

When Students Become Customers; The Changing Relationship Between the Student and the Academic: A Case Study from Social Sciences in Turkey

Öğrenciler Müşteri Olduklarında; Akademisyen ve Öğrenci Arasındaki İlişkinin Değişimi: Türkiye’de Sosyal Bilimlerden Bir Vaka Çalışması

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ÖZ

Yükseköğretim, kâr potansiyeli yüksek, stratejik bir meta haline gelirken, yükseköğretimin tanımının hızlı bir şekilde değişmekte olduğu görülmektedir. Bu değişen bağlamda, artan bir şekilde metalaşmakta olan yükseköğretimin parçası olan tarafların da farklı konumlara geçtikleri görülmektedir. Hizmet sağlayıcısı konumuna geçen akademisyenlerin, öğrencilerin birer müşteri olarak ele alındıkları ‘Neoliberal Üniversite’de profesyonellik statülerini yitirmeleri söz konusudur. Bu durum, çalışmada ele alınacağı üzere, kurumlar, akademisyenler ve öğrenciler arasındaki ilişkinin dönüşümü çerçevesinde ortaya çıkmaktadır. Bu çalışma, İstanbul ve İzmir’de bulunan devlet ve vakıf (özel) üniversitelerinde çalışmakta olan 28 akademisyenle gerçekleştirilmiş niteliksel bir Doktora çalışmasının sonuçlarını, akademisyenin konumu temelinde ele almaktadır. Akademisyenlerin öğrencileri ile olan ilişkilerinin artan bir şekilde denetlendiği ve müşteri konumuna geçen öğrencilerin taleplerine ilişkin akademisyenlerin deneyimi temelinde bu çalışmada sunulacak olan vaka, yükseköğretimin değişen yapısına ilişkin tartışmanın ışığında yürütülecektir. Bu tartışma, akademisyenlik mesleğinin, ‘Neoliberal Üniversite’ çatısı altında geçirmekte olduğu değişime ilişkin daha geniş bir tartışmanın parçasıdır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Türkiye’de yükseköğretim, Neoliberal üniversite, Yükseköğretimin metalaşması, Müşteri olarak öğrenci

ABSTRACT

The definition of higher education is going through a rapid transformation where higher education is seen as a strategic commodity with a high profit potential. Actors involved in an increasingly commodified higher education arena are taking different positions in this changing context. Neoliberal ideology is taken as the basis of the transformation of higher education. Academics taking the role of service providers are losing their professional positions where students are being regarded as customers in the ‘Neoliberal University’. This implies a change in the relationship between institutions, academics and students which will be analyzed throughout this paper. The paper takes the point of view of academics, bringing in results of a qualitative PhD study conducted with 28 academics working in public and foundation (private) universities located in the cities of Istanbul and Izmir. The case presented in this study will be analyzed as part of the discussion on the changing nature of higher education in which academics are increasingly being controlled through their relationship with their students and the effects of the increasing demands of the students taking the role of customers. This analysis is a part of a broader discussion on how the academic profession is changing under the context of the ‘Neoliberal University’.

Keywords: Higher education in Turkey, Neoliberal university, Commodification of higher education, Student as customer

Atalay S., (2018). When students become customers; the changing relationship between the student and the academic: A case study from social sciences in Turkey. *Journal of Higher Education and Science/Yükseköğretim ve Bilim Dergisi*, 8(3), 512-521. <https://doi.org/10.5961/jhes.2018.292>

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Received/Geliş Tarihi : 12.04.2018

Accepted/Kabul Tarihi : 05.06.2018

INTRODUCTION

It is possible to speak of a transformation of universities throughout the world. This is referred to as 'commercialization of higher education' or the rise of 'academic capitalism' (Rhoades, 2007; Jessop, 2017). The idea of the 'University' built on the philosophical contributions of Humboldt, Fichte and Schleiermacher, which is later taken as the Humboldtian Model has been influential throughout the world since 19th century (Charle & Verger, 2005). Krull (2005) summarizes Humboldt's standpoint as:

*"For Wilhelm von Humboldt, a modern university rested on four pillars: (1) The integration of teaching and research, including the obligation to foster the creation of knowledge as well as its preservation and transmission; (2) the complementary principles of *Lehrfreiheit* (freedom to teach) and *Lernfreiheit* (freedom to study); (3) the demand for *Einsamkeit* (solitude) and *Freiheit* (freedom) in the autonomous pursuit of truth; and (4) the introduction of the seminar system as the backbone of a community of teachers and students" (p. 99).*

This model is built on the unity of research and teaching and here higher education is considered to be a public service where universities are to be managed by the state (Shills, 1992). Even though this model is linked to the state authority, higher education is seen as part of the pursuit of knowledge and truth, which should be kept away from the demands of rulers (István, 2001) and the bourgeois interests (Tekin, 2003). This type of university is also concerned with raising 'good citizens' for the nation state (Tekeli, 2003). The unity of research and teaching, the autonomous position of the university, the pursuit of knowledge and truth only for their own sake and the aim towards raising 'good individuals' are considered to be the characteristics of the Humboldtian model.

After World War II (WWII) there has been a big increase in student enrollments in higher education throughout the world. This is referred to as the massification of higher education and scholars have mentioned that higher education has moved out of its 'elite status' (Atalay, 2017). The pressure created through higher numbers of students combined with neoliberal policies towards cutting public expenditures on higher education, have been the driving forces behind the transformation of universities (Altbach, 1995; Pedro, 2009). Humboldtian University is losing its relevance to the contemporary developments of today's world.

In the neoliberal era, the services which were previously offered by the state are becoming commodified services which are either privatized for consumption (Ünlütürk Ulutaş, 2011) or organized in business terms through New Public Management Strategies. New Public Management aims at increasing "the efficiency and productivity of public services through using the strategies of the market system" (Willis et al. 2017: 3105). New Public Management (NPM) strategies involves the public sector looking at the business model for guidance in achieving efficiency and productivity.

Another aspect of neoliberalism which is relevant to our discussion is the construction of the neo-individual referred to as the 'homo-economicus'. In neoliberalism, homo-economicus is seen as a rational individual who is a calculator of pleasure and pain. This is a mechanistic individual who tries to achieve maximum output with minimum effort, motivated by the results of her actions (Adaman & Madra, 2015). Human action is only evaluated on the basis of its consequences, the output put forth (İnsel, 2000). This is accompanied by the thinking that, since humans have the obligation to make best possible rational choices and are motivated by their actions, they have the responsibility to invest in themselves. This forms the notion of 'human capital'. "Any activity that increases the capacity to earn income, to achieve satisfaction [...] is an investment in human capital" (Read, 2009: 28). Here the individual is seen to be the carrier of a potential which must be developed through investment. This investment brings a return that becomes materialized in earnings, securing a person's life chances (Kramer, 2017).

Higher education is organized as a product, delivered for its 'exchange' value' (Naidoo & Whitty, 2013) and becomes a form of 'capital' (Lawson, Sanders, & Smith, 2015). With the neoliberal notion of 'homo-economicus', individuals are expected to invest in themselves. Education gains strategic importance in this regard. Education is a form of human capital and educational choices have respected rates of return. Individuals have to invest in themselves by making the right choices where education is seen as an investment commodity (Sahota, 1975; Ercan & Özar, 2000). With the discourse of human capital, students become persons who make strategic choices, including educational choices, in order to increase their life chances. Higher education becomes an important form of investment in this regard (Anwaruddin, 2013). However, while higher education is gaining strategic importance, financing and management of academic activities have become problematic in the neoliberal era. This results in the transformation of higher education systems.

Today we see another type of model gaining importance throughout the world. This new model is referred to as the 'Neoliberal University' (Anwaruddin, 2013; Mandell, 2017) and the 'University of Excellence' where business principles become significant in the management of higher education. Concepts such as Total Quality Management (TQM) gain particular importance (Nalçaoğlu, 1999; Erdoğan, 2003). In this type of university, research and teaching activities are standardized, closely surveilled and the output is carefully assessed through performance systems. There is a constant reference to 'quality'. Cost accounting principles are applied to higher education (Parker & Jary, 1995; Newfield, 1997). Neoliberal University operating on business principles adopts concepts such as, TQM, efficiency, cost accounting from the business world. Activities in higher education are monitored to be evaluated in an input output ratio assessment. Higher education with its legacy of the pursuit of knowledge and truth is becoming another commodity subject to cost effectiveness measures under the Neoliberal University.

Turkey's Higher Education

Turkish higher education has been a public service and universities have had strong bonds with the state policy (Günel & Günel, 2011). Whenever there was political turbulence, universities were greatly affected. In coup d'état of 1960, 147 academics have been discharged (Yamaç, 2009). After the coup d'état of 1980, 95 academics have been discharged (Tekeli, 2010). A very important institution has been founded after this coup. In 1981, Turkish Council of Higher Education (YÖK) has been established as a coordinating body in higher education. All higher education institutions have been bounded by this central state authority (Kılıç, 1999). This institution has implemented policies which are interpreted to be operational for the neoliberal transformation of higher education in Turkey (Coşar & Ergün, 2015). The law amendment proposed by YÖK, that made the establishment of foundation universities possible, can be seen as a very significant policy change in Turkish higher education.

In 1984, Bilkent University has been founded on the grounds of the law amendment implemented by YÖK (Erguvan, 2013). Even though, this law has permitted the establishment of universities by non-profit foundations, some scholars have argued that, these institutions can be regarded as private universities due to their operational structures (Arslan & Odman, 2011; Vatansever & Gezici-Yalçın, 2015). Fırat & Akkuzu (2015) state that for most of the foundation universities in Turkey, the investment is less than the revenue from tuition. They argue that these universities cannot be regarded as non-profit institutions and that they are directly connected to private sector capital and that the term 'foundation' should be regarded as a screen.

Even though it is possible to say that the establishment of private universities has significantly changed the structure of higher education in Turkey, it is important to take into consideration a policy shift in the handling of public services which is the New Public Management Strategies (NPM). Application of NPM strategies in Turkey's higher education becomes most evident in the draft law proposed in 2013 by YÖK, the central state authority in higher education. There are five basic principles and aims in this draft law: "1. Diversity, 2. institutional autonomy and accountability, 3. performance evaluation and scientific competition, 4. financial flexibility and diversity in resources, 5. quality assurance" (YÖK, 2013). These aims may be seen as the reflection of neoliberal rhetoric in higher education; the market principles are being implemented through NPM strategies.

We can also refer to a rapid massification of higher education in Turkey. The number of students admitted to higher education was 64.498 in 1975 (Çetinsaya, 2014: 44). If we look at

YÖK statistics, the number of all students (including vocational, undergraduate, graduate) for the year 2016-2017 is 7.198.987 (YÖK, 2017). We can talk about a significant increase (11.162%) in student numbers in approximately 41 years. The number of higher education institutions has also risen over time. There were 18 universities in 1975 (Günay & Günay, 2011), whereas in 2016 there are 181 universities of which, 111 are public, 63 are private and 7 institutions are private vocational schools. 15 private universities were closed after the coup attempt of July 15, 2016 (Karataş-Acer & Güçlü, 2017: 1912). It is possible to state that today, financing of Turkey's higher education is still a public enterprise. The number of students enrolled in public institutions in the year 2016-2017 is 6629961 whereas total number of students in private universities and vocational schools is 569019 (YÖK, 2017).

Looking at developments such as the establishment of private universities, the financing of higher education towards self-steering universities, new YÖK Draft Law and the adjustment to the Bologna Process, scholars have argued that after 1980's it was possible to see the neoliberal transformation of higher education in Turkey (Hız, 2010; Ulutürk & Dane, 2011; Balaban, 2012; Coşar & Ergün, 2015; Vatansever & Gezici-Yalçın, 2015). In the light of this transformation, for our Phd study, we have set out to understand the effects of this transformation on the academics from social sciences working in Istanbul and Izmir.

Yalman (2011) states that the fact that in this transformation, the performance criteria have been based on natural sciences, including medicine and engineering, has marginalized social sciences. There are basic differences between the research and teaching activities in social and natural sciences (Huang & Chang, 2008). When higher education is evaluated in terms of outputs, social sciences become problematic in terms of identifying its return value. Critical thinking will be hard to identify as an output (Newfield, 1997). Today the quest for quantifiable outcomes and immediate results become significant in higher education (Evans, 2007). We see many social sciences departments being closed throughout the world in this regard. It is also possible to see market values of departments by looking at which departments are preferred in private universities (Atalay, 2017). For example, there are no geography departments in private universities in Turkey. This can be seen as a threat for the future of social sciences.

METHOD

Taking the aforementioned arguments into consideration, the study has been conducted to understand how these developments are affecting the teaching members¹ working in social sciences in Turkey. Faculty of Letters, has been selected as the representative of social sciences for sampling purposes.

¹Teaching members are academics working as Assistant Professor Dr., Associate Professor Dr. and Professor Dr. This limitation was seen to be necessary in order to base the study on a more homogeneous and comparable population. Other academic positions such as Research Assistant, Lecturer and Instructor are expected to be subject to different and additional pressures and control strategies, which is thought to require a thorough examination through an independent and extensive study. Recently a law amendment which has eliminated the position of Assistant Professor Dr., has been issued and published in gazette on 06/03/2018. A new position called "Dr. Teaching Member/Lecturer has been issued (<http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2018/03/20180306-11.pdf>).

Academics working in archeology, anthropology, geography, philosophy, psychology, sociology, history, history of art and history of science in public and private universities located in Istanbul and Izmir constituted the study's population. Academics have been identified and listed by looking at universities' websites. It was seen that there was a total number of 1075 academics, out of which 906 were working in Istanbul and 169 were working in Izmir. The list itself, provided an important point. It was seen that the academics working in the selected fields in Istanbul were mostly employed in private universities (520 academics). Moreover, almost 46% (240 academics) of the listed academics were seen to be working in psychology departments. Istanbul, with the highest number of private universities in Turkey, constituted a big academic labor power market for social sciences founded in private universities; especially for the department of psychology. Only 15 academics working in the selected departments of private universities were employed in Izmir.

The problems of the study can be summarized as follows: With the commodification of teaching and research, implementation of various higher education control strategies by the institutions, are the academics losing control over the academic labor process, over their working conditions and can this be interpreted as part of the process of 'proletarianization of professionals'? During a time of transformation in Turkey's higher education, this study focuses on the conditions of academic work from the academics' point of view.

Since the main aim of the study was to develop a deeper understanding of the working conditions (labor process) of academics, this study was designed as a qualitative study and the sampling technique used was the purposive sampling technique accordingly. The study has not sought statistical generalization. Purposive sampling technique has been preferred where predetermined criteria has been used in accordance with the purpose of the study (Guest, Bunce, & Laura, 2006; Punch, 2011). Maximum variation sampling was mostly used in making initial contacts. This was where different positions from different institutions and departments were regarded as categories for variation. In order to get an idea of the workload, student per teaching member ratios were calculated using data provided by YÖK. Institutions have been ranked using these ratios. Academics, especially the ones working in Istanbul, have been contacted through email using addresses listed

in their department websites. Snowball sampling technique was used in establishing contacts with academics who were thought to be in positions which would be very significant for the study. Snowball sampling technique² was also used during the field work conducted in Istanbul between 06/03/2017 and 26/03/2017.

Academics working in private universities were mainly targeted since they were considered to be in the center of the commodification process. Academics working in public universities provided a case for comparison. Accordingly, semi-structured in-depth interviews have been conducted with 28 academics, out of which 19 were working in private universities and nine were working in public institutions. With the preliminary assumption that, working in more precarious conditions, academics working as assistant professor³ were also targeted in the study. 16 academics with the title assistant professor, 7 with associate professor and 5 with professor have been interviewed.

The study has been conducted with academics working in 17 different universities, out of which 11 were private and 6 were public institutions. Major differences have been observed between these institutions, that led to a classification of these universities as type A, B, C and D. Type A university is a private institution built on big 'monopoly' capital. The foundation behind this type of university has big holding revenues from many business ventures whereas, the main source of income for type B and C universities is the tuition fee⁴ and accordingly the students themselves. Type B universities have been established earlier than type C universities and receive students with higher university entrance exam scores⁵. We can say that they are more preferred by students. Type D university is simply a public university.

Interviews have been recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded. Codes have been analyzed in themes designed according to the "labor process theory" which was the theoretical framework of the study. One of the themes of the study was 'control'. This category was used to understand how academics were controlled through various higher education mechanisms such as performance assessments, technological control, direct surveillance and monetary reward mechanisms such as the academic incentive and higher education actors such as the board of trustees, head of departments and the students. It was seen that students were perceived as customers espe-

²It is important to note that the study has been conducted under the conditions of State of Emergency. After the Coup Attempt of July 15, 2016, State of Emergency has been declared on July 20, 2016. It is considered vital to establish trust during an in-depth interview process. It was harder to establish trust in this study due to the conditions of state of emergency. Accordingly, it was seen that snowball sampling technique was operational in making additional contacts. With the reference of academics the participants were acquainted with, they were seen to be more willing to participate in the study.

³It is stated in the Higher Education Law number 2547 that Assistant Professors are appointed for two or three years. They may be reappointed for a total maximum duration of 12 years. This position may be considered as a non-tenure track position. With the law amendment mentioned before, the Dr. Teaching Members /Lecturers are to be appointed for four years (<http://www.yok.gov.tr/documents/10279/29816/2547+say%C4%B1%C4%B1%20Y%C3%Bcksek%C3%B6%C4%9Fretim+Kanunu/>).

⁴These categories have been derived from Firat & Akkuzu (2015)'s analysis on the operations of private universities in Turkey.

⁵There is a university entrance exam in Turkey where students are ranked according to their exam results. They are able to choose the university for which their exam score is deemed sufficient. In this regard, it is relatively easy to rank universities in terms of their 'popularity' in the public eye.

cially by private universities and this perception affected the position of academics. In the following section a discussion on the status of the student as a customer will be carried out and the findings of the study will be rendered in the framework of this discussion.

RESULTS

“As I made my way to my office at 7.30am last Thursday, I noticed an A4 poster stuck to the lift door. Then I noticed one on the wall. And one on the notice board. Then one on my classroom door. In fact, they were tacked to nearly every available surface along the corridor. And they all bore the same statement: ‘All I’m asking for is a little respect seeing as I pay you £9,000 a year’” (The Guardian, 2015).

In this newspaper article written by an academic, we see an example of a relationship established between the student and the academic. This type of relationship may be referred to as a customer and provider relationship where the customer reminds the provider of the monetary value of their work.

With the commodification process within ‘Neoliberal University’ we see higher education losing its “meaning outside a system of market relations” (Rosh White, 2007: 594). As mentioned earlier university education has become a necessity for one’s future chances, especially for job prospects (Svensson & Wood, 2007). This places strategic importance on higher education while academics lose their significance in higher education, operating on business principles. Higher education institutions adopt market terms and positions within institutions are redefined: “the language of ‘line managers’, ‘customers’ and ‘products’ begins to displace the academic language of deans, students and courses...” (Parker & Jary, 1995: 324-325). Higher education is becoming a product, an investment capital and the students are becoming the customers. The idea and rationale behind higher education is changing and we see market-like mechanisms prevailing throughout the world.

The discussion revolving around the status of the student involves the view that students are customers since they are paying for their education: “... students are only satisfied when they have gotten what they paid for: a quality education in a field of their choice with an accompanying credential that is valued in the labour market” (Mark, 2013: 3). The customer position may be interpreted as an ‘active role’. They are seen to be actively involved in the co-production of the product of higher education. We may see in scholarly discussions the notion that, the nature of higher education as a service that is comparable to other services. Guilbaut (2018: 297) states that higher education is similar with a gym service where customer involvement is deemed necessary to yield successful results. Svensson & Wood (2007: 22) advocate the uniqueness of higher education as a ‘product’ comparing it with a car sales service. The ownership of a degree requires the ‘customer’ to be assessed through exams and grades by the ‘supplier,’ whereas a car dealer has to sell cars to anyone with means to buy.

These comparisons are stated by authors who do not defend the position of seeing the student as a customer. However, it

is important to note that these comparisons involve a market rhetoric as well. We see the notion that higher education is just another service/ product which should be organized in market terms. This can be interpreted as an indicator of the commodification process of higher education. Brennan and Bennington (2000: 21-22) remind us of the different philosophical positions behind the idea of higher education. It may be seen as a provider of job skills whereas just as we have discussed before, it may be viewed as a vital vehicle for knowledge production which will contribute to the betterment of humankind. As the latter standpoint is becoming obsolete, the discussion itself on the subject is revolving around the concept of higher education as a service comparable to any other.

When regarding the student as the customer, customer satisfaction becomes a necessary goal. There is a greater emphasis on students’ satisfaction where, academics are losing their central role in academic endeavors (Bay & Harold, 2001; Pedro, 2009). Academics may be disregarded during the decision making processes in higher education institutions (Altbach, 1997; Evans, 2007). The authority has shifted from the academic to the student (Roberts & Donahue, 2000). The changing conditions of academic work are solidified in various higher education strategies implemented by universities.

There is an increasing competition in the higher education arena (Enders, De Boer, & Weyer, 2013), where a global higher education ‘market’ is formed (Lynch, 2015). Higher education institutions have different legacies and accordingly resources available to deal with this competitive pressure (Naidoo & Whitty, 2013). This creates different coping mechanism that are reflected in ‘higher education strategies’; the strategies employed by institutions in the delivery of higher education. These different strategies may all depend on the market mechanisms for operation but they can be regarded as differing in intensity. We can say that this may be true for the competitive pressures in and outside a country. There may be attributes specific to a country and there may be different experiences within a country. This study focusing on the Turkish academic, provides a case from Turkey.

In this study, it was seen that there were major differences between public institutions and private institutions in terms of the role of the student as a customer. It was seen that the academics who felt the student pressure were mostly from private universities. This difference can be seen in the experience of a participant who is a teaching member in a public university while teaching part-time in a private institution:

“I am teaching at this school and the student profile is very different from here [public institution]. There... for example... there is a smart board in there, that we do not have here. There are power outlets near the smart board and they have plugged their phones to be charged. While I was lecturing, one of them [student] got up from her seat very calmly, unplugged her phone, sat down in her seat and started doing something on her phone. It was as if I wasn’t there and wasn’t lecturing. If this have had happened here in public [university], my reaction would have been huge... I decided to ignore this. The attitude

of the student towards the hodja⁶... there is no student- hodja relationship there. Sadly, there is a customer and worker relationship..." (p. 17, Assoc. Prof. Female, D).

This may be interpreted as an indicator of the importance of the commodification process. When students have a central role in the profit making process of institutions, the academic is seen to be losing control over the teaching process. Musselin (2013: 26) states that with the commercialization of higher education, academics have become more aware of student 'wants' and sees this as a customer-centered approach. In private institutions academics are seen to comply more to the wills of students. This may be true for an academic from a public university teaching in a private institution. She adapts to the institutional atmosphere. A participant from a private university stresses upon this topic:

"... the concepts of hodja and student aren't conceptualized in the minds of these students. They are like, 'I have paid for this and I will pass this course'... students see this place as a commercial site. Accordingly, a student can go directly to the management and complain about you, like she [the instructor] did this and I don't like this and so on" (p. 15, Asst. Prof. Female, C).

Especially in type B and C universities, where the main source of income is from tuition, it could be seen that students have the right to directly go and complain to higher authorities in that institution. During the field study in Istanbul, it was seen that there was a box posted on which "write to the rector" is written in the entrance of one Type C university. This box resembled a customer complaint box. In another case, we see the parents as customers considering they are the ones usually covering higher education expenses. "Our vice rector gives his personal phone number to all parents. He says call me and talk to me directly" (p. 8, Prof. Female, C).

Students may complain to the management on various subjects including the way the lecturer 'looks at him/her':

"[students complain about things like] 'Just like he glared at me'. When they [students] make noise in the classroom I try to change their seat and they are like, why he tried to change my seat, is this a high school? What can I say to this person, she is putting on nail polish during the lesson and you cannot do anything about this. They see you as a waiter, yell at you like you are their waiter. Here is so much noise in the classroom but you cannot shut them up... the management takes their side" (p. 19, Asst. Prof. Male, B).

The student who does not like the way the instructor stares at him/her is seen to complain on the topic. We see the academic in a passive position, submitting to the wants of students even when it jeopardizes the quality of the lecture.

The students also expected and at times demanded to be able to contact teaching members anytime through e-mail:

"E-mailing and other stuff has changed. They [students] can write to you in the middle of the night and furthermore say things like, 'I wrote to you but did not get a response'. It is just like we have to answer them in the middle of the night or at the weekends" (p. 6, Prof. Male, B).

It should also be noted here that the university management may expect this demand to be met:

"I have heard this for example: a teaching member was late in answering a student's e-mail, he was approximately a week late. Rector said, 'this student e-mailed you, why haven't you answered the mail'... This is mostly about being a private institution. There is this state of mind, since the students are paying this much money in a year" (p. 10, Asst. Prof. Male, A).

Participant 11 (Asst. Prof. Female, C) states that students may call the teaching members at night:

"Making them [students] understand that they cannot call me at 12 pm has taken a lot of time. I tell them not to call me at 12 pm unless someone dies. They can call you; they are a bit childish here [in this institution]. This is also about you; they cannot call me I am kind but firm. They can call easygoing hodjas at 3 am".

Besides establishing constant contact with the students, another outcome of the student as customer approach may result in the standardization of course material. Rosh White (2007: 599) shares the findings of her study: "Also, roughly two thirds of the students interviewed felt it is acceptable to challenge or query a grade". Many of the participants have drawn attention to this situation. The coping mechanism was usually seen to be the standardization of assessment and evaluation". Participants in our study state that they have started using multiple choice questions in orders to cope with the increasing number of students challenging their grades. For example, Participant 25 (Asst. Prof.) says

"In order to gain time, I have started formulating my exams as multiple choice questions. I have been decreasing the number of open end questions. This is advantageous for me in two regards. One is that it is easier for me to read the exam papers and two, it is easier when the students challenge their grades".

Teaching members involved in this study, coming from different disciplines in social sciences, are standardizing their assessment due to time limitations and the grade query, even when it is harder for them to conceptualize their course material in the regard.

Student evaluations are an important source in establishing control over the teaching members. Naidoo & Whitty (2013: 217) argue that since students are increasingly seen as customers, student evaluations may be regarded as customer satisfaction surveys. Lust (1998: 39) referring to the findings of a study state that students are seen to prefer instructors who give them higher grades and who make the lessons more

⁶Hodja is used in everyday language in the Turkish Academia to refer to a lecturer/ teacher. It may be regarded as a cultural phrase.

entertaining. Participant 20 (Assoc. Prof. Female, B) says: “Who is a good instructor in the eyes of the student? She is the one giving them high grades; that is very clear.” Participant 14 (Asst. Prof. Female, C) state that student evaluations are very important for the university management: “Students will be positive about the instructors who give high grades and who can be easily manipulated. I think this is true. I am a very amiable instructor so my evaluations are always high”. We can see that the academics are aware of the wants of students.

Schneider (2013: 123) referring to the results of a survey state that, 40% of the faculty agreed with the fact that they gave grades which were higher than what the students actually deserved in order to get better evaluations. This resulted in a ‘grade inflation’. Another coping mechanism the faculty used was ‘dumbing down’ lessons. Accordingly, Participant 15 (Asst. Prof. Female, C) states that the student performance is low in her institution; that she prepares her lessons and then later on spends time trying to make the material easier for her students. Rosh White (2007: 602-603) says: “Being a ‘customer’ rather than a ‘learner’ is a disengaged position. It is also a position that relies on others to satisfy and to deliver (goods or services)”. Brennan & Bennington (2000: 25) state that higher education is a unique service that requires a lot of effort on behalf of the student. We see in the case of Participant 15, that the effort on behalf of the student is taken over by the academic. The teaching member is seen to be ‘dumbing down’ her lessons. As Bay & Harold argue (2001: 6), regarding the student as a customer means there is a not only a shift of power from the academic to the student but a shift of responsibility from the student to the institution (academic).

Participant 19 (Asst. Prof. Male, B) says that in order to please the student, the university management do not want the academics to be disciplined towards students, that the academics are expected not to give them assignments which will require a lot of effort on the student’s part. He also states that even, taking attendance becomes problematic:

“They [management] say take attendance, it should be over 70% and we do take attendance. Then half of the class fails. And then they ‘say why do you punish the student’. Never mind, just let the student think that you are taking attendance’. Anyway no one [student] is intimidated, they do not show up to the classroom. So it is all like a pretend game. Everyone except the hodja; the administrative personnel and the students, seem like they have a deal. You are like a puppet, a puppet”.

Here we see that the management expect the academic to pretend like he is taking attendance whereas students who are regarded as customers do not suffer the consequences of not attending classes.

Participant 20 (Assoc. Prof. Female, B) states that, the student achievement level in her institution is low and that she is having a hard time reaching out to them and “stoop” to their level. So she is very critical about student evaluations:

“They ask questions like, ‘has the instructor been just, has she been on time, is she an expert in her area?’. It is very weird

to ask this population such questions; there is a big gap to be filled. They ask, ‘is the instructor a master of her lesson, of her lesson topics?’. This is very absurd I think, since this is not in their capacity. For example, I may be the first hodja they have ever seen. They may be a freshman and they might compare me with [instructors from] other lessons”.

Evaluations become problematic in this regard. Svensson & Wood (2007: 20) state that higher education aims to equip students with the ability to critically assess even the situations which may contradict their short term self-interests. However, just as Participant 20 pinpoints, a first year student may not have enough educational experience to develop this critical outlook. This creates a troubled teaching experience for the academic. Parsell (2000: 328) argues that the notion of student as customer, promotes an academic “culture of blaming others for academic failure”.

The study showed that student evaluations were mainly used in private universities where students paid tuition. A teaching member from one public university states that her university tried to implement student evaluations but decided not to pursue this endeavor:

“They tried that [evaluation] one year. They gave evaluation forms to students and the results were hilarious; at least for our department. One of our hodjas was always absent, he had a drinking problem. It turned out that the best academic was him. Students came to the conclusion that he was the best academic since he did not show up for his lessons. So we reached results which were very far from objectivity” (P. 3, Prof. Female, D).

Bay & Harold (2001: 3) argue that even though students know what they want for the short-term, this may not be true for their wants in the long term. Taking student satisfaction as the major source of academic evaluation may be detrimental both for the student and the institution.

Student evaluations may be an important source of feedback for the academic. However, it was also seen that student evaluations were not always used by the university management in this manner. Participant 13 (Asst. Prof. Female, C) states that even though student evaluations are a part of her performance evaluation, she is not informed of the results. They are only seen by the management. Similarly, Participant 24 (Asst. Prof. Female, B) says:

“There are two types of student evaluations. One is the evaluation the university does; students are obliged to evaluate instructors before they learn their grades. The other one is the evaluation that the department does. I did not know that the university did an evaluation, I wasn’t informed. One day a student came [informed me] and I was like, ‘is there an evaluation? Where are the results?’ We don’t see them, no. Though the evaluation carried out by the department is used as... not as a feedback... but as a threat”.

We can expect that when evaluations are used in this way, it may create a hostile relationship between the academic and the students. Student evaluations become a source of threat.

As it was stated earlier, another mechanism was observed during the study. Some institutions did not conduct student evaluations. This did not mean that the students were not regarded as customers. An informal complaint mechanism was used by these institutions: “There is no official student evaluation. If a group of students go [to the management] and complain... there is no such evaluation. They don’t look to see whether the instructor performs well in his lesson... the academic is laid off” (P. 19, Asst. Prof. Male, B). Here we can see that customer satisfaction becomes the only institutional aim. Likewise, Participant 26 (Asst. Prof. Male, C) says: “If there is a complaint, the dean or the rector directly wants to see the hodja and asks about it. If they don’t think he is right, they might open an investigation”. This informal complaint mechanism may be seen as an important source of control, bearing the consequence of job loss for the academic.

The results of the study point out to the fact that when students are regarded as customers by their institutions, their relationship with the academics become problematic and at times antagonistic. We may take into consideration the teaching experience of an academic from a public university, who does not feel the student pressure:

“... when I am teaching, I feel like I am on stage. I think it is very pleasant when a plenty of young and intelligent students, who have been chosen with an exam are listening to you for hours. That is why I think, being an academic is the best job in the world” (P. 17, Assoc. Prof. Female, D).

CONCLUSION

The philosophical roots of the Humboldtian University, which has formed the conception of higher education until the Neoliberal Era are being abandoned as higher education is being viewed as another commodity, organized and presented through the use of business principles. As higher education is becoming commercialized, academics as the main source of teaching and research are losing their significance in academic endeavors. They are submitting to the student demands which arise from the new position students are filling; the position of customers. Public cutback on higher education funding, together with the privatization of higher education institutions leads to a higher education service where students become the main source of funding.

With the commodification of higher education in the context of the Neoliberal University, we see the transformation of national higher education systems. We can refer to the transformation of Turkish higher education after the formation of YÖK in 1981 and the law amendment that permitted the establishment of private higher education institutions. In this study, in-depth interviews with 28 teaching members from 11 private and 6 public universities located in Istanbul and Izmir have been conducted to understand the effects that this transformation has on academics. A significant finding of the study was the fact that students were being regarded as customers especially by private institutions and that this created a form of ‘control’ over academics who have participated in the study.

A clear difference in the position of students was observed between private and public institutions. Especially in type B and C private institutions where tuition was the main source of income, students were seen to be regarded as customers and this affected their relationship with the academics. For example, students were seen to demand constant contact with academics even beyond working hours. They were able to complain about the academics when they did not like the way the academic glanced at them. They could interrupt the lesson, paint their nails during the lesson, make noise and refuse to have their seats changed. By not objecting to these circumstances, academics were seen to hold a passive stance in these situations even when these affected the way they delivered their course material.

The study showed that academics are becoming more aware of the wants of the students where higher grades, absent instructors are preferred; institutions demand from the academic, attendance to be disregarded and student performance assessment to require little workload from the student. This also involved standardization of assessment in order to cope with the increasing number of students who challenged their grades. Student evaluations which may be seen as customer satisfaction surveys, meant that first year students with very little higher education experience, would evaluate the competence of their instructors. Some institutions conducted these surveys but did not share the results with the academics or did not use these surveys whereas they relied on the direct student experience; firing an academic whenever there was an informal verbal complaint from students.

As Emery, Kramer & Tian (2003: 43) state “How one is evaluated determines how one performs”. Lust (1998: 40) asks whether we can regard the “decline in academic standards” in higher education together with the “rise of consumerism” just as a coincidence. In this Turkish case, we see the academics becoming aware of the importance of giving higher grades, simplifying the course material, establishing constant contact, decreasing the workload and disregarding the course attendance. This shows us how higher education will become problematic when students are regarded as customers, whose demands should be met at all times. If the students are seen as customers, this brings us to the question asked by Rosh-White (2007): “The customer is always right?”. When students become customers in private institutions and even in public ones through the implementation of NPM, we may expect a restructuring of academic activities. Lust (1998, p. 40) asks another question which may be relevant here: “And, if the ‘customer is always right’ should the students expect to determine the curriculum?”.

Students are a vital part of higher education. Their experiences and demands are very important for the delivery of this unique service that has an important historical legacy. However, when their position becomes the central focus, just as the scholarly discussion points out, higher education becomes another ‘product’ which may be delivered in accordance with customer satisfaction. It is important to approach this transformation with caution, bearing in mind that higher education has a legacy of the pursuit of knowledge and the betterment of humankind.

Seeing it as another product to be bought and sold, organized in accordance with customer demands, bears the danger of rendering the concept of 'higher' education obsolete. This may also disengage the historical positions of 'teacher' and 'learner', the positions that complement each other and may create an antagonistic relationship between higher education actors.

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