

Questioning Administration Processes and Autonomy of Higher Education System in Turkey

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Abstract

In recent years there is a leading discussion about the changes in higher education system in Turkey both on the media, public and among the academic staff at the universities. The Turkish government has already introduced many new universities since the early 2000s and invested on the facilities, infrastructures and university personnel. The idea behind investing on the new universities was originated in the idealism or slogan called "a university for each province". By this idealism, a large number of universities have been founded in many small cities located in rural areas. Vocational schools under body of newly born universities were also grounded in very small districts of the provinces. But it was not a simple process to establish necessary infrastructures and recruit or train academic staff with adequate experience and competences for newly born universities. The Council of Higher Education introduced a program called Faculty Member Training Program and switched on 50-D employment type, designed particularly for research assistants and based on short term contracts and precarious work. In addition Ministry for National Education initiated a program titled Selection and Placement of Students for Post-graduate Study Abroad, which is an exam for those candidates who want to take master and doctoral education abroad. The selection processes for both programs are highly centralized and questionable but the issue which is even more serious is about the number of the positions reserved for particular fields of studies. All in all, this paper will mainly focus on the processes of administration processes for employment and autonomy of Turkish universities.

Keywords: higher education, autonomy, employment system, administration, Turkish universities

1. Introduction

Higher education policies have always been on the agenda of decision makers and politicians in Turkey. Almost every government has changed some certain bodies and structural organizations as well as employment policies at higher education institutions in Turkey. Regarding all changes in the university bodies, it is possible to claim that the history of Turkish universities is also a history of vicious educational reforms as well as "history of exportations". Until 2016, for example, there occurred five mass exportations or dismisses in 1933, 1947, 1960, 1971 and 1983 in Turkish Universities (Mazıcı, 1995). Just before further mass exportations in 2016 and 2017 Turkish government has noted many unusual and radical changes since the early 2000s. For instance, rectorate elections are always referred to as political decisions by ruling governments and presidents and cause many allegations among public and mass media. The election system was partially representation of faculty members before the government removed system of presidency elections held for universities in November, 2016 by means of a decree law no.676 after military coup attempt in July, 2016. Despite the fact that it was a questionable step in terms of representation of faculty members and autonomy of academia, none of the university senates could publish a message questioning the decision. Even before the military coup attempt in July, 2016, the government took several controversial decisions for universities. Autonomy of academia and academic freedoms remained standstill and even seriously fell back. It went seriously worse just after academics for peace petition and signature campaign in January 2016. Many of the signatory academics were criticized harshly by the government and exported from their positions through decree laws just after the military coup attempt in July 2016. On the other hand political campaign, titled "a university for each province" and started in 2006-2007, has advocated inevitable increase in the number of universities and rising demand for many academic personnel to run education processes at the university bodies. The campaign resulted in building up many new universities even in far rural areas of Turkey. Question of quality of

education, employment policies, infrastructure and over-education have emerged as more serious educational, social, cultural and financial problems.

This paper discusses changes in higher education policies in Turkey from the late Ottoman rule to recent processes. The current study is a descriptive analysis of qualitative and quantitative data based on literature review and text analysis of the newspaper articles and statistical analysis of the data released by Council of Higher Education. Initially some background information about birth and growth of Turkish academia is provided. Secondly some of the changes in administrative perspectives, university bodies and creation of new universities are investigated. Then the idea of autonomous university is re-visioned and discussed.

2. Birth and Growth of Turkish Universities

The birth of Turkish university system can be dated back to the first public education act passed by Ottoman rule in 1869 (Sargin, 2007). By means of the act, the Ottoman Empire created first proper/regular university system that can be seen as the first attempt and left *madrasah* (Medrese) education at schools. They also created the first university with the name of Darulfünun but the school was closed and reopened for several times due to different reasons (Toprak, 2008). The second attempt in regulating university education was in 1933 almost ten years after the republican revolution in 1923. Before 1933 there were several universities designed for different purposes in Ankara and Istanbul. The reform was actually passed after a report written by Albert Malche in 1932 (Sargin, 2007). And Turkish Republic accepted the European model as the only university system that could be built up in Turkey. By that reform, position of the rector at the university was described, defined and formally secured. Darulfünun was changed into Istanbul University in 1933. The third attempt was the first University Law no.4936 passed in 1946 and several other universities were built up in Ankara and Istanbul. For the first time the universities were provided autonomy in employing their personnel and admitting students (Mazıcı, 1995).

During 1930s, 40s and 50s there were also some other improvements in Turkish education system. For example, upon Atatürk's invitation, many German professors who left their countries during WWII, contributed significantly to the improvement of university system and infrastructures in Ankara and Istanbul. However, the contribution of German professors did not last long and most of them had to leave because of authoritarian and non-democratic applications at the universities in the late 1940s and early 1950s (Mazıcı, 1995). Prof.Philipp Schwartz, who served as academic personnel at faculty of Medicine of İstanbul University, listed several significant determinations in his report in 1951 before he left in 1953. Namely, he noted that:

- a) The administration of the university is insufficient.
- b) Foreign language education in university is inadequate.
- c) The number of students taken to the university should not be reduced. As they decrease, the problem of their choice grows. Precautions to be taken in the case of augmentation should be emphasized instead of reduction.
- d) The university budget is insufficient. The benefits provided by student contributions are minimal; but the student's reaction to the feeling of "discrimination" is too great. This should be achieved at the administrative and general budget levels.
- e) University autonomy should not be considered to include only university administration and teaching members. The first and most important condition of university autonomy is to ensure that the winners of the maturity test reach as much as they desire (i.e. autonomously) to higher science resources.¹ (Fişek, n.d.)

German professors and their Turkish students created close links between American, European and Turkish universities in terms of scientific research and developments (Mazıcı, 1995). For example, Prof. Muazzez İlimiye Çiğ was one of the leading academicians who took education from German scholars and created many scientific studies on Hittite and Sumer civilizations in Turkey.

Initiation of village institutions was also one of the most important attempts in order to improve education system in Turkey. After John Dewey's report about future of the education system in Turkey, 21 village institutions were built up all around Turkey. Hasan Ali Yücel as ministry of Education and İsmail Hakkı Tonguç as general director of primary education were responsible for the movement of public education in these schools. A High Village Institute, which was the institution functioning as teacher training college for teacher candidates of Village Institutes, was built up in Ankara in 1943 (Toprak,

¹ My own translate from Turkish to English.

2008). Even though the schools were closed off in 1954 due to political reasons, many leading teachers, writers and novelists such as Fakir Baykurt, Talip Apaydın and Mehmet Başaran took education at these institutions. The institutes contributed greatly to the improvement of educational system, socio-economic and cultural conditions while extending primary education to small villages (Toprak, 2008).

After the military coup in 1960, Turkish state had a new constitutional law created by scholars. And for the first time universities became more autonomous and status of the universities and academic personnel was directly guaranteed in the Constitution (Arap, 2010). According to 1961 University Act (1961 Constitutional Law, Article: 120):

Universities are established only by the State and by law. Universities are public entities with scientific and administrative autonomy. Universities are governed and supervised by the bodies established by their respective authorized faculty members and the provisions on state universities established by law are reserved. University organs, lecturers and assistants can not be removed from their duties at any time, outside the University (Gözler, 1999).

After another memorandum in 1971, this condition was changed in 1973, when Council of Higher Education was first introduced. Turkish Ministry of Education was defined as the head of the council. The council was given extensive authority over the university administrations. For instance, it was the council's decision to initiate new universities and institutes and organize employment rates according to the requirements of the university senates. 1973 Law of Universities (Law No: 1750) had further authorities on university administration as mentioned below:

Council of Higher Education: It is a commissioned council in order to carry out necessary studies, researches and evaluations with the aim of directing the field of higher education in accordance with the requirements of modern science and technology and the principles and policies of the State Development Plan within the understanding of the integrity of higher education and to ensure coordination between higher education institutions and follow the applications. [...] If the freedom of learning and teaching is threatened by universities, the Council of Ministers confiscates the relevant universities or the faculties, institutions and institutions affiliated with this university ("1971 Üniversiteler Kanunu," 1973).

Within scope of the law, a board, titled University Supervision Board, which was directly linked to prime ministry, was created and was responsible for providing State supervision and control over universities. Apart from the main council and board, an Inter-universities Council was initiated in order to provide academic coordination among universities. The Inter-universities Council was also responsible for regulating university entrance system. According to Article 52, it was written that "Entrance into universities is regulated by the Inter-Universities Council, taking into account manpower planning, the capacities of the universities, the abilities of the students and the recommendations by the Council of the Higher Education." ("1971 Üniversiteler Kanunu," 1973). In accordance with that article, a center, called Inter-universities Student Selection and Placement Center (Üniversitelerarası Öğrenci Seçme ve Yerleştirme Merkezi - ÜSYM) for student selection and assessment was established in 1974 and universities lost their rights of student selection for the programs ("Tarihsel Gelişme," 2016).

One of the main reasons for such changes in university administration system was mostly because of the students' movements in 1968 because at that time the students were taking into political movements and occupying university campuses. They were mainly criticizing pro-American policies in Turkey and decisions taken at higher education institutions. It is worth to see what students thought about university education in order to understand political perspective of the government and position of the students at that time. An interview that was done with Deniz Gezmiş, regarded as a student leader, in 1969 gives a lot details referring to autonomy of the universities and students' rights. Gezmiş said that "Taking a university education is a right given by the Constitution. Participating in the revolutionary struggle as a student is a task that Mustafa Kemal puts on us. If all the world's reactionaries come together, they will not get this right and our duty." Political engagement of students has been seemed as a main threat towards on the legal order of the state for many years now.

In 1981, after the military coup in 1980, Turkish state introduced a Higher Education Law no.2547. The Council of Higher Education with a head professor was defined as the only institution responsible for all universities in Turkey. The law was including many administrative regulations dealing with autonomy of the universities. According to the Law:

The Council of Higher Education is an institution which regulates all higher education and directs the activities of higher education institutions and has autonomy and public legal personality within the duties and authorities granted to it by this law.

For Higher Education Council; The Higher Education Supervisory Board (...) (1) and the units are concerned with the necessary planning, research, development, evaluation, budget, investment and coordination activities are connected. (Article: 6)

Rector's tasks and responsibility (Article 13-B/4):

(4) In cases where it is deemed necessary, [Rector has the right] to change the positions of the teaching staff and other personnel in the establishments and units constituting the university or to give them new duties ("2547 Sayılı Yükseköğretim Kanunu," 1981).

In the first paragraph, universities were defined as autonomous institutions but in the second paragraph, the supervisory board became responsible for managing all educational processes at universities. The rectors' status and responsibilities for university staff were also radically increased. The last paragraph was the article that most of the academic personnel suffered from.

In the early 1990s, Turkey had several serious problems dealing with population boom and education of these people who migrated from the other regions of Turkey to metropolitan cities of the country such as Istanbul, Izmir, Ankara and Bursa because of various social, economic, cultural and political reasons. Avni Akyol, Minister of Education in Turgut Özal's government and former member of Council of Higher Education, gave an interview to a national daily, *Milliyet*, and recommended people not to give birth anymore because there were not adequate school buildings (See Screen Shot - 1). In his interview, he also mentioned that "So many children are born and so we have difficulty in building new schools. That is why I attach great importance to citizen contribution. I participate in the opening of the schools already made by the contribution of the citizens. I do not go to the opening ceremonies of other schools." (Katarıcı, 1990).



Screen Shot – 1: Avni Akyol's Interview published in Milliyet (Katarıcı, 1990)

Since the early 1980s there has been a similar condition for the number of university students and there were many high school graduates who wanted to take university education. There occurred a radical rise in the number of students at universities between 2006 and 2016 and the number increased from 2.407.330 in 2006 to 7.198.987 in 2016 (See Table – 1).

Year	Associate Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Master's Degree	Doctorate Degree	Total
1990-1991	70801	624909	25006	11705	732421
1991-1992	75828	673022	28742	12220	789812
1992-1993	93686	786174	33442	13949	927251
1993-1994	105063	967249	35797	14752	1122861
1994-1995	125878	970192	41012	16025	1153107
1995-1996	148993	1001146	49893	19671	1219703
1996-1997	168134	1045031	51320	19427	1283912
1997-1998	192326	1130019	49123	19996	1391464
1998-1999	202723	1171734	50979	20367	1445803
1999-2000	217758	1194490	53547	19543	1485338
2000-2001	239271	1260960	65068	21739	1587038
2001-2002	262649	1297389	73466	22514	1656018
2002-2003	323971	1455760	79811	23088	1882630
2003-2004	344984	1476010	90057	24835	1935886
2004-2005	384456	1558539	92566	27335	2062896
2005-2006	441014	1714090	111814	32503	2299421
2006-2007	482208	1782728	108683	33711	2407330
2007-2008	502622	1843265	104028	34879	2484794
2008-2009	548695	2183133	109281	35669	2876778
2009-2010	593955	2702418	137199	44368	3477940
2010-2011	595052	3004532	125690	42938	3768212
2011-2012	662259	3421667	168156	51468	4303550
2012-2013	755789	3890800	217588	59763	4923940
2013-2014	1802972	3405340	332470	78297	5619079
2014-2015	2013762	3628800	342101	78223	6062886
2015-2016	2285406	3900601	417084	86094	6689185
2016-2017	2555926	4071579	480215	91267	7198987

Table – 1: Number of Students Enrolled at Turkish Universities

The number of universities was limited those universities which were only located in western cities in Turkey until the late 1990s (Sargin, 2007). For many years the number of universities was the same until 2006. For example, the number of all universities in Turkey was only 77 (State Universities = 53, Foundation Universities = 24) and the number increased from 93 in 2006 to 115 in 2007 and 185 in 2017-2018 (See Table - 2). Obviously, the growth of universities is not usual since the number was more than double in less than ten years (“Yükseköğretim Bilgi Yönetim Sistemi,” 2018).

Table – 2: Increase in the number of Universities

Type of University	Year						
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017-2018
Foundation University	67	69	76	77	81	70	68
Foundation Vocational School	6	8	8	8	8	6	5
State University	108	108	109	109	114	117	112
Total	181	185	193	194	203	193	185

3. Administration Processes for Employment at the Universities

The reason behind dramatic increase in the number of universities was the decision purposefully taken by the Turkish government in 2006. The government planned to build up new universities for each province in Turkey in scope of “a university for each province” policy. Accordingly, the first task was to build up campuses for new universities and the second task was to find academic staff in order to provide education for potential students. For the second task the government instrumentalized two programs under domination of and coordination between Council of Higher Education, Measuring, Selection and Placement Center and Ministry of National Education. The first program, called Faculty Member Training Program (*Öğretim Üyesi Yetiştirme Programı – ÖYP*), was introduced in 2010. The purpose of the first program was to provide master and doctoral education for potential graduate students in central universities defined and meet demands of

new universities by training candidate faculty members. However, the program was abolished by Council of Higher Education in 2015. The reasons behind the decision were argued as:

Our universities have begun to refrain from demanding the staff of ÖYP research assistants from YÖK every year, which has led to the inability to use many of the ÖYP positions. Between 2010 and 2014, about 3550 of the positions allocated for this purpose with the Budget Code Act were left vacant ("ÖYP Kaldırılma Kararı," 2015).

The second program was Selection and Placement of Students for Post-graduate Study Abroad (*Yurtdışına Lisansüstü Eğitim için Gönderilecek Öğrencileri Seçme ve Yerleştirme* - YLSY). The program aimed at sending students to universities abroad and charge them with educational activities in universities located in different cities. The selection and assessment processes for these programs were centralized and always discussed in the public and university bodies. From time to time it was argued that there were not transparent applications in the selection processes. Some statistics for both programs are listed below and clearly there is an important difference between the number of the positions and applications (See Table – 3) ("ÖYP Nedir?," 2013). There was actually high demand for especially ÖYP program. Just after military coup attempt in 15 July many of the people who got acceptance and positions in scope of ÖYP program were exported from the universities because of their potential relations with illegal organizations by means of decree laws.

Table – 3: Statistics for positions and applications for ÖYP and YLSY Positions by

	Number of positions	Number of applications	Number of placements	Years
ÖYP	3041	65972	2958	2010
ÖYP	3676	77895	3603	2011
YLSY	1199	4284	1048	2010
YLSY	--	2574	477	2011

It was also alleged that new universities were mainly utilized by the government and they created universities without qualified academic personnel and infrastructures. Even worse they created homogeneous administrative structures. For example, Mehmet Öztürk (2015), a former syndicate leader, defined a serious problem as follows:

[...] at many universities the merit principle is lifted. The same situation is experienced at Hitit University. [...] We are worried about the fact that similar practices are passed on to our university which is located in our city. After the beginning of his work in 2011, the Rector made a database in which the academicians (working/living in other institutions in Turkey) originally from Çorum could register their personal information in February 2012 and invited them to Hitit University. This opened the way for the academicians from Çorum to come to our university. Of course, in addition to the benefits of such practices, our university may seriously reduce the quality of education and training, which has to be categorized according to legal norms, laws and regulations. It [University] needs to be managed according to qualifications/competencies, knowledge, skill and level of education rather than "fellow citizen (hemşehri)" understanding and political viewpoints, which is a real matter. [...]

On the other hand, the government was always trying to encourage all educational institutions including vocational schools and universities to collaborate with business sectors because business sectors always needed qualified personal (Kırazoğlu, 2016). For example, Mehmet Simsek, vice prime minister in 2016, called for all participants of Turkish Industry and Business Association (*Türk Sanayicileri ve İş İnsanları Derneği* - TÜSIAD) to take over vocational schools in Turkey:

[...] We are ready to revolve any vocational school to business sectors. [...] We will look at creating a quality index in education. We will work with you in vocational technical training. We are ready to transfer any vocational school you want, with your budget, everything. Please, if you want to ... You already open your front, you can open your own vocational schools in organized industrial sites (OSB). We support you per student. But let's work with you along with the budget if you want. We will go to the school-based budget for this reason. We can not teach a foreign language, we will really need a serious effort in that matter [...] (Kenarlı & Tiftikci, 2016).

A similar call was expressed by İsmet Yılmaz, Minister of National Education, in 2017. The minister noted that "We are also ready to transfer the management of vocational education high schools to professional organizations. We do not want to manage the vocational high school as a ministry. There shall be chambers of commerce and industry, artisan chambers, municipalities within the administration of the schools." (Yılmaz, 2017). It seems that the government does not want to deal with any assessment system or any workload that the state institutions can not manage and the easiest way is to leave all

schools to the business sectors only. Obviously these tendencies are going to turn into radical changes in education system and come up with different problems in the higher education system.

Lately, government took several decisions and passed a law dealing with changing status of assistant professors at the universities despite the fact that the decisions were not thoroughly discussed in the public. According to the changes, the assistant professors are going to be titled as lecturers with doctorate degrees and can be appointed as associate professors if they pass the phase of academic work examination and without passing interviews and language test. The people with doctorate degrees can also be accepted as lecturers with doctorate degrees at state universities (Ergin, 2018). These changes in employment processes presumably lead novel problems and questionable conditions in terms of providing quality higher education for Turkish students.

4. Autonomy of Higher Education System

Autonomy of Turkish universities is obviously limited, centralized and strictly defined by Council of Higher Education in accordance with educational policies made by the governments. For example, academic amnesties were passed for university students, who were banned years ago or had to leave their education because of any reasons in 2011 and 2012. Abolishing tuition fees for many university programs excluding evening education programs in 2012 was represented as enlargement of freedoms at universities. There were not legal barriers, limits of duration or ban for university students in terms of registration and taking education at the university programs including bachelor, master and doctorate degrees as long as they met legal requirements of the programs. However, many of these partially positive steps were pulled back by several decisions taken in 2014 and 2016. For example, the limit for duration of university education for all programs was defined and students who were enrolled at a master's program were banned for another master or doctorate program without finishing the first one in legal limits ("Lisansüstü eğitim ve öğretim yönetmeliği," 2016).

The changes have been centralized on the exams, called ÖSS, YGS/LYS, etc., which the high school students should take and pass in order to enter a department in a university. The main focus was obviously on the changes actualized governance types at the universities. The changes in the examination system did not actually have any effect on the perspectives of the candidate students and the type of assessment still remained as "multiple choice" version test. Even worse the candidate students seriously started to think about their future jobs after getting a bachelor's degree in Turkey. Therefore, 850.000 students did not prefer any department to study in the last August in 2017 since many of the students did not tend to study in department that they think as "useless" in terms of finding a job. According to questionnaire results from Turkish Higher Education Council conducted just after the phase of release of the university entrance exam, 65,73% of the candidate students alleged that "they did not have good results to prefer the department that they wanted to study" and 27,39 % mentioned that "they had worries about finding a job after finishing the department" ("YÖK'ün Yaptığı Anket Sonuçları: Bilinçli Tercih, İstihdam, Kalite," 2017). The perspectives of the candidate students were understandable regarding higher unemployment rates particularly for graduate students in Turkish economy. Kırac (2017) informed that considering their level of education 708 of applicants for a job in Turkish Employment Agency (İŞKUR) are doctoral graduates, 12,366 of them are masters and 329,000 of university graduates. Perhaps that could also be explained by means of "over-education" as Habibi (2015, 2017) claims. On the other hand, it was observed that faculty of theology (N=14.538) and faculty of law (N=15.745) were two leading fields of study preferred by the students in 2017. However, it is still questionable in terms of the role and autonomy of universities as a result of recent changes in governance and employment policies done by the Turkish government in university bodies and administration systems as well as the quality of curricula employed by the universities.

It is definite that employment policies of the governments, limited autonomy of the universities and particularly universities founded without further quality considerations played an important role in decision making process of universities. In this sense, Sargin (2007) argued that "[...] insistent demands for the establishment of a university in the cities by the leading administrative and civic organizations of each city are due to the fact that universities are being seen as an important economic input together with the students, faculty and other employees." Arap (2010) clarified that there was "the political power of the era in the framework of university legislation" and "influence of politics on the establishment decisions of new universities (to determine the place and number of universities to be established)" (14-20).

It is possible to see similar political considerations and practices in job advertisements by universities. The following job advertisement is posted by Turkish university. It is calling for an assistant professor candidate who took religious education on "devil" issues during his/her doctoral study (See Screen Shot – 2) (Ayhan, 2017).

Mühendislik Fakültesi	Bilgisayar Mühendisliği	Bilgisayar Yazılımı	Yardımcı Doçent	4	1	Görüntü izlemede gürültü baskın olarak çıkarılmış olması olmak.
İslami İlimler Fakültesi	Felsefe ve Din Bilimleri	Din Bilimleri	Yardımcı Doçent	5	1	Kur'an ve Sunnet rehberliğinde şeytanla mücadele edecek insan eğitimi üzerine çalışmaları olmak.
Teknik Bilimler Meslek Yüksekokulu	Bitkisel ve Hayvansal Üretim	Bahçe Tarımı	Yardımcı Doçent	4	1	Kentsel atık sularının tarımsal sulamada kullanılması üzerine çalışmaları olmak.

Screen Shot – 2: A Job Advertisement for a Position of Assistant Professorship

Regarding future educational policy defined by the government as “creating religious generations in Turkey”, it seems that the policy totally linked to the job descriptions. Perhaps, this condition and all recent educational policies can be explained through a hypothesis, known as *linguistic determinism*, by Sapir and Whorf, saying that “the form and characteristics of our language determine the way in which we think, remember and perceive.” (as cited in Harley, 2014: 90).

5. Conclusion

All in all the current study discussed administration processes in employment and autonomy of higher education institutions in Turkey. Considering all processes from the late Ottoman Empire Era to current changes, it revealed that Turkish universities did not actually have academic autonomy in term of student and faculty recruitment as well as administrative decision-making within their own administrative bodies even though there occurred some positive improvements in 1960s. Many new universities were founded but employment processes for academic personnel were not transparently administrated and infrastructures of universities were not extensively regarded. It is also clear that these universities did not respond to the needs of both academic staff and the potential students who wanted to take university education because limited autonomy of the university administrations for personal and student selection was only managed by the Council of Higher Education in accordance with the decisions taken by the government.

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