

Perceptions of Academics towards the Impact of Foundation Universities on Turkish Higher Education*

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of foundation universities on the higher education system of Turkey through perceptions of academic staff in state and foundation universities. In this qualitative research, 15 members of academic staff were interviewed for their perceptions regarding a variety of issues about foundation universities. Analysis of academic staff perceptions could be summarized as follows: staff tend to agree that foundation universities create employment opportunities; keep the students, who may otherwise have chosen to study abroad, in the country; and that they ease the financial burden of the state by providing higher education for students who may have been neglected by state universities. Increasing the number of graduates, raising quality through competition, and reversing the brain drain are also regarded as additional positive effects of foundation universities. In spite of the positive effects, academic staff also mentioned some negative aspects which could be summarized as; offering only popular programs with high job prospects in order to attract students, accepting academically challenged but affluent students which could result in a differentiation in qualifications between state and foundation university graduates. Low job security and high turnover in some departments are also of some concern. Foundation universities are not deemed to be contributing sufficiently to academic research. In addition, the interventions of founders and board members are considered to hamper the process of institutionalization and autonomy. Perceptions regarding the future of these institutions predict an increase in the number and a widening gap in quality.

Key Words

Private Universities, Higher Education System, Global Trends in Education, Neo-Liberalism, Privatization in Education.

Free market and privatization trends which started in the Reagan-Thatcher era of the 1980s accelerated with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. Opinion among people and governments worldwide has shifted from the expectation that the state will deliver goods and services to a new faith in free market mechanisms. This shift is reflected in education and particularly

in higher education, which began to be regarded as a semi-public service. All over the world, tertiary education services are also offered by private sector (Aktan, 2007, p. 23).

Private higher education is the most dynamic and fastest growing sector of the twenty first century. A combination of unprecedented demand for access to higher education and the inability or unwillingness of governments to provide the necessary support has brought private higher education to the fore. Private higher education has long dominated higher education systems in Japan, the Republic of Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines. There has been a dramatic shift from public to private tertiary education in Latin America, such that Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia now have at least half their students in private universities. Private higher education has also spurred many countries in

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Central and Eastern Europe and the countries of the former USSR (Altbach, 1999). In Turkey, the increasing number of foundation (not-for-profit private) universities, various other foundations and corporations formed around higher education institutions, the growing number of alternatives such as evening programs, offered at a higher fee than day programs in state universities in recent years, are some of the changes in funding of higher education (Şenses, 2007).

Following the constitutional amendment in 1984, the first foundation university, Bilkent, was established. Since then, the number of private universities has reached 65 (Yükseköğretim Kurulu [YÖK], 2012). The expansion of private universities is primarily owed to the inability of public universities in updating their academic and organizational policies to meet global demand and submit to market pressures. Also public universities have long been restricted by legislation and funding constraints due to a centrally governed mechanism. Most important of all, public universities could not respond to the growing demand from a young population. Consequently the system encouraged foundation universities, which was followed by a great expansion in the number, scope of institutions and programs (Mızıkacı, 2010).

Foundation universities have been a topic of discussion since the time they were established. There have been supporters as well as opponents among researchers, academics and politicians. Supporters generally highlight the fact that these universities absorb the demand for higher education, ease the financial burden of the state, and keep the students, who may otherwise have chosen to study abroad, in the country (Yetkin & Atabek, 2006). Foundation universities intensify the competition in higher education and find creative ways for student intake. This competition is contributing to the scientific progress in the country, and reversing brain drain of the educated population (Sarıcaoğlu, 2012).

An increasing number of students prefer foundation universities due to their positive characteristics such as student-focused service, quality teaching staff, hands-on training, cooperation with business community, and quick adaptation to new technologies, and instruction in foreign language (Sarıcaoğlu, 2012). In addition, almost 40% of the students studying in the foundation universities in Turkey are enrolled in programs related to economics, management, and administrative studies, which train the minds that will contribute to the global economy. This percentage is considerably

lower in the state institutes which cannot adapt to market needs quickly or do not function according to market principles and have different priorities. Graduates of foundation universities are most likely to become professionals who will generally aim to work for multinational companies and banks that can afford to pay high salaries. In this sense, the relationship with economic globalization is direct (Yalçınan & Thornley, 2006).

According to some scholars and researchers who are critical of these institutions, foundation universities were established as non-profit organizations, however they have become for-profit institutions. The tuition fees of these universities (for the 2012-2013 academic years, between 10.000 and 30.000 USD) are not affordable for many Turkish households and a very small number of students (according to ÖSYM data for 2010-2011 academic year approximately 194.000 students) take advantage of the opportunities offered by foundation universities. The students who can afford to pay the tuition fees generally come from higher socio-economic families, which does not alleviate the inequality in educational opportunities (Tansel & Güngör, 2002). Other criticisms to foundation universities include, financial systems based on student tuition fees rather than foundation funds, big differences among universities in issues such as total spending per student and student fees/revenues ratio (YÖK, 2007).

In addition, the position of Rectors and their relationship with the Boards of Trustees in these institutions is controversial. The Rector is the chief executive officer in state universities, whereas in foundation universities, they are only members of the Board of Trustees. This situation can create issues, for example, in autonomy, institutionalization and academic leadership. The official representative of the legal entity and the final decision maker in academic appointments is the board of trustees, which has sometimes created conflicting power bases within the administration (Ergüder, 2010, pp. 70-71).

There have been both positive and negative reviews about not for profit private universities in Turkey which are likely to change the university system in the country. Hence, the characteristics of these institutions, the effects on the education system need analyzing. A model in assessing private universities has been proposed by Daniel Levy. Levy classifies private higher education institutes as (2006, pp. 6-9):

1. Culturally Pluralizing: Private higher education institutes based on religion, ethnic, or gender.

2. Elite Private Higher Education: Elite private higher education emerges where the public sector is lacking in quality, status, job prospects, and political order. They are often deprecated as elitist, serving privileged groups, and contributing to inequitable development. In addition, there are also semi-elite universities, a level below top public universities but well above the mass of private and public institutions. A popular tendency in these institutes is, modest private universities reinvesting their financial gains from courses with heavy demand (yielding substantial income) into more costly fields, facilities, and faculties.

3. Non-Elite Demand Absorbers: Private non-elite universities emerge from the excess of demand over supply. The gap between demand and supply increases especially where the State is unable or unwilling to pay the bill for increasing cost of higher education. Non-elite institutes can be roughly divided into two; one is serious and usually responsibly job-oriented. The other, profits from the large demand-supply gap, and is vulnerable where countries build accreditation systems. The development role of these institutions is limited. But the main development role of the serious non-elite institutions can be to bring comparatively unprivileged groups into the development process, and serving the globalizing job market.

To understand the types of Turkish foundation universities, the perceptions of academics employed both in private and public higher education institutions must be voiced. Private universities in Turkey have been a research topic for a while but mainly on comparison of academics' job satisfaction levels, or curriculum and instruction methods. There is not enough research on perceptions of academics concerning the positive or negative effects of foundation universities on the education system. For this purpose, the effects of private universities in the higher education system in Turkey were analyzed within the framework of academics' perceptions and their effects in economic, academic, research, social and governance dimensions were looked into. This exploratory study aims to identify the problems of private universities, offer possible solutions to these problems and thus improve the quality of higher education in the light of scientific data.

Method

In this study, qualitative research methods were used. Within the scope of the research, in-depth interviews with semi-structured questions were conducted with 15 academics from both foundation and state universities in order to obtain their views and perspectives. Participants work in various departments such as translation studies, tourism management, finance, architecture, psychology and mechanical engineering. The number of PhD holders (11) outweighs the MA/Msc holders (4) because PhD holders (assistant, associate and full professors) were assumed to be more experienced and knowledgeable in the higher education system of Turkey, therefore could have more insights into the research questions. Purposive sampling technique was used in order to reach academics with certain criteria (employed either foundation or public but are experienced in both university types). For this purpose, the snowball method was used and the interviewees were asked to provide contact information of another academic who have the same criteria. 15 academics with various titles employed in 13 universities in Istanbul were contacted and the interviews took place in the higher education institution they worked.

Data Collection Tool

15 participants were interviewed within the framework of five main themes: (1) the *raison d'être* of foundation universities (2) their positive effects on the higher education system, (3) their adverse effects on the higher education system (4) the main problems perceived in these institutions, and (5) thoughts on the future of foundation universities. Literature and expert opinion were consulted with in the preparation of these questions.

For the purpose of the research problem, the open-ended questions posed to the participants are as follows:

1. What are the reasons underlying the establishment of foundation universities? Which circumstances have led to the emergence of foundation universities?
2. What are the positive effects of foundation universities on the higher education system in Turkey?
3. What are the negative effects of foundation universities on the higher education system in Turkey?
4. What are the main problems you see with foundation universities?
5. How do you see the future of foundation universities? What do you think foundation universities will become in the future?

Academics' names, the higher education institutions they are working at, and their academic titles are kept confidential, and the participants are only given codes. While giving direct quotes from the participant, the "code number" is given.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed and converted into typed text. To ensure reliability and validity, academics were presented the interview texts for their approval before using the text for analysis. Direct quotations by the interviewed individuals were used and consistency within the opinion was analyzed to ensure inner reliability.

The content analysis procedure that was applied for the analysis of the interviews is "categorical analysis". The raw data was converted into codes and categories. In this context, a paragraph that expresses a complete opinion was specified as the unit of analysis. Quantitative demographic data were also assessed and presented under the concerned heading. Qualitative research findings and their interpretation were created by analyzing the views of participants under certain categories.

Findings

Findings Related to Participants' Perceptions Regarding Raison d'être of Foundation Universities

Academics' responses to the first question "What are the reasons underlying of establishment of foundation universities?" have been presented in Table 1:

Table 1.
Perceptions Regarding Raison d'être of Foundation Universities

Raison d'être	Frequency
Release burden on the State/ Absorb demand not met by public universities	11
Financial reasons/ Financial gain from students who were not placed in a public uni./ Lucrative business	10
Commercialization of education / Liberalization/ Globalization	4
Big enterprises wanting to train their own labor force	4
Big businesses wanting to invest in education/ perpetuate the family name	3
Desire to create a different university (research oriented, alternative to universities abroad, reverse brain drain, more liberal, free thinking)	2

Participants' responses mostly fall under two cat-

egories, the majority mentioning the demand not being met by public universities and also obtaining financial gain from students who want to get a higher education diploma. According to 4 participants, globalization and free market practices have also affected Turkish higher education. One of the reasons was expressed as, big corporations desiring to train their own work force in a way they require. However, the desire to create a more liberal, free thinking, research-oriented Turkish university that will be an alternative to universities abroad was mentioned only by 2 participants.

Findings Related to Participants' Perceptions Regarding Positive Effects of Foundation Universities

During the interview, participants were asked a second question, which is, "What has been the positive impact of foundation universities on the higher education system?" Table 2 shows the responses to this question.

Table 2.
Perceptions Regarding Positive Effects of Foundation Universities

Positive Effect	Frequency
Popularizing higher education / Increasing number of university graduates	5
Creating competition (getting best students and academics/ improving academic quality)	5
Increasing number of scientific publications of the country	4
Increasing economic capacity, employment/ Creating a second income	4
Slowing down brain drain	4
Keeping students, who may study abroad, at home	2
Producing more liberal, alternative ideas in a flexible, less restricted environment	2
Building close relations with local and international business world / Encouraging entrepreneurship	2

Academics mentioned a variety of positive effects of foundation universities, ranging from educational and academic to economic and even social dimensions. The two most frequently cited perception categories are increasing the number of university graduates in the country (5 participants) and also creating competition among themselves and with public universities to get the best students and academics (4 participants). Also, an academic effect was mentioned as increasing the number of publications and contributing to the recognition of Turkey in internationally indexed databases.

Financial contributions are mentioned as much as the academic effects by 4 participants, expressing the impact as creating financial movement, employment both for academics and non-academics. Furthermore, slowing down or reversing brain drain could be seen as a both academic and social impact on the system. Foundation universities' close relations with international business world could be attributed to the fact that the medium of instruction in English in almost all the foundation universities and they establish academic partnerships with international universities.

Findings Related to Participants' Perceptions Regarding Negative Effects of Foundation Universities

The responses to the third question of the interview, asking about the negative effects of the foundation universities, academics' perspectives and categories deducted from these responses are shown in Table 3.

Table 3.
Perceptions Regarding Negative Effects of Foundation Universities

Negative Effect	Frequency
Weakening public universities	7
Commercializing higher education	5
Damaging faculty-student relationship	4
Lowering higher education standards	4
Creating unfair system / inequality of opportunities	3
Upsetting academic and social balance by opening majors with market drive	3

Table 3 demonstrates that the most frequently expressed negative effect is the weakening of public universities. 7 participants mention this as a problem and that foundation universities transfer experienced and qualified academics of public universities by offering higher salaries. "Commercializing higher education and turning it into a commodity" was mentioned as a negative effect by 5 participants and also seen as a factor "damaging faculty-student relationship". Another perceived negative effect is, accepting students with relatively lower university entrance exam scores, which causes a decline in the quality of higher education. According to 4 participants, popularization of higher education and making it more accessible to the masses might have increased the number of university graduates, but lowered the standards of education. Also, "inequality of opportunities" was perceived as one of the

negative effects by 3 participants. Inequality in this context refers not only to the opportunity to study in a university, but also to the grades the students get in foundation universities. Some participants mentioned the problem of grade inflation in foundation universities, and said this causes inequality in getting a job or a scholarship between public and foundation university graduates. There is also a criticism for acting overly market-oriented manner in opening courses and departments, which was expressed by 3 academics. According to these participants, these institutions offer some undergraduate courses and graduate programs because they are currently popular in the country, not necessarily because of a shortage of qualified people in that field.

To summarize the positive and negative effects of these institutions, the most important contribution is seen as making university education more accessible and creating competition. The major negative effects are perceived to be robbing public universities of qualified staff and commercializing higher education. When the two lists are compared, the number of positive effects outweighs the negative. However, the frequencies of categories show that more academics agree on the negative effect categories. Positive financial effects, such as creating employment opportunities, keeping the students in the country, reversing the brain drain, are the most commonly expressed.

Findings Related to Participants' Perceptions Regarding Problems of Foundation Universities

Table 4 categorizes the responses given to the question "What are the major problems and challenges of foundation universities?"

Table 4.
Perceptions Regarding Problems of Foundation Universities

Problems	Frequency
Intervention of board of trustees in academic matters/ Failure to institutionalize	9
Heavy course/ work load of academics	6
Lack of job security	5
Low level of student motivation/ academic achievement	4
Lack of investment on academic facilities	4
Appointment (as opposed to election) of Rector	3
Difficulty of finding funds/ endowments	3

Among the major challenges of foundation universities, "intervention of board of trustees in academic matters" was expressed by 9 participants. Related problems in this category were also mentioned as,

“the members of BoT do not come from education background, foundation universities are like family firms, and BoT interventions reduce the Rector to a lesser status.” Working conditions which could be detailed as heavy workload of faculty, and low job security are not perceived positive by some participants. Teaching load is also seen an obstacle for carrying out research since it takes most of the working hours of the faculty, and thus affecting the scientific productivity of the institution. Low job security was mentioned by 5 participants and they all pointed to the high staff turnover in some foundation universities and relatively short (1 or 2 year) contracts. Students’ demotivation and low academic achievement was seen as a problem by 4 participants. The general profile of students in foundation universities is a private high school graduate teenager from a well-off family who is not as academically motivated to graduate and get a job as a low-income public university student. Lack of resources is something that one does not expect to find in a foundation university; however, when funds are spent on more apparent facilities such as landscaping in the campus, canteens and cafeterias, rather than the library or the scientific lab, the academics describe this as a problem as “lack of investment on academic facilities”. Appointment/election dichotomy about the Rector was pointed out by 3 participants, also “lack of endowments”, that is being dependent on student tuition fees or the support of the foundation was also expressed as a problem by 3 participants. In short, challenges are experienced in academic (excessive workload, lack of student motivation) and administrative (BoT interventions, Rector’s appointment) dimensions.

Findings Related to Participants’ Perceptions Regarding Future of Foundation Universities

Table 5 summarizes the predictions of academics towards the future of foundation universities.

Future prediction	Frequency
Gap will widen between high/low quality foundation universities	6
They will prosper, compete with public universities (if overcome their problems)	6
Numbers will go up, quality will go down	3
Public universities will continue losing blood	3

Some participants are optimistic; others are pessimistic about the future of universities. Optimists

predict a growth and development in foundation universities, whereas pessimists predict the dichotomy between the high quality and poor quality foundation universities will deepen. Academics generally think that foundation universities are here to stay because of the growing young population of the country and an accelerating interest in higher education. Once they establish their organizational culture, overcome their teething problems, and deal with their infrastructure issues, foundation universities are expected to contribute more than just financially to the higher education system of the country.

Discussion

The major contributions of foundation universities are perceived in the economical dimension with increased university students and employment. 2010-2011 ÖSYM figures demonstrate nearly 89% of higher education students study in public universities (3,583,834 students), and 9% study in private universities (193,244 students). Foundation Universities Association aims to reach 575 thousand Turkish, 60 thousand foreign students by 2023 (Saricaoğlu, 2012). In terms of employment, academics working in foundation universities in 2010-2011 is 12,392, 12% of the total. According to the Foundation Universities Association, approximately 10,000 non-academic staff are employed by these institutions (Saricaoğlu, 2012). In addition, every year private universities pay 500 million TL as social security premiums, 125 million TL as value added tax and in 10 years expects to increase its contribution to the country’s economy to TL 45 billion (Polat, 2012). Participants’ perceptions in favor of the economic contributions seem to be in accordance with these figures. Economic aspects of private universities such as creating employment, increasing corporate tax is frequently pointed out in the literature. Private universities pay taxes directly to the state budget, and undertake a service that is mainly provided by the state. In addition, with the investments they make, job opportunities they provide, private universities contribute to the overall development of the country in the long term (Geiger, 1986, p. 216; Levy, 2003).

The most frequently cited positive effect of foundation universities in education is increasing competition. It is often raised in the literature that the nature of private enterprises will increase competition and have a positive impact on the whole system. The major reason underlying the success of American universities such as Harvard and

Stanford is competition in the American university system. Institutions constantly compete with each other on issues such as the public interest, research funding, getting the best faculty and best student and not fall into lethargy (Rosovsky, 2003). Apart from ideological grounds, competition has also become one of the reasons why employees in public institutions are against private institutions. Along with the development of private higher education institutions, they appeared as rivals to public institutions (Levy, 2003).

Lack of job security in private universities has been criticized by participants in this study. Job satisfaction studies have put forth that job satisfaction was low, particularly among research assistant and instructors who have a high turnover in these institutions (Baş & Ardiç 2002; Kılıç, 2008). Sönmezer and Eryaman's (2008) survey asked participants whether they would like to work in a private or public school and 50.8% (n = 217), of them said "no" to private schools. According to the same research, teachers working in public schools are more satisfied because of the higher job security despite lower salaries. Another point of criticism was there is little research conducted in foundation universities. Excess course load is seen as a difficulty in doing research faculty members in public universities (Dost & Cenkseven, 2007). According to the views of academics in another study, conducting scientific research is not one of the primary objectives of foundation universities (Yaşar, 2002). The 2010 publication ranking of the universities in Turkey reveals that the last 8 of 74 universities are foundation (Akbulut, 2010), and in 2011, again the 8 of last 10 universities in the list are foundation (URAP, 2011). Seeing the same foundation universities in the bottom of the list for two consecutive years seems to indicate the existence of dubious demand absorbers in the Turkish higher education system.

According to academics' perceptions, the founders of the foundation universities tend to see these institutions as family firms and this has a very negative impact on their autonomy and institutionalization process. This issue was discussed in Foundation Universities Report (2007) and Higher Education Strategy Report (2006) prepared by the Council of Higher Education (YÖK). Similar issues were analyzed in a SWOT analysis issued by Private Universities Association "Rector - Board of Trustees relationship" was listed as one of their weaknesses. Also the presence of some members in the BoT who have no experience or knowledge in the field of education is said to reduce efficiency (Vakıf Üniversiteleri Birliği, 2009).

Successful private universities in the developed part of the world have strong funds, for example Harvard has 29, Yale 18, Stanford 15, Princeton 12, and MIT owns 8 billion dollars of capital funds. However in Turkey, the foundation university with the strongest financial structure only has 500 million dollars. In short, Turkish private universities struggle with lack of financial resources, Endowments and donations can help to overcome this problem; however, such philanthropic acts are not common in Turkey yet (Terzioğlu, 2008).

Two major categories of private universities in Turkey are: 1. Demand absorbers as public universities were not able to meet the increasing demand for higher education and 2. Semi-elite institutions, as providers of quality status, job prospects, and political order (Levy, 2006) when public universities could not keep up with national and international demands of the higher education market and the society. While most of the foundation universities are demand absorbers, a few of them have become distinctive and serious semi-elite institutions.

Demand-absorbers can be grouped as serious and less serious ones. Serious ones are job oriented; they mainly function as training institutions, attract mid-performing students and offer a variety of courses to meet market demands. They have concern about the job market, follow up on their graduates and have a good reputation among employers. However, there are also dubious demand absorbers in Turkey with their low admission requirements, low investment in educational resources and dependence mostly on student fees. Their research performances are low. Semi-elite universities in Turkey are backed up by strong businesses; they compete with public universities and have partnerships and alliances with international, mostly American universities (Mızıkacı, 2010).

Turkish higher education has been experiencing a 'massification', and a rapid increase in student enrolment. However, massification in many private institutions has occurred without an accompanying increase in resources -financial, physical and human - which has had a direct impact on the physical infrastructure, the quality of teaching and learning, research, quality of life of the students, etc. The challenge for most policymakers is the creation of a higher education system that combines mass access with quality. More and more institutions, in their bid to raise funds, have resorted to admitting less qualified students. The increase in numbers has had an effect on quality, which in turn led to falling expectations and standards in universities. Because of the need to regulate the growing number of private higher education institutions and it seems

essential to set up appropriate quality assurance mechanisms. The national as well as international accreditation agencies could oversee quality assurance of both private and public institutions.

Foundation universities are here to stay considering the unstoppable demand for higher education of the youthful population in Turkey. It is encouraging to see that there are some quality foundation universities focusing on serious instruction and research, however to expand their contributions on a wider scale, and diminish inequality in educational opportunities, they need to offer more scholarships to students and tighten their links with industry, create a distinction and thus improve their social reliability and prestige.

More research is needed on foundation universities, particularly on students, as well as faculty members. Topics such as student profiles, satisfaction levels, status of their graduates, employers' views on graduates, how they compare to public university graduates in job entry exams could be analyzed for a realistic and objective assessment of foundation universities.

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