THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF EDUCATIONAL TOURISM: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF AKDENIZ UNIVERSITY AND THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

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Abstract. Globalisation and digital transformation are reshaping how universities approach internationalisation and educational tourism. Educational tourism has traditionally depended on physical mobility, with students travelling to gain academic and cultural experience. Advances in online learning and hybrid teaching now enable new forms of mobility that do not require travel. This study examines these changes through a comparative case analysis of Akdeniz University in Türkiye and the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. Using qualitative document analysis, the research reviews institutional strategies, policy documents and public materials related to internationalisation and digital learning. The findings show that Akdeniz University continues to follow a traditional model of internationalisation based on face-to-face instruction and regional student mobility. Digital tools are used in teaching but do not yet influence international engagement. The University of Edinburgh demonstrates a contrasting approach in which digital transformation is fully integrated into internationalisation. Edinburgh provides extensive online programmes, hybrid learning environments and digital pathways that support global participation. These differences indicate that digital educational tourism develops in line with national policy priorities, institutional capacity and approaches to digital learning. The study concludes that digital educational tourism expands access and flexibility, but it requires strategic alignment between digital transformation and internationalisation policies.

Keywords: Digital Transformation, Higher Education, Educational Tourism, Internationalisation, Comparative Case Study

INTRODUCTION

Educational tourism has traditionally referred to the movement of students and researchers across borders to gain knowledge, develop skills or participate in academic activities (Rodriguez et al., 2013; Selby, 2021). This type of mobility has been an important element of internationalisation and cultural exchange in higher education, and it has supported global learning for many years (Tashenova et al.,2023; Aguiar et al., 2024). Recent developments in digital technologies are changing the structure and meaning of educational tourism. Digital transformation influences how universities organise teaching, design learning environments and establish international cooperation. Researchers describe this development as a process that affects pedagogy, institutional practice and global interaction, rather than a simple shift in tools (Prabowo & Bandur, 2022; Singun, 2025).

Online learning systems, virtual exchange models and digital campus applications now allow students to participate in international learning without travelling. These developments show that the core aims of educational tourism, including knowledge acquisition and intercultural engagement, can take place through technology-supported environments (Hackett et al., 2023; Tomasi et al., 2020). In this study, the term digital educational tourism refers to international learning activities delivered through digital platforms rather than physical mobility. It includes online courses, virtual exchange, participation in international academic programmes at a distance and collaborative digital projects between universities. Digital educational tourism therefore combines the objectives of traditional educational tourism with learning experiences that are not tied to location.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the integration of digital systems into higher education and encouraged universities to rethink the relationship between internationalisation and digitalisation (Nieto-Taborda & Luppicini, 2024). Studies show that this shift has created diverse institutional responses, shaped by national priorities, digital capacity and strategic direction (Peters et al., 2020; Toader et al., 2021). Scholarship has examined digital learning, virtual mobility and online internationalisation, yet there is still room for work that brings these strands together to better understand how digital transformation redefines educational tourism across different institutional contexts. Comparative perspectives can contribute to this discussion by showing how universities interpret similar global trends in different ways and how their strategies produce distinct models of international engagement (Shenkoya & Kim, 2023).

This study contributes to this ongoing discussion by examining Akdeniz University in Türkiye and the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. The two institutions reflect different national environments and different levels of digital development. Akdeniz University continues to rely mainly on traditional, face-to-face international mobility, while the University of Edinburgh has developed extensive digital systems to support online learning and global participation. The aim of the study is to analyse how educational tourism is being reshaped through physical and digital mobility within these two settings. The study asks how digital transformation influences internationalisation at Akdeniz University and at the University of Edinburgh. The research uses qualitative document analysis to examine each institution's

internationalisation strategies and digital learning policies. In this approach, digital transformation is understood as a pedagogical, cultural and institutional process that shapes how universities take part in international education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational tourism has been widely discussed in the higher education literature as a form of mobility driven by learning, cultural exchange and personal development. Early work focuses on the role of physical travel in gaining academic and intercultural experience, often linking educational tourism with study abroad, language learning and field-based research (Tang, 2020; Liu & Gao, 2022). This traditional model positions international mobility as a way for learners to access new environments and knowledge. It also supports universities in developing global visibility and academic partnerships.

Recent research shows an important shift in this area due to advances in digital technologies. Scholars describe digital transformation in higher education as a process that changes how institutions manage learning, design curricula and build collaborations (Prabowo & Bandur, 2022; Singun, 2025). Digital transformation is not only a technical issue. It affects pedagogy, administrative structures, academic culture and the forms of mobility available to learners. This view is supported by studies that explore how online learning, virtual exchange and hybrid programmes create new opportunities for international participation (Hackett et al., 2023; Tomasi et al., 2020).

A growing body of literature examines virtual mobility as a distinct form of international engagement. Virtual mobility allows students to participate in academic courses, exchange activities or collaborative projects across borders through digital platforms (Kosman et al., 2024). It reduces the barriers associated with travel, cost and visas, and can extend access to students who are not able to take part in traditional study abroad programmes (Enkhtur et al., 2024). Research in this area suggests that virtual mobility can support intercultural learning and collaboration when structured effectively, although it also requires digital competence and well-designed learning environments (Peters et al., 2020).

Digital mobility became especially prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many universities adopted online or hybrid learning models to continue their international activities. Studies show that this period encouraged institutions to reassess the relationship between physical and digital forms of internationalisation (Toader et al., 2021). The literature describes different institutional responses, shaped by national policy frameworks, available resources and levels of digital readiness. These differences demonstrate that digital educational tourism does not develop in a uniform way.

Recent studies also explore how internationalisation and digital transformation intersect. Some researchers argue that digitalisation expands the possibilities for global engagement by enabling universities to connect with wider audiences (O'Dowd, 2023). Others point to challenges related to quality, access and cultural interaction in online environments (Cheng et al., 2023). Several studies emphasise the importance of integrating internationalisation strategies with digital transformation plans, suggesting that institutions need clear frameworks for digital mobility and online collaboration (Shenkoya & Kim, 2023). This work highlights the importance of understanding how universities adopt digital tools to support international learning and how these decisions shape academic tourism.

Within this research landscape, digital educational tourism is understood as a form of internationalisation that combines the goals of traditional educational tourism with digital delivery. It encompasses learning experiences that cross borders without requiring travel and includes online degree programmes, virtual exchanges, international collaborations and participation in global academic networks. Although the literature discusses these components, fewer studies explore how universities with different contexts and capacities interpret and implement digital educational tourism. Examining these variations can contribute to current debates by clarifying how digital transformation influences institutional models of internationalisation.

This study builds on this body of research by comparing Akdeniz University in Türkiye and the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. The literature on educational tourism, digital transformation and virtual mobility provides the conceptual foundation for understanding how the two institutions interpret physical and digital internationalisation. It also supports the analysis of how digital educational tourism is shaped within different national systems and institutional structures.

THE RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative comparative case study design to examine how digital transformation influences educational tourism in higher education. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study aims to understand institutional strategies, policy interpretations and conceptual developments rather than measure individual behaviours or numerical outcomes. A comparative case study allows a detailed examination of how two universities interpret similar global trends in different ways, and how these interpretations shape their internationalisation practices. This approach is supported by established case study methodology, which emphasises context, complexity and institutional meaning-making (Yin, 2018; Stake, 2005).

Akdeniz University in Türkiye and the University of Edinburgh in Scotland were selected as the two cases. The selection follows purposive sampling, which is commonly used in qualitative research to identify cases that can provide rich information relevant to the research aim (Patton, 2002). The universities were chosen because they represent different

national systems, different levels of digital development and different approaches to internationalisation. The University of Edinburgh has a well-established digital learning ecosystem, while Akdeniz University continues to prioritise face-to-face and regionally focused international mobility. These contrasts make the two institutions suitable for exploring how physical and digital mobility interact within different higher education environments.

The study uses publicly available documents produced between 2018 and 2025. This period was selected because it reflects the years in which digital transformation accelerated, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The documents include strategic plans, internationalisation policies, digital learning strategies, official announcements, and relevant sections of university websites. National higher education strategy documents were also included when they were referenced by the institutions or shaped their policy orientation. Only official and verifiable documents were used to maintain reliability.

Data were analysed through qualitative document analysis. This method involves reading and interpreting documents in a systematic way to identify themes, concepts and patterns (Bowen, 2009). The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, documents were screened to confirm authenticity, relevance and timeframe. Second, the content of each document was examined using thematic reading. The themes were informed by the literature on educational tourism, internationalisation and digital transformation, and included ideas such as digital mobility, virtual exchange, digital learning environments and the relationship between physical and digital internationalisation. Third, the findings from the two universities were compared to identify differences and similarities in how they conceptualise and implement digital transformation in the context of educational tourism. This comparative process follows the logic of cross-case analysis, which helps to show how similar phenomena take different forms across institutions (Ragin, 2014).

Some types of information were not included. Non-official sources such as blogs or social media content were excluded because they do not meet the standards of authenticity required for document analysis. Documents produced before 2018 were not analysed because they do not reflect current developments in digital transformation. The study also does not include interviews or surveys. The focus is on institutional policies and strategies, and the aim is to understand how educational tourism is framed and developed in official documents rather than how individual actors experience these processes.

Through this qualitative and comparative approach, the study provides an interpretive understanding of how digital transformation shapes educational tourism in two different institutional and national contexts.

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

Türkiye: National Findings on Internationalisation and Digital Transformation

Through The documents related to Türkiye show that the country has pursued an ambitious higher education internationalisation agenda since the early 2000s. National reports on international student mobility state that Türkiye's international student population increased from 15,000 students in 2000 to over 338,000 in 2023, making Türkiye one of the fastest-growing host countries in the world. The files show that most students come from nearby regions such as Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa, with strong representation from countries including Azerbaijan, Syria, Turkmenistan, Iran and Afghanistan. This pattern is visible in multiple Council of Higher Education (YÖK) and international mobility documents and reflects a regional model of educational tourism shaped by geographical and cultural proximity.

Türkiye's internationalisation strategy (2024–2028) emphasises physical mobility, scholarships, cultural diplomacy and the expansion of Turkish-language education abroad. The strategy documents refer to the development of high-level cooperation networks but do not describe a detailed national framework for digital mobility. Türkiye's StudyFinder platform also shows that many universities do not offer English-medium or fully online degree programmes to international students. The platform demonstrates that Akdeniz University lists no distance education programmes accessible to foreign students, and many Turkish institutions similarly show limited digital options.

The monitoring and evaluation reports (2019–2024) indicate gradual progress in digitalisation at the national level, especially during and after the COVID-19 period. However, digital transformation is still described as uneven across institutions. The reports highlight challenges related to technological infrastructure, academic staff readiness and curriculum adaptation, especially in relation to online or hybrid teaching. As a result, Türkiye's national trajectory in educational tourism remains primarily based on physical mobility and face-to-face programme structures, with digital mobility emerging but not central to national policy.

Akdeniz University: Institutional Findings

The evidence from Akdeniz University shows a similar pattern to the national context. According to the Times Higher Education profile, the university has 39,309 students, and only 4% are international students. The student–staff ratio is 29.4, and the university is placed in the 1201–1500 ranking band globally. The International Outlook score is 25.5, a figure that reflects limited global engagement.

Akdeniz University's international student composition is shaped by regional dynamics. The file about student numbers from each country shows that the largest groups come from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Russia and Afghanistan, confirming a regional concentration. There is no evidence in any file of substantial student participation from Western Europe, North America or East Asia, regions typically associated with global digital mobility.

The StudyFinder platform confirms that Akdeniz University does not offer open or distance education programmes to international students. Searches for open education and distance education return "Not found records." This indicates that the university does not currently participate in digital educational tourism or offer digitally accessible degree pathways to international learners.

The university's monitoring reports (2019–2024) emphasise traditional quality assurance areas such as curriculum renewal, student satisfaction and face-to-face teaching practices. Although there are brief mentions of digital tools used during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is no structured long-term digitalisation plan presented in the documents. The reports show that Akdeniz University relies largely on in-person instruction, with digital tools used as complementary rather than transformative elements.

Taken together, these findings describe an institution whose internationalisation remains tied to physical mobility, regional recruitment, and limited digital transformation at the programme level. As a result, Akdeniz University represents a traditional and location-dependent model of educational tourism.

Scotland and the United Kingdom: National Findings

The Scottish and UK policy documents present a different approach. Scotland's Digital Strategy (2021) sets out a strong national vision for digital inclusion, lifelong learning and the use of digital infrastructure across public services. The document calls for "world-class digital learning environments" and highlights the importance of skills development for a globally connected society. Scotland's "International Education Strategy" (Annual Report 2024–25) also positions universities as central actors in global engagement and economic development. It emphasises transnational education, digital collaboration, and long-term institutional partnerships.

The report *"Higher Education Partnering for Global Impact"* highlights Scotland's commitment to global education, including coordinated approaches to international student transitions, cross-border collaboration, and the expansion of digital education capabilities. The documents repeatedly underline that Scotland views digital capacity not only as a support tool but as a driver of innovation and international accessibility. This national orientation supports a framework where digital mobility is seen as an extension of physical mobility rather than a replacement.

The UK-wide context, supported by the *International Students' Transitions* report, shows that British universities host high proportions of international students and rely on a diverse global population. National frameworks support online, hybrid and transnational education, enabling flexible engagement for learners worldwide.

University of Edinburgh: Institutional Findings

The findings for the University of Edinburgh reveal a highly developed digital and internationalisation strategy. Times Higher Education indicators show that the university ranks 29th in the world, with 49% international students and over 35,000 total students. The International Outlook score is 96.2, reflecting deep global engagement.

The University's Digital Strategy (2024) identifies digital transformation as a central institutional priority. The infographic summarising the strategy highlights goals such as personalised and intuitive digital services, a safe and accessible digital estate, and digital skills development for all members of the university community. The strategy also connects digitalisation to student experience, sustainability and research excellence.

The *Online Learning Brochure* (2021) and *Online Masters Guide* (2023) show that the university offers over 80 online degree programmes and has taught more than 4 million learners through MOOCs and short online courses. These programmes are designed for international participation and are fully accessible to learners outside the UK, with no requirement for physical travel.

The *Example of Practice: Blended Learning Fusion* document shows how the Edinburgh Futures Institute has developed a hybrid model where online and on-campus students learn together through synchronous and asynchronous activities. This demonstrates an advanced form of digital mobility, where the learning experience is intentionally designed for international accessibility.

The university's *Strategy 2030* and *Internationalisation Strategy* further reinforce global engagement. The documents describe sustained partnerships, transnational activity, global research networks and a commitment to inclusive digital participation. The *Student Factsheets* show that Edinburgh has stable international enrolment patterns, strong research performance and diverse global demographics.

Overall, the University of Edinburgh represents a digitally mature and globally connected institution where digital mobility is embedded in core academic structures. For Edinburgh, digital educational tourism is an established and strategic model of global engagement.

Comparative Findings

Table 1

Institutional Comparison

Indicator	Akdeniz University	University of Edinburgh
Global ranking (*2025 World University Rankings by Times Higher Education*)	1201–1500 band, low international outlook 25.5	29th, international outlook 96.2
Total students	39,309	49,640
International student share	4%	49%

International student geography	Mainly regional: Azerbaijan, Syria, Turkmenistan, Iran, Afghanistan	180+ countries (online + on-campus)
Online degree programmes	0 (no distance programmes for foreigners)	80+ fully online degrees
Number of online students	289	4870
Number of online international students	0	2990(from outside of the UK)
Digital learning environment	Basic LMS use, limited strategy	Advanced digital campus, hybrid-by-design, digital services built on strategy
National policy alignment	Strong physical mobility policies; limited digital focus	Scotland's digital strategy supports online, hybrid, and global access

Table 1 presents key institutional indicators for Akdeniz University and the University of Edinburgh. The figures show that the two institutions operate within very different internationalisation and digital transformation environments. Akdeniz University is positioned in the 1201–1500 band of the 2025 World University Rankings by Times Higher Education, with a total enrolment of 39,309 students and an international student share of 4 percent. Its international students come mainly from regional countries such as Azerbaijan, Syria, Turkmenistan, Iran and Afghanistan. The university does not offer online degree programmes for international students, and its number of online learners remains limited. Akdeniz University relies on a basic learning management system and does not have a comprehensive digital strategy. This aligns with Türkiye's national framework, which continues to prioritise physical mobility and scholarship-based internationalisation.

In contrast, the University of Edinburgh ranks 29th in the world and has 49,640 students, of whom 49 percent are international. Edinburgh attracts students from more than 180 countries and offers over 80 fully online degree programmes. It enrols 4,870 online students, including nearly 3,000 learners located outside the United Kingdom. The institution operates an advanced digital campus supported by hybrid-by-design teaching models and a university-wide digital strategy. Scotland's national policies reinforce this institutional orientation, as they promote digital inclusion, flexible learning and global participation through online and hybrid pathways.

The comparison highlights clear differences in how educational tourism is interpreted and implemented at the two universities. Türkiye and Akdeniz University follow a traditional model centred on physical student mobility, regional recruitment and face-to-face learning. Digitalisation appears in national and institutional documents but does not yet shape internationalisation practices. Scotland and the University of Edinburgh, by contrast, combine physical mobility with digital mobility, integrate online learning at scale and use digital tools to expand access for international learners. Digital educational tourism, as defined in this study, is therefore fully operational at the University of Edinburgh but remains undeveloped at Akdeniz University.

These differences show that digital educational tourism is shaped by national policy priorities, institutional capacity and pedagogical design. They also demonstrate that digital transformation is not only a technological shift but a broader cultural and organisational process. While Akdeniz University continues to operate within a place-based model of internationalisation, the University of Edinburgh uses digital systems to create a global, location-independent form of educational tourism.

CONCLUSIONS

The study shows that internationalisation in higher education is changing as universities respond to digital transformation. The comparison between Türkiye and Scotland demonstrates that educational tourism can take different forms depending on national policy, institutional capacity and approaches to digital learning. Educational tourism is no longer tied only to physical mobility; it now includes digital participation, which allows students to engage with universities without travelling. In this context, digital educational tourism emerges as a meaningful extension of internationalisation.

The results indicate that Türkiye continues to rely on a traditional model of internationalisation that is based on physical mobility and regional connections. National strategies support growth in international student numbers, but digital mobility is not yet fully integrated into policy or practice. This context shapes the approach of Akdeniz University, which attracts a regionally concentrated international student population and does not currently use online or hybrid programmes to support global participation. Digital tools are present at the university, but they have not yet influenced how internationalisation is planned or delivered.

The findings also show that Scotland and the University of Edinburgh follow a different path. Scotland's national strategies promote digital inclusion, hybrid learning and flexible global engagement, creating favourable conditions for digital mobility. The University of Edinburgh demonstrates a mature and intentional digital transformation model. Its online programmes, hybrid classrooms and international partnerships show how digital educational tourism can expand access and connect learners worldwide. This approach highlights that digital transformation is not only technical but also pedagogical and institutional.

Overall, the study concludes that digital educational tourism is shaped by broader structural factors and by institutional readiness. It represents a shift in how universities design learning and build global engagement. Digital mobility has the potential to make international learning more accessible, sustainable and diverse, but it requires coordinated strategies and investment. The comparison presented in this study offers insight into how different systems adopt digital transformation and how these choices influence educational tourism.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study suggests that universities in Türkiye may benefit from developing clearer institutional strategies that link digital transformation with internationalisation. Aligning these two areas can support new forms of mobility and strengthen the global presence of institutions. For Akdeniz University, designing online or hybrid programmes for international students could broaden global participation and reduce the institution's dependence on physical mobility. These programmes can attract students from regions that do not typically engage in traditional mobility and support more inclusive educational practices.

Improving digital capacity also requires investment in infrastructure and academic development. Training staff in digital pedagogy, online course design and virtual exchange can help ensure that digital programmes meet international quality standards. At the national level, including digital mobility in Türkiye's higher education internationalisation strategies can encourage universities to create flexible and globally accessible learning pathways. Support mechanisms such as recognition policies, national platforms and competitive funding can help advance this shift.

Collaborations with digitally advanced universities, such as the University of Edinburgh, may be useful for capacity building. Joint digital programmes shared online courses and virtual research partnerships can support knowledge exchange and innovation. Future research can explore how students experience digital educational tourism and how digital learning environments can sustain intercultural interaction. Such work can guide universities in designing digital mobility experiences that are inclusive, meaningful and aligned with internationalisation goals.

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