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## What hospitality and tourism higher educators learned from COVID-19: A case of Turkiye

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## Abstract

Among all the sectors, the hospitality and tourism sector has been detrimentally affected by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This research aimed to determine how changes have been experienced specifically in the Turkish tourism higher education and tourism sector. Twenty-seven academics from the hospitality and tourism education departments were interviewed. Most agreed that restrictions have limited student access to hands-on practical courses and internships, which are crucial to developing necessary competencies. Moreover, the results showed the curriculum does not always meet the needs of the hospitality industry for a trained and skilled workforce. The challenge is to decide what else should be taught and what methods and teaching approaches should be used. As a result, industry-academia cooperation is necessary to reassess the curriculum programs to meet sector needs considering the pandemic impacts.

## Keywords

COVID-19, curriculum, tourism higher education, Turkiye

## Revisions

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# What Hospitality and Tourism Higher Educators Learned From COVID-19: A Case of Turkiye

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## Abstract

Among all the sectors, the hospitality and tourism sector has been detrimentally affected by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This research aimed to determine how changes have been experienced specifically in the Turkish tourism higher education and tourism sector. Twenty-seven academics from the hospitality and tourism education departments were interviewed. Most agreed that restrictions have limited student access to hands-on practical courses and internships, which are crucial to developing necessary competencies. Moreover, the results showed the curriculum does not always meet the needs of the hospitality industry for a trained and skilled workforce. The challenge is to decide what else should be taught and what methods and teaching approaches should be used. As a result, industry-academia cooperation is necessary to reassess the curriculum programs to meet sector needs considering the pandemic impacts.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, curriculum, tourism higher education, Turkiye

## Introduction

OED's [Oxford English Dictionary] researchers must be commended for trawling through eight billion words in recent news stories before arriving at the same conclusion: that words and phrases such as coronavirus, quarantine, ventilator, respiratory, sanitizer, flu-like, self-isolation, social distancing, flattening the curve and non-essential have decimated rivals from 2019 such as Brexit, climate emergency, bush-fire and even impeachment to achieve global dominance (The Economic Times, 2020, para. 3).

As the opening quote of *The Economic Times* suggests, COVID-19-related vocabulary has achieved global dominance, surpassing even recent popular words like Brexit and climate emergency. Therefore, it is inevitable that the pandemic has forced countries to attempt extensive changes in business and education.

The pandemic has had direct, indirect, and induced effects on economies around the world (Lemma, 2014). Regulatory restrictions and crisis psychology in the general population have deemed the hospitality and tourism segments of the service industry the most prominent (Sota et al., 2020) *victims* (Wilder-Smith, 2006) among businesses. Being the world's most labor-intensive sector with 330 million jobs globally (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2019), the impact the tourism sector experienced has been arguably the most drastic due to flight cancellations (Schaper, 2020), strict border controls, mobility limitations (Worldwide Erc, 2020), public gathering restrictions (El Sheikh et al., 2020), and reductions in recreation spaces (Thomas & Berk, 2020). The industry suffered estimated losses of 4.7 trillion USD in revenue and 197 million jobs (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020) as a specific result of the pandemic.

When it comes to education, these uncertain and unexpected situations have affected all levels and all fields, including hospitality and tourism departments at higher education institutions. Several studies evaluating the immediate changes in education after the first spread of COVID-19 (Gewin, 2020; Griffin, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Remuzzi & Remuzzi, 2020; Times Higher Education, 2020), which commonly indicated that various restrictions were introduced with the intention of preventing the spread of the pandemic (Remuzzi & Remuzzi, 2020) and educational institutions ranked high in terms of these restrictions in every society (UNESCO, 2020). Specifically, COVID-19 has caused the largest disruption of education systems in history (UN, 2020), affecting more than 168 million school-age children (UNICEF, 2021) and approximately 94% of the world's student population, which rises to 99% when the developing world is concerned. Therefore, many universities around the world worked strenuously to move past the initial postponement or cancellations of lectures, workshops, conferences, and extracurricular activities to resume educational activities as adaptively as possible in the face of the pandemic restrictions.

Even though certain educational trends were ubiquitously observed in most universities—such as transitioning from face-to-face instruction to online delivery (Gewin, 2020; Lei & So, 2021; Park & Jones, 2021; Times Higher Education, 2020; Zhong et al., 2021)—the literature on the educational response to the pandemic is still limited. More studies are needed to grasp the educational impact and aftermath of the pandemic, especially with respect to the variations among (a) developed versus developing countries and (b) educational fields and disciplines based on their curricular content. Consequently, the aim of this study was to investigate qualitatively and highlight how higher education in the applied field of hospitality and tourism was influenced by the pandemic, as well as analyze the field-specific actions taken to overcome difficulties and disruptive elements. Turkiye was chosen as the destination and the unitary focus of the study was on departments and degrees with a considerable number of applied courses such as food preparation and service. Additionally, the selected departments and degrees require internships in hotels, restaurants, and related workplaces. The following sections elaborate respectively on (a) the literature concerning the pandemic's impact on higher education in hospitality and tourism, (b) the pandemic's impact on Turkish higher education, (c) methods, (d) findings, and (e) discussion and limitations.

## Literature Review

### *Impact of COVID-19 on Hospitality and Tourism Higher Education*

Since the onset of COVID-19, only a limited number of studies have examined the effects of the pandemic on tourism education (Dewi, 2020; Edelheim, 2020; Qiu et al., 2020; Tiwari et al., 2021; Ye & Law, 2021). The importance of sharing information was emphasized in one study which showed the positive effects of technology in online education by exemplifying tourism education at Nankai University (Qiu et al., 2020). Online education starting with the pandemic has shown that higher education must adapt to a different process and this transformation process will affect higher education (Edelheim, 2020). Tiwari et al. (2021) investigated tourism educators' views on the effects of COVID-19 on tourism education, the difficulties they encountered, and the process of restarting tourism education after the pandemic. They emphasized that new implementations in tourism should be adapted to tourism higher education and thus tourism students should be prepared for the new normal (Dewi, 2020). The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism education led to a focus on curriculum design and labor regulations and emphasized that tourism educators should be prepared for similar crises (Ye & Law, 2021).

Even though this paper focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on hospitality and tourism higher education, the challenges borne by the pandemic are not isolated but built upon the historical academia-industry divide. One of the common results obtained from hospitality education studies is that the curricula fail to meet the needs of the hospitality industry mainly due to the lack of a trained and skilled workforce (Chang & Tse, 2015; Hornsby & Scott-Halsell, 2015; Ravichandran et al., 2017). Various authors have expressed concern that the tourism and hospitality industry constitute various sub-sectors, whose diverse and constantly changing needs are expected to be addressed by tourism and hospitality education. (Beesley & Davidson, 2013). Secondly, the hospitality and tourism curriculum has to provide theoretical as well as applied courses (Leung & Jiang, 2018) to build substantive knowledge, skills, and values while instilling core competencies (Dopson & Tas, 2004; Gursoy et al., 2012; Gursoy & Swanger, 2004; Gursoy & Swanger, 2005). Thirdly, a balance should be maintained between industry operation, and knowledge-based and managerial-based courses (Smith & Cooper, 2000). As resources in hospitality education may not be allocated solely to the transient demand for workers with specific sets of skills and knowledge, an ongoing cooperation between the industry and academia is crucial for a strong curriculum to respond to the industry's needs in the long run (Chang et al., 2017).

Curriculum evaluation and development is a never-ending process with multiple stakeholders: faculty, staff, administrators, students, and industry (Wang & Abukhalifeh, 2020). The main role of faculty is to develop and maintain relationships with all stakeholders through the development of relevant and valid curricula, which will produce graduates with employable skills (Griffin, 2020; Hein & Riegel, 2012; Phelan et al., 2013; Solnet et al., 2010; Wheelahan & Moodie, 2021). Comparing the perceptions of hospitality management content areas, Griffin (2020) found that certain areas may be more positively evaluated by hospitality faculties than industry professionals, which suggests that higher education institutes should continuously re-evaluate their curricula with input from industry.

Factoring in the pre-existing curricular issues of tourism and hospitality education, a limited number of studies have specifically investigated the modification of existing hospitality curricula

to produce qualified graduates during and after the COVID-19 period. One of these studies, Bilsland et al. (2020) reviewed recent research on *virtual training and internships* components in hospitality and tourism to find out if and how these virtual approaches can provide the necessary industry requirements post-COVID-19. In their research, Wen et al. (2021) investigated the importance of interdisciplinary research, especially after COVID-19, discussing its benefits and challenges. Both studies emphasized that interdisciplinary research should be encouraged to increase the level of social welfare. Similarly, Higgins-Desbiolles (2020) emphasized the role of both the industry and the tourism academy in the struggle for the rapid recovery of the tourism industry after the pandemic. Hence, this study follows the recommendations of these studies, highlighting the potential areas of cooperation between industry and academia in its analysis.

### ***The Case of Turkish Higher Education During COVID-19***

Since the first COVID-19 instance was formally confirmed on March 11, 2020, Türkiye has implemented strong actions. These tactics included requiring masks everywhere, enforcing cleanliness standards, imposing curfews, banning internal and international travel, and switching to online education. Türkiye was the first—and may still be—the only nation to require curfews for residents who are under 20 or over 65 (WHO, 2020). Although the limitations were partially lifted as of June 1, 2020, the process of normalization began. The actions made had an impact on social life as well as the economy. Most hotel business operations were likewise suspended at this time (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2021).

Türkiye is the second largest country in the European Higher Education Area (after Russia) with 7.5 million students in 207 universities (The Council of Higher Education in Türkiye [YOK], 2020). In Türkiye, a centralized structure under the authority of YOK handles establishing and maintaining quality assurance mechanisms in higher education through strategic planning and coordination between universities. Therefore, they have taken immediate and necessary actions reflecting not only the decisions taken by the state but also the practices and decisions common among world universities so that Turkish higher education could run effectively and adaptively during this severe pandemic period.

Following the first COVID-19 case on March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2020, YOK established a Coronavirus Board for universities on March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020, and appointed a vice-rector to make a broad evaluation of measures against the coronavirus. Since then, they have taken the following actions in both undergraduate and graduate programs: (a) nearly 6,000 academics in 16 universities took part in a course entitled Learning and Teaching in Higher Education in the Digital Age; (b) 50,000 students attended a course called Digital; (c) a distance education roadmap was developed for curriculum, infrastructure, human resources, content, and implementation; (d) all digital courses in the universities were opened to be accessed through an interface called YOK courses; (e) digital sources and distance learning methods were used for theoretical courses in practice-based programs; (f) applied courses were given at the most appropriate time by extending the calendar; (g) the shortcomings in the practice-based programs were compensated for in different ways such as written projects and internships (including the summer semester) in the appropriate time with protective measures or via distance education (YOK, 2020).

In sum, Turkish higher education has faced challenges in this new COVID-19 period, like all other countries; however, recent research from different fields of education in different countries will

help the global improvement of higher education. This study aimed at examining how hospitality and tourism higher education has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, this study primarily had an exploratory nature, where the goal was to investigate and identify the main challenge areas for tourism and hospitality higher education in Turkiye during the pandemic. This exploration was deemed necessary as the existing literature on the educational impact of the pandemic lacked in terms of geographic and socioeconomic diversity (i.e., developed vs. developing world), as well as the diversity of educational content (i.e., dearth of focus on applied fields).

The specific research questions follow:

- How did hospitality and tourism higher education change during COVID-19?
- What immediate actions were taken to run the existing education system?
- How can the existing higher education system be modified to make it more sustainable?

## Methods

This study employed qualitative methods to examine the situation through a holistic approach to understand in detail how and why participants perceive their experiences related to the research topic (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Wilson, 2020). Hence, the perspectives of academics employed in hospitality and tourism higher education departments were the basis for the answers to the research questions. Purposive sampling was used to elicit the respondents' knowledge of the research topic (Hong & Cross Francis, 2020). The interviewees were drawn from a publicly available list of websites of hospitality and tourism higher education departments at both state and private universities. Twenty-seven academics were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol between April and June 2020. Secondary sources such as department programs and YOK documents were analyzed to develop an appreciation of the context within the frame of the study.

The semi-structured interview protocol was developed from existing literature through the expertise of the research for consistency (Creswell, 2009). However, participants were encouraged to lead the conversation in directions they considered important (McGrath et al., 2020) when recounting their experiences concerning the effects of COVID-19. Interviewees were first asked background and demographic questions (gender, age, educational background, experience in the field, etc.) to establish rapport (Bell, 2014; Schoultz et al., 2001). Subsequently, 11 questions were asked specifically about their opinions on the effects of COVID-19 on tourism and hospitality education. Some of these questions were *What were the immediate changes in delivering the courses?*; *What are the challenges of online teaching?*; *Will there be changes in the admission requirements for the students?*; and *Will there be changes in the program/courses?* Data were analyzed and coded manually by all the authors using the thematic analysis model (Ghasemi & Rasekh, 2020).

## Validity and Reliability

Throughout the history of research and the recent *qualitative turn* (e.g., Dixon-Woods et al., 2006), several concerns have been emphasized regarding the validity and reliability of qualitative studies compared with positivist and quantitative approaches (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Regarding reliability, documentation related to methodology procedures (recordings, transcripts, detailed

study protocols, and datasets) was stored to detect errors and mistakes (Gibbs, 2018) while enabling similar studies by future researchers (Yin, 2011).

The themes or codes developed during the analysis were clearly defined so that code meanings were consistent, regardless of the number of analysts involved in the project (Miles et al., 2014). Demonstrating these codes during publication or presentation increases the reliability of the research project's deductive analysis. Therefore, the themes and codes were defined and presented clearly as tables (Miles et al., 2014). Researchers worked collaboratively and were involved in all stages of this study from the beginning through publication and were continuously cross-checking each other's work. Researchers further ensured reliability by clarifying points such as the meaning of quotes and by building on the identified themes during the data analysis stage. A holistic approach to concept development was taken, categorizing raw data into first-order empirical themes which were put into second-order conceptual categories, and which were then converted into theoretical dimensions (Sandhu & Kulik, 2019). This lent richer insight, engagement, and nuance to this study through a better understanding of the phenomenon explored (Johnson & Parry, 2016).

Validity measures were also a priority during the study (Maxwell, 2013). Firstly, trust was built through crosschecking by sharing anonymous datasets with the participants and receiving their feedback to test our findings, interpretations, and explanations within the Turkish context of our study (Davis & Lachlan, 2017). Secondly, triangulation was achieved by collecting data from both primary and secondary sources and by having multiple researchers (Patton, 1999). Moreover, the authors looked for alternative explanations to present the data and evidence with positive and negative cases to validate the general perspectives in this study (Maxwell, 2013) by supporting the explanation of the data analysis results with the participants' quotes, narratives, and perspectives (Furman et al., 2006). Overall, these dynamic reliability and validity considerations helped the authors present worthwhile conversations in the tourism and hospitality education field.

## **Findings**

The findings of this study are grouped under four headings: background of the participants and the three research questions:

- How did hospitality and tourism higher education change during COVID-19?
- What immediate actions were taken to run the existing education system?
- How can the existing system be modified to make it more sustainable?

### ***Background of the Participants***

The study included 27 participants from 25 universities (19 public, 8 private). Demographic characteristics were gender, age, academic title, status of universities, department, years of experience in the institution, and years of experience in the tourism sector. Table 1 shows the demographic details. Out of 27 participants, 18 were male and 9 were female. The highest age group (45-54) constituted 48.1%. The academic positions were Professor ( $n = 14$ ), Associate Professor ( $n = 4$ ), Assistant Professor ( $n = 6$ ) and Instructor ( $n = 3$ ). Participants worked in various higher education departments within the following fields of hospitality and tourism: Gastronomy and Culinary Arts ( $n = 7$ ), Tourism Management ( $n = 7$ ), Tourism and Hospitality Management ( $n = 4$ ), Tour Guidance ( $n = 4$ ), Tourism and Travel Services ( $n = 2$ ), Hospitality Management ( $n$



= 1), Recreation Management ( $n = 1$ ), and Tourism and Hotel Management ( $n = 1$ ). Work history varied among the participants, the largest share of which (40.7%) had 11-20 years of experience in their institutions. Two-thirds of the participants (66.6%) had up to 10 years of practical work experience in the hospitality and tourism sectors.

**Table 1.** Participants' Demographics

Variable	Characteristic	<i>f</i>	%
Gender	Female	9	33.3
	Male	18	66.6
Age	25-34	4	14.8
	35-44	8	29.6
	45-54	13	48.1
	55-64	1	3.7
	65-74	1	3.7
Title	Prof	14	51.8
	Assoc. Prof.	4	14.8
	Asst. Prof.	6	22.2
	Instructor	3	11.1
Status of University	Public	19	70.3
	Private	8	29.6
Department	Gastronomy & Culinary Arts	7	25.9
	Hospitality Management	1	3.7
	Recreation Management	1	3.7
	Tourism Management	7	25.9
	Tourism Guidance	4	14.8
	Tourism & Hospitality Management	4	14.8
	Tourism & Hotel Management	1	3.7
	Tourism & Travel Services	2	7.4
Years of experience in Institution	0-10 years	7	25.9
	11-20 years	11	40.7
	21-30 years	8	29.6
	31-40 years	1	3.7
Years of experience in Sector	None	4	14.8
	1-10 years	18	66.6
	11-20 years	2	7.4
	21-30 years	1	3.7
	31-40 years	0	0
	41-50 years	1	3.7

### *Changes in Hospitality and Tourism Higher Education During COVID-19*

Participants were asked about the changes they experienced during COVID-19 in hospitality and tourism higher education including admission requirements for students, demand for programs, mode of teaching, and preparation process for online lessons.

Participants were asked if tourism and hotel management programs should continue the same admission requirements for students (e.g., health certificates). The analyses showed some of the academics were in favor of this requirement, whereas some were not (see Table 2). Those in favor of requesting health certificates mentioned that not just tourism and hotel management programs, but all educational institutions should ask for health certificates. One participant emphasized specifically Gastronomy departments;

[It] should be done. Since gastronomy is a practical area, we do it already. Given the fact that the kitchen is a closed area, it is also a risky one. We ask for a full-fledged report from the primary care physician of our

university. Students have to present this report—not only for COVID-19 but also for the prevention of the spread of all infectious diseases. (P8)

On the other hand, some participants did not see a need to request health certificates because they deemed it a violation of the right to education. For example, one faculty expressed: “Can’t somebody who is infected with coronavirus receive tourism education? I find this to be in violation of the Constitution... Let’s assume that I myself am infected. Does that mean that I will be deprived of my right to education?” (P4).

**Table 2.** Opinions of Academics on Health Certificates for Admission

Theme	Subtheme
Favorable	Administering simple coronavirus test to check for infection All higher education institutions requesting a health certificate Requesting a comprehensive health certificate Requesting a certificate specifically from students in the Gastronomy Department
Unfavorable	No need Violation of right to education Health certificates not reliable Infection occurring after certificate obtained/Certificates temporary Scope of practice too extensive Pandemic only a temporary state Education institutions stay closed until pandemic ends

Participants were asked if a change would occur in student demand for tourism education institutions as Table 3 denotes. Of the 27 participants interviewed, most of them ( $n = 18$ ) thought that student demand would decrease since “the golden age of tourism is over” (P12). Conversely, one participant said that even though “a decrease can be observed in the coming period, it surely will recover” (P25). The analysis showed that this decrease would result from tourism’s vulnerable nature and demand for a shift towards technology-based entertainment areas which involve less personal contact.

**Table 3.** Opinions of Academics on Changes in Student Demand for Tourism Education Institutions Under COVID-19 Pandemic Conditions

Theme	Subtheme
Decrease in Student Demand	Sector being fragile Demand being focused on technology-related areas Demand being focused on areas involving less personal contact Establishments being closed during pandemic & causing decreased employment
No Change in Student Demand	Institutions providing tourism education in major cities preferred Increasing interest in the Gastronomy Department
Increase in Student Demand	Increased need for vacation during pandemic Economic impacts of sector being better understood during pandemic Changing vacation preferences opening new areas of employment Foreseeable demand for personnel trained in technology

Seven participants argued that no change would occur. These academics emphasized that higher education programs in major cities were preferred by students, and interest in Gastronomy departments continues to increase each year. One participant said “We expect more enrolment in the coming year. There may even be an increase in demand for medical tourism” (P8).

A few participants ( $n = 2$ ) stated that an increase in demand would occur due to the socioeconomic impact of the sectors being better understood during the pandemic, people changing their vacation preferences, thus, resulting in new areas of employment and a foreseeable demand for *technology-savvy personnel*

Participants were also asked about their modes of teaching in terms of the type of applications used during distance learning. Most (55.5%) used the university's own infrastructure for distance learning. The rest of the participants used alternative applications such as Zoom (14.8%), Microsoft Teams (11.1%), Meet (7.4%), Adobe Connect (3.7%), Blackboard (3.7%), and Ferculus (3.7%).

When academics were asked about their opinions on the preparation process for online lessons, the results (see Table 4) showed that some participants thought online teaching required broadly the same process as face-to-face education while others believed it to be entirely different. For example, one participant (P14) mentioned how they were readily using online materials as in TEDx videos so only needed to convert to a digital medium. This participant said the only difference was that "Once in a while, we make a joke; however, you cannot do this in distance learning."

Another participant (P9) explained the difference as having

Lack of direct interaction with students, lack of lecturer competence, and concerns about being recorded such as *What if the administration watched this recording?* Sometimes, we say things we do not mean. The issue here is what if somebody listens?

Another participant (P11) mentioned,

I was trying to tidy up my older notes. I had to work two to three times harder in this process. We also have a lot of meetings on the side. I have a hard time keeping up with all the WhatsApp messages.

**Table 4.** Opinions of Academics Regarding Online Lesson Preparation Process

Theme	Subtheme
Same as face-to-face education	Preparing slide shows
Different from face-to-face education	Uploading distance learning resources to the system
	Assignments instead of exams
	Preparing slide shows
	Making video recordings

### ***The Immediate Actions Taken to Run the Existing Education System***

When asked about immediate actions taken to run the existing education system in terms of social distancing, issues faced in distance learning and knowledge, skill, and competence levels of the students, academics suggested having more sections for courses, checking daily body temperatures, as well as requiring masks and social distancing specifically in gastronomy and culinary areas. However, reasons given for not being able to take some of these actions were high costs, lack of a sufficient number of instructors and lecturers, lack of infrastructure (e.g., air conditioning), and social distancing being a temporary solution as detailed in Table 5.

One participant (P2) replied,

Our faculty is rather small, not enough seating space for students and lecturers. We are headed towards somewhat of a hybrid order, see the challenges, resolve the issue by concentrating on the more physical aspects of teaching and learning.

The same participant suggested catering arrangements, lunch boxes, and social distancing but added “This can be difficult in a state university.” Another participant (P20) said having fewer students might be better for education even after COVID-19 since “it may help them receive a more specialized training or education.”

**Table 5.** Opinions of Academics on Social Distancing in Tourism Education Institutions

Theme	Subtheme
Favorable opinions	Decreased student quotas Multiple sections Daily body temperature checks Mask checks Social distancing specifically in gastronomy and culinary areas
Unfavorable opinions	Lack of physical infrastructure High costs Insufficient instructors Social distancing only a temporary solution

### *Issues Faced With Distance Learning*

The analysis showed that three main themes emerged (see Table 6) as challenges faced during COVID-19: technical/infrastructural issues, instructor/lecturer issues, and student issues.

**Table 6.** Opinions of Academics on the Issues They Faced With Distance Learning

Theme	Subtheme
Technical/infrastructural issues	University distance learning systems not recording sessions Access issues with IT department Internet connection issues Lack of infrastructure Security issues in alternative applications
Issues related to instructors/lecturers	Inability to use technology Adaptation issues Plagiarism issues with course content Inability to have effective/efficient lessons Inability to give practical lessons Lack of interaction with students Insufficient assessment and evaluation in exams
Issues related to students	Unequal opportunity in education Problems in accessing classes due to financial difficulties (no computer or internet connection) Lack of motivation Low attendance Students’ not paying attention

Some technical issues mentioned were lack of recording capabilities in university distance learning systems, IT access problems, internet connection issues, lack of infrastructure, and security issues in alternative applications (e.g., Zoom, Meet, Microsoft Teams). For example, one academic (P23)

said “We couldn’t do online lessons unless it was compulsory, because the system might not support it.”

Lecturer and instructor issues included inability to use technology, adaptation issues, plagiarism issues with course content, less effective or efficient lessons, inability to give practical lessons, lack of interaction with students, and insufficient assessment and evaluation in exams. For example, one academic (P20) said,

There must be an IT department accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. If we have a problem at school, I can take my computer and solve the problem. But in the online system, we are alone in our homes during the lesson.

Lastly, student issues mentioned included unequal opportunity in education, lack of motivation, low attendance, and lack of attention from students. For example, unequal opportunity in education was expressed by an academic (P26) as having

no problems with the application itself, but we face serious issues with student attendance. Lots of students are unable to get access to a computer, internet connection, etc. due to financial issues. Some of them may not be attending because of irresponsibility, but it is not easy to distinguish them. All in all, attendance rates are very low.

Opinions of academics concerning the impact of the pandemic on the knowledge, skill, and competence levels of the students addressed both advantages and disadvantages. Many thought that students would be able to turn this crisis into opportunity and benefit from the current conditions by increasing technology use and skills. Technology has been gaining importance due to distance learning, providing students with opportunities to develop their technology acumen. At the same time, technology-enabled students to attend lectures at universities abroad, keep up with seminars (webinars), and improve their foreign language skills. During the pandemic, numerous certification programs were offered online. For example, one academic (P4) said, “In terms of knowledge and skills, it is important for graduates of tourism-related departments to have a good command of English and be able to work online, especially if the pandemic continues.”

Students also had the opportunity to enrich their CVs by making use of such programs. Lastly, students who were able to set more time aside for themselves were also able to contribute to their self-improvement by reading books or attending training sessions.

Academics who thought that the pandemic had negative impacts on the knowledge, skill, and competence levels of students in tourism-related departments had three complaints. Firstly, students lost motivation due to staying home during the pandemic. One academic (P7) said, “Face-to-face education was more meaningful. When I meet with students, I can see their lack of motivation. I think distance education is disadvantageous.” They believed this lack of motivation likely had negative effects on their levels of success. Another disadvantage of distance learning was the absence of internships and practical classes, thus limiting hands-on experiences. Students having difficulty accessing computers or the Internet could not keep up with classes, which in turn deprived them of necessary knowledge. Lastly, the quality of education suffered due to distance learning being more theoretical, monotonous, and involving less interaction as detailed in Table 7.

**Table 7.** Opinions of Academics Regarding Impacts of Pandemic Upon Knowledge, Skill, and Competence Levels of Students

Theme	Subtheme
Advantages/turning crisis into opportunity	Increasing technology use and skills Opportunity to develop foreign language Increased opportunities to attend online certification programs Self-improvement
Disadvantages	Loss of motivation Lack of practice/internship Difficulty accessing classes Decreasing quality of education

Regarding academics' opinions on how the pandemic affected student employment in the tourism sector, both favorable and unfavorable viewpoints were present (see Table 8).

**Table 8.** Opinions of Academics on Impacts of the Pandemic on Employment

Theme	Subtheme
Favorable	More employment opportunities in long run Greater need for trained personnel Improved student quality Selection of tourism departments by highly motivated candidates
Unfavorable	Fewer employment opportunities in the short term Greater difficulty entering labor market due to lack of experience Students being drawn away from sector

Favorable opinions included more employment opportunities in the long run, greater need for trained personnel, improved student quality, and tourism departments being selected by students with higher enthusiasm for the industry. For example, one academic (P20) said,

Surely, this will give way to an increase in interest for double major programs. . . create new job areas for those taking classes from a second undergraduate program related to tourism or. . . entirely different. Our sector is fragile and impacted by many factors. If students cannot pursue a double major program, they should join certification programs in different areas.

Unfavorable opinions, on the other hand, focused on fewer employment opportunities in the short term, greater difficulty entering the labor market due to lack of experience, and diminished overall interest in the sector. For example, one academic (P10) said,

The sector needs personnel who will interact with the customer personally. So long as the all-inclusive system continues, it is quite difficult for small and medium-scale establishments to focus on quality. By focusing on efficiency, they will try to do business with minimal personnel, fewer customers, and higher prices. Their preference for more experienced personnel would be a disadvantage for new graduates.

### ***Modifying the Existing System as a More Sustainable Higher Education Program***

Participants were asked about their recommendations for the existing educational system to make it more sustainable. Internship practices during the pandemic and possible curriculum changes after the pandemic were the main foci.

### ***Internship Practices During the Pandemic***

Some academics argued that internship practices should continue even if the pandemic persists, while others said that practices should be put on hold until the pandemic subsides. Those in favor of internships argued for their indispensability for tourism departments. According to these academics, giving theoretical assignments were not effective as they failed to instill and develop practical skills. Among the participants who were not in favor of continuing internships during the pandemic, one academic (P11) said,

I have 78 students. I do not want to send them away for internship because if even one of them contracts COVID, I could be held accountable. They would have a right to do so. There's also an ethical aspect.

These academics also suggested that students should be evaluated using alternative methods instead of internships under pandemic conditions. They argued that the most important thing was the health and well-being of the students and, thus, they should not face risk in any way. One academic (P21) said,

Tourism-related departments should cancel internships as a precaution. Just like we cannot pull a medical student away from the hospital, we should leave the decision on internships to the students. It wouldn't necessarily be obligatory then.

### ***Possible Curriculum Changes in Higher Education Programs on Tourism After the Pandemic***

Academics suggested possible curriculum changes in programs on tourism after the pandemic (see Table 9). Some academics believed that their existing curriculum was sufficient although they could be improved by incorporating pandemic-related topics. Additionally, some thought that along with standard classes, students should attend conferences and receive disaster, risk, and crisis management training regularly throughout their university education.

**Table 9.** Opinions of Participants Regarding Possible Curriculum Changes

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subtheme</b>
Revised curriculum	Hygiene/Sanitation
	Technology/Informatics
	Digital Marketing
	Crisis Management
	Virtual Tourism
	Medical Tourism
	Time Management
	Psychology
	Social media management
	Online hotel management programs
	Occupational health & safety
Improving existing courses	Adding courses on pandemic
Supporting curriculum with conferences	Disaster/Risk/Crisis Management

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

### ***Conclusion***

With the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, many things have changed around the world. Within the scope of the measures taken regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, an online education

system has been introduced in many countries. This change in the education system has had some positive and negative impacts. The tourism sector, which has considerable economic and socio-cultural importance and is very vulnerable, has been greatly affected by the pandemic. This study explored the impacts on educational practices and curriculum programs in tourism higher education in Türkiye.

Academics argued that changing the curriculum or updating the course contents were necessary. Courses on hygiene, digitalization, crisis management, and health tourism were recommended. In addition, participants were concerned about the impact of the pandemic on the knowledge, skill, and competence levels of students in tourism-related departments. They emphasized the need to adapt, especially in the use of technology. Dewi (2020) supports this result. The implementation of a *new normal* in tourism (high standard sanitation, high standard security, staycation, niche tourism, solo travel tours, wellness tours, and virtual or digital tourism) is aligned with changes in tourism curricula as universities prepare students to face the future. Tourism education curricula should encompass a more in-depth coverage of sanitation and work safety, crisis management, system-based skills, interpersonal skills, and attitude development, as well as creativity, innovation, and technology adoption (Dewi, 2020). Moreover, emergency plans must be in place to provide clear codes of conduct for tourism education institutions in case of catastrophic events (Ye & Law, 2021).

Internship during the pandemic process was another topic of discussion. Due to the pandemic, many businesses temporarily closed or decreased their activities. Higher education institutions providing tourism education in Türkiye switched to take-home projects instead of internships. When the academicians were asked about internship practices during the pandemic, most emphasized that increased homework was a temporary solution, and that internship was indispensable in tourism education. Bilslund et al. (2020) examined tourism and hotel management internships in prior research, whose results were aligned with the findings of this study regarding the important role internships play in tourism education.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

This study primarily had an exploratory nature due to the existing gap in knowledge. Even though academic publications on the global effect of the pandemic on higher education are increasing, the geographic distribution, pedagogy, or disciplinary foci of these studies lack diversity. This lack of diversity prevents a comprehensive and cohesive theoretical understanding of the pandemic's educational impact. Hence, the current study was conducted to contribute to the body of knowledge by bringing the perspective of an applied education field from a newly developed country setting.

Pedagogy in today's world has clearly been evolving to reflect not only changing skills and ideas but also new teaching methods. Because of the pandemic, different and enhanced teaching modalities have emerged as well as accompanied challenges. Teaching and delivery approaches have expanded to include digital learning, online and remote curricula, as well as interactive and collaborative research teams and projects to accommodate more flexible and inclusive teaching and learning class schedules while compromising the traditional and arguably *comfortable* classroom setting. In this sense, this study also contributed to the conceptual understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of digital learning by illustrating how COVID-19 impacted the curriculum in tourism higher education institutions. The resulting 21 main themes and 82 sub-



themes were examined in the findings section. Moreover, the findings also addressed the practical repercussions of pandemic-time education, chiefly the employment opportunities of tourism sector graduates whose education and training were deeply affected by the restrictions. Lastly, this research highlighted the effects of the pandemic on the knowledge, skill, and competence levels of tourism students, thus contributing to the ever-evolving and ever-debated nature of pedagogy pertinent to tourism and hospitality higher education.

### ***Practical Implications***

The most important practical contribution of the research is the express need for reassessment of the curriculum programs in tourism higher education institutions considering the impacts of the pandemic. In this context, a considerable voice emerged in academia to change and improve the curriculum and methodology in tourism higher education institutions. Some academicians suggested new courses to be added to curricula specific to sensitivities developed under the pandemic era. Hygiene and technology-based courses emerged as examples of the advocated for new content. However, the question was not only what else should be taught in the curriculum, but also what methods and teaching approaches should be used for instruction. The suggestions made for solving problems encountered in the online education system is another practical contribution of this research. Our new pedagogy of learning and teaching must consider the context in which learning takes place and the applied requirements of fields such as tourism and hospitality. Additionally, the strategy adopted must lead to the achievement of meaningful and purposeful cognitive learning. Finally, making spatial and structural changes in higher education institutions, such as the layout and capacity of classrooms, social areas (canteen, cafeteria, conference rooms, etc.), and sanitation spaces (e.g., bathrooms) emerged as other findings with practical implications.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

Among the limitations of the study, first, interviews were conducted online or by phone, not face-to-face, due to the pandemic restrictions. This may have lessened the depth of information compared to face-to-face situations by denying the researchers the opportunity to probe with subsequent questions. This was due to the timing of the interviews conducted during the first peak of the pandemic when most faculty was overwhelmed with the rapid transition requirements. Getting appointments for interviews during this time via phone or receiving return emails was a major challenge from the beginning. Hence, it was not practical to do follow-up calls or emails, or through synchronous meeting software (e.g., Zoom, Google Meets, Microsoft Team), most of which participants were still not very proficient during the time of the interviews. Secondly, interviews were conducted only with academicians working in the field of tourism education. Hence, the study did not include perspectives of students or tourism sector representatives, which must eventually be sought when making final decisions on curricular development or revisions. Although the study has achieved data saturation, the sample size of the study was limited to 27 because of time and cost constraints. Finally, the suggestions and findings are reflective of the educational institutions in hospitality and tourism programs in Turkiye. Thus, suggestions and findings may not have a high degree of generalizability. However, the authors believe the findings of this research still incorporate certain pedagogical elements applicable to other tourism and contextually similar applied fields within the greater world of higher education.

Future quantitative or qualitative studies could be conducted to examine the effects of the pandemic on tourism education. Students' views on the online education system and curricula may differ from the views of academicians. In this context, it is advisable to ask the opinions of students in tourism higher education institutions in future studies. Interviews could be conducted with all other stakeholders, especially with the administrative directors of educational institutions. Finally, only academicians from different departments in tourism were interviewed in this research. Future studies could evaluate the impacts of the pandemic on different departments of tourism programs.

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