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# FEAR OF UNEMPLOYMENT AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS: A CASE STUDY AMONG DISADVANTAGED UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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### Abstract

Although there are two dimensions of fear of unemployment, individual and contextual, relevant literature mainly focuses on the individual dimension. This results in ignoring the contextual dimension of the fear of unemployment in underdeveloped regions with disadvantaged youth population. This study examines the relationship between students' fear of unemployment and contextual factors in Munzur University, one of the most disadvantaged universities in Turkey. Results indicate that negative perceptions towards macroeconomic performance, political clientelism, and the quality of the university increase fear of unemployment.

Keywords: Fear of Unemployment, University Students, Contextual Factors, Political Clientelism.

Jel Codes: A22, D73, E24, I21.

#### Atıf/Citation

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# İŞSİZLİK ENDİŞESİ VE BAĞLAMSAL FAKTÖRLER: DEZAVANTAJLI ÜNİVERSİTE ÖĞRENCİLERİ ÖRNEĞİ

# Öz

İşsizlik endişesinin bireysel ve bağlamsal olmak üzere iki bileşeni olmasına rağmen, literatürde bireysel kısım daha çok araştırılmıştır. Bu, özellikle daha dezavantajlı genç nüfusu içeren az gelişmiş bölgelerde, gelecekteki işsizlik endişesinin bağlamsal boyutunun göz ardı edilmesine yol açmaktadır. Bu çalışma, Türkiye'nin en dezavantajlı üniversitelerinden biri olan Munzur Üniversitesi'ndeki üniversite öğrencileri arasında işsizlik endişesi ile bağlamsal faktörler arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemektedir. Sonuçlar, makroekonomik performans, politik kayırmacılık ve üniversitenin niteliğine yönelik olumsuz algıların işsizlik endişesini arttırdığını göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İşsizlik Endişesi, Üniversite Öğrencileri, Bağlamsal Faktörler, Politik Kayırmacılık.

Jel Kodları: A22, D73, E24, I21.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

University students might have concerns when they consider a potential unemployment in their post-graduation lives. Fear of unemployment<sup>3</sup> across university students is affected by individual and contextual factors. Skill level, academic achievement, gender, ethnicity, family socio-economic status and affiliations are key individual factors. Contextual factors include students' perceptions of the labor market and their university (Álvarez-González et al., 2017; Behle, 2020). Contextual factors under the influence of macroeconomic conditions and institutions generally receive less attention in the relevant literature (Tholen & Brown, 2017). Having the right individual skill set may not be enough to find a secured job in underdeveloped countries where labor markets are less efficient. In these countries structural problems in labor markets (high unemployment, low wages, and precarious work) (Fields, 2011), inadequacies in higher education planning and quality, (Kapur & Crowley, 2008) and widespread political clientelism (Bustikova & Corduneanu-Huci, 2017) might increase students' fear of unemployment.

This study aims to reveal the relationship between university students' fear of unemployment and contextual factors. It is clear that negative perceptions towards macroeconomic performance and labor market increase fear of unemployment (Álvarez-González et al., 2017; Ma & Bennett, 2020; Pisarik et al., 2017). Higher levels of fear of unemployment are observed among students who do not feel they belong to the university they study at (Rothwell et al., 2008) or who think that the university does not provide them with skills for business life

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> In the related literature, this phenomenon is also discussed in terms of "perceived employability" (Álvarez-González et al., 2017; Rothwell et al., 2008) or its psychological reflections such as anxiety and worry (Ersoy-Kart and Erdost, 2008; Pisarik et al., 2017).

(Qenani et al., 2014). Due to its economic instabilities in the last 20 years (Akçay & Güngen, 2019), Turkey has faced record-level unemployment rates. As the government employed a policy to open a new university in every city in the 2000s without taking academic and physical infrastructure into consideration, increasing numbers of university graduates<sup>4</sup> who have been deprived of quality education have deeply experienced this problem of unemployment. Between 2013 and 2019, unemployment rate across 25-34 years old university graduates decreased from 7,5 % to 5,3 % among OECD countries, while this rate steadily increased from 11,1 % to 14,9 % in Turkey (OECD, 2020).

Students studying at newly established peripheral universities in the east of Turkey often experience the problems of these contextual factors more intensively. Physical and academic infrastructure problems and inadequacies in preparation for business life in regional universities cause university satisfaction among students to remain low (Karadağ & Yücel, 2021). The life satisfaction of these students, whose employability expectations weaken due to the pressure of academic inflation and high regional graduate unemployment (TURKSTAT Database, 2021), also decreases (Güneş & Acar, 2022). Another characteristic of the students at the universities in question is that they usually come from the surrounding provinces with low-income levels in accordance with the literature (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Triventi & Trivellato, 2009). Fear of unemployment is more common among students from families with low socio-economic status. They do not have the job opportunities or networks that upper-class families provide for their children (Çolakoğlu et al., 2017; Gilani, 2019; Vargas et al., 2018; Xia et al., 2020).

On the other hand, political clientelist practices are quite widespread in countries where democratic experience is weak (Keefer, 2007) and economic inequalities among ethnic groups are widespread (Wang & Kolev, 2018). This results in differences as to the democratic satisfaction between the supporters of the party carrying out clientelist practices and those of its opponents and makes the latter disadvantageous as for the benefits to be gained (Wang, 2018). In that regard, to consider political clientelism, which is deeply rooted and still strong in the Turkish society (Sayarı, 2014) is essential. Previous studies have shown that political clientelism can affect the employment of *university graduates* (Hossain et al., 2020; Xu & Zhang, 2015). One of the main contributions of this study is the inclusion of the perception of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Between 2008 and 2020, the gross enrollment rate in higher education in OECD countries increased from 62.6% to 76.9%, and from 29.6% to 57.6% in middle and high-income countries. In Turkey, this rate increased from 38.2% to 112.8% (TURKSAT, 2021; WORLDBANK, 2021).

political clientelism in contextual factors as a variable determining fear of unemployment among *university students*.

In the study, it was investigated to what extent the contextual factors determined the fear of unemployment of the students. The sample of our study consists of the students of Munzur University, which is disadvantaged like many universities in the east of Turkey in terms of the mentioned contextual factors. Three contextual variables, namely "political clientelism", "macroeconomic performance" and "quality of the university" were created with polychoric principal component analysis, and these variables were used in the ordinal logistic regression model. Stata 14.2 package program was used in the estimation of the established model. Our findings show that contextual variables significantly determine students' fear of unemployment.

## 2. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

We gathered the data of our study from an online survey applied to undergraduate students at Munzur University in May-June 2020 (n= 333). In the questionnaire, information about the employment expectations and fear of unemployment of the students after graduation, basic demographic characteristics (gender, socio-economic status of family, etc.) and academic achievement level were compiled. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. Our dependent variable that represents the fear of unemployment was formed with the question: 'I am concerned about not finding a job after graduation (1: completely disagree, 5: completely agree). Gender, family socio-economic status and grade point average representing academic achievement were used as control variables. 68.2 % of the students in the sample belong to families with low SES. The tendency for universities in low-income regions to be preferred by students from families with low socio-economic status (Chen, 2019) is also true of Munzur University.

	Ν	Mean/%	Std. D.	Min	Max
Dependent variable					
Fear of unemployment	333	3,59	1,32	1	5
Contextual variables					
Political clientelism	333	3,58	1,39	0,97	5,61
Macroeconomic performance	333	4.30	1,15	0,93	5,54
Quality of the university	333	4,54	1,00	1,11	5,68
Control variables					
Gender	333				
Female		52,9 %		0	1
Male		47,1 %		0	1
SES	333				
Lowest SES		15,0 %		0	1
Lower middle SES		53,2 %		0	1

 Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Upper middle SES		25,8 %		0	1
Highest SES		6.0 %		0	1
Grade point average	333	2.47	0.57	1	3.94

Polychoric principal component analysis (PCA) was applied to 12 items based on students' subjective evaluations in order to create contextual variables that would predict fear of unemployment. After one item below the communality value of 0.5 was removed, the analysis was repeated and three components with an eigenvalue of greater than one was extracted. These are respectively 'political clientelism', 'macroeconomic performance' and 'quality of the university'. These components explain 82.9 % of the variance. Bartlett's test of sphericity (p<0.001) and KMO value (0.794) provide the sufficient conditions for implementing PCA. Cronbach's alpha coefficient meets the conditions of internal consistency at the level of scale (0.837) and subscales. All of the communalities are well above the threshold value of 0.50 (Hair et.al., 2014). The pattern matrix table and supplementary information regarding the PCA analysis using Promax rotation are shown in Table 2.

Items	Mean score	Political clientelism	Macroeconomic performance	Quality of the university	Communalities
I believe that I will not be qualified in my job applications due to my identity/culture.	3.03	0.922	0.008	-0.097	0.83
I believe that I will not be qualified in my job applications due to my opinions.	2.88	0.957	-0.144	0.024	0.82
I believe that some people with different opinions and political preferences are favored in the hiring processes.	3.60	0.859	0.085	-0.004	0.81
Being an oppositional and critical person in Turkey can cause you to be unemployed.	3.68	0.763	0.179	0.100	0.78
The level of unemployment in Turkey makes me worried about my own future.	4.07	0.015	0.910	0.021	0.85
I am worried about being unemployed due to the current economic conditions.	4.10	-0.003	0.964	-0.011	0.92
The cost of living increases my fear of being unemployed.	4.09	0.020	0.941	-0.006	0.90
Getting a diploma from Munzur University will help me find a job more easily.	4.14	0.015	0.095	0.830	0.75
I believe that the quality of education at Munzur University is sufficient for me to find a job.	3.95	0.029	-0.047	0.913	0.82
I believe that Munzur University adequately prepares me for business life.	4.00	0.019	-0.051	0.934	0.85
Munzur University prepares its graduates at a level where they can compete with graduates of Turkey's best universities.	4.22	-0.067	0.024	0.888	0.78

 Table 2. Results of Polychoric PCA (Pattern Matrix)

#### DİCLE ÜNİVERSİTESİ İKTİSADİ VE İDARİ BİLİMLER FAKÜLTESİ DERGİSİ

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Eigenvalue	4.98	2.63	1.51	
% of variance	45.3	23.9	13.8	
α	0.87	0.90	0.87	

Notes: Items were prepared with 1-5 Likert scale (1: completely disagree, 5: completely agree). The items regarding the quality of the university were coded reversely.

Due to the ordinal structure of our dependent variable, ordinal logistical regression was used in determining the relationship between fear of unemployment and contextual variables. The model is shown by Equation:

$$UW_i^* = \sum_{j=1}^n \beta_i X_{ij} + \varepsilon_i$$

where  $UW^*$  is the unobserved latent variable,  $\beta$  are the coefficients of independent variables, X is the vector of independent variables and  $\varepsilon$  is the error term. Because  $\beta$  coefficients in ordinal logistic regression are not based on standardized latent variables, they cannot be directly interpreted in terms of effect sizes. Therefore, our study considers fully standardized coefficients ( $\beta^*$ ) following Long & Freese (2014). This coefficient shows how many standard deviations a change in the independent variable leads to a change in the dependent variable (in the latent variable), while other variables are constant.

### 3. **RESULTS**

In our study, two separate models have been designed to predict fear of unemployment. In the first model, only contextual variables were used. As it can be seen from Table 3, the contextual variables that we created with the help of PCA successfully predicted fear of unemployment. When the fully standardized coefficients are examined in order to compare the effect sizes of the contextual variables, it is observed that fear of unemployment of the students is mostly affected by the problems in the macroeconomic performance. ( $\beta^* = 0.405$ ). It can be stated that students are quite sensitive to macroeconomic parameters such as economic stability, unemployment and inflation.

	MODEL I	MODEL II
Contextual variables		
Political clientelism	0.311***	0.345***
	(0.078)	(0.080)
	[0.197]	[0.212]
Macroeconomic performance	0.770***	0.694***
	(0.103)	(0.104)
	[0.405]	[0.353]

Table 3. The Relationship Between Contextual Variables and Fear of Unemployment

Quality of the university	0.327**	0.334**	
	(0.107)	(0.108)	
	[0.150]	[0.148]	
Control variables			
Gender			
Female		0.267	
		(0.212)	
		[0.059]	
SES			
Low SES		0.847***	
		(0.225)	
		[0.174]	
Grade point average		0.460*	
		(0.191)	
		[0.115]	
Observations	333	333	
Pseudo-R2	0,120	0,141	
Log likelihood	-445.1	-434.5	
Brant test	Chi2=11.68; df:9;	Chi2=23.34	
םזמות נכא	<i>p</i> =0.232	df:18; <i>p</i> =0.178	

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; fully standardized coefficients in brackets; SES categories have been grouped as low SES (lowest and lower-middle) and high SES (upper-middle and highest); reference categories for the control variables are: male and high SES.

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

Political clientelism is the second important variable that affects fear of unemployment ( $\beta^* = 0.197$ ). Students who believe that they will be discriminated in hiring processes due to their identity, opinions or political preferences have a higher level of fear of unemployment. Item averages indicate that students have a high perception of political clientelism (Table 2). Finally, it has been determined that students who expect that the education offered at Munzur University and the diploma to be obtained from this university will have little contribution to finding a job are more concerned about unemployment. ( $\beta^* = 0.150$ ). The students stated that the education they received at Munzur University and the diploma they will obtain will have a low contribution to their employability (Table 2).

In the second model, the contextual variables were controlled by adding individual variables that are frequently used in the literature. Although there is no significant difference between the fear of unemployment of female and male students, students from families with low social status have higher fear of unemployment. Contrary to the findings in the literature (Qenani et al., 2014), in our study, it was found that students with high grade point averages have higher fear of unemployment. Our survey data shows that students with higher grade point average are more willing to work in the public sector and are more aware of job-related exams. This situation can be considered as a factor that increases the fear of unemployment.

In the second model, in which control variables were added, no difference was observed in terms of significance and effect sizes of contextual variables. This means that the contextual variables are robust. The low change in Pseudo  $R^2$  value in the broad model indicates that the contextual variables have a greater explanatory power. Brant test was found to be statistically insignificant in both models. This result shows that the parallel lines assumption in ordinal logistic regression is met (Liu, 2009).

## 4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that university students' fear of unemployment is significantly affected by contextual factors. Structural problems such as instability, high unemployment and inflation rates in the Turkish economy increase the fear of unemployment of students. In general, unemployment rates among university graduates in Turkey are serious, but these rates are much higher in the eastern regions of the country. For this reason, perceived employability of the students in our sample, most of whom come from the surrounding provinces, remain weak.

One of the main contributions of our study is that it reveals that political clientelism is one of the most important barriers for students. Students who believe that different identities and political views will prevent merit in hiring have a higher fear of unemployment. Turkey is ranked 96th among 180 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index with a negative course over the last ten years (Transparency International, 2021). According to the BTI Transformation Index data, Turkey, which had a serious decline in democracy indicators in the same period, was included in the category of moderate autocracies among developing countries (Hartmann & Thiery, 2022). The students included in our analysis believe that they will be negatively affected by this deterioration in the political environment in their recruitment processes due to their ideas, identities, and political preferences. The oppositional political preferences of these Kurdish-dominated regions are influential in the emergence of these negative expectations.

On the other hand, students who find the university inadequate in terms of the quality of education and preparation for working life are more concerned about unemployment. It is seen that the students' perceptions about the prestige of the Munzur University are negative. This situation causes them to feel disadvantaged in the labor market they will enter when they graduate. The unplanned increase in the number of universities and departments in Turkey in recent years, on the one hand, leads to a loss of qualifications, and on the other hand, leads to an increase in the unemployment rate of university graduates. It is inevitable that academic inflation in Turkey (Yalçıntaş & Akkaya, 2019) will be more destructive for students with low socio-economic status who come to university with the expectation of being employed.

Since students' fear of unemployment is significantly related to contextual factors, some reforms are needed in this regard. Some of these are the implementation of macroeconomic policies that will eliminate regional economic inequalities, the elimination of political discrimination through the establishment and operation of democratic institutions, the abandonment of the policy of opening universities without considering the academic and physical infrastructure, and the improvement of existing universities. Although our results are limited to Munzur University, we think that this case study is a good representation of peripheral universities.

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