

Navigating the Covid-19 Turbulence in Higher Education: Evidence from Turkish Faculty Members

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Abstract

Covid 19 was the first pandemic of the modern era to strike with such virulence. We sought to understand this recent phenomenon and contribute to the empirical findings on the expectations from HEI leadership and management in Turkey. Drawing on the Turbulence Theory, we explored how the academic staff experienced the initial phase of the pandemic in Turkey and how they perceived the HE leaders' navigation of the crisis at the selected universities. Within qualitative phenomenology, data from semi-structured interviews with a convenient sample of 10 academic staff in five public and five private universities in Turkey, was analysed through content analysis. Findings highlighted the opportunities and challenges of the pandemic for

Article Info

Article History:

Received
January 26, 2021

Accepted:
May 18, 2022

Keywords:

pandemic, higher education, leadership, faculty members, turbulence, Turkey.

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the faculty at personal and organizational level in an intersectional pattern. Moreover, the ways HEI leaders navigated the crisis created binaries in the form of experience vs. inexperience and trust vs. distrust. The challenges derived from the rapid but ineffective decision-making processes and the heightened surveillance mechanisms over the academic staff; which in some cases resulted in lack of trust. Hence, the turbulence level was shaped by how the universities and their leaders addressed it. In such cases, practices of building trustworthy connections, more distributive forms of leadership and robust communication; which would help the leaders to navigate the turbulence at times of crises are significant. Further recommendations are provided for research, policy and practice.

Cite as:

Örücü, D. & Kutlugün, H.E. (2022). Navigating the Covid-19 turbulence in higher education: Evidence from Turkish faculty members. *Research in Educational Administration & Leadership*, 7(3), 597-631. DOI: 10.30828/real.1159121

Introduction

Covid-19 in 2020 as the first pandemic to strike with such virulence of the modern era (Tourish, 2020). Educational organizations encountered an immediate shift to address the disruptions and disjunctions that the pandemic created. This unforeseen crisis had adverse implications on higher education institutions (HEIs), whereas higher education (HE) is inherently a problematic domain globally (Davis&Jones, 2014; Drew, 2010). Universities had to navigate the pandemic through various means such as migrating their courses online (Samoilovich, 2020), taking different measures in their processes



and prioritizing their responsibilities (Fernandez&Shaw, 2020). Yet, such turbulent situations (Gross, 2016) and crisis require a rapid response and certain capabilities and skills (Gurr&Drysdale, 2020) from the educational leaders.

Since the pandemic started in 2020, educational researchers have contributed to the literature, exploring its challenges, implications and strategies within educational contexts. (Agasisti & Soncin, 2021; Gurr&Drysdale, 2020; Harris, 2020; Marinoni et al., 2020). The responses in HE during the first outbreak were the sudden closure of the universities, migrating classes online, employing remote and alternative working practices for the staff; which all led to immense pressure on all parties ranging from students to university governors (Kerres, 2020; Netolicky, 2021). For HEIs, it was a global emergency with a turbulence of challenges particularly during the first stage of lockdowns- the initial six months just after March 2020.

Some studies have explored the implications of Covid19 on educational leadership in HEIs with its diverse impact on research, teaching and community engagement (Altbach & de Wit, 2020; Marinoni et al., 2020). Thus, as Tourish (2020) asserted, “coronavirus crisis is also a crisis of leadership theory and practice” (p. 261), which brings more responsibility to the HE leaders. Decision making, building trust and accountability, dealing with various organizational issues related with different stakeholders within uncertainty was challenging; especially with poor evidence to guide us and face unpredictable outcomes.

Hence, how HEIs in different countries respond in policy and leadership to such emergency situations is important, while HEI policy

and leadership already experience shifts in theory and practice (Davis&Jones, 2014). In this sense, what academic staff experienced in such unprecedented crisis and turbulence is significant, as their personal and professional challenges heightened with the uncertainty and complexity of the pandemic state (Garretson et al., 2021). Moreover, the impact of the senior-level university leaders' practices are significant for the academics in coping or struggling with this crisis.

Therefore, drawing on the Turbulence Theory (Gross, 2020), we sought to explore how the academic staff experienced the initial phase of the pandemic (between March and September 2020) and how they perceived the HE leaders' navigation of the crisis at the selected universities in Turkey.

The pandemic was defined by international contagion and the disruption of domestic processes by an unseen threat (Saxena, 2020); and it was an unexpected crises and impacted all domains of life in the first phase. Therefore, we explored particularly the initial reactions of the HEIs during the first phase of the pandemic in Turkey from the perceptions of the faculty members. The guiding research questions are:

1. How did academic staff experience the Covid-19 crisis in terms of opportunities and challenges?
2. How did the academic staff perceive the navigation of the pandemic by the HEI leaders at their universities?

Theoretical Framework: Turbulence Theory and Higher Education Contexts

The outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic ostensibly led to turbulence regarding the different systems and subsystems of politics, economy, health and education. Universities, at the intersection of all, had to respond to this crisis immediately (Karademir et al., 2021).

Turbulence is characterized as “a time in which events, demands, and/or persons interact in highly uncertain, changing, inconsistent, variable, unexpected or unpredictable ways” (Emery & Trist, 1965, p. 26) as it yields surprise, volatility, rapid strategies and decisions, complex demands, and uncertainty (Ansell et al., 2021). Turbulence during the crisis reveals the decision-making competencies of leaders under threat, urgency and uncertainty (Gross, 2016). In this regard, Gross’s (1998) Turbulence Theory could be utilized to analyze the responses of the educational organizations in such instable and volatile state of crises as in the case of Covid-19. Gross and Shapiro (2004, p. 56) explicates the four levels of turbulence in educational organizations. The turbulence degrees and general definitions are summarized below:

Table 1. *Degrees of Turbulence in Educational Organizations*

Degree of Turbulence	General Definition
Light	Associated with ongoing issues, little or no disruption in normal work environment, subtle signs of stress
Moderate	Widespread awareness of the issue, specific origins
Severe	Fear for the entire enterprise, possibility of large-scale community demonstrations, a feeling of crisis
Extreme	Structural damage to the reform movement is occurring. Collapse of the reform seems likely

Source: (Gross and Shapiro, 2004, p. 56)

Although Gross & Shapiro's (2004) turbulence levels are related with response to change initiatives; this framework could explain the impact of Covid-19 in HEIs and other educational organizations. Hence, "the intensification of speed, complexity and conflict appear to be the common factors producing turbulence" (Ansell & Trondal, 2018, p. 2). Despite the impetus of turbulence for HEIs to stabilize their operations, they encountered the pressure of the unexpected change with high volatility. In this sense, stabilization and adaptation are the categories recommended for the public organizations to respond to such instant turbulence (Garretson et al., 2021). In case of light or moderate degree, there is room for the development of plans to navigate the crises. Yet, proactive planning is at risk during severe or extreme turbulence (Gross, 2020). When the first phase of Covid 19 outbreak in Turkey is considered within this framework, the initial phase created moderate to extreme turbulence dominating the macro and micro systems in various levels. The organizations had to shift from routine program action to rapid response leading to pressure for rapid and unexpected change with high volatility (Garretson et al., 2021).

Thus; crises and turbulence necessitate certain leadership capacity and vision under unexpected conditions. As the crises create threat, urgency and uncertainty (Zhang et al., 2018), HEI leaders are at the crossfire of different stakeholders. Research hints at certain leadership approaches in lieu of turbulent situations (Bigley & Roberts, 2001; Harris, 2020; Horton, 2020). Hence, resilience of the HE leaders is significant in shifting from the routine to alternative forms of operations (Izumi et al., 2020). In this respect; trust, support, communication and adaptable leadership styles receive attention (Dumulescu and Mutiu, 2021; Yokuş, 2022) . Fernandez& Shaw (2020)

propose three best practices as building individual connections with people through establishing mutual trust, distributing leadership and clear communication with all stakeholders; while prioritizing responsibilities. The credibility of the leader at times of such ambiguity and emergency also requires sensemaking (Spillane, 1999) and relevant crisis management skills such as communicating the complexities in simpler terms, while outlining the potential plausible solutions (Agasisti & Soncin, 2021). During the emergency, university leaders should consider its structural impact on teaching and learning, research and innovation, decision-making structures, and on their own role in providing the academic community with a strong vision by adopting a test and learn attitude (Samoilovich, 2020).

In Turkish context, university students' expectations from the HE leaders revealed five aspects as "networking, enhancing educational practices, calmness & compassion, analytical & strategical thinking and transparency" (Yokuş, 2022; p. 383). Similarly, in Italy, a clear governance, transparent decisions, straight communication and ongoing support to the university community were significant factors in navigating the new normal (Agasisti&Soncin, 2021) . Garretson et al. (2021; p. 32) further recommended a move from control-based systems to more flexible and adaptable systems in leadership by adopting a new kind of organizational leadership; which requires rational decision-making based on deep analyses (Baer & Duin, 2020) with an agile and adaptive mindset (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020). Likewise, Ansell et al. (2021) claimed that public institutions should be more flexible, agile and adaptive to transform in response to turbulent situations. Therefore, the response of HE to Covid19 in Turkey necessitates further exploration.

Context: Higher Education Structure in Turkey and Covid 19

Turkey, with a centralized HE system, has 129 public and 78 private universities with over 176.000 academic staff of different ranks (CoHE, 2020). The CoHE is an autonomous institution, officially in charge of planning, coordination and governance of the HE system in accordance with the Turkish Constitution and the Higher Education Laws (CoHE, 2022). Public and private universities are legally accountable to CoHE in their operations with limited institutional flexibility. Since the pandemic outbreak, the CoHE has made some emergency decisions, such as the suspension of face to face classes and migrating to distant education, urging universities to form Coronavirus Boards and take the necessary precautions through healthy campus regulations. The theoretical courses were delivered online; while the majority of the practice-based courses remained face to face. Moreover, they asked universities to take measures regarding travel and overseas meetings, international participation and measures against discrimination (Saraç, 2020).

The main challenge was having to migrate classes online in a week for the universities in March 2020. Although CoHE had already allowed and encouraged the universities to deliver 30% of the courses online for ten years and the global trends had already emphasized the significance of distance learning long before the pandemic; surprisingly, the universities and academic staff still had challenges in adapting to the new modes of delivery (Karadağ&Yücel, 2020). The ongoing Digital Transformation in Higher Education Project contributed to distance education process in Turkey, as 6000 academics and 50,000 students in 16 universities had been offered a course titled



'digital literacy'. Over the past years, more than 120 distance education centers were founded in universities in Turkey (Saraç, 2020).

In this regard, while some universities were ready for this new form of instruction, others with weak technological infrastructure experienced chaos in the initial phase. Evidence shows that the evaluation of CoHE and universities during this period by the students and the academic staff does not seem satisfactory through different variables (Karadağ&Yücel, 2020). In many cases, even if the university was competent in remote instruction, students may have had poor technological facilities at home; which led to the digital divide between students (Karaköse, 2021). Thus; the academic staff had a pivotal role in reaching the students and navigating the various dynamics across the students, colleagues and university leadership teams. Given this challenge, how fast-changing decisions by CoHE and the university administration as well as the academic staff's individual issues with the pandemic and digital transition could affect their experience and the ways in which university management could facilitate such turbulence requires exploration.

Methodology

Research Design

Given our purpose, we utilized a phenomenological approach in the realm of qualitative research (Denzin, 1997; Marshall & Rossmann, 2012) to capture the subjective perceptions and understandings of faculty members on the first six-months of the pandemic and how the university administrators navigated this urgent crisis from their perceptions. Phenomenology is the most appropriate design for this purpose as it provides an opportunity to describe the

lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Based on the research questions, semi-structured interview questions were prepared to seek the individual views of the participants, who directly experienced the phenomenon under exploration.

Participants of the Study

The participants of the study were identified based on convenience sampling (Patton, 2012) due to the limitations of social distancing rules in the first six months of the pandemic. Ten academics of various academic titles and university types participated in the study to receive diversity of views. Table 2 demonstrates the participants' codes and demographic information:

Table 2. *Demographic Information about the Participants*

Participant Codes	Gender	Age	Academic Title	University Type	Years of Experience
Academic 1 (A1)	M	42	Professor	Public	18
Academic 2 (A2)	F	45	Assistant Professor	Public	8
Academic 3 (A3)	F	65	Professor	Public	35
Academic 4 (A4)	M	38	Research Assistant (Dr)	Private	6
Academic 5 (A5)	F	35	Assistant Professor	Private	12
Academic 6 (A6)	F	40	Lecturer (Dr)	Private	13
Academic 7 (A7)	F	45	Lecturer (Dr)	Private	10
Academic 8 (A8)	M	44	Research Assistant (Dr)	Public	18
Academic 9 (A9)	M	50	Professor	Public	20
Academic 10 (A10)	F	44	Associate Professor	Private	20

Data Collection Instrument

A semi-structured interview form was prepared by the researchers based on the related literature and research purpose. It has 3 parts as: Description of the study and consent, demographics form and interview questions. Expert opinion was sought from a professor specialized in qualitative research in HE field. Based on the feedback, some questions were modified. That second form was piloted with two academics, beyond the actual participant group. Modifications were made and the final version was utilized during the interviews. Interview questions addressed the views of the academics on the pandemic, its challenges and opportunities regarding the personal, professional and organizational implications at their universities, their perceptions on how/if the HE leaders responded during the crisis and their expectations from the university leaders.

Data Collection Procedure

Ethical permissions were received from the university. Individual appointments were made with the participants. Interviews were conducted through Zoom video stream online between April and October 2020 due to the lockdown, covering the first 6 months of the pandemic as the level of turbulence was severe to extreme during that period. The participants were informed about the aims and their consent was sought for the interviews and recording. Participants were informed that they could withdraw anytime during the interview without any excuse. Each interview took between one- hour or one hour and a half; typically conversational and interactive. With flexibility, we used prompts and developed new questions based on the replies to grasp the individuals' unique experience, as an element of phenomenology (Denzin, 1997; Salmons, 2014). After each

interview, the researchers transcribed the dialogues, adding the notes they took and discussed their insights about the session.

Data Analysis

As for the data analysis, we transcribed audio recordings and followed Marshall and Rossman's (2012) four stages of content analysis as "organizing the data," "generating categories, themes and patterns," "testing any emergent hypothesis," and "searching for alternative explanations". Through this, we identified the central themes seeking to reveal the pros and cons of the pandemic for the academic staff and their views on the HEI leadership. Additional inductive and deductive coding processes were employed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) where necessary in the secondary coding stage. Then we coded and reduced the units of information and formed different categories to help to answer the research questions. The systematic data collection and analysis procedure contribute, it is assumed, to the credibility and authenticity of the data. Structured analysis and intercoder reliability as well as member check was performed for validity and reliability. Validity and reliability were also ensured through analysis of the findings separately by each author following the same method (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). We used participant codes as A1, A2, A3..., to facilitate our qualitative data reporting for anonymity (see Table 2). By fully providing details of the systematic data collection, being as transparent as possible and relying on detailed thick descriptions, the credibility and authenticity of the data was enhanced. Moreover, we, as academics, continually questioned and reflected on our the positionality, on our own assumptions and preconceptions and how these could have impact on the interview questions, discourse and our contact with the participants.

Findings

Given our purpose, the data revealed some contradictory patterns across public and private universities pertaining to the phenomenon as the initial experience of the academic staff showed some contrasting patterns. In relation to our research questions, data yielded two main categories with opposing patterns within under two headings as “Faculty Views on the Opportunities and Challenges of the Pandemic” and “HE Leaders’ Navigation of the Pandemic as Perceived by The Academics”.

Faculty Views on the Opportunities and Challenges of the Pandemic

Regarding the faculty experiences of the pandemic, the themes can be categorized into four groups as “personal challenges and opportunities” and “organizational challenges and opportunities”. Online collaboration among colleagues and improved digital literacy are opportunities at a personal level, while increased readiness for turbulence, increased trust, more autonomous learning, improvement in academics’ discourse in the classroom can be regarded as organizational opportunities. When the themes reflecting the challenges at personal and organizational level are grouped together, the challenges encountered at individual level are digital challenges, psychological challenges, increased workload, surveillance mechanisms and invasion of in-class privacy.

The themes categorized under organizational challenges are ambiguity across all levels, top-down decision changes by the CoHE and university administration, grade inflation, changing nature of the job, weakening organizational culture, heightened competition, severe turbulence level, job insecurity in private universities and students’

lack of technological facilities. We will discuss the findings in this respect as the opportunities and challenges since they overlap and show contrasting patterns across different universities. The table below shows this pattern:

Table 3. *Opportunities and Challenges of the pandemic at individual and organizational level*

	Individual level	Organizational Level
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - collegial collaboration -Improvement of digital literacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Increased readiness for turbulence -increased trust between leaders and faculty members in some cases -students’ flexibility to rewatch the recorded sessions -Improvement in the Faculty discourse in the class
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Digital challenges -Psychological challenges -Increased workload -Surveillance mechanisms-invasion of in-class privacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Ambiguity across all levels - Top-down decision changes by the CoHE and university administrations -Grade inflation -Changing nature of the job -Weakening organizational culture -Heightened Competition -Severe Turbulence level -Job insecurity in private universities -Students’ lack of technological facilities

Digital teaching in the new normal appeared to be both an opportunity and a challenge for the academics. Half of the participants hinted at the improvement of their digital skills in using online tools. Some of them had never used such tools and suffered from getting

used to them; while a few of them were experienced in Moodle and Zoom to a certain extent. Those already familiar with the digital software had improved their teaching skills online through learning to use more advanced techniques such as break-out rooms and material development for the distance education systems. Yet, the academics whose institutions could not immediately migrate to synchronous classes had difficulty in recording the courses initially. A4 explicated this as:

It was a huge challenge to shoot and record videos for Youtube until moving to synchrononeous live classes. For a 3-hour class, I had spent 10 hours for recording and editing the videos. However, this provided me with the necessary digital skills that I had never thought of earlier. It was a positive outcome of the pandemic.

Even A8, already familiar with distance education, narrated that he did not have the chance to deliver live courses because he had over 500 students while Zoom could accommodate 100 at a given time. Moreover, the students, especially in public universities had constraints and lack of technological facilities. Due to these limitations, some of the academics preferred to deliver classes in the first months via written notes, powerpoint slides, written discussions and feedback. This means, they were not able to use the synchronous tools during that stage. In contrast, the students' opportunities to rewatch the recorded sessions in other universities, was a positive aspect of the "new normal", as they called it. The recordings of the classes also led the academics to be more careful about the discourse and language they used during the online classes.

On the contrary, a few academics referred to how online collaboration with the international academic community enhanced

during that time. For example, a couple of participants mentioned the easy access to remote international conferences and online webinars for different national and international audiences. More importantly, one academic invited internationally recognized scholars to his online graduate courses; which he thought was inspiring for the students. Further, A3 elaborated on the new insights that this new normal could bring to the HE:

I think pandemic will bring transformation to academic lifestyle. Those who are able to cope with digitalization will survive. In this period, students had the chance to meet and listen to a variety of academics on the social media. This should be considered as an awakening for all parties. The old-fashioned traditional academic image is not worthy anymore. Agility will be the key! Those who manage to be agile and transformative will survive.

As for the challenges of the pandemic at personal level, in addition to the digital challenges, psychological challenges, increased workload and the invasion of class privacy upon synchronous class records were among the difficulties stated. The majority of academics alleged that their wellbeing was under threat during the initial phase of the pandemic. The Covid phobia, the ambiguity, feeling of isolation, lack of socialization, missing face to face interaction in classes and the increased workload due to the remote working conditions; all led to psychological issues and discontent for them.

At organizational level, nearly half of the participants highlighted their increased readiness for emergency within the first 3-months of the pandemic. The beginning was a chaos, yet after a while the university administrative processes got more regulated. Herein, the intersectionality of the issues at work and home led to strains on

the part of the academic staff. Herein, the challenges related with the university organization, the ambiguity across all levels, top-down and instant decision changes by the CoHE and university administrators led to severe turbulence, changing the nature of the profession. The majority of the participants reflected that the adaptation to the new rules and the instant announcements had increased their workload. What had not been their responsibility prior to the pandemic had bureaucratically become their responsibility to track and report. This led to disjunctures in work-life balance as the working hours had totally altered. There were instances where some academics had to teach late-night classes at weekends because the digital capacity of some universities were not adequate to host large numbers of students simultaneously during the workday. A5 narrated her observation and experience as follows:

In digital classes, interaction was weak with the students. This could be because it was recorded. Remote learning requires more preparation and more material development. And it was hard for the students to get motivated. We were given tasks by the management every single day and the majority of the faculty assigned too many assignments to students, which led to burnout on the students.

A few participants related to the weakening of organizational culture as a result of the remote working routine and communication was not as effective as before. Moreover, the cuts in the research and academic funds as a result of the financial constraints nationally heightened the competition among the staff for securing funds. One aspect of this issue was about the academic staff working in private universities, some of them were worried about their job security, when the government and accordingly the private universities employed the

short term working grant for the non-public institutions and firms. A7's reflections were somewhat a summary of the intersectionality of the phenomenon on personal and organizational levels:

When we started working from home, the university employed the short term working grant, while we still worked full time and over time. This way our social security benefits decreased. Meanwhile, there was always a hidden pressure that we might lose our jobs anytime as the economic crisis was around the corner. I was pulled to different angles by different parties. Multitasking is the nature of our job, but with the pandemic it got worse. To name a few: Teaching and tracking hundreds of students online, only a few of whom turned on their cameras; the faculty administration asked for more and more paperwork even every single day, more than ever. I couldn't pull myself together to concentrate on my research. We were stressed by handling online exams. And we witnessed the grade inflation at the end of the semester because whatever you do, you can't stop student cheating in remote exams. I also had to manage the domestic life while at home. All together, I developed anxiety and feeling of alienation to my job and life.

Organizational demands in the form of increased workload and red tape led to top down decisions within the HE organizations and more control-fixated administrative style. The responses and coping strategies of the academic staff varied across 4 main ways as prioritising tasks and methods, sensemaking of the procedures and new decisions and self-care. A2, an academic in a public university, reflected on her experience as:

This was an extreme situation. My priority was my students and reaching out to the majority. I was in a survival mode. I couldn't even get depressed because of the workload. I You had to reconsider your whole methodology. It was an exhausting process. Those who were good teachers before the pandemic managed well.



A9, a senior academic from a public university, also narrated his experience as:

The work load and demands increased heavily since the outbreak of the pandemic. As we can't gather in person, anything that could be resolved in face to face communication, has become a mail thread, which you have to allocate time. Submitting everything on the online systems, filling in too many forms, communicating with colleagues, admin and students simultaneously put me in pressure.

Academics from the private universities seemed to have more challenges related with the control-fixated administrative processes during the pandemic. Organizational challenges showed an overlapping pattern with the organizational demands during the first phase of the pandemic, which leads to the personal coping strategies on the part of the academic staff.

HE Leaders' Navigation of the Pandemic as Perceived by The Academics

Our data revealed that the HEI leadership takes various forms and styles based on the experience, approach and strategies of the university governors and sub-system leaders in navigating the turbulence during the first 6 months of the pandemic. Building upon the new demands and challenges as well as the advantages of the pandemic as experienced by the academic staff, the academics' perceptions over the HE leaders' (Rectorate, Faculty Deans and Department chairs) implementations revealed contradictions in the administrative and leadership approaches as perceived by the academics. Table 4 below demonstrates the pattern:

Table 4. HE Leaders’ Navigation of the Pandemic as Perceived by The Academics

HE Leaders’ Navigation of the Pandemic	Level of Trust
<u>Leading with Experience</u>	
Team Building	Higher level of trust towards the management
Transparency	
Humanistic approach	
Bottom-up decision-making	
Consultation	
Communication	
Support	
<u>Leading with Inexperience</u>	
Creating Tension	Lower level of trust towards the management
Authoritarian/ Control-fixated strategies	
Top-down decisions	
Create tension	
Higher level of accountability	

When the HEI leaders’ navigation of the turbulence and their responses to the pandemic from the views of the faculty members is analyzed, trust and distrust emerge as two striking themes. These are binaries in the form of *Experience vs. Inexperience and Trust vs. Distrust* within the groups. However, the CoHE’s state as the main supervisory body and central policy-making function is critical as the central decisions are conveyed through top and mid-level HE leaders across the universities. This was also mentioned by some participants, where one of them (A1) explicated thoroughly:

The CoHE considers the issue with a standardized perspective. Different universities and departments have unique needs and

practices. They need to consult and consider the regional and departmental differences. In an engineering department, where 95% of the courses are theoretical in the 2nd year, you can do the courses and exams online; while in the faculty of Dentistry and Medicine, you can't do this because the majority of the courses are practice-based. It is a Turkish tradition to make short-term plans, but under these new conditions, we want to know what is ahead of us in the long run. We can't get anywhere with last minute decisions and implementations. For instance do we have a B or C plan in case of a new emergency situation?

In this regard, to navigate these decisions at the universities requires expertise and experience on the part of the university leaders, especially amidst turbulence. The data revealed this pattern clearly as the first binary regarding the management processes at the selected universities is about the leadership experience and the capacity. This main finding highlighted that universities with more experienced and robust academic leadership teams navigated the storm more comfortably and flexibly; whereas the academic leaders who relied more on the more control-fixated administrative style created more strain and stress on the faculty members. Experience, in the way participants described, in this sense relates to the transparency, accessibility, bottom-up decision making processes and paying attention to the human needs of the staff and the students; ongoing support and building team-spirit. Inexperience was associated with the top-down decisions changing each week, control-focused authoritarian approach, excessive workload and heightened levels of accountability that leads to too much paperwork and tension. One of the academic staff, A 10, commented on the approach of their rector as:

Our rector is experienced in crises management and is a good communicator. He and his team were accessible to us at all stages 7/24 and they created a specific Q&A section on the website for us and the students to facilitate the urgent problems alongside the routines of the university. I felt comfortable and I can say that they managed the process effectively.

In contrast, A2 described the opposite form of administrative style hindering their work processes during the lockdown:

The decision-makers did not leave any space for us. Based on the instructions and regulations sent by the CoHe, they almost always conveyed implied messages about the high level of control and accountability. The hidden message was about easing the life for the students and keeping all reports and paperwork in place for the quality checks and accreditation. Meanwhile, I was trying to deal with my students and my own Covid 19 without access to technological facilities. This was more important to me than filling in the same form for many times for the performative processes.

Secondly, the contradictory pattern, which results from the first binary is Trust vs. Distrust. The pattern revealed that the effective leadership style at all levels led to trust among the faculty members; while the opposite occurred with less experienced teams. For instance, a couple of academics found the senior management ineffective in the administration of the pandemic and thought that the way they acted was pure rhetoric; which left the staff with distrust in the implementations. The views of A6 highlighted this as:

I reckon the HE administrators in our university failed this test. They put forward decision areas, asked for our opinion saying ...today



the agenda is this and that...pretending as if they were encouraging our participation in decisions. Yet, they did what their agenda was. I think more informed –decision making processes could have been employed. On the surface, it was informed and participative but I’m sure they did what the CoHE urged them to do. I would expect a more direct and transparent approach. Just tell us CoHE wants this way, and there was no need to waste time in pretending to be participative decision-makers. That way they would be more honest.

Another academic (A5) emphasized the loss of trust because of the variety of implementations across different universities although the CoHE was the main supervisory institution. She narrated this as:

When the rules and regulations by policy makers in the CoHE change too swiftly, our university plans accordingly. Then we lose our accountability. For example, one day they said fully remote teaching, then moved to hybrid, then left it to the discretion of the individual universities. Our students kept saying...this university did this...that university doesn’t do this...etc. First, they said asynchronous classes, then urged synchronous...added TV shootings...Now move to YouTube...Our governors had to follow the CoHE but they lost their credibility in some way by these fast changes.

Further, A7 elaborated on the rise of control- focused management style in her university as:

The senior management was not transparent enough. They did not inform us immediately about the next steps and realities; especially concerning job security. I felt threatened many times as they kept asking who is doing what in a recurring manner. Too much email

traffic... we weren't left with any autonomy... I was short of reaching out to my students while reporting on what I did to the authorities... This pandemic revealed the different capacities and adaptation level of the colleagues in the faculty. As some colleagues criticized the others' work patterns and kept complaining about anything and everything, those who paid more effort felt annoyed and the trust within the groups weakened. However, our department chair navigated the tension by mediating between us and the upper management successfully; which eased the challenges at least a bit.

On the contrary, the academics working with more supportive HE leaders were more content and built more trustful relations with their colleagues and the university governors as A3 explicated:

We tried to produce solutions together with both the Dean and the Head of Department. We had strong communication. Sticking together, we helped each other in preparing the online course contents. The rectorate was highly supportive and attentive to our needs and hardships. During this period, I developed more trust in my department colleagues and the administrators. I now feel the groups cohesion more here.

In sum, the pattern, revealed by the data, demonstrated that the personal and organizational challenges and opportunities are interrelated with how HE leaders navigated the pandemic at Turkish universities. Those with more experienced management teams had more opportunities than the challenges. The repercussions of the challenges that the organizational and inevitably the policy demands around the work of the academics were related with how HEI administrators navigated the turbulence. Hence, trust and distrust



within the departments were also interrelated with leading with experience or inexperience as perceived by the participants.

Discussion and Conclusion

To recall, we aimed to understand how the academic staff experienced the initial phase of the pandemic in Turkey and how they perceived the HE leaders' navigation of the crisis at the selected universities. Hence, we had two main research questions which addressed the initial experience of the academic staff related to the Covid-19 crisis- the pros and cons that the pandemic created and how HE leaders navigated this crisis at the selected universities from the perspectives of the academic staff. The findings revealed that the level of turbulence with the pandemic in HEIs was moderate to severe (Gross, 1998) in Turkey during the first 6 months; which had implications on the academic staff's professional and personal lives and how they perceived the HEI leadership responses.

As of the first research question, the participants' experience, during the initial 6 months of the pandemic with lockdowns under the moderate to severe levels of turbulence, was shaped by both the opportunities and challenges through personal differences and organizational demands. In this sense, we came up with an interrelated matrix which demonstrates how organizational demands such as excessive workload, bureaucracy, migrating urgently to the remote teaching systems and working practices and heightened accountability measures of the universities. The sudden move to the digital outlets were challenging to those with less familiarity with the technology. On the other hand, those with familiarity, considered it as an opportunity to improve themselves to adapt to the new normal. For some, it was

also an opportunity to build easier international networks through digital migration (Samoilovich, 2020). As part of the roadmap for distance education by the CoHE, the participants had experienced swift modifications in their universities' curriculum, infrastructure, human resources, content, and implementation (Bozkurt et al., 2020). Furthermore, some of them had psychological and physical issues due to the screen fatigue, Covidphobia, workload and feeling of isolation. Both at personal and organizational levels, they experienced the turbulence in either moderate or severe forms regarding the HE organizations (Gross&Shapiro, 2004). There was urgency, fear, a feeling of crisis and complexity at various levels (Ansell & Trondal, 2018) as they encountered the pressure of the unexpected change. Yet, the experience differed across the public and private universities within the limits of our research. Those universities who were able to stabilize and adapt their procedures (Garretson et al., 2021) were more comfortable with navigating the turbulence of the pandemic.

As for the second research question addressing the perspectives of the academic staff about how HE leaders navigated this crisis, the participants had diverse views in the form of binaries related to two domains as the experience and building trust. The participants' remarks revealed that the universities with the experienced leadership teams were more successful in navigating the crisis (Gross, 2020). The "experience", in this sense, involved transparency, support, strategic management, bottom-up approach, less control but more care and support through open-door policy (Izumi et al., 2020); while the "inexperience" was associated with top-down decisions, high level of control and authority and ambiguous implementations (Harris, 2020; Horton, 2020)

Secondly, in some HE organizations that the participants labeled as “experienced”, where the care, support and collaboration was present, the bond of trust was the gluing force in the organization. In contrast, the HE leaders who acted indifferently and lacked transparency were labeled as “inexperienced” by the relevant participants. In such cases, the faculty experienced the loss of trust within the university and towards the university leaders; which resulted in negative feelings and alienation heightening the turbulence level to severe for them (Izumi et al., 2020; Yokuş, 2022).

These findings confirm the proposition that prioritizing care and support systems before accountability measures brings trust and cohesiveness (Samoilovich, 2021; Yokuş, 2022); especially at times of severe turbulence (Garretson et al., 2021; Gross, 2020). This could also apply to the relationship between HE leaders and faculty members but also for the faculty and student relations ((Karadağ&Yücel, 2020), as the findings of this study also demonstrated. Thus, the expectations of the university students from the HE leaders (Yokuş, 2022) are similar to those of the faculty in this study, as transparency and mutual trust is the core concepts for the whole organization.

It is once more confirmed that Covid-19 had a turbulent impact (Gross & Shapiro, 2004) on the world education systems, in our case, the HEIs in Turkey. That is; the HE system had already its inherent challenges (Bozkurt et al., 2020) when hit by the pandemic, which raised the turbulence level for the academic staff, students and the HE leadership and policy (Karadağ&Yücel, 2020). The challenges derived from the rapid but ineffective decision-making processes and the heightened surveillance mechanisms by the HEIs over the academic staff; which in some cases resulted in lack of trust. Hence, the

turbulence level is also shaped by how the universities and HEI leadership implementations address it. Those with high trust and support systems across the whole university have the capacity to ease and facilitate the turbulence level (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Samoilovich, 2021) within the HEIs.

Contributions and Implications

In such turbulent times, the HE leaders need to consider the structural as well as the emotional impact of the phenomenon for the whole community in their universities. The caring culture around a common purpose, building trust and prioritizing the vision and strategies through effective communication and support are pivotal (Samoilovich, 2021). Moreover, the findings of this study attune with Fernandez & Shaw's (2020) three best practices of building trustworthy connections, more distributive forms of leadership and robust communication.

Our findings hint at the ambiguity of decisions and frequent decision changes at policy level may lead to distrust and anxiety, unless the university leaders at different levels have the capacity to ease the turbulence (Gross & Shapiro, 2004) for the faculty. Hence, engaging in adaptive leadership (Goode et al., 2021), flexibility and building trust through transparent implementations and decisions could be working strategies for the HEI leadership.

This study, we reckon, would contribute to the research and practice in HEI leadership in terms of fathoming the impact of unprecedented crises and turbulence on the organizations and individuals. That is; the HEIs are significant in transforming the societies through research, teaching and service. Under turbulent



conditions, the way the leaders navigate large-scale crises (Tourish, 2020) is crucial for the survival of the staff, organization and the stakeholders. Our endeavour was to shed light on the experiences of the academic staff and their views on the HEI leaders during the pandemic. Obviously, our world and education systems will face different forms of pandemics and other crises in the future; therefore, the findings of this study could illuminate on how HEI leaders could address the needs of the academic staff and university organization in times of such unexpected crises.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited with the perspectives of ten different academic staff from different universities around Turkey. We do not claim that the findings could be generalized to all the HE institutions in Turkey. We were urged to understand the phenomenon and portray a picture of the initial experience of the academics related with the pandemic turbulence and its management in the HEIs.

It is still ambiguous what the new forms of HEIs will look like in the post-pandemic era. Yet, new forms of educational leadership would be crucial as the turbulence could appear in various scales and shapes. Therefore, policy-making practices in such turbulent situations and HEI leaders' navigation of such emergency policies is an area that would require further exploration. We were not able to delve in detail into the policy level within this paper; yet, future research could explicate the governance systems during such crises. In any form of the "new normal", prioritizing care before the strict accountability measures could be an asset for the educational leaders, especially in health and disaster related crises. Our participants were the faculty members without any senior administrative roles. Hence, the picture

could be way more complex for the senior HEI leaders and administrators of different ranks. Their first-hand experience could be explored utilizing different research methods, which would contribute to research, policy and practice.

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