

STRESS AND FUTURE CAREER ASPIRATIONS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN TURKEY

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—Abstract—

It is evident that everyday life stresses may cause changes in the systematic cycle of human kind. It has been proven that university students have been carrying “future goal concerns” with them since the start of their university experience. Studying in Turkish universities has allowed university students to undertake the process of finding a job in either the public or private sector with ease at the end of their studies, as demonstrated by the TUIK (Turkey Statistic Intuition). However, in the last few years, unemployment rates have been increasing rapidly. The increasing number of students enrolled at universities could be a contributing factor to high unemployment rates. According to the statistics of the Turkish Higher Education, in 2000-2001, 1.5 million students were enrolled to study. In 2015-2016, 6.7 million students were enrolled. Therefore, students will be faced with greater competition in finding employment. This is of great concern to the university student and his/her future career plans, especially during a time of slow economic growth. Students who are job hunting under these circumstances are under immense pressure. This paper addresses a number of factors – social and economic, academic – which may be stressful to students in Turkey. The role and responsibility of society in this regard is also reiterated.

The aim of this study is to examine the factors that constitute sources of stress for Turkish university students and to provide suggestions for solution. Therefore the

method of this study includes surveys carried out among students of various university programs in Turkey and is based on statistical data. As a result of the study, the effect of stress factors will be evaluated and suggestions for opening relevant programs and courses at state and private universities will be given as well as a solution through the support of entrepreneurship will be recommended.

Key Words: *Factors, career, stress, social and economic factors, academic*

JEL Classification: M12, M54

1. INTRODUCTION

Our world today is one of challenges, achievements, and stress. It is clear that everyday life stresses cause changes in the regular cycle of human kind. Stress has a significant impact on an individual's ability to perform life activities including activities related to academia and work performance. Permanent stress can cause depression and other health disorders which are increasing problem among the young generation between the ages of 15-24. Stress can have a disruptive influence on students' future career by decreasing their learning ability and ability to demonstrate knowledge, by delaying entry into the labour market, and by decreasing their future productivity as well. Stress and its consequences can create a high societal cost and also have economic impact from decreasing productivity.

There are various definitions of "career" in professional literature. In describing a career, Arthur and Rousseau (2001) state that everyone with a profession has a career as well, and apart from a professional career they also have a career in life. Therefore, each job during one's professional life is considered a part of their career which draws attention to the importance of planning and career selection during student life.

Generally, stress emerging during any stage of life is considered an unfavourable phenomenon. Stress influences life directly, making every day more difficult. Sabuncuoğlu (2004) writes: "Nowadays a completely stress-free life is possible only in dreams" (p.409). Therefore, scientific research and caution concerning stress is indispensable. University students especially suffer from the effects of stress throughout their study period. According to Cahir and Morris (1991), stress might be a factor increasing motivation and productivity, however, may also have negative physical and psychological effects on students.

In Turkey, the worries of students start well before entering university, and increase upon entering university. During university years, factors resulting from the faculty in place and university environment may also stress students. One of the main sources of stress during university years might be connected with finding employment and the pressure originating from career choice. In recent years, these worries have been further increased by the increasing proportion of unemployment among professionals.

In Turkey, students have a varying spectrum of motivation when choosing university programs. Later, many students are unhappy with their career

opportunities and cannot secure proper jobs due to improper program choice which was not made on the basis of their talent or preference.

Factors of stress influencing university students can be divided into two groups: academic factors, and social and economic factors (Sarita, 2015). These factors in turn are divided into individual stress factors or community stress factors (Gümüştekin & Gültekin, 2009; Durna, 2006). The following will examine these factors in the Turkish society.

2. STRESS FACTORS INFLUENCING CAREER CHOICES

Sources of stress or factors causing stress can be divided into two main groups, individual stress factors and communal stress factors. Individual qualities, talents, age, gender, level of education and so forth may also be the source of individual stress, while structural factors in an organization, politics, organizational processes or working environment may be the sources of communal stress (Gümüştekin & Gültekin, 2009; Durna, 2006).

This study will examine the most frequent factors of stress among university students in Turkey and the effect thereof on career building. Following the idea of Sarita (2015), social and economic factors followed by academic factors will be examined. The social and economic factors include: the unemployment rate for the 15-24 year age group, and family factor. The academic factors included: the competitive environment - the increasing number of professionals, and exam stress.

2.1 Social and Economic Factors

2.1.1 Unemployment

Youth unemployment is a critical issue worldwide. Young people aged 15-24 account for a significant part of the labour market. As indicated by Table 1 this age group has employment difficulties mainly in the “skilled workforce” category (Çondur & Bölükbaş, 2014).

In a study of university students (Mazumdar et al., 2012), worries about future proved to be the main source of stress to students. In Turkey, many students choose their study areas in a way to make future employment easier because they fear the difficulties of finding proper jobs later (Sarıkaya & Korshid, 2009).

Therefore, it can be concluded that students are worried about unemployment even before starting their studies.

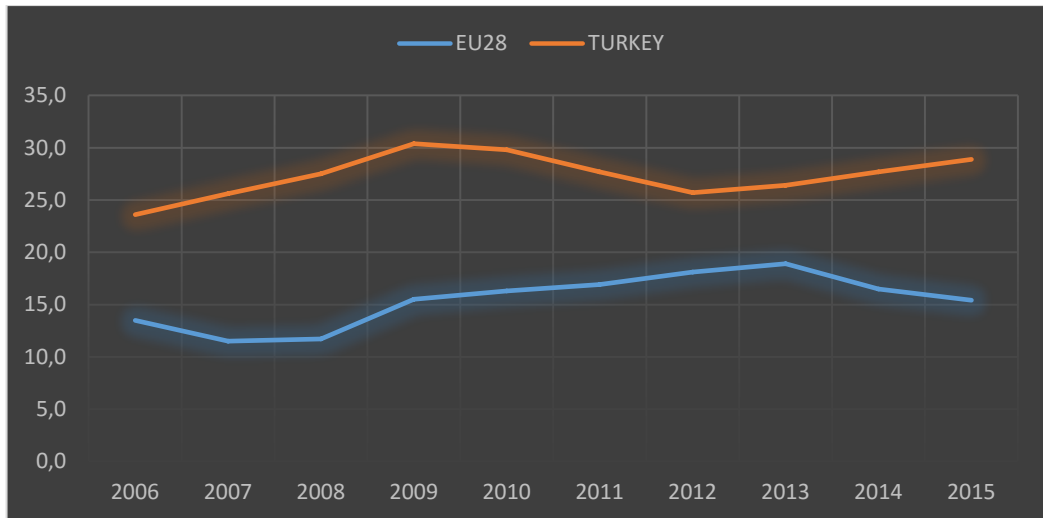
Table 1: Unemployment in the 15-24 age group related to level of education (%)

| Year | Illiterate | Literate but no formal education | Primary school, first classes | Primary school, 8 classes or matching vocational school | General secondary school | Vocational secondary school | College or university | Elementary education |
|------|------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|--------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| 2000 | 5 | 11 | 8,3 | 13,7 | 20,6 | 20,8 | 28,3 | 10,3 |
| 2001 | 8,7 | 14,6 | 10,6 | 17,7 | 24 | 25,5 | 30,7 | 9,6 |
| 2002 | 11,5 | 15,7 | 12,4 | 20,7 | 26,8 | 28 | 38,3 | 10,7 |
| 2003 | 18,1 | 30,2 | 15,3 | 19,7 | 25,9 | 23,8 | 38,8 | 11,4 |
| 2004 | 9,6 | 13 | 13,4 | 19,6 | 26,6 | 29,3 | 39,8 | 13,3 |
| 2005 | 11,3 | 16,3 | 14,1 | 19,2 | 25,3 | 25,6 | 30,5 | 14,5 |
| 2006 | 12,5 | 15,3 | 14,7 | 17,9 | 25,2 | 21,1 | 27,2 | 15,2 |
| 2007 | 16,7 | 17,3 | 14,7 | 19,3 | 23,5 | 22,6 | 28,5 | 16,8 |
| 2008 | 11 | 19,8 | 14,3 | 18,7 | 25 | 20,8 | 29,8 | 17,9 |
| 2009 | 19,5 | 23 | 17,9 | 21,6 | 30,6 | 27,6 | 33,2 | 22,4 |
| 2010 | 16,4 | 18,4 | 14,9 | 10,9 | 27,2 | 23,1 | 32,5 | 18,4 |
| 2011 | 11,2 | 15,1 | 11,2 | 14,1 | 22,4 | 21,2 | 30 | 14,5 |
| 2012 | 9 | 14,8 | 2,5 | 0 | 19,8 | 19,1 | 28,5 | 14,1 |
| 2013 | 10,3 | 15,5 | 10,9 | 15,1 | 21,9 | 18,6 | 29,2 | 15,5 |
| 2014 | 12,1 | 15 | 16 | 13,1 | 20,4 | 19,3 | 28,3 | 14,8 |
| 2015 | 7,9 | 14,1 | 16,3 | 14 | 22,2 | 18,1 | 29,5 | 15,6 |

(Source: www.tuik.gov.tr)

Between 2000 and 2015 professionals accounted for the biggest part of unemployed people in this age group. According to previous studies (Turgut et al., 2004; Şahin, et al., 2009), many university students experience fear of unemployment, however, according to the research of Dursun and Aytaç (2009) and Kralj *et al.* (1989) the fear of unemployment is greater in female university students than in male university students. In a recent survey, Kula and Şaraç (2016) indicated that female students are more fearful concerning the future, than male students. The data of the Turkish Bureau of Statistics (TUIK) on youth unemployment also support this idea, unemployment among female professionals being 35.9% compared to a 21.5% among males. Refer to Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Unemployment rates in the 15-24 age group by Tertiary Educational Attainment, Turkey-European Union (28 countries) by Years



(Source: Eurostat, 2015)

Although the admittance process between the European Union and Turkey is seems to be drawn out, neither of the parties has given up on membership issues yet. During recent years, Turkey with its developing economy has always shown higher unemployment rates that that of the EU, as seen is Table 1, which constitutes a negative situation for the country.

2.1.2 Family

Providing the environment that shapes behaviour and personal qualities form a young age, family plays an important part in everyone's relation to events emerging throughout their lives. The basic social factors influencing career choice are one's social environment, relationship with parents, social and economic order of the family and the individual's place in it. Appreciation of occupations is different in each society. Some professions may be respected in a certain society but looked down on in others. Therefore, individuals are directed to opt for a profession which is accepted and appreciated in the social environment they live in. One of the important factors of career selection is the family (Özen, 2011).

One of the most important decisions in life is to choose a profession that is accepted and appreciated in our society. According to studies, the most important

factors influencing a young individual's career choice are existing knowledge, interest in the potential profession, individual values and the level of satisfaction originating from it. On the other side, along with the socioeconomic state of young individuals, the influence of family and other factors, and the differences between certain countries and cultures may also influence carrier choices with young individuals (Şentürk & Buran, 2015).

A study conducted by Işık (2013) among university students showed that approximately 19% of students thought that they could not opt for the profession they really desired due to the disagreement of their family, spouse and environment, or economic difficulties.

The influence of the family on career choice is manifested even before university education. In their study, Batur and Adıgüzel (2014) pointed out that for most students at secondary schools specializing in sciences, career choice was influenced by their family.

There are also studies surveying students of different faculties in Turkey. Özder (2014) in his survey made among prospective geography teachers draws attention to the influence of “the family factor” on these students' career choice. As for students of administrative faculties, Yayla and Cengiz (2005) found that in the choice of accounting studies, “the family factor” also had an important role. Durna (2006) in a study carried out among undergraduate and graduate students found that the economic situation of graduate students was better than that of undergraduate students, and the stress level of the latter was also higher. Family income has also proven to be an important stress factor.

2.2 Academic Life

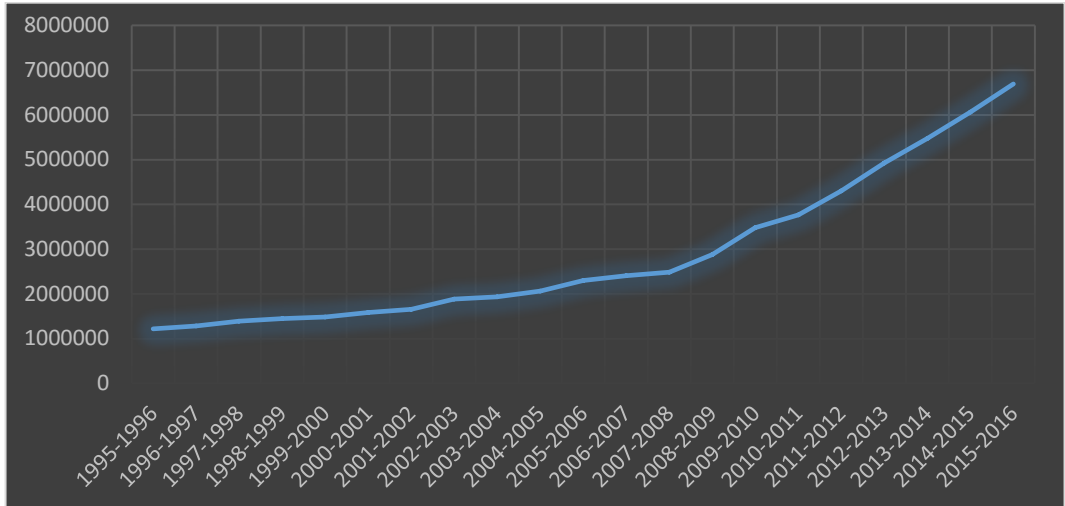
2.2.1 Competitive Environment – Increasing Number of Professionals

Universities play an important part in the development of a country. They have an important role in educating skilled work force and generally increasing quality of life and helping to establish the general culture of a country (Demirtaş & Çoban, 2014).

Therefore, Turkey has increased its investment in education during the years of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) government. With these investments, the government succeeded in opening a university in each of the country's districts. Presently there is at least one university in each of Turkey's

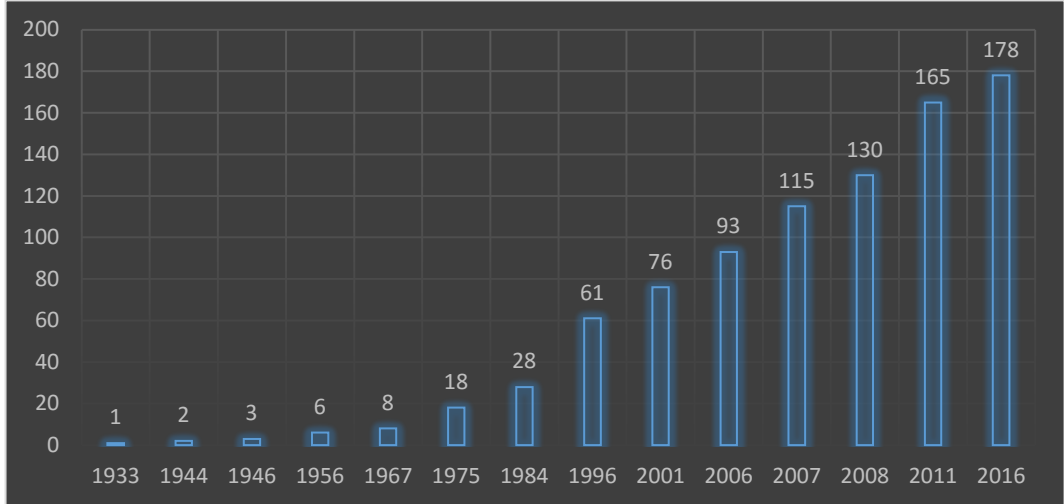
districts. The increasing number of university students can be seen in Figure 2. From 2002 to 2016 the number of university students has increased dramatically. In 2002, there were close to 2 million students in Turkey, while this number in 2016 is close to 6.7 million.

Figure 2: Number of University Students in Turkey by Years (1995-2016)



(Source: YÖK, Higher Education Data)

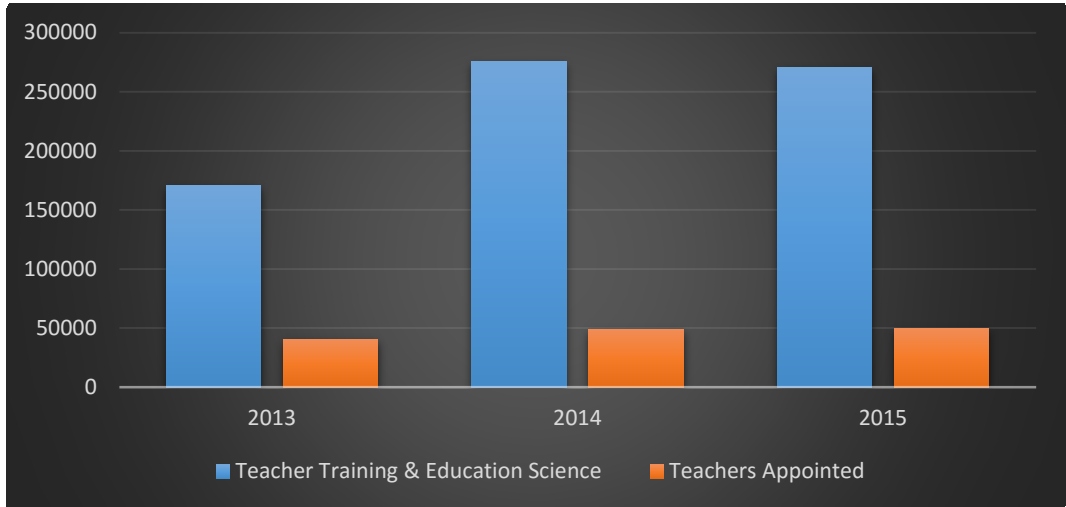
A study carried out on the increasing number of students (Işık, 2013) has shown the effect of this increase on university students. Due to a large number of professionals it is more difficult to find a proper job. Therefore, many people regard higher education as a waste of time.

Figure 3: Number of Universities in Turkey

(Source: YÖK, Higher Education Data)

Figure 3 shows the number of universities in Turkey. Since the establishment of the first University of Turkey in 1933 there has been a steady increase. By the middle of 2016 the number of universities in Turkey has grown to 178. In the era of the AK Party government beside state universities, the establishment of private universities is also supported. Since the establishment of the first foundation university, İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent Üniversitesi in 1984, by 2001 the number of foundation universities has grown to 23. After AK Party coming to government in 2002, the number of private universities increased and by the middle of 2016 it has grown to 69.¹

¹ Fifteen private university are shut down due to the mobilization which is enacted executed in 23th of July in 2016. The number of private university diminished from 84 to 69. And overall the numbers of universities resulted as in the numbers of 178 from 193.

Figure 4: Number of Students in Teacher Training - Teachers Appointed (2013-2015)

(Sources: Teacher Training Data; Teachers appointed)

There is strong competition among university students in Turkey. As indicated in the figure above, the number of students participating in teacher training highly exceeds the number of teachers appointed to positions. In 2013, there were 170.000 students in teacher training but only 40.000 positions available to teachers. In 2014 and 2015 the number of students in teacher training exceeded 270.000, while the number of teachers appointed to positions remained limited, which constitutes a serious problem for students.

2.2.2 Exam Stress

In this part of the study, the topic examined will be the stress caused by exams before, during and after university studies. In Turkey, students take examinations from the second part (4 years) of primary education (“ortaokul”). Secondary education also starts with an exam, afterwards, students also start their university life with an exam. After graduation, they may also face exams during the process of finding a job. According to Batur and Adıgüzel (2014) and Tanrıverdi and Kavsut (2015), the exam system applied in secondary education constitutes a serious pressure on career selection.

There is also serious exam stress during higher education. There various studies in literature (Marshall et al., 1998; McClelland et al., 1985) concerning this topic.

Exams are an important part of evaluating students' progress and results in education. Among children and youth, the most frequent fear is a fear of examination, which causes physical and psychological changes before exams, and exam stress may influence one's exam results unfavourably (Çapulcuoğlu & Gündüz, 2013).

In Turkey, if a student wants to have a successful academic life they are bound to be successful in exams throughout their educational life. ÖYP (Program of Educating Members of Teaching Board) evaluating system and points gained play an important role in academic success.

When counting ÖYP points, undergraduate studies account for 35%, ALES (Academic Personnel and Graduate Education Entrance Exam) for 50%, and language proficiency for 15% of total points acquired. In 2015, this system was discontinued due to the decision of YÖK (Council of Higher Education).²

ALES is an examination which is applied in:

- according to Amendment 5538 to statutory rule No. 78 on the members of educational boards of higher educational institutes, appointing teachers, educators, researchers, experts to the board of education of higher educational institutes,
- entrance to graduate education,
- selecting applicants to graduate education in foreign countries (OSYM, 2016).

During recent years, there has been a growing interest in working in public service in Turkey. Due to unemployment and wages more and more people turn to public service for employment (Yavuzaslan, 2015). Worries about the future lead employees towards a more reliable employment opportunity instead of a more lucrative one or career development. This result is also supported by the fact that public servant positions and the public sector are still popular (Kozak & Dalkıranoglu, 2013). In 2014, almost 3.5 million people applied for KPSS

² YÖK discontinued this system by their decision of 22.09.2015. from 2016 the ÖYP program was discontinued.(<http://goo.gl/4DsStE>) With ÖYP, students could apply through a single system to all universities. From then on, they may apply directly at the universities as far as the contingent of the university is not filled. With these exams, evaluation of applicants is based on their results in undergraduate education, and in ALES, they must score at least 70 out of 100, and in language proficiency, at least 50 out of 100.

(Examination for Selecting Public Servants). This number is almost double of those applying in 2004 (OSYM, 2014).

Various studies have been made about the stress factor of KPSS. These studies mainly concentrated on prospective teachers. In their study, Can and Can (2011) concluded that stress in prospective teachers manifested in tension, sleeping difficulties, tiredness, feeling of failure and constant worrying. This study has also shown female teachers being more stressed out than male teachers. According to Sadioğlu and Sezer (2016), female prospects experience much more exam stress. On the other hand, a study made by Yılmaz and Yaşar (2016) could not point out any statistical differences between sexes.

In a study about prospective teachers in training Akpınar (2013) pointed out that the most important stress factor was KPSS. Even today studies are continued about the effect of KPSS on prospective teachers. A study conducted by Epçaçan (2016) pointed out that the metaphors describing prospective teachers' feelings about KPSS could be grouped as “competition”, “illness”, “nightmare” “impersonal”, “nonsense” and “alien”, which also shows the unfavourable effect of KPSS on students.

3. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Due to constraints in time and economic reasons, we did not conduct any field studies (survey). Therefore this study is based on surveys carried out among students of various university programs in Turkey and statistical data.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Through this study, we would like to draw attention to the factors causing stress to university students: with relation to social, economic and academic areas we would like to contribute to the literature on the topic and draw the attention of decision makers and researchers to this area. With our study, we aim at introducing the factors causing stress to university students, but in the future further studies are necessary to discover the proper solution to these problems. In further studies, it is also important to draw the attention of universities and study programs to the importance of the requirement of the labor market.

5. CONCLUSION

With the increasing number of students participating in higher education, employment opportunities for professionals decreased significantly. Employment situation after graduation has inevitably created stress for both university graduates and students still continuing their education. In Turkey, university education at state universities has been free of cost since the 2012 decision of the Council of Ministers (Resmi Gazete, 2012). From this date the number of university students has increased.

Regarding the changes in the educational system in Turkey, it can be established that there is a serious problem concerning the careers of university students. Therefore, steps must be taken to address the expectations of students after graduation. Investment in education has a lot of positive sides in Turkey, however, some unfavourable situations have also emerged. For instance, research carried out by YÖK (2007) has shown that the capacity of higher education exceeds the expectations of the labour market contributing to the high level of unemployment among professionals. Higher education institutes should re-evaluate their programs based on the requirements of the labour market.

Negotiations on Turkey's EU membership have been under way for a while. According to Eurostat data, whereas in 2015 the median age of EU citizen was 42.4 years, it is only 30.7 in Turkey. Based on these data, keeping in sight the fast ageing of the population in the European Union, supposedly the higher education system of the EU will have an unused capacity in the future. In case Turkey is admitted in the European Union, it will create a new career opportunity for Turkish university students which may also have a reducing effect on the stress experienced by student population in Turkey.

However, since the world is developing very fast, it is inevitable that competition should exist in education just like in all other areas of life. The number of trained individuals is increasing in every area, therefore university students should re-evaluate their career plans and should venture out to create their own businesses and this way securing an employment opportunity for themselves. Qunlian (2011) sees entrepreneurship as an important way of preventing unemployment. Small and Medium Industry Development Organization (KOSGEB, 2016) provides a 50,000€ (15 thousand euros) non-repayable support to new entrepreneurs which may offer new ways of career development to university students.

Gender-specific studies show that female students experience much more stress than male students (Dursn & Aytaç, 2009; Kula & Saraç, 2016). In Turkey, many entrepreneurship programs (e.g KOSGEB) favours women. These encouragements may have a positive effect on female students.

As a result, we may summarize that stress strongly influences life, and worries about the future constitute an important stress factor in students' life. This intensive stress may force students to make improper choices about their careers and therefore cause problems in their professional life. Therefore, the state universities and the private sector should act in a more planned and coordinated way and conduct further studies and research in this area.

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