

Second University Programs for Personal and Professional Development: Reflections from Anadolu University Open Education System

Hasan Uçar

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In a world that is constantly changing, transforming, and growing, people's personal and professional development needs to be supported on an ongoing basis. The continuous updating of knowledge and the need for different qualifications have brought continuing education or lifelong learning to the agenda. In this context, Anadolu University Open Education System Second University Programs, an important indicator of openness in education, have been launched to meet these needs. This study aims to explore the reflections of the Second University programs of Anadolu University's open education system on the personal and professional development of learners. The data were collected from open and distance learners in Anadolu University Open Education System through an open-ended question. Content analysis was used to analyze the data. The results show that those enrolled in Second University programs benefit personally and professionally.

Introduction

Open and distance education has become increasingly popular in recent years, as it offers flexible learning opportunities for individuals who cannot attend traditional on-campus programs. Besides, open and distance education programs can be effective tools for personal and professional development, as they allow individuals to learn at their own pace and on their own schedule (Klein & Ware, 2003). Anadolu University's open education system, which is a pioneering and innovative institution in providing open and distance higher education in Türkiye and in the world, is an important institution in the context of open and distance education. Established in 1982, the open education system of Anadolu University has provided flexible and accessible learning opportunities to millions of students. It has also played a leading role in democratizing education and promoting lifelong learning (Bozkurt, 2017). This study examines the reflections of the Second University programs supporting lifelong learning in Anadolu University Open Education System on the personal and professional development of learners.

Anadolu University's Open Education System

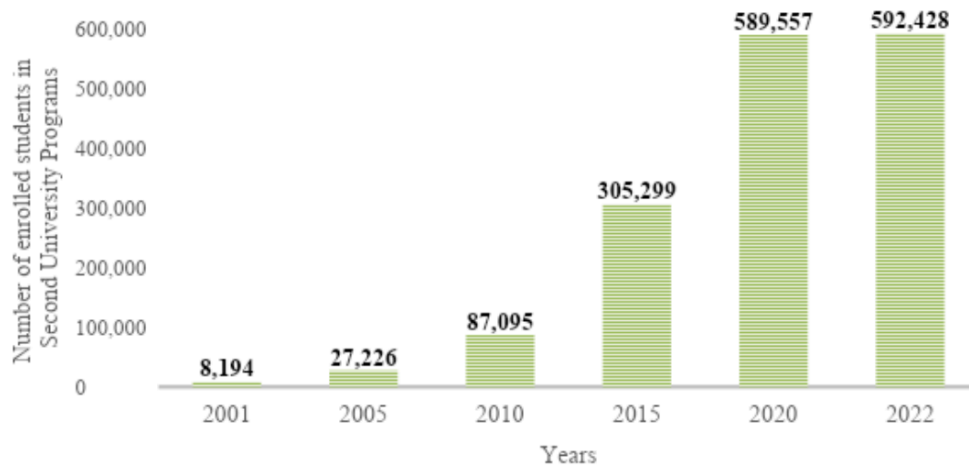
Anadolu University, which is celebrating its 41st anniversary as a provider of open and distance education in Türkiye, is one of the world's leading providers of open and distance education. In addition to Türkiye, there are students enrolled in the Open Education system in more than thirty different countries. With over four million graduates, the university currently provides higher education to over one million learners worldwide each academic year. Currently, Anadolu University's Open Education System offers 21 undergraduate and 39 associate degree programs. By law, students wishing to enroll in higher education in Türkiye for the first time must take a university entrance examination. However, those who are currently enrolled in or have completed a higher education program can enroll in Second University programs in Anadolu University's Open Education System without taking an entrance exam. Thus, Anadolu University's Second University programs offer learners the opportunity for personal and professional development.

Second University Programs: A Reflection of Openness in Education

Anadolu University Open Education System initially offered an opportunity for higher education to millions of people in Türkiye who were unable to access face-to-face education for the first time due to time and space constraints. Over time, changing needs and developing technologies, along with globalization, have revealed people's need for lifelong learning. As a result, it is accepted by everyone that education should be continuous. In this context, not only students seeking higher education for the first time but also people wishing to continue their lifelong learning have been given the right to enroll in Anadolu University's Open Education System since 2001. Thus, there have been significant changes over time in the numbers and profiles of those enrolled in this system. The number of students in this program has increased substantially in the last two decades, from 8,000 to approximately 600,000 (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Number of students enrolled in Second University programs between 2001-2022



Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to examine the reflections of the Second University programs of Anadolu University's open education system on the personal and professional development of open and distance learners. For this aim, a case study approach was adopted (Yin, 2003). The study's main aim is to discover the reflections of open and distance learners of Anadolu University's open education system who enrolled in Second University programs within the context of personal and professional development. The data were collected through an open-ended question. Content analysis was used to analyze the data.

Findings

To collect data in the context of the research, students in the Second University programs of the Open Education system were asked the question, "What does the Open Education system mean to you in terms of personal and professional development?" through the learning management system. Thousands of responses were received from students regarding this question, but 450 responses were analyzed in the context of the research after the review of four field experts. The experiences of four students in the open education system regarding their personal and professional development with the Second University are presented below. Akin (a pseudonym) stated:

I am 43 years old, and I work as an occupational safety specialist. After I started studying as a Second University in the health management department, I started to see and express the deficiencies in the health and safety units I work in more clearly. It is a great feeling to continue learning, to take exams, and to struggle.

Burak (a pseudonym) predicated the following:

The Department of International Relations, which I studied as a Second University program, has changed my perspective on politics, the world and even myself. I see the change in myself in a way that is priceless in this regard. Thanks to the Second University, I have made incredible personal gains.

Cansu (a pseudonym) stated:

I studied law at university and then started working as a lawyer. But for the legal issues I was working on, I decided to study sociology. Studying this department helped me to understand and interpret the society, sociological structure while doing my job. Thank you open education.

Duru (a pseudonym) indicated the following:

I retired at an early age and now I am living in a place with a garden. I felt that I was having difficulties while gardening. I got help from YouTube etc. for many subjects, but then I enrolled in the agriculture program within the scope of the Second University program. While studying, I learned and applied very good things about agriculture and gardening. Having exams helped me to work harder and learn in detail.

Results show that learners enrolled in a Second University benefit from these programs in the context of personal and professional development in their lives. Regarding personal development, through the Second University programs, the learners are making changes in their lives to boost their potential. These programs enable individuals to acquire new knowledge and skills and to improve existing knowledge and skills. This contributes to the personal development of individuals and the improvement of their quality of life. In terms of professional development, these programs enable individuals to develop their professional knowledge and skills. More student stories covering student experiences in the open education system are also included in the book published by Bozkurt et al. (2023).

Conclusion

In the past, students mostly enrolled in the Anadolu University Open Education system in Türkiye due to constraints such as time, space, and work life, while in recent years, it can be said that those who study at university or have a university diploma have enrolled in Second University programs for their personal and/or professional development. The Open education system of Anadolu does not only provide open and distance education but also learning opportunities that support the personal and/or professional development of thousands of learners. Through these programs, individuals can acquire new professional knowledge and skills and improve their existing professional knowledge and skills. This also contributes to the professional development and career advancement of individuals. In this context, Second University programs provide an important opportunity for personal and professional development.

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