

# Shifting Over 15,000 Students and Faculty Members Online in a Week

**Istanbul Okan University** is the youngest university in Turkey and is widely regarded as the most dynamic among its peers. Established in Istanbul in 2003, the university is now spread out across three campuses, and offers 213 undergraduate, graduate and PhD-level programmes, across ten faculties, two vocational schools, three graduate schools and a conservatory department for music and theatre studies.

True to its motto, 'The university closest to business life', Istanbul Okan University bridges the gap between the academic and business worlds by adopting a contemporary, practice-oriented approach to education. Through the Preparing for Business Life Program, the university's students work at business firms from their freshman year onwards. The university also has in place cooperation protocols with several business institutions across Turkey, as well as academic institutions abroad such as Beijing University, Murray State University and Anadolu University.

## Initiating the 'Closest Education' programme

Over the last two years, Istanbul Okan University invested in creating an agile teaching and learning environment, to better meet the needs of its evolving student demographic. The university implemented blended learning in 2018, leveraging Blackboard Learn as its Learning Management System (LMS). The university also began to offer online courses by leveraging the Blackboard Collaborate platform.

As the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic began to be felt in Turkey, Istanbul Okan University announced the suspension of on-campus classes on March 16, and a week later, on March 23, the university initiated its 'Closest Education' programme. The initiative would take classes fully online and bring education closer to students through their mobile and personal devices.



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The challenge was to dramatically scale up online education in a severely compressed time frame, and to do so with minimal disruptions. Fortunately, Istanbul Okan University's instructors and students were familiar with Blackboard's technologies — most had been leveraging Blackboard Learn and Blackboard Collaborate before the pandemic forced closures. Teachers had been receiving regular training at the beginning of each academic year since Blackboard tools were first adopted in 2018.



Established in 2003

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15,000 students

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600 faculty members

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213 programmes

## Preparedness and support pave the road to success

Continuous training contributed to the overall preparedness and success of Istanbul Okan University's 'Closest Education' initiative. By the time classes had to be shifted entirely online in March, over 500 educators had already attended a combination of regular in-person and online live training sessions. Hybrid learning had been integrated into several courses over a two-year period and over a 100 graduate and undergraduate programmes were already being offered online. Several of the university's administrators and educators wielded prior experience in distance education.

Once the decision to transition to fully remote learning was taken, Istanbul Okan University's Learning Application and Research Centre set to work to provide the necessary support to the university's faculty and students. The centre's in-house team created and made available video-narrative help pages, interactive guides as well as e-mail communication channels for the teachers and students. Direct support was made available through a call center and targeted faculty training further facilitated a smooth transition.

## Embracing alternative assessment methods

Up until the point that classes had to be entirely taken online, most instructors at Istanbul Okan University preferred to conduct assessments on a group level — coursework and grading was often based on group activities and projects. After classes went online in March, alternative assessment methods had to be introduced. To better tackle this issue, faculty members opted for solutions such as online exams that assign random test questions to each student and 'take-home' exams that have be completed within a limited timeframe. And all student uploads are checked for originality and plagiarism using Blackboard SafeAssign.

Meanwhile, features such as discussion boards and Wikis still allow students to have meaningful, effective interactions on multiple levels with each other and their instructors. Feedback channels and real-time follow-up mechanisms allow them to participate actively and remain engaged.

## The result?

In the weeks following their full transition to remote instruction on March 23, 2020, Istanbul Okan University has delivered 5,383 lessons to 15,479 students that have attended a total of 200,603 virtual live classes. Virtual classroom recordings have been viewed 53,000 times, while small and large exams have been held 27,043 times.

*“During the pandemic we achieved unprecedented, institution-wide participation in online learning. We now plan to leverage this large-scale immersion into virtual learning to further develop our education model. We are anticipating a substantial increase in blended learning, flipped learning and peer instruction practices across our programmes.”*

*- Emel Koç, Director of the Learning Application and Research Centre*

Several of Istanbul Okan University’s faculty members have also noticed that the shift to online education has triggered a marked increase in student preparedness — in a model that closely resembles that of flipped learning, students prefer to prepare for each class in advance, laying the groundwork for active learning during the class itself.



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## Looking ahead

Online education is pivotal to institutional resilience and academic continuity. Even before the pandemic, Istanbul Okan University had implemented digital tools to complement face-to-face learning. Now, the university's educators believe blended learning will become the key to post-pandemic pedagogy — they have seen first-hand how hybrid learning scales up flexibility, accessibility and student engagement.

*“Online learning is the future — in time it will undoubtedly replace land-based learning entirely. Mobile devices and platforms have granted more people access to online education and its benefits, while machine learning has engendered personalised, competency-based learning. Soon we will witness the increased integration of the elements of virtual reality and augmented reality into the online learning structure, while advanced machine learning algorithms will further democratise learning.”*

*- Güner Gürsoy, Vice Rector of Istanbul Okan University*