

Turkish higher education at the crossroads: critical issues of systemic and institutional structures

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To boost the social and economic outlook of the country, Turkey has recently initiated educational reform at all levels and especially higher education, including organizational restructuring and expansion for increased accessibility. The swift increase in the number and size of universities has resulted in a challenge to find trained faculty. One important programme to meet this challenge has been the government's sponsorship of students for graduate study abroad in exchange for future service in higher education institutions. This study explores the organisation of the Turkish higher education system and reports the systemic barriers and oppressive structures in the system that stand as solid blocks against any change and transformation the returning scholars could potentially instil. The author argues that sending students abroad to return to their country to improve higher education, without carefully reviewing and eliminating the repressive structures and the domination of power holders at both national and institutional levels, is not enough to attain the higher education goals that Turkey aspires toward.

Key words: Turkish higher education, Turkish universities, higher education reform, Turkey, MEB, YÖK

Although education has always remained one of the top priorities for the Turkish nation, the meaning, purpose and practice of education in Turkey has drastically changed several times since the modern republic's establishment in 1923. Higher education too has undergone a major restructuring process in the past few decades in an effort to construct a dynamic national workforce by creating a democratic and

modern education system. Higher education in Turkey has begun to be viewed as the catalyst of change, scientific and economic growth, democratic citizenship, and intercultural communication and awareness. Consequently, a great amount of effort has been placed in developing standards to help the national educational institutions in their attempts to team up with their counterparts in the world. However, this has been a slow, though steady, process. Starting with only one higher education institution in 1923, the number of public universities in the country reached eight in 1970, 27 in 1982 and 53 in 2000. Between 2006 and 2008, this number almost doubled again with the addition of 41 new universities (MEB, 2009a, 2009b). This continuous progress has generated a need for qualified faculty members more than ever before. Despite initiating additional graduate programmes in large universities, the unmet demand for trained faculty has led to an amendment in Turkish Law No 1416, referred to as 'Students to be Sent to Foreign Countries' ('*Ecnebi Memleketlere Gönderilecek Talebe Hakkında Kanun,*' 1929). Although the original aim of this law was to train personnel to fill positions in the growing industrial sector (eg factories) of the newly-formed Turkish Republic in the 1930s, the expansion of education, specifically the higher education system, shifted the emphasis toward educating academicians to teach at the newly-established universities in Turkey, and thus, to enrich the educational standards of these universities ('*Türk Öğrencilerin Yabancı Ülkelerde Öğrenimleri Hakkında Yönetmelik,*' 1993).

With this agenda, the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MEB) has carefully selected and sponsored a large number of students to receive graduate education overseas. Hüseyin Çelik, the former Turkish Minister of National Education declared that 1,755 students had been sent abroad through Law No. 1416 between the years of 1994 and 2005, and that the government anticipated sponsoring 5,000 more students in the next five-year period starting in 2006-07 (Gerçek Gündem, 2006). As part of this '*5,000 students in 5 years*' project, 819 students had already been sent abroad in 2007 and 2008, and the government emphasised that the goal of 5,000 would be reached by the end of 2010-2011 (MEB, 2009c). Today, the number of MEB-sponsored students studying for a graduate degree in other countries alone is 575, and the United States calls itself home to 420 of these students (MEB, 2009d).

Although clear guidelines were implemented to explain its operation and functioning ('*Ecnebi Memleketlere Gönderilecek Talebe Hakkında Kanun,*' 1929; '*Türk Öğrencilerin Yabancı Ülkelerde Öğrenimleri Hakkında Yönetmelik,*' 1993), funding for this programme has recently

been questioned, particularly due to recent economic crises in Turkey. The dialogue about the millions of dollars spent on sponsored students, a significant number of whom do not even return to Turkey to share their experiences and knowledge gained abroad, coupled with the executive problems attributed to this financial support mechanism, has not only caused scepticism about the purpose and utility of this practice (Güngör and Tansel, 2008; Kurtuluş, 1999; Tansel and Güngör, 2003; Tuzcu, 2003), but has also obscured the role of the returning scholars within the Turkish higher education system. Yet an in-depth discussion of the outcomes and effectiveness of this practice has not been released to the public by MEB, nor has the limited information published been successful in answering concerns about whether Turkey is really making a wise investment by spending a large amount of money on this minority, but hypothetically privileged, group of scholars.

Furthermore, although the studies mentioned above have focused on student non-return as the main problem with the programme, a recent research study (Çelik, 2009) demonstrated that the intrinsic characteristics of the Turkish higher education system and its universities were creating major barriers to returning scholars, indicating that the country could not fully utilise their experience and training, and thus, their return did not necessarily lead to the desired changes in higher education. Therefore, this study explores the Turkish context with a critical eye to shed light on issues related to systemic and institutional organisation of Turkish higher education and discusses ideas for change.

The structure and governance of higher education in Turkey

Having taken their basic characteristics from the continental European and Anglo-American models, Turkish higher education institutions are mainly public enterprises under the control of the state and managed by a centralised bureaucracy. These institutions focus on teaching, research and public service as their general mission, and represent overall national development goals in their curricula. With the exception of specific types of schools, such as the military and police academies, the typology of Turkish higher education in terms of mission statements, institutional size, academic and faculty structure, financial resources, governing rules and systems, presents a relatively homogenous structure, although the quality of institutions varies greatly (Mızıkacı, 2006).

Since the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, expansion in the higher education sector, as discussed earlier, has been considerable, thanks to a substantial increase in the number of institutions, students

and teaching staff. Starting with the conversion of the *Darülfünun* [Academy of Sciences] (founded in 1863, as the first and only secular higher education institution of the Ottoman Empire with a modern structure) to Istanbul University in 1933, as the first contemporary Turkish higher education institution, Turkey set its goal as creating institutions that would pursue Western-style higher education and play a key role in promoting the social, economic, cultural and ideological principles and aspirations of the nation-state. In the following few decades, several universities were established to accomplish this endeavour (Barblan, Ergüder, and Gürüz, 2008).

While all other higher education institutions (academies, vocational schools and teacher training institutes) were partly or entirely under the control of the Ministry of National Education, upon the initiation of Law No. 4936 in 1946, the universities, though they were financially state-governed, were granted institutional autonomy and a corporate character until the military coup of the 1980s (Barblan *et al*, 2008). During this period, especially between 1950 and 1980, Turkish universities were greatly affected by external factors such as social and economic troubles, and most important of all, the politics and ideologies of the nation. The universities came to be viewed as a threat to the existence and stability of the republic by the military, which considered itself to be the sole guardian of the state and the secular regime (Arslan, 2004).

The established European pattern of the Turkish university model underwent a critical change in the 1950s, as the new government of the time believed that the manpower requirements of the growing market economy would be better met by the American university model; thus, four new universities were established in critical geographical locations of Turkey (Barblan *et al*, 2008; Yeditepe University, 2007). Following the fall from power of the Democrat Party in 1960, a new, liberal constitution was prepared and the academic and administrative autonomy of the universities was officially recognised, as faculty members were given the right to elect rectors and deans, except in the case of Middle East Technical University (METU), which had been given a special status (Barblan *et al*, 2008; Ilgaz and Gök, 2007; Yeditepe University, 2007). With the growing economy, population increase and expansion of higher education, several private higher education institutions were allowed to open in the early 1960s; however, in 1971, the Supreme Constitutional Court ruled that these institutions were in violation of the Constitution, and thus, they were all affiliated with the existing state academies under the control of the Ministry of National Education (Barblan *et al*, 2008).

In 1973, a new university law, covering all state universities except METU, established the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) as a planning and coordination body, and the Inter-University Board (ÜAK) as a supreme academic body composed of the rectors and two elected representatives from each university. However, because the Council was chaired by the Minister of National Education and included lay members, it was soon deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Constitutional Court, on the grounds that the presence of such members violated university autonomy. In 1976, despite the exceptional constitutional clause maintaining the special status of METU, the Supreme Constitutional Court, on similar legal grounds, significantly curbed the powers of its board of trustees, effectively putting an end to the special system of governance at METU (Barblan *et al*, 2008; Yeditepe University, 2007).

None of these developments were nearly enough to meet the increasing demand for higher education in the country. Thus, with the enactment of Higher Education Law No 2547 ('Yükseköğretim Kanunu,' 1981), the first and most comprehensive higher education legislation in the Republic, and the applicable provisions of the 1982 constitution, higher education in Turkey underwent substantial reform of organisation and governance of its institutions. A highly centralised structure was established, with the reinstatement of the Council of Higher Education as 'an autonomous body with juristic personality which governs all higher education, directs the activities of the institutions of higher education, within the context of duties and powers given by this law' ('Yükseköğretim Kanunu,' 1981, Article 6).

YÖK has reduced the faculty senates, which prior to the 1980s had the authority to enact academic regulations, to mere advisory bodies. All existing governing structures, including the Higher Education Supervisory Board (a body that supervises and controls the universities, their units, teaching staff and their activities on behalf of YÖK), the Inter-University Board (consisting of university rectors), and the Student Selection and Placement Centre (ÖSYM) were attached to the pre-eminence of YÖK to carry out the duties of planning, research, development, evaluation, financing, investment and coordination of higher education. The responsibilities of these bodies ranged from controlling the activities of higher education institutions to ensuring coordination of preparing, administering and evaluating the centralised entrance examinations. By this restructuring movement, expansion of higher education throughout the country was consolidated; all higher education institutions were designated as universities, and through

mergers and reorganisations, eight new universities were created to eliminate the institutional and functional fragmentation in the system; access to higher education was centralised through the introduction of a central university entrance examination; student fees at public universities were established; and foundation of private universities was once again allowed. With the aggressive attempts to respond to demographic pressures and the manpower needs of a growing nation in the following decade, 25 state and two private universities were founded between 1992 and 1994, bringing the total number of universities to 56. As of this writing, the total number of universities stands at 139, with 94 public universities and 45 private/foundation universities (MEB, 2009b).

Throughout this expansion, YÖK has stringently monitored, controlled and regulated the organisation and programmes of both public and private higher education institutions and has institutionalised extensive government interference in university affairs through government policies. The outcome is a colossal bureaucracy and a centralised hierarchical structure that fortifies the political rather than the scientific character of higher education institutions and academics and severely limits the capacity for innovation and change (Bostrom, 2007; Timur, 2000). Since the executive officers of the Council that control the universities are appointed by the government in power, the higher education system, which has not changed over the years in response to the changes that have occurred in the country since the introduction of YÖK in 1981, is criticised today more than ever before for turning into a 'political arena in which politically driven (educational) practices are continuously acted out' (Arıkan, 2002: 25). Many believe YÖK abuses its power over institutions by suppressing alternative viewpoints on controversial issues (Bollag, 2002), and as a result, the majority of the Turkish people are frustrated by the absolute dictatorial authority of YÖK and by the silenced and fearful university system and academic community it has generated over the years (Güçlü, 2002, as cited in Arıkan, 2002).

Today, YÖK consists of 22 members, seven of whom are appointed directly by the President of the Republic, with priority given to former rectors; seven are nominated by the Inter-University Board (an academic advisory body comprising the rectors of all universities and one member elected by the senate of each university) and appointed by the President; and eight elected by the government, mostly from among senior civil servants, and appointed by the President, all for a renewable term of four years. Until recently, there was also a member representing the military,

but this member was removed in an attempt to attain a more civilian structure in the interest of becoming a full member of the European Union. The president of YÖK is appointed by the President of the Republic, who is presumed to be constitutionally neutral and above day-to-day politics. Daily functions of YÖK are carried out by a nine-member executive board elected from among its members, including the president of the Council. The Minister of National Education represents YÖK in the parliament and can chair the meetings of YÖK, but has no vote (YÖK, 2005, 2007).

Academic administration, faculty structure, responsibilities, and advancement

All public higher education institutions in Turkey are state establishments, and correspondingly, all of their academic and administrative staff have civil servant status and are governed by the Civil Servant Law No 657 ('Devlet Memurları Kanunu,' 1965). They are also subject to the definitions and job descriptions specified in the Higher Education Law No 2547 (Barblan *et al*, 2008; Mızıkacı, 2006; 'Yükseköğretim Kanunu,' 1981). Academic institutions recruit teaching faculty and staff according to the definitions set by law, and the basic structure of staff employment in public universities is determined by government legislative and budgetary instructions. Full-time teaching staff and faculty members are employed based on state contracts for unlimited periods and their career development and salaries are decided by the government. Although private higher education institutions are required to maintain the same academic career development and job descriptions, they enjoy relative autonomy in that they are free to establish their own employment and administration principles adopted by their boards of trustees (Mızıkacı, 2006).

When the Higher Education Law of 1981 underwent a major reform in 1992, less authoritarian procedures for nomination and appointment of rectors were implemented. Yet the current organisational structure of the Turkish university still presents a central top-down governance style with rigidly described hierarchical roles. At each public university, the rector is appointed for a term of four years by the President of the Republic from among three candidates; these academics hold the title of professor and are elected by the Council of Higher Education by secret ballot from six nominees elected by the assembly of faculty members of that university. The President has the final authority to assign a candidate with a lower vote than other contenders. Each rector may select up to three (five in the case of universities responsible for national

distance education) of the university's full-time professors to act as vice-rectors. Deans, who are the representatives of faculties and their units, are appointed by the Council from among three full professors nominated by the rector, while school and institute directors are appointed directly by the rector. Each department within a faculty is made up of divisions, and division heads are elected by faculty members in that division, who, in turn, advise the dean regarding the appointment of department chairpersons. Rectors, senates (consisting, under the chairman of rectors, of vice rectors, deans of each faculty, an elected teaching staff member, directors of graduate schools and schools of higher education) and university administrative boards (consisting, under the chairman of rectors, deans and three professors selected by senates) are the upper-level governance bodies within universities, while deans, faculty boards (consisting, under the chairman of deans, heads of departments, directors of any graduate schools and schools of higher education, and three elected professors, two associate professors and one assistant professors), faculty administrative boards (consisting, under the chairman of deans, three professors, two associate professors and two assistant professors, all selected by the faculty boards) are the governing organs at the unit level (Yeditepe University, 2007; YÖK, 2001, 2005).

Academics in Turkey fall into two categories according to the law: teaching staff members (instructors, lecturers and ancillary staff such as research assistants, specialists and educational planners), and teaching faculty members (professors, associate professors and assistant professors, all of whom hold at least a doctorate degree and an academic title at institutions of higher education) ('Yükseköğretim Kanunu,' 1981). Full professors and associate professors at Turkish universities have tenure. The numbers of academic and administrative staff posts allocated to each state university are determined by the government for each fiscal year (YÖK, 2005). Teaching loads, the volume and the type of teaching, and other responsibilities of the teaching staff are specified by the internal regulations of higher education institutions. Teaching loads of the faculty are determined by legal provisions and vary according to the academic degree held. The highest amount of classroom teaching hours is twelve-plus hours a week for those who do not hold academic titles. Those who hold an academic title teach relatively less, such as ten hours a week. However, due to the large student population and the number of courses in public universities, there are always overtime hours (resulting in loads of up to 30 hours a week). Furthermore, faculty members are expected to get involved in

research, service, supervision, guidance, and if appointed, administrative activities (Mızıkacı, 2006). The decision as to how much of the practical work, seminars, and doctoral supervision are to be counted towards the minimum total of ten hours of teaching per week rests with the Council of Higher Education ('Yükseköğretim Kanunu,' 1981).

Although there has been a shift in the national economy from state governance to a more liberal and market-oriented economy, along with a major focus on the expansion and implementation of cooperative research programmes, especially with countries that are members of the European Union, national funding of research and development in Turkey is still extremely low. Similarly, the universities, most of which have been established as research institutions, receive very little government support and insufficient incentives for research, so they necessarily focus mainly on teaching. Thus, research carried out both by universities at the institutional level and by the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK) at the national level is scarce compared to that of developed countries and cannot respond to expectations of Turkish citizens (Mızıkacı, 2006). Although the number of publications by Turkish scholars in internationally reputable journals catalogued by highly regarded indexes (ie SCI, SSCI, AHCI) has shown a remarkable improvement in the last decade, the results of such research at Turkish higher education institutions have failed to produce a significant number of patents or industrial products (YÖK, 2005).

Academic promotions and appointments at Turkish universities are carried out in line with the procedures and norms set by law. Assistant, associate and full professorship titles are awarded by the Inter-University Board and YÖK, according to the provisions and criteria followed by a set of examinations and/or evaluation reports in the given discipline. For the appointment of assistant professors, law requires a doctorate or specialist status in medicine, or proficiency in certain branches of the fine arts as determined by the Council of Higher Education upon the recommendation of the Inter-University Board. In addition, it is a prerequisite that the candidate passes a centralised foreign language examination. Yet meeting the preconditions is not sufficient to be appointed as an assistant professor at a higher education institution. A vacancy for the position in a unit of the university needs to be announced by the rectorate. In the case of multiple candidates, deans in faculties and organisations attached to the faculties, or directors in graduate schools and schools of higher education attached to the rectorate, assign three professors or associate professors, one of whom

shall be from outside the university in question and one an administrator of that unit, to give written statements on each candidate. Deans or directors, upon receipt of the opinion of the administrative board concerned, submit the nomination to the rector, who makes the appointment (Mızıkacı, 2006; 'Yükseköğretim Kanunu,' 1981).

For the associate professorship position, in addition to the qualifications required for an assistant professorship, having produced and published original research is a major condition. The associate professorship examinations are held once a year by the Inter-University Board. The Inter-University Board appoints a jury of three or five members according to the regulations concerning the Promotion and Appointment of Academic Staff, taking into consideration the major area of study and specialisation. The jury examines candidates' work, gives them an oral, or if necessary, a practical and applied examination, and awards the successful candidates the title of associate professorship in the relevant field. Similar to the appointments of assistant professors, receiving the title of associate professorship from YÖK is not sufficient to be appointed as one. There must be a vacancy in a university unit for the position that is advertised by the office of the rector. The rector assigns three professors, one from outside the university and one the administrator of the relevant unit if there is one, to examine the candidate(s). These professors pass their views on to the rector, and based on these views and of those of the University Administrative Board, the rector makes the appointment (Mızıkacı, 2006; 'Yükseköğretim Kanunu,' 1981)

Finally, to be promoted to full professorship, in addition to the qualifications of an associate professor, the law requires that a candidate has worked in the relevant field of study for at least five years after receiving the title of associate professor. Similarly, a vacant post for the position in a university is necessary for the appointment. The rector, after announcing the vacancy, selects at least five full professors, including at least three from outside the university, to evaluate the applicant(s). The rector then submits to the University Administrative Board these evaluations, including the evaluators' preferences among multiple candidates. The appointment is made by the rector upon the decision of the administrative board of the institution, taking these reports into consideration (Mızıkacı, 2006; 'Yükseköğretim Kanunu,' 1981). Once a professor is appointed to a state university, all universities must recognise the title. They may offer lower positions, but this is rare. This centralised structure lowers the standards for promotion. All universities do not share the same culture of quality, but participate in

this centralised process of faculty promotion (Bostrom, 2007). The academic staff appointments and promotions at all levels are made by the universities, taking into account the minimum requirements set by the Council of Higher Education and the university senate. Yet, as discussed above, the title of associate professor is obtained centrally according to the prerequisites determined by the Inter-University Board (YÖK, 2005).

In order to increase the quality of academicians to the international level, the criteria for earning academic degrees and titles have recently been elevated by adding, for example, the prerequisite of international academic/scientific publication(s) in highly ranked journals and a higher level of foreign language proficiency determined by a standardised language test. However, the improved promotion system is considered to be problematic by most academicians, as one's expertise in the field that is not statistically translated into international publications and service to the academic institution and community (ie teaching and workshops) receives little to no attention. Furthermore, inadequate resources and equipment, as well as limited time left from teaching and administrative duties to produce research, acts as a hurdle which deters Turkish academics from fulfilling the requirements for promotion (Arıkan, 2002). When these factors merge with state and institution-mandated laws and regulations, some of which are prone to nepotism in the hands of power-holders, academic promotions are slow and often biased (Arıkan, 2002), leading to major frustrations for most academics (Gümüş, 1996).

As can be seen, the distribution of power in the current system is exceedingly disproportionate and causes major obstacles for any potential reform in higher education. The President of Turkey has ultimate control over the university system. The authority of the President is followed by the Council of Higher Education, rectors, and deans. Within this structure, rectors are exceedingly powerful and have the right to give promotions and appoint faculty; ordinary faculty members are powerless and have almost no say in administrative tasks and other university affairs. Students and administrative staff have no representation on any of the management boards. Decision-making power rests with the lucky few, whether a rector, dean, director or department chair. Such a hierarchical system presents restrictions and struggles for the majority, with no power over the decisions made in many areas, from teaching and research to academic promotions (Arıkan, 2002; Mızıkacı, 2006). Correspondingly, most academics in Turkey, as they try to carry out their scholarly duties, are pushed to deal

with difficult circumstances such as heavy teaching loads, limited material and moral support, low pay, slow promotion, favouritism and politics in the workplace; they ultimately develop into idealists trying to beat the odds by doing too much with too little and surviving in a culture of control (Arıkan, 2002).

Funding of higher education institutions

Public higher education institutions in the Turkish Republic are required to follow the organisational structure defined by law, with funding subject to central governing bodies. The Higher Education Law ('Yükseköğretim Kanunu,' 1981) clearly defines allowable sources of financial support. These are annual 'budgetary allocations; contribution aids from institutions; student fees and payments received; incomes from sales of publications and from movable and immovable property; profits from the enterprises of the revolving fund; and donations, bequests and sundry' (Article 55).

Although self-generated income sources such as revolving and research funds from services to community (i.e medical services and contract research) and the annual student fees, both of which are regulated and controlled by appropriate legislation, are fairly stable revenues for higher education institutions, state-allocated funds are, by far, the major source of funding (Mızıkacı, 2006; YÖK, 2004). However, despite the important role higher education is deemed to play in Turkey's future growth and global competitiveness, the state's financial support for higher education has gradually diminished in the last couple of decades, regardless of a simultaneous increase in the number of universities and students, with the exception of short periods such as 1992-1994 during which numerous new universities were established. Furthermore, the existing line-item budgeting system, with extremely specific earmarks negotiated between the Council of Higher Education and each university on the basis of the past year's allocations before it is passed on to the Ministry of National education for the minister to defend in the parliament, grants little or no autonomy or flexibility to public higher education institutions. Their growing private competitors, on the other hand, enjoy the luxury of being able to create their own income sources independently and set their own costly tuition rates (Mızıkacı, 2006; YÖK, 2004).

The systematic and rigid under-funding of public institutions has hindered the development of higher education and affected its quality in many ways. It has resulted in a lack of modernisation of instruction; unsatisfactory physical facilities; poor funding for information

technology, teaching and learning materials and equipment; limited grants for research and development projects; and inadequate investment in new higher education institutions and staff development programmes (YÖK, 2004). Dependence upon public resources and strict state control over institutional budgets are crucial issues to overcome so that public universities can be equipped with the same financial decision-making powers and autonomy as those of their private competitors (YÖK, 2004).

Access to higher education

Access and admission to higher education in Turkey are vastly centralised and based on an extremely competitive nationwide single-stage examination administered by the Student Selection and Placement Centre (ÖSYM) every year. The centre was established in 1974, and affiliated with the Council of Higher Education in 1981. All prospective students who wish to enter a higher education programme must sit for the exam on their predetermined date and at their assigned location (usually public schools and universities countrywide) under strict monitoring. The single session three hour and fifteen minute pencil and paper test starts and ends at the same time in 151 test centres throughout the country, and there is absolutely no acceptable excuse to miss and make up the test. The only option is to take it again the following year, which is a common practice for students who did not get a placement the previous year, as well as for those who were previously placed into a programme, but were unsatisfied and would like to change their field of study.

The results of the examination are calculated through an interactive computerised evaluation process. Once the candidates receive their scores and percentiles, they rank and send in their list of preferences for their desired programmes and universities based on the previous year's enrolments specified in a booklet published and distributed by ÖSYM. Placement of the candidate is based upon the composite score, taking into account the score of the entrance examination as well as the high school grade-point average, normalised nationally using the success of the classmates of the candidate in the entrance examination and also using a factor which depends on the high school type and the programme of the candidate. The maximum number of students to be admitted to each higher education programme is typically predetermined by YÖK upon recommendation from universities, and the rank of the scores of candidates wishing to enter the same higher education programme plays a crucial role in this process.

In Turkey, as in most other developing countries with a large youth population, the demand for higher education far exceeds the places available (Mızıkacı, 2006), leading to disappointment for a large number of high school graduates who either cannot obtain a placement or secure one in a less preferred programme, often teacher education, for those who aspire to enter more prestigious professions. The latter situation, coupled with the difficulty of securing a teacher assignment after graduation, has resulted in an army of uncommitted, if not unemployed, teachers. The view in Turkish society that teaching is a stable job with short working days and long summer vacations, especially suitable for females, who are traditionally expected to fulfil housewife duties, has contributed to this problem.

Institutional autonomy

Institutional autonomy of Turkish universities has long been a subject of debate. The highly centralised system of higher education leaves little room for institutional autonomy for public universities, with structures leading to the central planning of knowledge creation and teaching/learning activities. Therefore, public universities enjoy only a partial degree of autonomy (Mızıkacı, 2006). Administrative autonomy is nearly nonexistent; governance, structure and staffing arrangements of universities are all written into law and centrally controlled. Universities can only partly employ and fire their academic staff, who are subject to the *Civil Servant Law* ('Devlet Memurları Kanunu,' 1965). For example, salaries are decided by the government. Universities cannot adjust the numbers and distribution of staff to best meet the needs and priorities of the institution.

Similarly, financial autonomy is extremely limited. Except for the establishment of a new university (or a new school within an existing university), the decisions of YÖK and the universities are not subject to ratification by the government. Nevertheless, indirect governance stemming from the public finance laws (which stipulate in minute detail the procedures of the annual budget and the auditing of expenditures) creates an inevitable dependence of public universities upon the government. Public universities in Turkey cannot set tuition rates charged to students, as 'contribution fees' are set by the Council of Higher Education; they do not have access to independent funding sources, and they have little flexibility on how they use their state-provided resources, with so many line items in their budgets and little authorisation to shift resources. Furthermore, the universities can only partly decide the size of student enrolment; while they are asked to

inform the government of their enrolment quota each year before the university entrance examination, modifications in this allocation can be made by YÖK as needs dictate. Similarly, although the universities are free to design their curricula, course content, grading systems and degree requirements, they have to get the approval of YÖK and set their principles according to established guidelines (Mızıkacı, 2006).

Additionally, the Council of Higher Education controls and appropriates the operation of all universities in the same manner, maintaining a univocal structure, rather than granting autonomy to universities to create a diverse and flexible higher education system that will accommodate the needs of students and the internationalisation of the growing education sector (Arıkan, 2002). Ninety-five per cent of university students in Turkey attend public higher education institutions, all of which operate on the same hierarchical model and with analogous missions and purposes. The system of higher education, as it currently operates, fails to respond to the needs of society and the economy, as the law policing higher education and the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) operates with the backing of the Ministry of National Education and is highly centralised, detailed, rigid and out-of-date. What is more, the bureaucratic practices which YÖK operates in interpreting and implementing the law, as well as strict internal structuring at the institutional level, worsen the already problematic nature of Turkish higher education and place major constraints on faculty and students. Thus, it is important that reform is carried out to transform universities into institutions independent of excessive state control, which, in turn, will require responsibility and accountability on the part of each institution for the appropriate use of resources; to construct a transparent management system; and to concentrate on achieving goals and preferred outcomes for the university, students and the public. Such delegation of power will be the foremost step toward establishing a reactive, dependable and well-off university system and will help not only expand tertiary education and provide superior access to higher education, but also create higher quality institutions which are capable of responding to the growing needs of society and competing both within and outside the nation (Arıkan, 2002; Mızıkacı, 2006).

Discrepancies among higher education institutions: quality and administration gaps

While access to higher education is a quantity issue for Turkish students and higher education, discrepancies between the universities can be considered a quality issue. The historical demand for higher education

led the way towards rapid growth in the number of universities, often ignoring long-term preparation and planning processes. Although the fast and unplanned expansion of higher education in the early 1990s established more than 20 new universities in a short span of time and substantially helped to meet the demand for higher education, it was carried out at the expense of academic standards, and this made some universities' educational and academic quality vulnerable. What is more, this expansion put a great strain on the state budget for higher education in subsequent years.

Accordingly, the new universities, in the long run, failed to hire sufficient teaching staff or provide adequate facilities and could not maintain a high standard of education. Once these discrepancies between the universities became obvious, YÖK launched several institutional staff development programmes. One of these was the academic staff-development programme, which provides graduates from developing universities with post-graduate education opportunities in more established universities. The programme has increased the number of qualified university teachers and improved the teaching staff/student ratio at the undergraduate level on average by 45 per cent. However, the ratio continues to lag behind the desired level, and there are still major differences among institutions (Mızıkacı, 2006; YÖK, 2004).

Even today, some of the institutions most recently opened for the political purposes of enhancing provincial status and fulfilling pre-election promises are still suffering from a lack of academic staff, physical plant and resources, leading to a loss of academic reputation and competitiveness. Thus, they remain as only local institutions drawing students from neighbouring cities and with low admission scores. These discrepancies among institutions are evident in many other ways, too, from the enormously diverse cut-off scores of comparable programmes at different universities in the university entrance examination to the academic staff/publication ratio. These drastic differences generate inauspicious conditions for 'developing' university graduates by undermining their chances of employability. Top-level employers in Turkey seek future employees from among the 'developed' university graduates, even going so far as to name their top few university preferences in their job advertisements (Mızıkacı, 2006). Therefore, it is important that steps are taken to support the developing universities and their academic staff so that the quality gap between the universities is gradually closed and all universities, regardless of their size and region, take an active role in increasing the value and return from higher education in Turkey

Standards, national accreditation and quality assurance system

The Council of Higher Education and the Inter-University Board are, by law, the bodies responsible for setting criteria for the overall recognition of academic programmes and for establishing a national system of quality assurance with a structure and function comparable to its international equivalents. However, at present, there is no national accreditation and quality assurance system for higher education in Turkey. There have been serious attempts to create one within the limits of the current legislation since the late 1990s, especially with the recognition and implementation of the Bologna Process, an attempt to make academic degree standards and quality assurance standards more comparable and compatible throughout Europe (YÖK, 2005).

Several prominent universities have adopted quality assurance programmes in collaboration with American and British assessment institutions and/or agencies during the last two decades. For instance, the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) of the United States was invited to Turkey in the first half of the 1990s to evaluate the engineering programmes of four major universities. These universities, since then, have been cooperating with ABET for quality assurance (Mızıkacı, 2006; YÖK, 2005, 2007). This collaboration motivated all engineering faculties in the country to launch MÜDEK, a similar national accreditation system for engineering programmes, which has only recently been awarded official recognition and license for external evaluation. There are currently other agencies aspiring to conduct independent national accreditation in other disciplines (YÖK, 2008).

Such quality assurance as a widespread implementation has been welcomed by both public and private universities. For example, a pilot project titled 'Turkish University Quality Assessment Project' was carried out by YÖK in 1997 in cooperation with the British Council, Ankara and the UNIVERSITAS Higher Education Management Consultants in the UK, and 13 selected departments from eight universities participated in the project. The goal of the project was to develop a highly needed academic assessment mechanism through a model accreditation and quality assurance system. However, the project did not result in the successful formation of such a national quality assurance system (YÖK, 2005). Similarly, in 1998, a national quality assurance system for teacher training programmes was launched in collaboration with the World Bank. Yet, the programme ended its pilot stage after nine months without reporting any results (Mızıkacı, 2006).

In view of the push to create a national quality assurance system for compliance with the Bologna Process, the Inter-University Board set up

the commission of Academic Assessment and Quality Control in 2003, which promotes self-assessment of academic programmes. In the long term, it was planned that the national evaluation procedures would be developed into a national accreditation system, and academic assessment and evaluation mechanisms would eventually lead to a full accreditation system, so that funding could be linked to performance and potential student 'consumers' could be properly informed about available higher education alternatives. Furthermore, drawing on all these initiatives, it was hoped that new legislative and structural arrangements would be undertaken by 2010 (Mızıkacı, 2006; YÖK, 2005).

Unfortunately, the centralised system of higher education makes continued establishment of a national quality assurance and accreditation system similar to MÜDEK dependent upon the financial and governance policies of one decision-making mechanism and parliamentary process. Thus, the timely organisation of such a system has been viewed as an ongoing need to be addressed by central authorities (Mızıkacı, 2006). Although since 2008, Turkish universities have been required to conduct self-assessments and devise strategic plans accordingly, a process underway at the time of writing, this system still entails external assessment with the involvement of foreign experts and agencies (YÖK, 2008).

As it currently stands, the lack of an accreditation and quality assurance system at the national level leads to quantity/quality discrepancies among institutions, and at the international level lessens the overall competitiveness and reputation of the country. There are no mechanisms to provide fair assessments of the relevance, competence, and performance of university programmes, and thus, neither institutions nor faculties feel the need to be accountable. No input or output parameters seem to affect the state funding of institutions or salaries of individuals. Consequently, sharing the wealth equally serves as a disincentive to institutions and individuals who are more productive than others (Bostrom, 2007). Further, procedures and methods that are widely used to evaluate and increase the quality of faculty at Turkish universities are not always straightforward. Several universities have adopted academic staff evaluations based on student opinion questionnaires and through the assessment of faculty in terms of scholarly publications, research and quality of teaching. In addition, faculty members at each institution submit Faculty Performance Reports at the end of each academic year, which contain self-reports of their academic research, publication, courses taught, seminars organised, practical work and a copy of each paper presented at conferences. These individual reports are

collated into quantitative results as university-wide development indicators and submitted to YÖK. Afterwards, YÖK, through the evaluation boards that examine these reports, can make recommendations for each higher education institution to improve and/or promote its achievements. For the time being, all of this quality-assessment activity is done within the individual university framework and does not require national accreditation and evaluation (Mızıkacı, 2006).

The main concern with these procedures is that, without an external agency and in a highly centralised structure, it is tricky to gather reliable transparent information at the institutional level and to turn any results into decisive indicators for quality improvement at the national level. In the existing system, any evaluation reported by the given institutional administration would not result in any career promotions or reductions. Academic staff in public universities, as civil servants, enjoy the protection of regular career and salary increases irrespective of their individual professional performance. Thus there is a need to improve the existing mechanism of employment of academic staff that is currently regulated by law. It is widely believed that promotion and development of academic staff in higher education institutions has to have its own specific, appropriate grounding, so that more effective regulations in career development and/or adaptation of a national-accreditation system can be made possible. In the end, a national quality assurance system is crucial for a better understanding of human resource development for knowledge-based investment; for improving Turkey's international profile and higher education reputation; for fostering student and staff development; for improving income generation; for promoting strategic alliances; and for encouraging research and knowledge production (Mızıkacı, 2006).

Yet establishing and maintaining a successful national quality assurance system calls for the development of a general framework for introducing and consistently investing in a peer review mechanism, which is currently missing in Turkish higher education. Peer review can be conducted both on the individual level through the evaluation of teachers' performance by their colleagues, and on the organisational level through an overall assessment of the quality of teaching and learning at an educational institution. In an ideal arrangement, the quality assurance agencies provide the overall framework and start the peer review process, but the peers gradually take over as the review process advances (Gutknecht-Gmeiner, 2005). In the current hierarchical structure of Turkish universities, there is no self-regulation, and instead of autonomous reviews oriented towards development, there are strict

procedures and formal reports aimed at control. Furthermore, the top-down command and rule chain among faculty members often does not promote a mentor-mentee relationship between younger, less experienced faculty and older and renowned professors to inspire mutual learning, and what is worse, the power of personal and professional interests and relationships interferes with academic decisions. Thus, an independent and transparent peer review system is crucial for developing a quality culture and taking a proactive approach to quality assurance at the faculty, programme and institutional level. Such a system should incorporate stakeholders at the institutions (ie faculty and students) and external peer-review groups and/or quality assurance agencies. An objective assessment and peer review of research and teaching at universities will create norms for superiority in research, and will also improve the quality of teaching, and therefore increase the appreciation for good teaching in terms of rewards and promotion. It will also simulate collaboration and teamwork between faculty members, and thus diminish the isolation of individuals. A reliable peer review system, at the institutional level, will give professors, programmes and institutions the opportunity to review and improve their own professional standards and practices, which will help raise the professionalism, accountability and overall esteem of the higher education system.

Conclusion

There is a huge gap between rhetoric and reality in Turkey when it comes to change in higher education. Turkish universities and academics suffer from over-regulation, with nationally defined strict rules and laws which tend to inhibit reform and acts deviating from uniformity. Thus, sending students abroad to return to their country to improve higher education, without carefully reviewing and eliminating the repressive structure of YÖK and the domination of power holders at the institutional level, as well as taking into consideration the national capacity and local will for change, itself is not likely to be enough to attain the higher education goals that Turkey aspires toward.

Although Turkish universities hold up Western universities as their ideals, the higher education system is not ready to operate, or to be evaluated, on the basis of Western standards and quality measures. Its current organisation creates challenges and obstacles for the majority of academics, who, in the centralised, bureaucratic and hierarchical configuration, often lack power in decision making and struggle due to unwarranted control and restraints, lack of academic and moral resources and support, nepotism and preferential treatment, low status

and poor pay. Thus, it is important that the present higher education law, which has been amended so many times over the past few decades, and which still cannot keep up with the developments in the higher education sector, goes into a complete reformation. With this agenda, proper parameters must be adopted for increasing institutional autonomy, especially in governance and financial matters. To do that, effective decentralisation policies in management and delegation of power need to be coordinated, and new arrangements for the financing of higher education and improvement of academic staff salaries need to be made. Intricacies and discrimination in career development and promotion should be abolished, and objective assessment criteria and a national quality assurance system both for academic staff and the institutions should be implemented.

Such changes will advance the accessibility of resources and operations in the areas of instruction and research at Turkish universities, increase the power and capabilities of the main actors and motivate them to take an active role through an increased sense of belonging and responsibility in their academic environments, raise the esteem of academic staff and institutions, empower the role and enhance the competitiveness of various enterprises in higher education, and ultimately, will make higher education more flexible and responsive to the needs of the country.

Based on the discussion above, the following construction analogy is appropriate: Turkey, by sending students abroad for reform at home, has been attempting to add a second storey to an existing structure with major flaws, instead of tearing down the underlying features beneath the surface structure that cannot be salvaged and starting fresh. Sending students abroad to return and reorganise universities in the country, when there is much groundwork to be done to prepare a firm basis for change, no matter how good the intention might be, does not appear to be the solution. Even though foreign-educated students benefit from a prestigious education abroad, and their role in Turkish higher education upon return is considered to be significant, their capabilities and chances of involvement are slimmed down and their academic fervour is tested in a system that lacks material resources, moral support and unequivocal standards. They are prone to constant power struggles in the midst of heavy teaching loads and struggles for promotion and tenure. They are often left with the options to either clash or go along with the system in an academic environment that enforces hierarchy, conformity and survival of the fittest, and although the rhetoric calls for change, it rejects any attempts to change the toxic roots of the system.

If this is happening simply due to an unintentional oversight and if the government and the MEB administrators are sincere about the aims of this study-abroad programme and the prospect of true change in Turkish higher education at a deeper level, the underlying forces, whether they be related to institutional autonomy, faculty empowerment, academic freedom, or concerns regarding nepotism, favouritism and discrimination in academia, must be aggressively handled. MEB must consider working tenaciously, along with YÖK, toward tackling the obstacles that lie in front of these scholars for the possibility of real transformation to emerge. Unless the issues such as the resistance to change, and unwillingness to diffuse power and to empower the powerless are seriously dealt with, and what these scholars bring back is valued not only for surface-level improvements, the system will continue perpetuating the status quo and enslaving the academics, and Turkey's efforts and money spent on these brains will be nothing but a waste—just like the money spent to add on to a home and to renovate it to make it look modern from the outside, when the foundation has major problems causing the owners and tenants distress and pain.

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