

DEMOCRATIZATION AND MASSIFICATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN TURKEY AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

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ABSTRACT

The imbalance between supply and demand of higher education has always been the greatest challenge for Turkey. To overcome this challenge, Turkey beginning in 2006 established new public universities, mostly in less developed provinces. Now one in two fresh high school graduates is being admitted to a higher education program. Yet, the rapid growth of higher education triggered debates about the quality of education. Based on an analysis of available statistics and reports, this essay analyzes this process of massification in Turkey, including a brief synopsis of its higher education system at the beginning of the new millennium, and then the rapid expansion after 2006. It then discusses four major challenges waiting to be addressed in this nation of some 80 million. First, there is still significant unmet demand for higher education in Turkey and there is no clear strategy on how to meet with the increasing demand in the coming years. Second, there is a substantial shortage as well as regional imbalance of quality faculty. Third, the governance structure of higher education system has been poor; the system is considered as too centralized, highly rigid, and out-of-date. Fourth, as Turkey abolished tuition fees at public universities since 2013, it needs to develop a sustainable financial model.

Keywords: Massification, Turkish Higher Education, Democratization of Access, Board of Higher Education of Turkey.

Throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries, the massification of higher education has posed major challenges to national governments in both developing and developed countries. Massification involves greater social mobility for more population, new modes of funding, diversification of higher education systems, and generally a lowering of academic standards as well as higher rates of failure and dropouts (Altbach, 2007; Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Blanden & Machin, 2004). Although the processes accompanying massification are similar in many countries, the policy challenges are often of a different character, shaped by political culture, the history of higher education institutions, and by demography and geography (Theisens, 2004). For example, while many countries have introduced and often increased tuition, in 2012 Turkey abolished tuition for its public universities after it has rapidly expanded its higher education system (Özoğlu, Gür, & Gümüş, 2015). That is why it is valuable to contextualize the experiences of each country.

Imbalance between supply and demand of higher education has always been the greatest challenge for Turkey. The relatively young population and the rapid rise in secondary education enrollments have placed immense pressure on the higher education system in Turkey (Çelik & Gür, 2013). In order to increase access, Turkey heavily invested in higher education and expanded the system rapidly during the last decade.

This essay analyzes this process of massification in Turkey, including a brief synopsis of its higher education system at the beginning of the new millennium, and then the rapid expansion after 2006. It then discusses four major challenges waiting to be addressed in this nation of some 80 million. This paper is based on an analysis of available statistics and reports—such as,

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official government programs, development plans, official statistics, and documents. It also utilizes related studies about the challenges of Turkish higher education in the last decade. The essay is not comprehensive. Rather, it examines the development of an expanding higher education system and its pressing issues from a macro perspective. As such, it has some implications for other expanding higher education systems that face similar challenges.

A. Higher Education in Turkey at the Beginning of the New Millennium

As Turkey entered into the 21st century, there was a significant unmet demand for higher education. While about 1.4 million applicants took the centralized university entrance exam in Turkey in 2000, only about 400 thousands of them were admitted to higher education programs in the same year. In another words, about one million applicants were not admitted to universities because of limited supply of higher education. Accordingly, hundreds of thousands of applicants kept retaking the exam. The Board of Higher Education (BHE) -- which is responsible for all higher education institutions in Turkey and constitutionally independent from the government -- and governments had mostly tried to meet with this constantly increasing demand by increasing the number of available seats at the existing universities as well as establishing open education and night programs for many years (YÖK [The Board of Higher Education], 2007). Still, there was a huge imbalance between demand and supply (Çetinsaya, 2014; Özoğlu, 2011; Özoğlu et al., 2015). The centralized national entrance exam served as a means for the government to limit access to a university education, choosing only the most successful students.

Unquestionably, any discussion on Turkey's transformation in the recent years has to include a mention of the so-called "postmodern coup d'état" of 1997, i.e., February 28, 1997 military memorandum to the Turkish government. In 1997, the Turkish Army issued a memorandum, which led to the overthrowing of the democratically elected government led by pro-Islamic Necmetin Erbakan. The political struggles between the secularist army and the government had some unfortunate consequences for higher education system (Gür & Çelik, in press).

In the aftermath of 1997 military intervention, on the basis of secularism and following the lead of the army, the BHE banned the headscarf on university campuses and changed the regulations for the university entrance exam. The ban prevented Muslim women who choose to wear headscarves from entering university campuses – a restriction against their religious beliefs (Seggie, 2011). Backed by the army, the universities strictly enforced the ban and many women students who refused the decree were expelled. This ban was enforced until 2008 resulting in thousands of able women being denied their basic rights of pursuing a university degree (Gür & Çelik, in press).

As part of the effort to limit access to higher education in part because of enforcing secularist rules, in 1998 the BHE changed the regulations for the university entrance exam (Çelik, 2011; Gür & Çelik, in press). Prior to 1998, all high school graduates were admitted to college programs solely based on their test scores in conjunction with their GPA's—regardless of the types of high school they attended. After 1999 though, the test scores of the graduates of vocational schools (including public Imam-Hatip High Schools that provide religious education) were cut significantly when applying to a college program unrelated to their high school specialization, thus making it nearly impossible for them to get into a selective college program unrelated to their high school specializations. The reason for this change was that the BHE wanted graduates of Imam-Hatip High Schools to pursue college education only in theology programs. Many have criticized this new system as it restricted academic freedom of students by creating inequality among equally accomplished candidates from different high schools.

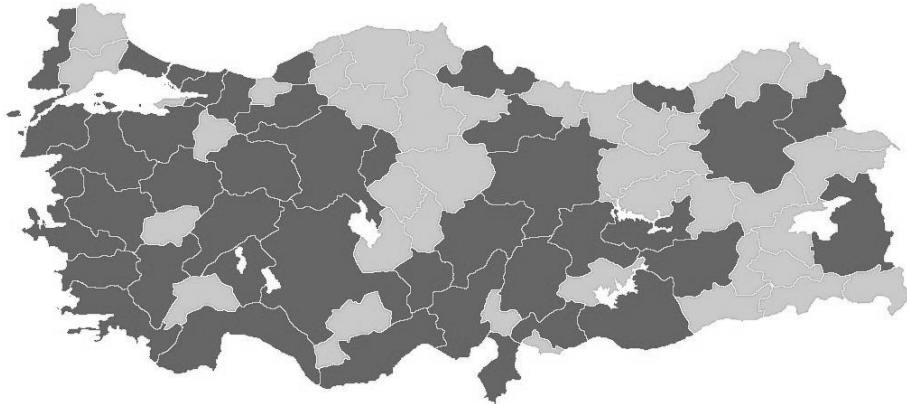
In 2002, the Justice and Development Party led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and describing itself as conservative democrat, won the general election. The army was still powerful at that time, and a struggle between the secularist army and the democratically elected government ensued. The BHE and university rectors formed an alliance with the army to put pressure on the government. In one infamous instance, a former president of the BHE and rectors of some prominent universities attended a rally with signage and slogans that stated, "Army, do your job" — which in Turkish case means "a coup d'état." With the new government, and starting in 2006 in earnest, the government decisively expanded higher education. The new BHE administrators also refrained making political remarks and instead focused on broadening access and academic freedom since 2007 (Gür & Çelik, in press).

B. Massification of Turkish Higher Education after 2006

The government's response to the imbalance between supply and demand of higher education was to establish 15 new universities, mostly in less developed provinces of Turkey beginning in 2006. Yet, the government's decision to establish new universities was not welcomed by the BHE. The Board claimed that there was no infrastructure to establish so many new universities at once. As the government realized that there was still a huge demand for higher education, it passed new legislations in 2007 and 2008 to establish new universities in the remaining 26 less developed provinces lacking a public

university (Figure 1). Thus, each province had at least one public university by 2008 (Özoğlu et al., 2015). The rapid growth of higher education in Turkey triggered debates about the quality of education. Many have argued that establishing so many universities without necessary infrastructure in a very short time would lower the quality and these institutions would face significant academic, financial, and administrative problems (Arap, 2010). Despite these arguments, new public universities have also been expected to undertake important roles in local, regional, and national development (Altınsoy, 2011).

Figure 1 - Locations of Old and New Universities By Provinces Before/After 2006

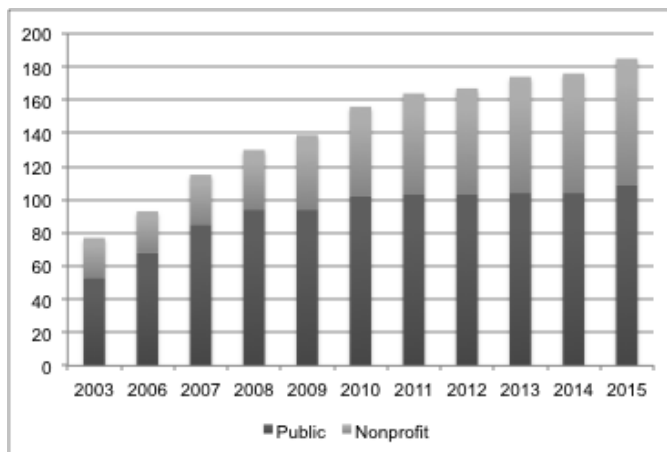


Source: The author. Note: Black provinces represent the provinces, which already had universities before 2006, and grey ones represent the provinces that have had new universities after 2006

As part of the expansion of higher education, the national budget for higher education almost quadrupled in a decade. This enormous increase was supported by Turkey's booming economy during the last decade. Higher education's share of the Central Government's total national budget was about 3.3 percent in 2005; by 2014 it was about 3.9 percent. Similarly, public budget for higher education increased from 0.8 percent to almost 1 percent of the GDP (MEB, 2015). Also, faculty salaries were increased by about 30 percent in December 2014 by the government to attract talented people to academia.

The Constitution of Turkey allows the establishment of "foundation universities"—non-profit private universities. Along with the public universities, the number of foundation universities also increased in the last decade. After 2008, the BHE openly encouraged and facilitated the establishment of new foundation universities. Between 2008 and 2015, the number of Foundation universities more than doubled (Figure 2). Moreover, while public universities charged a nominal fee until 2012 and no tuition fee after 2012, private universities charge tuition. From a financial sustainability perspective encouraging the establishment of more private universities further supported the national drive to expand enrollment capacity.

Figure 2 - The Number of Public and Nonprofit Private Universities (2003-2015)



Source: Data obtained from the BHE website.

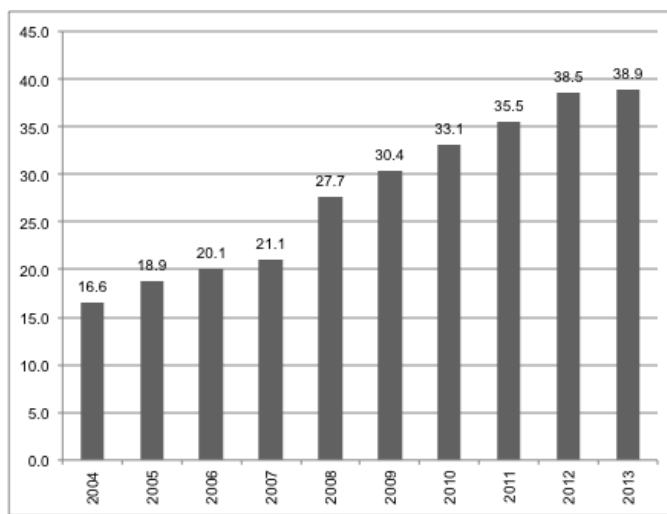
The number of higher education students has increased from about 2 million in 2004 to 5.5 million in 2013. There were three primary sources of this increase (Özoğlu et al., 2015). First, the Board increased the number of seats available at the existing universities. Second, many of the new universities have grown very rapidly and admitted a sizeable portion of new students. The third one is open education, modeled after the Open University of UK. Open education --considered as lower quality education by the public-- made sense in Turkish case when it had a very limited number of universities in 1980's and 1990's. After the expansion of universities in which face-to-face instruction became available to a greater number of students, one would expect a decrease in terms of the number of students who choose to go to open education.

On the contrary, the number of open education students jumped from about 1 million a decade ago to 2.5 million as of 2013 (Çetinsaya, 2014). There are various reasons for this increase. First, the capacity at face-to-face programs is still not enough to meet with the demand for higher education. Second, admission to open education programs is much easier and these programs charge only a nominal fee. Third, being an open education student is convenient to especially adult and/or working learners as well as college graduates. Fourth, in comparison to face-to-face programs, graduation rates are often lower and the average year for graduation is often higher.

While the number of higher education students more than doubled in a decade, the number of all teaching/research faculty (including Professors, Associate Profs, Assistant Profs, Lecturers, Research Assistant, and Experts) increased from approximately 80,000 a decade ago to about 150,000 as of 2015. Since the rate of increase in the number of faculty is smaller than the rate of increase in the number of students, the average number of students per faculty increased modestly in the last decade. Excluding open education students, the average number of students per faculty increased from 17 a decade ago to 21 as of 2013 (Çetinsaya, 2014). The average number of students per faculty with PhD increased from 44 to 48. Therefore, Turkey continues to suffer from a chronic shortage of faculty.

With the rapid increase of number of students, Turkey's gross enrollment ratio is now above the average of developed countries based on UNESCO statistics as of 2013 (UNESCO, 2015). Nonetheless, one should keep in mind that about 47 percent of Turkish students attend open education system and there is still unmet demand for face-to-face higher education programs (Çetinsaya, 2014). The good news is that the net participation rate of higher education for 18-22 years old has increased from about 17 percent in 2004 to 39 percent in 2013—about a 134 percent increase in a decade (Figure 3). Only about ten years ago, international experts on the nation's higher education system observed that Turkey "is looking to expand from an elite education system with low participation to a mass system with much higher access and participation and a greater diversity of educational programs and institutions." (The World Bank, 2007, p. 4). Now, about one in two fresh high school graduates in Turkey is admitted to a higher education program. In other words, using Martin Trow's (1970, 1974) terminology, Turkey clearly and rapidly moves from a mass to a universal higher education system—in which more than half of the age cohort goes to the college. This is a very significant expansion.

Figure 3 - The Net Participation to Higher Education for 18-22 Year Olds (2004-2013)



Source: Data obtained from Çetinsaya (2014) and Ministry of National Education statistics (MEB, 2015).

C. Four Major Challenges Ahead

Although Turkey has expanded its higher education system and improved its accessibility by establishing new public universities, there are many challenges faced by these newly established public universities in Turkey. In a qualitative study with 12 rectors of recently established public universities, Özoğlu et al. (2015) found that these universities faced difficulties in recruiting experienced administrative staff and high quality faculty. The rectors reported also several other issues. For instance, financial support from the central government has been perceived as generous but not sufficient. More importantly, as the budget is not precisely allocated based on strategic plans, rectors have had difficulty in formulating their goals and implementation of them. There is also a limited university-community partnership in many cities and unrealistic economic public demands of universities.

In addition to challenges of newly established universities, there are four major systemic challenges that we have to take into consideration in developing policies for Turkey. These major challenges are as follows:

1) There is still unmet demand for higher education.

While the participation rates in higher education is rapidly increasing, there is still significant unmet demand for higher education in Turkey. The disparity between the number of applicants seeking admission and the number of seats available is still large. During last several years, there have been around 2 million applicants, but only around half of them have been admitted to higher education programs (Özoğlu et al., 2015). Moreover, about 47 percent of higher education students are in the open education programs; this ratio is considered as too high in comparison to many other developed countries. Projections show that the demand for higher education will continue to grow because the number of high school graduates will increase in the coming years (Çetinsaya, 2014). As of now, there is no clear strategy on how to meet with the increasing demand for higher education in the coming years.

2) There is a substantial shortage as well as regional imbalance of quality faculty.

According to one estimate, excluding open education programs, Turkey needs at least 45,000 faculty in order to reach the OECD average for the number of students per faculty, i.e., 15.6 (Çetinsaya, 2014). Although each province has now at least one public university, there has always been an imbalance between regions and provinces in terms of the number of faculty and students. To illustrate, as of 2005, 42 percent of professors working in Turkey were in just three major cities (YÖK, 2007). As of 2013, the southeastern part of Turkey has about 10 percent of the total population, but only has 2.5 percent of professors (Çetinsaya, 2014). Newly established universities located in the less-developed provinces experience extra difficulty in attracting quality faculty (Özoğlu et al., 2015).

There are some programs to overcome the faculty shortage. There are about 2.800 graduate students currently studying abroad who are to return and teach at these newly established universities. There has also been a domestic program toward research assistants in order to train them to be hired at newly established universities. In addition to the salary increase (30 percent) of 2014 and there is now a performance pay. The latter started in January 2016 and is based on individual faculty's academic performance. The two together have been great incentives for people to work in public universities. Also, faculty working at less developed regions receive extra pay. Still, there is a need for more targeted efforts to increase the number of faculty as well as tackle regional imbalance in terms of quality faculty.

Moreover, considering that more programs are being offered in English and the government is pushing for internationalization of higher education, the need for talented international faculty who can teach courses in English is increasing. The influx of Syrian students and academics into Turkey also creates a further impetus for internationalization of higher education in Turkey. Some academic programs in Arabic have recently been established at a Turkish public university. There are also some public and private initiatives to establish Arabic language universities in Turkey. The success of all of these efforts depends on the quality of faculty.

3) The governance structure of higher education system has been poor.

The current higher education governance model in Turkey has some serious shortcomings. It has a highly powerful Board, i.e., the BHE, at its center. The BHE was established during the military junta in the aftermath of the 1980 coup d'état. The junta blamed universities for being the source of social conflict during the 1970's that claimed thousands of lives and accordingly created a highly centralized system to control universities (Gur, 2014). This system has been characterized as "too centralized and highly rigid;" moreover the law covering higher education is considered as "highly detailed, rigid and out-of-date" (The World Bank, 2007, p. 9). As a result, administrative and financial autonomy of universities is very limited in Turkey. Although many --

including government documents as well as the BHE presidents -- have called for comprehensive reform of the higher education system (Barblan, Ergüder, & Gürüz, 2008; Çetinsaya, 2014; Kalkınma Bakanlığı, 2013; Küçükcan & Gür, 2009; Özcan, 2009; The World Bank, 2007; Yavuz, 2012; YÖK, 2007, 2011), thus far all reform attempts failed due to the political power struggles among political parties, the Turkish national Presidents, the BHE, universities, army, and other stakeholders (Gür & Çelik, in press).

Although the BHE was modeled after state governing boards in the United States (Doğramacı, 2007; Gürüz, 2008), the current structure is not based on a lay governance model. Unlike most regulatory bodies and board of trustees at OECD member countries including the United States that have members from outside university (Fielden, 2008), all members of the BHE of Turkey are either former/current academic or state officials. Accordingly, the accountability of higher education system to the public is problematic.

Additionally, the way the university rectors are appointed is very complex (Günay & Kılıç, 2011) and includes much political involvement both on the part of faculty and the BHE. First, there is an election among the faculty. Then, the BHE shortlists three candidates based on the election result, and then submits it to the Turkish national President. Lastly, the national President appoints one rector among these three candidates. This model has many serious shortcomings. Faculty are often divided among themselves along the political spectrum. Rectors often hire unqualified faculty who would be a good electorate in their next election. Third, when national Presidents preferred to appoint a person who came second or third in the rector election instead of a person who came first, many criticize the Presidents for not respecting "the ballot box" and ignoring the wills of the faculty (i.e., Hakan, 2015).

This process of appointing rectors, as well as the current structure of the BHE, makes it extremely difficult to induce effective management of Turkey's public academic institutions. Reforming the BHE requires changing the Constitution. There is no consensus among the political parties to alter this dynamic and all recent attempts to reform higher education have failed (Gür, 2014; Gür & Çelik, in press). However, there is still some reason for hope. A new development plan for 2014-2018, published in 2013, as well as the current government's action plan, published at the end of 2015, include items to help restructure the highly centralized higher education system, and accordingly to increase autonomy of the universities (64. Hükümet Programı, 2015; Kalkınma Bakanlığı, 2013).

4) The current financial model does not seem to be sustainable.

International comparative studies show that almost all countries experience financial difficulties when they provide universal access with nominal tuition fees. As Turkey has an expanding public higher education system with no tuition fees since 2013, it needs to develop a sustainable financial model; otherwise many students especially in the public universities face a low quality educational experience. There is no clear strategy on how current financial model will be maintained. Accordingly, Turkey needs to increase its budget available to higher education; universities also need to diversify their sources of income (Kurt & Gümüş, 2015). As there have been significant disparities in terms of educational quality and access by gender, social and economic groups; cost sharing between the government and individuals along with well-designed student scholarships/aids would increase access and equity in Turkey (The World Bank, 2007). Moreover, more studies are needed to show who really benefits from free tuition policy at public universities.

E. Conclusion

Turkish higher education has experienced exceptional expansion, removing a number of barriers to access to a university education. The students have now more opportunities than ever before. Yet, the system has many problems, including a chronic shortage of quality faculty. Although the funding available to higher education in Turkey has been increased generously, international comparisons show that it is still below the OECD average in terms of per student expenditure (Kurt & Gümüş, 2015). Thus, it needs to develop a new funding model marked by a greater diversity of income sources, including a consideration of tuition and larger financial aid program for students.

Challenges associated with moving from a mass to universal higher education are not unique to Turkey. But, while developed countries such as the US have moved from mass to universal higher education several decades ago (Trow, 1970, 1974), Turkey moved towards universal higher education only very recently and rapidly. Additionally, reforming higher education governance of Turkey has been a persistent issue for many years, but all reform attempts have been inconclusive up to now. Reforms are needed to increase the autonomy and accountability of universities.

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