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# The Academicians' Perspective on the Challenges Facing Higher Education in Turkey

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**Abstract**

This study explores various challenges facing higher education in Turkey. While several studies done in the past highlight a number of challenges of Turkish universities, those challenges were often not articulated well. In this study, we made an attempt to provide a framework for understanding the major problems and challenges Turkish universities have been struggling with. Some of the challenges discussed in this study are rooted in the perception and assumption that higher education institutions are a gateway to the job market. Although this perception is partially true, the real purpose of higher education is to provide the students with various critical thinking skills so that they can make informative decisions and address the challenges they may encounter once they graduate. In this research, the key issues associated with challenges Turkish universities are struggling with are investigated and presented using academic research, and the assessments and observations of the authors of this study.

*Keywords:* Higher Education; Top Universities; Challenges of Universities

## 1. Introduction

The world's top 500 universities is among the most talked about topics in the academic field. It could be argued that there is a correlation between a country's development level and the ranking of its universities. For instance, looking at the data published by Top Universities (2014), it's seen that the following developed countries made the

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world's top 500 universities list: USA 97, United Kingdom 48, Germany 37, Japan 16, France 22, Australia 23, Canada 20, Italy 15, South Korea 14, China 18, Spain 12, Netherland 13, and Turkey 5. According to the same report, only 10 Russian universities made the list.

South Korea, which has achieved a rapid development in technology in recent years, is known for its commitment to education. With 197 universities and 222 colleges, South Korea's literacy rate is 92% (South Korea, 2011). The importance given to general and science education is evident in the case South Korea. Thus, it may be suggested that there is a strong relationship between the quality and the number of universities in a country and the development level of that particular country. For example, according to a report published by the World Bank (2000), while the most developed countries and regions such as the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Australia, and South Korea have the best university in the world and the percentage of college students in such countries is over 50 percent, in developing countries this percentage ranges from 35 percent to 15 percent, and in the underdeveloped countries located generally in African and Asia it is below 5 percent. (World Bank, 2000).

This study aims to determine the scope of the problems of higher education in Turkey and proposes solutions. Some of the problems cited in this study are problems experienced by the newly established universities, some are prevalent in older universities, and some are fundamental problems that are common in both older and more recently established universities. In this research, the key issues associated with challenges Turkish higher education institutions are struggling with are investigated and presented using academic research, a literature meta-analysis, and the assessments and observations of the authors of this study.

## 2. Literature Review

The challenges of universities or higher education institutions in Turkey have been explored in a number of academic studies. For instance, Bakioğlu and Hacifazlioglu (2007) in their research studied the faculty perspectives on problems at private universities. In his study, Bayrakdar (2006) investigated the regulations and policies put forward by the Turkish Higher Education Council and the faculty perspective on those policies. Akar (2010) in his research examined the impact of globalization on higher education in Turkey. The author has examined issues such as the impact of globalization on the growing demand for higher education in Turkey, the lack of well-educated and trained faculty, research practices, knowledge creation, and the lack of financial resources.

In addition, the challenges and problems of Turkish universities have been examined from a technical perspective and various solutions have been presented. For instance, Isman (1997) studied adoption of innovation and the use of educational technologies in higher education. Cinar et al., (2009) have done a comprehensive study on the problems of technical and vocational schools in Turkey and proposed solutions.

The aforementioned studies explored various challenges and issues facing higher education or universities in Turkey. Some studies have examined the challenges in terms of technical and infrastructure problems (Isman, 1997), some other studies have examined the legal and administrative dimensions of similar challenges (Bayrakdar, 2007), and finally, some studies have examined the problems in terms of the lack of quality academic personnel, and the lack of research and development at universities (Akar, 2010).

In the following section, we elaborate on various challenges and problems facing universities in Turkey and present potential solutions to each problem.

## 3. Methodology

In this study, we employed a research method which was mainly based on a review of the scientific literature and faculty perspectives of the problems facing higher education in Turkey. The key issues associated with challenges our higher education institutions are struggling with were investigated and presented using academic research and a

literature meta-analysis. Further, the numerous problems and challenges facing universities in Turkey were documented and explored by the authors of this study as they themselves are faculty members too. We classified the problems and challenges Turkish universities have to deal with into ten different categories, elaborated on them, and finally offered possible solutions to each problem.

## 3.1. Research Goal

One would agree that higher education institutions are a place where knowledge is created. However, higher education institutions struggling with various structural, organizational, and personnel problems may not be able to achieve their goals. Hence, in order for higher education institutions to place their focus on creating knowledge, they should be provided with all the resources they need, and the current problems they are facing should be handled in a professional manner.

While various studies done in the past point out numerous problems Turkish universities face, those problems were often not articulated well. In this study, we provide a framework for understanding the major problems higher education institutions in Turkey have been struggling with. Some of the problems discussed in this study are rooted in the perception and assumption that higher education institutions are a gateway to the job market. Although this perception is partially true, the real purpose of higher education is to provide the students with various critical thinking skills so that they can make informative decisions and handle the problems they will face once they graduate.

In this study, we explore why Turkish universities are not among the best universities in the world and offer possible solutions. We emphasize that Turkish universities need to be a pioneer in science and technology and strive to be among the best universities in the world in order for Turkey to create and sustain its competitiveness and to be among the developed nations. It must be understood that both the government and the society need to be open to new ideas to find solutions to the problems Turkish higher education institutions have been struggling with.

## 3.2. Problems of Higher Education and Proposed Solutions

Despite a rapid increase in the number of universities in Turkey, this increase does not seem to correlate well with creating more knowledge, finding solutions to the country's problems and advancing the university-community cooperation. For in-depth examination of the problems of Turkish universities, we find it necessary to take a closer look at the subject matter and present solutions. We classify the problems and challenges facing Turkish universities into ten different categories and elaborate on them. These categories include:

- A lack of physical infrastructure,
- A lack of information and communication technologies,
- Differences in regional development,
- A lack of academically qualified and professionally qualified personnel,
- A lack of financial resources,
- Problems with establishing a relationship with external entities and institutions,
- Mobbing,
- A lack of a nationwide university ranking system,
- A lack of a nationwide university accreditation system,
- A lack of a personnel performance evaluation system.

### 3.3. Analyses and Results

### 3.3.1. A Lack of Physical Infrastructure

The majority of the universities in Turkey are opened before a full-fledged infrastructure is put in place, assuming that their infrastructure will be completed in time. This situation gives rise to an enormous amount of cost and time lost, and affects education, training and research opportunities negatively. Therefore, universities, faculties and departments should not be opened without doing a comprehensive feasibility study and fully-built infrastructure is put in place. Inadequate infrastructure is among the most important problems of higher education (Marmolejo, 2007). Similarly, site selection is one of the most important issues. When selecting a location for a university, rather than its initial investment cost, the site's long-term affordability must be considered. When choosing a location, suitable areas for expansion should be considered. Faculties or colleges thought to contribute to the development of the small settlements should not be opened as such places of insufficient quality education and training opportunities are known to cause serious problems.

When establishing a new university, the whole campus should not be built in a single location, rather, different schools and colleges may be established in different prominent industry and technology regions. For example, if a new college of maritime is to be established in Istanbul, it would be logical to establish it in the Tuzla region, as that region is the home of the largest shipyard in Turkey.

### 3.3.2. A Lack of Information and Communication Technologies

The most essential information and communication technologies must be employed in universities to manage higher education in an efficient and quality manner. According to a report published by the UNESCO, information and communication technologies have a major role in increasing the quality of higher education (UNESCO, 2011). Virtual communication platforms may be utilized to facilitate communication between faculty members and students, to distribute lecture notes to the students, to make the announcements about the exam, and to provide students with instant and quick feedback on their exams and assignments. Tools such as WebCT and Blackboard are used successfully in numerous countries around the world for these purposes and similar tools can easily be designed and configured for use in Turkish universities as well. Universities can even develop their own virtual environments based on their own needs. Digital or virtual classroom environments can be created using available web technologies.

### 3.3.3. Differences in Regional Development

Regional development related problems directly affect the overall quality of Turkish universities. A report published by the World Bank indicates that regional economic differences are not taken into account when establishing a new university in Turkey (World Bank, 2007). Especially the university personnel take into consideration the development level of the city they plan on living in. It's difficult to bring well-educated personnel to underdeveloped cities as they often lack social and economic opportunities. Various means of transportations such as railways and airports of the city where the university is established are important factors for many faculty and staff because such means of transportation indicate whether the infrastructure is available for the ordinary course of life. Educational and hospital facilities are also of great importance. Furthermore, the significant investments in the city where the university is located will contribute positively to the university's development.

When developed countries are examined; we see that there are no significant differences between big cities and small towns. In general, economic prosperity and development is homogeneously and uniformly spread in developed countries. In general, in Turkey there are major differences between the cities in terms of their development levels. In large cities, there is a large increase in the number of universities and this increase also creates more problems for cities with various major problems. This matter should be addressed urgently, and the

capital investment plans should be prepared to ensure the development of small cities, and to promote the public interest. Especially, incentives should be provided to firms investing in high-tech industries and education.

### 3.3.4. A Lack of Academically Qualified and Professionally Qualified Personnel

According to the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), one of the most important accreditation bodies in the world, having academically and professionally qualified academic personnel is one of the most important standards for higher education institutions (AACSB, 2012). However, in Turkey, when establishing a new university, how well-educated academic personnel would be hired and appointed is not considered, rather, temporary academic personnel are bussed around from other universities. Although article 35 of Law No. 2547 was passed to provide such universities with well-educated and well trained personnel, unfortunately, this law can easily be ignored when appointing research assistants, which may lead to nepotism and favoritism. Qualified and trained personnel shortage is a major problem experienced in small universities. Unbalanced structure of specialization is observed in various departments and programs. While a well-established university may have ten full professors in a single department, a university of the same size in a small town would be lucky to have just one assistant professor in a department.

It is not possible to bring in the needed qualified personnel and faculty due to the differences in infrastructure and regional development. The key issue here is that a department should not be established without ensuring that qualified personnel and faculty can be hired. Initially, optional exchange programs between universities may be employed. Further, financially rewarding offers should be presented to the faculty and staff willing to take part in the exchange programs. There must be qualified personnel and the necessary assessment criteria should be established. Joint programs and faculty exchange programs with universities located in other countries may be established. One should not think "Our department gives quality education, there is no need to send students abroad with the exchange program." The practice of sending the personnel and staff abroad should be continued to improve the competence of the academic personnel.

### 3.3.5. A Lack of Financial Resources

Recent graduates' interest in the teaching profession in Turkey has greatly diminished in recent years. Low wages and incomes are cited as the main reasons for the diminishing interest in the profession. According to research conducted by Jaschik (2012), the average monthly income of academic personnel in Turkey is way below the average monthly income earned in many other countries. Qualified individuals planning to be a faculty member or a scientist should not be worrying about financial difficulties, rather they should be concentrating their time and efforts on creating knowledge and doing research and development. In the current system, faculty members try to maximize their monthly salaries by teaching additional courses beyond their normal teaching load.

Numerous faculty members in Turkey are willing to spend the majority of their time teaching as many number of courses as possible for economic reasons. Turkey can become a prosperous nation much more quickly if it places an emphasis on research and development, and quality in education. A country's development level may be measured through scientific publications, patents, and the industrial applications of these patents. In the current system, because faculty are busy teaching all the time, they cannot even follow scientific publications in their fields. When it comes to offering new courses, the most qualified faculty members should be preferred. Salaries should be tailored based on the circumstances of the current economic outlook and an objective merit-based performance evaluation system should be put in place. Scientific publications and patents should be awarded and faculty should be encouraged to participate in scientific activities. More than regular course load should not be imposed upon faculty. Gifted and bright graduates should be encouraged to be a research assistants at universities.

### 3.3.6. Problems with Establishing a Relationship with External Entities and Institutions

Universities in developed countries are seen as a source of knowledge. Individuals, whether they are university students or not, when they want to inquire additional information on a subject, can take private lessons. In Turkey, however; the exchange of this information is not at a desired level. Community-university as well as university-industry collaborations have not been fully established. Firms have distrust against external organization and universities. Some companies believe that some universities offer no quality education (Ozturk et al., 2005a).

Parents raise their children since the beginning of secondary education with the mentality that children "should get a college education, this issue is as important as life itself, so children should always be studying for exams to prepare for a college, and if they are accepted by a college they will enjoy the infinite freedom and have the opportunity to do what they cannot do today." Thus, in recent years, significant increases have been seen in the number of secondary school students and parents visiting universities. Turkey is taking steps towards becoming a more conscious society.

Another important difference we see in developed nation is that alumni of a university keeps their relationships with their university alive long after they graduate. This contributes positively to the development of their university. Thus, permanent structured cooperation is created between a university and its alumni that allows the university to generate a stream of donations through external entities and individuals. Finally, an important issue is that long-term internships opportunities can be created in engineering education through university-industry cooperation (Ozturk at al., 2005b).

### 3.3.7. Mobbing

Mobbing is defined as "psychological abuse, emotional terror, intimidation, psychological violence, workplace psychological harassment or workplace psychological terror" (Zaph, 1999). It is an important social stress factor in the workplace. Unlike some other stress factors, it intentionally and systematically harasses and targets a person. Mobbing is an emotional attack. The purpose of mobbing is to create systematic pressure on a person or persons in the workplace, thus forcing them to quit their job. The ultimate goal here is to stigmatize and traumatize a person (Turkish Language Association, 2005). As a result of mobbing, institutions may be faced with a significant loss of key human resources. Peace and harmony in the organizations is lost, deteriorating morale (Cakir, 2006).

Some disputes and conflicts are inherent in the business world. Seeing disputes and conflicts as a learning opportunity is considered among the qualities of a good manager. Unfortunately, at some universities relations are based on not to think, feel, trust, and ask. To prevent mobbing, a university's mission, goals, job descriptions, and personnel policies should be clearly laid out, and all employees should always be treated with respect and dignity. The most important factor for universities is to lay out and implement an "anti-bullying policy". One of the most important steps in avoiding emotional attack syndrome is to identify problems in a timely manner within the institution and to take the right steps (Cowie et al., 2002; Jarretta et al., 2004; Sheehan, 1999).

Many developed countries' constitutions include laws to prevent psychological harassment. The term mobbing has officially entered the Turkish legal system after the 8th Labor Court in Ankara used it in a legal case involving emotional harassment in a workplace. The amendment added to law no. 2547, which was enacted in 1981, is considered as a way forward.

### 3.3.8. A Lack of a Nationwide University Ranking System

In Turkey, the university entrance exams are conducted each year and students make their decision as to what college they wish to attend based on the information available in the college application forms and guidelines. In general, students prefer to attend a college in a well-developed city. Their first preference is either Ankara or

Istanbul, then surrounding cities and provinces. Although a 20-year-old university in Anatolia may have a well-developed infrastructure and highly trained personnel, and spends a significant amount of funds running various projects, and is ranked way above the national average in terms of the number of scientific publications, its overall ranking is way below a college established in a well-developed region. This problem continues to be ignored. The necessary steps have yet to be taken to remedy this issue.

Cornell University located in Ithaca in New York State in the US is known by everyone in the country. Nevertheless, there is nothing special about Ithaca other than being a college town. Why is it not the case in Turkey? Because there is no nationwide university ranking system. For instance, many people in Turkey do not even know there has been a university in the city of Nigde for the past 20 years. This can be fixed by ranking universities along with their departments across the country by independent ranking organizations each year. These reports should be disseminated to both students and organizations across the country. According to research conducted in 25 different countries, 71 percent of students take into account the ranking of universities (Rogers et al., 2007).

### 3.3.9. A Lack of a Nationwide University Accreditation System

As pointed out by the well-known management expert Peter Drucker (1997), "You cannot manage it if you cannot measure it." Therefore; the quality of the education programs of Turkish universities must be assessed and evaluated at regular intervals to make sure they are in compliance with the generally accepted standards in the education world.

This "quality control" can be performed in engineering schools by Engineering Curriculum Assessment and Accreditation Association (MÜDEK) or The Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET). Similarly, the economic and administrative sciences departments and programs can work with the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). Other schools and faculties can cooperate with similar professional organizations in their area, or create their own professional accreditation agencies and can assess the quality of education at regular intervals. Once the problems are identified through various assessments conducted at regular intervals, they should be addressed as soon as possible and a "continuous improvement" approach to quality education should be implemented at universities.

### 3.3.10. A Lack of a Personnel Performance Evaluation System

Just like University students' performance is measured through midterm exams, assignments, and final exams in each semester, every faculty member's performance should be evaluated at the end of each academic year. In their study, Clement and Stevens (1989) draw attention to the importance of evaluating the performance of faculty members. The criteria to be used must be determined when evaluating faculty members' annual performance. Scientific publications, presentations given, the projects done by a faculty member in a given year may be categorized as "achievements in research and development."

To assess a faculty member's performance for a given course, students' feedback and comments may be solicited through numerous surveys. For this purpose, at the end of each semester students can fill out an evaluation form for each course they take, and this can be done very easily in a digital environment. This category may be labeled as "teaching category". Finally, the committees on which faculty members serve to improve the quality of education in his/her university would be another category, which may be labeled as "professional services" category.

## 4. Conclusion

Although it can be argued that more problems may be added to the aforementioned list, as pointed out before, this study merely provides a framework that can be used to evaluate the solutions to the problems facing Turkish universities. Of course, the solutions discussed in this study may be tailored by each university according to their

needs. Each university should understand that it is a long process and requires successful change management. As pointed out by Machiavelli (1995), "there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things".

As a result, the future of Turkey striving for higher standards of living for its citizens may depend on how well Turkish universities will become at creating new frontiers in science and technology. If no attempt is made to address the aforementioned challenges, Turkish universities may not be able to compete with other universities across the globe.

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