of dropout, including all the factors together, and this may encourage the implementation of possible preventative measures. In addition, dropout studies in the literature have mostly been conducted using quantitative methods to determine the approaches of students attending school towards dropout. For this reason, as it includes individuals who had dropout experiences in its sample, this study may fill an important gap in the literature. Obtaining data from individuals who have dropped out is important in terms of acquiring information about the obstacles to individuals' attendance at university, as well as helping to produce effective solutions to these obstacles. Therefore, the present study attempts to answer the following research question: What are the most common issues and factors associated with dropout from higher education from the viewpoint of individuals who have had dropout experience?

Method

This study is designed as phenomenological research to investigate factors associated with dropout from higher education from the viewpoint of individuals who have had dropout experience. The truths and realities of undergraduates who left a university are constructed through their experiences and perceptions. Phenomenology is an approach to qualitative research that focuses on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group (Creswell, 2016). Because the phenomenon focused on in this study seems to reflect complex interactions among factors, the qualitative method was preferred. Qualitative research provides a better sense of the subject matter, and allows researchers to draw a clear and rich picture through an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. In other words, a qualitative researcher focuses on the phenomena in their natural settings (Gizir, 2014).

Study Group

The participants of this study consisted of individuals who had left their departments in which they were studying and did not continue their education in different departments or universities. In other words, the study group is composed of individuals who dropped out of university permanently. Individuals who later transferred to other departments/universities or enrolled in open education faculties or in distance education were not included in the study group. Within the scope of the study, researchers contacted twenty-four individuals who had dropped out, either by social media or e-mail groups, and informed them about the study. Nineteen of these individuals agreed to participate in a face-to-face semi-structured interview. Many of the individuals with whom the researchers got in contact, did not want to volunteer for an interview stating that they did not want to remember their past negative experiences. As a result, the study group consisted of nineteen participants; seven female and twelve male. In accordance with ethical principles, the personal information of the research participants was kept confidential. Demographic characteristics of the study group is summarized in ■ Table 1.

Instrument

The data were obtained through semi-structured interviews using an interview template including twenty-four open-ended questions. The template was developed through a comprehensive literature review to conceptualize the subject matter as well as the opinions of three experts on qualitative research and higher education. After making a number of revisions considering the experts' opinions, the interview questions were tested by means of a pilot study considering their content, wording,

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of the study group.

Participant	Age	The university dropped out from	The department dropped out from	Current occupation
Interviewee-1	28	Çukurova University	Agricultural Engineering	Crane Operator
Interviewee-2	29	Çukurova University	Department of Business	Theater Manager
Interviewee-3	26	Istanbul Okan University	Department of Finance	Insurance Broker
Interviewee-4	32	Mersin University	Department of Finance	Photographer
Interviewee-5	36	Ankara University	Medical Faculty	Financier
Interviewee-6	33	Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal University	Department of Business	Civil Servant
Interviewee-7	35	Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal University	Department of Kindergarten Teaching	Hairdresser
Interviewee-8	37	Mersin University	Geological Engineering	Exporter
Interviewee-9	19	Muş Alparslan University	Faculty of Islamic Sciences	Nurse
Interviewee-10	25	Dokuz Eylül University	Department of Sociology	Warden
Interviewee-11	25	Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University	Department of Literature	Tradesmen
Interviewee-12	32	Çukurova University	Department of Economics	Marketing Staff
Interviewee-13	24	Girne American University	Department of Computer Engineering	Unemployed
Interviewee-14	35	Gazi University	Department of Kindergarten Teaching	Housewife
Interviewee-15	35	Çukurova University	Department of Mechanical Engineering	Technician
Interviewee-16	32	Near East University	Department of Computer Engineering	Tradesmen
Interviewee-17	27	Gaziantep University	Department of Archeology	Unemployed
Interviewee-18	30	Selçuk University	English Language Teaching	Housewife
Interviewee-19	36	Hacettepe University	Department of Mining Engineering	Tradesmen

sequence and approximate length of interview time. Because conducting a pilot study is one of the most frequently-used procedures to acquire validity and reliability studies, it was preferred in this study. After the pilot study was conducted with two participants, the interview questions were reviewed and necessary modifications were made. The interviews reflected the chronology of the individuals' dropout decision-making. For instance, the interviews started from questions concerning the attributed meaning of university education for participants, and their selection of the university and department. The subsequent questions covered the experience of university life and the process of dropout. The final part of the interviews related to the feelings of the participants before and after leaving university. A typical interview lasted between sixty to eighty minutes. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed with the permission of the interviewees. All the interviewees signed an Informed Consent Form prior to the interview.

Data Analysis

The data obtained using semi-structured interviews were content analyzed, including the processes of identifying, coding and categorizing the masses of information. Before analyzing

the data, each utterance was written by the researchers without any correction. After validating the accuracy of the transcriptions, the researchers made a holistic review of the data to form a general understanding. The codes, categories and themes emerged through revising the data many times by taking the relevant literature into consideration. At the same time, some procedures were used throughout the study to ensure the validity and reliability of the study. In addition to taking the experts' opinion on the interview template and conducting a pilot study, validity and reliability were also attained through triangulation using multiple analysts. Specifically, triangulation is seen as one of the techniques commonly-used in qualitative studies to increase the reliability and validity of a study. Triangulation procedures are conducted using multiple analysts, multiple sources, multiple methods or multiple investigators (Stake, 1998). In order to triangulate in this study, four interview transcripts were randomly selected and given to three people who were experts in the field of qualitative research for analysis. Moreover, each researcher analyzed the data separately and the categories and codes which emerged were compared. The final themes, including categories and sub-categories, were constructed after comparing the categories and codes



drawn from the three experts and the final review. After this, the themes which emerged were supported by direct quotations from the participants' responses, and also using comprehensive related literature to provide evidence for the interpretations.

Through the analysis, the researchers reviewed the raw data in a round and reduced it into six major analytical themes including a number of categories as follows: (i) department choice (graduated high school type, reasons for getting university education, vocational maturity, non-autonomy in department choice, parental education level, university entrance exam score), (ii) social adjustment (classroom relationships, social environment, facilities of the city where the university was located), (iii) academic factors (self-regulated learning skills, courses based on rote-learning, absenteeism, raising awareness of own interests and skills communication with faculty members), (iv) organizational factors (physical structures of the campus, academic advisory system), (v) financial difficulties, (vi) final dropout decision (academic failure, evaluation of appropriateness of vocational choice, marriage, employment opportunities after graduation).

Results

At the end of the analysis, a number of common factors associated with dropout emerged. Specifically, the results show that the themes of *department choice*, *social adjustment*, *academic factors*, *organizational factors* and *financial difficulties*, and *final dropout decision* were the most common factors associated with dropout emerging in the views of the participants. In addition, analysis of the data reveals that each theme is related with others, and that the dropout decision is made at the end of a long period. Therefore, the themes were also examined under three basic stages: the pre-college, college and final dropout, as explained in detail below. These three basic stages were drawn from the experiences of participants, as well as being based on how they related these to dropout during the interviews.

Pre-college Factors Affecting Dropout

Analysis of the data shows that individuals who had dropout experience questioned their dropout decisions from the beginning. It was observed that the participants mainly emphasized the factors affecting their department choice.

Department Choice

The theme of department choice included six categories; *graduated high school type*, *reasons for getting university education*, *vocational maturity*, *non-autonomy in department choice*, *parental education level* and *university entrance exam score*. The results show

that *graduated high school type* was one of the most influential factors on department choice. Almost all of the participants stated that graduated high school type creates pressure on individuals to choose specific departments. One participant, who graduated from science high school and dropped out of the faculty of medicine, commented on this subject as follows: "I wasn't sure whether it was the influence of the teachers or it was the social environment that I belonged to, but there was a perception that if you graduated from science high school, you would either become a doctor or an engineer. So, I chose the faculty of medicine to study at." [Interviewee-5]

Moreover, it was observed that a number of the participants perceived university education as a means for academic, social and intellectual development, while others thought that university education was a process that needed to be completed after high school. Their opinions were categorized as *reasons for getting a university education*. One of the participants who thought university education was important for social and intellectual development stated, "I started university to improve myself, to meet new people." [Interviewee-9]

Another category under the theme of department choice is *vocational maturity*, defined as the ability of the individual to decide on the appropriate occupation for their interests, talents, personality traits and expectations. The result reveals that the majority of the participants were not aware of the fact that they had chosen their profession by their choice of department in the period of transition from high school to university. In other words, they had not been mature enough to choose a suitable vocation. A typical participant response was, "I went to university to be free and feel comfortable. That's why I didn't think about my department. I understood that it wasn't appropriate for me when I was in my third year." [Interviewee-1]

Moreover, the majority of the participants stated that their family members played an important role in their choice of department. Such opinions of the participants were categorized under the title of *non-autonomy in department choice*, including the interrelated categories of *parental education level*. The greater the *educational level of parents*, the less autonomy the participants felt that they had in department choice. A participant whose mother is a primary school teacher stated: "My parents wanted me to go to the university in the city where they live. We made the department and university choice together. My mom knew every detail in the university selection guide better than me". [Interviewee-12]

During the interviews, it was observed that participants' *university entrance exam scores* also played a role at the department choice, as well as the factors mentioned above. Considering



these factors, it may be proposed that the department choice of the participants was made without due thinking, regardless of the interests and abilities of the individual. For example, one participant said, “*Obviously, studying finance didn’t feature in my mind at all. I wish to be a teacher. But my exam score wasn’t high enough to choose a faculty of education. My uncle suggested I choose finance, and I chose a finance department without giving it much thought.*” [Interviewee-4]

Factors Affecting Dropout in the College Process

Social adjustment, academic factors, organizational factors and financial difficulties were raised by the participants as important factors related to dropout in the college process. It was also realized that making a department choice unconsciously in the pre-college process influenced participants’ experience negatively in college, and this provided a basis for the dropout decision as explained below in detail.

Social Adjustment

The results reveal that the participants had certain negative experiences both in and out of their classes and universities with respect to social relationships with other individuals and the facilities of the city where the university was located. The related opinions of the participants were classified as a social adjustment theme, and included three categories; *classroom relationships, social environment, and facilities of the city where the university was located.*

The *classroom relationship* category emerged from the opinions of the participants on the unsatisfactory friendship relationships in the classroom and the difficulties in not having common interests with others. A participant’s statement related to this category is, “*I tried to make friendships, but I could not be successful. Frankly, I didn’t like the circle of friends. They seemed highbrowed to me.*” [Interviewee-9]

The participants also mentioned their dissatisfaction with the *social environment* of the university. According to their expressions, while some of the participants could not get involved in the social environment, others were isolated from social environment. Five of the participants who made their department or university choices under pressure, stated that they could not get involved in the social environment. For example, one participant said, “*Actually, I did not want to study in Adana as my family lived in this city. Unfortunately, I was accepted at university in Adana. With this disappointment, I did not get involved in the social environment at the university. I travelled to the cities where my high school friends lived. I did not stay in Adana for two months in two years.*” [Interviewee-1]

The category of *facilities of the city where the university was located* is mainly based on the complaints of a number of the participants on the adequacy of social and cultural facilities of the city. Specifically, four of the participants who went to a university which was located in a small or medium sized city complained about limited social and cultural facilities, and mentioned that they spent most of their spare time at home or in a shopping mall. A participant frequently expressed his negative experiences related to the social environment and also the facilities of the city saying, “*Actually, I didn’t fight anyone, but I didn’t get along with anyone very well. Friends in class was so boring for me. There was no social activity in the city. The most popular activity that we had was going to the shopping mall.*” [Interviewee-14]

Academic Factors

The theme of academic factors included five categories: *self-regulated learning skills; courses based on rote-learning; absenteeism; raising awareness of own interests and skills; and communication with faculty members.* The results show that most of the participants had problems with *self-regulated learning skills.* Self-regulated learning skill is defined as an individual’s ability and motivation to implement, monitor and evaluate various learning strategies for the purpose of facilitating knowledge growth (Schunk & Ertmer, 2000). A participant’s statement highlighting a lack of this skill is as follows: “*I was not motivated to study. I wish I had support in this regard. I was a student who did not like studying.*” [Interviewee-8]

All five participants stated that the *courses based on rote-learning* disappointed them. These participants mentioned their high expectations of the academic and intellectual content of university courses, especially after a challenging entrance exam process. One of the participants noted their dissatisfaction regarding the courses as follows: “*I was disappointed with the courses in college. There were lots of unnecessary courses. I was supposed to read and discuss literary works, but there was no context.*” [Interviewee-11]

As indicated in the previous sections, a number of the participants chose departments in which they were less interested or were not interested in. The participants who had to study in an undesired department, had negative perceptions towards their department. These are the participants who were absent from school. *Absenteeism*, which adversely affects the academic success of students, may cause them to dropout by reducing commitment to their schools. A participant expressed that he did not regret dropping out, by saying, “*Now I think that I have lost time. I still love reading literature, but I cannot do it as a profes-*



sion. *Attending all of the lessons sounded crazy at that time. Sometimes I did not attend lessons, even if I was at the campus. The lessons were too boring for me.* [Interviewee-11]

Moreover, a number of participants emphasized that when they realized the necessary skills required for the profession which they would obtain after completing their department course, they decided the profession was not suitable for them. These participants stated that they felt overwhelmed, and that they experienced various social adjustment problems because of the idea that the department was not suitable for his/her interest and skills. According to them, these kinds of experiences led to adjustment problems, such as limited interaction with classmates. The results show that the participants made their decision to drop out in the third or fourth year *after becoming aware of their own interest and skills*. As such, it may be stated that the participants examined their interests and skills while the number of courses which are directly related to the profession increased in the third and fourth year of university. Therefore, participants began to get answers about the appropriateness of the profession to their character, interests and skills in these years. One of the participant's explanation related to this category was as follows: *"At the end of the third year, the decision to dropout became clear for me. I felt that the profession wasn't suitable for me."* [Interviewee-7]

In addition, except for three of the participants, all the others noted the importance of *communication with faculty members* out of the classroom. The participants stated that faculty members kept students at a distance, and did not communicate with them out of the classroom. An example statement for this category is, *"Our lecturers kept away from us. They did not communicate with us out of the classroom. In fact, these were the people responsible for enlightening us on our personal development. But they did not support us in this respect."* [Interviewee-4]

Organizational Factors

In addition to the aforementioned factors related to the social and academic context, the participants also emphasized organizational factors that affected their dropout. Explicitly, they complained about the physical structures and student services of their universities. The results indicate that *the physical structure of the campus* had an important influence on the students' adjustment to university life. Physical distance within the campuses and also the departments was raised as an important factor for dropout. The following can be seen a good example for this category: *"Campuses were too far from each other. The campus of my department was too far away from the main campus. So, I never felt a member or a part of the university."* [Interviewee-14]

In addition, adjustment to university life had an important role in students' success. *Academic advisors* make students' adjustment to school easier and keep students' university lives healthy. The participants criticized their advisors saying that they only communicated with them during the course registration period and stated that they expected guidance from academic advisors, not only on academic matters, but also on individual and social issues. Two participants expressed the same related to this category is as follows: *"I had an advisor, but I met him only during the course enrolment periods."* [Interviewees-6 and 14]

Financial Difficulties

Four of the participants stated that they had had to work part-time while they were attending university because of *financial difficulties*. They perceived part-time work as an obstacle, not only to expanding their social network, but also to fulfill from fulfilling their academic responsibilities. One of them explained that he did not fulfill academic responsibilities since he had to work part-time saying, *"Financial difficulties began to increase after the second semester. So, I had to work and I did not have much time to study. I could not take some exams."* [Interviewee-4]

Financial difficulties were also linked to absenteeism and academic success by these participants.

Final Dropout Decision

Analysis of the data indicates that each theme and each category included in these factors were related with one another. It seems that the decision to dropout from higher education, as emphasized by almost all of the participants, requires a long period of time. The results show that certain factors are more influential on the eve of the final dropout decision. These factors were categorized under the theme of final dropout decision. The categories of *academic failure, evaluation of appropriateness of vocational choice, marriage and employment opportunities after graduation* are categorized under this theme, based on the expressions of participants regarding the final dropout decision that was made, based on the effects of factors influential in the pre-college and college periods. Some of the participants insistently noted that they had decided to drop out because of academic failure. They related their *academic failure* to financial difficulties, weak self-regulated learning skills, evaluation of appropriateness of vocational choice, and courses based on rote-learning. For example, the participants noted that they had to work in part-time jobs because of financial difficulties, so they could not attend courses and some examinations, and that they also had no time to study. Moreover, some of the participants had dropped out during third or

fourth year of university. They mentioned questioning the *appropriateness of vocational choice*. A participant's statement related to this category is, "If I had studied literature instead of my department of early childhood education, I could have graduated. Frankly, I cannot put up with kids." [Interviewee-14]

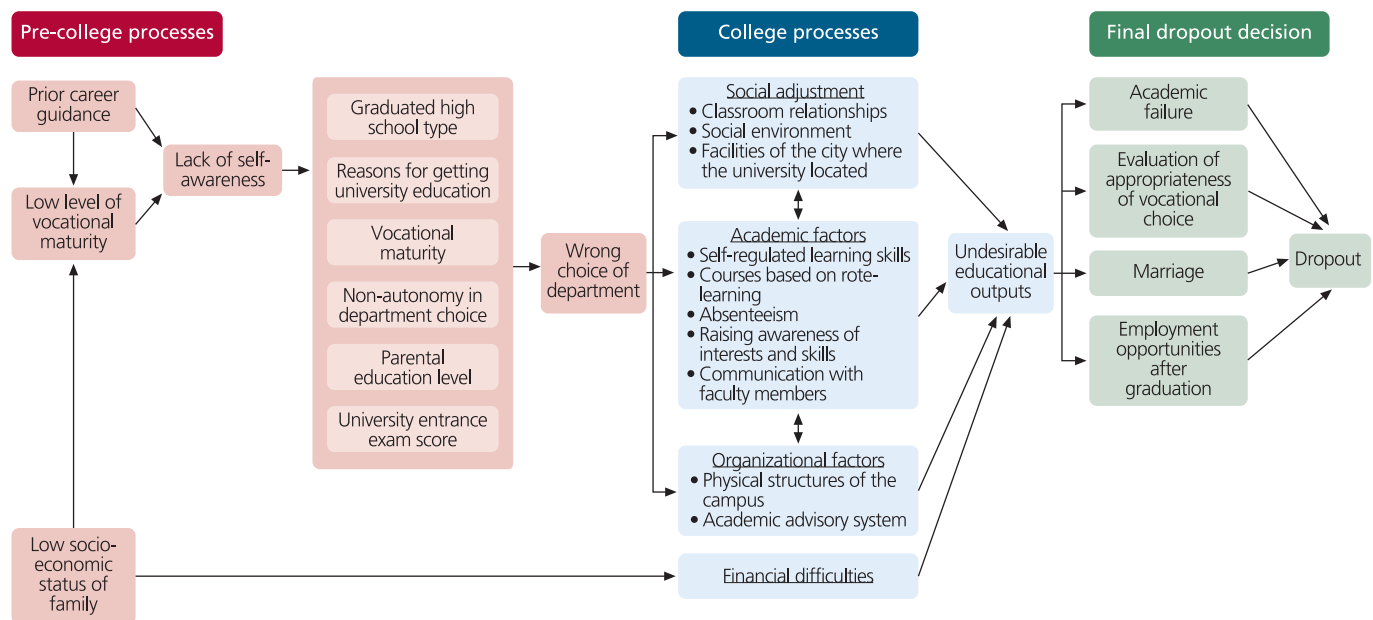
In addition to academic failure, two of the women participants stated that they could not complete their education, because they got *married*. They reported that they were overwhelmed by the specific responsibilities of marriage. As such, it should be noted that a number of participants evaluated their academic standing. After this evaluation, they decided that they could not complete their education and they created different opportunities for themselves. The participants declared marriage causing an increase of responsibilities as a reason for their final dropout decision.

Analysis also reveals that *employment opportunities after graduation* are influential on the final dropout decision. Some of the participants stated that limited employment opportunity after the graduation from the department in which they were studying had an effect on their final dropout decision. One participant expressed his opinion about this saying, "The Finance department has no future in any way, there are lots of graduates, but there is no employment opportunity." [Interviewee-6]

Discussion and Conclusion

Analysis of the data indicates that dropout from higher education is the end of a long process, which can be examined under three basic stages: the pre-college, college and final dropout decision. The relationship among the themes and categories drawn from the expressions of the participants are presented in Figure 1, and are also discussed in detail in the discussion and conclusion part of the study.

In this qualitative study, the most common factors are examined from the first-hand perspectives of individuals who had dropped out. It may be stated that the participants decided to drop out of college for a variety of reasons. Their decision was dictated by circumstances. As a whole, all of the participants made their department choice with regard to their current situation, regardless of their interest and skills. The results of this study, similar to the literature review, show that individuals make their department choice by taking into account the expectations of their families or school communities and/or by relating to their high school type (Korkut-Owen, Kepir, Özdemir, & Yılmaz, 2012). Although the participants of this study perceived their university department choice as their choice of profession, the findings reveal that families played an important role in the participants' university department choices. Normally, it is expected that a student acquires his/her inde-



■ Figure 1. Processes of dropout from higher education.



pendence and organizes his/her life as an individual at the age of university department choice. However, it was observed that families may have acted in a dictating manner at the time of department choice of the participants, because of the participants' low level of vocational maturity. Savickas (1990) defines vocational maturity as the ability to make appropriate vocational choices that fit one's abilities and interests. According to Kniveton (2004), individuals who are aware of their interests and abilities will more actively seek a career that suits them. On the other hand, their career lives may be interrupted. The results show that making a department choice in an uninformed way, may create a negative impact on making friendships and participating in academic issues for the participants.

In addition to the reasons listed above, a number of participants stated that they made their department choices according to their college entrance exam scores without questioning whether the department was appropriate for their interests and abilities. Sarıkaya and Khorshid (2009) note that high school students make their department choices considering their exam scores, which prevents participants from building friendships with class-mates and developing a sense of belonging towards their departments. Along with all these problems, inadequacies of academic context, study and time management skills acquired in high school leads to academic failure (Korkut-Owen et al., 2012).

The explained effects of department choice on students' experiences at university, the results related to the social adjustment, academic failure, and questioning of the appropriateness of vocational choice stand to reason. Social adjustment, referring to classroom relationships, social environment, and the facilities of the city where the university is located, was one of the issues frequently stated by the participants. Close relationships are important in every period of life, but especially during the college period when rapid and intense changes are experienced and the quality of the relationships contributes to the formation of the individual (Rabaglietti & Ciairano, 2008). Research examining the protective aspects of classroom relationships in college emphasizes that it makes it easy to adapt to college life (Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2008), increases the level of success and happiness, and contributes to the socialization of individuals (Hartup & Stevens, 1997). Being deprived of classroom relationships may allow individuals to develop anti-social behaviour and cause loneliness and social isolation (Bilgiç, 2000). In this study, the participants emphasized that they did not adjust to the relationship environment of the classroom and that they found it difficult to have common interests with classmates. The positive classroom relationship perception may facilitate social adjustment and it may

reduce the risk of dropout. On the other hand, if students are unable to communicate effectively with classmates, they may feel isolated and this may increase the risk of dropout (Elkin, Broxton, & James, 2000).

In addition to classroom relationships, not feeling a part of a social environment, which may be defined as the environment where individuals are in communication, may be evaluated as an important factor for dropout. The participants frequently expressed their negative attitudes and feelings regarding social environment, and this may be considered as a meaningful finding. In addition to social environment, facilities of the city where the university is located played an important role in the social adjustment of the participants. The facilities of the city where the university is located may contribute to diversify the leisure time activities of participants, which may, in turn, contribute to having a wide social network. The participants who dropped out from universities located in small towns complained about insufficient facilities for social activities.

Moreover, self-regulated learning skills, courses based on rote-learning, absenteeism, raising awareness of own interests and skills, and communication with faculty members were included in the academic factors theme because they were related to the academic practices in the college experience. Schunk and Ertmer (2000) define self-regulated learning as an individual's ability and motivation to implement, monitor and evaluate various learning strategies for the purpose of facilitating knowledge growth. Within the context of this study, most of the participants stated that they had problems with self-regulated learning skills. According to Quin (2013) individuals who have problems with self-regulated learning skills are unable to follow appropriate strategies for fulfilling their responsibilities in the classroom. This may lead to academic adjustment problems, which may be seen as a reason for dropout. Not only problems in self regulated learning skills, but also courses based on rote-learning, was evaluated as a reason for dropout by the participants. They stated that the content of courses failed to meet their expectations. Experiencing disappointment regarding the courses may cause a loss of individuals' motivation, and this may affect academic adjustment negatively (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008).

The participants also stated that they did not have enough information regarding the department they chose before starting college and, at the same time, their awareness of own interests and skills expanded in the college. In parallel with this finding, Berger (2000) states that while the perception of the department he/she continues in is not suitable for oneself may be related to the individual not being independent in the



choice of department, it may also be related to realistically evaluating ones' skills and abilities. In addition, communication with faculty members appeared to be one of the most common issues stated by the participants. According to Tinto (1993), if college students evaluate their communication with faculty members as satisfying both in and out of the classroom, they will have higher educational aspirations, and this will contribute to the persistence of students. Similarly, Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) point out that when students discuss their career goals with faculty members, their vocational maturity levels increase and their perception regarding the department becomes clearer. The results of this study reveal that participants cared not only about in-class, but also about out-of-class communication with faculty members. Disappointment concerning the courses and ineffective communication with faculty members may have caused absenteeism for most of the participants. Absenteeism dramatically affects the connectedness and engagement of participants and leads to dropping out (Taylı, 2008).

Organizational factors appeared as one of the other themes, including the physical structure of the campus and academic advisory system. The physical structure of the campus, which includes libraries and students' residential halls is important in creating an environment that is conducive for learning and development to complement the academic programs. Analysis of the data reveals that most of the participants found the physical structure of their campus to be inadequate. Dissatisfaction with these conditions may have caused negative perceptions towards the university leading to certain undesirable behavior, such as absenteeism. According to Harvey and Szalkowicz (2015), difficulties in commuting to campus, inadequacies of residential halls, relationships with faculty members and academic advisors all shape the students' decision to continue or to leave school. In addition, some participants complained about the inadequacy of the academic advisory system. They noted that they expected guidance, not only for academic matters, but also for individual and social matters. According to studies revealing the relationship between the academic advisory system and dropout, effective academic advice has a positive effect on students' academic and social adjustment (Chen, 2012; Yorke & Longden, 2008). Tinto (1993) argues that when a student fails to be adequately advised on an on-going basis this often results in a student leaving school.

In addition to social, academic and organizational factors, a number of the participants stated that they had decided to drop out because of financial difficulties. Financial difficulties may be seen as a barrier, and may adversely affect persistence at school, either directly or indirectly. A student who cannot

cover the living expenses of college life, may choose to drop out or to work in a part-time job. Lack of financial support from family and limited scholarship opportunities may cause financial difficulties, and this may be a cause of low academic achievement and eventually dropout (Braxton, 2012; Harvey & Szalkowicz, 2015). According to the participants, financial difficulties, working in a part-time job and academic failure were interrelated as a reason for dropout. In addition to these, a number of the participants argued that marriage, which brings new duties and responsibilities was a reason for dropout. Gençtanırım (2014) identifies risky behaviour for university students as anti-social behaviour, heavy alcohol consumption, substance abuse and marriage. Therefore, it may be stated that for the participants, individual, social, academic or financial problems resulted in marriage which was a risky behaviour regarding dropout.

The most important function of a profession is providing an income to meet living expenses and portray respect. The participants evaluated the employment opportunities of their departments after graduation and, as a result of this evaluation, if the department had limited employment opportunities, they finalized their decision to leave. It is possible to explain this finding by the human capital approach. According to the human capital approach, education contributes to the formation of human capital by providing knowledge and skill accumulation for individuals. Skills which are increased through education increase the productivity of individuals as well as their earnings (Ergen, 2009). Therefore, when individuals decide to invest in human capital through university education, they take into consideration individual expenditures and benefits to be achieved thanks to graduation.

The final dropout decision in higher education is based on the interactions of many factors over a long time period, as can be seen in Figure 1. In other words, such a decision is too complex to explain with a single reason. It may not be considered as a monolithic process, so there is no magic bullet to prevent it. For example, many of the participants experienced academic and social adjustment problems during the college process or endured the wrong department choice or financial difficulties in the pre-college process. In a similar vein, inadequacy of organizational opportunities and part-time working caused academic failure and absenteeism in many cases. Associated with academic failure and absenteeism, evaluating the appropriateness of vocational choice and potential employment opportunities after graduation or marriage caused dropout.



Furthermore, career guidance activities at the pre-college stage may affect individuals' vocational maturity level. A low level of vocational maturity may cause a lack of self-awareness leading to the making of department choices regardless of interests and skills. Individuals who cannot make their department choice independently may experience various problems during their study at college. Academic, social and organizational problems, as well as working part-time, result in absenteeism and (or) academic failure. Furthermore, absenteeism and academic failure may be classified as undesirable educational outcomes which lead to the idea of dropping out. Evaluation of appropriateness of vocational choice and employment opportunities after graduation or marriage finalized the dropout decision of the participants.

It should be noted that the participants of this study impacted the researchers through their honesty and openness regarding painful choices in their college life reflecting on their education. According to the findings, establishing effective guidance and counselling systems, not only for students and faculty members in higher education level but also for families, teachers and students at high school level when students are trying to choose the right department and higher education institution, is extremely important to prevent dropout from higher education. In order to increase students' persistence, university administrations should employ certain strategies, such as orientation, and educational and psychological support actions. A well-structured early warning system and advisory program which support students to complete their programmes and earn a diploma may guide faculty members and policy-makers. This study confirms that the decision to dropout is a complex phenomenon that cannot be easily described, so using a mixed method approach may provide detailed information to understand what exactly is behind the dropout decision. Moreover, the reasons given for dropout may be masked due to personal issues. Faculty members' experience and perception regarding the reasons for dropout may provide in depth information concerning this phenomenon. While the findings reported in this study examine the academic, organizational and financial factors related to the dropout decision, further research is necessary to define the relevant environmental and personality variables. Finally, it should be noted that the results need to be considered as descriptive of the common issues and factors associated with dropout at only one point in time and place. Therefore, caution needs to be taken when generalizing the results of this study.

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