Students' Opinions on COVID-19 and University Life

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Article Info	Abstract
	The purpose of the study was to determine how the university students who continue their education online after the universities shifted to distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic evaluate this process. The study was designed as a case study, one of the qualitative research methods. The study group was selected using the maximum variation sampling method among the university students studying at a public university in the 2020-2021 academic year in Turkey. Semi-structured interview form was used as data collection tool. It was found that the university students were struggling with academic, social, psychological, economic, and health problems during the pandemic period. In addition, in the study, the effect of being at the family home on the university education was also examined. While some participants considered it as an opportunity to stay at the family home for the reasons such as the support of the family and being more comfortable, some others considered it as negative due to the reasons such as the absence of a study environment, behaviors of the family members, family problems, and family pressure.

Introduction

Natural disasters, wars, pandemics, and famines have affected all humanity from the past to the present, deeply changing the lives of the beings and causing chaos across the world. Coronavirus (COVID-19), which has been circulating since December 2019, still continues to affect the world with the same threats and dangers. With the rapid spread of COVID-19 worldwide, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020). The situation still remains serious and there are many cases globally in 2022. In order to prevent the spread of the virus across the world, several measures and prohibitions have been imposed based on the recommendations of the World Health Organization. Most countries have adopted some rules associated with social distancing, masks, and hygiene (Abidin, Alkaabi, & Razak, 2021; Cesljarev, Akerson, & Carter, 2021; Douali, Selmaoui, & Bouab, 2022; Ghosh, Jansz, & Ghosh, 2022; Johar, Amat, & Raja Ibrahim, 2021; Liu & Cheng, 2021; Onuralp, 2021; Paudyal, & Rana, 2021; Ye, 2021). Besides, various measures have been taken with the purpose of reducing the rate of spread of the virus. For example, social, cultural, and sports activities, many events, tournaments and festivals were temporarily suspended; national and international flights were canceled; and curfews were imposed. With these measures, COVID-19, which has made life stagnant in many parts of the world, has inevitably introduced a new world order.

The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected many areas of health, tourism, and economy, and social, cultural, and religious aspects of life. Educational institutions, which have many stakeholders, have been one of the most affected institutions after the healthcare sector. According to the data released by UNESCO in May 2020, 1.57 billion students' education lives, from kindergarten to higher education, were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide (UNESCO, 2020). This outbreak has brought an unprecedented change in the education system with quarantine, social distancing, and online education which were quickly implemented in most countries (Johnson, Veletsianos, and Seaman, 2020). Likewise the case in many countries, Turkey suspended all educational activities and later on launched the distance education in order to ensure social isolation and reduce the risk of transmission of the virus.

The COVID-19 outbreak has affected the entire education system and brought the higher education institutions to a new phase with distance education (Elumalai, Sankar, John, Menon, Algahtani, and Abumelha, 2020). Also in Turkey, the universities affiliated to the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) suspended education on March 16, 2020 and started to take some measures. In line with these measures, the higher education institutions took a decision to offer online courses and launched the implementation phase as of March 23, 2020 (CoHE, 2020). The universities continued their educational activities using synchronous or asynchronous methods on various platforms depending on their capacities. The universities, which completed the 2019-2020 academic year spring semester in this way, offered distance education also in the fall semester of the 2020-2021 academic year due to the increasing case numbers witnessed in the pandemic. However, this distance education was different from the education under normal conditions where all the infrastructure was being provided. Every teacher and learner with or without experience in distance education were suddenly faced with the fact of lecturing or taking lessons by the distance education method (Durak, Çankaya, and İzmirli, 2020). This introduced the concept "Emergency Distance Education" (Bozkurt, 2020) to the literature. Emergency distance education differs from distance education in that it is not an option, but a must; it offers temporary solutions in line with the current needs; and the efforts are dedicated to keep education running with available opportunities (Bozkurt, 2020). It is inevitable that emergency distance education, which is a necessity in times of a crisis, has some limitations.

With the advent of COVID-19, some problems associated with distance education started to emerge in higher education institutions. While some universities already had the infrastructure for synchronous or asynchronous education model, some others were deficient in infrastructure, and this increased the inequality among higher education institutions (Allen, Rowan, and Singh, 2020; Guangul, Suhail, Khalit, and Khidhir, 2020). The inequality experienced in the institutions also frequently manifested itself in the students. The pandemic brought difficulties to university students in their daily lives (August and Dapkewicz, 2020) as well as in their university lives (Karadağ and Yücel, 2020; Sahu, 2020; Turan and Gürol, 2020). The focal point of this study is to identify the problems faced by the university students in this process and to come up with suggestions to eliminate these problems.

To this end, the purpose of the study was to determine how the university students who continue their education online after the universities shifted to distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic evaluate this process. It was aimed to reveal the problems faced by the university students in this process and how they experienced the

process. This study sought answers to the following questions:

- According to the university students' opinions, how did the pandemic affect the university life?
- According to the university students' opinions, what are the problems encountered in the distance education practices?
- What are the university students' opinions about the effect of being at home with their families on their university education?

Method

Research Model

The study was designed as a case study, one of the qualitative research methods. Case study is a research method used to find answers to the questions "how" and "why" when the researcher has no control over the variables in a current situation (Yin, 2003). In this study, the case study was preferred because the university students' experiences were being evaluated during the COVID-19 pandemic period when they were receiving education at home.

Participants

The study group was selected using the maximum variation sampling method among the university students studying at a public university in the 2020-2021 academic year in Turkey. 20 students from different faculties, schools, and grades were included in the study group. The study was limited in that only the university students with internet access participated in the study. Personal information about the participants is given in Table 1.

Table 1. The Demographic Information of the Participants

Participant	Gender	Faculty	Grade Level	Participant	Gender	Faculty	Grade Level
P1	Female	Faculty of Education	1	**P11**	Male	Faculty of Arts and Sciences	3
P2	Male	Faculty of Education	2	**P12**	Female	Health Sciences Faculty	4
P3	Female	Vocational High School	2	**P13**	Female	Vocational High School	2
P4	Male	Vocational High School	2	**P14**	Male	Faculty of Education	3
P5	Male	Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences	3	**P15**	Female	Health Sciences Faculty	4
P6	Female	Faculty of Arts and Sciences	4	**P16**	Female	Theology Faculty	2
P7	Male	Faculty of Education	4	**P17**	Female	Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences	2
P8	Male	Faculty of Education	4	**P18**	Male	Theology Faculty	2
P9	Female	Vocational High School	1	**P19**	Female	Health Sciences Faculty	3
P10	Male	Faculty of Arts and Sciences	1	**P20**	Female	Faculty of Arts and Sciences	1

Data Collection

Semi-structured interview form was used as data collection tool. The interview form consists of two parts: personal information about the participants and the questions about the problems they faced during the pandemic. In the personal information part, there are some questions about the participants' gender, department, grade level, personal computer, and internet.

The interview form was prepared by the researcher. The informal interviews the researcher had with the university students in the courses formed the basis for the preparation of the interview questions. In this context, 4 questions and 2 probe questions were prepared. After the interview questions were prepared, an academician who has studies on distance education was asked to express opinion on the questions. In line with the expert opinion, the questions in the form of "positively/negatively affected" were changed to "how it affected" with the justification that the former might cause the participants to provide biased answers. Some of the questions in the form are as follows:
How has your university life been affected during the pandemic? Please explain.
How did it affect you to attend the university courses from your family home during the COVID-19? Please explain.

After the interview form was finalized, a pilot study was carried out with 2 juniors studying at the department of primary school teaching, who were receiving a course from the researcher, in order to measure the comprehensibility of the questions, and since no problems were encountered, the study proceeded to the main implementation phase.

The data were collected between November and December 2020. Due to the COVID-19, the interviews were conducted over Skype, rather than face-to-face, as the universities shifted to distance education. The researcher contacted the faculty members from different units of the university and asked them to identify the students who would voluntarily participate in the study. The contact information of the students who accepted to participate in the interview was obtained and communication was established with these students individually. Appointments were arranged for the participants to conduct the interview after informing them about the research and the interview process. The interviews lasted about 15-20 minutes. The interviews were recorded on a program and later on they were transcribed, and the analysis process was started.

Data Analysis

MAXQDA-20 software package was used in the analysis of qualitative data. After the interviews were transcribed, they were uploaded to the MAXQDA in Word format. Descriptive analysis technique was used in the analysis of the data. Descriptive analysis is used to identify what the participants said about the research problem or what kind of results were found in relation to it (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2018). Codes and categories were created based on the participants' answers to the questions. The participants expressed more than one problem affecting them in their opinions. Therefore, in some categories, the number of problems expressed by the participants was higher than the number of participants.

The study was tested in terms of validity and reliability. In order to ensure the internal validity of the study, the interviews carried out online were shared with the participants after they were transcribed, and they were asked to confirm that the shared contents were their own statements. In order to ensure the external validity, the participants' opinions were frequently referred to in the results section, and all the details about the data collection process were explained in the data collection and analysis section.

Results

In this part of the study, the data obtained from the university students were analyzed and supported with their opinions. In line with the first problem of the research, the participants were asked the following question: "According to your opinion, how did the pandemic affect the university life?" The data obtained from the students are shown in Figure 1.
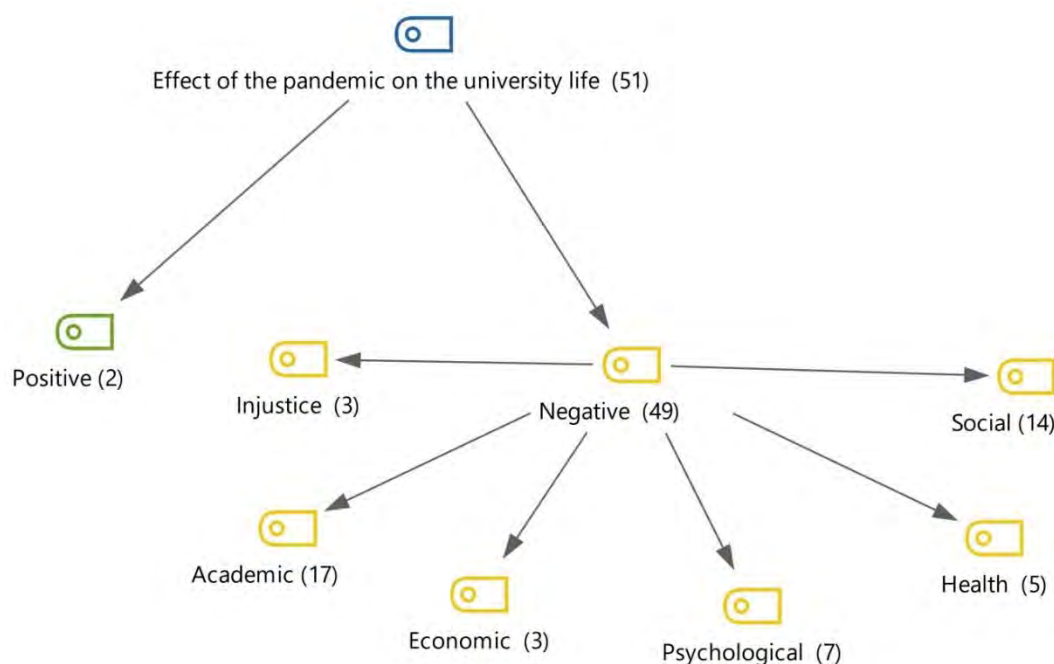

Figure 1. The Effect of the Pandemic on the University Life according to the University Students' Opinions

Figure 1 shows the codes and categories for the effects of the pandemic on the students' university lives. The majority of the participants stated that the pandemic period affected their university education negatively (18 participants) whereas 2 participants stated that it affected their university lives positively. The Participant K2, one of the participants who evaluated the process as positive and saw the situation as an opportunity to attend courses, said, *"I am currently studying at a second university and working at the same time. Under normal circumstances, I worry about getting time off from work and catching up with the courses, but now I can attend my classes online at my workplace."*

The negative effects of the pandemic period on the university education consisted of the following codes:

academic (17), social (14), psychological (7), health (5), economic (3), and injustice (3). The code "academic" was the most frequently referred one. In other words, the majority of the participants reported that the pandemic period negatively affected their university life in academic terms. The participant K3 expressed her/his opinion as follows: *"After the pandemic, I think I never received a quality education. One semester passed with homework and the other semester was full of online courses as if it was automated, but no avail... "*The participant K4 stated that *"I have some vocational courses and I used to have difficulty in understanding them even in the face-to-face education, now you can easily understand how difficult they are in online education."* The participant K14 emphasized the negative aspects of this period as follows: "*I cannot get my books due to the pandemic, my cargo packages arrive too late, so I have to be content with the information the instructors provide.*" The participant K7 underlined that she/he was negatively affected in academic terms and said, "*This year I will graduate and become a teacher, but I see the last year as a lost year. No internship, no practice... I feel very inadequate as a teacher candidate. "*

Secondly, the participants reported that the pandemic period affected their university lives socially. One of the participants (K1) stated that *"I don't even know my friends who are in the same class right now, there is no interaction, no sharing."* Another participant (K14) said, "*We live a home-based life, I don't even meet anyone but my family members, let alone traveling.*"

The participant K10, who emphasized that the pandemic period affected their university lives psychologically, said,

> "*In the first year of university, we had to attend courses from home... this is a psychological breakdown, a contradiction. You are a university student but you are not at university, you are with your parents. I even became a subject of mockery in the family.*"

The participants who perceived this period as an injustice emphasized the injustice and inequality of opportunity in the evaluation process. One of the participants stated, "*I consider this period as negative because I think there will be cheating in online exams, so it cannot be a fair exam period.*" One of the participants who emphasized the inequality of opportunity said, *"I do not find this period fair for me who does not have a computer or who live in a place where there is an unstable internet connection. I am not under the same conditions as people who go on the same road as me."*

Based on the participants' opinions, it can be said that the pandemic period mostly affected the university life negatively and the negative aspects manifested themselves more in academic and social fields.

In the study, the participants were asked whether they had any problems during the distance education period. They all reported that they encountered some problems in this period. In line with the second problem of the research, the participants were asked the following question: "According to your opinion, what are the problems encountered in the distance education practices?" Figure 2 shows the codes for the answers to this question.

The problems experienced in the distance education consisted of the following codes: not understanding the

lessons (18), internet connection problems (14), technical problems (13), timing (9) and lack of materials (6). The majority of the participants frequently mentioned about "not understanding the lessons" (18). The participant K11 asserted that the lessons taught through distance education were not efficient and said, "*It is not efficient because the instructor lectures for hours and we are in the position of listeners, we do not do anything else. So there is no permanent learning."* The participant K20, who were studying at a mathematics intensive department, said the following about failure to understand the lessons: "*I can understand the verbal-based lessons by reading the notes, I can consolidate it completely, but I have difficulty understanding the subject 'mathematical proofs'."* On the other hand, the participant K7 expressed her/his opinion as follows: "*Education should take place with interactive materials. The lessons where only the teacher speaks are boring. Besides, we sit in front of the screen for hours and this should also be taken into consideration."*
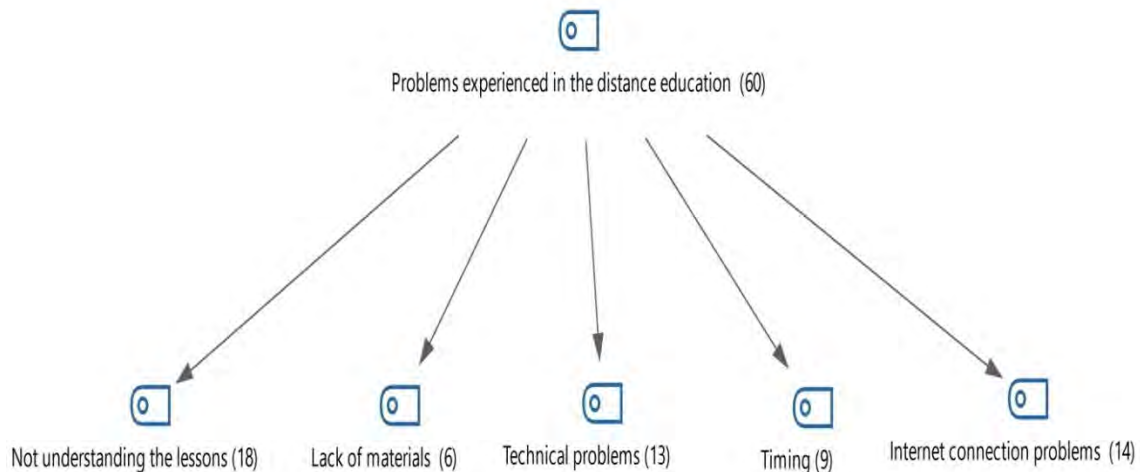

Figure 2. The Problems experienced by the University Students in the Distance Education

The codes "internet connection problems (14)" and "technical problems (13)" were also among the codes frequently repeated by the participants. It was found that the students had some problems associated with the Internet due to their place of residence or financial difficulties. The participants expressed the following opinions in this regard:

> *"I experience some problems about the Internet due to the district I live in, I can access the internet in certain parts of the neighborhood, and I cannot attend classes much because I do not go out regularly due to the pandemic (K10)"*
>
> *"Live lessons really drain my internet data package too much and I cannot renew my internet data package regularly due to my financial situation. (K4)"*

The problem with the distance education infrastructure experienced by the university students was referred to as "technical problems." The participants expressed the following opinions about the technical problems:

> *"During the course, we are experiencing many problems such as not being able to hear the teacher's voice, the video freezing, or the cancellation of the lesson due to the platform. (K20)"*
>
> *"Sometimes while I'm attending the lesson the system disconnects me and I have trouble in connecting again. Our teachers' voices can be heard interruptedly. This makes it hard to understand the lesson. (K11)"*

Based on these opinions, it can be said that the participants had some problems such as being disconnected from the lesson and receiving unclear sounds and videos due to the distance education infrastructure. It was found that the participants experienced some problems associated with the lack of materials and timing in distance education. Participants who did not have materials such as computers and tablets stated that they had problems in participating in online lessons.

One of the participants (K4) explained this situation as follows: *"I don't have a personal computer, my department is a PC-supported department, I fall behind in most practices in my department. (K4)"* Another participant (K10) said, "*We are 4 siblings at home and have a desktop computer, we all take online courses, I can attend the courses only when it is my turn for the computer."*

One of the participants (K15) who stated that she/he had problems with timing said, *"Our lessons are held consecutively and without a break. It is very difficult for me to focus on the lessons on the phone screen."* Another participant (K6) said, *"Some of our lecturers plan their lessons arbitrarily at the times they want, which causes conflicts with other lessons.*" The participant K13, one of the participants who found the duration of lessons short, expressed this situation as follows: *"The lessons are very short, when we move on to the main subject, the lesson ends and the subjects remain very superficial."* K13)*. Based on the participants' opinions, it can be said that the internet problems, technical problems, lack of materials, timing problems related to distance education caused the students to not get efficiency from the distance education and to comprehend the lessons less.

Finally, the study focused on the question "What are the university students' opinions about the effect of being at home with their families on their university education?" The Figure 3 shows the codes for this question.
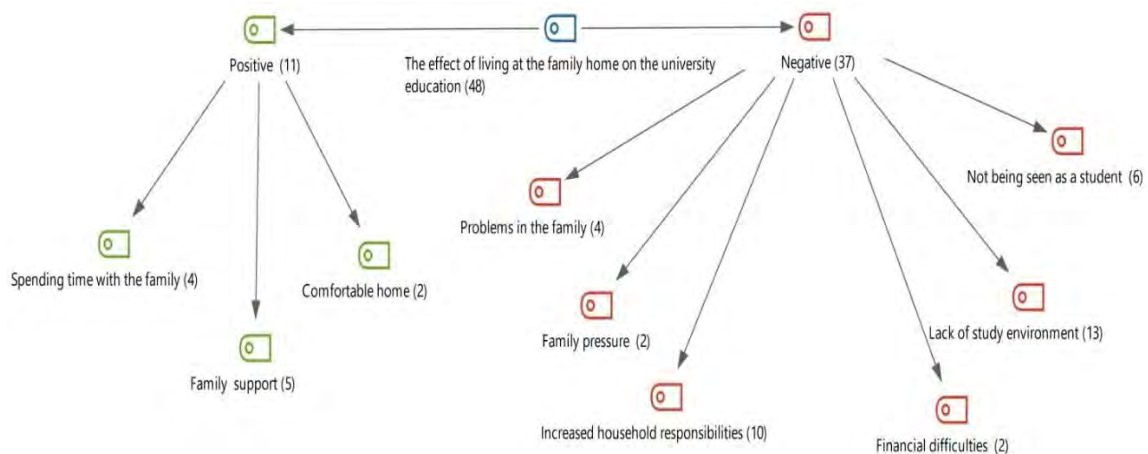

Figure 3. The Effect of Living at the Family Home on the University Education

When the Figure 3 is examined, it is seen that the university students evaluated the situation "living at the family home" in two categories, positive and negative. 7 participants who found it positive to continue their university education at their family homes put forward the following codes to support their argument: the support of the family (5), enjoying spending time with the family (4), and the family atmosphere being comfortable (2). The participant K7 emphasized that their families supported them in adapting to distance education and creating a

suitable environment with the pandemic and said, *"I have a family that provides me with all opportunities for my lessons and success. They recognize my right to make a choice and my right to speak and care about my thoughts."* A participant who emphasized the comfort of the family environment stated, *"I feel more comfortable, healthier, and safer at my family home"* (K16). The participant K3 who saw distance education as an opportunity to spend more time with her/his family during the pandemic expressed her/his opinion as follows: *"I can say that the pandemic worked for me because I am one of those who like to spend time at home and are fond of family."*

Some of the participants considered living with the family as negative and their number was higher than that of those who considered it as positive. 13 participants stated that being at their family homes negatively affected their university lives. The participants detailed these negative situations as follows: lack of study environment (13), increase in the responsibilities associated with home (10), not being seen as a student (6), problems in the family (4), financial difficulties (2), and family pressure (2). The students who participated in the interview considered the lack of study environment at home as a problem. The participant K2 said the following about this problem: *"I have 3 siblings at home, one of them is disabled, so I cannot prevent the noise. Since we do not have private rooms, we live in the same room together. This affects me negatively."* The participant K9 said, about the home environment, *"Guests come to our home all the time, and I cannot study while they are there."*

It is inevitable that being in a home environment also increases the responsibilities such as helping in housework. 10 participants emphasized that their university lives were negatively affected by the increase in the housework responsibilities at the family home. The participant K13 expressed her/his criticism about this issue and said, *"For example, I have a course that day, but my mother makes me clean the house thoroughly. I feel like a housewife."* It was noteworthy that all the participants who expressed opinion about this code were women.

The code "not being treated as a student" was mentioned by some of the participants. The participants expressed the following opinions in this regard:

> *"They behave as if there is no school and I came to the family home on vacation."* (K17)
> *"The people at home don't even see me as a student, let alone seeing as a university student! They don't take me seriously."* (K9)

Based on the participants' opinions, it can be said that the students were negatively affected by the attitudes of their families towards them, their families not seeing them as students, and not being able to create an environment where they can study.

Another factor that negatively affected the students who continued their education at their family homes was the quarrels and problems experienced within the family. One of the participants (K14) said the following about this subject, *"It is not possible to study at university from home. I constantly find myself in the middle of family problems. They quarrel, fight due to small details, it is hard to focus on the lesson, at least we were mentally comfortable in the dormitory."* Another notable result was about the family pressure. The participant K10 explained her/his situation in this regards as follows: *"I am tired of being told to study even though I study. I feel under pressure."*

Based on the students' opinions, it was found that the closure of the schools and the transition to distance education due to the pandemic prevented them from experiencing the university life socially and academically; the efficiency of the education decreased in the distance education due to the technical difficulties, time problems, and lack of materials; and the students experienced several problems associated with staying at their family homes.

Conclusion and Discussion

In this study, the universities' transition to online education due to the COVID-19 and the students' continuing their education at their family homes were discussed and the problems experienced by the students in this period were evaluated. In this part of the study, the results will be discussed by comparing them with those in the literature. In this research, the effect of the pandemic on the students' university education was discussed. According to the majority of the participants' opinions, it was found that the pandemic negatively affected their university lives. In general, the participants were negatively affected in academic terms. Also in the studies carried out by Afşar and Büyükdoğan (2020); Bayram, Peker, Aka, and Vural (2019); Altun-Ekiz (2020); Kürtüncü and Kurt (2020) and Altuntaş-Yılmaz (2020), it was found that the university students found the theoretical and applied courses inadequate due to the reasons such as the lack of opportunities for questions and answers in distance education and the insufficient technical infrastructure. Especially, it is seen as a deficiency that students pass the courses only by doing homework, the lessons are monotonous, and the applied courses that require skills cannot be carried out. For the students who have difficulty in understanding even the lessons taught face-to-face in the classroom interactively, it is inevitable to experience some academic difficulties in online education where time and interaction are limited. In order to ensure academic success in distance education, it is considered important to have the required technological infrastructure, design the program effectively, train the instructors in distance education, and adapt the course curriculum to distance education (Barr and Miller, 2013). With the advent of the pandemic which created a chaos, universities' transition to emergency distance education pushed these preparations and programs into the background. Although the emergency distance education made it possible to continue the education, it brought many problems in its wake. This period deeply affected the instructors and learners who were typically used to face-to-face instruction in classrooms (Zhang, Wang, Yang, and Wang, 2020) Moreover, distance education created unprecedented challenges in the courses requiring practice in laboratories (Cooper and Tschobotko, 2020). This result reveals the fact that there is a need for developing alternative methods for practice-oriented courses in distance education.

According to the university students' opinions, the pandemic also affected the students' university life in terms of socialization. Most of the participants stated that the pandemic negatively affected their university lives in social terms. Education, especially the university education, provides opportunities for students in terms of not only academic but also social development. With the pandemic period when some quarantine and social distancing rules were imposed, the university students had to be locked down in their homes. This lock down prevented the students from being together with their peers and participating in social, cultural, and sports activities. Previous studies also emphasized the social effects of the pandemic (Afşar and Büyükdoğan, 2020; Aktaş, Büyüktaş, Gülle, and Yıldız, 2020; August and Dapkewicz, 2020; Üçer, 2020). Another result was that the participants were psychologically affected by the situation. During the COVID-19 period, staying in the same environment for a

long time, doing limited and similar activities also affected individuals psychologically. Moreover, the uncertainty about the pandemic, health-related concerns and fears further increase this psychological effect (August and Dapkewicz, 2020; Cao et al., 2020; Demir, 2020; Çetin and Anuk, 2020; Tutku, Ilıman, and Dönmez, 2020; Wang Cheng, Yue, and McAleer, 2020).

Another remarkable result of the study was the students' emphasis that the pandemic created an inequality in education and evaluation. The way the education was evaluated and cheating in online exams were considered by the students as an injustice in distance education. On the other hand, evaluating the students who do not have the financial means and are not under the same conditions using the same system increases this injustice. The emergency distance education practices designed through internet access and computers have made the digital divide in the society clearer and caused the gap between those who have and do not have an internet access and compute to widen further (Bozkurt, 2020). The studies and reports in the literature also emphasize that the pandemic increased the inequality (Buluk and Eşitti, 2020; Giannini, Jenkins, and Saavedra, 2020; Hammond et al., 2020; Karadağ and Yücel, 2020; Keskin and Kaya, 2020; Kürtüncü and Kurt, 2020; Reimers and Schleicher, 2020; UNESCO, 2020; Patel, 2020; Uwezo, 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Yang, 2020; Zhang vd, 2020). As a result, it was found that the university students were struggling with academic, social, psychological, economic, and health problems during the pandemic period.

This study discussed the problems experienced by the university students in distance education practices. According to the university students' opinions, the problems associated with the distance education were identified as follows: not understanding the lessons, limited internet access, technical problems, limited time, and lack of materials. With the advent of the pandemic, the higher education institutions' rapid transition to the distance education has rendered it inevitable to experience some technical problems. However, the uncertainty about how long this situation will continue should be seen as an opportunity for the higher education institutions to establish a sound technical infrastructure. Another result was that the university students had some problems with timing in the distance education. They reported that the lessons were shorter than normal and, therefore, the subjects were explained more quickly. Although the distance education creates a learning environment independent of time and place (Arbaugh, 2000), it is also a problem that the time allocated for the lessons is not sufficient and the lessons are scheduled in an unplanned way.

In the study, the effect of being at the family home on the university education was also examined. While some participants considered it as an opportunity to stay at the family home for the reasons such as the support of the family and being more comfortable, some others considered it as negative due to the reasons such as the absence of a study environment, behaviors of the family members, family problems, and family pressure. The most frequently mentioned problem associated with staying with the family was the lack of a study environment. Most of the participants stated that they had some difficulties in following the lessons due to the high number of family members and the lack of a private room and computer. In addition, the participants emphasized the increase in housework responsibilities. It was found that the participants, especially the females, assumed more responsibilities in housework, which was an obstacle to their education. This result also reveals the problem of equality in education.

In general, in this study, the effects of receiving distance education and staying at the family homes during the pandemic on the university students were examined and it was found that the students considered this period as negative in academic, social and psychological terms. The following recommendations were developed in line with the results of the study. During the pandemic period when we have experienced great changes in our lives, the field of education has also faced a great change and transformation. In order to realize this change and transformation effectively, it is recommended that all the higher education institutions complete the ongoing works for establishing a distance education infrastructure.

In line with the principle of equality in education, the disadvantaged groups can be identified and provided with an internet and hardware support. In order not to interrupt the applied courses, an infrastructure can be established to offer these courses effectively in online environments. Sociality was one of the factors that affected the university students the most. Considering the uncertainty about the pandemic period, online platforms can help the university students, especially the freshmen, socialize and fraternize.

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