# COVID-19 Experience of Higher Education Students in Urban and Rural Areas[*]

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**Abstract**

According to official statistics, there are approximately eight million higher education students in Turkey. In other words, one-eighth of Turkey's population continues to higher education in Turkey. In this study, the digital divide in distance education in terms of the physical and social environment of higher education students is discussed. When the first COVID-19 cases were recorded in Turkey in the second week of March 2020, formal education was immediately stopped with distance education until finishing 2020-2021 education year and 2021-2022 higher education year started with partly (approximately %40) distance education. This paper focusses on undergraduate (BA) and postgraduate students (both MA and PhD) from Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University (AYBU) in Turkey to compare the function of living in the urban area or rural area during the COVID-19 pandemic. After finishing literature review and getting ethical approval for collecting original data, Phone and Skype interviews between June and September 2020 has done with thirty-four students. Then, the datasets analyzed with the NVivo program with regards to emerged main themes (e.g., location, urban and rural areas, and distance education). In this study, students living in the city center stated that they experienced more psychological, social and economic difficulties in order to overcome this pandemic. Students who live in rural or suburban areas and can access educational materials and facilities with secure internet access have been found to be more independent, safe and productive during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, home, urban-rural areas, higher education, distance education.

# Yükseköğretim Öğrencilerinin Kentsel ve Kırsal Alanlarda COVID-19 Deneyimi[**]

**Öz**

Resmi istatistiklere göre Türkiye'de yaklaşık sekiz milyon yükseköğretim öğrencisi bulunmaktadır. Yani Türkiye nüfusunun sekizde biri yükseköğretime devam etmektedir. Bu

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çalışmada, yükseköğretim öğrencilerinin fiziksel ve sosyal çevreleri açısından uzaktan eğitim sürecinde yaşanan dijital uçurum ele alınmaktadır. Türkiye'de ilk COVID-19 vakaları 2020 Mart ayının ikinci haftasında görüldüğünde, örgün eğitim derhal durdurulmuştur ve 2020-2021 eğitim öğretim yılı bitene kadar örgün eğitim uzaktan eğitimle devam etmiştir ve 2021-2022 yükseköğretim yılına kısmen (yaklaşık %40) uzaktan eğitimle başlanmıştır. Bu çalışma, COVID-19 salgını sırasında kentsel alanda veya kırsal alanda yaşama durumunu ve yaşanılan mekânın etkisini karşılaştırmak için Türkiye'de Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt Üniversitesi'nden (AYBÜ) lisans ve lisansüstü (yüksek lisans ve doktora) öğrencilerine odaklanmaktadır. Literatür taraması tamamlandıktan sonra orijinal verilerin toplanması için öncelikle etik kurulu onayı alındı ve bu onaydan sonra Haziran ve Eylül 2020 tarihleri arasında otuz dört öğrenciyle Telefon ve Skype görüşmeleri yapılmıştır. Daha sonra ortaya çıkan ana temalar (örneğin konum, kentsel ve kırsal alanlar, uzaktan eğitim) ışığında NVivo programı da kullanılarak elde edilen veriler analiz edilmiştir. Şehir merkezinde yaşayan öğrenciler, bu salgının üstesinden gelmek için hem psikolojik hem de sosyal ve ekonomik olarak daha fazla zorluk yaşadıklarını belirtmişlerdir. Diğer taraftan, kırsal alanda ya da şehir çeperlerinde yaşayan ve internet aracılığı ile eğitim materyalleri ve olanaklarına erişebilen öğrenciler pandemi boyunca daha bağımsız, güvenli ve üretken olduklarını belirtmişlerdir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** COVID-19, ev, şehirsel-kırsal alanlar, yükseköğretim, uzaktan eğitim.

**INTRODUCTION**

Higher education is an important part of the development goals and the guarantee of the future for Turkey (HE reports, 2019). According to data obtained from the Council of Higher Education, there are about eight million undergraduate (BA) and postgraduate students (both MA and PhD) studying at Turkish higher education institutions. In the 2019–20 academic year, there were 7,857,030 students enrolled in universities providing open and formal education. However, there were only 83,103 enrolled students in universities providing distance education. Although enrolment numbers do not show a remarkable difference between male and female students, there is a tremendous difference in terms of geographical regions.

In world history, wars, terrorist incidents, natural disasters, diseases, and epidemics appear as events that fundamentally disrupt education (Kahraman, 2020). In order to prevent interruption of the education process in such crises, fast solutions can today be produced with the help of digital learning technologies (Kahraman, 2020; Nerse, 2020). The pandemic caused by the coronavirus (COVID-19) has caused the disruption of formal education worldwide. In order to prevent the spread of the corona virus and the sustainability of students' education, most countries have decided to switch to the distance education system (Telli and Altun, 2020). In late 2019, a new type of coronavirus was encountered in Wuhan, China. COVID-19, which started as a local health problem, has since become a global epidemic in only a short time due to increasing mobility of the populace and rapid contagion factors (Özer and Suna, 2020; WHO, 2020). This pandemic has caused great changes in people's daily lives. Some governments have taken measures such as curfews and national and international travel restrictions to reduce interpersonal interactions. The curfew restrictions applied in many countries have deeply affected many areas, especially business life and education (Balcı and Çetin, 2020; Aydın and Köse, 2021). In order to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and slow the spread of the infection, some countries have seen it as necessary to close schools. Indeed, schools were closed in 194 countries in the second half of the 2019-2020 academic year after the new type of coronavirus (COVID-19) spread across the world and rapidly turned into a pandemic (Karip, 2020). This pandemic has impacted education on a global scale and in an unprecedented manner (Işık and Bahat, 2021). Given its devastating impact worldwide, responding to the educational needs of students is of paramount importance in such a times of crisis (OECD, 2020; Özer and Suna, 2020). Distance education gains importance in such situations through the provision of material online (Lembani et al., 2019).

Turkey also interrupted education in its schools with the appearance of the first cases of coronavirus in March 2020 (Karip, 2020). Distance education, an innovative education system, has been actively used by many countries during the pandemic when their education systems were disrupted or insufficient. After the interruption of formal education in schools, distance education with initiated and attempts were made to ensure the continuity of learning in Turkey. Distance education was enacted via synchronous and asynchronous methods according to the technological capacities of the country in question, teachers' ability to use technology, and students' access to digital technologies and internet connections (Aydın and Köse, 2021, Telli and Altun, 2020; Arık et al. 2021; Kutlu and Titrek, 2021). As stated by Lembani et al. (2019), access to education is an important determinant of the future success of the individual. In this context, it was only possible to meet the

education needs of students without gathering them into crowded classes, but with distance education during the pandemic period. On the other side, continuation of education via distance learning has not affected students equally due to the differences in the way it is provided (Özer et al., 2020). Several countries in the world have been caught unprepared for distance education and the opportunities and digital literacy differences between socio-economic groups have revealed the digital divide in distance education. In addition, students' socio-economic status and the physical environment students live in affect the extent to which they can benefit from distance education. The factors such as institutional and environmental barriers, digital and technological inequalities have affected the level of students benefiting from distance education (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021). Also, COVID-19 pandemic exposed the digital divide between high- and low-income communities in globe. Although it is claimed that opportunities for digital education have increased on a global scale, it is possible to say that there are significant differences between rural and urban areas in this regard (Nerse, 2020). Individuals in urban areas with rich ICT access may have a remarkably different educational experience those within semi-urban, town and rural areas where ICT access is much more limited (Lembani et al. 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, some students have not had reliable access to the internet and thus educational resources. Consequently, university students have not participated or benefitted from distance education on equal terms and they have experienced of the digital divide in higher education.

### Meaning of Home and Location

Researchers in different disciplines accept 'home' to be a multidimensional concept and emphasize the necessity of multidisciplinary research in defining it. In addition, different definitions have historically been offered by various disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, human geography, architecture, and philosophy to understand the meaning and function of the house (Saegert, 1985; Lawrence, 2987; Mallett, 2004). The word home is a difficult concept to define because it contains the understanding of a "space" or "place" as well as psychological resonance and social meaning (Saegert, 1985). Lawrence (1987) described the concept of 'home' as a dwelling unit that defines and limits the physical space where the household lives. On the other hand, Rakoff (1977) defines the house as the place used to express the feelings and thoughts of people, to perform cultural activities, and to provide physical shelter and protection. In addition, definitions of home reveal that the residential area and the concept of home are closely related to the psychology, economic situation, geography, and socio-cultural values of society. Accordingly, the concept of a house includes all family members living in that house as well as that of a pure architectural structure. In this context, the residential areas from the courtyard of the house to the garden, from the rooms to the terrace, are designed as a living space and this makes the space a complete home (social space).

The meanings people attribute to homes can of course vary to a certain extent from one culture to another (Rakoff, 1977). These life-prioritized spaces can basically be a simple tent in which poor people can get their heads, as well as residential complexes or palaces where all members and servants of wealthy families can live together. Although a relationship can be established between the form of these houses and the people's lifestyles, these relationships have become more complex in post-industrial revolution societies (Kuban, 1995). In general, before the industrial revolution, in societies where the majority of

the world population showed rural characteristics, socio-economic conditions did not change much and construction techniques were essentially similar, and in which houses were meant as places that respond to basic needs. In this sense, dwellings have been built functionally to meet all the needs of people living in rural areas. However, with the approach of the industrial revolution and the modern age, changes have occurred in the meaning and functions of homes. Housing units have begun to transform into commodities that are produced and marketed within certain economic and technological possibilities and constraints (Saegert, 1985). Nevertheless, the construction of houses in different shapes and sizes within the same society can be due to both the construction of the buildings and the building materials used. On the other hand, in societies dominated by socio-cultural elements, it can be seen that the functional programs of a standard house do not vary much from region to region (Kuban, 1995). This situation causes residents living in a certain space and using a given environment to add meaning to the dwellings built according to their culture and world views and morals (Rakoff, 1977). There is same situation for students, especially higher education students in the same context (Aydın and Köse, 2021).

Beyond the cultural predispositions related to the design and use of home and indoor spaces, it is also necessary to take into account groups of people with different demographic characteristics who share ideas and values with each other in daily life in society (Lawrence, 1987; Mallett, 2004). Because the age, gender, household income, working status, social class, local and social roles in daily life, domestic routines and religious practices, and technology usage levels of individuals living in houses may differ (Lawrence, 1987). All of this causes individuals to make sense of the home in different ways and to have different functions according to their perspectives. Many academic studies have revealed the existence of a strong relationship between household structure, age, gender, religious beliefs of individuals, and many socio-demographic variables, the design of the interior spaces, the meaning of the house, and the use of the dwelling (Lawrence, 1987; Mallett, 2004). For example, while elderly people in the same household prefer a more calm and relaxed home environment, children want indoor spaces that are suitable for playing games at certain times of the day. In addition, students may prefer physically and socially appropriate study environments at home. The importance of dwellings increases further in the winter months when people spend most of the day at home or when individuals are exposed to epidemics outside.

According to the records, humanity has suffered from severe epidemics of infectious diseases throughout history (DiMaio et. al., 2020). Some of these epidemics have caused a change in the course of history, both in demographic and economic terms (Larue, 2020). The bubonic plague epidemics (the Black Death) that continued during the Middle Ages resulted the deaths of more than half of the population of continental Europe (DiMaio et. al., 2020). It was the deadliest pandemic recorded in history. Epidemic diseases are not limited to specific geographical regions, but can spread from their point of origin to different regions, or even to the whole world. Epidemics that spread around the world are called pandemics (Açıkgöz and Günay, 2020; DiMaio et. al., 2020). In the 21st century, mankind's mobility is vastly greater than at any point in history. Therefore, the potential mobility of viruses that cause epidemic diseases has increased and the causal diseases have gained the opportunity to spread faster than ever before. An epidemic caused by a previously unknown new type of coronavirus (COVID-19) emerged in late 2019, and has since been declared a pandemic by the WHO (Açıkgöz and Günay, 2020; DiMaio et. al., 2020; Sirkeci and Yüceşahin, 2020). The

pandemic caused by the coronavirus (COVID-19) was detected in Wuhan, China at the earliest on December 19, 2019 and had spread to many countries, mainly continental Europe and North America, by April 2020 (Shereen, 2020).

The most accurate facts known about the current pandemic is that the corona virus spreads very quickly in places where social distance is limited. Respiratory systems commonly result in elderly people who are exposed to coronavirus and individuals with weak immune system or chronic diseases can collapse in a short time or individuals exposed to the virus may die (DiMaio et. al., 2020; Shereen et. al., 2020). Consequentially, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed a major health threat worldwide (Sirkeci and Yüceşahin, 2020). Countries struggling with the coronavirus epidemic want people to stay at home and not to go out unless they have to in order to reduce its rate of spread, prevent an epidemic taking hold, and saving lives (Tezer and Demirdağ, 2020). Some countries have even applied part-time or regional curfews (Sirkeci and Yüceşahin, 2020). Within the struggle against coronavirus in countries such as Turkey and the United Kingdom, the 'home stay' rhetoric has become a widespread slogan. In this process, the global pandemic caused significant disruption to the work plans of many people, but also ultimately forced family members to stay at home. In this context, the importance of the house where people live today has come to the fore. As a result, what the meaning and function of the house actually are and the requirement of meeting the daily needs of all family members (sociological, cultural, psychological, and environmental) have become open to discussion within different disciplines.

In this study, the meaning and functions of the house will be evaluated within the framework of cultural, demographic, economic, and psychological dimensions, and the requirement of meeting all the needs of the household will be discussed. 93% of the Turkish population lives in the cities and towns where they live in houses built for consumption culture. This study seeks answers to the following questions: During the epidemic period when staying at home is a legal requirement, to what extent do places of residence satisfy all higher education students? How do higher education students organize their daily lives and manage stress during this period of compulsory staying at home in urban and rural areas during the COVID-19 pandemic? The main purpose of the research is to reveal how the physical and ICT technology access characteristics of the house lived during the COVID-19 Pandemic period affect the online education process of higher education students. The responses to these questions will be discussed in line with the answers of the higher education students. Thus, by examining the COVID-19 experiences of students in urban and rural areas, the problems that occur in the distance education process and the deficiencies arising from the location are discussed.

**The Case of Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University (AYBU), Ankara, Turkey**

COVID-19 has affected universities and higher education students in different ways. To clarify our research questions, we choose Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University (AYBU) as a case because of its student profile and location. Moreover, accessibility and previous contact with different departments allow us to reach our participants easily, if we compare AYBU with other universities in Ankara. This situation allows us to save our time and choice participants purposively.

According to AYBU's official records[1], the university was established in 2010 in the capital of Turkey, Ankara. There were 18,926 undergraduate, 1,327 masters, and 3,597 PhD students at AYBU in November 2020 (AYBU, 2020). There are some departments (e.g., Politics, Psychology, and Engineering) in AYBU which teach English as part of their course, whilst other departments teach in Turkish. AYBU is an attractive university due its location and the quality of education it offers its students. Turkish students come from the various parts of the country to continue their education at AYBU. This has allowed us to access different participant demographics in a single location. In other words, we conducted our surveys with students who had lived in city centers and the countryside, have educated and non-educated families, or who have sufficient sources to survive in life or otherwise. This is a significant factor in determining the answers to this paper's research questions.

### Methodology and Datasets

After finishing literature review about COVID-19 in terms of education, especially distance education and rural and urban areas differences in the same context, to evaluate arguments and research questions of this study, a case study area needed. In other words, this research based on the data provided from the case study of Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University's different level and departments of higher education students. Fieldwork commenced after ethical approval had been obtained for the study from the Ethics Committee of the Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University. Semi-structured phone and Skype interviews were conducted with 14 undergraduate, 10 MA, and 10 PhD students, a total of 34 higher education students, from the Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University between June 2020 and September 2020. Due to the pandemic, this approach to collecting data with semi-structured way helped us to overcome the obvious difficulties with meeting people face-to-face (Iacono, Symonds and Brown, 2016). It takes long time to collect our data as compared to other online data collection methods (e.g., online survey or online secondary data) which are becoming the most popular ways to collect original data during the current pandemic. However, this method also useful to us in terms of an in-depth exploration of our research questions (Bryman, 2008; Cresswell, 2009; Mason, 2003). The rights of the participants, the confidentiality of their personal information and the purpose of the study have clearly explained to each participant. Then, their approval gained for interview. Students participated in the research on a completely voluntary basis. These ethical rules were also followed before, during and after the field study. Additionally, the participants' personal information was anonymised, such as name, age, nationality, etc. Pseudonyms were used to anonymise the participants' names. For example, the first female undergraduate student interview is shown as U-P1-F, the fifth female master student interview is shown as MA-P5-F, and the seventh male PhD student illustrated as PhD-P7-M.

While the participants were found via the convenience sampling method, the participant selection was made in line with our purposes. In general, there was a participant profile between the ages of 19-45, with approximately equal numbers of men (19) and women (15) attending, participants from different parts of Turkey including both urban (19) and rural areas (15). In other words, the participants come from various different backgrounds, which is important in terms of the validity and reliability of the

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[1]https://www.aybu.edu.tr/ogrenciisleri/contents/files/duyurular/KASIM%20AYI%20%C4%B0STAT%C4%B0ST%C4%B0KLER%C4%B0.pdf

research (Bryman, 2008). Table 1 provides detailed information about the democratic profiles of the interview participants.

**Table 1:** Demographic Variables of the Interview Participants

| Demographic Variables | Level | n | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Age groups** | 19-24 | 16 | 46 |
| | 25-29 | 8 | 24 |
| | 30-34 | 7 | 21 |
| | 35-45 | 3 | 9 |
| **Gender** | Female | 15 | 44 |
| | Male | 19 | 56 |
| **Education** | BA | 14 | 40 |
| | MA | 10 | 30 |
| | PhD | 10 | 30 |
| **Marital Status** | Single | 26 | 76 |
| | Married | 8 | 24 |
| **Current Home Ownership Status** | Renting | 11 | 32 |
| | Owning | 3 | 9 |
| | Living with family | 20 | 59 |
| **Employment Status** | Employed | 15 | 44 |
| | Unemployed | 19 | 56 |
| **Location** | Urban | 19 | 56 |
| | Suburban- Rural | 15 | 44 |

Thereafter, following the completion of the field work, interviews that were recorded with a voice recorder were first transcribed and then categorised with sub-categories such as living in a city center, living in a suburban area or countryside, studying from home, working from home, future expectations, etc. Additionally, voice recorder as a data collection tool allows us to record each word and to prevent lose any detail in our fieldwork and then analysis period. Finally, the interview data were analysed with the NVivo analysis program. The SPSS statistical program was only used in this instance to form a descriptive analysis. These tools allowed the data to be analysed systematically and accurately without missing any important detail (Bryman, 2008). In light of existing literature, this research followed these steps and themes as a part of content analysis to examine the research questions.

At this point, another important aspect is validity and reliability of data in this research. Enough time, convenient questions, order of questions and used words in the questions highly effecting the reliability of qualitative researches (Cresswell, 2009; Mason, 2003). In fieldwork period, we spent about five months to collect our date. In other words, the date collected especially in summer period after lockdown and distance education

experienced. Additionally, based on ethical approval forms, the interview questions are written clearly without disturbing the participants. Lastly, this paper pay attention to validity of date as another significant aspect of methodology. As a most cited category in qualitative based studies that there are four types of validation, which are construct validity, content validity, internal validity, and external validity (Moskal et. al., 2002). Without detailly explain each type of validity in this section, it is better to mention briefly how this paper reach this level: a) the questions asked via general to specific and in online platform (as an example of construct validity), b) the questions mainly focused on participants experience about COVID-19 and more specifically distance education experience both in urban and rural areas (as an example of content validity), c) the participants learned their rights before starting interview (e.g., their right to withdraw, confidentiality of study), therefore helped with the gathering of valuable data from them (as an example of internal validity), and d) AYBU preferred due to its accessibility of different levels of higher education students without time and bureaucratic restrictions (as an example of external validity). These steps followed carefully to find out valuable data and analyse them following ethical rules which gained before starting the fieldwork.

### Opportunities due to Location

Certainly, there are many and varied reasons that scholars should consider when answering the question of how we experience the COVID-19 pandemic differently, such as according to age, gender, race, occupation, or being unemployed. However, in a more inclusive way, all these differences or similarities occur in certain spaces. In other words, all these take place in urban or countryside areas. For this reason, the urban or rural places where people live are amongst the most important and common factors that affect how individuals have experienced – and indeed still are experiencing – the COVID-19 outbreak. The location-oriented analysis in this paper considers the impact of living area and experiencing the outbreak in terms of higher education students' perspectives. Firstly, this section focuses on the positive examples that depend on location.

Higher education students have experienced COVID-19 across the entirety of Turkey, whether in city centres or countryside areas. While existing studies are focused the Turkish education system and different areas (Nerse, 2020, Lembani et. al. 2019, Özer, Suna, Çelik and Aşkar, 2020) and tend to indicate that living in the countryside creates difficulties in terms of surviving one's education in a distance-related manner. Based on these location issues, in this paper the participants from different levels of higher education noted different aspects and their experiences with regard to living area. In this case, cultural differences are one of the most important distance-related factors, as one male PhD student noted:

> *The other day, for example, I went to a wedding, in my hometown ..... (in the south of Turkey). No matter how much you want to follow the (pandemic) rules, the halay (Anatolian folk dance) is played. You know our culture... People got up, pulled the halay, did the dance and played the Çiftetelli (local dance). Not much attention was paid (to social distancing). I don't know... if it's about the level of education anymore, or the boredom thought of this lockdown* (PhD-P3-M).

A female PhD student at AYBU who was working as a research assistant in another Turkish city said that:

> *[ …] is a small city. There are not many cases here. Maybe if I lived in Istanbul, the epidemic might affect me differently. I definitely recommend that you consider this. But I noticed that it was easier to live in a small place and deal with the epidemic* (PhD-P6-F).

The above two examples clearly showed that if one compares different-sized cities in Turkey, the small cities show certain similarities with regard to following pandemic rules and experiencing the same process. These kinds of examples are helpful to our understanding of how the local environment affects people's daily lives and routines during the pandemic. This is not only important with regard to daily activities and connections, as the same approach is being taken in terms of education. An undergraduate student, originally from the capital of Turkey but wanted to live in Ankara, explained his reasons for such, despite the pandemic:

> *I believe that I will achieve my personal development better in Ankara because I will be able to find the books I am looking for faster. There are more conferences in Ankara, more symposiums. New movies arrive in Ankara immediately, while they arrive in rural areas a month later* (U-P11-M).

A master's student explained her experience through a comparative perspective:

> *The number of cases has increased 100% in most parts of Ankara right now (in September 2020). I had to go to Ankara at that time. I went for 2 days and came back. It was very dangerous for me. For all the months since March I haven't experienced any stress but I experienced it all there in only two days* (MA-P9-F).

The second example in particular, was happen to a master's student who had stayed in Ankara for very short time to complete her master's course during the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. These were the most stressful days she claimed to have experienced since the start of the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, Ankara was the one of the most attractive cities in Turkey as a location to continue one's higher education and socialise and develop oneself both in and out of university. However, with the pandemic, due to its dense population and busy daily life the city became dangerous to higher education-level students (and, of course, many other groups). Accessing the education is not an issue (Nerse, 2020) for students living in countryside areas, or indeed for students living in the city centre. Lastly, one participant doing a master's course had been living in Ankara during the first days of the COVID-19 pandemic then moved to his hometown centre, and lastly moved to his village. Based on these different experiences, he compared these three places:

> *I can say that the house we are in in the village now [best] meets our needs because it is far from the city, away from the people... It is in a natural environment... It is a psychological comfort because it means that the precautions we need to take are fewer because we are far from most people* (MA-P8-M).

Living in the countryside is generally noted as an opportunity in terms of organising one's daily life, minimising the effects of the pandemic and pandemic rules, and continuing one's (distance) education. In the Turkish context, countryside areas have become more functional in terms of dealing with the pandemic during 2020.

### Difficulties due to Location

In contrast to the above examples, there are instances where location does not necessarily play a positive role in daily life and in social interactions. According to Saunders

(1990 and 2016), location is not the key issue in people's choice of and tenure status-based belonging in England. In other words, location does not play a role in the associated decisions and experience of a specific place; rather, this depends on the living area, people (in this case higher education students), and different stated views (both positive and negative).

**Table 2:** Students who want to live in another city/place

| Education Level | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Undecided | Agree | Strongly Agree | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| BA | 21.5% (3) | 14% (2) | 43% (6) | 0% (0) | 21.5(3) | 100% (14) |
| MA | 20% (2) | 0% (0) | 20% (2) | 40% (4) | 20% (2) | 100% (10) |
| PhD | 20% (2) | 20% (2) | 30% (3) | 30% (3) | 0% (0) | 100% (10) |
| Total | 20.5% (7) | 12% (4) | 32% (11) | 20.5% (7) | 15% (5) | 100% (34) |

Table 2 gives a summary of the interviews, which shows how higher education students consider their existing living area in a negative or confused manner. MA- and PhD-level students in particular seem to be making plans to live other cities than their home city. Additionally, at all levels amongst these students, the distribution of those choosing 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' is around 20%. While this statistic gives us an overview of the general viewpoint of living area, it might be better to look in more detail and to exact the reasons as to why higher education level students want to move other Turkish cities. To illustrate, an undergraduate student who has a good relationship with his family nevertheless stated that:

> Yes, […] (a city located in South of Turkey) is a touristic paradise that everyone wants to come to, but your heaven becomes your hell after a while. If you go into the same water for a month, two months, if you see the same things for a month, two months, after a while, one wants to go crazy (U, P1, M).

The population density is one of the most significant issues within a pandemic environment. Based on this density, people are trying to find alternative ways to overcome the current difficult times. As the examples below show, due to the pandemic, students have begun comparing their home cities with Ankara. For example, an undergraduate student compared his hometown and Ankara in terms of organising his daily life during the lockdown.

> If I were in Ankara, I would not go out except for vital things. I would try to meet my needs in different ways, (online). But after coming here (hometown) I feel like I am back to my old life (before pandemic) (U-P11-M).

As Nerse (2020) pointed out, rural and urban places are different in terms of experiencing and feeling about COVID-19. In contrast to this study, which depends on personal experience, each place might be represent different feelings and experiences in practice. In other words, it is difficult to generalise a place meaning and function purely due to its location as the various examples above have illustrated. Another undergraduate student living in a small city centre compared it with Ankara:

*The rate of spread of this disease is highest in big cities, but when I got here (a small city centre), there was exactly the environment I was looking for. You feel stressed in very crowded environments. That's good here. But as I said, we are in the centre of … (a small city in the middle of Turkey). The neighbourhood we are in is not exactly in the heart of the city. It is a bit of a walk. But despite that, we don't get involved in too many crowds when we go out to take care of our home's needs. I get really nervous when I think of the means of public transportation in Ankara. For example, I don't know how those facilities will be used when we get back to normal. So, I think it will be very stressful even if it is not infected* (U-P13-F).

Finally, one more undergraduate student living in a metropolitan city in Turkey said that "My freedom is very restricted here *(in the city centre)*. It *(his hometown village)* is a wide area where there are highlands, grass, insects… It is a nice place… It would be better if we were there as a family…" (U-K9-M). These different examples were given by students living in different parts of Turkey and in different-sized cities; they are clearly experiencing COVID-19 differently. Furthermore, they are explaining the difficulties with their living area. These are the basic things (e.g., living with family or alone, freedom, daily routine) in daily life and stated earlier than the issues about formal (both online and offline) education. It is vital to be aware of living area and local environment with regard to both their positive and negative aspects at the same time. Additionally, while focussing on education mainly discussed technical issues (e.g., internet access and available personal study room or a computer in the home) (Özer, et. al., 2020), it is necessary to consider the local environment and its impact on students' psychology and motivation as well.

### Home as a School with Regard to Location

The meaning of home emerged as another key factor in terms of its influence on the experience of the pandemic in Turkey. While the meaning of home has changed over time (Saegart, 1985; Saunders, 1990; Ronald, 2008), it has become more complex as a concept within post-industrial societies (Kuban, 1995; Mallett, 2004). Based on this general view, this study clearly confirms that the meaning of home has changed considerably with the COVID-19 pandemic for all levels of higher education students.

**Table-3:** Has the meaning of home changed with the COVID-19 pandemic

| Education Level | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Undecided | Agree | Strongly Agree | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| BA | 0% (0) | 0% (0) | 7% (1) | 64% (9) | 29% (4) | 100% (14) |
| MA | 10% (1) | 10% (1) | 10% (1) | 40% (4) | 30% (3) | 100% (10) |
| PhD | 10% (1) | 0% (0) | 40% (4) | 20% (2) | 30% (3) | 100% (10) |
| Total | 6% (2) | 3% (1) | 18% (6) | 44% (15) | 29% (10) | 100% (34) |

Schools have been closed but online education has continued with the type of education style changing from formal to distance learning. In this unprecedented pandemic situation, adapting to current education system from home emerged as one of the common issues. For instance, according to a last year undergraduate student living in a countryside area:

> *When online lessons started, we had to work hard, we had a lot of homework. Therefore, I was spending about 10 hours of the day writing my project on the computer or doing my homework due to the necessity given by the lessons. The past month and a half passed in this way. Apart from that, I was going out for breakfast, dinner and mostly in the garden. I was talking on the phone with friends in the garden, especially with my friends in Ankara. At least I had an autonomous area where I could go out and was not subjected to major restrictions since I was in the garden and in a village environment* (U-P7-M).

Individuals had considerable difficulties to manage their routines when the lockdown has been announced in Turkey. Students had to cope with the distance educational situation from their home due to the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. They have been had to reorganize their lives around educational activities, and attendance and learning processes. Both the home environment and physical situation of home and local area has affected students' views and experience of distance education during lockdown. Another view was expressed by a master's student in explaining his new responsibilities with regard to his education:

> *I continued my university studies at home in …. city centre (hometown). During this period, I had to go out more. Because when we compare it with Ankara, I only had to meet my own needs and some of the needs of the house in Ankara. In …. (hometown), on the other hand, I have a responsibility to meet the needs of my family as well as my own … Of course, I can say that this affected my studying more negatively* (MA-P8-M).

The types of houses and living alone or with the family highly affecting the connection with home (Mallet, 2004). Similarly, in this study, it was found that living with their families in their hometowns give the student's new responsibilities and caused time management problems in particular. It is not always easy to manage and adopt to this new way of life, to which a master's student, living in her hometown, highlighted the difficulties that she had lived with due to COVID-19.

> *I was in the thesis process at that time in Ankara, I was at the end of my course and focussed on my thesis. I was studying at home (in her hometown), but Ankara is metropolitan… Sometimes I went to the school library when I couldn't work at home. And that was more comfortable for me. In other words, while I was planning to complete the thesis in Ankara, I suddenly completed it in …. (hometown). It was painful and troubling for me. I can say that coming home suddenly, establishing order, adapting… Or not being able to benefit from library facilities… Having problems with the Internet, and so on* (MA-P9-F).

The reorganisation of daily life and adaptation to new situations have been among the more significant issues for the higher education students with the COVID-19 pandemic. According to results of the interviews, appropriate physical environments and available facilities (e.g., private study room, internet connection, library access) in their home have an impact on students' concentration and productivity. While it is an opportunity for the students, living and continuing their educational lives in another city away from their family, to have to suddenly spend time with their families instead, this new and unexpected life negatively affected their studies. Additionally, 78% of higher education students expect that there will be changes in the traditional education system soon and ICT

will see much greater use in education. Therefore, distance learning and home-studying practices will be experienced by many more students.

**CONCLUSION**

In many sectors, people have been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the most COVID-19-affected sectors is education. In the vast majority of countries, schools have been closed by government directives in order to prevent the spread of coronavirus, and students have thus not been to school in most countries for some considerable time. Digital-based distance education systems have been initiated by government directive to mitigate the impact of the pandemic when educational institutions were compulsorily interrupted. While this pandemic affects different parts of daily life, education, and especially higher education, is one of the most important areas which is separately and interactively related with other parts of daily life. In other words, the changes, difficulties, and opportunities of COVID-19 with regard to higher education are being experienced at the same time across, essentially, the entire world. Distance learning has not affected students equally due to institutional and environmental barriers, digital and technological inequalities (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021). In addition to the positive side of distance education for individuals who can access online learning materials students were caught unprepared for distance education in low-income communities and the issues caused digital divide for higher education students. Students who did not have sufficient IT infrastructure have had difficulties accessing educational material when they switched from formal to distance education (Nerse, 2020; Özer & Suna, 2020; Telli & Altun, 2021). This is the main discussion and finding in existing literature about impact of COVID-19 pandemic on education life. Moreover, students living in urban, suburban, and rural areas have experienced the distance education process differently.

Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University, as an inclusive case from Turkey, has represented different impacts of the coronavirus pandemic, in practice, simultaneously. Personal situation (e.g., age, gender, marital status) affect higher education students in terms of how they personally experience the pandemic. However, living in the countryside, the suburban area or in the city centre is one of the key factors that greatly affect students' experiences of distance education (Nerse, 2020). In this way, existing studies highlighted about living in a rural area is equal to living difficulties with regards to accessing internet, social and cultural activities as well. However, living in a city centre was mostly noted as being negative by all levels of students in terms of organizing their daily lives during the pandemic. They felt more stressed, and life more problematic, living in city centres due to their crowded population and busy lifestyles. Before the pandemic, urban areas were centres for social, cultural, and education-based activities. Nonetheless, the densely populated urban areas where the virus spreads more rapidly due to population density and movement may become dangerous and effectively non-functional areas during the pandemic. By contrast, if the problem of internet connections and other education-related infrastructure can be solved, suburban and rural areas may become the ideal places to continue a life of education with less stress. Students living in rural areas remarked that they lived a more stress-free and independent life, while individuals living in the city stated that they felt under pressure due to the pandemic. Also, the majority of higher education students indicated that the meaning of home has changed for them as they spend more time at 'home' under compulsory curfew. However, depending on their home environment (e.g., physical

structure or how many people are living in the same home), higher education students experienced the pandemic in different ways to each other.

To conclude, this current study shows that there are various conditions that lead to students' differing experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The accessibility of distance education materials and the living location are the most significant factors for all levels of higher education students in Turkey. In this context, more studies should be carried out in the future in the attempt to increase quality of education based on the experiences of the students and to ensure that all students benefit from equal opportunities. In this case, comparison of different urban and rural areas could be another empirical study to focus on same topic deeply and with different perspectives. In addition, minimizing the differences between rural and urban areas in terms of ICT tools and platforms will reflect positively on education.

**Article Information**

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|---|---|
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