ACADEMICS' PERSPECTIVES ON DISTANCE EDUCATION: EXPERIENCES, CHALLENGES, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Abstract:

This study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences and difficulties encountered by academics during the distance education process at a provincial university in Türkiye. Designed within a qualitative research framework and grounded in interpretive phenomenology, the study investigates academics' perceptions of distance education, the pedagogical and technological challenges they faced, their views on institutional support, and the strategies they employed to manage the process. The study group comprised 17 academics (8 male, 9 female) from eight different departments. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analysed using content analysis techniques. Results showed that although many academics considered themselves technologically competent, this competence was largely limited to basic technical skills rather than the effective pedagogical integration of technology into teaching practices. Major challenges included insufficient technological infrastructure, limited student engagement, a lack of interaction due to closed cameras, and substantial constraints in delivering practice-based courses and conducting valid and reliable assessments in an online environment. While the distance education experience contributed positively to academics' technological development, especially in terms of digital tool usage, it also diminished professional satisfaction in disciplines heavily reliant on practical applications. Academics reported developing various personal coping strategies, such as modifying course content and employing alternative digital platforms. However, institutional support mechanisms were frequently viewed as delayed, reactive, and inadequate. Overall, the study concludes that the rapid and crisis-induced shift to distance education exposed a discrepancy between technological adaptation and meaningful pedagogical transformation. The findings highlight the necessity of developing sustainable and discipline-specific institutional policies that promote hybrid learning models, enhance technological infrastructure, ensure equitable access to resources, provide ongoing pedagogical training, and introduce clear regulations regarding attendance and camera use in order to foster interaction and engagement in future distance education contexts.

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1. Introduction

Distance education is an instructional model in which the learner and the instructor are physically separated, and teaching is delivered through technological means (Uşun, 2006). This model enables the continuation of student–teacher interaction through the use of the internet and digital platforms (Bozkurt, 2017). Developments in information and communication technologies have transformed distance education into a more interactive and accessible form. Within this transformation, different modes of implementation such as synchronous, asynchronous, and blended learning have emerged (Köse & Koç, 2014; Herand & Hatipoğlu, 2014; Kaur, 2013). Distance education offers numerous advantages, including flexibility of time and place, access to large audiences, geographical independence, equal opportunity, cost-effectiveness, access to digital resources, rich instructional materials, and support for lifelong learning (Ağır, 2007; Akyürek, 2020; Meriç, 2022). However, it also presents significant disadvantages, such as limitations in motivation and social interaction, challenges in practice-based courses, technological infrastructure and communication problems, difficulties in classroom management, and a lack of effective feedback (Bakioğlu & Çevik, 2020; Çakın & Akyavuz, 2020; Çoban, 2020; Fidan, 2020).

With the advancement of information and communication technologies, distance education has assumed an increasingly central role in higher education and has become a compulsory mode of instruction for universities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hodges & Fowler, 2020). This period enabled almost all academics to experience distance education first-hand. Numerous studies have been conducted on distance education during this time (e.g., Bakioğlu & Çevik, 2020; Bedenlier *et al.*, 2020; Fidan, 2020; Rapanta *et al.*, 2020). Prior to the pandemic, distance education was largely used as a supportive or complementary method; however, under crisis conditions, it evolved into emergency remote teaching characterized by a rapid and unplanned transition (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). During this process, academics and teachers encountered various pedagogical, technological, and emotional challenges. For institutions and educators caught unprepared, the focus shifted from pedagogy to merely transferring existing course content to online platforms (Crawford *et al.*, 2020).

Understanding the experiences and challenges faced by the academics who constitute the study group of this research is critically important for the development of sustainable and high-quality digital teaching models in higher education. Universities with prior experience in distance education that serve as leading and guiding institutions for others must continuously monitor the quality of their learning designs (Crawford *et al.*, 2020) and remain prepared for pandemic-like crises (e.g., wars, natural disasters). Particularly in education systems reshaped by emerging technologies, distance education is likely to remain an integral component of education.

One of the main challenges faced by academics in distance education is the difficulty of effectively transferring pedagogical competencies from face-to-face teaching environments to online settings (Rapanta *et al.*, 2020). It is argued that academics who lack sufficient experience in online course design, fostering interaction, and sustaining student engagement struggle in their teaching processes (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). In one study, the majority of academics (68.9%) considered distance education inadequate, especially for applied courses, although they believed it could serve as a solution during extraordinary circumstances (Aksoğan & Çalış-Duman, 2020). The limitations of distance education in practice-based and laboratory-oriented disciplines may negatively affect academics' professional satisfaction and perceptions of teaching. This highlights that distance education requires not only technological readiness but also a strong pedagogical foundation (Ali, 2020; Mishra & Koehler, 2006).

In conclusion, the effective and sustainable implementation of distance education practices in universities depends directly on a comprehensive analysis of the pedagogical, technological, and organizational challenges encountered by academics, as well as on strengthening the individual and institutional adaptation strategies they develop. Without adopting approaches that centre on academics' experiences, needs, and solution pathways, it does not appear possible to enhance the quality of distance education or to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

In particular, universities in rural areas of Turkey conduct distance education processes under different conditions compared to central universities due to their limited technological infrastructure, human resources, and institutional support opportunities (Pençe, 2024). In this context, revealing the problems experienced by academics will contribute to understanding the inequalities of opportunity in distance education (Çakıroğlu Çevik, 2023). On the other hand, although existing studies reveal problems in thematic areas such as pedagogical transformation, technological adaptation, changes in interaction, and increasing workload, there is a need for an in-depth examination of the specific effects of these challenges on academics in different disciplines, seniority levels, and institutional contexts. The findings obtained will contribute to policies and practices for both improving institutional support mechanisms and building a sustainable and effective distance education ecosystem.

2. The Purpose of This Study

The aim of this study is to examine in depth the experiences and challenges encountered by academics working in different faculties and departments at a provincial university in Türkiye during the distance education process. The study seeks to explore academics' perceptions of distance education practices, the pedagogical and technological difficulties they face, their evaluations of institutional support mechanisms, and the coping strategies they develop throughout this process from a qualitative perspective. Accordingly, through interviews conducted with academics from various disciplines, the

study aims to understand the unique dynamics of distance education within the context of provincial universities. This research seeks to answer the following questions:

- How do academics working at a provincial university in Türkiye experience the distance education process?
- What are the main pedagogical, technological, and organizational challenges faced by academics during the distance education process?
- What similarities and differences exist among academics from different academic disciplines regarding their distance education experiences?
- What individual and institutional strategies do academics develop to cope with the challenges encountered during the distance education process?

3. Research Design

This study was conducted within the framework of a qualitative research approach, employing an interpretive phenomenological design, in order to explore the experiences and perspectives of faculty members working at a provincial university regarding the distance education process. Interpretive phenomenological research aims to uncover the meanings that individuals attribute to their direct and consciously experienced phenomena (Demircioğlu, 2023; Smith & Osborn, 2007). Within this framework, the study focused on how distance education was experienced by academics and how these experiences were reflected in their professional practices.

The primary data source consisted of the lived experiences of faculty members who were the direct implementers of the distance education process. Participants' perceptions of the process were examined through dimensions such as technical infrastructure problems, digital competencies, student participation, and levels of interaction. In addition, the adaptation strategies they developed and their suggestions for the future were also evaluated. section intended to contain a detailed description of all the methods, materials, collaborators and participants at the study. The protocols used for data acquisition, techniques and procedures, investigated parameters, methods of measurements, and apparatus should be described in sufficient detail to allow other scientists to understand, analyze and compare the results. The study subjects and participants should be described in terms of number, age and sex. The statistical methods should be described in detail to enable verification of the reported results. This section could contain a separate sub-section that comprises the explanation of the abbreviated terms used in the study.

3.1 Participants

In phenomenological research, it is essential that participants have direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation and are able to meaningfully represent those who have lived through it (Creswell, 2013; Demircioğlu, 2023). For this reason, a purposive sampling strategy was employed in the study. Within this framework, academics who had experienced distance education and who differed in academic title, department, and

gender were intentionally included in the sample to ensure a rich and diverse range of perspectives. The distribution of the participants according to department, gender, and academic title is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of the participants by department, gender, and academic title

Department	Title	Male (M)	Female (F)
Special education (S)	Associate professor (A)	AMS1, AMS3	-
	Doctor lecturer (D)	DMS2	DFS1, DFS2
Computer science (C)	Doctor lecturer (D)	-	DFC4
	Associate professor (A)	-	AFC5
Music education (M)	Professor (P)	PMM4	-
	Associate professor (A)	-	AFM9
Physical edu. and sports (P)	Associate professor (A)	-	AFP8
	Doctor lecturer (D)	DMP6, DMP8	-
Guidance and psychological counseling (G)	Doctor lecturer (D)	DMG5	DFG6
Journalism (J)	Professor (P)	-	PFJ3
Turkish language teaching (T)	Professor (P)	PMT7	-
English language teaching (E)	Doctor lecturer (D)	-	DFE7
Total		**8**	**9**

The sample of the study consists of a total of 17 participants, including 4 Professors, 5 Associate Professors, and 8 Doctor lecturers (8 males and 9 females). Voluntary participation was obtained from 8 different departments. As shown in Table 1, each participant was assigned a specific code. In the coding system, the first letter indicates academic title, the second letter indicates gender, the third letter represents the department, and the final number denotes the participant's order.

3.2 Data Collection Instrument

During the development of the data collection instrument, national and international literature on distance education, emergency remote teaching, and digital transformation in higher education was first examined in detail. Based on the theoretical and conceptual framework derived from this review, an initial pool of questions was generated. The draft interview form prepared at this stage consisted of 15 open-ended questions designed to explore academics' experiences with distance education, the problems they encountered, their coping strategies, their perceptions of institutional support, their level of preparedness for potential future distance education processes, and their suggestions. In addition, four demographic questions were included to determine participants' academic title, gender, department, and duration of distance education experience. Care was taken to ensure that the questions were written in a clear, understandable, and non-leading manner. To establish content and face validity, the draft form was reviewed by two experts in qualitative research and distance education. Based on the feedback received, several questions were restructured, overlapping items were merged, and the clarity of

certain expressions was enhanced. This revision process, grounded in expert evaluation, was considered a significant step in strengthening the validity and reliability of the data collection instrument (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). Following these revisions, the interview form reached its final version, consisting of 4 demographic questions and 13 open-ended questions.

3.3 Data Collection Process

In this study, data were collected using the semi-structured interview technique, one of the qualitative research designs. Semi-structured interviews are frequently preferred in qualitative studies because they allow for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). Within this scope, individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with 17 academics participating in the study. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring diversity in academic titles and disciplines in order to reflect varied experiences related to the process under investigation. Purposive sampling is considered an appropriate approach in qualitative research, as it enables the collection of rich and in-depth data regarding a particular phenomenon (Patton, 2002).

The interviews were conducted with the participants' written informed consent and were recorded using an audio device. Each interview lasted approximately 35 to 45 minutes. Audio recording was preferred in order to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data and to minimize the risk of information loss. In addition, recording the interviews enabled the researcher to concentrate more effectively on the flow of the conversation and on participants' responses, rather than on extensive note-taking. The use of audio recording in qualitative research is widely recommended, as it enhances data accuracy and supports more rigorous analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). After the completion of the interviews, the recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researcher, and accuracy checks were conducted. In this way, the dataset to be used in the analysis process was prepared in a detailed and systematic manner.

3.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using content analysis. Content analysis refers to the systematic coding of qualitative data, categorizing them, and organizing them under themes (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). To ensure the reliability of the data, inter-coder consistency was examined. The data were independently coded by the researcher and by an academic expert in the field. Following the coding process, inter-coder agreement was calculated using the reliability formula proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). Based on the participant × code matrix evaluation, code-based reliability ratios were determined, and the overall reliability coefficient across all codes was found to be 91%. This rate, being above 90%, indicates a very high level of agreement between coders (Landis & Koch, 1977). Codes on which disagreements occurred were discussed until consensus was reached, and the final code list was established accordingly.

4. Results and Discussion

In this study, interviews lasting approximately 35–45 minutes were conducted with academics working in different departments at a provincial university to explore their perspectives on distance education. The interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. As a result of the content analysis, nine main themes were identified: academic self-efficacy, technological infrastructure and technical problems, camera use and interaction, student participation, practical courses, assessment and evaluation, professional development, individual and institutional strategies, and recommendations (see Table 2). Table 2 presents the themes, codes, code descriptions/frequencies, and representative quotations derived from the interview data.

Table 2: Analysis of the data obtained from the interviews

Theme	Code	Code Description / Frequency	Sample Quotations
Academic Self-Efficacy	High self-efficacy	Academics feeling competent in distance education / (f=13)	*"I consider myself competent… I did not have difficulty using technology." (DFS1);* *"I think I am competent." (DFC4)*
	Partial/low self-efficacy	Perceived inadequacy in technology use and interaction / (f=4)	*"I see myself as partially competent." (AFP8);* *"I could not use technology very well." (AMS1)*
Technological Infrastructure and Disruptions	Inadequate infrastructure	Insufficient infrastructure, especially in practical courses / (f=10)	*"We tried to conduct choir class via Zoom; it was impossible." (AFM9);* *"The university did not provide technical equipment support." (PMM4)*
	Internet problems	Connection interruptions and speed issues / (f=14)	*"Internet connection and disconnections." (DFS1);* *"I experienced connection problems." (AMS3);* *"…sometimes we had interruptions." (DMP6)*
	Hardware and system problems	Device-, audio-, and software-related problems / (f=8)	*"I had sound and device problems." (DFS2);* *"Switching between files was very slow." (DFE7)*
Camera Use and Interaction	Negative effects of cameras being off	Loss of interaction and motivation / (f=11)	*"The lesson turned into a monologue." (DFS1);* *"The atmosphere in the language class died." (DFE7)*
	Adapting to cameras being off	Belief that cameras did not affect learning / (f=6)	*"It did not affect me at all." (AMS3);* *"It did not affect it." (PMT7);* *"…I started the lesson by checking their preparations and tried to conduct it in a question–answer format. This ensured participation even if they did not turn on their cameras." (DMP8)*

Student Participation	Low/fluctuating participation	Insufficient participation levels / (f=15)	*"Participation was not at the level I wanted." (DFS2);* *"It was around 50%." (AMS1);* *"Largely yes. There was higher participation at first, but it decreased in later terms." (DFE7)*
	Strategies to increase participation	Methods used to enhance motivation and participation / (f=8)	*"I used Kahoot and Quizizz." (DFE7);* *"I gave extra points." (AMS1);* *"Yes, it worked. I told students who regularly attended that I would support them in grading." (DMG5)*
Practical Courses	Digital adaptation	Adapting practical courses to online environments / (f=6)	*"We conducted micro-teaching." (DFE7);* *"I taught using two cameras." (PMM4);* *"…we received feedback from students. We used role-play. I placed two students in Zoom's waiting room, then brought them to the main screen—one as the client and one as the counselor—while the other 40 students watched like 'therapists behind the mirror.'" (DFG6)*
	Insufficiency in practice	Online practice not replacing face-to-face experience / (f=11)	*"It did not replace a real child." (AMS1);* *"Students could not obtain sufficient efficiency." (AMS3)*
Assessment and Evaluation	Preference for assignments	Assignments perceived as more efficient / (f=14)	*"Assignments were more efficient." (DFS1);* *"I chose homework because the exams were unreliable." (AMS3)*
	Distrust in exams	Cheating and validity concerns / (f=13)	*"There are WhatsApp cheating groups." (AFP8);* *"The exams were ineffective; there was a lot of cheating. The assignments were only partially effective." (DFG6)*
Professional Development	Technological development	mprovement of digital skills / (f=13)	*"I made a leap forward in preparing digital materials." (DFS1);* *"I transformed my courses into a digital archive." (AFC5)*
	Loss of professional satisfaction	Pedagogical/artistic dissatisfaction / (f=5)	*"My special education spirit became dull." (DFS1);* *"It was a technical, not artistic, development." (AFM9)*
	No development	No perceived contribution (f=1)	*No, I do not think it contributed much to me." (DFC4)*
Individual and Institutional Strategies	Individual Strategies	Efforts to improve course content, assessment, and interaction /f=8	*"We had to learn to cope with uncertainty. Flexibility became my most important strategy." (DMS2);* *"We discussed short videos prepared by students." (DFS1);* *"I improved my digital material production skills." (DFS2)*

	Limited institutional support	Institutional support limited to technical infrastructure, system guidance, and administrative regulations / f=9	*"There was nothing provided institutionally… support remained mostly at the administrative information level."* *(DFS1);* *"Institutionally, the infrastructure was insufficient." (PMM4);* *"The institution only informed us about how to use the system." (DMG5)*
	Collaboration and solidarity	Cooperation among academics and institutional flexibility / f=4	*"At the departmental level, we established an informal solidarity network and shared our materials." (DFS2);* *"Faculty administration provided significant support by allowing flexibility in practical courses." (AMS3)*
Suggestions	Hybrid and new technologies	Hybrid models, VR, virtual laboratorie / (f=14)	*"Investment in virtual reality is essential." (DMS2);* *"The hybrid model should become permanent." (AFP8);* *"Investment in virtual reality (VR) is essential. Students should be able to put on the glasses at home and enter a virtual private tutoring classroom. The future is here, yet we are still uploading PDFs. Additionally, seminars on distance learning should be provided to students." (AFC5)*
	Infrastructure and equality of access	Increasing equality in education / (f=3)	*"Distance education infrastructure should exist in all faculties and departments." (PMT7);* *"Even if a student's computer is weak, they should be able to remotely access the university's powerful computers to run heavy software." (DFC4)*
	Need for institutional planning and regulations	Inter-university cooperation / (f=2)	*"Students should be able to access all university libraries with a single click." (AFM9)*

Under the theme of Academic Self-Efficacy, two codes were identified: High self-efficacy and Partial/low self-efficacy (see Table 2). It was determined that the majority of the participants (13 academics) perceived themselves as competent in distance education, while four reported feeling partially competent or not competent. One participant who did not perceive themselves as competent (AFM9) explained this view by stating, *"No. I do not think I am competent because I had practical courses, and it was very difficult to conduct practical courses."* These findings indicate that academics generally adapted relatively quickly to the distance education process and felt competent in managing it. However, those who taught practice-based courses reported feeling insufficient or only partially competent. This suggests that perceptions of competence are closely related to the nature and structure of the course taught. One academic evaluated their experience positively

by stating, "*I consider myself competent. Within the opportunities provided, I did not have difficulty using technology*" (DFS1). Similarly, academics from different disciplines expressed that being able to use online platforms at a basic level contributed to their sense of competence. It can therefore be inferred that perceptions of competence in distance education were largely defined in terms of the ability to use technological tools. In other words, participants tended to evaluate self-efficacy primarily through technological literacy. Particularly, younger academics and those who interacted more frequently with technology demonstrated higher levels of perceived self-efficacy in conducting online courses. This finding is consistent with Albert Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory, which posits that individuals' prior experiences directly influence their perceived competence. Similarly, it has been argued that as instructors' experience with distance education increases, their adaptation to online environments also improves (Wingo *et al.*, 2017).

Within the theme of Technological Infrastructure and Disruptions, participants emphasized that infrastructure was particularly inadequate for practical courses (f=7) and that they experienced serious issues such as connection interruptions, freezing, delays in uploading and opening presentations (f=12), as well as audio, hardware, and software problems (f=6). These findings indicate that participants encountered significant difficulties related to devices, software, and internet connectivity. This result supports findings from previous studies conducted with teachers and academics (Bakioğlu & Çevik, 2020; Can, 2020; Çardak & Güler, 2022; Fidan, 2020; Kurnaz & Serçemeli, 2020). On the other hand, it is evident that infrastructure inadequacies led to serious limitations, especially in practice-based and performance-oriented courses. Participants from fields such as music, sports sciences, and special education frequently emphasized that the infrastructure did not meet educational requirements. This finding supports the argument put forward by Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) regarding emergency remote teaching, namely that a "one-size-fits-all" approach does not work. In conclusion, regardless of departmental differences, academics implemented largely similar practices during the emergency distance education process.

Under the main theme of Camera Use and Interaction, more than half of the participants (f=11) emphasized that students keeping their cameras off reduced interaction and motivation, while others (f=6) stated that they became accustomed to this situation over time and that it did not affect the learning process. During the process, the absence of a nationwide requirement to turn cameras on or enforce attendance may have led academics to accept that not using cameras did not significantly affect the process, resulting in a sense of normalization. However, when cameras are off, it becomes unclear whether the student is actually present and, if present, whether they are actively listening. In this regard, participant DFS2 stated, "…*While explaining to students the importance of making 'eye contact' on screen, the fact that their cameras are off is not an explainable situation.*" This statement highlights the perceived importance of keeping cameras on. Similarly, a study conducted by Şen and Kızılcalıoğlu (2020) with academics reported that students' reluctance to turn on their cameras created interaction problems.

When interaction decreases, lessons naturally tend to turn into monologues. In conclusion, keeping cameras on is considered important for maintaining healthy interaction and a positive classroom atmosphere, and it appears to be even more critical in practice-based fields.

When the three themes above are evaluated in terms of academic title, it is understood that professors generally perceived their self-efficacy as high and were less concerned about students not turning on their cameras. Associate professors, on the other hand, emphasized technical infrastructure problems and institutional workload imbalance. Assistant professors, identified as relatively younger academics, were found to be more active in using technology and integrating Web 2.0 tools such as Kahoot and similar applications into their courses.

Under the main theme of Student Participation, 15 participants stated that participation was insufficient, while others described the practices they implemented to increase engagement. Low participation, combined with students keeping their cameras off, was identified as one of the most challenging aspects of the process. To increase participation, some academics awarded extra points, some conducted periodic quizzes, and others used applications such as Mentimeter, Kahoot, interactive presentations, in-video questions, micro-teaching, and gamification strategies.

Within the theme of Practical Courses, six academics stated that they adapted their practical courses to the online environment through micro-teaching and the use of multiple cameras. Others, however, reported that they could not achieve sufficient efficiency and emphasized that such courses should be conducted face-to-face. These findings suggest that although creative and alternative solutions were employed to transfer practical courses online, these solutions did not fully replicate the experiential learning environment offered by face-to-face education, particularly in practice-intensive fields. In courses requiring teaching practice, musical performance, or athletic skills, dimensions such as interaction, instant feedback, and performance-based assessment remained limited in online environments. This situation aligns with studies emphasizing that emergency remote teaching implemented during the pandemic is structurally different from planned online learning (Hodges & Fowler, 2020). Similarly, research indicates that practice-based learning experiences in teacher education programs can only be partially achieved through distance education (König *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, studies highlighting the need to redesign instructional activities in online higher education stress the importance of strengthening pedagogical presence and effective learning design, especially in applied fields (Rapanta *et al.*, 2020).

Under the theme of Assessment and Evaluation, assignments were more frequently preferred, while the reliability of exams was considered low. Supporting this view, AMS3 stated, "*I think assignments were more efficient because students worked on them more seriously. Exams are not very reliable; I believe there was cheating.*" Participants frequently emphasized incidents of academic dishonesty. This finding is consistent with literature arguing that assessment processes in distance education need to be restructured (Cheng & Jordan, 2013). In other words, traditional online exams may not be well-suited

to distance education contexts. Participants suggested that performance-, project-, and process-based assessments would yield more valid results in online environments. In this regard, AMS1 expressed, "*Traditional exams have lost their meaning. I shifted toward process-oriented assessment.*" These findings indicate the importance of reconsidering assessment practices in terms of academic integrity, technology integration, and learning outcomes (Öztürk, 2024).

Within the theme of Professional Development, findings indicate that the distance education process contributed significantly to academics' technological competencies. A large majority of participants (f=16) reported improvement in their technological skills. For example, PFJ3 stated: "*Yes, it contributed—technologically. I personally experienced new-generation journalism (Mobile Journalism). I updated myself on remote interview techniques and digital verification tools. Journalism was already digitalizing; the pandemic accelerated this process for me.*" This statement demonstrates that the pandemic accelerated an already ongoing digital transformation and triggered individual professional updating.

Conversely, some academics stated that distance education reduced their professional satisfaction in pedagogical, artistic, or practice-based dimensions. In particular, in practice-oriented fields, the limitation of face-to-face interaction negatively affected professional fulfillment. Additionally, DFC4 stated, "*No, I do not think it contributed much to me.*" Taken together, these findings indicate that the impact of distance education on professional development varies depending on the discipline. Positive contributions appear more prominent in technology-related or theory-oriented fields, whereas professional satisfaction decreased in practice-based and performance-oriented areas. Therefore, adopting a uniform approach that ignores disciplinary differences does not appear appropriate.

Participants' efforts to restructure course content, adapt assessment methods, and improve digital material production skills point to an individual transformation in instructional design. The literature emphasizes that pedagogical flexibility and adaptability are critical during crisis periods (Hodges & Fowler, 2020). Hodges and Fowler (2020) distinguish between planned online teaching and emergency remote teaching, noting that instructors often relied on individual efforts to sustain the process during sudden transitions. Similarly, Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) describe this process as "*pedagogical improvisation*," where instructors developed personal initiatives to maintain instruction. In this study, strategies such as shifting toward theoretical content in applied fields, redefining learning objectives, and adopting alternative assessment methods can be interpreted as concrete examples of such pedagogical improvisation.

Findings also reveal that institutional support was largely limited to providing technical infrastructure and guidance on system use. However, the literature emphasizes that sustainable distance education requires not only technical infrastructure but also pedagogical guidance, continuous professional development, and institutional vision (Çardak & Güler, 2022; Fidan, 2020; Kurnaz & Serçemeli, 2020). The finding that institutional strategies were largely reactive suggests that institutions adopted a crisis management approach rather than a strategic digital transformation perspective. The

"*informal solidarity networks*" observed in the findings point to an adaptation model based more on collegial collaboration than on formal institutional structures. Departmental material sharing and administrative flexibility can be considered an intermediate level between institutional and individual strategies. Overall, the solidarity pattern identified in this study indicates that academic communities can rapidly develop adaptive approaches even in the absence of formal policy frameworks.

Under the theme of Recommendations, three codes were identified: (1) hybrid and emerging technologies, (2) infrastructure and equality of access, and (3) the need for institutional planning and regulation. Participants emphasized the necessity of making hybrid learning models permanent and investing in advanced technologies such as virtual reality (VR). For example, statements like "*Invest in virtual reality*" (DMS2) and "*The hybrid model should become permanent*" (AFP8) demonstrate that remote learning experiences should not be abandoned entirely. This finding suggests that academics view distance education not merely as a temporary crisis solution but as a teaching model that should be further developed. The literature similarly highlights the importance of hybrid learning models that strategically combine face-to-face and online learning (König *et al.*, 2020). Studies distinguishing emergency remote teaching from planned online learning emphasize the central role of pedagogical design in achieving sustainable digital transformation (Hodges & Fowler, 2020). In applied fields, particularly, virtual laboratories and simulation technologies have been shown to positively influence learning outcomes (Rapanta *et al.*, 2020). Thus, participants' recommendations point toward the need to deepen digital pedagogical transformation in higher education. At the same time, suggestions related to infrastructure and equality of access reveal that digitalization has not only a pedagogical but also a social justice dimension. Statements emphasizing the establishment of a strong distance education infrastructure across all faculties and enabling students to remotely access institutional hardware make visible the impact of the digital divide in higher education. Differences in access to digital resources can create inequalities in learning processes. Therefore, sustainable digital transformation requires standardized and inclusive infrastructure policies.

Finally, recommendations concerning inter-university collaboration and centralized digital resource access demonstrate that digitalization cannot remain limited to individual efforts but must be structured at the institutional and policy levels. Findings emphasizing that institutional capacity is as decisive as teacher competencies (König *et al.*, 2020) support the results of this study. Overall, the recommendations' theme indicates that digital transformation in higher education must progress simultaneously along the axes of pedagogical redesign, infrastructure equity, and strategic governance.

5. Conclusion

One of the main conclusions drawn from the discussion of the study findings is that academics did not encounter distance education through a planned and gradual transformation process; rather, they faced a sudden and compulsory transition during

the pandemic period. This abrupt change caused instructors to be unprepared for the process, and problems such as insufficient technical infrastructure, lack of knowledge about digital tools, and limited practical experience were strongly felt at the beginning. However, as the process progressed, it became evident that their experience in using technology increased, their awareness of digital tools improved, and, accordingly, their self-efficacy perceptions regarding distance education were strengthened.

The second significant result indicates that although academics became more compatible with technological tools and largely overcame technical problems, they did not reach the desired level pedagogically. Limited student participation, cameras being turned off, the inability to ensure active engagement, and the ineffective implementation of assessment and evaluation processes negatively affected the quality of the teaching–learning process. Moreover, many academics were not sufficiently familiar with technology-supported alternative teaching methods and techniques or did not know how to integrate these tools pedagogically. As a result, instruction largely remained lecture-based.

Third, although the process provided academics with certain professional competencies such as digital literacy, flexibility, and crisis management, it was observed that a systematic and sustainable preparedness approach for similar extraordinary situations did not develop. In other words, experience was gained; however, this experience was not transformed into a long-term preparation strategy at either the institutional or individual level.

Fourth, clear differences were identified among academics in terms of digital competence and pedagogical adaptation. These differences were found to stem from individual motivation, prior technology experience, and disciplinary variations.

Finally, it was determined that the solutions proposed by participants focused more on institutional regulations rather than individual responsibilities. Academics emphasized that university administrations should strengthen technical infrastructure, provide in-service training, and implement regulations to enhance student participation. In contrast, they placed more limited emphasis on self-evaluation regarding their own pedagogical transformation.

6. Recommendations

It was observed that the distance education process partially transformed academics' conceptions of teaching. Although the belief that face-to-face education is indispensable was largely maintained, a more positive attitude toward hybrid and flexible learning models emerged. This finding suggests that blended learning practices can be designed more consciously and systematically in the future. Therefore, it is recommended that academics, with the support of their universities, continuously implement hybrid learning models. Furthermore, developing discipline-specific distance education designs is considered essential.

The findings also revealed significant differences among academics in terms of digital competence and pedagogical adaptation. Individual motivation, previous technology experience, and disciplinary differences directly influenced the quality of the distance education process, leading to variations in practice and quality even within the same institution. This highlights the importance of developing a standardized and holistic institutional policy for distance education.

One of the fundamental factors for establishing classroom culture, interaction, and active participation in distance education is keeping both the student and instructor cameras on. Therefore, in future implementations, making camera use and class attendance compulsory is considered highly important.

Finally, one of the primary problems affecting the distance education process was connection-related disruptions. To be better prepared for future processes, it is necessary to strengthen the university's technological infrastructure and take measures to provide adequate support for both academics and students.

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Data Availability

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during this study can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. All other sources consulted in the preparation of this study are listed in the reference section, together with their DOI numbers or relevant web links.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University's Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee after the research proposal was reviewed and approved for compliance with ethical standards.

Informed Consent

The submitted work does not contain any information that could identify individual participants. No identifying information of the participants has been included in this study.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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