

The Transformation of Higher Education in Turkey 1981-2007

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I extend a hearty welcome to the participants in this meeting in the capital of Turkey, and especially to Dr Jan Sadlak, Dr Per Nyborg, and Ms Katia Dolgova-Dreyer. I am also glad to see that a large number of rectors of Turkish universities and leaders in our higher education system are here with us. In the past we have met during the sessions of the International Conference on Higher Education, established in 1981. Out of the 19 such Conferences held to date in different countries, four have taken place here in Turkey. Now we are pleased to host the present meeting which will bring us abreast of the developments in the Bologna Process.

Today I want to tell you about what has been happening in higher education in Turkey over the past quarter of a century, but first let me give a brief historical background.

In the period from 1923 to 1933, it was felt that Turkey's principal higher education institution, Istanbul *Darülfünun*, a remnant from the Ottoman Empire, had failed to live up to the expectations of Turkish society because of its inability to develop and advance. For this reason, Atatürk invited Professor Alfred Malche from Switzerland to study the *Darülfünun* with a view to its reform along the lines of a Western European university model. Professor Malche's report identified the drawbacks inherent in having lecturers* appointed by the university rector; it was proposed therefore that the government appoint lecturers instead:

Nothing is more important to the university's future than the selection and appointment of professors. According to the current system, professors find other professors... Persons with an interest are bad judges. Professors should be consulted but other parties should make the decisions.

One of the main reasons that reform was needed was brought out by the then Minister of Education, Reşit Galip:

Darülfünun has no coordination to provide scientific cooperation between the faculties and other divisions. Lecturers cannot devote themselves sufficiently to teaching because of their work outside of

*In this text "lecturer" refers to a teaching staff member of any rank.

the university, and they consider themselves responsible only for those hours they teach thus preventing them from conducting scientific research. The consequence of this state of affairs is that there are very few publications. The administrative positions in *Darülfünun* and its faculties are elected ones. This has led to greed, frustration, and disagreements among the faculty members. There is no effective outside control.

On July 31, 1933, after the Turkish Grand National Assembly had examined Professor Malche's report and found it well substantiated and valid, law 2252 was passed abolishing the *Darülfünun*. A day later, on August 1, 1933, a new higher education institution under the name of 'Istanbul University' was established. As the first university of the Republic of Turkey, Istanbul University, with its radical administrative structure determined by law began operations as of this date. This was the first time the word *university* appeared in Turkish law.

During the period 1933-1946, a rector administered Istanbul University. The president appointed the rector upon the recommendation of the minister of education, and the minister of education appointed the deans upon the recommendation of the rector. The rector was granted the authority to: represent the university; determine the university's organization; carry out and supervise academic studies; foster communication between all of the university bodies; and authorize payments. According to law, the rector could both invite faculty committees to convene separately or together, and could chair the meetings. In addition, the minister of education appointed professors from the two to three candidates submitted by faculty committees.

The goal of the reform, an important part of the revolution that Atatürk directed, was to bring education, teaching, and research studies up to the level of Western countries; and to transfer the university administration systems of Western countries to Turkey. The reform was based on the principle of universities being held accountable to society. As a result, during the 1933-1946 period, research rapidly increased, the level of higher education rose and the university was very successful. During this time, upon the recommendation of the Germans, a Higher Institute of Agriculture, which included faculties, was established as a university in Ankara.

In 1946 when the multi-party democracy period began, a proposal was put forward to bring about 'university autonomy'. University autonomy, based on a proposal made by a commission of professors, was interpreted as including "the rectors and deans being elected by the lecturers" and consequently in 1946, the Universities Law 4936 went into effect with regulations in accordance with this interpretation. The perception of autonomy reflected in this law, one not actually exemplified in independent and advanced countries, was retained, with a few modifications as suggested by a committee of professors in law number 115, in 1960. Moreover, in article 120 of the 1961 constitution the wording: "universities

will be administered by the organs that they themselves have elected” was guaranteed and consolidated. However, this guarantee brought an artificial immunity to lecturers rather than to universities. In light of article 120 and the passing of the aforementioned laws, it might be said with some justification that universities reverted to that system prevailing in Turkey prior to 1933.

According to the articles of Universities Law 4936 and illustrative of the understanding of ‘autonomy’ current at that time in some circles in Turkey, universities left the control in the hands of the administrators whom they themselves chose, and those administrators were impervious to any effective control. This, in a sense, came to mean that ‘lecturer immunity’ was actually practiced. Article 12 of the law decreed that, “The rector would be elected for two years by committees of faculty professors by a simple majority from among salaried ordinarius professors or professors; and [the rector] would be from a different faculty each time”.

During this period, the authority of the rector was very limited. The rector, who chaired the senate, was *primus inter pares*, first among equals, had one vote and the senate would make the decisions. Outside of this, the rector had little authority in the legal process. The deans would chair faculty committees for example; and such matters as permission for a student or assistant to go abroad would be decided by these committees. The rector could not interfere at all with deans. When a rector of a respected university met with an angry faculty dean, they could exchange sharp remarks in front of everyone. The authority of deans was limited in the same way. For this reason, an important amount of a lecturer’s time was spent in faculty committee meetings. They allocated the rest of their time to carrying out freelance work, especially those in the faculties of medicine and law; that is, in their private practices.

When the planning period began in 1962, the State Planning Office requested that universities recruit more students. However, universities, claiming they were autonomous, refused, stating, “We cannot take any more students”. In the thirteen-year period from the time the planning period began until 1975, eleven new universities were established. Thus, the number of universities increased to nineteen. However, interestingly, although the number of students in universities and academies had reached 49,000 in 1975, this number paradoxically decreased to 42,000 in the period to 1982.

While it was necessary to provide increased educational opportunities to university-aged students, at least in a manner that would reflect population growth, and despite the fact that the infrastructure was ready, the schooling ratio of university-aged students in the 1975-76 academic year fell from 9.1% to 6.3% in the 1980-81 academic year.

As for research, one of the most important indicators is the number of papers published internationally. The Institute of Scientific Information (ISI) indexes the number of Turkish publications in 1981 at an international level, at around 380. Turkey was ranked forty-third in the world (Chart 7 and Chart 8).

The state of higher education institutions before 1981 was a much-debated public issue. In the newspapers of that time, according to the data from the State Institute of Statistics, for every 100 students entering university, only 17 would graduate. Of the number of students registered in university 10% left school in the first year, and 33% left in subsequent years. University capacity was not fulfilled. There was a very uneven distribution of lecturers; for instance, a university opened with seven lecturers and those lecturers also held administrative positions. The university system became dysfunctional and there was talk in the media that the higher education system needed to be revamped and developed according to a strategic plan.

In 1981, I accepted the responsibility of drafting a new law on higher education. Among the main aims of this law was the formation of a council of higher education: one third of this council's members would be nominated by the Inter-University Council; a third would be from members nominated by the government (these members would be approved and appointed by the President); a third of the members would be directly appointed by the President. There was also a body charged with evaluating each university's performance. These were outside control mechanisms which could not have been tolerated in earlier years.

The law would also include such principles as lecturers in universities working full time, and *docents*, or associate professors, aiming to become professors, having to apply for permanent positions in other universities. The goal was, as in more developed countries, for academic advancement to depend on leaving the university where one had received one's schooling and teaching elsewhere.

During the preparation of the law the input of top university administrators from nine countries, led by Secretary General of the European Rectors Conference, Andris Barblan, was taken into consideration. After the law was put into effect, a conference was organized for December 7-9, 1981, with the participation of university administrators who were involved in the examination of the law; and a large majority of Turkish university rectors and other scientists. Foreign scientists attending the conference praised this law at a press conference held on December 10, 1981. Shortly thereafter, a Turkish lecturer sent a letter to Andris Barblan criticizing the new law. In his answer dated January 20, 1982 (Appendix), Barblan said that the new law was more or less in accordance with the Anglo-Saxon higher education model and that the law did not coincide with the Rousseau model mentioned in the letter of criticism. Moreover, he mentioned that for those who were brought up according to the old system, the new model would be hard to understand and be accepted in Turkey.

That first International Conference on Higher Education (I.C.H.E.) was the beginning of a series of international Conferences. During the second one, again held in Ankara, the developments in Turkey under the new university system were debated. At that time Ignaz Bender, Kanzler of Trier University in Germany, was elected President of the Conference. Since it has met in Trier, Maastricht, Edinburgh, Washington DC, Stockholm/Turku, Marseille, Halifax (Canada), Ankara, Leicester (UK), Qingdao (China), Prague, Maribor (Slovenia), Irbid/Amman, Krakow, Luxemburg, once more in Ankara, and Cluj-Napoca (Romania). During the last meeting of I.C.H.E. it was proposed that future meetings should have on their agendas reports of developments in the Bologna Process.

Now let me give an overview of developments after 1981. The university-academic division that existed within the Turkish Education system ceased to be in effect after the passage of the Higher Education Law (6 November 1981) and the Organization for Institutions in Higher Education Decree (20 July 1982). Higher education institutions and conservatories that were once affiliated to ministries were now gathered under various universities. Improved coordination, planning, and a degree of cooperation reduced frustrations and related problems.

There were 19 state universities in 1981. With the conversion of academies and higher education schools, this number went up to 27 in 1982. The provision of distance learning was undertaken in the 1982-1983 academic year by the faculty of Open Education at Anadolu University. Since in those days, universities could only be established by governments, it was not possible to found private universities. In some countries, especially in the USA, such leading institutions as Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and Stanford had been founded as private non-profit institutions, and I believed that universities similar to these would be beneficial to Turkey. I emphasized the importance of the USA model at every opportunity, but an article of the Turkish Constitution stated that universities could only be established by the State through an act of parliament. Therefore, during the Republican period several private universities had been closed. In 1982 an amendment to the Constitution allowed private universities of higher education to be established provided that they were strictly non-profit. In addition, an act of law following that amendment required that the standard of teaching and research in a private institution of higher education should be no less than that of the geographically closest public university. With this new opportunity, Bilkent University was established in 1984 jointly by three foundations, and the first students were enrolled in 1986. This was followed by the foundation of other private universities from 1992 onwards, totaling 30. There are now 115 universities in Turkey (see Chart 9). This has led to a healthy competition between the public and private universities.

The aforementioned decrease in the number of students being accepted into universities and academies, between 1975 and 1982, from 49,000 to 42,000, had been unexpected and disappointing. However, from the 1981-1982 academic

year onwards, there has been a steady increase every year. In 2007, the number of students admitted to tertiary education had reached 626,390. Students studying at universities numbered 232,627 in 1981; by 2006 the number was 1,543,845 (see Charts 2 and 3). In addition, students studying within the Open Education System in 2006 numbered 799,053. Accounting for 6.3% in 1980, students attending higher education comprised 34.5% of the Turkish higher education age group in 2006, which had increased in the meantime from four to six million (Chart 1).

Meanwhile complementary to these figures, there was a significant increase amongst the university teaching staff. Only 20,244 in 1979, the number of those teaching at university reached 84,785 in 2006 (Chart 4). Amongst these, teaching staff numbers (professors, associate professors, assistant professors) had gone up from 4,047 in 1979 to 32,739 in 2006 (Chart 5); other teaching members went up from 16,197 to 52,046 (see Chart 6).

I have already mentioned that scientists in Turkish Universities had written around 300 articles in international journals in 1981 and that our ranking internationally was forty-third. In 2005 the number of Turkish publications had gone up to 16,266 (Chart 7), and Turkey was now ranked eighteenth in publications worldwide (Chart 8).

In conclusion, it is fair to say that the change in the Turkish higher education system has led to a tangible improvement in the quality of the education and research, as well as in the number of young people able to benefit from higher education.

