Perspectives of Doctoral Students on Quality in Turkish Higher Education: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the views of doctoral students on quality in Turkish higher education. In this qualitative study, the participants were doctoral students enrolled in the field of Educational Administration. Criterion sampling technique, one of the purposeful sampling methods, was employed in determining the participants. The research data were collected using semi-structured interview forms developed by the researcher based on the relevant literature and expert opinions. During the data collection process, face-to-face interviews were conducted with the participants. The data were analyzed using content and descriptive analysis methods. The findings indicated that doctoral students consider quality in higher education as a multidimensional concept involving various factors. They emphasized competent academic staff, suitable physical facilities, social opportunities, recognition, and educational quality as key attributes of a high-quality university. Furthermore, the study revealed that most of the participants were dissatisfied with the current state of higher education quality in Türkiye and some of them expressed pessimism about its future improvement. Additionally, they demonstrated limited awareness of quality-related studies in Turkish higher education.

Key words: Quality, higher education, quality in higher education

Introduction

Among the various service sectors, education, particularly higher education, significantly contributes to both the economic and social progress of society (McArthur, 2011). Within this framework, the importance assigned to education is escalating, leading to a rapid evolution of the education sector. Presently, higher education is widely recognized as an integral component of the service industry (Galeeva, 2016). With the growing interest in higher education, the number of students and institutions has also increased and public resources have become insufficient in response to increasing costs. Universities have adopted a competition-oriented

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approach in order to meet the increasing demand with the diminishing public resources (Tezsürücü & Bursalıoğlu, 2013). This competition has exerted pressure on higher education institutions not only at national but also at international level to increase their effectiveness (Ekinci & Burgaz, 2007). Universities should be able to meet expectations and respond to the needs of students in an increasingly competitive environment (Tayyar & Dilşeker, 2013). Therefore, the quality of services provided by higher education institutions is becoming increasingly important in today's context (Gencel, 2001). Universities have been compelled to innovate in order to appeal to both students and financial stakeholders (Orshinger, 2006). Furthermore, the substantial role played by higher education institutions in the economic and social development of nations has underscored the imperative need for the enhancement of higher education systems (Bakioğlu & Hacıfazlıoğlu, 2016). The internationalization of higher education and the proliferation of private universities are additional factors driving the restructuring of higher education systems at both national and international levels (Halai, 2013). Quality serves as a cornerstone of this restructuring and transformation process (Özer, 2012).

Since the 1980s, the topic of higher education quality has been the focus of many debates (Bakioğlu & Hacıfazlıoğlu, 2016). In order to effectively compete in the education market, institutions of higher education have endeavored to distinguish themselves from others by delivering superior quality services. Fulfilling the needs of students through the provision of high-quality education has become the primary objective for universities (Telford & Masson, 2005). In addition to race for innovation and research, universities are also expected to grant high quality services (Yousapronpaiboon, 2014). Additionally, the establishment of a quality-centric higher education system encompassing research, education, and societal contribution is imperative. With the proliferation of accessible information facilitating global expansion, universities are striving to ensure that the quality of their services meets national or international standards (Ekinci & Burgaz, 2007). Consequently, the concept of quality is now being addressed within the framework of harmonization and the attainment of specific standards (Hacıfazlıoğlu, 2006). The basic standards of the quality cycle in higher education are education and instruction, academic staff, administrative structure, management and physical facilities (Bakioğlu & Hacıfazlıoğlu, 2016).

Today, the opinions and experiences of students are acknowledged as significant criteria in the comprehensive evaluation of higher education. The adoption of a student-centered approach in decision-making and implementation processes

within universities is regarded as the foundation of the quality assurance mechanism (Bakioğlu & Hacıfazlıoğlu, 2016). Crossley and Watson (2003) assert that student experiences form the core of quality assessment in higher education. The transition of universities towards a more student-centric structure is cited as one of the driving factors behind this paradigm shift (Hill et al., 2003). Since students are the direct beneficiaries of the services provided by universities, they are considered as customers of these institutions. Generally, parents, administrators, industry and society are considered to be second-order customers of universities, whereas students are considered to be first-order customers. Hence, it is imperative that the quality of services provided by higher education institutions be evaluated from the perspective of students (Teeroovengadum et al., 2016). Enhancing the service quality to align with students' interests and needs will prove effective in bolstering their loyalty to their universities and facilitating the attainment of their educational objectives (Özgül & Devebakan, 2005). Furthermore, student opinions and experiences provide stakeholders of higher education institutions with important clues for obtaining solid data about universities and making decisions (Hill et al., 2003).

Although there has been a significant focus on the quality of higher education, the investigation of this topic from the perspectives of students remains comparatively scarce in both international literature (Douglas et al., 2006; Hill et al., 2003; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016) and within the Turkish context (Hacıfazlıoğlu, 2006; Özçetin & Gök, 2017; Tayyar & Dilşeker, 2013; Topsakal & İplik, 2013). In this study, it is posited that students' evaluations regarding the quality of higher education in Türkiye, within both present circumstances and future projections, will provide essential data for university administrations and policy makers. Moreover, the insights derived from doctoral students' perspectives on quality can significantly enrich the quality enhancement endeavors within higher education institutions. Therefore, this study seeks to conduct an in-depth analysis of doctoral students' perspectives regarding the notion of quality in higher education, delineating the attributes of a high-quality university and assessing the quality of higher education in Türkiye. The present study sought answers the following questions:

1- What comes to the mind when thinking of quality in higher education?

2- What characteristics does a quality higher education institution have?

3- How is the current quality of higher education in Türkiye?

4- How will the future quality of higher education be in Türkiye?

5- What is currently known about quality studies in higher education in Türkiye?

The Concept of Quality

Quality is a concept that has been pondered throughout history and is currently the subject of intense scrutiny and focus. It is derived from the Latin word "Qualis" and has different definitions according to its area of use (Tezsürücü & Bursalıoğlu, 2013). While records of quality considerations exist in prehistoric times, the emergence of quality as a concept occurred in the 19th century (Karaca, 2008). It is difficult to articulate a precise definition of quality (Hacıfazlıoğlu, 2006). Throughout history, quality has been defined in various ways, including excellence, value, compliance with standards, and meeting customer expectations (Reeves & Bednar, 1994). Brysland and Curry (2001) conceptualized quality within the realm of service as an abstract notion that fulfills customer expectations and instills a sense of worth. Juran and Godfrey (1998) delineated quality through two fundamental perspectives. Firstly, quality is construed as the attributes of goods that satisfy customer requirements, thereby ensuring customer contentment. The alternative conceptualization involves rectifying shortcomings that lead to inefficiencies and discontent. Crossby (1979) defined quality as a production system that produces services or products in an economic way and meets customer demands, while Feigenbaum (1983) defined it as conformity to conditions.

Quality in Higher Education

There is no clear definition of quality in education and it is a controversial concept. Indicators of educational quality vary from person to person (Hughes, 1988). While some emphasize the quality of inputs in education systems, others highlight process and output quality. Sometimes quality is assessed within the context of suitability for use, and fulfillment of the needs of strategic stakeholders, including policymakers, parents, teachers and students. Therefore, it has been argued that educational quality is a multidimensional concept and cannot be measured by a single marker (Cheng & Tam, 1997). Cheng (1995) defined educational quality as the characteristics of the inputs, processes and outputs of the educational system. This definition emphasizes the provision of services that fully satisfy the needs of both internal and external strategic stakeholders by meeting explicit and implicit expectations. Therefore, the quality of educational institutions may vary according to the perceptions of stakeholders.

Today, with the expansion of higher education and the growing number of institutions and students, there has been a notable increase in the importance placed on quality within universities. Nevertheless, due to the complex nature of higher education, there exists no consensus on the definition of quality or the methodologies for its measurement (Özer et al., 2011). Barnett (1992) addressed the quality of higher education through three primary approaches. First of these is the objective concepts approach. This approach relies on the principle that higher education quality is evaluated according to certain performance indicators by determining a common method for all institutions. Secondly, the relative concepts approach defines quality as adherence to intended purpose, without specifying standardized criteria or metrics for measurement. Quality perception is subjective, varying among individuals. Thirdly, within the developmental concepts approach, quality assessment entails an internal evaluation of organizational processes aimed at enhancing the overall work quality of the organization (Bakioğlu & Hacıfazlıoğlu, 2016).

Gencel (2001) outlined the basic principles on which quality management of higher education institutions has been grounded. The first is the focus on quality. Educational institutions should adopt the understanding of quality for lifelong learning, increasing the welfare level of the people and creating a democratic culture. Another element is customer orientation. In higher education, the demands and needs of internal customers such as teaching staff and management staff and external customers such as students, graduates and parents should be taken into consideration (Crossby, 1979). Another principle is continuous improvement. During higher education, education programs, plans, students and educators should be continuously monitored and improvements should be made when necessary. There should be a team spirit in higher education institutions. All stakeholders should take part in decision-making processes to improve service quality. Top administration should have effective leadership skills. The selection of administrators should prioritize individuals with a strong educational background and technical expertise (Gencel, 2001). Bakioğlu and Hacıfazlıoğlu (2016) also underscored the importance of fostering a culture of quality within higher education institutions, noting that such a culture is indispensable for internalizing the concept of quality.

The adoption of quality-oriented approach in higher education is of great importance for the effectiveness and efficiency of the services provided. In this context, quality practices within higher education have emerged and progressively expanded on a global scale. An understanding of the quality of higher education has become

increasingly significant, particularly concerning its contribution to the national economy through the cultivation of skilled individuals (Karahan & Kuzu, 2014). The reasons for the quality issue are the rising number of students and institutions, the expansion of the autonomy of state universities, international student mobility and the free movement of the economy. In this context, the discourse on quality has transcended national boundaries to encompass the international arena, becoming one of the fundamental elements shaping inter-country relations (The Council of Higher Education [YÖK], 2007). Studies on quality, which started in the USA in the 1980s and in the UK in the 1990s, have gradually spread all over the world (Kalaycı, 2008). Developed countries have established "National Quality Assessment Agencies" within the scope of quality assurance studies in higher education. They are founded by the state or as independent organizations. The objectives of such agencies are to build an understanding of quality assurance, to evaluate institutions of higher education, to determine the strengths and weaknesses of these institutions, to make recommendations and to inform the public. Subsequently, efforts were made by the European Union countries to create a European Higher Education Area. As a result of these efforts to adopt a common understanding of quality assurance in higher education, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) was established in the 1990s. The Lisbon and Bologna processes also supported quality assurance studies and accelerated them (YÖK, 2007).

Quality Studies in Turkish Higher Education

With the Regulation on Academic Evaluation and Quality Development in Higher Education Institutions, published in the Official Gazette dated 20 September 2005 and numbered 25942, Commission of Academic Evaluation and Quality Development in Higher Education Institutions (YODEK) was founded and the first practices for quality assurance were initiated. This regulation was prepared in accordance with the Standards and Principles of European Quality Assurance. Later, within the scope of the same regulation, "Academic Evaluation and Quality Development Board" (ADEK) was established and higher education institutions were held responsible for preparing reports every year. Due to the developments in higher education, some amendments were made to the Higher Education Law No. 2547 in 2011. Internal and external quality assurance studies were initiated for the improvement and refinement of education. On 23 July 2015, the Regulation on Higher Education Quality Assurance was published,

YODEK was abolished and the Turkish Higher Education Quality Council (YOKAK) was established. Within the scope of the relevant legislation, the formation of quality commissions for each institution of higher education has been made compulsory. In Türkiye, student participation in quality assessment processes is at a high level. Students actively engage in managing YODEK, participating in internal and external evaluations of higher education institutions, and preparing self-assessment reports (YÖK, 2010).

Method

Research Design

In this study, a qualitative descriptive design was employed to investigate the perspectives of doctoral students regarding the concept of quality in higher education, the attributes of a quality university, and the quality of higher education in Türkiye with the aim to conduct a more in-depth exploration. Qualitative research involves an in-depth exploration of participants' views and perceptions within their natural context, presented in a comprehensive manner (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011). Qualitative descriptive studies are used for getting straightforward and mostly simple answers to questions that are important to practitioners and policymakers (Sandelowski, 2000).

Participants

In this study, participants were selected using criterion sampling, one of the purposeful sampling methods, to ensure representation. Criterion sampling involves selecting units with specific characteristics (Büyüköztürk et al., 2013). The criterion for participant selection in this study was defined as enrollment in doctoral education. It was presumed that doctoral students possess considerable insights into the quality of higher education. Consequently, the researchers deemed it advantageous to explore the perspectives of doctoral students. This research involved 12 doctoral students pursuing studies in the field of Educational Administration, consisting of seven women and five men, ranging in age from 29 to 38.

Data Collection

In the present study, a semi-structured interview form was used for gathering data. Initially, a literature review on quality in higher education was carried out and a semi-structured interview form was developed by the researcher to examine the perceptions of doctoral students on quality in higher education. The interview form

consisted of two parts. The first part included information on demographic variables such as age and gender. In the second part, five questions were formulated to ascertain the perspectives of doctoral students regarding quality in higher education. The questions were designed to be flexible and open-ended, supplemented with probes for additional depth when necessary. The objective of the questions in this section is to determine doctoral students' views on the concept of quality in higher education, the characteristics of a quality university and the quality of higher education in Türkiye.

Data Analysis

In this study, content analysis and descriptive analysis were employed to analyze the data collected from participants. Content analysis is a method that is generally used in social sciences and allows working on human behaviour in non-linear ways (Büyüköztürk et al., 2013). Descriptive analysis involves carefully examining and understanding data using predefined themes (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011). To bolster the validity and reliability of the present study, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability strategies were applied, as recognized benchmarks in qualitative research. In order to ensure the credibility of the research, the interview period was kept as long as possible to collect robust data. Furthermore, direct quotations were incorporated to accurately convey the perspectives of the participants. To ensure transferability, each phase of the study was elucidated, employing clear and accessible language throughout the research process. To maintain dependability, every stage of the research was carefully documented by establishing audit trails. Additionally, both the researcher and experts reviewed the findings to ensure confirmability.

After completing the interviews with the participants, five themes were identified based on the questions in the interview form. Codes were generated corresponding to these themes, revised with input from two experts, and prepared for analysis. In this study, the open coding technique, where coding is conducted based on concepts derived directly from the data was utilized (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Throughout the analysis process, responses from participants were meticulously scrutinized and matched with their respective codes. Each answer was counted as one frequency, allowing for comparisons between codes based on responses from all participants. Ultimately, all codes and frequencies were analyzed, leading to the derivation and interpretation of findings.

Findings

The five themes identified from the literature review and the analysis of the interview forms are; perception of quality in higher education, quality university, current quality of higher education, future quality of higher education and quality studies in higher education. Research findings will be presented within the scope of these themes.

Perception of Quality in Higher Education

The theme, derived from the responses to the first question is outlined in Table 1, along with the associated codes.

Table 1

Participants' Views on the Concept of Quality in Higher Education

Theme	Codes	f
Perception of Quality in Higher Education	International recognition	7
	Producing scientific studies	4
	Qualified academic staff	3
	Efficient services	2
	Accreditation	2
	Finding solutions to the social problems	2
	Continuous self-renewal and development	2
	Competitiveness	1
	Contribution to academic development	1
	Providing qualified labour force	1
	Contributing to social development	1
	Meeting expectations and needs	1
	Providing a new vision	1

More than half of the participants ($f = 7$) stated that the concept of quality in higher education evoked international recognition. Less than half of the participants ($f = 4$) perceived it as producing scientific studies, three participants as qualified academic staff, two participants as efficient services, accreditation, finding solutions to the social problems, and continuous self-renewal and development. Very few participants ($f = 1$) mentioned competitiveness, contribution to academic development, providing qualified labour force, contributing to social development, meeting expectations and needs, and providing a new vision. In support of these findings, a participant (P9) stated as follows:

> "*Raising individuals who are qualified to compete at the international level, who have the capacity to constantly renew themselves and lead innovation are the basic elements of quality in higher education.*"

The statement of another participant (P3), who addressed the concept of quality in higher education in the context of academic staff, is as follows:

> *"When I think about it, what comes to mind is the execution of teaching activities aligned with contemporary trends and requirements, led by globally competent academic personnel."*

In summary, the findings revealed that the participants' views of the concept of quality in higher education are primarily centered on the importance of international recognition for institutions, the emphasis on conducting rigorous scientific studies and research and the crucial role played by qualified and experienced academic staff members in delivering effective teaching and learning experiences.

Quality University

The theme accompanied by the related codes extracted from the responses to the second question is delineated in Table 2.

Table 2

Participants' Views on the Characteristics of a Quality University

Theme	Codes	f
Quality University	Qualified academic staff	11
	Suitability of physical conditions	11
	Social facilities	10
	Recognition	9
	Quality of education and instruction	7
	Management support	7
	Democratic management	3
	Publicity activities	2
	Library facilities	2
	Cooperation with different institutions and sectors	1
	Innovation	1
	Research and development projects	1
	Objectivity	1

Almost all of the participants (f = 11) stated that qualified academic staff and the suitability of physical conditions, and the majority (f = 10) stated that social facilities are the characteristics of a quality university. The statements of some participants can be given as examples to support the findings:

> *"The academic staff at a quality university should be open to continuous development, embrace innovation, think globally, and maintain a sense of inner peace." (P10)*
> *"The physical conditions of a quality university should not only meet the needs of individuals but also provide an environment that motivates them and enables them to use their energy correctly." (P7)*
> *"Quality universities should offer social opportunities that facilitate students' socialization. Moreover, I believe that the university environment should also*

benefit from these social opportunities and activities to foster integration within the community." (P12)

Regarding the characteristics of a quality higher education institution, most of the participants (*f* = 9) stated that quality universities are internationally recognized institutions. In addition, more than half of the participants (*f* = 7) listed the quality of education and instruction and management support as the characteristics of a quality university. In support of these findings, some of the participants' statements on the subject are as follows:

> *"A quality university should adopt an approach that considers the educational requirements of students and other stakeholders. Higher education institutions that make innovations and provide easy access to information can be considered as exemplifying quality." (P12)*
> *"A quality university is an internationally recognized institution that can offer its students the opportunity to get to know different countries." (P4).*
> *"In a quality university, management should actively engage stakeholders in the decision-making process. Furthermore, administrative staff should demonstrate courteous behavior towards students." (P7)*

Less than half of the participants (*f* = 3) emphasized a democratic management approach as a characteristic of a quality university. A small number of participants (*f* = 2) mentioned publicity activities and library facilities, and very few participants (*f* = 1) mentioned cooperation with different institutions and sectors, innovation, R&D projects and objectivity. In support of these findings, the statements of some of the participants on the subject are as follows:

> *"A quality university has a rich library and access to international resources." (P7)*
> *"Quality universities are institutions that attach importance to publicity activities that enable them to integrate with the society and have a stronger image." (P10)*

In summary, the participants' perspectives on a quality university mainly point to the competence of academic staff, the quality of physical infrastructure, the availability of social amenities, the comprehensiveness of educational programs, and the degree of recognition received. This reveals that a quality university is primarily perceived as having highly qualified academic staff, alongside well-developed physical and social resources, comprehensive educational offerings, and a strong reputation.

Current Quality of Higher Education

The theme identified from the responses to the third question alongside the corresponding codes is presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Participants' Views on the Current Quality of Higher Education

Theme	Codes	f
Current Quality of Higher Education	Insufficiency	6
	Characteristics of the university	4
	Characteristics of the city	2

Half of the participants (f = 6) stated that the current quality of higher education is insufficient, while less than half of the participants (f = 4) stated that it varies from university to university. Very few of the participants (f = 2) stated that the current quality of higher education varies according to the city where the universities are located. This situation is clearly seen in the statements of some participants:

> *"I do not currently perceive the quality of higher education in Türkiye to be sufficient. I attribute this to factors such as the lack of scientific freedom, financial challenges faced by universities, and the absence of university autonomy." (P10)*
>
> *"We can say that quality of higher education in Türkiye actually differs from university to university currently. Indeed, we can witness that some universities provide quality services in both academic and institutional terms. However, unfortunately, it is not possible to talk about a quality understanding at this level in most universities." (P12)*
>
> *"While the quality of services provided in big cities is quite high in Türkiye's standards, I do not think that we can achieve the same quality in provincial universities." (P1)*

In summary, the dominant perspective among participants reflects dissatisfaction with the current quality of higher education in Türkiye, with many considering it inadequate. Furthermore, some participants highlight the nuanced nature of university quality, noting variations based on factors such as location and the specific institution. This shows that the perception of higher education quality in Türkiye is multifaceted, with participants acknowledging both inadequacies and the localized differences in quality across cities and universities.

Future Quality of Higher Education

The theme, derived from the responses to the fourth question, is outlined in Table 4, along with the associated codes.

Table 4
Participants' Views on the Future Quality of Higher Education

Theme	Codes	*f*
Future Quality of Higher Education	Not promising	8
	Better than today	4

A majority of the participants (*f* =8) expressed a pessimistic view, believing that the future quality of higher education is not promising and is unlikely to improve compared to the present state. This is clearly seen in the statements of some participants:

> *"When I consider our current situation, it becomes evident that adapting to changing conditions is crucial, as the outcomes may vary depending on our actions. However, I personally find the future prospects to be less than promising."* (P5)
>
> *"I think it is not promising. The quality will not be ensured in the future except for a few universities that plan well, and that universities will turn into places where people study for a few years more."* (P4)

Less than half of the participants (*f* = 4) stated that they think that the future quality of higher education will be better than the current situation. Some of the participant views that support this finding are as follows:

> *"I am not hopeless. I believe that other universities can develop over time by taking existing quality universities as a model. Of course, the employment of qualified academics and financial support for these universities are of urgent and vital importance."* (P9)

In summary, the prevailing sentiment among participants is a critical assessment of the current quality of higher education, with a majority expressing negative opinions. Key factors contributing to this outlook include the centralized structure of higher education, unfavorable physical conditions, a perceived lack of qualified academic staff, and a noted difficulty in keeping pace with innovations and advancements.

Quality Studies in Higher Education

The theme along with the related codes extracted from the responses to the second question is delineated in Table 5.

Table 5

Participants' Views on Quality Studies in Higher Education

Theme	Codes	*f*
Quality Studies in Higher Education	Limited knowledge	5
	Bologna process	5
	Accreditation practices	3
	Turkish Higher Education Quality Council	2
	Projects	2
	ECTS (AKTS)	2
	Patent studies	2

Almost half of the participants ($f = 5$) said that they have limited knowledge about quality studies in higher education. Bologna process ($f = 5$), accreditation studies ($f = 3$), Turkish Higher Education Quality Council ($f = 2$), projects ($f = 2$), ECTS ($f = 2$) and patent studies ($f = 2$) were the issues that the participants mentioned about quality studies. In support of these findings, the statements of some of the participants on the subject are as follows:

> *"Actually, I do not know so much about higher education quality studies in Türkiye. However, if there is such a quality study, it is seen that such an understanding does not take place in practice. In other words, what is wanted to be done in terms of quality service is most likely to remain on paper and cannot go beyond formalities." (P9)*

> *"I know that although some initiatives have been taken by Turkish Higher Education Quality Council, most of them remain on paper and many departments of universities cannot be accredited." (P10)*

In summary, nearly half of the participants indicated a limited understanding of quality studies in higher education. Conversely, the remaining participants demonstrated a more nuanced knowledge, particularly centered around topics such as the Bologna process and accreditation standards. This demonstrates the varying levels of awareness and expertise among participants regarding quality studies in higher education.

Discussions, Conclusions and Recommendations

The first finding of the present research pertains to participants' perspectives on the concept of higher education quality. The majority of participants view higher education quality in terms of international recognition, with a strong emphasis on producing scientific research and having qualified academic staff. This finding suggests that participants perceive quality in higher education as a multifaceted

construct encompassing various factors, and they associate quality primarily with attaining international recognition. Hughes (1988) stated that quality indicators in education differ from person to person. Similarly, Cheng and Tam (1997) stated that educational quality has a multidimensional structure and cannot be handled with a single indicator. In this context, the present finding seems to be in line with the literature in terms of the diversity of the participants' views on quality. Furthermore, the findings of this research align with the findings of Topsakal and İplik (2013), who similarly observed that university students associate perceived quality with the competence of academic staff. Devecioğlu (2015) stated that the recognition of universities can be achieved not only through national research but also through international publications and studies, and emphasized the importance of universities becoming internationally respected institutions. Therefore, it can be argued that higher education institutions should prioritize policies aimed at achieving international recognition. Douglas et al. (2006) stated that the academic dimension is the main service offered by universities and greatly affects student satisfaction. Consequently, recruiting proficient academic staff can significantly improve the quality of higher education by elevating the standards of scientific research.

Regarding the second research question, an analysis of participants' perspectives on the attributes of a quality university revealed a recurring emphasis on several key factors. These included the presence of qualified academic staff, the adequacy of physical infrastructure, the availability of social facilities, recognition and the quality of education and instruction programs. This finding is consistent with the results of Tayyar and Dilşeker's (2012) study, which indicated that academic staff is the most influential variable affecting student satisfaction in universities. Moreover, Kalaycı et al. (2011) concluded that the concepts that students associate with quality are well-trained academics, strong academic staff, physical structure suitable for the requirements of the age and the environment necessary for socialization. Özer et al. (2011) argued that so as to increase the quality in higher education, physical strengthening and personnel improvements should be made in addition to structural arrangements. Hacıfazlıoğlu (2006) emphasized that the effectiveness of teaching activities within an institution is closely tied to the quality of academic staff. The author highlighted the significance of carefully selecting and adequately training teaching staff in universities. Ekinci and Burgaz (2017) underscored the significance of international recognition, noting that universities pursue this path to showcase their service quality. Bakioğlu and Hacıfazlıoğlu (2016) emphasized that the basic standards of the quality

cycle in higher education are education and instruction, academic staff, administrative structure, management and physical facilities. In this context, the findings of this study align with the existing literature, as students' perspectives on the attributes of a quality university mirror themes commonly highlighted in scholarly research. The research findings suggest that both the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) and universities should implement improvements and adopt measures aimed at enhancing the quality of services provided, as part of their quality development initiatives.

As a response to third research question, half of the participants claimed that the current higher education quality in Türkiye is not sufficient. The rest stated that the quality of higher education varies according to the university and the region where the university is located. Commonly perceived negativities regarding the quality of higher education among participants include financial problems, inadequate academic staffing, limited university autonomy, and challenges faced by provincial universities. A series of studies in the literature argue that the numerical growth in the number of institutions brings along some problems in terms of academic and administrative staff, which negatively affects the quality of higher education. For example, Özer (2013) underscores that the concentration of academic staff in major cities leads to imbalances among universities, resulting in a decline in both educational and academic quality. Arap (2010) contends that there is a lack of systematic planning in the establishment of universities, highlighting that the simultaneous establishment of a large number of universities imposes a significant burden on the country's budget and leads to challenges in financing resources. Doğan (2013) asserts that newly established universities have problems in providing students with sufficient socialization opportunities and quality of life. Altınsoy (2011) argues that institutions located in major urban centers prioritize enhancing service quality within a competitive environment. They gain advantages by leveraging the opportunities available in their surroundings. In addition, it is also known that these universities are more preferred by students because they have fewer problems concerning academic staff and infrastructure. Özer et al. (2011) emphasized that the higher education system in Türkiye currently operates under a centralized structure and advocated for universities to transition towards greater autonomy. In this context, it is crucial to identify and implement policies that will empower all higher education institutions to deliver quality services.

Addressing the fourth research question, this study unveiled that participants' perspectives regarding the future quality of higher education in Türkiye predominantly

lean towards the notion that future quality will not surpass the current state. Çetinsaya (2014) states that there are optimistic and pessimistic views about the current situation and future of universities today. The pessimistic views of the participants primarily stem from concerns related to universities' challenges in adapting to innovations, the centralized structure of higher education, shortage of academic staff, and insufficient planning. Arap (2010) emphasized the importance of economic, physical and personnel preparation phases for universities to become qualified institutions and stated that it does not seem possible for newly established institutions to reach the basic criteria that they should have in the short and medium term. According to Özer et al. (2011), higher education in Türkiye is undergoing a growth phase, cautioning that rapid growth can also bring challenges. They emphasized the importance of taking careful steps to improve quality in the face of this growth. The accelerated expansion in higher education has underscored the need to enhance the quality of education and research. In this context, it can be argued that restructuring quality processes is necessary to enhance the competitiveness of Turkish higher education system in the international arena and to address societal needs. As long as these processes are not improved and current practices continue, it appears unlikely for the Turkish higher education system to attain a satisfactory level (Çetinsaya, 2014). Given the ongoing expansion of higher education in Türkiye, it becomes imperative to establish an effective quality assurance mechanism within higher education. This is crucial for enhancing international recognition of universities, positioning them as esteemed institutions globally in the scientific realm, nurturing the development of academic staff, and meeting the evolving needs of students and society.

The final finding of the current research is the limited knowledge of participants regarding quality studies in higher education in Türkiye. Almost half of the participants expressed a lack of substantial knowledge about quality studies. Conversely, the other participants exhibited a focus on topics such as the Bologna process, accreditation standards, and the Turkish Higher Education Quality Council. This situation can be interpreted as that the knowledge of doctoral students about quality studies in Türkiye is limited to basic concepts. Özer et al. (2011) highlight the absence of accountability mechanisms of universities to society as a primary concern within higher education in Türkiye. In light of this, it is crucial for universities to engage in transparent communication with all stakeholders, particularly students, regarding initiatives aimed at enhancing service quality.

While quality in higher education has been extensively discussed at a theoretical level, there is a noticeable scarcity of studies that delve into this issue from the perspective of various stakeholders. In this context, conducting various studies that explore the concept of higher education quality from the viewpoints of students is crucial. This allows universities and policymakers to take into account these perspectives in their efforts to enhance the quality of higher education. Similar studies should be conducted with faculty members, administrative staff and undergraduate students to obtain more findings in order to make more robust analyses on the subject. Quantitative and mixed model research addressing the concept of quality in higher education can also be conducted. The limitation of the current study being conducted with participants from a single higher education institution is acknowledged. It is deemed essential to conduct similar studies across different universities to ensure robust and comprehensive data collection.

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