

The Open University Movement: A Comparative Case Study of Mega Universities

Açık Üniversite Hareketi: Mega Üniversitelerin Karşılaştırmalı Bir Vaka Çalışması

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Özet: Açık ve uzaktan eğitimdeki artış ve yükseköğretim alanında açık üniversite hareketinin yükselişi, dünyanın farklı yerlerinde her biri 100.000'den fazla öğrenciye sahip açık mega üniversitelerin kurulmasıyla sonuçlanmıştır. Erişimin faydalarına ve düşük maliyetlere rağmen, bu tür kurumlara yönelik temel eleştiri kalite güvencesi ile ilgili olmuştur. Bu makalenin amacı 1) Türkiye'deki Anadolu Üniversitesi, Hindistan'daki Indira Gandhi National Open University ve İngiltere'deki Open University olmak üzere üç açık mega üniversiteyi resmi web sitelerinde görüldükleri şekliyle, misyonları, vizyonları, sloganları, öğrenme ortamları, giriş şartları ve kalite güvence politikaları açısından karşılaştırmak; 2) açık üniversite hareketiyle uyumlarını ortaya çıkarmaktır. Bu nitel çalışma, karşılaştırmalı bir vaka çalışması yaklaşımı kullanır ve verileri sabit karşılaştırma yöntemiyle analiz eder. Başlıca bulgular, bu üniversitelerin kitleleştirme yoluyla erişim stratejilerini belirlediklerini ve maliyetlerini düşürdüklerini ortaya koymuştur. Üniversiteler, dünya çapındaki öğrenci kitlelerini çekbetmek için web sitelerindeki kalite güvence politikalarıyla ilgileniyor görünmektedirler. Ortaya koyduğumuz soru, gerçek eğitim ortamlarında nitelik ve nicelik arasındaki dengeye ne ölçüde ulaşıldığıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: açık ve uzaktan eğitim; açık üniversite hareketi; mega üniversite; kitleleştirme; eğitim politikaları.

Abstract: The increase in open and distance education and the rise of open university movement in the field of higher education have resulted in the establishment of open mega universities in different parts of the world with populations of more than 100,000 students each. Despite the benefits of access and low costs, the main criticism of this type of institution has been about quality assurance. The aim of this paper is 1) to compare and contrast three open mega universities namely Anadolu University in Turkey, Indira Gandhi National Open University in India, and Open University in Britain, in terms of their missions, visions, mottos, learning environments, entrance requirements, and quality assurance policies as they appeared on their official websites; and 2) to highlight their alignment with the open university movement. This qualitative study employs a comparative case study approach, and analyses data with the constant comparative method. Major findings suggested that these universities seemed to establish their access strategies and lower their costs through massification. They appeared to be concerned about quality assurance policies on their websites mainly to attract student masses around the world. The question we raise is the extent to which the balance between quality and quantity is reached in actual educational settings.

Keywords: open and distance education; open university movement; mega university; massification; educational policies.

1. Introduction

New forms of education such as distance learning and e-learning models have emerged due to the opportunities provided by technology through globalization and new informatics (Çetinsaya, 2014, p. 30). In this respect, open and distance education has become a growing aspect in the context of teaching and learning (Peters, 2008; Peters, 2010; Vasilevska et al., 2017). It is defined as

most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner, with the effect that all or most of the communication between teachers and learners is through an artificial medium, either electronic or print (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2002, p. 22).

any educational process in which all or

Open and distance education services aim to build ca-

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capacity, increase the quality and diversity of educational designs, enhance the resources utilized in the realm of education, become more cost-effective, create more chances for retraining, improve access, and increase internationalization. They also aim to help the development of multiple competencies, rapidly serve key target groups, and reach large audiences (UNESCO, 2002).

One of the impacts of the open and distance education movement has been the emergence of open universities around the world (Hanna, 2013; UNESCO, 2017). The advantage of open and distance learning extending educational opportunities at lower costs than campus-based education was a powerful motivator: It could reach more, teach more, and cost less. The reconfiguration of the access-quality-cost triangle (Daniel, Kanwar and Uvalić-Trumbić, 2009) seemed efficient for open universities, transforming them into huge institutions, mega universities, with student populations of more than 100,000 (Daniel and Mackintosh, 2003).

Despite the benefits of access and costs, these open mega universities have faced several criticisms such as them being stuck in a purgatory, trying both to be a university and to confront the nature of the university at the same time (Latchem and Jung, 2012). If open universities continue seeking ways to resemble higher education institutions, they will be confronted with the threat of losing their critical stance towards what a university can additionally be (Tait, 2008). Another criticism concerned the lack of adequate quality assurance (Latchem et al., 2006). Although quantitative indicators and scored numbers indicated great successes in the access-quality-cost triangle, lower standards for admission, lack of student commitment, and nominal quality of the courses were concerns still needing to be addressed. The size and the scale of Turkish open education has been of great concern to researchers in the last decade (Yurdakul and Şahin Demir, 2022) as “more than half of the higher education students in Turkey are registered in open education (i.e., off-campus) programs” (Gür et al., 2018, p. 27).

This study is mainly concerned with the evolution of the open university movement around the world and the foundation of open mega universities. Therefore, the aim of this paper is: 1) to compare three open mega universities in terms of their missions, visions, mottos, learning environments, entrance requirements, and quality assurance policies; and 2) to highlight their alignment with the open university movement. This qualitative study employs a comparative case study approach (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2016; 2017) and analyses data with content analysis (Merriam, 1998). Employing a comparative perspective allowed a better understanding of the functioning of open mega universities in terms of their own characteristics and their alignment with the promises of the open education movement, including exploring the possibilities behind open universities and conceivable weaknesses occurring in the process.

2. Literature Review

2.1. 2.1. The History of Open and Distance Education

The concepts that created a path for open and distance education started in the 19th century. The literature reviews the history of open and distance education under three timeframes: (1) correspondence study, (2) electronic communications, and (3) open and distance teaching universities (Simonson et al., 2015).

The beginning of correspondence study was marked by an advertisement called *Composition through the medium of the Post* published in a Swedish newspaper in 1833 (Baath, 1985). Then followed Isaac Pitman (1813-1897)'s post offering instruction via correspondence and the foundation of the Phonographic Correspondence Society in England. Later, correspondence institutions in Britain increased to provide education for those who did not have a chance (Shale, 2011). Correspondence education was replaced by electronic communications which started with radio stations at the end of 1920s and continued with TV broadcasting in 1930s. Courses were offered by satellite technology around the 1950s. The third phase of the history of open and distance education is marked by the establishments of The University of South Africa in The Republic of South Africa in 1962 and Open University in the United Kingdom (UK) in 1969 as open and distance higher education institutions (Simonson et al., 2015; Shale, 2011; Tait, 2008). Around the 1980s and 1990s; live, high quality audio and video systems were used and since the mid-1980s, computer mediated systems and the Internet have started to direct the structuring of open and distance education.

The prominent features of the open and distance education movement were being a free movement in education and a unique criticism of the architectural design of brick-and-mortar schools with face to face teaching methods (Peters, 2008). Students developed their creative skills through learning-by-doing methods in home-like settings. Influenced by the ideas of freedom, dialogue, and democracy, open and distance education resulted in discussions on the relationship between open and distance education institutions and open societies. These ideas were also related to the contemporary concepts of adult education, lifelong learning and open university movement (Peters, 2008; Peters and Britez, 2008).

2.2. 2.2. The Open University Movement

The open university movement began in the early 1970s reflecting the social, economic, political, and technological developments of the late 20th century. The movement included seven general principles namely egalitarianism (open to all), equality of educational opportunities (removal of all barriers of caste, economy, and gender), lifelong and ubiquitous learning, flexible learning, a learner orientation, autonomous learning, and learning through communication (Peters, 2010, p. 66).

The open university movement influenced the role of stu-

dents in many aspects, namely, being adaptable to e-learning, having technical infrastructure, being computer literate, and having self-control and motivation (Vasilevska et al., 2017). Furthermore, learners must be able to monitor their own improvement, prepare their place and time for studying, study with the absence of a supervisor, and improve their skills in evaluating themselves (Candemir et al., 2002). Thus, learners in this movement are expected to be autonomous, independent, and highly motivated (Bates, 2005; Bayne, Knox and Ross, 2015).

This movement shaped higher education in two different ways: (1) Dual-mode (face-to-face and virtual learning) teaching and learning at campus-based higher education institutions and (2) foundation of open universities as individual institutions.

2.2.1. Dual-mode teaching and learning

Open university movement reflected itself at campus-based universities offering specific open and distance courses. Many of the conventional higher education institutions considered “interactive activities, tests, assignments and student-created content” (Fresen, 2018, p. 225) that online learning offers as opportunities. However, conventional higher education institutions face challenges while adapting themselves into a dual-mode delivery (Kanwar et al., 2018). These challenges include lack of funding to improve infrastructure, the need to build capacity and the need for instructors and students to develop their skills in order to adapt to the necessities of the dual-mode delivery. In order to overcome these challenges, the institutions need to develop their own strategies, establish their own open and distance learning structure with a centralized plan, create funding for their autonomous action plans, build their staff capacity by offering promotion and tenure possibilities and promote research in this area (Kanwar et al., 2018).

2.2.2. Open Universities

Open university movement also led to the establishment of open universities as higher education institutions. Tait (2008) defined open universities as “innovative distance-teaching higher education institutions that have used distance in radical ways to improve openness” (p. 85). In essence, open universities are considered as being highly political in their nature because they are generally state-led organizations and exist as a requirement of higher education to satisfy the demands of human capital in society (Tait, 2008). The goals of open universities are to create new resources for a country, lower their costs and increase their number of graduates, give way to equal educational opportunities, attract adult students, focus on new professional qualifications, and develop innovative teaching and learning policies in the context of higher education (Peters, 2010).

Open universities differ from conventional campus-based universities as their target student population is mainly working adults and use special configurations of multi (mass) media and methods of distance education to meet

large-scale learning needs (Farnes, 2000). The worldwide dissemination of this new model started with the appearance of more than 80 successive universities with mutual characteristics (Gourley, 2008; Peters, 2010). The outstanding features of open universities could be summarized as follows: The undertaking of a national mission, the large-scale delivery for mass higher education, new formal and informal opportunities for adult education, an industrialized model of higher education, the systematic and sophisticated use of communication technologies, transformation through independent learning, cost-effectiveness, and alignment to new postmodern trends such as individualization (Peters, 2010). All these features pointed to fundamental paradigm shifts in the usual definitions of knowledge and learning.

In addition, some recent studies highlight the challenges of open university students (Ross and Sheail, 2017) and teachers (Gil-Jaurena and Dominguez, 2018). In general, they seem to have a tendency to attach their problems to their distance from the campus. They emphasize the need to increase their engagement with the content and have more interaction and peer support in order to strengthen the teaching and learning environment.

2.2.3. Open Mega Universities

Open universities differed in size from small to large which led to a relatively new term, the open mega university which is “found in various parts of the world that report enrollments of more than 100,000 students each” (Daniel and Mackintosh, 2003, p. 814). They are defined by a combination of three main features: “distance teaching, tertiary education and size” (Daniel, 1996, p. 20). Two influences of mega universities on the development of higher education were the increasing number of attendees and the decreasing costs of attending. Daniel (1996) further delineated the characteristics of mega universities: (a) strong relations with the state and involvement in the processes of national policy making, (b) easy access to communication and network facilities, (c) integration with other higher education providers that do not offer distance education services, (d) various and large numbers of students, (e) a vocational focus in the curriculum with an emphasis on areas of high demand, (f) cost effectiveness in comparison with conventional higher education institutions, (g) interdependent systems of operating focused on division of labor in designing and producing materials and transmitting them to students, (h) difficulty in gaining quality and recognition due to the connotations of quality with age, (i) exclusive access and human interaction that may be overcome by new technology in the future, and (j) significant international roles.

Open mega universities represent a specific mode of distance education practice that has gained more and more importance over the years in many countries (Daniel and Mackintosh, 2003). Guri-Rosenblit (1999) specifically discusses the role of mega universities in handling the challenges that higher education systems face. In terms of the trendsetting characteristic of open mega univer-

sities, these institutions could also continue to have a central role in the 21st century in further transforming higher education for independent learning (Daniel, 2017; Panda and Mishra, 2007).

3. Method

The method used in this qualitative study is the comparative case study approach which allowed the analysis of three different mega open universities. This approach “promotes a model of multi-sited fieldwork that studies through and across sites and scales” (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017, p.15) and analyzes commonalities and differences between cases (Miles et al., 2014). In addition, it ensures obtaining stronger results than what could be obtained through the study of a single case (Yin, 2012).

3.1. The Sample

This study examines three open mega universities: (a) the Open University (OU), (b) Anadolu University (AU), and (c) Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). In the selection of these sample universities, the geographical location was one of the factors. Open University in the UK, Indira Gandhi National Open University in India, and Anadolu University in Turkey are universities selected from three different geographical locations in the world. The contextual backgrounds of the samples are presented in the following part. The data used in this study is collected from the official web pages of the sample universities, which are open to the public use; therefore, the ethics committee approval is not required.

3.1.1. The Open University (The Open University, 2023a)

Open university movement started in the UK with the foundation of the Open University (OU). In the country, distance higher education has a history of nearly 160 years, when University of London started the first distance teaching in 1858; which enabled it to become an important collaborator for the liberation policies of the country as well as the colonial ones with an “imperial mission” of the country (Gaskell, 2018, p. 86). After more than a century, the OU was established in 1969 with a similar mission to open its doors to everyone. Initially, the university became well-known and accessible due to the use of populist marketing strategies including mass communication channels such as partnering with the BBC and TV and radio series (Times Higher Education, 2018). However, in the 1990s, as a result of neo-liberal policies, state funding became limited, increasing the financial burden of studying in the open university system and decreasing its rate of massification through the low or middle-income population from all over the world. In the 21st century, with technological and digital revolution that offered a huge range of flexibility and pedagogical innovation on campuses, open universities became attractive again (Tait, 2018). According to Times Higher Education (2018), the OU is the largest educational institution in the UK, an open mega university, which has around 200,000 registered students with a network of 5,000 tutors.

3.1.2. Indira Gandhi National Open University

The second case of our study is located in India. In the 1940s, the scope of higher education began to increase in India in order to supply the endless demand of the growing population (Zawacki-Richter and Qayyum, 2019). Considering distance education in the 1960s, India adapted the Russian model based on their system of correspondence education and evening classes (Panda and Garg, 2019) to foster continuing education, part-time or self-directed study opportunities for the growing number of the population especially the disadvantaged within the system. In the 1980s, together with the international developments in lifelong learning and the success of the open university movement, India adapted the OU model in the UK and established the first provincial open university in 1982, which is now called Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University (Panda and Garg, 2019). Afterwards, the notion of a national open university with a double mission to both coordinate other provincial open universities within the country and serve as the biggest and populist open and distance education institution was considered. Therefore, IGNOU was founded in 1985, a central state university that coordinates distance education systems and programs throughout the country (Zawacki-Richter and Qayyum, 2019). This open mega university serves around “2.7 million students in India and other countries through its schools of studies and a network of regional centers” (Indira Gandhi National Open University, 2023a). It also uses the media and the latest technology and has a significant contribution to the development of distance and open higher education, community learning, and professional development.

3.1.3. Anadolu University (AU)

The third case of our study is located in Turkey. In 1980s, open university movement dropped into the agenda of Turkish Higher Education as a functional tool to disseminate higher education all over the country. AU was founded in 1982 as an example of dual-mode open universities. It is the first one in Turkey to offer open and distance education (Anadolu University, 2023a), and a ‘second university’ option which offers university graduates a chance to study in a second program (Anadolu University, 2023g). First, the open door policy was implemented to accommodate as many students as possible. However, in 2011, the system changed and access to the open university system required students to take the standardized nation-wide university entrance examination (Kondakçı et al., 2019). This development in entrance requirements basically originated from the criticism about the quality and reputation of the open and distance education programs when compared to other residential university contexts (Zawacki-Richter and Qayyum, 2019). However, this created a conflict with the philosophy of open education by making the entrance requirements of residential and distance education almost the same in Turkey. Today, two of the prominent missions of AU (Anadolu University, 2023b) are (a) to take excess students from conventional higher education institutions and (b) to develop opportunities in the field of higher education (Demiray

and Curabay, 2010). The university has reached across national borders to serve Turkish citizens throughout the world including countries such as Azerbaijan, Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Anadolu University, 2023c). Like many open universities, AU has also developed cooperative arrangements with the media, the Turkish Radio and Television Institution (TRT) in this context, to reach many students through the state television station and radio channel. This mega university has 2.170.759 students registered in the distance education programs in the 2021-2022 academic year, making it one of the most populous open universities in the world (Yurdakul and Şahin Demir, 2022, p. 68).

3.2. Criteria for Data Collection

This study based its selection on five headings for data collection on Daniel's (1995) definition of the general characteristics of the mega universities as they presented themselves on their websites. These headings are mission, vision, motto, learning environment, and quality assurance policies. The headings of mission, vision, and motto are related to the characteristics of prominence in national policy, linkages to the rest of tertiary education, and international roles, all of which are indicated in the objectives, aims, and roles of the universities. While the mission is concerned with how the universities defined their missions to position themselves within open universities, the vision is about how universities defined their final objectives to build the most typical characteristics of themselves. The motto, on the other hand, is concerned with how universities used industrialized advertisement-style strategic phrases to introduce themselves with a short but attractive strategy. The heading of learning environments includes the characteristics of access to communications facilities and operating systems, and how universities create learning conditions to reach learners. The heading of quality assurance policies is directly related to the characteristics of quality and recognition to explain how universities create a showcase to attract more qualified learners. Daniel's (1995) characteristics of students, curriculum, and cost effectiveness are not included because the focus of the present study is the extroversive functioning of the universities to attract more students. Instead, we add a new sixth heading, entrance requirements, to understand how accessible these universities are for the masses, and how they set rules to limit or encourage the access of various learners to education.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected from the official websites of the three selected universities that comprised the sample for this study. Websites are channels through which universities present themselves to the world, position their strengths and highlight their added-value. Thus, the analysis of the information these institutions place in the public domain through their official websites offer an important perspective (Emil, 2020).

3.4. Data Analysis

Detailed descriptive data from the three universities

were used to explain how these universities evolved within their own contexts. Content analysis served as the basis for data analysis, which is extensively used in social science research (Merriam, 1998). On the websites of the universities under study, six headings, namely, mission, vision, motto, learning environment, entrance requirements, and quality assurance policies, were screened to find the occurrence of keywords or concepts and categorized each according to similarity in meaning. As a result, several categories emerged. To ensure the reliability of the data analysis, three members of the research team worked independently to review the data and come up with a set of categories. After comparing and contrasting the categories, a mutual understanding for the final set of categories was reached.

4. Findings

Comparisons of the three institutions in the study sample occurred across six headings: mission, vision, motto, learning environment, entrance requirements, and quality assurance policies. Analysis of the data collected from the official websites of these institutions resulted in the following findings.

4.1. Mission

The mission of a university is important because it is how the institution defines itself and its function. When we looked at the mission statements of our sample universities, we first noticed the category of openness highlighted in three of the universities in different ways. AU mentioned distance learning opportunities (Anadolu University, 2023b) while OU uses the word 'open' in terms of learning (The Open University, 2023b) and IGNOU (Indira Gandhi National Open University, 2023b) highlights the importance of Open and Distance Learning Systems. In addition to openness, there are three categories that universities emphasized in their mission statements where there were similarities or differences: mode of functioning, accessibility, and educational goals.

First, in case of modes of functioning, while AU is a dual-mode university which underlined both distance and on-line teaching and learning opportunities in its mission statement, OU and IGNOU are single-mode using only Open and Distance education systems. Second category is accessibility. All of the three emphasized that they are open to local and international people at any age. The third category is educational goals where all three sample universities have similar goals in the sense that they want to advance universal knowledge through high-quality research, teaching and learning, technology, and national and global partnership with a creative and innovative perspective.

As for the length of the mission statements of the sample universities, compared to OU and AU, IGNOU's website was quite long, entailing not only a statement of mission but also a detailed list of what it must do to attain that mission. For instance, IGNOU being a role model, improving standards, and developing and promoting net-

works for effective delivery of open distance learning.

4.2. Vision

The vision of an institution reveals its targeted standings. While AU (Anadolu University, 2023b) and OU (The Open University, 2023b) had relatively short vision statements, IGNOU (Indira Gandhi National Open University, 2023b) had a longer and richer vision statement. The concepts in the vision statements of the three sample universities can be studied under two categories: internationalization and education. The vision statements of all three universities had as an end having a global impact by accommodating as many people as possible. Internationalization is reflected in the vision of AU as becoming a world university while in the vision of OU as reaching more and more students. IGNOU states its aim of internationalization more explicitly in its vision as being a university with international recognition and presence as well as its contribution to national development.

As for educational goals in their vision statements, AU focused on life-long learning education whereas OU emphasized life-changing learning to meet the needs of the students and enrich society. IGNOU, on the other hand, sets its educational goals in its vision as a quality education where the learner is at the center to increase their skills and competencies with the use of innovative technologies and methodologies.

4.3. Motto

OU (The Open University, 2023a) and IGNOU (Indira Gandhi National Open University, 2023a) had mottos; AU did not. OU and IGNOU presented their mottos together with their logos on their websites. However, a common category could not be identified. The motto of OU was “learn and live” which indicated that learning and living go together; in other words, getting one’s education should not be a block to getting the other things required to live. The motto of IGNOU was “the people’s university” reflecting its institutional aim to reach people.

4.4. Learning Environment

Learning environments are important channels for reaching out to people. Both OU (The Open University, 2023c) and AU (Anadolu University, 2023d) had separate sections on their websites in which they discussed the learning environments in their universities. Rather than having a separate section, IGNOU (e.g. Indira Gandhi National Open University, 2023a) embedded information about its learning environment in various sections of its website.

The focus of the university learning environments can be grouped under three categories: technology, flexibility and support. As for technology, OU presented its learning environment as an open learning space using its own unique method of open and distance learning. AU described four learning environments on its website: the ANADOLUM eCampus, a glossary of open and distance learning, face-to-face classes, and textbooks. The ANADOLUM eCampus is “a platform that offers open and distance learn-

ing services in an integrated way” (Anadolu University, 2023d). This platform is a high-tech learning environment with four components: “the learning management system, learning analytics tracking, synchronous classes, and the mobile application” (Anadolu University, 2023d). On the other hand, the IGNOU website mentioned the launch of EduSat, a satellite dedicated only to education enabling interactive digital channels: The regional and high enrollment study centres have active two-way video-conferencing network connectivity, and this has made it possible to transact interactive digital content (Indira Gandhi National Open University, 2023a).

The second category, flexibility is expressed in the websites as the flexibility of either as the design of the programs offered or the way students take the classes. In the AU, the structure of design permits flexible functioning to add and remove modules: “The modules may operate independently or interdependently via patterns” (Anadolu University, 2023d). In addition, the dual mode of AU also offers flexibility. It applies a holistic approach to learning, combining open and distance education with learning and communication technologies to maximize learner interaction and motivation. Face-to-face classes are scheduled lectures in different locations to get students and lecturers together in a class environment. Similarly, the OU offers flexibility for its students to study their courses in places and at times they choose to fit in with their jobs, families and other commitments. IGNOU also mentions the provision of a flexible education system for its students to overcome the challenges of access and equity in its website.

Third category is support which is reflected in the websites of the universities. All three websites emphasize the learner-centeredness of their education system and highlight various support structures provided for their students. AU specifically mentions that it supports its learning environment by producing non-discriminatory educational materials and providing teaching and curriculum services to enhance learning. OU explains its supportive learning environment as providing its students personal tutors, group tutorials and specialist advisors for academic expertise and guidance when needed. These tutorials are in the form of online conferencing, study networks and course forums. IGNOU supports its learning environment by equipping all study and regional centres with adequate ICT equipment for information sharing and helping students with their learning difficulties; maximizing opportunities for interaction with learners and offering mediated counselling and induction programmes.

4.5. Entrance Requirements

As for the entrance requirements, two categories were identified: test scores and tuition fees. Of the three universities in our sample, AU (Anadolu University, 2023e) and IGNOU (Indira Gandhi National Open University, 2023c) required an entrance examination. AU requires two different entrance exams; one for the Turkish students, a national university exam, and the other, administered by

the university itself for foreign ones. Acceptance into these universities was contingent upon achieving the required score on the test. The “second university” programs of AU do not require any entrance exams. It has become a main route of admission in the recent years being more and more popular among university graduates (Gür et al., 2018, p. 81). On the other hand, OU does not have any entry requirements. Another requirement for accessing these programs is related to finances or program fees. All three of the universities require some fees, OU (The Open University, 2023d) being the most expensive one.

4.6. Quality Assurance Policies

Quality assurance policies have gained importance in the competitive realm of higher education including open universities. In this study, the quality assurance policies indicated on the websites of the sample universities can be grouped under two categories: institutional and academic policies.

As for the institutional policies, AU (Anadolu University, 2023f) implements a Quality Management System particularly in relation to the fundamental and ethical values of the university. It aims to increase the level of quality awareness among its institutional stakeholders. It also aims to conduct creative and collaborative education, high quality research and high impact social responsibility activities at national and international levels. On the other hand, IGNOU (Indira Gandhi National Open University, 2023d) implements a Total Quality Assurance System committing itself to high quality and excellence in its institutional performance including teaching, research and social responsibility activities. In addition, IGNOU emphasizes that it has norms, procedures, mechanisms and performance indicators in place to ensure high quality operation and evaluation of the institutional systems. OU follows its Guide to Quality and Standards with a high level of commitment to assessment and accountability to ensure high quality and continuous improvement in educational, research and social responsibility activities.

As for the academic policies, AU aims to create teaching and learning environments where academicians and students can collaborate, communicate and self-improve to reach high performance. In addition, the university sets high quality formal, open and distance education as its another academic target. IGNOU aims to offer quality education with high performance standards and high quality resources. OU (The Open University, 2023e), on the other hand, emphasizes excellence in teaching and learning opportunities and an effective advising system for all students. It also aims to provide a curriculum that is continuously evaluated and improved.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, we compared three mega open universities within six headings of information obtained from their official websites to find out how similarly or differently

they apply strategies to achieve their goals according to the demands of the 21st century as effectively and efficiently possible balancing quantity with quality. This section discusses the findings where the three open mega universities are compared and contrasted with the extent they are aligned with the open university movement. The websites of these universities appear to highlight their distinctive features which can be interpreted as different *colors* of the movement: OU is the pioneering institution, which defined the route of the process at the very beginning. AU is a dual-mode institution with quite a big population. IGNOU is the most crowded of all the mega universities throughout the world.

In the first heading of our findings, the missions of these universities reveal they all adhere to the category of the openness which is one of the characteristics of open university movement (Peters, 2010) (i.e., reaching to many as well as to disadvantaged people such as jail inmates and disabled learners with aims of quality, flexibility, equity, internalization, etc.). In addition to their commonalities, there are some differences in expressing in their mission statements. With its dual mode, AU has crafted its statement in a more classical way, including campus-based learning. OU has developed a shorter, professionally defined mission, albeit one with impressive style. IGNOU, which is designed as a typical open university institution, has included every open university movement characteristic in its mission statement.

The vision statements are very similar to the institutions’ mission statement styles but with a visible emphasis on reaching more people to achieve a global impact. In their vision statements, we can see their internationalization efforts: AU aims to be a world university. IGNOU separates its vision into two, one part for its national role and one for its international presence. OU, first opened to serve individuals in the United Kingdom, has become a role model for global institutions. These qualities all serve to open university movement in the sense that these universities aim to increase the number of graduates both nationally and globally (Peters, 2010).

The third heading, motto, indicates in fewer words the philosophy of the institutions. Although AU has preferred not to use a motto, the other two universities have structured their mottos which highlight their institutional aims to reach more people including adult learners, also in line with the traits of the open university movement (Peters, 2010).

Analysis of the fourth heading, learning environments, reveals the institutions are trying to use the facilities of technology as much as possible. However, they are also facing the challenge of covering the human side of learning through supportive and social learning environments. This challenge of the dichotomy of the technological and human sides of learning is apparent in all universities, resulting in high-tech, innovative, and flexible mechanisms for support and sociability, such as face-to-

face, interactive, and two-way conferencing learning opportunities (Farnes, 2000; Gourley, 2008). All these traits are again in line with the open university movement.

As for the fifth heading, one would expect that entrance requirements for open universities are inclusive enough to welcome as many students as possible by diminishing barriers to access. It is claimed that enrollment in on-line courses is growing more rapidly than the enrollment of the overall university courses (Allen and Seaman, 2010). Although OU does not have entrance examination requirements, AU and IGNOU do which is a potential barrier to access even though they expect relatively lower scores than traditional university programs. Thus entrance examinations as requirements for acceptance can be argued to be barriers for access to learning because performance in a limited given time during the exam cannot always reflect the full potential of a student (Burdman, 2012). Tuition fees are also a crucial barrier for learners, especially those of low socioeconomic status. These universities have generally opened some areas to disadvantaged populations through fee exemptions such as prison inmates and disabled people. However, most students must still pay tuition fees. By comparison among the sample universities in our study, fees at OU are much higher than those of IGNOU, thus posing a potential barrier for people wishing to enroll at OU. On the other hand, AU does not charge any tuition fees anymore, charging study fees only. These requirements seem to raise the question of the extent they conform or contradict with the principle of open and extensive access of the university movement (Peters, 2010).

The last heading analyzes quality assurance, a topic of numerous debates concerning mega open universities. Highly criticized for supposedly lowering standards in learning in the literature (e.g. Nelson and Thompson, 2005; Southard and Mooney, 2015), mega open universities try to pay attention to their quality assurance policies to overcome their educational challenges and criticisms. The three universities in the study sample have well-organized introductions in their official websites under sections concerning institutional strategy policies. Thus, the effort to prove themselves “qualified” is a priority for mega open universities trying to attract more learners with decreasing costs to reach the access-cost-quality triangle standards.

The findings of this study indicate that these open universities aim to fill an important gap by allowing an alternative route to higher education. In a world with increasing population every day, there is a higher demand for university education where open and distance education plays a critical role. In the Turkish case, “...open education now constitutes almost half of the higher education system. This ratio is 47% for bachelor’s degree programs and 55% for associate degree programs. Despite the establishment of new universities, the demand ...has grown over the last decade.” (Gür et al., 2018, p. 28). The role has become even more critical in the face of the global crises

such as the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 making the importance of open and distance education more central. The most important issue is assuring quality in education with massification. The question that arises here is how to ensure a balance between quality and quantity in these open universities. This concern is also linked to the industrialization of higher education where the goal changed from public good to individual wealth (Smith and Bender, 2008). Smith and Bender (2008, p. 9) explain this shift as follows:

Beginning in the 1980s, [higher] education, like research, lost much of its intrinsic value; it was discussed more and more in terms of the market, as an individual investment in human capital. Increasingly higher education was treated as a private good, a product to be purchased for personal benefit, hence the notion of student loan programs, which amounts to a capital investment in oneself, in contrast to a scholarship signifying a collective investment in a public good. This change produced a student as customer, too often more interested in certification than in inquiry.

This industrialized higher education context encouraged individuals to enroll in higher education institutions to receive credentials and gain more money in competitive market conditions. One of the higher education responses to increase access resulted in mega open universities leading to the masses attending universities. However, this massification contributed to an increase in quantity, but not necessarily in quality. In order to gain a certificate/diploma, students arguably become one name in the list of the masses enrolled in these institutions and often do not experience classroom discussions or peer-learning friendship-building environments where active learning occurs. Thus, without ensuring quality, it is argued that individualized learning environments with flexible time and location opportunities have the potential to put quality education and the socialization component of higher education at risk (Schejbal, 2012).

As a conclusion, although open universities are very much popular and in demand, these academic, socio-cultural and technological changes in higher education should not be overlooked in terms of quality assurance in the open university movement. The fact that the three open mega universities under examination in this study emphasize their quality assurance mechanisms on their websites is an indication that these universities are aware of the concerns about the quantity versus quality debate, and take a positive step towards placing quality as a central issue in the open university movement. The critical question that remains to be answered for future studies is the extent to which these mechanisms reflect themselves in ensuring quality in the actual educational settings so that they become role models in the context of open university movement.

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