
THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION SYSTEMS IN TURKEY, THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND SAUDI ARABIA

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Abstract

In many countries, *open and distance education* is perceived as a way to meet the growing need for higher education. This paper explores the development of online and distance education in three countries that are still a white spot on the landscape of international distance education research although they have implemented elaborated distance education systems: Turkey, Russia and Saudi-Arabia. In order to understand the current state of distance education systems in the three countries, their respective systems are described from a historical perspective, compared in regard to their organization, important institutions for open and distance education and current developments. This comparative analysis directs the focus on little investigated education systems and contributes to an enhanced understanding of their past, present, and future.

Abstract in German

In zahlreichen Ländern wird *open and distance education* mittlerweile als Weg gesehen, dem steigenden Bedarf an Hochschulbildung zu begegnen. In dem vorliegenden Artikel werden die Fernstudiensysteme der Türkei, Russland und Saudi Arabien analysiert; Länder, die trotz ihrer etablierten Systeme in diesem Kontext bislang wenig beforscht wurden. Um die aktuell existierende Situation des Fernstudiums in diesen Ländern zu verstehen, werden die jeweiligen Systeme aus einer historischen Perspektive heraus beschrieben und hinsichtlich ihrer Organisation, zentraler Institutionen und momentaner Entwicklungstendenzen verglichen. Dieser Vergleich bedeutet eine Fokussierung auf bislang wenig analysierte Bildungssysteme und trägt zu einem erweiterten Verständnis ihrer Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft bei.

Abstract in Turkish

Açık ve uzaktan eğitim birçok ülkede yükseköğretime yönelik giderek artan talebe cevap vermenin bir aracı olarak görülmektedir. Bu çalışmada Türkiye, Rusya ve Suudi Arabistan'da açık ve uzaktan eğitimin gelişimi incelenmiştir. Uzaktan eğitim konusunda oldukça büyük ölçekli sistemlere sahip olmalarına karşın, bu üç ülke uzaktan eğitim üzerine var olan uluslararası alanyazında yeterince yer almamışlardır. Bu üç ülkenin uzaktan eğitim sistemlerinin güncel durumunu anlamak için, her bir ülkede uzaktan eğitimin gelişimi tarihsel bir perspektiften ele alınmış, üç ülkenin uzaktan eğitim sistemleri yapı, sahip olunan önemli açık ve uzaktan eğitim kurumları ve güncel gelişmeler bakımından karşılaştırmalı bir şekilde tanımlanmıştır. Bu karşılaştırmalı analiz dikkatleri alanyazında çok az incelenmiş üç eğitim sistemine çekmiş ve incelenen üç eğitim sisteminin geçmişi, bugünü ve yarınının daha iyi anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunmuştur.

Keywords: distance education, open education

Introduction

With the emergence of the Internet, we have witnessed a massive growth in (online) distance education (ODE) over the last 20 years. Today, almost all higher education institutions offer programs that integrate digital media in an online environment to provide flexible learning opportunities, independent of time and place. This also applies to Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Russia.

The international visibility of research from these countries is limited (Zawacki-Richter, Bäcker & Vogt, 2009; Zawacki-Richter & Anderson, 2014), Notwithstanding the lack of international publications from Turkey, Russia and Saudi Arabia, these countries have a long tradition in distance education, and online distance learning plays an increasingly prominent role. In Russia, distance education was introduced as early as the 1920s, and today about 50% of all students in Russia and Turkey are enrolled in distance education programs. The Saudi Government invests heavily in the development of online education and e-learning.

The aim of this paper is to shed some light on distance education systems in Turkey, the Russian Federation and Saudi-Arabia, and to compare them with regard to their historical development, regulatory frameworks, policies, delivery modes, distance teaching and research institutions, and statistics on student enrolments.

Definition of distance education and modes of delivery

Distance education has different meanings and labels in various countries (e.g. distance education, open education, blended learning, flexible learning, etc.). When comparing different forms and modes of delivery between countries, it is therefore important to elaborate on the concept of distance education, particularly in the context of its historical development.

The origins of distance education go back to what were called *correspondence* courses (correspondence study). With the development of new media, which were also used for distance teaching (e.g. telephone, fax, radio, video, computer, etc.), the term *correspondence study* became too narrow. In North America the terms *independent study* and *home study* were therefore used as competing designations, until the notion of *distance education* finally prevailed. The terms *distance education* and *open learning* are often used synonymously. However, *open learning* differs from *distance education* in the following respect: “[...] the concept of open learning is different from distance education since it embraces the idea of students being able to take courses or programs without prerequisites and being able to choose to study any subject they wish. Indeed most of the *Open Universities* were founded upon this basic premise. While some distance education programs may involve open learning, most do not.” (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p.2). Open learning therefore allows access to study without academic restrictions or prerequisites. Distance education programmes may or may not follow the approach of open learning, that enables as much independence and self-determination as possible.

Considering previous definitions, we can define distance learning or distance education as a form of learning and teaching in which technical media are used to bridge the distance between the parties involved in the learning process. The capability of media to afford two-way communication for interaction between learners and teachers and among learners is an essential part of the process. This requirement is reflected in the more recent and widely accepted definition by Simonson, Schlosser and Orellana (2011): “Distance Education is institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors” (p.126).

The various types of technologies used for teaching and learning are collectively referred to as “educational technologies” (cf. Veletsianos, 2010), and this term includes printed study materials. The term *e-learning* generally means learning with electronic media, i.e. via the Internet, but also via television and radio, audio and video. E-learning is therefore defined more narrowly than distance learning, since the latter may also include print-based study materials and correspondence communication. E-learning can therefore be regarded as a particular form of distance learning, but not all distance learning is necessarily electronic (Rosenberg, 2001). Online learning is learning and communication via networked computers (online distance education).

With the development of *new* media, Naidu (2003) observes that “The proliferation of information and communications technology (ICT) in conventional campus-based educational settings is clearly blurring the traditional boundaries between distance education and campus-based face-to-face educational practices” (p.350). Hence, terms such as *blended learning* (Sauter & Sauter, 2002), *flexible learning* (Collis & Moonen, 2001) or *distributed learning* (Lea & Nicoll, 2002) have become prevalent. All these terms describe a continuum between traditional distance education and contact education, in which pedagogical approaches, methods and technologies are used to enable extended and more autonomous, individualized, and self-directed learning opportunities. Today, most higher education institutions utilize e-learning, either in pure distance programs, or in blended learning programs to support on-campus lectures and laboratory sessions. Online distance education “has moved from the periphery into mainstream higher education” (Stöter, Bullen, Zawacki-Richter, & von Prümmer, 2014, p.423).

The definitions and conceptualizations of distance education, open learning, e-learning etc. elaborated above provide the common ground for the purposes of this discussion. Nevertheless, these terms have different meanings in different countries, due to historical developments in distance education in various national contexts.

History, development and role of distance education in higher education

The status and recognition of distance education on the tertiary level varies considerably between different countries. According to Guri-Rosenblit (2014), the most prominent modes of distance teaching institutions until the last decade “were the single-mode distance teaching universities, the dual-mode universities (most notably in Australia and Canada), and the extensions in US universities” (p.111). With the development of e-learning and online learning methods and media, new distance education providers have emerged and altered modes of operation of campus-based and distance teaching universities. The boundaries between conventional and distance education have become increasingly blurred.

In order to understand the role and status of distance education in Turkey, Russia and Saudi Arabia, the following sections describe a brief history of distance education followed by a description of how distance education is embedded in the respective broader education systems.

Turkey

Except for scattered attempts of e.g. introducing correspondence study at Ankara University to provide training for bank employees in 1956 (Simsek, 2004), concerted efforts to introduce distance and open education to Turkish higher education followed in the 1980s. Despite the fact that the military government introduced a new constitution and a centralized system of higher education ensuing the 1980’s coup, a number of possibilities emerged for new types of higher education institutions.

In 1981, there were 27 universities in Turkey, which were able to accommodate only 5.9% of the relevant age cohort (Simsek, 1999). At that time, Turkey suffered seriously from global and local economic crises. Since open and distance education is usually associated with lower operational costs, this form of education is often considered as an alternative to residential higher education, particularly in developing countries (Berberoglu, 2010). Hence, it was suggested as a tool to serve not only the school age population in Turkey, but also to bring higher education to the masses. During the 1980s and 1990s distance education was also considered as a means of realizing equity in higher education by offering access to students from low socio-economic backgrounds who could not afford residential programs (Selvi, 2006).

A notable milestone for open and distance education in Turkey was the establishment of Anadolu University (AU – <https://www.anadolu.edu.tr/en/about-anadolu/institutional/anadolu-at-a-glance>) in 1982. AU's open education initiative started with programs in management and economics; currently, it offers 15 four-year undergraduate degree programs in different fields in social sciences, economics and management, and 34 associate degree (pre-graduate) programs in various vocational-technical fields (<https://www.anadolu.edu.tr/acikogretim/acikogretim-sistemi/acikogretim-sistemi-1>). In 2010, Istanbul University and Ataturk University established open education faculties with the prospect of sharing the load on AU. According to 2014 data, these two universities enrolled 49,266 and 29,627 students respectively (HEC, n.d. a). In 2015, there are 109 public and 76 foundation universities (non-public, tuition fee paying, less competitive and equivalent of private university) in the country (HEC, n.d. b).

With the turn of the twenty-first century, offering distance education alongside residential programs has become of increasing interest to Turkish universities. Recent statistics of the Higher Education Council (HEC, n.d. a) support this claim and show that over 50 Turkish universities now offer study programs by means of distance education. According to 2014 data, around 2.5 million students are enrolled in various open and distance education programs, with the total higher education enrolment being about 5.5 million students (HEC, 2014). Thus, distance education in Turkey constitutes one of the main pillars in providing higher education for the masses. Although open and distance education modes lost popularity among the school-age population, the movement has adopted other missions. Distance education is now the main educational practice for realizing lifelong learning and responding to in-service development needs of employed personnel in the public and private sectors; those mostly in the age range of 25 to 44 years, who want to continue learning and update their qualifications (Selvi, 2006). Based on their analysis of two distance education centres and one virtual university in Turkey, Latchem et al. (2009) found that: "The majority of the distance education students are aged 26-45, with around 50% in the 26-35 age group, indicating a strong demand from employees and older learners keen to improve their qualifications" (p.11). The number of four-year undergraduate programs has also increased; thus, generalizing Latchem's et al. (2009) observations, it can be argued that distance education serves most often certification purposes.

From primary to tertiary education levels, the Turkish education system is organized in a centralized manner (Zapata, Pont, Albiser, & Fraccola, 2013). At the tertiary level, the Higher Education Council (HEC), functioning autonomously under the Ministry of National Education governs structural and functional issues in an equally centralized manner.

Higher education programs are organized into pre-undergraduate (associate degree programs), undergraduate (bachelor degree programs), and graduate (masters and PhD degree programs) levels. This structure was already in place before the country joined the Bologna Process in 2001.

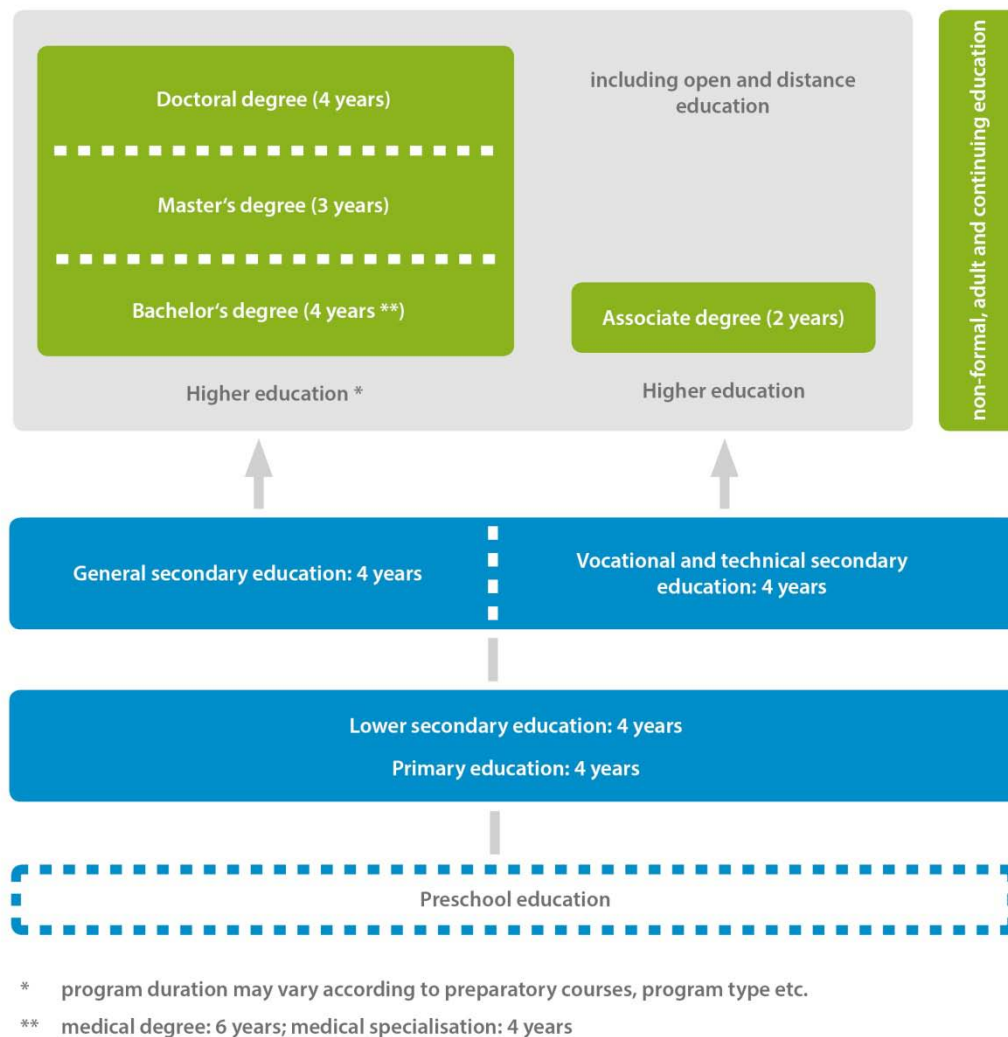


Figure 1. Structure of the education system in Turkey
 (own representation, adapted from Zapata et al., 2013 and MNE, 2014)

The HEC in Turkey holds the authority for establishing distance education programs. Universities are allowed to deliver up to 30% of their total course load in the form of distance education. As opposed to the philosophy of open education, residential and distance education students are accepted according to the same regulations. Thus, student success in secondary education and the university entrance exam both contribute to a total score which determines access to distance education programs. Certain regulations allow students, particularly in vocational and technical education, to continue to higher education programs in their related field without being required to take the university entrance exams, for the purpose of accomplishing continuity between secondary and higher education (ÖSYM, 2002).

Degrees gained from open, distance education and residential programs in Turkey are legally equal, still, degrees obtained through open education have this indicated on the certificate.

However, despite equivalent legal status, open and distance education degrees do not have equal status in practice. In most cases, a residential program diploma is preferred to an open and distance education one, by both private and public employers.

There are important distinctions between open education and distance education in Turkey. Despite the fact that considerably fewer students are enrolled in the latter, distance education programs are offered at 56 higher education institutions, at associate, bachelor and masters levels (HEC, n.d. a). In contrast, only three universities are entitled to deliver open education programs.

A second difference is related to entrance regulations. Open education regulates admission rather flexibly, making use of different options; for example, a secondary education diploma is taken into account, together with a minimum score of 140 in the university entrance examination. In contrast, distance education programs base admission exclusively on a minimum score of 140 in the university entrance exam. Due to existing quotas for distance education programs and the resulting competition for places, the higher the student's score in the university entrance examination, the better the chance of being accepted into the program.

A third difference is in terms of course delivery. Particularly in synchronous distance education programs that follow a specific course schedule, students are required to be present in front of their computer at specified times to attend online classes. Open education, on the other hand, allows a more flexible schedule, which tends to mean that interactivity with students and teachers is rather limited.

Former Soviet Union and the Russian Federation

During Soviet times, correspondence and evening schools were incorporated into the public educational system and expanded nationwide. In 1922 a government committee was tasked with establishing a nationwide correspondence education system. Various educational institutions for self-education were established thereafter, including the *Labour Faculty*, in which workers and peasants ages 16 and up were prepared for higher education studies (Rosen, Gardner & Keppel, 1965).

The development of correspondence education as a regular part of higher education began with a decree by the Council of People's Commissars in 1926. Their five-year-plan for the economic development of the Soviet Union demanded a high number of qualified specialists, which the common education system had so far failed to produce (Rosen, Gardner & Keppel, 1965). Between 1940 and 1959, the number of part-time students enrolled in distance education courses increased by 4.5 times, while the number of on-campus students doubled. More than half of all students studied part time (de Witt, 1961). In 1959, Article 121 of the Russian constitution was changed and the new version emphasized the right of the Russian population to education. In order to secure that right, evening and distance education courses had to be further developed.

Peters (1967) observes that "the high percentage of distance education students allows for the conclusion that higher education in the Soviet Union underwent structural changes, which are unprecedented in the history of higher education" (p.9). However, the enormous expansion of distance education proceeded at the expense of its quality. Despite efforts to prevent distance education institutions from becoming second-class schools, the general problem of a lack of quality distance education could not be solved.

In the Russian context today, the term 'distance education' is used to describe the 'modern' version of distance education, which employs digital media (e-learning, blended learning, flexible learning), whereas the term 'correspondence education' represents the traditional Soviet system of distance education and continues to carry a rather negative connotation. This shows in the fact that e.g., beginning with the academic year of 2010/2011, correspondence education courses ceased to be offered at the State University of St. Petersburg, while distance education was planned to expand further (Zawacki-Richter & Kourotchkina, 2012).

The educational system in the Russian Federation consists of four segments (Russia, 1992): preschool, general, professional and continuing education. Higher education falls into the branch of professional education, which consists of primary/beginning professional education, mid-level professional education, higher professional education and postgraduate professional education.

The level of primary professional education corresponds with vocational education on level 3B, as defined by the UNESCO ISCED-classification (International Standard Classification of Education). The mid-level professional education is classified as mixed secondary and tertiary education, which can include practice related study courses at academies and institutions (levels 3B through 5B). The higher professional education level is equivalent to tertiary higher education below the doctorate (level 5A); the postgraduate professional education level represents tertiary research qualifications such as doctorate and habilitation (level 6).

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian higher education system has undergone continuous reformation. The system continues to experience major changes, all connected to the political goal of improving the quality and therefore international competitiveness of the country's universities. Political initiatives focus particularly on the consolidation of the system, which is characterized by a very high number of higher education institutions, many of which do not meet national and international quality standards.

According to the Russian Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat, 2014a), after the collapse of the Soviet Union the number of higher education institutions more than doubled in only ten years – from 514 in the academic year 1990/91 to 1,115 in 2010/11 (Rosstat, 2014a). This number is doubled if the branches of those higher education institutions in some of the 85 regions of the Russian Federation are also taken into account.

In Russia there are three possible ways of studying at universities and other higher education institutions (Russia, 2012, §17 no. 2):

- conventional on-campus/contact study: Students attend mandatory face-to-face seminars, usually 27-36 hours a week;
- combination of face-to-face and distance study: Students attend evening classes (after 6.00 pm) at the university 3-4 times a week, combined with self-study, usually 16 hours a week;
- correspondence and independent study, combined with face-to-face study blocks: Students attend a face-to-face session (max. 200 hours), which is usually divided into two periods.

From the study year 2013/14 onwards, the former fourth type of study – the *externat*, i.e. pure self-study beyond sitting the final exam at the institution (Russia 2012, § 17, no.1 2) – was officially included in the 'correspondence study' group of programs (Rosstat, 2014a).

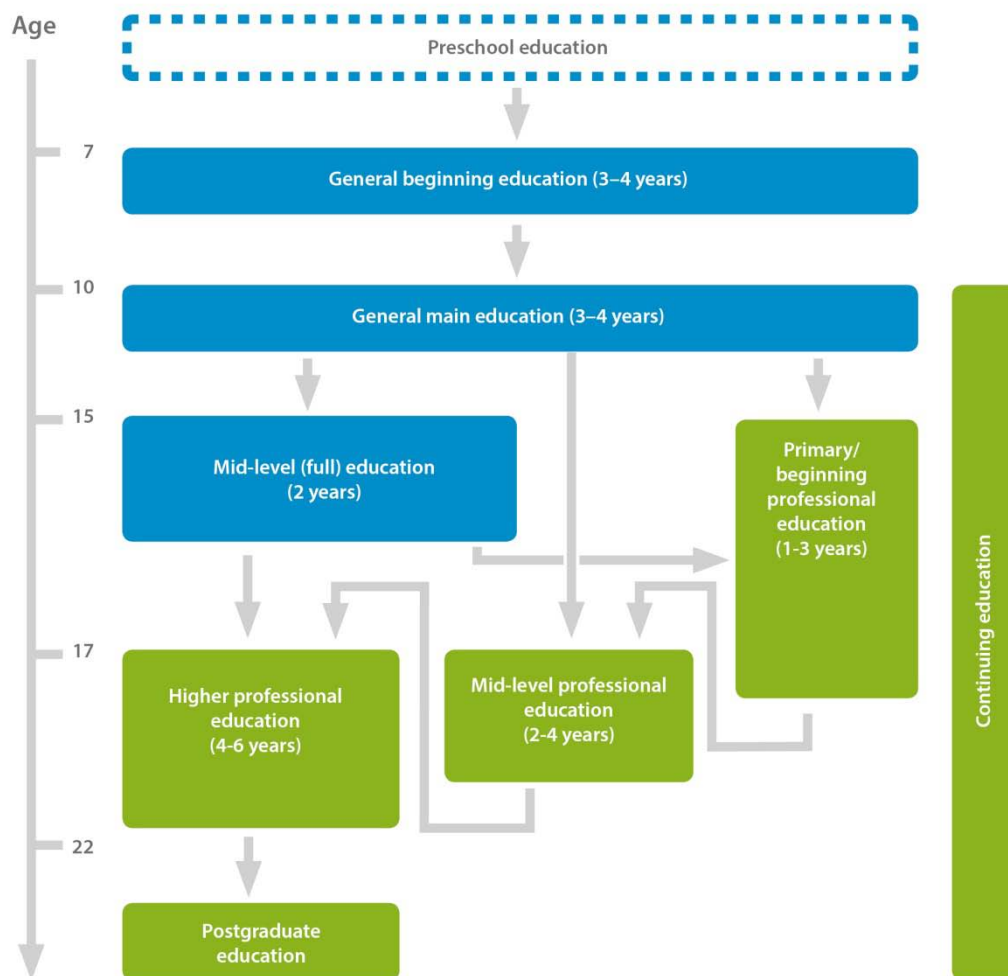


Figure 2. Structure of the education system in Russia
 (Zawacki-Richter & Kourotchkina, 2012)

The Russian Government is pushing the development and implementation of e-learning and distance education in schools and universities by providing project funds, for example, in the Federal Program for the Advancement of Education 2011-2015 (www.fcpro.ru). The aim of this program is that 85% of all teachers in schools and universities should use educational technologies effectively in their classes. Furthermore, various portals have been launched, providing access to over 100,000 electronic educational resources: the Russian Education Federal Portal (http://www.edu.ru/db/portal/sites/res_page.htm), the Federal Center for Educational Resources (fcior.edu.ru) and the Russian General Education Portal (www.school.edu.ru).

A leading provider of so-called “modern” distance education is the Moscow State University for Economics, Statistics and Informatics in Moscow (MESI, cf. Zawacki-Richter & Kourotchkina, 2012). MESI is the only Russian member of EADTU and is also internationally visible in the European Distance and E-Learning Network (EDEN). Since 2002, MESI has published one of the leading journals on e-learning and distance education research in Russia— *Open Education* — regarded as equivalent to the prominent British journal *Open Learning* published by the Open University, UK.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia seeks to meet the demand of Saudi society for education, and to make progress in the deployment of scientific and other educational endeavours. The country aims to promote knowledge and learning for students nationally, and, by means of open and distance learning, to meet future requirements and needs of the labour market.

Although formal regulations regarding distance learning emerged only during the 2010s (Alturki, 2014), the Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University established a distance learning program in the Faculty of Religious Science in 1954, and then in 1965 in the Faculty of Arabic Language. Over the following decades, distance learning programs and correspondence study programs were established, although these seem to have been limited to a small number of universities (Alturki, 2014). In 1980, the Saudi Government began a project of computer-aided teaching at the King Fahd University for Petroleum and Minerals. At the same time, the College of Education at King Saud University started teaching students computer skills for their study at university. Since then the Saudi Government has moved gradually towards promoting distance learning and e-learning programs in order to achieve comprehensive education for students who cannot attend schools or universities, either permanently or temporarily due to, for example, travel, disability or illness. Thus distance learning is now considered to be an established education delivery mode in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia began to focus on higher education in 1970 when the country entered a new era of rapid development. A separate Ministry of Higher Education was established in 1975 to assume responsibility for the planning, supervision and coordination of the Saudi higher education system and its mandate to qualify students in administrative and scientific fields to serve national development goals. The Ministry of Education is responsible for implementing plans and policies formulated by the Higher Education Council (HEC) for the development of higher education in the country.

The Saudi Arabian context is characterized by three main bodies responsible for the provision of open and distance education (ODE); namely the Saudi Electronic University (SEU), The Arab Open University (AOU) and the National Center for e-Learning and Distance Learning (NCeL). Today there are 25 public and numerous private universities in Saudi Arabia, with a total enrolment of around 1 million students compared to 7,000 in 1970 – a considerable development (Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, 2015). The oldest university in the country is the King Saud University in Riyadh, which was established in 1957. Thus, the higher education system looks back on a rather young history.

Currently, the higher education system in Saudi Arabia consists of four branches, namely, public universities, private universities, independent colleges and distance learning institutions. The higher education system has struggled to fulfil the mission of providing quality higher education to a large population of youth, with diverse social and economic characteristics and spread widely in different geographic regions. Moreover, the cost implications of expanding the number of residential higher education institutions were considered to be a major constraint. Given this situation, expanding opportunities for quality higher education became the responsibility of established residential institutions and those universities who offered blended distance learning. Between 1957 and 2010, distance learning was integrated into the higher education system by allowing universities to offer educational programs through this means of delivery. However, since the foundation of SEU in 2011, distance education programs at other institutions must be cancelled within the next 5 years to allow the current students to graduate. SEU has been solely responsible for providing distance learning programs across Saudi Arabia since 2013.

Distance learning programs offered by SEU as well as private universities are subject to continuous evaluation and analysis by the National Center for Distance Education and the National Center for Evaluation and Statistics at the Ministry of Higher Education. Figure 3 shows the general outline of the structure of the higher education system in Saudi Arabia (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009).

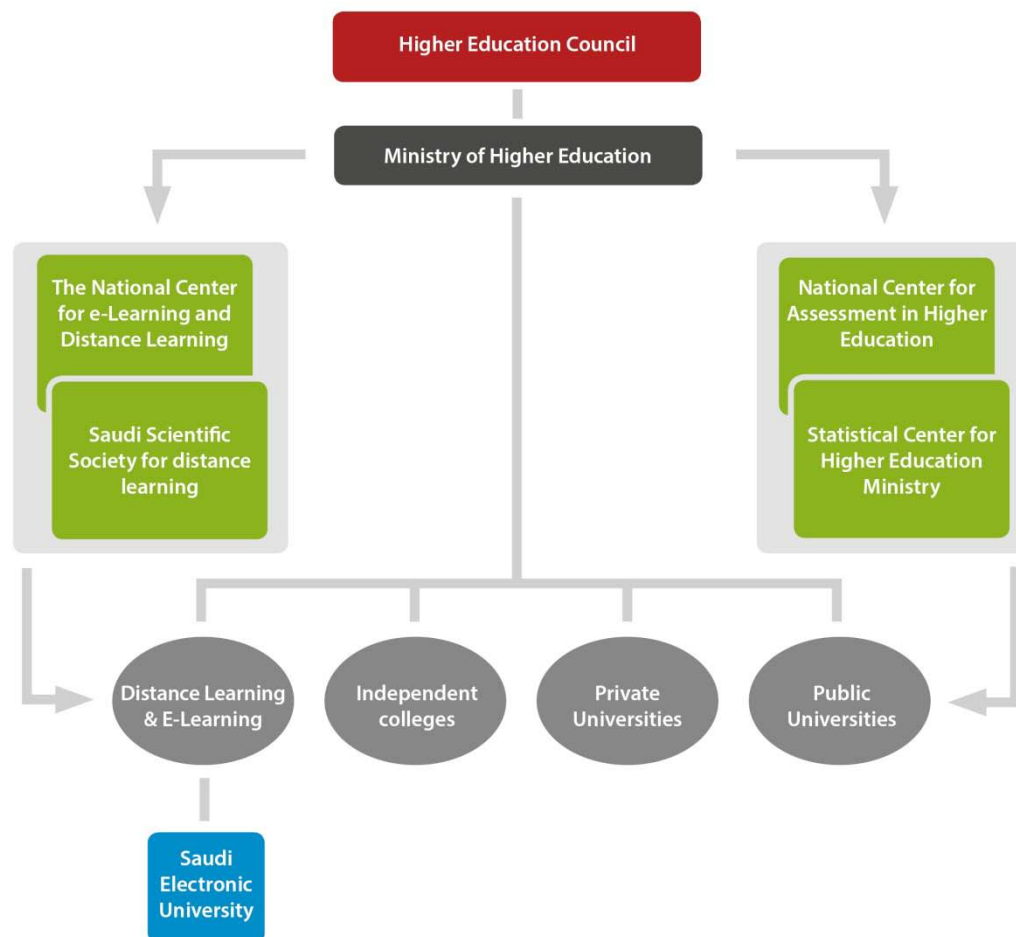


Figure 3. Structure of the higher education system in Saudi Arabia (based on Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009)

A special provider of open and distance learning that is active in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, Oman, Lebanon, Kuwait, and Jordan is the Arab Open University (AOU) that was established in 2002 in a strategic partnership with the Open University in the United Kingdom. In 2014, 2,626 students were accepted at the Saudi Arabia branch of the AOU, thus reaching a total enrolment of 11,000 students (Alturki, 2014). AOU will continue offering distance learning programs as it is a private university with a special license to do so; thus the establishment of the SEU does not affect the operation of the AOU.

Another development under the umbrella of the Ministry of Higher Education in 2008, was the emergence of the NCEL as a leader and supporter of e-learning in higher education. The goals of the centre are to promote the development of e-learning and distance education; to implement quality assurance mechanisms; to support and coordinate research projects on e-learning; to organize conferences and workshops for professional development (e.g. the International

Conference on E-Learning and Distance Education – <http://eli.elc.edu.sa/2015/en>); and to foster international collaboration in the field of e-learning and distance education (NCEl, n.d.).

Distance education student enrolments in Turkey and Russia

Figure 4 depicts student enrolment figures in distance or open education programs in Turkey and Russia over a time period of 15 years, from 2000 to 2014. Today there are about 2.5 million distance education students in each of the two countries. However, student enrolment patterns over time are quite different between the two countries. Whereas the average growth rate in distance education in Turkey is over 15% per year starting with about 500,000 students in 2000, the number of distance education students in Russia has decreased rapidly from 4.1 million in 2009/2010 to 2.6 million in 2014/2015. This trend corresponds with the general decline of student numbers in Russian higher education. In particular, numbers fell by one third, from 7.4 million in the academic year 2009/2010 to 5.2 million in 2014/15. However, the proportion of students enrolled in distance education programs remains about 50% of total enrolments.

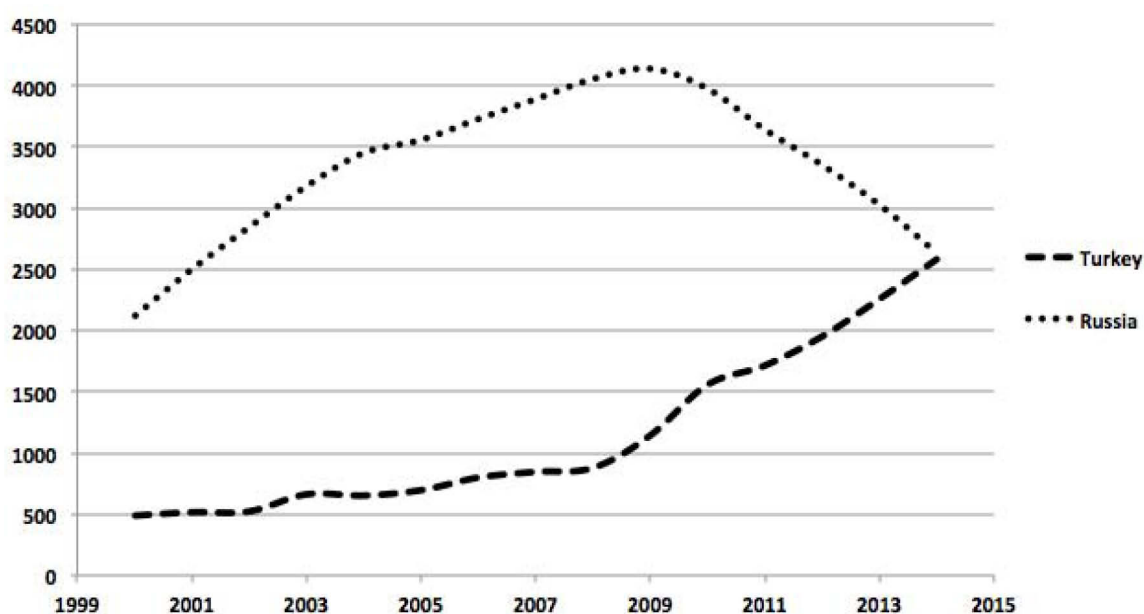


Figure 4. Student enrolments (in thousands) in distance or open education programs in Turkey (Higher Education Council – personal communication) and in distance education programs in Russia (Rosstat – http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/population/obraz/vp-obr1.htm) from 2000 to 2014.

The dramatic decline in student numbers can be explained by recent demographic changes in Russian society, such as the decline in the birth rate, which has continued since the 1990s (Rosstat, 2014c). The number of 15 to 19-year-olds, i.e. potential students, fell by one third – from 9.6 million in 2009 to 6.9 million in 2014 (Rosstat, 2014b), corresponding to the likewise decline in university admissions. Thus, we have witnessed a significant demographic “hole” in the generation of potential students in the Russian Federation. This in turn causes problems for Russia’s higher education institutions, even threatening the existence of some of them, since state funding has recently been made dependent upon student enrolment numbers (Berghorn, 2014). To fill the gap, Russian higher education institutions could focus on recruiting more foreign students; so far the percentage of foreign students is very low – 2.2% in 2012/13 (Rosstat, 2013). To increase the number of foreign students and researchers is therefore a major task and challenge for Russian higher education institutions – a goal that is strongly supported by the Russian Government.

According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2014) and the HEC, in Turkey a total of 3.03 million students were enrolled in on-campus higher education programs and 1.95 million students in distance or open education programs in 2012 (cf. section 4.1 regarding the difference between distance and open education in Turkey). Thus, when students in open and distance education programs are dropped from the total number of higher education enrolment it becomes evident that 39.16% of all students in tertiary education are enrolled in distance or open education programs. There has been an average annual growth rate of open education enrolments of over 15% since 2000.

Regrettably, detailed data on student enrolments in distance education is not available for Saudi Arabia. The total number of students in tertiary education programs increased from 371,522 in 1999 to 1,356 million in 2013 (UNESO Institute for Statistics – <http://data.uis.unesco.org/index.aspx?queryid=142&lang=en>). According to the Ministry of Education (<http://he.moe.gov.sa> and personal communication), blended learning programs were introduced in the academic year 2001/2002 with 5,631 students, a number which increased to 84,219 in 2012/2013, corresponding to an average annual growth rate of about 38%.

Thus, we see a constant growth in Turkey up to an impressive number of 2.6 million students in distance education in 2014/2015. An even higher growth rate, but on a much lower level of total enrolments, is evident in Saudi Arabia, at least for students in blended learning programs. Despite the overall decline in student numbers in Russia, distance education remains very relevant in the Russian higher education system, with approximately half of all students in tertiary education enrolled in distance education programs.

Summary and further perspectives

The aim of this paper was to explore the Turkish, Russian, and Saudi-Arabian distance education systems, in terms of their historical roots, and recent developments in modern distance education and e-learning initiatives. By uniting sources that are scattered and difficult to access due to linguistic barriers, the authors of this article have composed a picture of the educational systems in the three countries, with special consideration of the status and uptake of distance education programs.

In Turkey, growing numbers in residential programs do not imply a decline in open and distance education. The HEC has always adopted policies supporting open and distance education, and fostering their expansion in both public and association universities, as can be seen from the data provided. In addition, the growing economy pushes for further expansion of both residential and distance education programs. Developments in ICT suggest that not only will more programs be developed, but also that current open and distance education programs will increasingly rely on ICT technology. As a result, their content will be enriched and various delivery methods will be employed. Nevertheless, public opinion about this mode of delivery, technology literacy, technology infrastructure, and the cost of internet access still constitute major handicaps. So far, equality in status of degrees earned from open and distance or residential education exists only on paper. Likewise, changing employers' perception of degrees earned in open or distance education depends largely on increasing program quality. Furthermore, the target population for open and distance education programs has a low level of technology literacy. Hence, immediate measures are needed to invest in technology literacy of the population aged from 25 to 45. And finally, even if literacy is ameliorated, internet connectivity remains very expensive Turkey. This fact works against claims that open and distance education will increase access to higher education for students with low socio-economic status. It is hoped that dealing with the problems mentioned will contribute to further expansion of open and distance education in Turkey.

In Russia, historically and presently, distance education assumes a prominent role in the education system. However, a disparate picture emerges, which is corroborated by the different terminologies used: the traditional *correspondence education* on the one hand and the modern *distance education* employing new media (e-learning) on the other. There are strong efforts by the Russian Government, as well as higher education institutions, to increase the range of programs offered online, to increase their quality (Russia, 2013), and to recruit more students to boost enrolment numbers. As the newspaper *Vedemosti* (Malykhin, 2015) reported, the Russian Ministry of Education is planning to launch a national website as a gateway to open and distance learning by autumn 2015, called the “Russian national platform of open learning”. This initiative aims to present the various online offerings of Russian universities on one website, and to develop a platform for further development of high-quality online education in the country. The project starts with eight of the leading Russian universities (among them the Lomonosov Moscow State University and Sankt Petersburg State University) – each of which should initially offer at least four courses on the website. It is the goal of the Russian Ministry of Education and Science to incorporate more universities in this national open learning initiative and to increase the number of courses offered via this gateway; up to 100 courses by spring 2016 (Malykhin, 2015).

In Saudi Arabia, distance education is still in the early stages, with a view to future projects to enhance the dissemination of education and lifelong learning. Because of the potential flexibility in time, space, and choice of major subjects, the aim is to implement distance education programs to reach all people everywhere in Saudi Arabia. In preparation for this aim, the higher education system is supporting and encouraging a transformation from a fully traditional system to a blended learning one. Recently, most Saudi universities have begun to provide opportunities for distance education in certain disciplines. However, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) declared that only the SEU is allowed to offer distance education programs. The educational system in Saudi Arabia is being centralized, and all state universities must follow this decision. However, private universities and regional universities can provide distance education along with SEU, under a special license. At the end of 2014, SEU held a meeting with representatives from all Saudi universities, to discuss the future of e-learning and distance education in the country. They discussed how to implement the MOHE’s decision and how to accommodate students already enrolled in distance education programs offered by traditional universities.

Even though the three countries differ considerably in the aspects discussed above, they share the common denominator of having included – and even relying on – distance education as one of the pillars of their higher education systems. The demand for tertiary education remains high and in fact continues to increase, thus emphasizing the urgent need to meet this demand. This need applies equally to securing education for the personal development of individuals, as well as to addressing the societal and economic rationale for comprehensive education. The country-specific organization and integration of distance and open education discussed in this paper foster the goal of embracing open and distance education as a central mechanism to enhance lifelong learning opportunities. Finally, as Bozkurt et al. (2015) note for the development of research on DE in Turkey, thorough, theory-based research needs to be fostered. This observation can be extrapolated to the distance education systems in Russia and Saudi Arabia as well, reiterating the need in these three countries to complement existing and extensive practices with sound research.

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