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The Academic Home of Turkish Higher Education Research: A Demographic, Thematic and Methodological Examination of Doctoral Dissertations

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Abstract

This study elaborates on the epistemological foundations of Turkish higher education research drawing on data from 854 doctoral dissertations with an analytical framework based on the institutional organization of researchers and knowledge, the object of study, and the object of knowledge. The results imply that the long-established state higher education institutions (universities) have been the power engines of Turkish higher education research, which gained momentum with the millennium. Male gendered, full professorship, single supervision, and local PhDs were the salient features of advisors. The primary objects of study were topics related to student experience, institutional management, and teaching and learning. As for the object of knowledge, Turkish higher education research was found to be descriptive, regardless of the adopted research methodology. The doctoral dissertations

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within a maximum of ten different universities and 600 respondents, based on random sampling, had a commanding lead. Undergraduate students and state universities were also fertile components. The paper concludes by proposing the establishment of a dynamic resource database and the incorporation of certain theories and approaches in Turkish higher education research.

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Introduction

The worldwide massification of post-secondary education has led to higher education research focusing on the output of universities (Rumbley, et al., 2014; Tight, 2012a). The leading countries for establishing mass higher education systems were the first to develop higher education research as a scientific activity (Tight, 2007). The history of higher education in developed countries is already chronicled on its own, as demonstrated by Teichler (2020). It has now expanded beyond the developed world (Chan, 2019), albeit with a stark geographic divide (Rumbley, et al., 2014), to countries having divergent levels of social, cultural, and economic capital. Despite their scarcity (Tight, 2019), reviews of knowledge and research may be useful in depicting the overall picture locally.

Higher education is now the object of research as an interdisciplinary field of study (Brennan & Teichler, 2008; Kehm & Musselin, 2013). Accordingly, Altbach (2014a, p. 1308) indicated that "*the study of universities is an interdisciplinary endeavour based on the social sciences*". Although this has been welcomed for providing researchers

with the opportunity to work with other disciplines, the multi-disciplinary nature of higher education research is argued to have resulted in an ambiguous base of academic discipline (Altbach, 2014b). As such, Kehm (2015) highlighted that interdisciplinarity is the only common feature of higher education research, which exploits methodologies and theories from various social science-related disciplines to a great extent. Teichler (2015) suggested that national focus, fuzzy borderlines between research and evidence, heterogeneity, a small field of research, and the lack of self-identification are some common characteristics.

As can be understood, higher education research has a unique nature, experiencing both the advantages and disadvantages of heterogeneousness with interdisciplinarity. However, the issue of whether higher education studies is a discipline or a field of study is still open for debate. Altbach (2014b) concluded that higher education research is not a scientific discipline as it does not rely on an established methodology or a set of specific concerns to study. On the other hand, Bath & Smith (2004, p. 13) argued that it is a full-blown discipline based on its being *"a well-developed, multi-strand, complex collection of research agendas"*. Harland (2012) opted for the definition of an open-access discipline, as it welcomes interested parties from a great variety of disciplines. Tight (2020, p. 417) used Krishnan's framework in his literature review to address assertions that higher education studies are a discipline, which includes these six characteristics (or criteria): "(1) A particular object of research, (2) a body of accumulated specialist knowledge, (3) theories and concepts, (4) specific terminologies, (5) specific research methods, and (6) some institutional manifestation." He concluded that the jury is still out on the status of higher education studies, despite underlining the limited use of specialist terminology. It may be inferred that being a discipline

is the vision of higher education research, and not the destination but the journey that matters, in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Higher education studies can be traced back one and a quarter century. The first lecture on higher education studies was given by Dr. Hall in 1893 at Clark University (Ewing & Stickler, 1964). In the 1920s, higher education undergraduate programs started to open (Goodchild, 1991). In 1956, *The Center for Studies in Higher Education* was established by the University of California-Berkeley (Akbulut Yıldırmış & Seggie, 2018). The 1960s introduced early graduate programs (Hendrickson, 2013). The pioneers of research were *The Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE)*, which was incorporated in 1976 in Washington, D.C., *The European Higher Education Society (EAIR)* in 1979, and *The Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER)* was founded in 1988 in Kassel, Germany (Fulton, 1992). Since then, higher education research has flourished. Rumbley, Stanfield & de Gayardon (2014) identified 217 research centers, and 277 academic programs in addition to 280 academic journals worldwide. It could be inferred that they will increase exponentially in our knowledge-based society, thanks to technology.

Countries have had different legacies of higher education research. Although countries in North America were the front runners, others in Western Europe, Australasia, and parts of the Asian Pacific Rim subsequently enthused over higher education research (Tight, 2007). Today, the main actors in the USA, China, and UK host two-thirds of higher education programs & centers (Chan, 2019). However, vast differences in higher education research can be observed across countries (Teichler, 2015). Kehm (2015) argued that higher education research as a field of scholarship was flourishing two or three decades earlier in the US than in Europe. Some other variations are emergent.

To illustrate, higher education research in Europe is mostly concentrated on national higher education policies and system policy with a lesser focus on academic research and practice, both individually and institutionally (Teichler & Sadlak, 2000). While student affairs, multiculturalism, and vocational & technical education are the preeminent themes in the United States; financing, teaching & curriculum, and international comparative studies are salient in other countries (Rumbley et al., 2014). Understandably, higher education research is dependent on the overall policies of countries as well as their history of mass education.

The preceding paragraphs imply that higher education research is on a firm footing. In this regard, attempts have been made to clarify the extent, content, and boundaries. Teichler (2005, p. 450-451) classified four spheres of knowledge within higher education research: "Quantitative-structural aspects, knowledge and subject-related aspects, person-related or teaching and learning-related aspects, and the aspects of institution, organisation, and governance." Kehm (2015, p. 66) added two more, namely, "the relationships between higher education institutions, society, and the economy; and the competition and market behaviour of higher education institutions." Another classification based on the CHER (Consortium of Higher Education Researchers) members' thematic interests include "higher education system; access, students and graduates; study programmes, teaching and learning; knowledge, research, transfer; quality, evaluation, accreditation; academic profession and work; internationalisation, mobility; higher education policy, reforms; governance, management, organisation; funding, resources; higher education research, theory, methods" (Kehm & Teichler, 2013, p. 30).

On the other hand, Teixeira (2013, p. 114) proposed an eight-dimensional typology of themes based on the analysis of articles in top higher education journals, namely, "system regulation, government, and higher education institutions; institutional analysis, governance, management; quality, evaluation, assessment; funding and economic issues; access and equity; student satisfaction, performance, evaluation; academic profession; and other themes". Chen (1999) suggested eight themes within higher education research in China, as follows: "Theory of higher education, curriculum and teaching, administration and management, the economics of higher education, reform and development, moral education, comparative higher education, and history of higher education" (Chen & Hu, 2012, p. 660). Tight (2012a) also opted for another eight themes: "Teaching and learning, course design, the student experience, quality, system policy, institutional management, academic work, knowledge and research" (p. 22).

The themes and topics within higher education research have been elaborated over time. However, scientific method requires both analysis and synthesis. Accordingly, two thematic areas - teaching and learning, and higher education policy and organisation - have been distinguished (Horta & Jung, 2013; Macfarlane, 2012; Tight, 2008). Moreover, some themes stand out or remain in the background during certain frames of time. As higher education research is sensitive to the issues of higher education policy and practice, future-conscious higher education researchers should reveal the *zeitgeist* to steer the field of study (Teichler, 2003). Tight (2019) described this as the third phase of research "*which examines higher education research, partly to assess what has been studied, by whom, and how, and partly to identify where more research needs to be targeted*" (p. 133). Therefore, literature

reviews/analyses, systematic reviews, or meta-analyses may well be exploited to identify possible changes in thematic areas.

Turkish Context of Higher Education Research

The expansion of higher education has paved the way for higher education research. In an attempt to meet the ever-growing demand for higher education, Turkey followed an aggressive expansion strategy between 2006 and 2008 and established new public (state) universities across the country (Özoğlu, Gür & Gümüs, 2016). While the number of public universities almost doubled from 53 in 2005 to 104 in 2014, and amounted to 129 in 2021, the non-profit private higher education institutions were 24, 61, and 78 in number, respectively. The number of faculty members increased correspondingly from 79,555 in 2005 and 141,521 in 2014 to 181,420 as of mid-November 2021. While the number of undergraduate students enrolled at Turkish universities was 1,942,995 901 in 2004-2005 academic year, 5,642,562 in 2014-2015, and 7,791,280 in 2020-2021, the number of graduate students in Turkish universities was 119,901 in 2004-2005 academic year, 410,767 in 2014-2015, and 449,717 in 2020-2021 (Higher Education Information Management System, 2021). Meanwhile, the whole Turkish higher education system was being challenged by the issues of limited autonomy, low level of internationalization, accountability and flexibility, data-based planning and policy development, qualified academic staff, high student-to-faculty ratio, funding and financial resources, physical and social infrastructure, the collaboration between industry and academia, personnel benefits for academicians and vacant quotas (Tekneci, 2016). Investment in the field of higher education is of great significance for the productivity of higher education systems in order to achieve planned, programmed growth

and to carry out expansion policies (Akbulut Yıldırmış & Seggie, 2018). It is assumed that this expansion strategy is the factor that has triggered the diversity of activities in higher education studies in Turkey.

The legacy of Turkish higher education research in 2021 includes eight *Centers for Higher Education Studies*; these are in Istanbul (4), Ankara (1), Çanakkale (1), Sakarya (1), and Zonguldak (1). Besides, a master's degree program on the *Management of Higher Education* has been maintained in Eskişehir Osmangazi University and one on *Higher Education Studies* in Sakarya University (Aypay, 2015; Gök & Gümüş, 2015; Higher Education Information Management System, 2021). Two distinct non-governmental organizations, namely, *Higher Education Strategy and Research Association* (YÖSAD) and *Association for Higher Education Studies* (YÖÇAD), were established after 2013 (Akbulut Yıldırmış & Seggie, 2018). Moreover, four thematic journals, namely, *Journal of Higher Education (Turkey), Journal of Higher Education and Science, Journal of University Research,* and *Higher Education Governance and Policy* publish higher education studies, mostly in the TR Index (a full-text database containing articles in the fields of Science and Social Sciences, developed by TUBITAK ULAKBIM). Undoubtedly, all these efforts have magnified the number of higher education researchers in Turkey and *Higher Education Studies* was included in the social sciences, humanities, and administrative sciences in 2015, as one of the basic fields of associate professorship by the Inter-university Board (UAK, 2021). This is particularly crucial as it signifies the scholarly recognition of higher education research as a field of study.

The Turkish context for higher education research deserves a comprehensive literature review. An analysis of doctoral theses may provide an overview of the status of research in higher education while

equally helping in understanding trends, methods, developments, and gaps in a specific area (Drysdale, Graham, Spring, and Halverson, 2013). The data of the Turkish National Thesis Center database could well be exploited to learn about the nature of doctoral dissertations in Turkish higher education. The relevant literature provides us with two corresponding data; for April 2014 by Gök & Gümüş (2015) and for August 2017 by Akbulut Yıldırmış & Seggie (2018). The number of Master or PhD theses in higher education rose from 245 in April 2014 to 358 in August 2017, and 627 in mid-November 2021 (CHE, 2021). The number of Master or PhD theses in the field of education increased from almost 26,000 to 36,496 and 57,279, respectively. The number of Master or PhD theses expanded from almost 350,000 to 460,190 and 681,176, consecutively. Although the accumulation of Turkish higher education studies is limited in nature considering the total number of theses, it has great potential to reveal the overall picture.

Method

The methodological approach of the present study consists of the research design, criteria for data collection, data collection, and data analysis.

Research Design

The study examined the Turkish National Thesis Center database provided by the CHE to explore the field of Turkish higher education research. Doctoral dissertations were analysed in terms of their demographic, thematic, and methodological aspects. Answers were sought to the questions of (1) What are the characteristics of Turkish higher education research and researchers? (2) How is the research classified in terms of Tight's (2012) typology of themes in research on higher education? (3) What are the methodologies (research design,

data sources, data analyses, sampling) utilized by the research? Tight (2013) suggests that tightly-structured and methodologically-explicit literature analyses/reviews in higher education research give information about the data collection procedures, such as the time frame, databases referenced, and keywords, following the declaration of the topic of concern. Clarifications regarding the methodological issues are given below.

Criteria for Data Collection

The authors intended to study the evaluative or judgemental elements rather than the main content areas in the doctoral dissertations (Clement et al., 2015). Therefore, the parameters used for screening in July 2020 consisted of searching the title, access type (authorized or not), and whether it was a thesis-type doctorate. The search in the parameters also included the author, supervisor, subject, keywords, and abstract. Although other options could be obtained in some studies, they inclined to weaken the research focus. The access type parameter provided us with the opportunity to uncover 177 more studies without requiring authorization. These consisted of old studies and/or theses restricted by their authors. The examination of abstracts compelled us to exclude them as they mostly lacked the essential data for this study. Besides, the efforts to gain access might extend the data collection procedure unpredictably. Lastly, the thesis-type parameter offered the most options of all: master's, doctorate, specialization in medicine, proficiency in art, specialization in dentistry, and minor specialization in medicine. Understandably, covering doctorate theses as the highest-level for knowledge production was opted for in addressing the research objective. At the end of the data collection procedure, 854 doctoral theses completed between the years 1967-2020 were obtained (based on the search terms of “university” and

"universities") in both Turkish and English. This should be regarded as both the originality and limitation of the present study. The data collection procedure is illustrated below.

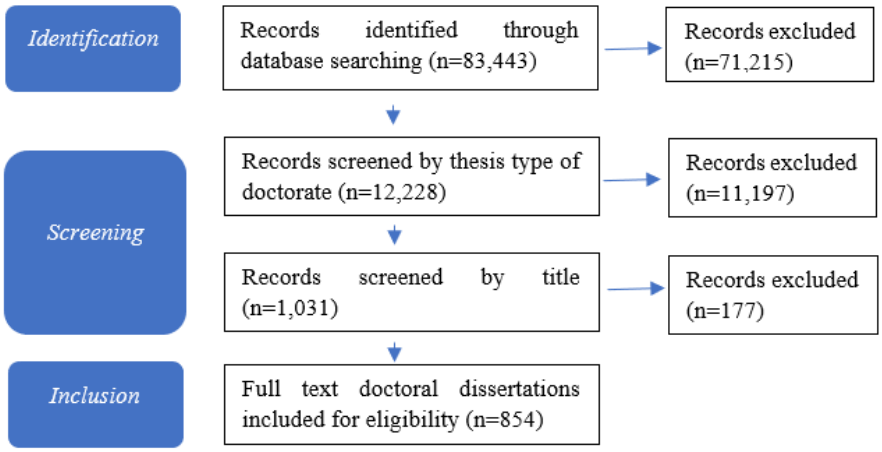

Figure 1.

Identification of Sample

Data Collection

Microsoft Excel™ and SPSS 23™ software were used to address the research data. The demographic, methodological, and thematic aspects of Turkish higher education research were collected under 44 distinct clusters of knowledge. The aspects included both quantitative information such as thesis records, the author, the advisor, departmental affiliation, the adopted theories, methodological approaches, instruments, variables, effect sizes, general topics and sub-topics, and qualitative information about the titles, keywords, and abstracts. We were unable to submit all research data, not because of the number of academic papers but because of poor reporting, especially of the adopted theories, effect sizes, and some elements of

sample selection. While the demographic and methodological aspects were categorized independently by three doctoral candidates enrolled in departments of educational sciences, thematic aspects were open-coded by the authors. The consensus was found to be high, owing to the use of the explicit frameworks of Tight's (2012a) typology of themes and Biglan's (1973) model.

Data Analysis

The frequencies and percentages were primarily used to scrutinize the demographic, methodological, and thematic aspects of Turkish higher education research. In addition, the distribution by department/school, period, theme, research method, and data sources were created. Due to its exceptional place, the school or faculty of education was given special attention in terms of its departments. The departments of public administration and business administration were also treated distinctively. Turkish higher education research was explored within five-year terms. However, all the doctoral studies before 2000 were aggregated as the millennium was found to be the year of momentum for the rapid growth of Turkish higher education research (Soysal et al., 2019). Tight's (2012a) typology of themes was adopted for the construction of the topics or themes in Turkish higher education research. It acknowledges eight distinct themes within research on higher education, as follows:

1. *Teaching & learning:* Student learning, different kinds of student teaching in higher education, the how-to genre;

2. *Course design:* The higher education curriculum, technologies for learning, student writing, assessment, postgraduate course design;

3. *Student experience:* Accessing higher education, on-course experience, success and non-completion, postgraduate experience, experience of different student groups, transition from higher education to employment;

4. *Quality:* Course evaluation, grading and outcomes, national monitoring practices, system standards;

5. *System policy:* The policy context, national policies, comparative and historical policy studies, funding relationships;

6. *Institutional management:* Higher education management practice, institutional leadership and governance, institutional development and history, institutional structure, economies of scale and institutional mergers, relations between higher education, industry, and community;

7. *Academic work:* Academic roles, academic development, academic careers, the changing nature of academic work, academic work in different countries;

8. *Knowledge & research:* The nature of research, disciplinarity, forms of knowledge, the nature of a university.

Our research methods comprised three major paradigms; namely, quantitative, qualitative, and mixed. A five-dimensional frame of reference suggested by Forsberg & Geschwind (2016) was used to identify data sources, which involved interviews, surveys, observations, documents, and reviews. We incorporated the mixed use of data sources as the sixth alternative. Moreover, clarification of the type of method and research design was included to highlight the content of the categories. Several procedures were considered to

address the selection of the sample. It was decided that the areas of exploration would be the sampling of universities and their participants, the unit of analysis, the sample selection procedure, and preferences.

Findings

We adopted the term academic home, inspired by Forsberg & Geschwind (2016), as a metaphor *"to elaborate the epistemological foundations of Turkish higher education research and the institutional background of researchers"* (p. 72). Three levels for structuring research proposed by Askling (2004, cited in Forsberg & Geschwind, 2016), were found to be not only informative but also inclusive and explanatory. Firstly, the institutions and researchers contributing to Turkish higher education research were explicated from different perspectives under the heading *The Institutional Organization of Researchers and Knowledge*. Secondly, the topics or themes studied by researchers were explored under the heading *The Object of Study*, concerning certain variables. Finally, the methods, research approaches, and sample selection were aggregated under the heading *The Object of Knowledge*. Conceptual mapping of higher education research included:

- *Methods*: Interviews, surveys, observations, documents, reviews, mixed data sources;
- *Research approaches*: Descriptive, correlational, experimental, case and field studies, questionnaire and scale development, content analysis, causal-comparative, narrative analysis, action research, discourse analysis, database search, ethnography, developmental and phenomenography;

- *Sample selection*: Sampling of universities and participants, sample selection procedures and preferences, unit of analysis.

Institutional Organization of Researchers and Knowledge

The authors and advisors of doctoral dissertations are introduced first as they deserve equal attention. Males authored 407 (47.7%) dissertations while female authors produced 437 (51.2%) of the dissertations. However, the gender of the authors of ten theses could not be determined (1.2%). An overwhelming majority of dissertations (n=719, 84.2%) were written in Turkish, while a considerable number of dissertations (n=124, 14.5%) were in English. Moreover, three out of the four English PhD theses (n=92) were completed after 2011. There were also six dissertations in German, four in French, and one in Russian, among the total of 854.

A total of 532 (62.3%) PhD theses were supervised by male advisors, and 319 (37.4%) by female advisors. We were unable to determine the gender of three advisors. 555 (65.0%) theses were supervised by full professors, 194 (22.7%) by associate professors, and 99 (11.6%) were supervised by assistant professors. A high number of theses (71%) among the 854 were supervised by an advisor of only one higher education thesis. On the other hand, 99 advisors supervised two to five different higher education theses, with a total number of 239. 759 advisors (88.9%) had PhD degrees from Turkish universities among 795 dissertations, with 59 missing from the system. The USA and UK were the foreign homes of advisors' graduate degrees with 16 (1.9%) and 15 (1.8%), consecutively. Only two of them had PhD degrees from France; and this was followed by one degree holder each from Germany, Netherlands, and Japan.

The research sample consisted of 854 doctoral dissertations from 156 distinct departments. The top five departments responsible for 40% of the total PhDs were *Educational Sciences*, *Business Administration*, *Counselling & Guidance*, *Physical Education and Sports*, and *English Language Teaching*. Some of the others were *Disaster Medicine*, *Security Management*, *Clinical Psychology*, *Sociology of Institutions-Associations*, *Zootechnics*, *Oral & Maxillofacial Radiology*, *Genetics & Bioengineering*, *Geophysical Engineering*, *Parasitology*, and *Management Information Systems*. One-fifth were approved by 125 departments with less than five PhDs. Figure 2 depicts the overall Turkish higher education research by department (n=836).

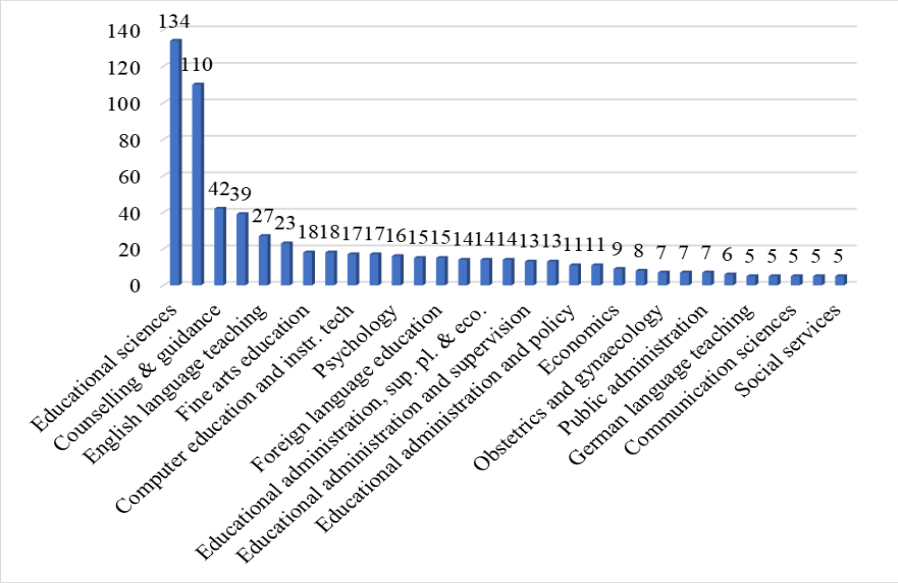

Figure 2.

Turkish Higher Education Research, by Department PhDs

Figure 2 indicates that the impact of the top department was much wider because educational sciences is an umbrella term in the Turkish Higher Education context, including such departments as *Counselling & Guidance, Psychological Services in Education, Curriculum & Teaching, Educational Administration,* and *Educational Administration & Policy*. From this point of view, at least 30% of Turkish PhD dissertations were conducted by the Department of Educational Sciences alone. Figure 3 depicts the academic home of Turkish higher education research by institution (n=848).

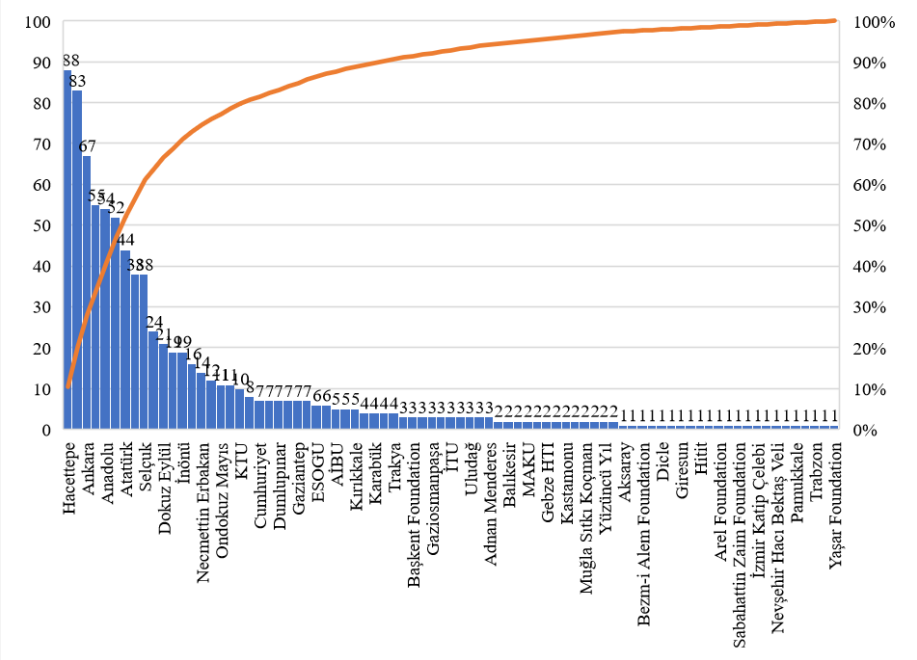

Figure 3.

Academic Home of Turkish Higher Education Research, by University

A total of 82 higher education institutions contributed to a total of 848 studies. More than 64% of the output was created before 1975 by the leading ten state universities located in Ankara, Eskişehir, Istanbul, Erzurum, Konya, and Izmir; namely, Hacettepe, Gazi, Middle East Technical, Ankara, Anadolu, Marmara, Atatürk, Istanbul, Selçuk and Ege universities. Thus, it can be inferred that the long-established state higher education institutions were the power engines of Turkish higher education research; while 17 different non-profit private universities published only 30 dissertations between the years 1967-2020. Samara State University in Russia is the only one abroad. This finding points to the field being shaped by the leading universities (Saunders, Kolek, Williams, & Wells, 2015). Figure 4 demonstrates the production of theses from 1973 to 2018 on a clustered bar chart (n=854).

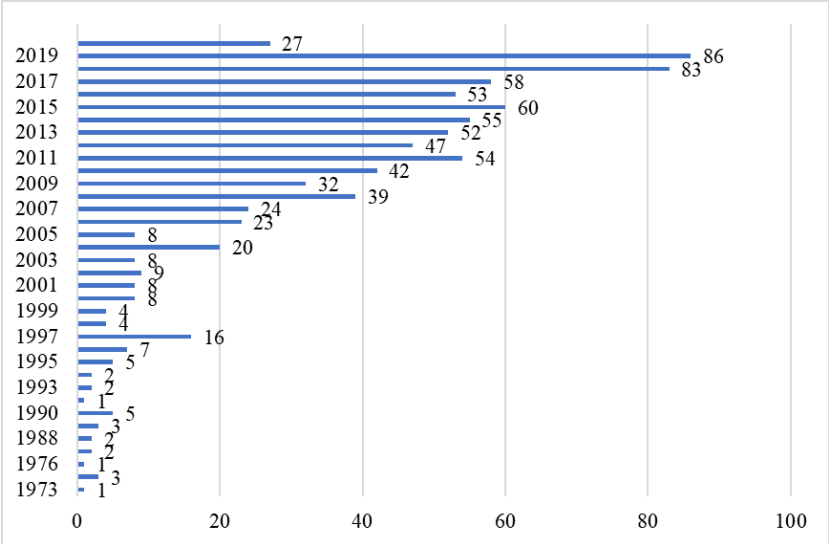

Figure 4.

Number of PhD Theses about Higher Education in study period (1967-2020)

The first doctoral thesis in Turkish higher education appeared in 1967 and gained momentum with the millennium. Only 66 of the total 854 studies were completed within the 33 years between 1967-2000. However, 54 studies were conducted between 2001-2005, 159 of them between 2006-2010, and 267 between 2011-2015. Eventually, Turkish higher education research expanded to the extent that 308 theses were completed during the period between 2016 and2020. Although the research sample solely comprised the PhDs with full text available in the Turkish national thesis center database, the increase could well be attributed to the expansion of the Turkish higher education system.

Object of Study

Table 1 represents the topics in Turkish higher education research (n=854) in the studied period, based on Tight's (2012a) typology of themes in research on higher education.

Table 1.
Distribution of Topics in Higher Education Research, by years

Themes within Research on Higher Education	Up to 2000	2001-2005	2006-2010	2011-2015	2016-2020	Total (n)
Teaching & learning	1.1	1.1	4.3	5.3	6.3	154
Course design	0.9	0.9	1.6	2.5	2.8	75
Student experience	2.1	2.2	7.1	11.0	13.0	303
Quality	0.5	0.2	0.8	1.4	2.5	46
System policy	0.4	0.2	0.6	0.8	0.7	23
Institutional management	1.9	1.3	2.3	6.2	6.4	155
Academic work	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.9	0.5	16
Knowledge & research	0.8	0.2	1.5	3.2	3.9	82
Total (%)	7.7	6.3	18.6	31.3	36.1	854

With a growing interest over time, the frequency of studies was inclined to ascend for all the themes. However, the top theme of student experience during all periods amounted to nearly one-third of the total Turkish higher education research. The subsequent themes were institutional management and teaching & learning. All three topics made up nearly three out of four studies in the relevant literature. The themes of course design and knowledge & research were closer to 10% on par. All the doctoral theses in the remaining themes of quality, system policy, and academic work hardly corresponded to 10%. Table 2 illustrates the distribution of topics in Turkish higher education research by the scientific domain (n=843), based on Tight's (2012) typology of themes within research on higher education.

Table 2.

Distribution of Topics, by Discipline

Departments & Schools	T&L	CD	SE	Q	SP	IM	AW	K&R	Total (n)
Educational administration, leadership & policy	0.8	1.8	3.6	0.5	1.1	2.8	0.4	0.6	97
Curriculum, teaching & learning	7.9	3.6	7.9	0.8	0.0	1.4	0.6	3.6	218
Guidance & counselling	0.7	0.4	7.7	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5	80
Public administration	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.7	0.0	0.0	13
Business administration	2.3	0.2	3.2	1.8	0.8	6.3	0.6	1.5	141
School of health	1.4	0.7	4.3	0.5	0.1	1.5	0.0	0.7	77
Social sciences	0.8	0.2	5.0	0.0	0.5	1.7	0.1	1.3	81
School of law	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	2
Agriculture	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.2	0.0	0.0	11
Communication & language	0.9	0.0	0.8	0.4	0.0	0.4	0.2	0.2	25
Medicine	1.1	0.5	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.1	18
Engineering	0.5	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.0	1.1	0.0	0.1	17
Arts & sciences	0.5	0.7	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.4	0.0	0.4	21

Others	0.7	0.2	2.4	0.5	0.0	0.7	0.0	0.5	42
Total (%)	17.9	8.5	35.8	5.3	2.7	18.3	1.9	9.5	843

Although it was previously established that student experience was the leading theme for scholarly study, Table 2 shows the widespread disciplinary focus of Turkish higher education research based on PhD theses. Accordingly, it is apparent that student experience and institutional management were the main aims in the department of *Educational Administration, Leadership & Policy*, while the department of *Curriculum, Teaching & Learning* had versatile objectives, such as teaching & learning, course design, student experience, and knowledge & research for each discipline and specific subjects; to illustrate, the teaching and learning of science, biology, chemistry, business, health, etc. Thus, they produced the largest number of doctoral dissertations on the theme of teaching & learning.

On the other hand, the department of *Guidance & Counselling* mainly focused on student experience, and almost neglected the rest. While *Public Administration* primarily aimed at researching institutional management, *Business Administration* included both institutional management and student experience. Both the *School of Health* and *Social Sciences* highlighted student experience and institutional management alike but had different focal points regarding teaching & learning and knowledge & research. The main aim of the faculties/schools of *Agriculture* and *Engineering* was institutional management, and the rest was almost negligible. While *Communication & Language* attached importance to teaching & learning and student experience, *Medicine* mostly researched teaching & learning, and *Arts & Sciences* concentrated on course design. The remaining studies in Turkish higher education research were found to

focus on student experience to a large extent. However, data for the *School of Law* was insufficient to make a judgment.

The Object of Knowledge

Table 3 delineates the distribution of methods in Turkish higher education research by the scientific domain (n=840).

Table 3.

Distribution of Doctoral Thesis Research Methods, by Discipline

Biglan Model	Departments & Schools	Quantitative	Qualitative	Mixed	Total (n)
Soft-life-applied	Educational administration, leadership & policy	6.8	2.0	2.7	97
	Curriculum teaching & learning	13.1	4.8	7.7	215
	Guidance & counselling	8.5	0.4	0.7	80
Soft-life-pure	Public administration	0.6	1.0	0.0	13
	Business administration	12.4	2.5	1.9	141
	School of law	0.0	0.2	0.0	2
Soft-non-life-pure	Social sciences	5.5	2.9	1.3	81
	Communication & language	1.3	0.6	1.1	25
	Arts & sciences	1.3	1.0	0.2	21
Hard-life-applied	School of health	6.8	1.0	1.4	77
	Agriculture	1.3	0.0	0.0	11
	Medicine	1.5	0.5	0.1	18
Hard-non-life-applied	Engineering	1.1	0.5	0.5	17
	Others	3.2	1.2	0.6	42
	Total (%)	63.3	18.5	18.2	840

Table 3 signifies that the quantitative research paradigm was overwhelming for all disciplines in Turkish higher education research except for the department of *Public Administration*, which primarily adopted the qualitative paradigm. The case was exclusively hegemonic for the department of *Guidance & Counselling* and the *School of Agriculture*. On the other hand, the departments of *Educational Administration, Leadership & Policy* and *Curriculum, Teaching & Learning* were found to welcome both qualitative and mixed-method studies to a great extent. The schools of *Communication & Language, Engineering*,

and *Arts & Sciences* also had a balance between quantitative research and the other two methods. Sociology did not emerge as an abundant theme of doctoral theses and ranked 6th, along with other social science departments. However, the data of the *School of Law* were inadequate to make a judgment. The distribution based on Biglan's (1973) clustering of academic task areas implied that Turkish higher education research comprised only five (soft-life-applied, soft-life-pure, soft-non-life-pure, hard-life-applied, hard-non-life-applied) out of eight academic areas and excluded the rest (soft-non-life-applied, hard-life-pure, hard-non-life-pure). Table 4 clarifies the type of method most employed in doctoral dissertations in Turkish higher education research (n=805).

Table 4.

Clarification of Type of Method Employed in Doctoral Dissertations

Method	**Clarification**	**n**	**%**
Interview	Structured and semi-structured interview data Scenario Role-playing exercises	57	7.1
Survey	Survey data Questionnaire data Enrolment data Experimental intervention	408	50.7
Observation	Auto/biographical data Observation data	13	1.6
Documents	Policy and reform texts Informant-produced texts (teaching material, student texts, websites, guidelines, reports)	42	5.2
Review	Literature reviews Research reviews Evaluation data	56	7

Mixed	Interview-observation Interview-observation-document analysis Survey-questionnaire-interview	229	28.4

Table 4 presents an extensive picture of the methods. Although there was a strong emphasis on quantitative approaches, differences in the adopted methods could be observed. As indicated by the clarifications, a great many methods in the social sciences were exploited, even in combination in some cases. However, the use of such methods as observation, scenario, role-play, auto/biography, and evaluation were found to be inadequate. Triangulation in pure quantitative or qualitative studies was proven by the overuse of mixed types of methods in comparison with the amount of mixed-methods research. Table 5 shows a clarification of the type of research design adopted in doctoral dissertations in Turkish higher education research (n=770).

Table 5.

Clarification of Type of Research Design Employed in Doctoral Dissertations

	Quantitative	Qualitative	Mixed-methods	Total (n)
Descriptive	229	49	73	351
Correlational	101	1	10	112
Experimental (complete randomization)	48	2	9	59
Case & field study	13	12	13	38
True experimental	29	0	2	31
Questionnaire development	18	6	4	28
Quasi-experimental (randomization used)	15	1	10	26
Scale development	16	2	6	24
Phenomenology	0	15	4	19
Content analysis	4	13	1	18
Causal-comparative	12	1	4	17
Quasi-experimental (no randomization)	7	1	4	12
Narrative analysis	3	6	2	11
Action research	1	5	2	8
Discourse analysis	0	5	1	6
Database search	2	4	0	6
Ethnography	0	2	0	2
Phenomenography	0	1	0	1
Developmental	1	0	0	1
Total (%)	64.8	16.4	18.8	770

Table 5 adds another dimension to the discussion. It could be inferred that Turkish higher education research was mostly descriptive, regardless of the use of qualitative or quantitative methodologies or a mix of the two. Accordingly, it was found that almost one quarter (27.9%) of the research sample was about the formation and change of higher education students' attitudes. Besides, a considerable number of studies used correlational designs, experimental research, and case & field studies. On the other hand, action research, discourse analysis, database search, ethnography, developmental, and phenomenography research seemed almost

peculiar to the literature. Incidentally, phenomenography is addressed as "*the only methodology to have been substantially developed by higher education researchers*" (Tight, 2020, p. 424). Nevertheless, these methods can be considered to be a source of wealth in research designs. Unfortunately, the Turkish context lacks a database to follow trends over time in higher education research. A huge amount of information is collected by the CHE and Student Selection and Placement Center (SSPC), but it was not made available to researchers to study inequalities or inefficiencies in the system, both cross-sectionally and longitudinally. Figure 5 renders the number of sampled universities in Turkish higher education research (n=747).

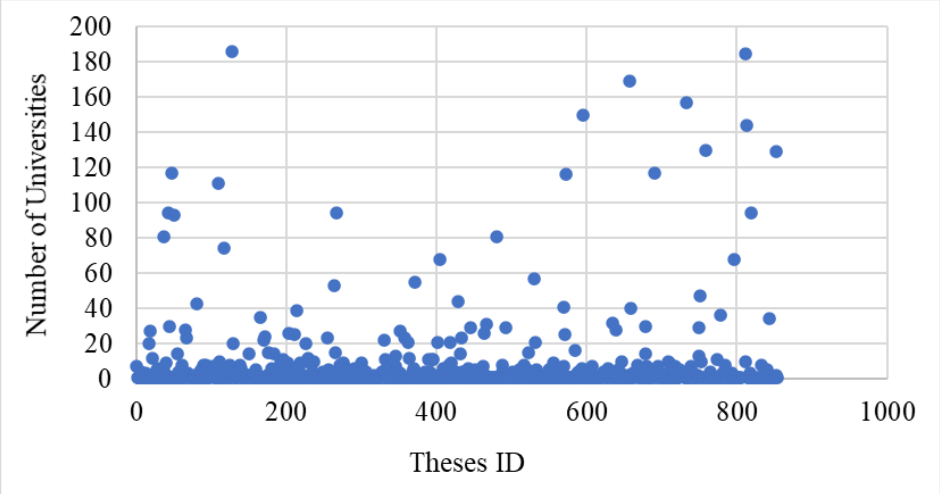

Figure 5.

Scatter Diagram for Sampling of the Universities

The PhDs produced at a maximum of ten divergent universities comprised 89% of the total Turkish higher education research. A

scatter diagram for the sampled universities suggests that a large majority of them (n=483, 65%) were conducted on a single university. The remaining dissertations included from 11 to 186 universities. Numerically, 2-5 universities were sampled by 108 theses, 6-10 universities by 74, 11-50 universities by 58, 51-100 universities by 58, and 51-100, and 101-186 universities were by 12 each equally. Figure 6 displays the number of participants/respondents in Turkish higher education research (n=758).

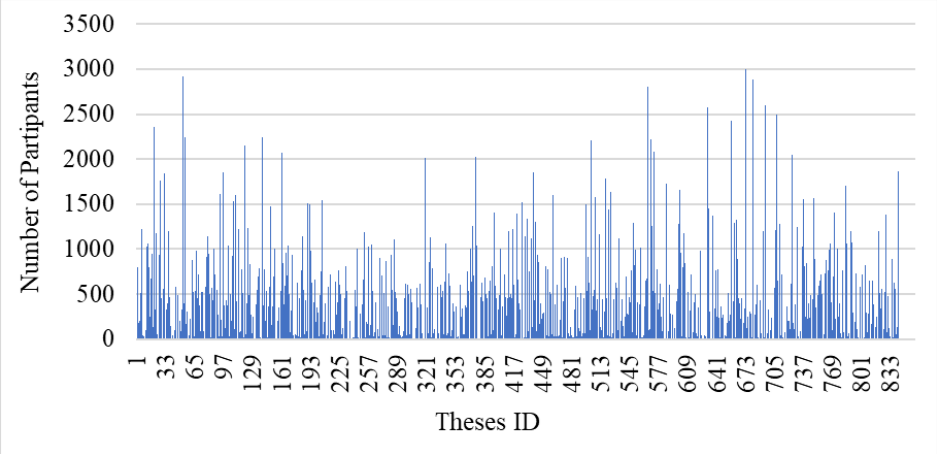

Figure 6.

Clustered Column Chart for Participant Sampling

The above Figure 6 implies that the studies were mostly carried out with the involvement of under 200 (38%) participants. Almost three out of four studies were conducted with a maximum of 600 individuals. Only 13 doctoral dissertations included over 3001 respondents. Considering that 314 studies were designed qualitatively or used mixed methods research, it can be claimed that at least 200 distinct quantitatively-designed PhDs had up to 600 respondents,

which comprised nearly 40% of the total quantitative studies. A pinpoint remainder was that 566 (74.7%) of 758 PhDs used random sampling, contrary to those with purposeful sampling (n=192, 25.3%).

Table 6 shows the distribution of the units of analysis by university type in Turkish higher education research (n=687).

Table 6.

Distribution of Unit of Analysis by University Type

Units	State	Private	Unknown	Both	Total (n)
University	10.3	0.6	0.6	1.9	92
Faculty Members	11.9	0.7	1.0	3.5	118
Undergraduate Students	56.8	2.5	1.7	5.7	458
PhD Students	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	1
Rectors	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1	2
Heads of departments	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.4	7
Reports	0.9	0.0	0.3	0.0	8
Members of the CHE	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	1
Total (%)	80.8	3.8	3.6	11.8	687

The above table suggests that undergraduate students and state universities were the fertile soil for Turkish higher education research. They both created the background for nearly two-thirds (62.5%) of total studies. Research on the university itself, and faculty members, also amounted to over 10% each. The good news is that another 10% was comprised by both state and non-profit private universities. Unfortunately, the remaining studies by PhD students, rectors, heads of departments, reports, and members of the CHE were negligible. This finding points to the lack of a critical eye on the most important control issues in higher education: the administration and selection of

future faculty members, for whoever has control over the entrance to the profession will be the future professors. A pinpoint remainder was the 117 (13.7%) research studies that had no specific unit of analysis.

Conclusions & Discussion

The results of our research were threefold. The first concerns the institutional organization of researchers and knowledge. A gender balance was observed while female authors led by a slight margin. English medium dissertations increased exceptionally after 2011, despite the overwhelming majority of dissertations being in Turkish. Male gendered, full professorship, single supervision, and graduating with local PhDs were the salient features of advisors. This suggests that the advisors specialized in higher education research have made a limited contribution to the Turkish context. The USA and Europe were the foreign homes of advisors' graduate degrees, albeit with negligible rates. The long-established state higher education institutions and a small number of schools of education have been the power engines of Turkish higher education research, which gained momentum after the year 2000. Unfortunately, non-profit private universities constituted a tiny share of the knowledge production in higher education research. Nearly one-third of Turkish higher education research was conducted between 2016-2020, which is consistent with the common trend. It has already been discussed that 2015 was a milestone for the legacy of Turkish higher education.

The second result of our research is about the object of study. The themes of student experience, institutional management, and teaching & learning were predominant in Turkish higher education research, despite some variations by department and period. While themes of student experience, institutional management, and teaching &

learning boomed after the 2010s, the share of system policy and academic work seemed to have remained stable for almost 50 years. The distribution by department revealed that different departments within similar faculties may have different foci, depending on the unique requirements and objectives of the discipline. Based on Biglan's (1973) model, accounting, finance, economics (soft-non-life-applied areas); botany, entomology, microbiology, physiology, zoology (hard-life-pure areas); astronomy, chemistry, geology, mathematics, physics (hard-non-life-pure areas) had a negligible share in the development of Turkish higher education research.

The third result is about the object of knowledge. The quantitative research paradigm was found to be excessively exploited in Turkish higher education research, albeit with some variations by departments. One may argue that doctoral dissertations use functional perspectives extensively. The departments of *Educational Administration, Leadership & Policy* and *Curriculum, Teaching & Learning* strikingly welcomed qualitative and mixed-method studies, which may well be attributed to academic acculturation mechanisms as well as the academic objectives unique to the disciplines. However, the clarification of research designs revealed that Turkish higher education research had a descriptive nature regardless of the use of qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methodologies. It may be the result of the studies regarding the formation and change of higher education students' attitudes. The studies within a maximum of ten universities and 600 respondents based on random sampling had a commanding lead in Turkish higher education research. The undergraduate students and state universities were also fruitful for Turkish higher education research.

The paper analysed 854 doctoral dissertations entitled "university" from 156 departments of 82 Turkish higher education institutions. It could be inferred that our results portrayed Turkish higher education research from a broader perspective and time frame. Admittedly, the examination of doctoral dissertations on higher education research/studies are available in some other contexts, such as Canada, Sweden, and the USA (Forsberg & Geschwind, 2016; Melendez, 2002; Rone, 1998). Additionally, academic journals have been more commonly used as data sources by scholars globally (Chen & Hu, 2012; Hutchinson & Lovell, 2004; Jung, 2015; Tight, 2004, 2007, 2012b, 2012c, 2013, 2014, 2015a; Ritter, 2012). Both doctoral dissertations and academic journals were also exploited by Turkish scholars (Aydın, Selvitopu & Kaya, 2018; Karadağ, 2018; Kıranlı Güngör & Güngör, 2020; Soysal, Radmard, Kutluca, Ertepınar, Ortaç, Akdemir & Türk, 2019). From a more specific perspective, Şenay, Şengül & Seggie (2020) reviewed the legacy of Turkish higher education studies over three thematic journals and two international conferences between 2015-2018. Apart from 794 published conference proceedings, all five reviews included a total of 939 doctoral dissertations and articles. This partly stemmed from the over-restriction of higher education research by the products of the departments of *Higher Education Administration/Studies*.

It was determined that the themes of student experience, institutional management, and teaching & learning were predominant in Turkish higher education research, based on Tight's (2012a) typology of themes in research on higher education. Some other comparable results are available internationally. Forsberg & Geschwind (2016) concluded that the aforementioned three themes were also accompanied by course design in Swedish higher education

research. The themes of student experience, teaching & learning, and system policy were reported to be salient among Korean higher education publications in international refereed journals (Jung, 2015). Tight (2007) compared the articles in three major North American thematic higher education journals with another three in the non-North American context. According to the results, the North American case highlighted the themes of student experience, course design, institutional management, and academic work, respectively, while the themes of course design, academic work and system policy were salient in the non-North American journals. The themes of system policy, course design, and academic work were front runners based on a pool of 406 articles published in 17 specialized higher education journals in 2000 (Tight, 2004). The themes of course design and student experience were found to be overwhelming in almost all disciplines in other reviews by Tight (2012b, 2012c, 2013) on 567 articles published in 15 major international higher education journals.

A two-clustered model for the themes within higher education research was proposed by Tight (2008). The *Clark Cluster* covers quality, system policy, institutional management, academic work, knowledge, and research, while the *Ramsden Cluster* encompasses teaching and learning, course design, and student experience. This is quite congruent with Macfarlane's (2012) higher education research archipelago highlighting teaching-learning and policy studies as two thematic areas of research. Our results for the lack of focus on the themes of course design, academic work, and system policy imply that Turkish higher education research has overlooked the underlying mechanisms beneath the tangibles of higher education. This is especially important considering that the main issues of the Turkish higher education system have been associated with higher education

policy and organisation (Akbulut Yıldırmış & Seggie, 2018; Özoğlu, Gür & Gümüs, 2016; Tekneci, 2016).

Remarkably, three themes were at the centre of attention, regardless of North American or non-North American contexts. This may partly stem from the fact that the existing Turkish higher education research is mainly concentrated on the description of current issues and improving specific undergraduate programs in teacher education and health education (Şenay, Şengül & Seggie, 2020). However, we will have to wait for accumulation of the knowledge base to discuss our findings locally. Yet, it can be asserted that the dataset of Turkish doctoral dissertations implied close similarity with the North American context in terms of an overwhelming focus on student experience. Moreover, the course design, system policy, and academic work foci in a non-North American context also seems to be absent here.

We were unable to find any study in Turkey with which to compare our findings regarding the object of study. However, studies mostly overlapped regarding the institutional organization of researchers and knowledge, and the object of knowledge. Similarities were mostly about the overwhelming use of the quantitative research paradigm, the rise of qualitative and mixed-methods studies, limited use of triangulation, state higher education institutions and schools of education as the power engines of Turkish higher education research, the dominancy of dissertations in Turkish, the distribution of the advisor's rank, the descriptive nature of studies, the millennium as the year of momentum, the boost of higher education research over time, sample size, and unit of analysis (Aydın, Selvitopu & Kaya, 2018; Karadağ, 2018; Kıranlı Güngör & Güngör, 2020; Soysal, Radmard, Kutluca, Ertepınar, Ortaç, Akdemir & Türk, 2019; Şenay, Şengül &

Seggie, 2020). However, minor disagreements were observed regarding the unit of analysis, sampling procedures, and use of research methods.

The descriptive nature of Turkish higher education research together with the overwhelming use of quantitative research methodology may partly be attributed to the recent emergence of the discipline, as well as the research traditions of educational sciences in Turkey (Erdem, 2011; Göktaş et al.,2012; Selçuk, Kandemir, Palancı & Dündar, 2014). Besides, the clarifications regarding the types of methods adopted in doctoral dissertations yielded that the researchers tended to exploit prevalent social science research methods, such as surveys, interviews, and documentary analysis, with a reduced interest in auto/biographical, observational, and conceptual methods. This is not extraordinary, as "*higher education researchers have adopted a great deal of terminology – as well as theoretical perspectives – from other disciplines, particularly across the social sciences*" (Tight, 2020, p. 423). However, phenomenography, the unique methodology of the field, seemed almost to be a stranger to the methodology of doctoral dissertations in Turkey.

Our findings indicated that Turkish higher education research is descriptive, regardless of the use of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. The rate of studies regarding the formation and change of higher education students' attitudes seems to be the usual suspect. However, higher education research is also supposed to be both exploratory and explanatory to a certain extent. Teichler (2003, p. 172) pointed out that it "*has to predict key issues of debates about five years in advance as individual higher education issues tend to be in the forefront of debate and of readiness for action*". It can be claimed that Turkish higher education research needs a shift from the bird's eye perspective to a

closer look, depending on empirical data. Areas of interest for higher education studies and researchers may include "comparative or international studies; administration, management or leadership; economics, financing or funding of higher education; quality assurance, assessment, or accreditation; curriculum and instruction, or teaching and learning; student affairs or student development" (Rumbley et al., 2014; p. 27). Local adaptations may also be required by the political, social, and economic context of Turkey over time.

Limitations & Implications

Although higher education is not an academic discipline, the study of higher education is an interdisciplinary field that utilizes social science theories (Altbach, 2014). The development of an interdisciplinary field requires conferences, journals, theses, professional organizations, centers, books and publishers, social media accounts, and academic fields with committed staff. Higher education in Turkey has achieved many of those requirements, except an academic department with staff who solely focus on higher education studies. However, this may prove to be crucial. Doctoral dissertations indicate research and socialization capacity while the development of institutional research capacity supports research capacity. In the Turkish case, it could be claimed that we have reached a certain research capacity with low socialization and low institutional capacity. There is also the problem of grey literature, for knowledge that is not readily available and one needs to search carefully to obtain (Altbach, 2014b).

Practical implications should be considered with the limitations of the present study based on a review of the Turkish National Thesis Center database. The authorities of the CHE and the SSPC need to

discover new ways of access, rather than treating PhD theses as bits of information (even though theses are considered as a contribution to knowledge), which they have been collecting for almost a century. They should convert them into databases and make them available for researchers to examine in every field or discipline. This will help researchers to explore new frontiers with a focus on longitudinal and comparative studies rather than just carrying out descriptive and cross-sectional studies. Methodological individualism leads faculty to *Homo Academicus,* assuming individual human beings as rational actors and as the main unit of analysis. These theses have been treated as data, physical or online, for quite some time. However, information is relational. Information makes a difference for a certain period in time. As a result, theses are regarded as technical problems. Technical problems are handled at Level 1. Level 2 is a semantic problem, and is open to more subjective interpretations. Information is just interpreted based on well-defined rules. People try to make sense (Weick, 2001) with limited rationality. Level 3 is an effectiveness problem, and deals with desired behavioural change. Both Level 2 and Level 3 are identified with knowledge. In order to create knowledge, one needs to employ effective cognitive and behavioural approaches. This is more likely to be achieved in Shannon's Level 2 & Level 3 (Boisot, MacMillan & Han, 2007, p. 29).

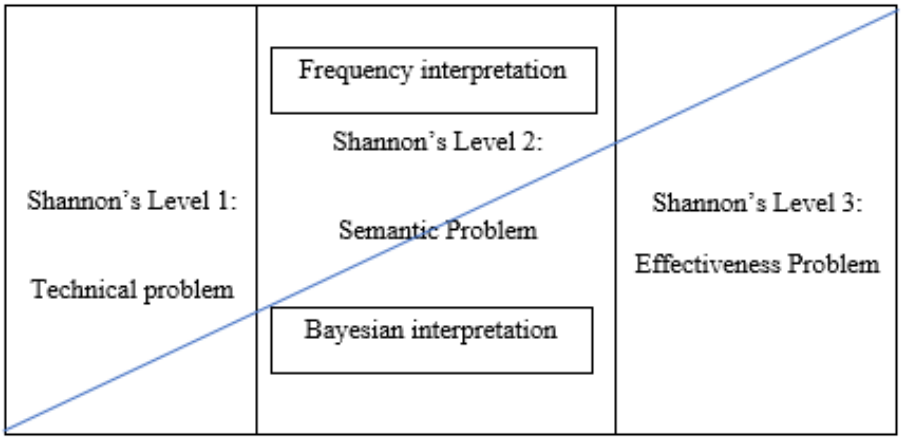

Figure 7.

Frequency and Bayesian Interpretations in Communication based on Shannon's Mathematical Theory of Communication

Thus, the CHE may transform the static thesis center (which is merely a listing) to a dynamic resource database where students and scholars may analyse content and meaning, such as Scopus and WoS, with a further pool of information (including the addition of the research data in the theses) so that researchers may conduct bibliometric, science mapping, and content analyses of doctoral theses. In that case, the scope may shift from local to universal. This will allow researchers to conduct faster/better literature reviews while they will be better positioned to identify gaps in the research.

We also suggest that the Turkish Scientific and Technological Research Council's (TÜBİTAK) JournalPark (DergiPark) should develop a dynamic database because some of the articles produced based on doctoral dissertations were published in those journals. It will help researchers to build their work on previous research while they

may also re-visit some systemic issues, such as inequalities. Moreover, these measures may lead to more interdisciplinary research in higher education as well as in other fields. These are all normative aspects of scientific openness, control, quality, and cumulative nature. As indicated by Aittola (2008, p.175), "*the quality issues revolving around doctoral dissertations concern not only academia or national higher education practices but also the international context of doctoral education, which seems to have a trend towards uniform demands and global academic markets.*" These measures are likely to help researchers to socialize into the academic profession better as the thesis center includes 681,176 theses from 1900 to 2021 (CHE, 2021). This is an enormous corpus, but it was not utilized effectively in the past as it currently is doing so. Finally, this may reduce ethical issues in the doctoral process and manuscript review procedures.

Suggestions for Future Research

Higher education has been an object of higher education studies (Brennan & Teichler, 2008; Kehm & Musselin 2013), and the study of universities is now an interdisciplinary endeavour (Altbach, 2014a). Therefore, the research examining higher education research – as the third phase following the expansion of higher education and higher education research (Tight, 2019) – should include all the outputs of divergent departments and schools. Tight (2012b) revealed that Educational Sciences and Social Sciences were the most prominent data providers globally on higher education studies. However, a huge potential was discovered, apart from the Faculty of Education, as the contributor of Turkish higher education studies. Nevertheless, we were stunned to observe that sociology, one of the major sources of theoretical perspectives in higher education around the world, did not emerge as one of the major departments concerning doctoral theses.

The relevant literature lacks research on doctoral thesis examinations in terms of relevance, critical approach, theoretical approaches, and results (Mullins & Kiley, 2002; Aittola, 2008; Smith, 2013). The depiction of the overall picture requires a greater effort on the 7,722 Master of Arts theses completed by November 2021. This may lead us to explore the tribes and territories (Tight, 2015a) in Turkish higher education research by mapping the borders, interactions, and knowledge they occupy. Also, the notion of the scholarship of teaching and learning (Tight, 2018), the teaching-research nexus (Tight, 2016), and the theory of academic drift (Tight, 2015b) should be incorporated into Turkish higher education research in order to deepen our understanding. The field should be enriched through critical studies, action research, discourse analysis, and phenomenography using auto/biographical, observational, and conceptual methods. Last but not least, Turkish higher education research is mainly functional. Turkish higher education theses need to be both epistemologically and methodologically open to different perspectives. The doctoral students need to consider - How do we know what we know? - and keep this in mind while conducting their theses.

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