

## THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTONOMY AND FINANCIAL FLEXIBILITY IN TURKISH HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

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### ABSTRACT

Higher education and an ability for independent research are regarded as important elements in fostering progress among developing countries. It is widely believed that a higher education institution should be able to distance itself from government control to be able to fulfill independent teaching and research activities. When universities are not financially independent, it can be argued that complete autonomy may be unrealistic. However in recent years limitation on the autonomy of higher education, across the world, has been exhibiting an increasing trend. Thus the universities of most countries fear that they are losing their ability to do independent education and research and fast becoming government agencies. A common view is that the academics are left no choice but to help solve manpower needs by training more highly qualified people in accordance with government and industry requirements.

This article deals with higher education institutions which have been forced to do more with less. The Turkish higher education institutions, especially newly established ones in relatively small provinces are under increasing financial pressure. Therefore, progress to build infrastructure for education and research is going at a very slow pace. Despite that, they are asked to be prepared for a challenge of unfair competition in education and research by their more established counterparts. It is clear that in order to improve the uniformity of higher education in Turkey more flexible financial policies are needed to speed up the progress of younger universities.

### ÖZET

Bu tebliğde Dünyada ve Türkiye’de Yüksek Öğretimde Özerklik bağlamında meydana gelen değişimlere bakılarak, Özerklik, Özgürlük ve Mali Esneklik kavramlarının arasındaki ilişki ve kökenlerine bakılacaktır. Daha sonra gelişmekte olan ülkelerde bu kavramların kullanımı irdelenecektir. Türkiye’de Yüksek Öğretimde bu kavramların kullanımı yeni açılan üniversiteler temelinde değerlendirilecektir.

### THE MEANING OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The higher education establishments (both universities and other higher learning institutions) are the primary producers of the knowledge that is to be transmitted to students. So they exist not only to instruct and educate but also to

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provide the main resources for their students and to contribute positively to the progress of their country.

In the modern state today, higher education across the world is institutionalized, and knowledge taught *in* higher education establishments is becoming universal. These establishments have become providers of the qualified work force for international as well as national needs. In this respect they are fulfilling the first of the four purposes that Barnett discerned for higher education:

1. the production of qualified manpower
2. a training for a research career
3. the efficient management of the teaching provision
4. extending life changes.<sup>1</sup>

There is general agreement nowadays that higher education in general and universities in particular represent an investment by society on behalf of students to benefit that society as a whole as well as its industry.

#### **AUTONOMY AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM**

The concept of autonomy is as old as the tradition of higher education. Complete autonomy implies that the higher education institutions concerned are self governing communities with no control from governments or other outside bodies on their internal activities. As Warnock says, “an institution that is self-governing can govern itself well or ill, despotically or democratically. But the principle it adopts, the decisions it makes, are dictated to it by no one from outside.”<sup>2</sup>

It is widely believed that in order to be able to teach and do independent research a higher education institution should be able to distance itself from government control. Since these functions are regarded as more and more important to fostering progress in the developing countries the need for autonomy in higher education is as even more pronounced there than elsewhere.

However, recent changes have limited autonomy and made it conditional in many parts of the world. Control is now more often in the hands of governments

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<sup>1</sup> Barnett, R, Improving Higher Education, Total Quality Care, SRHE &. Open Univ, Press, UK, 1992, p,18.

<sup>2</sup> Warnock, M., Higher Education: The Concept of Autonomy, Oxford Review of Education, Vol. 18, No.2, p.119.

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than of academics. Complete autonomy may be unrealistic as universities are not financially independent.

The 1990s have brought major changes to the concept of autonomy.

Universities fear they are fast becoming mere government agencies in most countries and the academics are left no choice but to help to solve manpower needs by training more highly qualified people in accordance with government requirements, so government interference is growing.

Autonomy is generally linked to the subject of academic freedom, that is to say, the freedom to teach, study, research and publish without interference. Academic freedom is essential to protect the individual academic from possible interference by governments, other academics, the press, the public and religious authorities. Academic freedom relates to the individual whereas autonomy relates to institutions. They can exist independently of each other. But the lack of institutional autonomy can jeopardize academic freedom in teaching and research, in curriculum decisions and in the academic spending, since these matters are directly related to academic freedom.

The Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals <CVCP> in Britain emphasized the following points relevant to the issue:

academic freedom is not job protection for life but the freedom within the law for academic staff to question and to test received wisdom and to put forward new and controversial or unpopular opinions without placing individuals in jeopardy of losing their jobs.<sup>3</sup>

In an ideal world, since there are no final truths, the concept of academic freedom should be sacrosanct and authorities should not interfere. But in reality, societies and universities are changing rapidly and the concepts of autonomy and academic freedom are subject to constant review and are becoming, harder to define in a way that meets universal approval.

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<sup>3</sup> Tight, M., (Ed) Academic Freedom and Responsibility, SRHE & Open Univ. Press, UK. 1988, p. 131.

## **HIGHER EDUCATION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES**

University education represents one of the biggest investments made by individuals and society. In the early 1960s developing countries realized they had to invest more in human resources. So the developing countries rushed into expanding their higher education provision without the necessary preparations and without the employment vacancies for the products of the universities. As a result, enrollment in secondary and higher education outpaced economic growth. Paper qualifications and diplomas were the main keys to enhancing job prospects. Those with superior certificates could get superior jobs, especially in the public sector. This was certainly true for Turkey. Consequently, the demand for higher education grew and more and more higher education institutions had to be opened.

The higher education institutions in the developing countries have a more complex and comprehensive task than their developed counterparts. They not only need to transfer the new technology and knowledge to the masses, they also have a responsibility to spread the idea of democracy.

Coleman and Court followed fifteen universities in twelve developing countries between 1961 and 1981 under the auspices of the Rockefeller Foundation. Their findings reveal that the idea of higher education in the developing countries is established on the same principles as foundation as in the developed countries with institutional autonomy and academic freedom. But contrary to the practice in developed countries, higher education in the developing countries is much more vulnerable and open to control by governments with central authority. The universities in these countries are public institutions and teachers are civil servants. This gives them a great “statism, dirigisme, self-censorship and a political avoidance of controversial issues”. They add that most of these universities are greatly dependent upon government budgetary support and they are thus vulnerable to budget cuts during economic crises.<sup>4</sup>

Developments in recent years in technology, together with related and coincidental social and economic changes have had a major impact on higher education throughout the world. A number of these changes will be noted briefly here since they have had their effect in Turkey as well as the rest of the world. In

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<sup>4</sup> Coleman, J., and Court, D., University Development in the Third World, The Rockefeller Foundation Experience, Pergamon Press, 1993, p.311-312.

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particular, technological advance has had a profound effect upon the labour market and on manpower planning considerations. In many parts of the world this has contributed to rapid urban migration as well as the need for a more highly skilled and educated workforce. At the same time, this urban migration has raised social expectations and consequently increased the demand for higher education still further. Now parents are eager for their children to gain the advantages that they think higher education will confer. Universities are increasingly seen as institutions to produce trained manpower. As a consequence, the content and character of higher education as well as its availability have also affected.

Both to keep abreast technological developments and to respond to the demand for higher education nations everywhere have had to expand higher education provision. This mass provision has gone a long way towards ending the elitist nature of university education. In some instances the expansion has served merely to postpone the unemployment of students who would not previously have been likely to go to university. In others it has been directed to fitting students for specific roles in industry of commerce. However, the difficulty of predicting manpower needs with any precision sometimes dooms such efforts to failure. Many graduates now complain that they have no opportunity to use the skills and qualifications they acquired at university; either they can find no work at all or they can only get employment unrelated to their studies; others need to get yet more qualifications. Consequently, the average educational level of the unemployed is rising.

Inevitably universities and industry have been brought into a closer relationship. Governments need a flourishing industrial base to provide the finance needed for higher education. Both governments and industry have an interest in ensuring that manpower needs can be met and unemployment kept to the minimum. Universities are expected to conduct the research that will keep industrial concerns competitive, while industries are expected to fund much of the research. One effect of this symbiotic relationship is an increasing emphasis on science and technology in the universities.

The increasing international nature of industrial development also has its implications for both the labour market and higher education. Individuals need to be trained to operate in an international environment with universally accepted standards of competence. This imposes demands on the higher educational institutions training those individuals. It also adds to the influence of multinational companies. This makes many people in universities feel that they are increasingly subject to the demands of big business. The extent to which universities can be independent is decreasing.

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## **TURKISH HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM**

Turkey's economic, political and social circumstances dictated a move away from the higher education system that made provision only for a small elite. So, in common with many other developing countries, the Republic accepted the need to provide higher education for vastly increased numbers. This required the authorities to rethink the philosophy underlying higher education in Turkey. After examining models to be found in various parts of the developed world, they chose a highly centralized system in which the government exercised close and strict control.

After lengthy discussions on the philosophy of higher education, the Turkish authorities opted for a system that was intended to meet Turkey's manpower needs rather than one designed first and foremost to train the mind. This trend can be seen throughout the world; since the 1950s there has been a noticeable move towards vocational education. This has gone a long way towards ending the elitism of higher education; universities are now accessible to the masses. This change has inevitably led to increased industrial and political influence upon universities.

YÖK, the Higher Education Council, established in 1981, promptly started to reshape and unify the higher education sector. It's not difficult to justify the expansion of universities as a response to student demand, or the change from elite to mass higher education as a result of social, political and economical pressure. The opening of the new universities throughout the country increased the student capacity and also broke the previous elitist domination of the metropolitan universities.

Some of the new universities were not properly planned or organized. In the rapid nature of expansion, academic goals and main purposes of universities were sometimes neglected while these institutions were endeavoring to respond to the huge demand for student places. The sudden increase in the number of universities inevitably resulted in significant staff shortages and many posts were filled with poorly qualified staff thus lowering the standard of education on offer and harming the reputation of academic staff in general, the qualified along with the unqualified. This development, combined with the general lowering of academic salaries, reduced the attraction of academic employment, so the quality of applicants declined.

The huge increase in student numbers has created many new institutions popularly referred to as "temelsiz üniversiteler" <universities without foundations>, since they lack the level of qualified staffing and facilities to merit

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the description of a university. Enormous efforts are being made to improve the situation, but this cannot be done without financial support from the government and the government has had to cut back on spending because of the parlous state of the country's economy.

In principle, regional universities are important for the development of their regions. In practice, however, the regional universities seem unable to meet the required standards and earn the approval of industry and commerce. Indeed, many of them through failure to achieve high enough standards, are in danger of becoming simply an extension of secondary schools. In many instances they provide a platform for regional politics and that may tempt governments to exploit them for electoral advantage. Since its establishment, these universities have been questioned and became main target for developed universities due to their lowering the public perception on higher education. Whatever the outcome of these discussions there is one reality: Whether accepted or not there are 53 state funded, 23 new private universities –5 of whom are in North Cyprus- and 2 high technology institutes, most of them are newly established ones.

As mentioned earlier since 1981 the higher education institutions reorganized and restructured in accordance with the current trends of higher education throughout the world.

One of the fundamental problems of state universities is financial independence. There is a common acceptance that higher education is a very expensive business and it is difficult to be independent from external bodies. The cost of scientific equipment, computers, books, to be in the international knowledge web, investments for infra-structure and staff salaries are increasing everyday.

Newly established higher education institutions in Turkey have little room to maneuver financially. They mostly depend on the annual state budget which is prepared by negotiations through last year's budget and inflationary increase. After a long hassle with state agencies for the needs of the university another problem starts. When the budget comes into effect the money allocated for the university never arrives at the right time. The allocated money usually given in a few installments by the treasury. In a sense the university does not own its own budget but fights against money shortages. As a result newly established regional universities suffer more because they mostly depend on the state budget as they have not established foundations and revolving funds yet. Only straight income comes from student fees which is only between 3-10 % of the universities income and the money is used for the students and a very small portion of it is used for education.

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The possibility of regional universities collaborating with industry is small for the reason they are established in small towns. The relationship between a university and the locals is another hurdle for them. Also the local government and the university's cooperation could be another option the university could eliminate itself from politics.

The result of unfair budget policies by the governments puts the regional universities in difficult financial circumstances. The progress is very slow for them to become a university and the university's main function concentrates on teaching. However they are also asked to compete with their established counterparts on science and technology,

### **CONCLUSION**

It has to be accepted that if Turkish universities want to compete with developed counterparts the governments, let alone flexibility in finance, should change their fiscal policies on the budgeting of universities.

If the fiscal problems could be solved, universities could start to gain their importance in the society by contributing to Turkey's well-being. Universities in Turkey should measure up to the definition of a university given by Tasker & Packham as an institution that:

“..has a moral purpose in the sense of upholding certain standards of truth, freedom and democracy. These may best be arrived at through rational debate and practice of intellectual rigour in addressing questions which are of major significance to society. The university has the moral responsibility of extending values to society at large.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Tasker, M. E. & Packham, D. E. Freedom, Funding and the future of the Universities, Studies in Higher Education, Vol. 15, No.2, 1990, p.182.



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