

COVID-19 in Turkey: Fewer Applications, More Enrollments

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During the epidemic, the number of students enrolled in universities in Turkey increased by 242,647 compared to the previous year. The demand for higher education decreased in many other countries around the world due to the COVID-19 epidemic; therefore, it is important to understand why the situation is different in Turkey. The aim of this article is to contribute to the discussion of the impact of the epidemic on higher education, with a focus on Turkish higher education.

During the epidemic, there was intense debate on the extent to which the demand for higher education would be affected. It was thought that both health concerns and the economic crisis would negatively affect demand for higher education. In times of economic crisis, two opposing forces influence the demand for university. On the one hand, decreasing family income tends to reduce demand; on the other, the almost non-existent opportunity cost of education tends to increase it.

This time, however, the situation is different. The economic crisis has been more severe and the measures taken to prevent the epidemic have increased inequalities. It was predicted that the widening of income inequality caused by the epidemic would reduce the demand for higher education for low-income groups and increase it for high-income groups. Considering the significant income inequality among higher education students in Turkey, the epidemic was expected to exacerbate existing inequality through reduced higher education demand.

Less Applications to the University Entrance Examination

The first step to entering Turkish higher education is the application for the university entrance exam. Within the Turkish education system, this is the only way to enter a university. Admissions are open to applicants from both general high schools and vocational high schools. Secondary education is mainly provided by three types of institutions: general high schools (public and private), vocational high schools, and religious

Abstract

In Turkey, higher education has been significantly affected by the COVID-19 epidemic. In April 2020, face-to-face education was replaced by distance learning. In 2021, the overall atmosphere of uncertainty affected high school students' applications for admission and preferences, especially low-income students in their senior year, who either postponed their plans for higher education or opted for open education. Demand increased for open education, formal two-year vocational programs, and formal undergraduate education in private universities.

high schools. Low-income students are reportedly much more likely to be enrolled in vocational and religious high schools, compared to middle- and upper-income students.

The decrease in the number of applications for the university entrance exam in 2020 was 91,000, representing a 4 percent contraction. This brought to an end the trend of an average 4.4 percent increase over the previous five years.

Four different types of student apply to university exams. The first group consisting of general and vocational school seniors, and the second group, consisting of graduates who have never been accepted before, make up the largest proportion of applicants. In 2020, for instance, these two groups accounted for 75 percent of applicants. The remaining 25 percent consist of the third group, those who have previously graduated from a higher education institution, and the fourth group, students still continuing their education in a higher education institution.

Prior to the pandemic, most applications in the first group were from high school seniors. This changed in 2020, when the number of applications of “unplaced” graduates exceeded that of seniors. In fact, in 2020, seniors’ applications fell below even the 2015 level. This change in trends is the first effect of the COVID-19 epidemic.

The decrease in the number of applicants from general high schools was negligible; in contrast, there was a remarkable 67 percent increase in the number of applicants from private high schools providing education in a foreign language. The number of applicants from religious high schools decreased by 5 percent, while the number of applicants from vocational high schools decreased more sharply, by 10 percent.

Increased Demand for Distance Education, Vocational Programs, and Private Universities

The second step for entering higher education is enrollment. In the 2020–2021 academic year, there were 1,609,913 new university enrollments, 53 percent for face-to-face education, and 47 percent for open education. Enrollments increased by 18 percent compared to the 2019–2020 academic year—well above the average of 2.7 percent over the previous five years.

- **Formal vs. Open Education:** In the 2020–2021 academic year, undergraduate enrollments increased by 113,338, a 16 percent growth from the previous year, of which 24 percent (27,112) applied for formal education, and the rest (76 percent) for open education.
- **Formal Education: Public vs. Private Universities.** There were 27,112 more enrollments in formal undergraduate education in the 2020–2021 academic year, and a 5.5 percent increase in face-to-face programs. Formal undergraduate enrollments in state universities increased by 4 percent, and in private universities, by 15 percent. Fifty-four percent of this increase was due to enrollment in state universities, and 46 percent, to enrollments in private universities. This is a novel and interesting situation; half of the additional enrollment in undergraduate education came from private universities, which have become the primary source of the increase in demand for undergraduate programs.
- **Two-Year Programs:** In 2021, there were 23,567 more enrollments in face-to-face two-year programs, a 7 percent growth. Public and private universities have similar growth rates for face-to-face two-year programs, around 7–8 percent, but public universities account for 79 percent of all enrollments.
- **Distance Education:** In terms of distance education, in the 2020–2021 academic year, enrollment increased by 35 percent overall. Enrollment in vocational programs increased by 31 percent, and in undergraduate programs, by 39 percent. For distance education, these figures suggest the beginning of a new trend, given that in the 2019–2020 academic year, distance education vocational school enrollments increased by barely 2 percent, and undergraduate enrollments decreased by 5 percent.

Conclusion: Trends in Application and Acceptance Rates

The number of students taking university entrance exams fell during COVID-19. Compared to 2019, among all applicants, the largest decline in 2020 was in senior students of vocational and religious high schools. Applications from senior students decreased, while applications from graduated, but unplaced students increased, exceeding those of senior students for the first time. There was a decrease in senior student applications

from every type of school, but the greatest contraction was again in those from vocational high school students. Applications from senior students in general public high school showed a small increase, but the main increase was from private high schools providing education in a foreign language.

There were decreases in undergraduate placements of senior high school students, and in two-year vocational placements of vocational high school students. The year 2020 saw a continuation of the previous year's increase in the rate of undergraduate acceptance of unplaced general and vocational high school graduates, while the acceptance rate of high school graduates who had been preparing for the university exam was almost twice the rate of senior high school students.

However, the situation was reversed for vocational high school students. In other words, if vocational high school students, generally from lower-income families, fail to be accepted into a program in their senior high school year, their chances of entering university are reduced by half. University enrollments increased in undergraduate and two-year vocational programs, and but the main growth area was distance education. Open education and two-year vocational program enrollments increased in public universities, but private universities had a higher rate of increase in overall undergraduate enrollments.

The epidemic's greatest impact was on low-income students in their senior year, who either postponed their plans for transition to higher education or opted for open education. There was an increase in demand for both undergraduate and two-year vocational programs from those high school graduates who had retaken the university exam, and the increased demand for undergraduate programs in private universities was driven by applications from private high school students. As the effects of the epidemic continue to be felt, it can be predicted that these emerging trends will continue. ▲

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