

## **Turkey's Ministry of National Education Study-Abroad Program: Is the MoNE Making the Most of Its Investment?**

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*To answer an overwhelming demand for university faculty, Turkey's Ministry of National Education (MoNE) developed a scholarship program to sponsor graduate study abroad. After completion, program recipients are expected to serve in Turkey's universities. However, the cost of the program relative to the contributions of returning scholars has led to tremendous criticism. In order to explore whether this program is truly worth the investment, the author chose a qualitative research design to investigate the experiences of two program beneficiaries. The results revealed that their contributions were minimized by numerous institutional barriers; consequently, the system was unable to fully benefit from their expertise. The author concluded that the elimination of obstacles inherent in Turkish higher education was necessary to realize the goals of MoNE's graduate study program. Key Words: Educational Reform, Higher Education, Turkish Ministry of National Education, MoNE, Turkey, Qualitative Research.*

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Since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the government has been acutely aware that education of its citizens is critical to the social and economic outlook of the nation. Higher education, in particular, has come to be recognized as a major catalyst for scientific and economic growth, socio-political progress, and intercultural communication and awareness. As a result, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on raising the nation's higher education institutions to the level of their counterparts in the Western world. To this end, the government has continuously added to its contingent of public universities, beginning with a single institution in 1923 and adding steadily to this number, establishing 53 universities by 1994 and reaching a total of 103 state institutions by 2011 (Günay & Günay, 2011). With this massive increase in the number of higher education institutions it became an urgent need for trained and qualified faculty members. In spite of strenuous exertions to respond to this need, including the addition of numerous graduate programs at the country's largest universities, these efforts were not enough to meet the growing demand for teachers. This deficit eventually led to the creation of an amendment in Turkish Law No. 1416, Students to be sent to Foreign Countries (Ecnebi Memleketlere Gönderilecek Talebe Hakkında Kanun, 1929), which provided for a government-sponsored study abroad program overseen by the Turkey's Ministry of National Education (MoNE). Under MoNE's auspices, the nation's most talented graduate students were sent to obtain advanced degrees at the world's most prominent universities; these elite scholars were then expected to return home and serve as faculty members in order to enrich the country's universities with their newly acquired knowledge and skills.

Although clear guidelines were established to outline the operation and functioning of MoNE's study abroad program (Ecnebi Memleketlere Gönderilecek Talebe Hakkında Kanun 1929; Türk Öğrencilerin Yabancı Ülkelerde Öğrenimleri Hakkında Yönetmelik 1993), its funding has been harshly debated in recent years. Millions of dollars are spent on sponsored students, a significant number of whom never return to Turkey to fulfill their obligation to serve in the nation's universities. Coupled with executive problems within the program, widespread criticism has caused questioning of the utility of this practice and obscured the role of the returning scholars within the Turkish higher education system. The lack of an in-depth discussion of the outcomes and effectiveness of the program and the limited information publicized by MoNE on the subject have only increased concerns about whether Turkey is *wasting* or *investing* by spending huge amounts of money on this privileged group of scholars.

Only a limited number of studies have been conducted to address the issues concerning Turkish students who receive government funding for foreign education (Güngör & Tansel, 2008; Kurtuluş, 1999; Tansel & Güngör, 2003; Tuzcu, 2003). Furthermore, these studies primarily focused on the issue of student non-return, rather than on the contributions of students who did come back. Tansel and Güngör (2003), for instance, investigated student non-return in relation to a phenomenon known as "brain drain" (Güngör & Tansel, 2008; Kurtuluş, 1999; Tansel & Güngör, 2003) through a survey research project. The aim of their study was to explore the possible reasons why Turkish students chose not to return to Turkey after completing their studies. After analyzing the data obtained from students studying overseas, the researchers reported that economic problems at home, Turkey's compulsory military service, and greater career opportunities abroad were the most significant reasons for non-return.

In another study, which specifically looked at MoNE's study-abroad program, (Tuzcu, 2003), the problem of non-return was discussed in relation to executive issues with the program, including the improper selection of sponsorship recipients and the discrepancy between the sponsored students' fields of studies and the areas that were most in demand in the Turkish university system.

In light of the brief discussion of the studies listed above, the deficiencies in the literature regarding the topic under discussion are threefold: First, no research has been conducted into the contributions of the returning professionals to the nation's higher education system or the roles they fill at their institutions. Next, none of the research has delved into issues such as student non-return from the perspective of the students themselves. Finally, MoNE has not conducted any empirical research other than the occasional publication of official reports. Consequently, both the public and the media have raised numerous concerns about the efficacy of the program; in addition, there have been serious disagreements between MoNE and the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) about its implementation.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how two faculty members in Turkish universities perceived their experiences as returnees after completing their doctorates in the United States in order to determine whether their contributions aligned with the goals of Law No. 1416 and the MoNE study-abroad program. This researcher, having earned his doctorate as a recipient of MoNE sponsorship himself and currently serving as a professor at a Turkish university, is uniquely able to bring his own experience and insight to this discussion. It is his hope that this study will permit the

public, the media, and the academic community in Turkey to better understand the intended role of these foreign-educated intellectuals, as well as informing the Ministry of National Education of the policy changes that need to be taken into account when making decisions that affect the selection, the systemic support and the reentry experiences of scholars sent abroad for study.

### **Turkey's Educational System**

In order to comprehend the difficulties faced by returning MoNE-sponsored scholars, it is important to first understand the context of the higher education system in Turkey. This section gives a brief overview of the laws governing this top-down organization, as well as the professional climate in which Turkish faculty members operate.

#### **Turkish Education Law and the Ministry of National Education**

When the modern Turkish Republic was first established and the issue of public education was addressed, one of the main concerns was the need to develop a democratic and modern educational system. To this end, it was necessary to create nationwide standards for education in order to increase the quality of schools and reduce the expenses involved. In 1924, Law No. 430, *Tevhid-i Tedrisat Kanunu* [Law on the Unification of Education] was enacted in order to combine all of the country's educational institutions under one central organizing body – the Turkish Ministry of Education. In keeping with the Republic's aims to secularize and democratize the nation, religious schools were closed, and private and minority schools were subjected to rigorous oversight (MoNE, 2001). Furthermore, in order to achieve greater consistency for the quality and content of education throughout the Republic, Law No.789, *Maarif Teşkilatı Kanunu* [Law on the Education System] was enacted in 1926; this legislation gave the Ministry of Education full responsibility for defining and controlling the degrees provided by both public and private schools.

Continued efforts to increase the quality of education resulted in a series of meetings – sixteen in all – which took place between 1939 and 1999 in order to make policy decisions aimed at increasing the quality of education (Akyüz, 2001; MoNE, 2001). The main objectives of the first few meetings were to determine the extent of compulsory education for Turkish citizens, to open new schools, and to sanction the teaching of Turkish language and history (MoNE, 2001).

With a dramatic increase in the number of schools and a rapidly growing student population, an urgent need for qualified teachers arose (Akyüz, 2001). In order to meet this need, training and certifying classroom teachers became a top priority. A structural and managerial transformation of the higher education system was clearly necessary to support training programs capable of preparing quality teacher candidates. The 1933 Reform Act initiated the first set of widespread changes, followed by further legislation in 1946, 1973, and 1983 (MoNE, 2001). In addition to addressing the need for classroom teachers, these changes were aimed at supporting advances in science and technology; educating students in line with their interests, skills, and abilities was viewed as essential to raising the status of the country to the level of other developed nations. The demand

for higher education institutions increased exponentially, and the number of public universities has been greatly augmented over a period of decades. Yet, while higher education in Turkey has advanced significantly, it has still not been successful in educating an adequate number of teachers or in reaching the desired standards (Akyüz, 2001). Attempts to meet the demand for faculty by initiating new departments and graduate programs have not been successful, necessitating a search for new solutions; the most important of these was the amendment of Law No. 1416 pertaining to students sent abroad for study (Türk Öğrencilerin Yabancı Ülkelerde Öğrenimleri Hakkında Yönetmelik, 1993).

### **A Brief Explanation of Law No. 1416 and MoNE's Scholarship Program**

Law No. 1416, originally enacted in 1929, established a government scholarship program for the purpose of sending Turkish students to be educated in well-developed countries under the sponsorship of the Ministry of National Education (Ecnebi Memleketlere Gönderilecek Talebe Hakkında Kanun, 1929). Only the most exceptional scholars were accepted into this program, and they were required to sign an official contract pledging that they would return to Turkey upon completion of their degrees in order to serve compulsory duty at the universities to which they would be assigned. With the major expansion of education and increasing educational needs, specifically in higher education, an important modification was made to Law No. 1416 with the passing of new legislation in 1993 (Türk Öğrencilerin Yabancı Ülkelerde Öğrenimleri Hakkında Yönetmelik, 1993). This statute, which was enacted in response to the urgent demand for qualified teaching staff at Turkish universities, has enabled thousands of post-baccalaureate students to pursue advanced degrees at the world's leading education and research institutions (Çelik, 2011; Tuzcu, 2003)).

At the time the data were collected for this study, the total number of students being sponsored through MoNE's study abroad program was approximately 1,130; over 800 of these were enrolled at U.S. universities (Çelik, 2009). Although these figures are reported to the public by the Ministry of National Education, there has been little supporting evidence over the years to show that the tremendous amounts of money spent educating these students has brought about any significant return on the investment. This has led to extensive criticism, particularly in relation to organizational problems with the application of Law No. 1416, as well as to the significant rate of non-return of sponsored students.

### **Organizational Problems with the Practice of Law No. 1416**

As Tansel and Güngör (2008) point out in their study, while the intentions of the MoNE study-abroad program are worthwhile, there are "some important deficiencies in the scholarship system that [have] led to widespread disillusionment and frustration among scholarship holders" (p. 65); and thus, they assert that the program seems to be falling short of its purposes. Tuzcu (2003), who authored the only study in the current literature that exclusively evaluated the planning approach of the MoNE sponsorship program, described fundamental problems with its organization. His study particularly criticized the Ministry of National Education's use of university resources in funding

study abroad, asserting that there is an alternative law for higher education planning that would be more appropriate for this purpose (No. 2547, Yükseköğretim Kanunu [the Higher Education Law]).

Another issue brought up in several different studies (Kanpolat, 2001; Türker, 2001; Tuzcu, 2003) was the process of selecting scholarship recipients. Kanpolat (2001) asserted that the selection of students for both study abroad and other government programs was biased and poorly managed. Türker (2001), as well, found that the selection of program recipients was not always properly executed. In confirmation of these findings, Tuzcu (2003) revealed that 71% of the higher-level administrators and 58% of the mid-level administrators at MoNE rated the quality of the program selection procedures as “moderate” or “low.”

The final problem described in the relevant literature was that students were frequently sponsored for fields of study that were not categorized as “in need” in Turkey. Tuzcu (2003) argued that better forethought and strategic planning regarding the need for personnel would eliminate the mismatch between supply and demand in higher education.

### **The Issue of Student Non-Return**

Spending money on students who do not uphold their agreement to return to the country has become a major objection of critics of the program. This issue has been the focus of several studies. Kurtuluş (1999), for example, found that, out of 90 Turkish students working toward degrees in the United States, nearly one half were not motivated to return to Turkey after graduation. Similarly, Tuzcu (2003), in a study identifying the problems with the planning of MoNE’s scholarship program, confirmed that the student non-return rate over the last few years was around 50%. Tansel and Güngör’s (2003) research agreed with this statistic, attributing it to the major economic crises which occurred in Turkey in 1994 and again in 2000. The findings of Tansel and Güngör’s (2003) study, although not specifically focused on MoNE-sponsored students, were helpful in understanding why Turkish students in general often chose not to return to Turkey after completing their education. Tansel and Güngör (2003) and Güngör and Tansel (2008) categorized the students’ reasoning under two main categories, which they labeled “push and pull factors” (Güngör & Tansel, 2008, p. 62). Push factors were characterized as circumstances in the home country that prevented students from wanting to return, while pull factors were incentives in the host country that caused them to want to remain abroad. Economic instability and limited opportunities for advancement in one’s field in Turkey were noted as the most frequent push factors. On the other hand, the opportunities for a better income, prospects for career advancement, and more favorable work environments (e.g., flexible hours) were reported as the most effective pull factors influencing student non-return.

The message to be derived from these studies is that the scholarship program run by the Ministry of National Education is not doing enough to meet the needs of its students once they have completed their studies overseas. This can be attributed in part to the inadequacy of the program itself; however, the current negative views concerning the program, coupled with MoNE’s reluctance to conduct empirical research into the experiences of returning scholars working at Turkish universities, have obscured the

issues faced by these individuals and impaired their ability to bring about the reform with which they have been charged.

### **Turkey's Academic Environment**

Aside from the obstacles created by problems with MoNE's study-abroad program, returning scholars are often thrust into a situation which is intrinsically opposed to progress. The academic environment in Turkey's public universities is overshadowed by an enormous bureaucracy that subjects faculty and students alike to favoritism, arbitrary decision-making, and lack of clear standards. The efforts of foreign-educated faculty members to introduce new teaching methods, modernize classroom equipment and materials, and develop new curricula are often met with stubborn resistance or even hostility. Promotions and tenure, while ostensibly based on predetermined standards for achievements in one's field, are frequently dependent on the favorable opinion of the higher-ups in the educational hierarchy; attempts to "rock the boat" and shake up the current order are sternly frowned upon (Arıkan, 2002). The narratives of two MoNE-sponsored scholars, as told by this researcher, provide an eloquent inside view of a system which, in short, cannot seem to get out of its own way.

### **The Researcher's Role in the Study**

Because of the unique nature of qualitative research, which places the researcher in the role of the primary collector of data, it is important to identify his or her personal beliefs, values, and biases from the outset. Like the participants, the researcher in this study is a Turkish national and a product of the Turkish education system. The researcher attended educational institutions similar to those attended by the participants. After completing his education through the MoNE's study-abroad program, the researcher, like the study participants, embarked on his career as a language teacher educator at a Turkish university.

In short, this study was anchored in the researcher's own personal and professional journey as much as in the stories of the participants. The researcher acknowledged that his approach to and interpretation of the data was subjective, yet still able to elicit the unique voices of his participants. This study was carried out with the researcher's belief that it was important to make public the diverse experiences of returning scholars so that they could carry out their mission of bringing new energy and ideas to their educational settings. With these issues in mind, the researcher set out to answer the question of how the two professors who participated in this study, after earning degrees in the United States as beneficiaries of the MoNE sponsorship program and returning to Turkey to perform their service in the nation's university system, perceived their own experiences and contributions in Turkish higher education and whether they felt that the system was benefiting from their expertise.

## Methodology

### Rationale for the Qualitative Approach to the Study

The researcher undertook this project with the awareness that MoNE-sponsored scholars are kept under tight control. In order to receive funding for their studies, they are obligated to accept stringent legal terms and conditions; during their time abroad, they are closely monitored by the Turkish government and are not permitted to develop their skills through work; and they often encounter deliberate obstructions in their assigned positions after their return to Turkey. In addition, their worth is routinely questioned by the public due to concerns about the money spent on them. Thus, in order to empower the participants and give them an opportunity for their voices to be heard, the researcher drew on an advocacy/participatory approach (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998) as the methodological perspective for this study. This concept, as a collaborative approach carried out *with* rather than *on* the research participants (Creswell, 2009), is designed to promote a transformational action agenda meant to improve “the lives of the participants, the institutions in which individuals work or live, and the researcher’s life” (p. 10) by raising awareness of the phenomenon under investigation.

This study utilized a qualitative research model, which originated from cultural anthropology and sociology (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2008) and was later adopted by educational researchers (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2006). The aim of qualitative research is to explore research participants’ practices in the midst of a particular social circumstance, event, role, or human interface. As Creswell (2009) explains, qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive, requiring the researcher to develop a description of the individual(s) and setting(s) being examined in order to analyze the data for themes or categories based on a personal perspective that is fixed in a particular sociopolitical and historical moment, and to interpret the personal and social implications of findings, discussing what has been discovered and suggesting further inquiries. Such an exploratory design is particularly important, he contends, when the researcher is not initially sure which factors are important and need to be scrutinized.

Merriam (1998) compares the researcher’s role in this process to that of a detective. In this scenario, everything is extremely important to begin with, as everyone is a “suspect” at first (p. 21). Therefore, the qualitative researcher should sustain a tolerance for ambiguity and sensitivity to details, as well as strong interpersonal and communication skills.

Although the unstructured, interpretive nature of qualitative design is not likely to make such a study acceptable in a Turkish academic community that is entrenched in the more customary quantitative research, the researcher’s interest in comprehending the meaning government-sponsored scholars have constructed from their experiences has led him to make the unconventional and possibly risky decision to choose a qualitative research method for this study.

## Research Questions

As the study aimed to add to the debate about MoNE-sponsored scholars by documenting the personal and professional experiences of two foreign educated university faculty members, the author posed the following research questions:

- How did the participants construct their opportunities for career development?
- How did they perceive their relationships with colleagues, students, and university administration?
- How did they evaluate their contributions to higher education in their country?
- How did their experiences in the Turkish higher education system parallel the aims of Law No. 1416?

## Data Collection: Participants, Setting, and Process

**Participants.** For sampling purposes, the researcher obtained a list of the population of interest from the Turkish Ministry of National Education on June 21, 2006. As Fraenkel and Wallen (2008) discuss, most qualitative researchers employ purposive sampling in order to “select a sample they feel will yield the best understanding of what they are studying” (p. 431). Thus, the researcher used purposive sampling and chose the only two individuals who met the following criteria: a) they had obtained a doctoral degree in the field of language education in the United States as MoNE-sponsored students; and b) they had taught at a university in Turkey for five to ten years after finishing their studies abroad.

The first participant, Alp (pseudonyms have been used to protect the participants’ identities) was a male assistant professor who had been a member of the English Language Teaching department of a large Turkish university since completing his doctoral studies at a Mid-Atlantic university in the U.S. in the early 2000s. The second participant, Ece, was a female associate professor who had been a member of the English Language Teaching department at another prominent Turkish university since completing her doctoral degree in the northeastern U.S. in the late 1990s. The focus of this study was on their experiences and on the perceptions and meanings they attached to those experiences as expressed in their narratives. Particular attention was given to the institutional and systemic obstacles they faced in the institutions they worked for and in the Turkish higher education system overall.

***Ethical considerations concerning the participants.*** The researcher employed the following safeguards to protect the rights and confidentiality of the research participants:

1. A research exemption form was filed with the Human Subjects Committee at Indiana University-Bloomington, and an endorsement for the proposed research was granted;
2. In order to obtain permission to conduct the study, the researcher passed the Protection of Human Research Participants Certification Test;

3. The required Exempt Research Statement and Study Information Sheet was filed in order to ensure that participants were fully apprised of the rationale behind the study, the research objectives, how the data would be collected and analyzed, and what the potential risks and benefits associated with the study were;
4. The participants signed a written consent form and were given access to all data collected, including transcriptions from interviews, written interpretations and reports;
5. The participants made their own decisions concerning anonymity and the use of pseudonyms;
6. The inquirer followed the academic code of ethics, including the protection of human subjects, confidentiality, and copyright issues, throughout the data collection, analysis, and reporting of this study.

**Setting.** Both of the institutions at which the participants were employed were located in a large city in Turkey and offered unconventional and relatively liberal (for Turkey) settings for students and faculty alike. Data collection, which was carried out by the researcher, took place both in the participants' offices at their affiliated institutions and at other locations of their choice (e.g., apartment).

**Process.** The researcher began the interview process with open-ended questions (e.g., Tell me about your life in Turkey since you received your doctoral degree) without mentioning any specific issues. This gave the inquirer the opportunity to elicit information about the experiences of the participants and speculate about and constantly narrow down the topics of relevance to the study. The researcher then moved on to directive questions, which required responses that followed his intentions (Ritchie, 2003). Each interview was audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. In addition, the researcher took handwritten notes to track nonverbal behaviors and to serve as back-up data in the event of an equipment malfunction.

The researcher also made use of other sources of data, which included archival files and reports from MoNE and (CoHE), newspaper articles on MoNE-sponsored students, and personal documents provided by the participants to supplement their stories (e.g., published books, curriculum vitae and correspondence). These documents were helpful for obtaining information on events that had occurred before the study began or that the inquirer was not able to personally observe (Patton, 1990). During the collection of these documents, intellectual property and copyright issues were taken into consideration, and consent was obtained wherever applicable. Because such documents do not always provide completely accurate accounts of what actually occurred (Creswell, 2009), the researcher attempted to determine their authenticity before they were used in conjunction with the interview data. Using both interviews and documents concurrently helped to reduce the limitations of using only a single method and provided a useful means for triangulating the data.

Finally, the researcher utilized his own field notes (e.g., descriptions of the setting, people or activities, and inquirer's comments). The inquirer kept both descriptive and reflective field notes. As explained by Bogdan and Biklen (2006), the descriptive field notes portrayed the participants and settings, providing a depiction of particular events, and actions, while the reflective field notes captured the researcher's thoughts

regarding procedures, development of ideas, ethical issues, attitudes and beliefs, and clarifications that required later attention. These ongoing field notes later assisted the inquirer in his reconstruction of both the participants' narratives and his own experience during the research process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### **Data Analysis**

The data collection and analysis phases of the project were carried out simultaneously (Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Merriam, 1998), so that important decisions could be made concerning the scope and direction of the research as it evolved. Following Merriam's (1998) assertion that analysis is fundamentally a process of making sense of the data, the researcher systemically organized the data in preparation for analysis. First, all interviews were transcribed verbatim. Second, parts of the interviews that were conducted in Turkish were translated into English. Third, the researcher located, read, took notes on, and photocopied the newspaper articles and other documents (i.e., official memos, MoNE and CoHE records and archival materials) pertinent to the study. Fourth, the researcher's field notes and observations were typed up and sorted. Finally, the data were organized categorically, maintaining chronological order within the categories so as to preserve the narrative flow. The researcher then read over all of the data to get a general feeling for the information and to establish its overall significance. This course of action helped the researcher to become familiar with the wide range of ideas mentioned and implied in order to make an initial judgment about the integrity, applicability, and utilization of the information gained.

This procedure was then followed by coding of the data. The researcher did not follow a complex coding scheme, but attached identifying details to each interview and to the set of field notes and documents. This portion of the research process also involved grouping the data (i.e., individual interviews, paragraphs, sentences) and tagging them with classifying terms frequently found in the actual words of the participants (Creswell, 2009). Afterward, the researcher used the leads obtained from the coding process to generate a report which provided a detailed rendering of information about the settings, people, and events pertaining to the study.

After this preliminary organization, the researcher then refined his categories and assigned a label to each one. In addition to identifying the themes and categories that appeared in the research text as findings supported by specific evidence from the data (e.g., assorted direct quotations), this information was used to determine ways to connect the themes and descriptions into a storyline which would be used to create a narrative account of the discoveries.

Finally, the researcher, by retelling the participants' stories in a research text, brought meaning to the data through a synthesis of interpretations filtered through his own experiences, as well as insights gained from the literature on which the study was theoretically founded. The aim of this process was to explore how the knowledge constructed through this study answered, failed to answer or shifted the research questions and to discover any other questions the findings yielded that the inquirer had not anticipated. Lastly, as the advocacy/participatory approach and the critical theory lens both entailed, the researcher brought to light oppressive structures within the Turkish system, and employing the inferences and implications of the study, called for an action

agenda for reform to improve the participants' lives, as well as Turkish higher education and the MoNE's international scholarship program.

### **Trustworthiness and Credibility Measures**

The traditional notions of reliability, validity, and generalizability, as understood in quantitative research, are replaced in qualitative studies by the concepts of "trustworthiness," "authenticity," and "credibility" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 124) to assist in verifying the accuracy of the findings and to judge whether they are convincing from the standpoint of the researcher, the study participants, and the target audience. Since the perspective of the researcher has a great deal of impact on a qualitative study, several actions were taken to ensure the trustworthiness and authenticity of the research. For trustworthiness purposes, the inquirer made his own subjectivity explicit to the reader by emphasizing his personal standing as "*one of the researched*," and by making the orientation of the study clear from the outset. The researcher also provided a detailed account of the focus of the study, his own role in the project, the basis for selection of the participants, and the context in which the data were gathered. Data collection and analysis strategies have been reported in detail to provide a clear picture of the methods used so that the reader could assess the viability, strength, and stability of such methods. Furthermore, when reporting the data, the researcher made every attempt to include stories that were initially omitted and information that sometimes conflicted with the themes, as sharing whatever contradictory information arises in a study of life experiences serves to add to the trustworthiness of a narrative account.

The researcher used triangulation of different data sources and examined the evidence from these sources to build a coherent justification for themes in order to reinforce the trustworthiness and authenticity of the findings. For example, interviewing the participants several times was not only useful for gaining additional information, but also served as a means of discovering whether there were any additions or inconsistencies in what was reported on different occasions. Similarly, the concurrent use of interviews, field notes, and documents helped to substantiate the inferences the researcher made from the data.

Other strategies were employed in addition to the triangulation of sources for increased quality control, cross-check of information, and convergence among different methods. These included member-checks of the interview transcripts and analysis; peer debriefings by a colleague; and weekly consultations with an adviser on the researcher's dissertation committee to obtain periodic feedback about the interpretations and reconstructions of the stories. In addition, an external auditor who was unfamiliar with both the researcher and the study reviewed the entire project at the conclusion of the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Reporting the Results**

Since this was a qualitative study, it was appropriate to present the results in a descriptive, narrative form. The final project included a retelling of the participants' stories and took the form of an in-depth reconstruction of their experiences and the meanings they attached to them. The researcher created interpretive connections among

the narrative vignettes and contextual descriptions to construct the larger narrative structure. This invited readers to engage vicariously in the challenges the participants had encountered and provided a lens through which they could view the participants' world and relive their stories.

## Results

### Alp's Story

#### **"Do not come back to Turkey!"**

It was yet another humid July morning in Turkey as I approached the door of the small office where two professors were sharing a quiet summer moment. The door and windows were propped open to take advantage of any breeze—even at this large, prestigious university, there was no air conditioning to alleviate the intense heat.

"That must be him," I told myself, matching one of the professors to the picture I had formulated in my mind. "Alp Hoca?" I asked, using the Turkish designation for "teacher." The professor stood, offering me a warm welcome. Although he knew me only through a few email communications, he introduced me to his colleague as a *friend* studying in the United States. The pleasant reception and his informal language quelled the initial nervousness I had felt.

As we chatted and discussed my plans for the future, I heard the same advice I had heard from so many others: "Do not come back to Turkey!" This time, it was coming from someone who, as I was doing, had completed his Ph.D. in the United States as a government sponsored student, and who had, as he put it, made the "mistake" of returning to Turkey. "I did not have someone to tell me what I am telling you right now. I did not know what to expect; so listen to me, and do not come back!" he repeated.

I had come expecting Alp to give me a description of how he had transferred the knowledge and training he had received in the United States to his position as a professor in Turkey, but instead, he was giving me a warning – and a personal revelation that made me feel uncomfortable. Yet, at the same time, I sensed that he was in earnest, and I instinctively trusted him.

Alp was clearly passionate about his assertion, and I wondered what could have happened to turn this seemingly enthusiastic intellectual into a pessimist. Yet nothing seemed to slow the litany of his accrued grievances. "I'm done with this school. I'm tired of intolerance, narrow-mindedness, and power struggles. I'm filling out job applications right now! I'm leaving this place next year!" Joining in the discussion, his office-mate revealed that she was weary of the happenings in their department and was now planning to retire early.

**Alp's education abroad.** My second interview with Alp took place, at his request, in his modest apartment. He described his first experience in the United States, where he had spent a year as a high school exchange student. In contrast to the Turkish educational system's highly centralized, predetermined curricula and limited, freedom in selection of courses, Alp was amazed at the choices and variety he found in the U.S.:

There was a variety of courses like cooking and carpentry, even though I didn't take either of them. It was new; it was new! I remember writing to my parents ... how the courses were different. It really affected me. I took Spanish back then, but even today in Turkey, only English, French, and sometimes German are taught in high schools.

Even biology class was new and exciting – he was astonished to discover that, rather than simply listening to the teacher and taking notes, the students were expected to perform dissections on their own and to draw their own conclusions from what they found.

His year abroad gave Alp the opportunity to experience things he might have otherwise only heard about or seen on television. It was for this reason that, when an old roommate called after his return to Turkey and told him that the MoNE was currently taking applications for their study-abroad program, he decided to take a chance and fill out the application, though he did not seriously think he had a chance of being selected.

Yet, despite his doubts, Alp was chosen as one of a select few scholarship recipients to pursue graduate studies in the United States. He was thrilled at the opportunity, yet he also realized how difficult his task would be. “Our mission was to restructure the Turkish university system, to make it better; to bring the current mass of information and new research techniques there [in the United States] to Turkey. Thus, we had a ‘Jon Turk’ mission. Like Prometheus fetching fire.” Alp thrived at his American university, working hard and earning his doctoral degree in three years; he was eager to return to his beloved country and begin his teaching career. What he did not expect was that his dream job would soon feel like a nightmare.

**Defeated expectations – lack of support from Turkish colleagues.** Almost immediately upon returning to assume his teaching position in Turkey, Alp could sense that neither he nor his proposals for change were welcome. “I soon observed that our faculty members were prejudiced. ... They weren't open to change or learning,” he explained. Although disagreement is to be expected in any academic setting, Alp managed to alienate himself in particularly short order. Sensing the hostility of his fellow faculty members, he responded in kind, criticizing colleagues in his department for what he considered their lack of true professional commitment.

Meanwhile, Alp's attempts to put his knowledge and training into practice were often thwarted, both by his co-workers and his superiors. “From the moment I set foot in my department, no one seemed to care about my credentials,” he complained. “What counted was my job title. ‘No, you can't do this, you are only a lecturer; no, you can't do that, you are only a lecturer.’ That's the only answer I heard whenever I tried to get something done.” Even though his colleagues were overburdened with teaching, advising, and administrative duties, Alp was not allowed so much as to direct a thesis. For his first four years in the department, he was assigned a heavy load of undergraduate courses and was never consulted regarding what he would prefer to teach.

Alp's dissatisfaction with his work environment began to affect his teaching. On several occasions, when he asked his students at the end of the semester what they had thought of him, they told him that they found him emotionally unstable; while this bothered him, he could only agree:

Most of the time, I was very unbalanced as a teacher; rude to the students; oppressive. ... My students had to tolerate me, because that was the system, but right now I really feel guilty about how I treated some of them. ... The educational context really, really, got on my nerves, and it turned me into a monster in many of my classes.

I wanted to know more about his unbalanced behavior, as it seemed so unlike his current, pleasant demeanor, and he explained: “I was teaching a novel class. My god, I was rough on them. I would humiliate them; I would take my anger out on them. Because ... every week, we were having faculty meetings, and I felt like I was being pushed to the bottom.”

**Resistance to new ideas.** On top of his lack of positive interpersonal relationships, Alp faced opposition to his modern-day thinking, particularly in the area of critical teaching and research. “Look at the publications of [Turkish] professors who have studied in the United States. Most of us are the ones who bring the latest research to our fields. I brought the concept of ‘critical’ to my department—as in critical studies,” he declared. He underscored his efforts to introduce new research paradigms, despite the emphasis on traditional methods such as quantitative research. After all, wasn’t bringing in new ideas what he was asked to do when he was sent to the United States? Yet the realities of the Turkish system prevailed:

Qualitative research was a very new thing—I took qualitative research in the United States, even knowing that people in Turkey are doing quantitative research. There was this problem: when they were sending us, they told us to bring back new things, and we did. Then they said, “What is qualitative, anyway? It must be quantitative.” But you [MoNE administrators] told us to bring what was new, and we brought it!

His individual attempts to modernize the content and methods of teaching and research in his academic department were not often successful, as his colleagues were neither supportive of his efforts nor tolerant of change. Although Alp was permitted to choose the material to be covered in his own classes, it was a struggle to gain acceptance for any new courses, programs, research methods and other pedagogic initiatives. Consequently, although asserting that he was all about “practicing what he preached,” the pressure from his colleagues sometimes caused him to relax some of his ideals and adopt a “do as I say, not as I do” approach with his students. He stressed that the difficulty of getting his attempts at reform and innovation recognized led to a disassociation between his assigned role of bringing new knowledge and methodologies to Turkish higher education and the realities of academic life.

**Lack of classroom materials and inadequate physical conditions.** Another obstacle that made Alp’s job nearly impossible at times was the lack of even the most basic necessities for teaching. Resources were extremely limited – his department did not even have a copy machine. Distributing classroom materials to his students meant that he either had to make copies for them at his own expense, which his limited finances prevented, or that he had to charge the students for the copies he made. While he hated to

do this, he really had no other choice. Alp also deplored the physical conditions in which he worked:

Classrooms are terrible. Like, I was teaching in [Room] B9. It was colder than outside; students were begging me to let them go, because they were literally sitting with their gloves and hats on. It was terrible, it was cold! The windows were cracked. Can you imagine this? ... I remember another time ... the electricity went off. I had a lesson plan of four hours, and there was no electricity, and I'm not joking. Four hours listening; do it! So ... I let them go.

**Inherent barriers to reform in Turkish higher education.** Alp believed that Turkey's rigid and prescriptive higher education system left no room for creativity or growth and that teaching staff were obliged to focus more on the rules than on their teaching. Overall, reflecting on his personal experiences and observations throughout his career in Turkey, he perceived that the hierarchical and bureaucratic nature of the nation's higher education system impaired attempts by faculty to respond to the needs of students. Any motions toward bringing innovation or reform, he felt, were thwarted by institutional barriers that deflected efforts to implement change.

Based on his own experience, he censured the lack of faculty autonomy in decision-making regarding university affairs; the organizational structure of the public university system did not encourage participation in leadership, instead fostering a top-down command-and-control model of administration. Alp argued that without major adjustments aimed at resolving the issues and challenges faced by faculty – from inadequate pay to the lack of autonomy to the poorly defined professional standards for review and promotion – the attempts to reform higher education would fall short, as had certainly been the case with his own efforts.

Alp believed that the lack of consistent standards, in particular, created a significant barrier to reform. Rectifying this situation, he asserted, called for establishing legitimate standards for teacher education, with such standards being carefully scrutinized in relation to the unique aspects of Turkey and the Turkish education system, as well as recent advances in teacher education around the world.

Although he felt that setting up rational standards was the key to raising the status of the teaching profession and improving the quality of education, Alp was decidedly against the administrative power mechanism in Turkish higher education. He asserted that a move toward a more horizontal system of governance was critical, enabling faculty to become vigorously involved in the formulation of academic policies, with standards and regulations serving as an egalitarian management system for accountability rather than as a means of authoritarian control. Such governance, he believed, would help faculty, programs, and schools to better serve the nation's diverse student populations and encourage them to work for the good of the educational system as a whole.

**Small victories.** In spite of the adversity which he constantly faced, Alp felt that he had truly tried everything he could to transform the dogmatic approaches to thinking and learning in the Turkish system. Looking back, he recognized that his efforts had,

indeed, brought about some positive change. For instance, he described his success in getting new courses introduced to the curriculum:

It was because of me that the Qualitative Research course was accepted to be a part of the department curriculum. It was at my demand that the Film and ELT course was accepted. These were, in my opinion, very important. In our department, the qualitative research course was included in the graduate level curriculum at my urging. And the film course was included in the undergraduate curriculum only through my efforts. In the curricular sense, these were two big achievements.

Alp was convinced that critical thinking courses such as these would be immensely beneficial for students, not only helping to improve their knowledge, but also enabling them to become more open-minded as professionals.

As we discussed his contributions to the university, Alp described some sacrifices he had made for the sake of his students. For instance, summer classes are not typical at Turkish universities; however, they may be offered at the discretion of faculty members who are willing to give up their summer holiday to teach them. Alp had volunteered his time over several summers to provide supplemental coursework for his students.

“And I mentioned Erasmus, right?” posed Alp, as he continued talking about his accomplishments. Erasmus, a major European exchange program, offers thousands of university students the opportunity to study for a period of time at a university or other higher education institution in participating European countries. The rationale behind the program, as he explained, was that contact with another country would enable the students to become more adaptable to new environments, as well as providing intercultural communication skills and an overall rewarding personal, academic, and social experience. He revealed that in his role as a coordinator for the program, he had made the largest number of connections in the university for students to study abroad.

Although Alp had not achieved everything he had hoped for, he was still relatively proud of the differences he had been able to make in spite of so many hurdles: “If you ask me, I believe I have contributed to progress,” he told me. “I believe I always did my best to benefit the university, my nation that sent me to the U.S. and helped me receive education, and my educational, economic, and social system.” He was particularly happy with the fact that, after his initial failures, he had eventually been able to establish strong relationships with his students. “My students have always told me this,” he mentioned,

That I taught them to look at things from another perspective; none of the other professors did that. My graduate students always say how much they benefit from me, because I never told them “no”. I always encouraged them by saying, “Why don’t you look at it this way?” through critical inquiry, by never discouraging them from topics they were passionate about, by never saying “no, stop” and building walls around them, and by always saying to them, “Here is what I believe; think about it and compare it to what you think. ... I will support your choice regardless.” I always try

to get them to make and support their own decisions and take responsibility for the outcomes.

Alp wanted to prepare his students to think critically and use their own minds, even in a repressive system which often silenced them. His education and training in the United States had given him a spirit of “*go ahead, go get it, do it, why don't you do it, why don't you try, give it a try,*” which he tried to reflect in his own teaching.

Yet, he was only human, and despite these small victories, Alp recognized that his perseverance in introducing the principles he had carried from the United States had decreased over time. It frustrated him to observe that his students were often unresponsive to his efforts to introduce new learning methods, as they had essentially been trained to resist anything outside the norm.

**Alp's dilemma – whether to stay or leave.** Although he felt he had made some progress, Alp was not convinced that he had made any significant contribution to the future of his department, as he continued to think of it as a “dysfunctional body.” Despite his reluctance to be drawn in, he was now a part of it and consequently felt persecuted and harmed by it. Day after day, he became more aware of negative changes in his attitude and behavior, and he was uncertain about the immediate and future outcomes of his efforts:

I am not sure about what I brought to the department in the long run, because there is a rigid, ill nature specific to our department. I cannot even tell you that they should shut down the department entirely and just leave me there, because that department infected me as well. Thus, as long as I stay here, that ill-natured system will continue, because after all, I became a part of that sick system. But on the other hand, I did my best, and if I changed something, I did it by myself with my own attempts. I could not change my department as much as I could change the Faculty of Education Journal, because in my own department, they said, “Sit down and keep quiet; don't cause any problems!”

Although he had always been willing to resist and fight back, the constraints within the system were just too strong. Alp concluded that leaving the university was the only way he would be able to realize his career goals. As a scholar, he was committed to the pursuit of social and environmental justice in his teaching and research, but the static intellectual environment of his department suppressed progressive thinking. He hoped to pursue personal and professional development in a fresh setting that would promote these endeavors.

Although he could not wait to leave the Turkish higher education system, Alp did not consider the money invested by MoNE on his education to be a waste; on the contrary, he believed that the government was, in fact, indebted to him:

I have been teaching 20 to 25 hours a week with spectacular English. Now you tell me how many hours a week an assistant professor teaches in the United States? A maximum of nine hours, or 12 hours at the most! I taught

24 hours! I have been working for five years. It means I taught for ten years according to world standards, isn't this right? In addition, I taught summer courses—nine credit hours each. In other words, I undertook a 12- to 13-year course load in five years here. In these five years, I also squeezed in a journal editorship, our university faculty journal, and also my own journal. I also refereed countless manuscripts and advised numerous students. The university asked for change; the education system asked for change, and I always guided students toward change, and if you look at this in terms of human cost, I used much effort. Thus, I don't think MoNE's investment was a waste. Actually, as I said, they owe me. They owe me, rather than I owe them!

However, leaving the university was easier to say than do for Alp. Torn between realizing his ideals and surviving in his academic environment, he found it difficult to make a decision about leaving Turkey. Although he constantly referred to his desire to quit, he was, in fact, hesitant about his future plans. There were so many issues to consider; there was no doubt that he loved his country and his work, and his eyes shone as he spoke about teaching and his students. Moreover, although he felt marginalized, he was encouraged by the small progress he had made. Nevertheless, he also recognized that what he wanted to achieve was at variance with the dynamics of the system; hence, one key question remained unanswered for Alp: "Can I really change the system, or will the system change me in the end?" He was fearful that the latter would be the case, and his struggle would not be worth it. "If I'm going to be absorbed into the system as it is, I'd rather go somewhere else," he mused.

Not surprisingly, at the end of our interviews, he was still in a state of indecision. He admitted to me that, while he dreamed of leaving, he also considered that his departure would be a 'loss' for him and a 'win' for the status quo – and he did not want to lose, not after all he had done and been through! Yet, as I left his apartment, he continued to implore me not to make the same mistake he had: "Do not come back to Turkey!"

### **Ece's Story**

#### **"Rules are flexible for some, but not for others."**

At 8:15 on a summer morning, I was wandering the corridors of the English Language teaching department of a prestigious Turkish university. I was early for an interview with my research participant, Ece, and no one was around except the cafeteria staff, who were busy preparing for the upcoming day.

Soon, students and faculty began arriving, and footsteps and chatter replaced the early-morning calm. A few minutes after 9:00 a.m., I noticed Ece walking from the parking lot, holding the hand of a little girl. "Finally," I thought, standing to one side in order to give her some time to settle in. As she approached her office, I greeted her; smiling, she invited me in. She had been running late, she explained, and had not had time to drop her daughter off at daycare. "It's a hectic life these days," she declared – an effect of her recent promotion to an associate professorship. Moving up the academic

ladder granted not only a more coveted title, but also a myriad of responsibilities; needless to say, she now had too much to do and too little time to get it all done.

After my interviews with Alp, Ece's gentler attitude came as a surprise. Yet no matter how tactful she seemed, I had imagined a different scenario after my experience with Alp. "Is she really not going to warn me against returning to Turkey?" I kept wondering, but the only theme I heard again and again was how chaotic her life was. Currently, she was teaching summer courses and conducting research, as well as taking care of her numerous administrative duties. Dealing with so many obligations left her no time for herself; as a case in point, she mentioned that she would soon have to attend a meeting in the dean's office that she had only just found out about. I could not decide if she was ever going to stop moving during our meeting.

After she scheduled yet another appointment, we began to discuss my dissertation research and Ece's availability for another interview. She nodded toward her overloaded schedule book and said she preferred to have longer, but fewer meetings. Tapping her pen on her desk, Ece looked, but was unable to find an opening for our next appointment, so I suggested that we exchange emails to discuss her availability and arrange a day and time. Leaving her office, I thought to myself that such a chaotic daily routine could not be good for anybody.

**Ece's education abroad.** Our second meeting was slightly less hectic than the first; sitting in her office, Ece described her early experiences in school. Although she modestly claimed otherwise, she had been a brilliant student and seemed destined for success. Having developed excellent English skills early on, she entered university with the intention of becoming an English teacher. She was very much focused on her studies, and unlike many of her friends, did not give much thought to "hanging out and staying out late." Consequently, she developed a strong foundation in English during her college years and graduated from her program at the top of her class.

Yet, despite her academic enthusiasm, Ece stressed that she had never specifically planned on pursuing graduate studies; she tended to make short-term plans and took life one day at a time. After she graduated from college, she began to think about going to graduate school, but she did not really know what she wanted to study. Eventually, she settled on pursuing her master's degree in Early Childhood Education, believing that going into a different field would broaden her personal and professional perspective by developing her knowledge and skills in a new content area.

As she was getting ready to start her master's studies, she received two separate offers of work as a research assistant. After careful consideration, she chose a research position in the English Language and Literature Department. Shortly after beginning her new job, she learned from a friend about the prospect of pursuing graduate studies abroad as a MoNE-sponsored student. Ece had entertained the idea of studying abroad before, but she had never thought it feasible. Now, the terms of this scholarship, particularly with its monthly stipend and allowances to cover health insurance and book costs, changed her outlook.

Ece applied for the MoNE scholarship and took all of the requisite exams. Although she did not count on being chosen, she was accepted into the program and soon found herself rushing to fill out applications to U.S. universities in time to meet their deadlines. What struck me as she described this process was that she had mainly picked

her schools at random. As acceptance letters started to roll in, Ece decided in favor of a large university in the northeastern United States and headed off to begin a new chapter in her life. She appreciated the opportunity to pursue graduate studies at a U.S. university, as she greatly admired the American educational system:

I believed that [American universities] were at the forefront of everything. I still believe in that, too. We, of course, have very good academicians here, we are good, but with the exception of certain institutions, we don't have schools that can compete with American universities. I knew then that the United States would make very special contributions to me.

She revealed that the reality exceeded her expectations; things only got better for her as time passed, and in the end, even with the early struggles and discomfort she experienced away from home, she found that studying in the United States suited her and her personal and professional goals. However, at times, Ece felt that her graduate education in the U.S. was not much different from what she would have received in Turkey. During our conversation, she seemed to want to credit U.S. education and the quality of Turkish education at the same time, which led her to make seemingly contradictory statements. Yet Ece never questioned the benefits of pursuing graduate studies in the United States; after receiving her master's degree, she elected to continue her education and began working toward her Ph.D. While she revealed that she had found aspects of her master's studies to be repetitive, she argued that her doctoral studies were much more meaningful to her.

Being very content with her life in the United States, Ece began to ask herself whether she should stay after completing her Ph.D. However, she reminded herself of her national duty to return to Turkey to complete her compulsory service. Although she could, in theory, find a job in the U.S. and pay the government back, she concluded that it was not the right thing to do. Not only would it take years to pay back her scholarship, but she was acutely aware of the responsibility she had undertaken. "You might be successful and desire to stay [in the United States], but the Ministry of National Education gives that funding on the condition that you return to Turkey to do service and to transfer your knowledge and training," she pointed out. "I always felt that responsibility deep inside of me."

Ece was ready to go back to Turkey and start preparing future teachers of English as a teacher educator at one of the most reputable universities in the country. She was confident that her education and training had prepared her well for the job, yet she admitted that she had major reservations about returning to live and work in her homeland. She had been away for years, and she understood that she would face issues with readjustment. In addition, she knew that professors were not well-paid in Turkey. At any rate, she told me, "I came back despite knowing this and other things." She was not a stranger to the institutional culture in Turkey, and she had legitimate concerns about the politics of the Turkish higher education system.

[In Turkey] things are a little more unregulated; rules can be bent and broken. And you become aware of this. And this is a troubling fact. In that sense, I was probably feeling more secure in the United States, because if

there is a rule, if you are right ... you know, you feel yourself more at ease. Things are a little bit more bendable in Turkey. For instance, things can be one way for some people, but another way for others. And this causes a feeling of vulnerability for people. I was expecting this would happen, and I was right ... There are individualized and biased rules, such that they work for some, but they do not for others. I was aware of that!

Yes, Ece was aware of all of these things; however, she was determined to go back and enthusiastic about helping to revolutionize education in Turkey.

**Finding her feet in Turkish higher education.** Ece began her teaching career as a lecturer, even though, with her qualifications, she should have been appointed as an assistant professor. She confessed that this just had not crossed her mind at the time. She quickly got involved in numerous tasks at the university, including a heavy teaching load:

What courses did I teach? Methodology courses, reading courses, speaking courses. ... I taught Linguistics for a long time. During the first few years, I usually taught these courses. After that, I taught materials development, testing, practice teaching, school experience. ... I taught every course on ELT and its practice ... translation ... I did, and still do, teach every course except literature.

Quite unlike Alp, this “friendly, hardworking, and approachable” academic was determined to establish good personal and academic relationships with her colleagues. I listened intently as Ece revealed, “I didn’t experience any problems in my normal colleague and friend interactions. I had heard that some may be subject to discrimination at certain institutions, because, for instance, they came from the United States; I have not experienced anything like that.” When I asked her more about this, she persisted in saying that she had encountered no resistance to her attempts to transfer her knowledge, training, and experience to her Turkish setting.

**Issues with Turkey’s academic culture.** Bemused by Ece’s narrative, which was so different from what I had heard from Alp, I asked her to tell me more about her perceptions of American versus Turkish education. Although she emphasized the similarities between the university where she currently taught – which she found to be open to innovation – and American institutions, she pointed out significant differences in the larger Turkish education system, enumerating the issues she found in Turkey as a whole. Academic freedom was often a concern; teacher-centered, rather than student-centered curricula were the norm; some courses relied too much on rote learning, rather than understanding the material; and the assessment system was based mainly on tests, rather than on writing papers and other alternative methods of evaluation. Furthermore, she revealed, she was bothered by certain environmental factors in the Turkish higher education system, particularly the subjectivity and partisanship in the application of rules:

There are prescribed rules to obey in any circumstance that govern the university, and there are also unwritten rules that are not spelled out on

paper. This troubles everyone, including me. As I said before, I could have been appointed as an assistant professor at the time; why wasn't I? Who made that decision? Maybe it would have happened had I pushed for it. In other words, you expect the leadership to objectively assess such things and consider you to be appropriate for the position. You expect them to treat you fairly. It is not nice that unwritten rules are put into practice. ... Rules are flexible for some, but not for others; it was like that in the past, and it is the same at present.

Even though, in this rare moment of criticism, Ece acknowledged that this situation bothered her a great deal, she professed that she did not let it get in her way. Particularly in her initial years, she had simply taught her classes and gone home, so she was not really affected by such issues. However, "as time goes by, you are reluctantly drawn into everything ... you become part of the place and problems. And when that happens, you become more aware of the institutional culture and what is going on," she argued. As she became more active in the department, she grew increasingly frustrated by the lack of support from colleagues:

What bothers me the most here in the Turkish system is that—in the United States, when you have even a minor contribution or an idea, it is immediately applauded and appreciated—but here even if you invented something, they would be "hmmm, good" or there would be no response whatsoever. ... There is no external encouragement, support or appreciation, and that of course wears on the individual over time. It affects and changes one's self confidence and self-perception, too. In general, there is always praising there, but here you are nothing!

**Lack of cooperation among colleagues.** As we spoke, Ece's narrative gradually revealed that her experiences were more complex than she initially let on. She clearly felt that lack of encouragement from her colleagues made it difficult to assess her own performance, and she began to doubt herself and her skills. Discouraged by the egocentricity in academia, she stated that she had a hard time understanding why joint effort and cooperation were lacking among professors. "It may partly be attributed to the dynamics of Turkish culture," she speculated, but her personal experience outside the university told a different story: "People outside academic circles are actually more helpful; they can work collectively—like every neighbor helps each other. There is such a positive environment."

Now, it seemed, we were getting to the heart of things. Ece described the less-than-admirable actions of academics, explaining that there was "intense competition and pretentiousness among people in the department that was not discussed." The narcissism and hostility affected the operation of departmental tasks from time to time and placed an additional burden on certain individuals:

For instance, a committee or duty comes, people are like "I have this project, I'm working on that paper, I have deadlines, but not very much time," and they say they can't do it. These are just small examples. And

you feel sorry for them and think to yourself that they must be really busy; and somebody else takes responsibility for their duties. Of course, then the tasks at the department are put upon the same few people who always do them.

In addition to the unfair distribution of administrative tasks, there was an unpleasant atmosphere of secrecy. Faculty members often did not share ideas, keeping their projects to themselves. For example, when Ece was filling in for the department chair for a while, she was asked for information about a certification program a few of her colleagues were evidently about to launch, and she had never heard of it. She also described how some of her colleagues would hide their research and prospective publications, not even mentioning if they were applying for tenure or a promotion. Ece did not appreciate such lack of communication and mistrust; she found these actions “odd and meaningless.” On the other hand, it was common for her colleagues to gossip about important information meant to be discussed only in private conversations. “For instance, I was going to go to [an African country]; I told a few people about it long before it was confirmed. Then I started hearing about it from people I didn’t even know.” She believed that “such actions do provoke people to be selfish” and articulated that she had always tried to avoid such behaviors; but she admitted that watching self-interested people and not responding in the same manner sometimes made her feel like a naïve fool.

**Successful endeavors.** These environmental hindrances did not diminish Ece’s drive to serve her country. She had a great enthusiasm to make a difference for teacher education in Turkey, and this was reflected in her many accomplishments. Her proudest achievement was, without a doubt, the language lab she had singlehandedly established, and which she described to me in detail:

It’s a multi-media computer lab. There are 30 computers linked to each other with a networking system. The instructor can see each student’s screen, close it, or project a student’s screen to the entire classroom, and can do many other things. All computers are connected to the Internet, and you can have all the students complete the same task at the same time over the Internet. There is projection ... an audio system, an amplifier.

In addition to creating the language lab, she promoted numerous initiatives in teacher education. As the coordinator for both the master’s and doctoral degree programs, for instance, she designed a plan modeled after her experiences in the United States. Rather than being offered no choice in the selection of courses, students would have the flexibility to choose electives within their specialization areas, established around a core curriculum.

Overall, Ece deemed Turkish academia to be “fairly open to new initiatives, innovative beliefs and thoughts brought from developed countries, as long as they did not threaten the existence and power of authority” within that system. Thus, she said that she had never been afraid to implement new initiatives inspired by her education abroad, whether or not they were always popular. “I can’t put into practice the things that I don’t support,” she asserted and continued with an example of how her divergence from some

of the old-school practices in the system, though it had not been initially appealing, was, in due course, embraced by her students and nurtured their confidence and progress. She described a research methods course in which she had each student choose a topic, come up with research questions and write a proposal – something they had never done in other courses. Although it was very difficult work for them, when they had successfully carried out their studies and written research papers, they were proud of what they had been able to accomplish.

**Riding the waves of systemic and institutional challenges.** Ece emphasized that she was successful in her position because she was balanced and patient, gradually introducing new ideas while making sure that they were culturally appropriate and relevant to the Turkish educational context. She realized that trying to bring about drastic transformation by strong-arming her way through the system would have little chance of success.

When I asked her how helpful Western practices were for addressing the unique problems of Turkish education, Ece emphasized the need to thoroughly review other countries' approaches to education to be able to prepare an effective program that would enrich teacher education practices in Turkey. "You cannot take a country's educational system and directly apply it to another country without modification," she asserted, just as "you cannot wear somebody else's dress without altering it; it wouldn't fit you."

She elaborated with an example of how certain globally accepted ideas and practices were not necessarily welcomed in Turkey and could not be easily adopted. For example, she pointed out that concepts such as "mentor teaching" and "peer teaching and assessment" made the majority of Turkish teachers uncomfortable, so they simply refused them.

Ece felt that being receptive to the alterations she had to make to put her Western-acquired knowledge and training into practice in Turkish higher education led to her growing success and reputation as a thriving academic. She had held various leadership roles at the university and had cultivated the power to make an impact. She had worked as the acting head of her department, as well as coordinating the master's and doctoral degree programs; she was also on the Quality Commission while serving as an active member of the Faculty Council and Faculty Management Board. This success had not happened overnight. It had come with hard work and considered action that meant, at times, putting up with the more unpleasant elements of the Turkish university system. She had faced a difficult climb up the academic ladder and had endured countless compromises in her endeavors to fit in.

**Reinforcing the value of MoNE's funding.** Looking back at her experience studying in the United States as a MoNE-sponsored student, Ece was extremely satisfied. She had been given the opportunity to go to "the best school one could possibly attend [in the United States]," and she was now teaching at one of the best public universities in Turkey.

"So do you think it was all worth coming back to Turkey?" I asked, the question having weighed on my mind since the beginning of our meetings. "Money-wise, I don't, that's for sure," she laughed. However, she was "spiritually" satisfied and content with her job. Despite her hectic schedule, she enjoyed teaching classes, directing theses and

conducting research. Ece made it clear that she had never regretted returning to Turkey. Had she stayed in the United States and worked there, she assumed she would have received “more external motivation” and secured “better pay,” but she believed that the challenges and conflicts she faced in Turkey would still exist anywhere in the world. Although she was not always happy with what she experienced, she had identified the issues and problems that she had to deal with as natural components of academic life and developed strategies to take the issues in hand and negotiate with, rather than resist the system.

For Ece, the MoNE scholarship, by and large, fulfilled its aims effectively. It had made it possible for her to study in the United States, and by doing so, had contributed to her personal and professional growth. She also believed that the country had gained considerably by supporting her and other students abroad. When I asked what the payoff for both parties was, she elaborated:

The United States contributed to my development as a scholar. My work here contributes to it as well. On the other hand, I trained countless students—at undergraduate, masters and doctoral levels. Some of those students became department chairs at other universities. It is very pleasant to experience such things. They are working at different institutions; they are in different countries. There were students who had received their master’s here whom we sent abroad for their doctorates. I have no doubt that they will be very successful there. ... I believe I have made an impact [on them]. Not only did I contribute to their development, I also guided them. ... If we look back, all these happened thanks to the MoNE scholarship.

However, she acknowledged that the percentage of non-returning scholars was unacceptably high, which suggested that there were major problems with the program. Yet, rather than suggesting ways of understanding the issues that discouraged scholars from returning, she focused on toughening up the consequences for non-return:

The Ministry of National Education should be stricter by either increasing the monetary interests or, I don’t know, maybe having them sign something with more severe penalties before they are sent abroad. ... I have no idea if non-returning scholars actually pay back the money or they cover their tracks, I don’t know, but since there is such a high number of non-returning scholars, the consequences must not be that harsh, or the circumstances are so good in the United States that they can make such good money to pay it back; I don’t really know. ... Conditions should be made more stringent one way or another to guarantee returning back because there is a high need for returning scholars.

Ece seemed to be quite passionate on this point and kept coming back to it. She expressed condemnation of people who did not return and emphasized the need for their potential contribution to the Turkish higher education system. She was convinced that no matter what the conditions might be, walking out because of individual frustrations with the

system would never be the rational thing to do. Rising above any hurdles and sufferings in the short term for the benefit of one's country, and demonstrating perseverance and determination for the higher good, were what she felt was needed for change to happen in Turkish higher education.

### **Discussion**

This project was initially begun with the intention of exploring how MoNE-sponsored scholars contributed to higher education in Turkey upon their return and whether MoNE's financial support system was indeed successful in achieving the aims delineated by this program. However, after consulting with committee members, the researcher's original purpose was soon replaced by the inspiration to consider the issue as a case of cross-cultural diffusion of ideas and to discover, based on the experiences of two individuals, what did and did not get diffused in the returning scholars' new context of Turkish higher education. The researcher hypothesized that the knowledge, principles and values instilled in MoNE-sponsored scholars during their education in the United States did flourish in many ways upon their return to Turkey, and that these intellectuals were able to contribute significantly to the higher education reform movement in the country. However, this hypothesis was not well supported by the research.

The stories of these two individuals highlighted the reality that the academic structure in Turkey was not always welcoming, and the bureaucratic patterns of governance and decision making in institutions represented substantial obstacles which often impeded their success at infusing new ideas and initiatives. They received little support from within the system which might have initially encouraged the enthusiasm and commitment needed to bring about positive change. Instead, low pay, perceived unfairness and a lack of standards in academic promotions and other rewards characterized the bulk of their experiences. Their creative projects and proposals were often thwarted, as in the case of Ece's language lab, which lacked ongoing support after she had established it due to a lack of available funds.

Another underlying theme in the narratives was the distribution of power. Both participants had become aware of the power of politics in Turkish academia soon after they started working at their respective universities. The lack of institutional and individual autonomy did not allow for redistribution of authority and control, and as a result, they experienced very little sense of empowerment and freedom.

Work overload was another serious threat to the implementation of change, as both individuals had many competing priorities and had to take on heavy teaching loads and administrative tasks, apart from their time spent on research. Another major barrier they reported was the flawed academic environment, which was characterized by cold and antagonistic relations, rather than a congenial and friendly atmosphere that could encourage collaboration and cross-semination of ideas. Although both individuals were good role models and demonstrated the desired characteristics of a successful academician, their efforts were generally restricted and they were unable to achieve more than surface-level improvements. What is more, no professional organization existed to provide support for their efforts, and thus, they had no other choice but to fight their own battles; this made it virtually impossible for them to challenge traditional views and structures.

Both Ece and Alp were ostensibly sent abroad to bring back new ideas. The data in this study reflected two individual approaches to the infusion of new thinking into the Turkish higher education system. Both participants valued a culture of openness over a culture of authority and hierarchy. However, both were oppressed by the system, though in different ways; in both cases, it was evident from their stories that Turkey was not creating the right environment for reform in higher education. With the distinction between change and transformation in mind, the data painted a picture of Alp as favoring transformation, whereas Ece appeared to be all about change, and the system did not let their perspectives come together and affect each other in a dynamic way. In light of the revelations in this study, the important question to be raised is as follows: What can be accomplished by each of the approaches put forward by these academics?

The irony was that although Alp was inclined to think more critically and have more innovative ideas, Ece was the one who showed the political savvy needed to achieve some level of empowerment. Over the course of her career, she became powerful enough so that she could indeed have an effect on the system, whereas Alp was habitually penalized as a challenger and not given the power to accomplish his goals. Yet, paradoxically, the two narratives provided examples of the ways in which the individual who went against the grain could sometimes bring about change, whereas the individual in a more progressive environment and with more power was more willing to conform to the ways things were. In this sense, two conclusions can be drawn here. It can be argued either that the country is getting more of their money's worth from Alp, as he was the one advocating for transforming higher education, or that it would benefit more from Ece's cautious strategy of not resisting the system but protecting her chances of being a catalyst for change over the long term.

Based on the experiences of the two study participants, opting for one strategy over the other is not necessarily the answer; this is clearly not an either/or situation. Most would agree that education aims both to preserve a culture and to add to it. Thus, rather than choosing between the approaches of resistance and resilience, neither of which by itself is effective in aiding reform, what seems to be reasonable is to find ways to enable the two strategies to complement each other. The data reflect that we most likely need both perspectives and personality types—rebels who expose and resist what is wrong in the system, and those who can work within the existing paradigm. If one approach or the other was allowed to prevail, then in one case, people would constantly be trying to transform everything, causing chaos; and in the other, they would always resist change, maintaining the status quo. Ultimately, change and transformation must work together, and the system should facilitate the alliance of different perspectives to collaborate in a positive way.

## **Suggestions**

By sending students abroad in order to take on the role of helping academic institutions to define themselves in the larger academic world, Turkey is clearly on the right path. Yet it is important that further steps are taken to ensure that the returning scholars, as well as other academics within the system, are not tyrannized by systemic barriers and are not penalized for their efforts in bringing about reform.

There is much discussion in Turkey about the sacrifices and changes which will have to be made in order to reach the goal of becoming part of the West, and it is almost

always the universities and academicians who are expected to be a driving force in this venture. Ironically, though, academic institutions are given little or no power to take on this duty. As reflected in the experiences of the two professors in this study, Turkish universities and academics are suffering from overregulation, using nationally defined roles and strict rules which punish reform initiatives. Likewise, although universities and professors seem to agree on the need to reform higher education, they are frequently the ones who prove unwilling to undertake the initiative. Senior professors and academics, who are concerned with losing their privileges and status, are especially likely to block transformation efforts and challenges to traditional viewpoints.

As it stands, there seems to be a sizable gap between rhetoric and reality when it comes to transformation in higher education in Turkey. What is missing is the understanding that sending students abroad to reform higher education in Turkey alone, without carefully reviewing institutional barriers to change, appears to be a failing practice for achieving the expected outcomes. Ultimately the current system is not ready to operate on the basis of Western standards. There is no culture of openness or a fair system of dispute in Turkish academia; and since the system penalizes the ones who refuse to be a part of the existing structure, they are forced either to conform or to fight hopelessly in isolation. As long as the core characteristics of the system are protected and unaffected by the surface changes academics accomplish through their individual efforts, and unless the forces within the Turkish higher education system that hinder the contributions of returning scholars are addressed and eliminated, the system will reproduce, rather than reform, itself.

Although the experiences of these two individuals cannot be generalized to other contexts in a traditional sense, they provide an important overview of a larger social reality, one which promotes and maintains itself by inflicting an academic culture of authority and hierarchy, rather than cultivating a culture of dissent, openness, and equality. Thus, before anything else, the system itself needs to be reformed.

Transformation of such a system requires much debate and calls for more studies of this nature to be conducted. Case studies using personal stories have the potential to create a dynamic platform for academics to voice their concerns, articulate and debrief issues with others, build up larger networks to open up the possibility for ideas and action, and perhaps form professional organizations to promote this much-needed transformation. This will mean that enthusiastic and innovative scholars will not feel isolated in a system of oppression and they will not feel forced to fight their own battles. This is particularly crucial in preparing the groundwork for building the type of culture that will make transformation possible.

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