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Multiple Degree Strategies in Türkiye: A Qualitative Study on Formal and Open Education Experiences

Türkiye'de Çoklu Diploma Stratejileri: Örgün ve Açık Öğretim Deneyimleri Üzerine Nitel Bir Araştırma

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the effects of multiple degree strategies on occupational flexibility and career security within the context of global economic uncertainty, digital transformation, and Industry 4.0 dynamics. Using purposive sampling with maximum variation strategy, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 university students (aged 19–27) simultaneously enrolled in formal, open and distance education programs to capture socioeconomic and academic diversity. Qualitative data were analyzed via thematic analysis using MAXQDA. Findings reveal that participants' educational motivations are driven by intrinsic development goals, familial and social pressures, and pursuit of economic security. The multi-degree strategy emerges as a strategic tool for adapting to labor market changes and mitigating occupational risks. We recommend: (1) synchronizing formal and open education timetables, (2) enhancing peer/mentor support systems in open education, and (3) restructuring career guidance services to reflect the realities of multi-diploma strategies.

Keywords: Cultural Capital, Degree Inflation, Formal Education, Open Education, Parentocracy.

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Öz: Bu çalışma, küresel ekonomik belirsizlik, dijital dönüşüm ve Endüstri 4.0 dinamikleri bağlamında, çoklu diploma stratejilerinin bireylerin mesleki esneklik ve kariyer güvenliğine etkilerini incelemektedir. Araştırma, örgün, açık veuzaktan eğitim programlarında eş zamanlı öğrenim gören 19-27 yaş aralığındaki 15 katılımcıyla yürütülmüştür. Amaçlı örnekleme kapsamında maksimum çeşitlilik stratejisiyle seçilen, örgün ve açık öğretime eş zamanlı kayıtlı 19-27 yaş arası 15 katılımcıyla yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmış; nitel veriler MAXQDA ile tematik analize tabi tutulmuştur. Bulgular, eğitim tercihlerinde içsel gelişim arzusu, aile ve sosyal baskılar ve ekonomik güvence arayışının belirleyici olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Çoklu diploma stratejisi, iş piyasasına uyum ve mesleki risk azaltmada stratejik bir araç olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Araştırma bulgularına göre açık ve örgün öğretim ders programlarının eş zamanlı ve uyumlu bir şekilde yürütülmesi, açık öğretimde akran/mentor destek mekanizmalarının güçlendirilmesi ve kariyer rehberliğinin çoklu diploma gerçekliğine göre yeniden düzenlenmesi önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Açık Öğretim, Diploma Enflasyonu, Kültürel Sermaye, Örgün Öğretim, Parentokrasi.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Uncertainty in the global economy and digital transformation indicate that traditional single-degree education is insufficient to meet individuals' professional and personal development needs (Friedman, 2005; OECD, 2019; Seevaratnam et al., 2023; Thwe and Kálmán, 2023; UNESCO, 2020). This situation further complicates educational choices for students in countries like Türkiye with centralized examination systems. The Turkish exam system generates intense psychological pressure on students while elevating parental expectations to a decisive role in career planning (Karakartal, 2023; Ünsal, 2023). Shaped by concerns over economic security and social status, these expectations typically manifest as steering toward 'stable' professions such as teaching or civil service (Altın, 2020; Karakartal, 2023).

The increasing number of students and the massification of higher education fuel the phenomenon known as "degree inflation" (Marginson, 2006) in the labor market; many young graduates are dissatisfied because they cannot find the expected employment guarantee or return (Güneş and Acar, 2022). In this atmosphere, the "multiple degree strategy" has started to gain importance; students are trying to increase their job security by obtaining degrees in different fields on the one hand, and on the other hand, they are turning to various education programs to meet social status or family expectations (Markova et al., 2022; Avcı, 2024). Thus, a multi-layered preference emerges, aiming to minimize economic risks and consolidate cultural or social capital.

In Türkiye, research on the psychological effects of the centralized exam system on students and the guiding role of families (Karakartal, 2023; Dilekçi et al., 2023) shows that exam success is shaped not only by individual performance but also by the socioeconomic level, values and expectations of parents (Mejia et al., 2021; Temel and Erkanlı, 2017). Within this "parentocracy" (Sobczak, 2018), students are increasingly inclined to obtain multiple degrees instead of a single degree, and family pressure and social norms reinforce this preference. This is supported by Idowu et al. (2020), who found that parental academic achievement directly increases students' aspirations for higher qualifications. On the other hand, the weakening of the advantages of the degree in the labor market (despite strategies such as "more degrees" or "more reputable institutions") has been questioned to a great extent (Marginson, 2006; Güneş and Acar, 2022). This questioning stems primarily from 'diploma inflation' caused by the massification of higher education, coupled with graduates' inability to secure employment guarantees or their compulsion to accept low-wage jobs (Hussain et al., 2023; Tamvada et al., 2022).

1.1. Purpose of the study

Although there are studies on the economic, psychological and sociocultural dimensions of multiple degree orientation in the existing literature (Markova et al., 2022; Nasser, 2023), the gap that emerges at the intersection of the centralized examination system in Türkiye, family expectations and "degree inflation" is not sufficiently examined. While many studies have addressed the multiple degree strategy either from an economic investment perspective or in the context of general education policies, in-depth analyses of how the competitive examination system in Türkiye and family orientation guide young people's career planning remain limited (Altın, 2020; Karakartal, 2023). Indeed, Altın's (2020) study points to the disconnect between the status promised by education and labor market realities in Türkiye, showing how many graduates face unemployment or precarious employment that constrains social mobility opportunities. Similarly, Karakartal (2023) reveals that parental attitudes, particularly authoritarian approaches, directly increase students' exam anxiety and shift their educational preferences from personal interest to fear of failure. At this point, this study aims to fill a gap in the literature and makes an empirical contribution by integrating the experiences of youth shaped in the triangle of centralized exams, family expectations and multiple degrees with direct participant accounts. Therefore, the focal points of this research are the extent to which the "more degrees" approach protects students in the labor market, how psychological pressure from the family transforms educational choices, and how the symbolic/status value of degrees becomes in the mass higher education environment.

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1.2. Significance of the study

To this end, the research uses a phenomenological design with qualitative research methodology to examine the data obtained from the interviews of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds studying in formal and open education programs. In this way, this study sought to uncover the dynamics in the Turkish context behind perceptions of "multiple degrees," family pressure, the conflation of more degrees with greater job security, and experiences of real-life disappointment.

Theoretical Framework

In today's modern societies, education is considered not only a means of individual knowledge acquisition and professional development but also a strategic "protective shield" against economic uncertainties and increasing social mobility. Digital transformation, globalization and flexible labor market expectations have shown that traditional single degree education models are no longer sufficient, which has paved the way for new approaches such as modular education systems, lifelong learning and multiple degree strategies to gain importance (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004; Jarvis, 2010). In this context, Gary Becker's (1994) human capital theory, Ulrich Beck's (1992) risk society approach, Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) understanding of cultural capital and Simon Marginson's (2006) discussion of degree inflation will be considered as a whole to explain the multidimensional structure of multiple degree strategies.

Becker's (1994) human capital theory interprets education as an investment that provides a competitive advantage in the labor market and increases income. Accordingly, individuals' acquisition of degrees in different fields can be seen as accumulation that increases occupational qualifications and earnings expectations. However, this theoretical framework focuses predominantly on economic outcomes and runs the risk of leaving the social or cultural returns of education in the background. This is where Beck's (1992) concept of risk society comes into play, suggesting that in unstable labor market conditions, people adopt multiple degrees as a strategy of individual security against future uncertainties. This approach implies that people are not only focused on returns, but also on obtaining certificates or degrees in different fields in order to alleviate the fear of crisis and unemployment.

Bourdieu's understanding of cultural capital goes beyond explaining education only in terms of economic returns. Bourdieu (1986), in his work "The Forms of Capital", defines cultural capital as a resource that "exists in embodied or objectified form and can be transformed into economic or social benefits under certain conditions". For example, a multiple degree is not only an investment that can bring a salary increase in the labor market; it can also become a means of gaining status and prestige in the eyes of the individual's family, environment and society. Bourdieu (1986) draws attention to the "invisible" means of transmission of cultural capital (values internalized in the family, symbolic privileges provided by educational institutions) and states that social power relations determine which professions are considered "respectable" and which degrees are considered "prestigious" in this process.

Marginson (2006) analyzes contemporary higher education in the context of global competition and international flows. According to Marginson (2006), universities are simultaneously subject to competition within the national system and shaped by global factors such as transnational student and academic mobility, rankings, research collaborations in an "open knowledge environment". While the quest for "position and status" is the main determinant in national competition, research capacity and international visibility play a key role in global competition. These two different areas of competition (national and global) feed into each other and show that universities strive to gain status both in the "local market" and on a "global scale".

These four theoretical approaches provide a holistic understanding of the different dimensions of higher education. Becker (1994) emphasizes the "economic investment aspect of education" and states that individuals make rational calculations for the future in their educational choices. On the other hand, Beck (1992) emphasizes the "risks produced by modernization". He shows that universities and scientific knowledge cannot be explained only by the discourse of "development and growth" but can also be the source or solution of "social and ecological threats". Bourdieu (1986) demonstrates that the transmission

of "cultural capital" in education reproduces social inequalities and elite positions, arguing that university degrees are positional tools that are "symbolically, if not economically, powerful". Finally, Marginson (2006) explains that "rising global competition" has pushed higher education institutions to strategize at the national and cross-border levels, with prestigious research performance and the international student market becoming key factors determining the future of institutions.

An analysis of these theories reveals that higher education is positioned at the intersection of dynamics such as "economic return", "risk and uncertainty", "cultural capital" and "global competition". Modern universities continue to function as human capital investments that provide individual prosperity and become part of socio-economic and ecological risks. On the one hand, universities represent the sphere of cultural capital where social status is reproduced. On the other, they become a means of trying to survive in an increasingly globalized competitive environment. Therefore, understanding the future of higher education requires a perspective that considers this multi-layered interaction.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design

With the modernization process, degrees have transformed into symbols of social status, while simultaneously triggering debates on educational inequality. As a result of these discussions, open and distance education institutions have been developed as alternatives to formal education to ensure access for disadvantaged individuals. The intense debate around the role of these institutions particularly regarding whether they might replace traditional education stems from the confluence of three global shifts: rising educational attainment, limited labor market absorption capacity, and evolving family expectations amid economic uncertainty. It is stated that this causes anxiety especially in universities where education expenses are low, and that families in developed and developing countries with low regional socio-economic levels may have higher expectations for children who can gather at universities (Yücel, 2023; Zengin and Şenel, 2020). As degree inflation progressively erodes the symbolic value of higher education qualifications, students and families increasingly pursue multiple credentials as a risk mitigation strategy. This context fueled the intensified 2000s discourse, accelerated by information technology advances, suggesting open and distance education might not merely supplement but potentially supplant formal education as the dominant future model (Şahin, 2021).

With the establishment of new universities in Türkiye, the total number of higher education institutions has reached 209 (Yükseköğretim Kurulu [YÖK], 2025a). Among these, 93 universities offer open and distance education programs in addition to traditional formal education. As of the 2024-2025 academic year, a total of 7.800.000 students are enrolled in universities across the country. Of these, 2.930.000 students are registered in Open and Distance Education Faculties, with 298.500 graduates reported (Yükseköğretim Bilgi Yönetim Sistemi [YÖKSİS], 2025). Although comprehensive statistics are limited, available data indicate that a significant portion of these students are either currently enrolled in another university program or are graduates of a higher education institution. For instance, of the 1.539.964 students enrolled in Open Education programs at Anadolu University (YÖK, 2025b), approximately 562.000 are concurrently students at another university, and 399.000 had already graduated from a higher education institution (Anadolu University, 2025). This trend suggests that, rather than being viewed as an alternative to formal education or as a reflection of future educational models, open and distance education in Türkiye is increasingly perceived as a secondary program within a broader multiple degree strategy.

This qualitative phenomenological research aims to gain an in-depth understanding of multiple degree strategies, open and formal education models and their effects on individuals' motivation to enter university. The phenomenological approach effectively reveals individuals' subjective experiences, meaning construction processes and social realities (Van Manen, 1990; Moustakas, 1994). In addition,

emphasizing meaning, concepts, definitions, metaphors and symbols aligns with qualitative research principles for understanding the social reality constructed by different groups or cultures (Berg, 2002). Therefore, this approach has been specifically chosen to shed light on the experiences of individuals pursuing multiple degree strategies in Turkey's unique socio-educational context and the meanings they attach to these experiences.

2.2. Sampling and participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling technique aligned with the research objectives (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Adopting a maximum variation sampling strategy (Palinkas et al., 2015), participants were recruited to represent the widest possible socio-economic and academic diversity. Key inclusion criteria included: (1) concurrent enrollment in formal and open/distance education programs, (2) age range of 19-27 years (to control developmental-stage variables; Patton, 2015), and (3) heterogeneous academic backgrounds. Prior to interviews, participants received detailed information about the study's purpose, confidentiality protocols, and provided written informed consent.

2.3. Data collection process

In the data collection process, semi-structured interview technique was adopted and the interviews were conducted on 20.01.2022 and 11.01.2023. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, a voice recorder was used with the permission of all participants, and detailed notes were taken (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). The interview form was designed to explore the motivations underlying multiple degree strategies. The flow of the interview was kept flexible so that participants could express their own experiences and thoughts comfortably, and the researcher took care to enrich the participants' perspectives by asking in-depth questions

During the interviews, the process of reaching data saturation was managed through an interim sample control approach (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006). The researcher periodically reviewed the collected data and observed that obtaining additional data from new participants would not make a significant difference as the main themes started to recur. In particular, themes such as "motivations for university entrance", "family expectations" and "economic and social reasons for the multiple degree strategy" led to similar statements after the 12th participant. At this stage, additional participant interviews were taken for a while, but no significant new codes or themes emerged and the data collection process was terminated. Thus, the research was terminated when it was evaluated that data saturation was reached with 15 participants.

2.4. Data analysis

Following the interviews, the audio recordings (and detailed notes) were transferred to the MAXQDA program; in the open coding phase, salient concepts and narratives in the participants' statements were categorized for the first time. Then, additional codes and meta- themes were related to each other to create frameworks such as "The Need to Come to University and Become a University Student", "Open Education and Formal Education Experiences" and "Perception of Multiple Degree Strategy". In line with the basic principle of the phenomenological approach, "bracketing" (Moustakas, 1994), the researcher tried to minimize her assumptions and focused on the subjective experiences of the participants

A second researcher also coded a certain amount of data to ensure reliability in the coding process. Since a high level of overlap was observed when the coding results were compared, the consistency of the generated themes between the researchers was confirmed. Thus, the study's data analysis process was structured to meet both reproducibility and validity criteria.

2.4.1. Demographic information

This study included 15 participants (I1-I15) with anonymized codes. All participants were between the ages of 19 and 27 and single, 5 of them were male and 10 of them were female. This distribution was created by purposive sampling technique to include young adults studying in both formal and open

education programs at the university. Most of the participants are studying in formal programs with a focus on social sciences such as History, Sociology, Turkish Language and Literature. The open education programs that the participants study are generally open education programs such as Sports Management, Child Development, Elderly Care, Medical Laboratory and Veterinary Medicine, Social Services, Civil Aviation Management, Visual Communication Design or Justice. In economic terms, the total income level of the families varies between 1,000 TL and 15,000 TL; some of them cover their education expenses with additional scholarships or partial work income. The educational level of the parents was generally primary school or high school, which is an important indicator reflecting the socioeconomic background of the participants. Detailed information about the participants is provided in Table I.

Table 1.

Demographic Information

Code	Gender	Age	Marital status	Formal education department	Open education department	Family total income
I1	Male	19	Single	History	Sport management	5.000 TL
I2	Male	22	Single	Sociology	Child development	3.250 TL
I3	Male	23	Single	Sociology	Aged care (2 years)	9.500 TL
I4	Female	21	Single	Sociology	Civil aviation transportation management (2 years)	2.300 TL
I5	Female	21	Single	History	Medical laboratory and veterinary medicine	1.000 TL
I6	Female	27	Single	History	Social services	Unspecified
I7	Female	19	Single	Turkish language and literatüre	Child development	Minimum wage level
I8	Female	26	Single	History	Child development	9.000 TL
I9	Female	23	Single	History	Sociology	Unspecified
I10	Female	21	Single	History	Child development	2.850 TL
I11	Female	19	Single	Turkish language and literature	Visual communication design	4.000 TL
I12	Male	23	Single	Geography	Coğrafi bilgi sistemleri (2 years)	15.000 TL
I13	Male	25	Single	Geography	Justice (2 years)	Unspecified
I14	Female	19	Single	Turkish language and literature	Medical documentation and secretariat (2 years)	4.250 TL
I15	Female	20	Single	History	Justice (2 years)	9.000 TL

2.5. Ethical approval and research permissions

In this study, all the rules specified in the "Directive on Scientific Research and Publication Ethics of Higher Education Institutions" were followed. None of the actions specified under the second section of the Directive, "Actions Contrary to Scientific Research and Publication Ethics", have been carried out.

Ethics Committee Approval Information

Ethical committee: Harran University

Research Ethics Committee Data of ethical approval: 12.11.2021

The number of ethical approvals: E-76244175-752.01.01-79890

3. FINDINGS

In this section, the qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews we conducted to understand the dynamics behind multiple degree strategies and motivations for university entrance will be discussed in detail. As the phenomenological approach focuses on foregrounding the participants' subjective experiences and perceptions, these findings will be presented in a thematic order based on participant accounts. Each theme reveals how intrinsic motivations, familial and social expectations, and economic uncertainties intersect to shape individuals' educational decisions, while the differences in open and formal education experiences and the individual and societal implications of the multiple degree strategy will also be examined comprehensively. In this context, each theme is developed through a holistic analysis of the data and aims to shed light on the main axes of the study, supported by direct quotations.

3.1. The need to come to university and become a university student: Reflections of ıntrinsic motivations, social dynamics and economic uncertainties

The decision to enter university is not only limited to the desire to acquire knowledge and have a profession, but also emerges as a multi-layered process in constructing an individual's identity, gaining self-confidence and in line with expectations shaped by social norms. Participants stated that they preferred university by being influenced by different dynamics such as personal development, social environmental pressure and economic uncertainties. In this framework, the concepts of human capital (Becker, 1994), cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), risk society (Beck, 1992) and degree inflation (Marginson, 2006) in the literature provide important theoretical bases for interpreting the participants' experiences. This main theme is analyzed in three sub-dimensions: (1) Personal Development, Knowledge Acquisition and Self-Proofing; (2) Reflections of Family and Social Dynamics on Education; (3) Reflections of Economic Uncertainty and the Search for Professional Security on Education. A summary of the coding hierarchy and representative participant statements for this theme is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2.

Thematic Coding and Sample Participant Codes for the Main Motivations Behind University Entry

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Sample Participant Codes
Motivations for University Enrollment	1.1 Personal Development and Self-Realization	• "My only goal is to learn and acquire knowledge" • "It's about proving myself and growing" • "University life is not just about textbook knowledge"
	1.2 Family/Social Pressure and Influences	• "It was mostly my family's wish" • "There would be social pressure from relatives" • "It's a way to escape from home"
	1.3 Search for Economic Security	• "No bread for the uneducated" • "The state is seen as a guarantee" • "There is much anxiety about the future"

3.1.1. Dynamics of personal development, knowledge acquisition and self- promotion

The desire to access knowledge and prove themselves play a decisive role in university preferences. For example, one participant said: "For example, I came to Sociology to improve myself" (I2, Male). This statement emphasizes the function of education to increase personal knowledge and contribute to the individual's intellectual development. Another participant emphasizes the importance of the learning process underlying the university experience with the statement "My only purpose is to learn, to gain knowledge" (I7, Female). In addition, another participant stated, "The reason is to stand on my own feet. To be able to stand on my own feet." (I5, Female), she states that education plays a critical role in terms of the individual becoming independent and gaining self-efficacy. Another participant emphasized the cultural diversity brought by formal education and said, "...for example, there are South Koreans,

Syrians, Afghans in our class now. When you chat with them, you grow culturally. I think it is something very different." (I14, Female)

The participants' perception of the university as a place for "self-development" and "gaining new horizons" is in line with Becker's (1994) human capital theory that education is not only an economic investment but also a process that shapes the potential of the individual. However, the participants' particular emphasis on "intellectual curiosity" and "cultural interaction" brings to mind Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital approach. Cultural capital affects not only an individual's position in the labor market, but also his/her prestige and interaction patterns within society.

For example, I14's statement "growing culturally by meeting students from different countries" shows that the participant's worldview has expanded thanks to the diversity offered by the university environment. This is a concrete example of how habitus, as defined by Bourdieu (1986), is transformed through the educational process. Therefore, the participants see the university as a lifelong learning and identity construction tool rather than just a degree.

This sub-theme, which emphasizes personal development and intellectual curiosity, shows that university is an important field in terms of economic returns and social and cultural values. The next sub-theme will discuss how the participants' decision to enter university is shaped by the influences they receive from their family and social environment.

3.1.2. Reflections of family and social dynamics on education

It is observed that family and close social environment pressure is as important as individual desires in university choices. In the narratives of the participants, it is noteworthy how the expectations of parents or extended family, and sometimes even common occupational patterns in society, guide students' decision-making processes. One participant said, "My mother wanted me to study like this a lot" (I10, Female), revealing how family expectations guided the individual's educational decision. Another participant said, "My family, my parents wanted me to study more. Especially my father wanted me to be a teacher" (I9, Female), showing that social norms and occupational patterns shape the orientation of the student.

At this point, the concept of parentocracy (Sobczak, 2018) facilitates our understanding of how families frame students' university choices and success by bringing their economic, social and cultural resources into play. Parentocracy emphasizes the strong determination of the family over the educational process of the child. Here, the extent to which parents engage opportunities such as schools, tutoring centers or private tutoring while "investing in their children's future", how they find which profession/university "reputable" and how they direct them, show that decisions presented as "independent choice" of the student are actually transformed into a family-centered strategy (Sobczak, 2018).

Particularly in the case of "high-status professions" or "universities with a high degree value", parents can provide various kinds of support to give their children a head start from an early stage: for example, allocating additional budget for exam preparation, choosing a good private school, foreign language courses or international programs. I10's statement "My mother wanted me to study like this" reflects not only an emotional demand, but also a strategic role of the parent in providing financial and emotional resources for this educational process, so that the child can enter university and have a career in the future. Thus, which options in higher education become "accessible" to children is largely determined by the extent of resources (cultural, economic, social) available or mobilized by parents.

In sum, familial and social dynamics are one of the most critical determinants behind university choice, which is only seen as "the student's unique choice". The parentocratic perspective reveals how parents manage this process and how family strategies largely shape children's academic/vocational path. While parents strive to choose the most "guaranteed" or "reputable" profession for their children's future, they

also have the potential to reproduce inequalities in higher education. Therefore, the choice of university is mostly realized within a limited set of options with parents' financial and moral support and guidance. This shows how the process of parentocracy has a significant and directive impact on students' decisions. The next sub-theme will discuss how these intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and factors such as "economic uncertainty" and the search for "professional security" play a decisive role in university choices.

3.1.3. Reflections of economic uncertainty and the search for occupational security on education

Economic uncertainty and risks in the labor market are among the important factors behind students' orientation towards university. Many respondents attribute their motivation to enter university not only to personal development or family expectations, but also to economic uncertainties and concerns about job security. In particular, the fear of future "unemployment" and ever-changing economic conditions cause participants to see their educational choices as a strategic tool. For example, while one participant drew attention to the function of education in providing career and future security by saying, "It's just for the profession, you know, the future." (I1, Male), another participant said, "That's police work. To increase my chances." (I3, Male), he states that certain professions serve as a buffer to reduce risks and protect against economic uncertainties. Another participant said, "Where does it come from? When I look at the country from my point of view, we have a situation like this: there is no bread for those who do not study." (I11, Female), suggesting that economic requirements and fluctuations in the labor market are a dominant factor in the decision to study.

The statements in this area concretely reflect the individual risk management strategies pointed out in Beck's (1992) risk society theory. In an environment of increasing uncertainty and competition, individuals try to minimize future risks through strategies such as "studying" and "having a degree in different fields". I3's discourse on "policing" points to the tendency to prefer relatively protected fields of employment such as civil service or security.

On the other hand, another participant, I1's statement "I studied at 2 universities, I am unemployed" is a reflection of the phenomenon of degree inflation (Marginson, 2006) in the Turkish context. With the increase in participation in higher education, it is seen that a degree does not provide as much privilege in the labor market as it used to, and even the "risk of unemployment" does not disappear. This shows that the link between "having more degrees" and "real job security" is being questioned.

Economic uncertainty and the search for job security in university preferences reveal both the risk management strategies of individuals and the new concerns created by degree inflation. Thus, participants sometimes see education as a "lifeline" and sometimes as an "unnecessary" expenditure. In the next main theme, it will be revealed how this pursuit of multiple strategies, i.e. the simultaneous reading of open and formal education programs and the tendency towards multiple degrees, is experienced.

3.2. Differences between open education and formal education experiences

The configuration of learning environments in higher education has significant differences in terms of students' access to information and their level of social interaction. In the literature (Demir, 2024; Dolmacı and Dolmacı, 2020; Şanlıöz-Özgen and Küçükaltan Günlü, 2024; Tüzün and Yörük Toraman, 2021), it is emphasized that the interactional differences between face-to-face (formal) and distance (open) education models play a decisive role in students' active participation in courses, opportunities to receive feedback and overall learning satisfaction. Participant statements detail both positive and negative aspects of the experiential gap between these two models. This main theme is addressed in two sub-themes: (1) Quality of Learning and Social Interaction and (2) Systemic Challenges and Program Alignment Issues. A summary of the coding structure and illustrative participant codes for this theme is presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3.
Formal-Open Education Comparison

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Sample Participant Codes
2. Formal-Open Education Comparison	2.1 Learning Quality and Interaction	• "Participation in formal courses is more active" • "Open education is just exam-oriented" • "Distance education feels like watching a documentary"
	2.2 Systemic Difficulties	• "Exam schedules clash" • "I learned nothing from open education" • "Exam questions were leaked"

3.2.1. Quality of learning and social ınteraction

Participants mostly emphasize "learning quality" and "social interaction" when comparing formal and open education models. While face-to-face communication and instant feedback are prominent in formal education, the flexibility offered by open education is perceived as an advantage; however, it is stated that the learning process may be weakened due to insufficient social interaction. For example, a 19-year-old first-year student participant stated the following: "In one, you try to figure it out by yourself. You cannot ask anyone anything" (I7, Female). This statement of the participant shows that the lack of interaction in the open education process has a negative impact on the process of comprehending the subjects in depth. The participant implies that not being able to have one-on-one contact with the lecturers in the classroom environment restricts the motivation to learn and the ability to internalize the information, while revealing how critical the face-to-face communication available in formal education is. In addition to this, another participant shared his experiences: "We watch videos in open education. Formal education is more effective. Learning is better in formal education in terms of one-to-one education, face-to-face warm contacts." (I12, Male).

Open education's most frequently mentioned disadvantages are the "lack of mutual interaction" and the limited opportunity to "ask questions and get help". I7's statement "In one of them, you try to figure it out yourself. You can't ask anyone anything" points to the difficulty of getting instant feedback in distance education. Similarly, I12's statement, "It is better to do (lectures) with the lecturers in the lecture environment" indicates that the face-to-face communication provided by formal education increases learning motivation and participation.

These findings are in line with the interactive learning situation discussed in e-learning and online education literature (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004; Jarvis, 2010). Participants stated that learning is also possible through online materials and videos, but the "live communication" in formal education plays a critical role in terms of students' mastery and motivation. Face-to-face education deepens the learning process by providing an environment where students receive direct feedback from professors and classmates and can have discussions.

To summarize briefly, there is a strong distinction between the instant interaction and social environment of formal education and the flexibility and timelessness of open education. Participants emphasize that the advantages of social interaction in formal education are decisive in the quality of learning; however, some of them also try to take advantage of the opportunities of open education such as "working at their own pace". The next sub-theme will examine the coordination of programs between these two models and the reflections of systemic challenges on participant experiences.

3.2.2. Systemic challenges and ınterprogram alignment problems)

Participants who run open and formal education programs simultaneously mentioned various systemic challenges such as time management, alignment of course contents and overlapping exam schedules. According to the participants, having an intensive course schedule in a department in formal education

and following open education materials both require serious planning and effort. For example, a participant who continues both formal and open education experience; "After I started open education, it became a little difficult to take Harran Sociology." (I4, Female) points out that the timing, content integrity and course operations of open education programs contradict each other. In the background of this statement, the student's difficulties in accessing the curriculum and educational materials reveal the differences between the flexibility offered by open education and the structured environment of formal education. Another participant expresses her disappointment with her open education experience more clearly: "I did not learn anything about the department I studied in open education. I only have a degree" (I6, Female). This critical statement highlights the methodological deficiencies in the open education model and the inadequacy of the learning content. The participant draws attention to the fact that her expectations were not met during the education process and the superficiality of knowledge transfer, emphasizing the negative effects of this situation on the student. Another participant similarly mentioned the difficulties of running two systems together: "It is difficult to run both at the same time" (I8, Female).

The statements of the participants clearly reflect the time management problems caused by maintaining two different systems (formal and open education) at the same time. I4's statement "It became a bit difficult to take Harran Sociology" shows that the conflicts in the course and exam calendars of different universities or faculties put a strain on students. Similarly, I6 emphasizes that not being able to devote enough time and energy to open education makes the learning process superficial with the statement "I did not learn anything about the department I studied in open education. I only have a degree". One of the most striking comments summarizing this experience is I8's statement "It is difficult to manage both at the same time".

These problems highlighted by the participants show that multi-degree strategies may not always provide the expected benefits in practice. The methodological incompatibilities (different course contents, overlapping exams, incomplete materials) and time management problems that come with pursuing two programs at the same time can negatively affect an individual's academic performance and motivation. This situation overlaps with the problems of "quality assurance in modular education systems" (OECD, 2019) and "lack of coordination between programs" (Patton, 2015), which are also emphasized in the literature.

In summary, it is understood that the combination of open education and formal education models involves serious challenges for participants in terms of both time and learning efficiency. In particular, curricular conflicts and lack of sufficient interaction may lead to the risk of reducing open education to a mere pursuit of a "degree". In the next main theme, participant perceptions of the economic and career dimension of the multiple degree strategy will be discussed, and the reasons why students pursue multiple degrees will be examined in the context of the function of this strategy in reducing risk and providing status.

3.3. Perceptions of the multi-degree strategy and future prospects

In today's labor market and education policies, the multi-degree strategy is considered as a multidimensional tool that individuals use not only to acquire academic knowledge, but also to create alternative career paths, mitigate risks and take strategic steps against future uncertainties. Discussions in the literature on degree inflation and diversity of qualifications suggest that the degree offered by the education system is no longer sufficient to provide status and job security on its own, and participant statements support these criticisms with concrete examples. This theme is addressed in two sub-dimensions: (1) Alternative Career Options and Risk Mitigation Approach and (2) Critical Perspective on the Status of University Education. A summary of the coding structure and representative participant statements for this theme is presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4.

Thematic Coding and Sample Participant Codes for Multiple Degree a Strategies and Future Prospects

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Sample Participant Codes
Multiple Diploma Strategies	3.1 Risk Reduction and Career Flexibility	• "A single degree doesn't guarantee employment" • "If one fails, I can use the other" • "My goal is to have four diplomas and become a civil servant"
	3.2 Critical Perspective on Diploma Value	• "A degree is just a piece of paper" • "It feels empty" • "Anyone with a diploma is respected"

3.3.1. Alternative career options and risk mitigation approach

Economic uncertainties and the competitive labor market environment push students to adopt an alternative career strategy that does not rely solely on a single degree. This strategy aims to reduce economic risks and keep different career paths open simultaneously. Career and future concerns make the logic of "increasing one's chances" by obtaining more than one degree more attractive to the participants.

In this context, it is observed that the participants have turned to an alternative degree strategy with the expectation that it will offer more solid career security. For example, one participant stated, "That is the police. To increase my chances." (I3, Male), expressing his intention to pursue a career in law enforcement by taking the Police Academy entrance examinations. Similarly, another participant said, "I am studying at the Department of Justice, 2 years. I will take the DGS exam this summer. I plan to transfer to Law from there." (I13, Male), revealing how he determines a strategy against future uncertainties. Another participant expresses her desire to gain a competitive advantage in the global labor market and to be in a stronger position against the current economic uncertainties with the statement "I want to complete my Master's degree abroad." (I11, Female).

The phenomenon of "degree inflation" put forward by Marginson (2006) and Beck's (1992) concept of risk society are clearly felt behind the participants' pursuit of "more degrees". While I3 aims to reduce his economic risks by turning to professions that provide state security such as "policing", I13 states that he plans to switch to the field of Law through the "Department of Justice". These examples show that the participants do not want to restrict themselves to only one profession, but on the contrary, they put different career scenarios into action with the discourse of "increasing my chances". On the other hand, I11's statement "I want to complete my Master's degree abroad" can be interpreted as an effort to gain competitiveness in the international market and reduce local job risks. As a result, the multiple degree strategy emerges as a defense mechanism the participants developed against economic uncertainty.

Therefore, the desire for more degrees is a clear reflection of the participants' desire to reduce occupational risks and increase competitiveness. Although the multiple degree strategy is perceived as a kind of insurance against fluctuations in the labor market, participant statements also show that it does not always offer a sure success. In the next sub-theme, participants' critical views on the role of a university degree in providing status and social position will be examined.

3.3.2. A critical view on the status of university teaching

While students attribute a high status to the degree, they are also critical of its practical relevance. While the degree is still perceived by many as an important "credential", the increasing participation in higher education and the limited nature of the labor market lead to comments such as "the degree no longer has the value it used to". One participant stated, "When I look at it now, it feels empty" (I11, Female), pointing out that the degree is no longer a privileged and sufficient status symbol as it used to be, and

emphasizing that this situation should be evaluated in parallel with the discussions on the change in the quality of education and degree inflation. Supporting this critical view, participant I9, a 23-year-old History student, emphasizes that a degree is not the key factor for cultivating personal success and competence, noting, "I have seen people who can achieve something without getting it." (I9, Female). Contrary to this point of view, another participant who stated that the degree is very effective in determining the status said, "I think a university degree is prestige. People with a degree are respected in every way... For example, if an educated person calls a black color white, everyone believes it. Because he has a degree" (I14, Female). The participant emphasizes that a degree is still an important means of achieving high status in society. In contrast to these, I15 said, "There are those who come just to pass the time. Some of them are in their second university, some of them do not believe that they will be appointed anyway. At first, I thought I would just socialize." (I15, Female) emphasizes that the degree is a tool for socialization.

This perspective is in line with the concept of "degree inflation" discussed by Marginson (2006). The quantitative expansion of educational levels makes the degree more accessible than ever, while at the same time weakening its privileged position in the labor market. I15's view that "There are those who come just to pass the time" reveals that some students see the degree as "a means of socialization or occupation rather than studying". This critical view suggests that participants who question the economic and social returns of university are aware that professional security is not as "automatic" as it used to be.

To summarize, although university degree continues to be a strong source of status and prestige in the traditional sense, changes in the labor market and the increasing number of higher education graduates cause the participants to critically evaluate the value of the degree. While some do not deny the prestige that a degree brings, others emphasize that this prestige is not reflected in finding a job or self-actualization. Therefore, the multi-degree strategy and the expectations of being a university graduate are becoming increasingly questionable in the eyes of the participants.

4. DİSCUSSİON and CONCLUSİON

The findings of this qualitative study provide an in-depth understanding of how multiple-degree strategies and the interplay between open and formal education models shape individuals' motivations for pursuing higher education—thereby filling a significant gap in the literature. In line with Becker's (1994) human-capital theory, most participants see education as a rational economic investment aimed at professional qualifications and employment opportunities. Yet the data reveal that this logic extends beyond economics: education also furnishes socio-psychological benefits such as self-confidence, self-efficacy, and personal development, turning it into a multidimensional experience that contributes to identity formation and individual autonomy.

Participant narratives show that expectations of social status powerfully influence educational motives. Degrees function not merely as certificates of competence but as symbolic markers of one's position in society, echoing Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital. Families leverage educational titles to reproduce class positions, strategically positioning education as a vehicle for upward mobility in Türkiye (Altın, 2020; Şahin, 2019). In this "parentocracy" (Sobczak, 2018) context—reinforced by the centralised examination system—parental expectations eclipse individual preferences, limiting autonomy and turning multiple degrees into an almost compulsory strategy.

This structure perpetuates intergenerational transfers of cultural capital, fosters social inequality, and imposes psychological burdens. Supporting Tatlı and Atmaca's (2023) findings, participant accounts describe heightened stress, diminished self-confidence, and anxiety linked to parental pressure. The symbolic weight carried by education sustains the belief that credentials guarantee mobility, but when graduates face unemployment or precarious work, a semantic rupture arises—manifesting in disillusionment and lowered aspirations (Görmüş et al., 2023).

Despite expanded higher-education access, many graduates in Türkiye experience joblessness or low-wage, insecure employment, eroding trust in education's value (Altın, 2020). Unemployment produces economic hardship and psychosocial strain, forcing university-educated youth into low-skilled roles outside their specialization. To hedge against this mismatch between education and labour-market realities, individuals increasingly adopt multiple-degree strategies, consonant with Beck's (1992) "risk-society" thesis.

Yet sequential degrees no longer guarantee security, illustrating Marginson's (2006) "credential inflation": as mass higher education expands, degrees' status-defining value declines (Güneş and Acar, 2022; Avcı, 2024). Malkoç's (2019) work corroborates that second degrees are driven by job insecurity, ideal-career aspirations, and personal growth—showing education's existential as well as economic significance. Karakartal (2023) and Mejia et al. (2021) further highlight how Türkiye's competitive exam system intensifies student pressure, diminishing self-esteem and fuelling burnout—underscoring the need for holistic, student-centred reform (Tatlı and Atmaca, 2023).

Overall, university education in Türkiye sits at the crossroads of economic returns, personal development, social status, and cultural-capital accumulation (Agiomirgianakis et al., 2018). The degree's meaning has evolved amid "degree inflation" and risk-society dynamics, making study in multiple fields increasingly attractive-or compulsory. While some participants value university for intellectual curiosity and personal growth, many are propelled by family pressures, the promise of "guaranteed" employment, or the allure of state-secured professions (Özyer and Yıldız 2020). As graduate numbers swell and competition intensifies, expectations collide with labour-market realities, generating disappointment and questioning the meritocratic ideal (Green and Henseke, 2021).

Policy implications, therefore, point toward prioritizing quality and holistic learning over the mere proliferation of degrees. Functional solutions-such as better alignment between open and formal systems, coherent curricula, and coordinated exam schedules-could nurture intrinsic motivation while enhancing labor-market positioning. Although limited to 15 participants aged 19-27 at Harran University and conducted in 2022-2023, our study offers nuanced insights into the socio-economic and psychological dynamics of multiple-degree strategies. Future research should deploy larger, regionally diverse samples, mixed-methods designs enriched with quantitative data, and-where feasible-international comparisons to deepen understanding and refine policy responses. Based on our empirical findings, we propose the following policy measures:

- Formal and open education program schedules should be synchronized to reduce systemic barriers (e.g., exam timetable conflicts), with curricula aligned around core competencies across institutions.
- To address the interaction deficits observed in distance education, interactive digital platforms, peer-support systems, and mentorship mechanisms must be strengthened.
- University guidance services should be restructured to provide personalized career counseling that informs students about the realistic returns and potential challenges of multiple-degree strategies.

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GENİŞ ÖZET

1. GİRİŞ

Küresel ekonomideki belirsizlik, dijital dönüşüm ve Endüstri 4.0 dinamikleri, yalnızca tek diplomaya dayalı geleneksel kariyer modellerinin güvenirliğini zayıflatmakta; yükseköğretimde "çoklu diploma stratejileri"ni stratejik bir seçenek hâline getirmektedir. Türkiye'de merkezi sınav sistemi, artan üniversite kontenjanları ve artan istihdam rekabeti, öğrencilerin eğitim tercihlerini karmaşıklaştırmakta; aile yönlendirmesi, kültürel sermaye beklentileri ve "diploma enflasyonu" gibi olgular süreci daha da kırılgan kılmaktadır. Bu çalışma, örgün ve açık/uzaktan programları aynı anda yürüten 19-27 yaş arası 15 üniversite öğrencisinin deneyimlerinden hareketle, çoklu diploma stratejilerinin motivasyon kaynaklarını, öğrenme deneyimlerini ve gelecek öngörülerini fenomenolojik bir bakışla incelemektedir. Becker'ın insan sermayesi, Beck'in risk toplumu, Bourdieu'nun kültürel sermaye ve Marginson'un diploma enflasyonu tartışmaları, analitik çerçeveyi oluşturarak bulguların çok katmanlı yorumlanmasına olanak tanımıştır. Çalışma, literatürde çoğu kez ekonomik getiriye indirgenen çoklu diploma olgusunu, aile-temelli baskılar, sosyo-psikolojik beklentiler ve sistemsel bariyerler kesişiminde bütüncül biçimde ele alarak alana özgün bir katkı sunmaktadır.

2. YÖNTEM

Araştırma, nitel araştırma tasarımlarından fenomenolojiye dayanmaktadır. Maksimum çeşitlilik örneklemesiyle seçilen katılımcılar hem örgün hem açık öğretim deneyimine veya birden fazla diploma programına sahip olma koşulunu sağlamıştır. Yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler Ocak 2022 ile Ocak 2023 arasında gerçekleştirilmiş; her görüşme yaklaşık 45 dakika sürmüş, ses kaydı alınmış ve ayrıntılı saha notları tutulmuştur. Veriler MAXQDA 18 yazılımında açık kodlama, eksenel kodlama ve tematik bütünleştirme adımlarıyla analiz edilmiştir. Araştırmacı önyargısını askıya almak amacıyla "braketing" uygulanmış, ikinci bir araştırmacı ile bağımsız kodlama yapılarak güvenilirlik sağlanmıştır. Kodlar, "Üniversiteye Giriş Motivasyonları", "Örgün-Açık Öğretim Karşılaştırması" ve "Çoklu Diploma Stratejisinin Gelecek İşlevi" başlıklarında üst temalara dönüştürülmüştür. Veri doygunluğuna 12. katılımcı sonrası ulaşıldığı gözlenmiş; yine de tematik yinelenmeyi teyit etmek amacıyla üç ek görüşme yapılmıştır. Katılımcıların %67'si kadın, %33'ü erkektir; aile gelirleri 1 000-15 000 TL aralığında değişmektedir; ebeveyn eğitim düzeyinin çoğunlukla ilk-ortaöğretim olması, sosyo-ekonomik çeşitliliğin yakalanmasını sağlamıştır. Etik ilkeler doğrultusunda gönüllü onam formları alınmış, tüm kimlik bilgileri anonimleştirilmiştir.

3. BULGULAR, TARTIŞMA ve SONUÇ

Katılımcı söylemleri üç alt boyutta yoğunlaşmıştır: (i) Kişisel gelişim ve öz-gerçekleştirme: Katılımcılar üniversiteyi "kendini geliştirme", "dünyaya farklı gözle bakma" alanı olarak konumlandırmış; disiplinler arası merak, kültürel etkileşim ve özgüven kazanımı vurgulanmıştır. (ii) Aile ve sosyal baskılar: "Parentokrasinin" belirleyici rolü, ebeveynlerin "saygın" meslek ve kurum beklentileriyle tezahür etmiş; aile desteği aynı anda hem itici güç hem baskı unsuru olarak algılanmıştır. (iii) Ekonomik belirsizlik ve mesleki güvence arayışı: İşsizlik korkusu, düşük ücretli istihdam ve kamuda kadro güvencesi beklentisi, çoklu diploma planlarının temel rasyoneli hâline gelmiştir.

Örgün öğretim, "yüz yüze etkileşim" ve "anında geribildirim" sayesinde öğrenme kalitesinde üstün algılanırken; açık öğretim "zaman-mekân esnekliği" sağlayarak özellikle çalışan öğrenciler için pratik bir seçenek sunmaktadır. Buna karşın açık öğretimde sınırlı sosyal etkileşim, materyal yetersizliği ve sınav-takvim çakışmaları motivasyonu düşürmekte, programlar arası eşgüdüm eksikliği öğrencileri zorlamaktadır. Bir katılımcının "açık öğretimde sadece diploma var, öğrenme yok" sözü, modelin niteliğe dair eleştirilerini özetlemektedir.

Katılımcılar çoklu diplomayı üç araçsal işlevle temellendirmiştir: (a) Risk azaltma: Polisevliğine başvuru, adalet meslek yüksekokulundan hukuka geçiş gibi senaryolar, ekonomik dalgalanmalara karşı "B planı" oluşturmaktadır. (b) İş piyasasında rekabet avantajı: Yurt dışı lisansüstü planı veya disiplinler arası

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kombinasyon (Sosyoloji + Çocuk Gelişimi) fırsatlarını çoğaltma beklentisi yaygındır. (c) Statü koruma/edinme: Diplomanın sembolik gücü hâlen hissedilse de "enflasyon" algısı kuvvetlidir; bazı katılımcılar diplomanın "eski prestijini kaybettiğini" belirtirken, diğerleri hâlen sosyal saygınlık sağladığını savunmaktadır.

Bulgular, Becker'ın insan sermayesi yaklaşımını doğrular biçimde diplomanın hâlâ ekonomik yatırım olarak görüldüğünü, ancak Beck'in risk toplumu çerçevesinin de işaret ettiği gibi artan belirsizliklerin öğrencileri "sertifikalarla kendini sigortalama" davranışına ittiğini göstermektedir. Bourdieu'nun kültürel sermaye kavramı, aile baskısının diplomanın sembolik değerini çoğaltarak eğitim eşitsizliklerini yeniden ürettiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Marginson'un diploma enflasyonu tartışması ise çoklu

Çoklu diploma stratejisi, Türkiye'de gençlerin hem ekonomik belirsizlik hem de aile-temelli statü baskılarıyla başa çıkma çabasının bir ürünü olarak şekillenmektedir. Ancak açık-örgün model entegrasyonundaki kurumsal uyumsuzluklar, öğrenmenin niteliğini ve motivasyon sürekliliğini tehdit etmektedir. Politika yapıcılar ve üniversite yönetimleri için üç temel öneri sunulmaktadır: (1) Açık ve örgün program takvimlerinin senkronize edilmesi, ders içeriklerinin ortak çekirdek yeterlikler etrafında hizalanması; (2) Açık öğretimde etkileşimli platform ve mentorluk mekanizmalarının güçlendirilmesi; (3) Öğrenci rehberlik sistemlerinin, kariyer planlamasında çoklu diploma stratejisinin gerçekçi getirilerini gösterecek şekilde yeniden tasarlanması. Çalışmanın 15 katılımcıyla sınırlı olması genellenebilirliği kısıtlasa da bulgular yükseköğretimde diplomaya ilişkin değer-risk dengesi tartışmalarına derinlik katmakta ve gelecekte nicel araştırmalarla desteklenmesi gereken özgün bir veri zemini sunmaktadır.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

In this study, all rules stated to be followed within the scope of the "Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive" were followed. None of the actions specified under the title of "Actions Violating Scientific Research and Publication Ethics," which is the second part of the directive, have not been carried out.

Ethics Committee Approval Information

Ethical committee: Harran University

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CONTRIBUTION OF RESEARCHERS

The contribution rate of the 1st and 2nd authors to the research is 50%.

Author 1: Research design, data analysis, reporting, validity and reliability studies.

Author 2: Determination of the method, consultancy, critical comment, validity and reliability studies

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest between the authors or any institution in the study.