

# Between Compliance and Practice: Understanding Teaching Quality in Turkish Higher Education

## Uyum ve Uygulama Arasında: Türk Yükseköğretiminde Öğretim Kalitesini Anlamak

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**Abstract:** Teaching quality has become a central component of quality assurance systems in higher education, however, it remains a complex and context-dependent concept to be examined. This study explores how teaching quality is interpreted and constructed by institutional actors within the Turkish higher education system. Adopting a qualitative design, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with 12 quality coordinators working at universities holding five-year institutional accreditation. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings show that teaching quality is understood through multiple and sometimes competing views, including compliance with formal procedures, measurable performance indicators, and pedagogical practice. Findings also revealed that the influence of institutional pressures and a recurring gap between formal representations of quality and everyday teaching realities. These results suggest that teaching quality is not only assessed through standardized mechanisms but also interpreted, negotiated, and enacted within institutional contexts. The study contributes to the literature by offering empirical insight from the Turkish higher education context and by showing how teaching quality is shaped both by quality assurance structures and by local meaning-making processes. It also points to the need for more comprehensive and context-sensitive approaches to quality assurance that better capture the pedagogical and relational dimensions of teaching.

**Keywords:** Sensemaking Theory; New Institutional Theory; Teaching quality; Quality assurance; Turkish Higher education

**Özet:** Öğretim kalitesi, yükseköğretimde kalite güvencesi sistemlerinin temel bir bileşeni hâline gelmiştir; ancak araştırmalarda hâlâ karmaşık ve bağlamsal bir kavram olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Bu çalışma, öğretim kalitesinin Türk yükseköğretim sisteminde kurumsal aktörler tarafından nasıl yorumlandığını ve inşa edildiğini incelemektedir. Nitel araştırma desenine dayanan çalışmada, beş yıllık kurumsal akreditasyona sahip üniversitelerde görev yapan 12 kalite koordinatörüyle yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Veriler, refleksif tematik analiz yoluyla çözümlenmiştir. Bulgular, öğretim kalitesinin resmî prosedürlere uyum, ölçülebilir performans göstergeleri ve pedagojik uygulama gibi birbiriyle zaman zaman yarışan farklı bakış açılarıyla anlaşıldığını göstermektedir. Sonuçlar ayrıca kurumsal baskıların etkisini ve kaliteye ilişkin resmî uygulamalar ile gündelik öğretim gerçeklikleri arasındaki tekrarlanan bir boşluğu ortaya koymaktadır. Bulgular, öğretim kalitesinin yalnızca standartlaştırılmış mekanizmalarla değerlendirilen bir olgu olmadığını; aynı zamanda kurumsal bağlam içinde yorumlanan, müzakere edilen ve hayata geçirilen bir süreç olduğunu da göstermektedir. Bu çalışma, Türk yükseköğretimi bağlamına ampirik bir katkı sunmakta ve öğretimin pedagojik ve ilgili boyutlarını daha iyi yansıtan, daha kapsamlı ve bağlama duyarlı kalite güvencesi yaklaşımlarına duyulan ihtiyaca işaret etmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Anlamlandırma Teorisi; Yeni Kurumsal Kuram; Öğretim kalitesi; Kalite güvencesi; Türk yükseköğretimi

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Quality in Higher Education

Quality in higher education is widely recognized as a contested, multidimensional, and context-dependent concept, which makes it difficult to define with precision (Green, 1994; Martin & Stella, 2007; Westerheijden et

al., 2007). That is why, rather than referring to a single, universally accepted standard; quality is constructed and shaped by the purposes attributed to higher education, the expectations of different stakeholders, and the broader educational, political, and social contexts (Harvey, 2005; Harvey & Williams, 2010). This indeterminacy is not merely conceptual; it reflects the inherently complex

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nature of higher education institutions, which simultaneously serve teaching, research, and contribution to society (Harvey & Newton, 2004). Accordingly, defining quality in higher education inevitably raises questions about which purposes should be counted on and who should determine them, including the state, institutional leaders, academics, students, and employers (Trow, 1996, 1998).

One of the mainstream perspectives conceptualizes quality as the *attainment of high standards* or as conformance to predetermined specifications. This view has practical appeal because it allows quality to be translated into measurable benchmarks and formal criteria. As standards are not fixed or determined, they must be selected, interpreted, and revised, and in such a case, satisfying specific standards does not necessarily guarantee genuinely high-quality educational practice (Harvey & Green, 1993). Another prominent perspective defines quality as *fitness for purpose*, suggesting that institutions should be evaluated according to the extent to which they achieve their pre-stated goals. Although this view accommodates institutional diversity, it also raises questions. Since higher education institutions have inherently multiple purposes, it is often unclear which goals should be prioritized or who has the authority to define them as mentioned above (Harvey & Knight, 1996; Trow, 1996, 1998).

A further debate emerges from managerial and market-oriented perspectives, particularly the idea that students should be regarded as customers or central stakeholders in higher education (Cheng & Tam, 1997; Gunn, 2018). While this perspective has gained visibility in quality discussions, it remains controversial because the “customer” of higher education may be students, the state, employers, or those who fund the system (Trowler et al., 2012). More broadly, this debate reflects concerns about the transfer of private-sector concepts such as efficiency, customer satisfaction, competition, and market share into public higher education (Barnett, 2010; McCulloch, 2009; Vidovich, 2007). Such a shift may redirect attention away from the educational purposes of universities and toward performance, reputation, and ranking logics (Dill & Soo, 2005; Hazelkorn, 2015). When definitions and approaches are evaluated together, it emerges that quality in higher education is best understood not as a fixed attribute but as a negotiated or composed concept shaped by criteria, priorities, and institutional context. Therefore, higher education institutions first consider building their quality policy rather trying to complying with national or international standards of quality agencies.

## 1.2. Teaching Quality as a Contested Dimension of Quality

Teaching quality has become a central concern in higher

education, particularly as systems have expanded, diversified, and become internationalized. In such a context, universities are increasingly expected to prove that they provide high-quality teaching in order to attract students, strengthen their institutional reputation, and remain accountable and competitive in national and global higher education environments. Accountability, external evaluation, and accreditation have therefore become key mechanisms through which institutions demonstrate educational quality, transparency, and performance (Blackmore, 2009; Broadfoot, 1998; Marginson, 2006). However, this development has also reshaped the meaning of teaching quality. As quality becomes more closely associated with accreditation results, external evaluation criteria, performance indicators, and documentary evidence, the question of what actually happens in classrooms may have moved into the background. Given the organic and interaction-based nature of teaching and learning, this perspective has fallen short of explaining how teaching quality is actually shaped through classroom interaction, student engagement, and context-sensitive pedagogical decisions (Biggs et al., 2022).

Even though earlier studies often treated academic standards and student achievement as indicators of quality (Stubbs, 1994), more recent studies, which are providing a wider perspective, emphasize that teaching quality involves pedagogical practices, student engagement, learning outcomes, and the transformation of disciplinary knowledge into meaningful student understanding (Ashwin, 2014; Ashwin et al., 2020; Biggs et al., 2022). From this perspective, teaching quality concerns both the content transmitted in the classroom, and the ways in which knowledge is experienced, interpreted, and sustained within instructional settings. For this reason, studies on teaching quality increasingly foreground broader dimensions such as flexibility, responsiveness, accessibility, critical thinking, active participation, and students’ responsibility for their own learning (Hammonds et al., 2017; Schuck et al., 2008). In addition, this point of view brings forward individual factors such as academics’ knowledge, attitudes, and skills and also institutional factors such as organizational climate and leadership practices which are sustained across the university (Ashwin, 2020; Biggs, 2014; Elken & Stensaker, 2018). Teaching quality, therefore, is best understood from a broader pedagogical and institutional perspective rather than merely complying with standards.

## 1.3. Quality Assurance and the Formalization of Teaching Quality

As a result of quality assurance mechanisms’ having become part of broader accountability and governance reforms aimed at promoting transparency, comparabil-

ity, and continuous improvement, teaching quality has increasingly been framed through assessed indicators, formal procedures, and externally reviewable evidence (Biggs, 2014; Brennan & Shah, 2000). Instruments such as accreditation procedures, institutional self-evaluation reports, and performance indicators such as curriculum design, student feedback, graduation rates, and employability outcomes have significantly shaped how teaching quality is defined, monitored, and evaluated. Yet, this approach has led to debates about how to monitor or evaluate processes that are not “countable” as teaching quality encompasses a broader and multidimensional set of elements, including pedagogical knowledge and skills, responsiveness to students’ needs, effective feedback, peer review, and institutional support for teaching development (Sackdanoung, 2023).

Thus, the formalization of teaching quality is complex because teaching itself is difficult to evaluate directly. When quality is treated as a technical matter, institutional performance tends to be assessed through indicators, procedures, and evaluation mechanisms (Barnett, 1997), which seems easier and more reliable way of scaling. Yet higher education outcomes are abstract, long-term, and shaped by students’ diverse capacities, interests, and learning processes, which makes their evaluation less straightforward than the assessment of tangible products (Baldwin & James, 2000). Although such mechanisms support comparison across institutions, departments, and programmes, they may also privilege what can be documented and reported over the richer pedagogical dimensions of teaching and learning (Cuenin, 1987; Stensaker & Leiber, 2015). Proxy measures such as student satisfaction, continuation rates, and graduate outcomes can be useful for benchmarking, but they do not always reflect how teachers and students experience good teaching in practice (Ashwin, 2022; Gakhal, 2018). In this sense, quality assurance may encourage symbolic compliance rather than genuine improvement, as institutions can appear aligned with external expectations without substantially transforming teaching and learning processes (Newton, 2002; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008).

Classroom-level studies point to this limitation more clearly. Students’ perceptions of teaching quality are shaped not merely by institutional indicators, but by pedagogical competence, communication, feedback, fairness, responsiveness, and student–teacher interaction. Kaynardag (2019), for example, found that instructors with pedagogical training were evaluated more positively in delivery, communication, and assessment, with the strongest difference in communication. These findings suggest that teaching quality cannot be understood as a technical output of quality assurance systems

or as a fixed set of institutional standards. Rather, it is a dynamic and socially negotiated construct shaped by formal frameworks, institutional priorities, pedagogical practices, and the ways institutional actors interpret and enact quality in practice.

#### 1.4. Theoretical Lens: New Institutional Theory and Sensemaking Theory

The limitations of indicator-based and procedural understandings of teaching quality make it necessary to examine quality not only as an evaluative outcome but also as a socially and institutionally constructed phenomenon. In this respect, teaching quality should be approached as something continuously produced, interpreted, and enacted by actors operating across different institutional levels. QA processes do more than regulate teaching; they also shape how teaching quality is defined, communicated, and legitimized within universities.

New Institutional Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how universities respond to external expectations for legitimacy, conformity, and accountability (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). According to this perspective, organizations operating within the same field tend to become increasingly similar under coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In higher education, coercive pressures emerge from regulatory bodies and national quality agencies; mimetic pressures arise from uncertainty and imitation of perceived successful or legitimate practices; and normative pressures stem from professional norms and academic cultures. These pressures do not simply determine organizational behavior; they also influence how institutions define and legitimize concepts such as teaching quality. Meyer and Rowan’s (1977) argument that organizations often adopt formal structures as rationalized myths is particularly relevant here, as it suggests that teaching quality may be formally defined in one way while being enacted differently in practice.

However, institutional theory alone does not fully explain how actors within organizations interpret and enact these pressures. This gap is addressed by Sensemaking Theory, which emphasizes the interpretive processes through which individuals construct meaning in complex and ambiguous environments (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is especially relevant in the context of teaching quality because the concept itself is inherently ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations. University administrators, quality coordinators, and academics do not merely implement predefined definitions of teaching quality; rather, they actively interpret, negotiate, and reconstruct these meanings based on their

roles, experiences, and institutional contexts (Stensaker et al., 2011). Research on sensemaking in higher education suggests that quality-related concepts are translated into locally meaningful practices through ongoing interaction and interpretation (Marshall, 2018). These two perspectives, in terms of teaching quality implications, provide a stronger analytical basis: While New Institutional Theory helps explain why teaching quality becomes formalized, legitimacy-laden, and shaped by field-level pressures, Sensemaking Theory helps explain how these formal expectations are translated, negotiated, and sometimes reworked in practice.

### 1.5. Teaching Quality in the Turkish Higher Education Context

In Türkiye, quality assurance in higher education is primarily coordinated by the Turkish Higher Education Quality Council, an administratively and financially autonomous body responsible for external evaluation, institutional accreditation, monitoring, and quality assurance practices. As a member of the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area, Türkiye has developed its national quality assurance standards in alignment with mainly European reference points, particularly the ESG- learning outcomes, transparency, comparability, student-centered learning, and continuous improvement (ENQA, 2015). Through institutional self-evaluation reports, external review visits, follow-up processes, and evidence-based reporting requirements, THEQC provides a national framework for examining how universities plan, implement, monitor, and improve their educational activities. Within this framework, institutions are expected to demonstrate the alignment between their strategic goals, internal quality assurance systems, program structures and continuous improvement mechanisms (THEQC, 2025). Within this system, teaching quality is largely made visible through documented, and externally reviewable evidence. Universities are expected to report that teaching-related processes are planned, implemented, monitored, and improved in accordance with recognized quality criteria. Teaching and Learning section standards include course and program learning outcomes, curriculum design, course-program alignment, student workload and credit structures, assessment procedures, student evaluations and participation which are based student-centred instruction. Although these indicators are useful for monitoring and comparison, they cannot fully capture the relational, contextual, and pedagogical dimensions of classroom practice, student engagement, and learning experience. As previous research similarly warns, quality assurance may support institutional improvement, yet it can also encourage symbolic compliance when institutions adapt to external ex-

pectations without meaningful changes in teaching and learning (Newton, 2002; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). External evaluation studies in Türkiye also show that quality assurance mechanisms often emphasize reporting, input-oriented criteria, and procedural compliance, while offering limited insight into actual classroom processes, pedagogical practices, and student learning outcomes (Yıldırım & Aslan, 2021).

This creates a central discussion in the Turkish higher education context. Teaching quality is expected to support substantive educational improvement, yet it is frequently assessed through formalized procedures and evidence-oriented reporting practices. The limits of formal quality indicators become clearer when the actual experience of teaching is considered. Research on teaching excellence shows that national and institutional quality initiatives often rely on proxy measures such as student satisfaction, continuation rates, and graduate outcomes which may facilitate benchmarking, but do not necessarily reflect how academics and students understand high-quality teaching (Gakhal, 2018). Evidence from Turkish higher education supports this point. Üstünlüoğlu (2017) found discrepancies between students' and lecturers' perceptions of pedagogical competence: students viewed lecturers as competent in more administrative aspects of teaching but were less satisfied with active learning, effective feedback, varied teaching methods, participation, and the connection between theory and practice. Similarly, Kaynardağ (2019) stated that students' perceptions of teaching quality are strongly shaped by pedagogical competence in delivery, communication, and assessment. Çakmak and Kayabaşı (2023) further found that academics define quality teaching through physical learning conditions, student-centered and supportive environments, affective and social climate, instructional preparation, and active student involvement.

When those statements and findings are considered together, it could be suggested that teaching quality in Turkish higher education cannot be fully captured through formal standards, observable outputs, or documentary evidence alone. As discussed in the related literature, Turkish higher education system also reflects a discrepancy between quality assurance structures and the complex realities of teaching practice. This calls for an analytical perspective that considers both quality assurance structures, and how these structures are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted by institutional actors in everyday educational practice. Despite the growing prominence of quality assurance in Turkish higher education, limited research has examined how teaching quality is conceptualized and constructed by actors po-

sitioned at different levels of the system. Existing studies have tended to emphasize formal structures, standards, and evaluation procedures, while giving less attention to how quality is understood in practice by those responsible for interpreting, mediating, and sustaining these processes within universities. Addressing this gap, the present study aims to explore how teaching quality is conceptualized and constructed across different institutional levels in the Turkish higher education system, with particular attention to quality coordinators and research universities. The originality of the study lies in moving beyond procedural and indicator-based accounts of quality assurance to examine teaching quality as a socially and institutionally constructed phenomenon shaped by both centralized pressures and local meaning-making processes.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how teaching quality is interpreted, negotiated, and constructed by institutional actors within the Turkish higher education system. Rather than examining teaching quality through predefined categories or standardized indicators, the study focused on how meanings are produced across different institutional positions within a centrally coordinated quality assurance context.

The study was informed by an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that meanings emerge through context, interaction, and interpretation (Saunders et al., 2003). This orientation is closely aligned with Sensemaking Theory, which emphasizes how individuals interpret ambiguous, complex, or changing institutional conditions and construct meanings that guide their actions. In the context of this study, teaching quality was not approached as a fixed or purely technical category, but as a concept that institutional actors interpret, negotiate, and make sense of within the broader quality assurance environment. Consistent with this perspective, reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) was employed as the primary analytical approach. This method was particularly suitable because it enabled an in-depth examination of how participants made sense of teaching quality, how they interpreted quality assurance expectations, and how shared as well as divergent patterns of meaning were constructed across their accounts.

### 2.2. Participants

The study employed purposive sampling (Patton, 2014)

to recruit participants with direct involvement in institutional quality assurance processes and substantial knowledge of teaching quality practices. The sample consisted of 12 quality coordinators, each from a different university holding five-year institutional accreditation-7 of the universities were state universities while 5 of them were foundation universities. The focus on these universities was intentional, as five-year accreditation indicates that an institution has undergone THEQC's external evaluation process and has been recognized as having a mature and systematically functioning internal quality assurance system. Under the Institutional Accreditation Program, THEQC may grant full accreditation for five years, conditional accreditation for two years, or deny accreditation, depending on the extent to which institutions meet the relevant quality criteria.

This sampling strategy was not intended to achieve numerical representativeness, but to generate information-rich accounts from institutions with sustained engagement in national quality assurance processes. Participants (quality coordinators) occupied highly specific institutional roles and were responsible for, or actively involved in, the design, implementation, and monitoring of quality assurance activities within their universities. The final sample size was considered sufficient because the interviews provided rich, focused, and relevant data in relation to the research questions, and later interviews did not introduce substantially new patterns beyond those already identified. Therefore, data collection was concluded once adequate thematic depth and variation had been reached.

Potential participants were contacted via their institutional email addresses and received an informed consent form prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were actively serving in quality-related roles at the time of the study.

### 2.3. Data Collection

The primary data source consisted of semi-structured interviews, which enabled participants to articulate their experiences and interpretations in depth while also allowing flexibility for probing and clarification. This format was considered particularly appropriate for the aims of the study, as it created space to explore how participants understood and made sense of teaching quality within their institutional contexts. The interview protocol was developed in line with the theoretical framework and research questions of the study. Following recommendations for qualitative interview design, an initial pool of questions was generated through a review of the literature on teaching quality, quality assurance, and sensemaking processes (Kallio et

al., 2016). The questions were designed to address the key domains – understanding of teaching quality, institutional teaching quality practices, teaching quality enhancement, measurement of teaching quality- of the study while remaining sufficiently open-ended to encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives. More specifically, the interview guide focused on participants’ definitions of teaching quality, their views on indicators and evaluation practices, and their perceptions of possible gaps between formal policy and institutional practice.

To enhance clarity and content relevance, the interview guide was reviewed by experts in the field and revised accordingly. A pilot interview was then conducted to assess the comprehensibility, sequencing, and overall flow of the questions, and minor revisions were made based on the feedback obtained. This process contributed to the development of a coherent and flexible interview protocol.

The interviews were conducted either online or face to face, depending on participants’ availability, and each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. With participants’ consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using transcription software. The transcripts were then reviewed and corrected for accuracy prior to analysis. The data were collected between May 2024 and March 2025.

## 2.4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), a flexible yet systematic approach well suited to exploring how participants interpreted and constructed meanings of teaching quality within their institutional contexts. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s six-phase process, moving iteratively from familiarization with the interview transcripts to coding, theme development, refinement, definition, and final interpretation.

The coding process was both inductive and theoretically informed. Initial coding remained closely grounded in participants’ accounts, allowing patterns of meaning to emerge from the data. At later stages of analysis, these patterns were interpreted in light of key concepts from New Institutional Theory and Sensemaking Theory. This approach enabled the study to remain attentive to participants’ own meanings while also situating those meanings within broader institutional dynamics. Throughout the analytic process, reflexivity was maintained by critically considering the researcher’s role in shaping interpretation and theme development.

## 2.5. Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed in line with Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria for qualitative research. Credibility was supported through sustained engagement with the data, careful review of the interview transcripts, and iterative movement between data, codes, and themes throughout the analysis. Transferability was addressed by providing sufficiently detailed descriptions of the research context, participant group, and analytic procedures. Dependability was strengthened through transparent documentation of the research process, including participant selection, data collection, and stages of analysis. Confirmability was supported through ongoing reflexive attention to the researcher’s assumptions and interpretive role during theme development.

## 3. Findings

The findings indicated that teaching quality was not perceived as a fixed or uniform construct, but as a contextually shaped and multi-layered phenomenon. Six main themes emerged: teaching quality as compliance, teaching quality as measurable performance, teaching quality as pedagogical practice, institutional practices shaping teaching quality, the gap between discourse and practice, teaching quality as negotiated meaning emerged from the data, which are reflecting participants’ interpretations of teaching quality within their institutional contexts. The themes are presented below together with illustrative participant responses.

### 3.1. Teaching Quality as Compliance

One of the most prominent themes in the data was the conceptualization of teaching quality as compliance with formal procedures and external requirements. Participants frequently associated teaching quality with the extent to which institutional processes aligned with national quality standards and evaluation criteria. In this sense, quality was often understood as a function of documentation, reporting, and procedural completeness.

As one participant noted,

*“Teaching quality is mostly reflected in how well we align our processes with external evaluation criteria. Preparing reports and ensuring compliance has become a central part of how quality is understood.”*

Similarly, another participant emphasized the procedural dimension of quality:

*“When we talk about quality, the first thing*

*that comes to mind is whether all required documents and procedures are properly completed.”*

These accounts suggest that teaching quality is, to a significant extent, framed through formalized systems of accountability, where compliance with predefined standards becomes a primary indicator of quality. This interpretation reflects the influence of institutionalized quality assurance mechanisms, which translate abstract notions of quality into structured and auditable processes.

### 3.2. Teaching Quality as Measurable Performance

A second theme highlights the strong emphasis on quantifiable indicators in defining teaching quality. Participants frequently referred to results of assessment and evaluation, student evaluations, and other performance metrics as key tools for assessing teaching effectiveness. In this view, quality becomes closely tied to what can be measured, compared, and reported.

For example, one participant stated:

*“Assessment and evaluation scores are one of the main indicators we rely on when evaluating teaching quality as teaching quality refers to accomplishment of course learning objectives. If their scores are high, then we can conclude that course learning objectives are achieved.”*

Another participant similarly noted:

*“We often look at quantitative data—results of assessment and evaluation, evaluation forms, performance indicators—to understand whether teaching is effective.”*

These findings indicate a tendency to equate teaching quality with measurable outcomes, reinforcing a performance-oriented understanding of quality. While such indicators provide valuable insights, participants also implicitly acknowledged their limitations, suggesting that not all aspects of teaching quality can be captured through numerical data alone.

### 3.3. Teaching Quality as Pedagogical Practice

In contrast to compliance- and measurement-oriented perspectives, participants also described teaching quality in terms of actual pedagogical practices. This perspective emphasizes what happens in the classroom; including student engagement, interaction, and meaningful learning experiences. There are some excerpts from interviews:

*“Students may pass the course, but some do so with very high grades while others barely*

*meet the minimum requirements. The question is how this difference should be interpreted when evaluating teaching quality. If almost all students pass a course, this does not automatically indicate high teaching quality. It may also reflect the level of difficulty of the exam or the grading practices of the instructor.”*

As one participant explained:

*“For many academics, teaching quality is still about what happens in the classroom—interaction, engagement, and how students actually learn.”*

A few participants highlighted the distinction between formal representations and actual experiences:

*“Even when the results appear to align with the course learning outcomes, that alone may not be enough to conclude that teaching is of high quality.”*

*“There is a difference between what is reported as quality and what is experienced in teaching practice.”*

*“If we define teaching quality only in terms of learning outcomes, we may overlook other important aspects of higher education, such as critical thinking, academic engagement, and disciplinary understanding.”*

Participants questioned the adequacy of outcome-based indicators in capturing teaching quality. As some suggested, students may pass the same course with very different levels of achievement, raising the issue of whether grades ranging from AA to DD can be treated as equivalent evidence of learning. Others noted that high pass rates may sometimes reflect easy exams or lenient grading rather than quality teaching. Similarly, several participants argued that alignment with course learning outcomes, although important, is not by itself sufficient to define teaching as high quality. In this sense, participants challenged the assumption that university teaching is only responsible for delivering predefined learning outcomes and instead emphasized broader pedagogical and developmental dimensions of quality.

### 3.4. Institutional Pressures Shaping Quality

Participants consistently referred to various forms of institutional pressure that shapes how teaching quality is defined and operationalized. These pressures may stem from national regulatory frameworks, institutional expectations, and broader academic norms. Several participants emphasized that teaching quality is often

framed in relation to external evaluation demands and accountability requirements.

As one participant noted,

*“External evaluation criteria strongly shape how we define and prioritize teaching quality.”*

Another similarly stressed that

*“What counts as quality is often determined by what can be reported, documented, and shown during evaluation processes.”*

Participants also drew attention to the influence of inter-institutional comparison and imitation. In this regard, one participant stated that

*“Universities tend to follow each other’s practices, especially those that are seen as successful or officially recognized.”*

Another participant expressed a similar view by noting that *“once a practice becomes associated with prestige or accreditation success, other universities begin to adopt it as if it were the correct model.”* These accounts suggest that teaching quality is not defined only through internal pedagogical considerations, but also through the tendency to align with practices perceived as legitimate within the wider higher education field.

Normative pressures were reflected in participants’ references to professional expectations and shared academic assumptions about what good teaching should look like. Some participants suggested that quality is shaped by established academic norms, even when these are not formally stated. For example, one participant remarked that *“there are also unwritten expectations in academia; people develop a shared sense of what quality should mean.”* Another noted that *“sometimes we are guided not only by formal criteria, but also by what is seen as academically appropriate or professionally acceptable.”*

Participants further indicated that these pressures can create discrepancy between formal compliance and educational substance. Some questioned whether institutional definitions of quality always reflect meaningful teaching and learning. For instance, one participant stated that *“Sometimes the pressure is not to improve teaching itself, but to make sure that the institution appears to meet the required standards. Academics are unwilling to fill out the forms and they complain it takes more time than delivering the course.”* Another observed that *“You may align with all the criteria on paper, but that does not necessarily mean that teaching has improved in practice.”*

These findings align with the dimensions of coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures, suggesting that teaching quality is internally defined while also being shaped by external expectations. As a result, institutional actors often navigate competing expectations, balancing compliance with external standards and internal academic values.

### 3.5. The Gap Between Discourse and Practice

A particularly salient theme emerging from the data was the discrepancy between formal quality discourse and everyday teaching practices. Participants frequently highlighted a gap between how teaching quality was represented in official documents and how it was actually experienced within academic settings. In their accounts, quality often appeared coherent and structured at the level of institutional reporting, yet much less clear-cut in daily teaching practice.

As one participant stated,

*“There is often a gap between what is written in reports and what actually happens in teaching.”* Another participant similarly noted that

*“On paper, everything looks very structured and aligned, but in practice, teaching quality depends on many informal and contextual factors.”* Several participants emphasized that quality documents tend to present an idealized and standardized picture of teaching, whereas real teaching processes are shaped by classroom dynamics, disciplinary differences, instructor preferences, student characteristics, and varying institutional conditions.

Some participants also questioned whether what appears as quality in reporting always reflects meaningful learning. For example, one participant remarked that

*“Sometimes all the procedures seem complete in the documentation, but that does not necessarily mean the teaching process is equally strong in reality.”* Another suggested that

*“A course may appear fully aligned in the system, yet the actual learning experience can be very different depending on how the course is taught.”* These accounts indicate that formal representations of quality may capture procedural compliance more easily than the complexity of teaching and learning.

This theme highlights one of the central tensions identified in the study: the gap between idealized representations of teaching quality and the everyday realities through which teaching is actually practiced and experienced. In formal discourse, teaching quality may appear

coherent, well documented, and fully aligned with institutional standards. However, many participants stated that this formal representation does not always correspond to how teaching is actually practiced and experienced in classrooms. Quality assurance systems can make teaching quality visible through reports, indicators, and institutional evidence, but such visibility may remain largely procedural. In other words, what is written, reported, or demonstrated on paper may differ from the everyday realities of teaching, where quality is shaped by academic judgement, student engagement, disciplinary contexts, and classroom interaction. In this sense, teaching quality is not simply produced by formal discourse; it is enacted, negotiated, and sometimes constrained within the practical conditions of academic work.

### 3.6. Teaching Quality as a Negotiated Meaning

Across all themes, teaching quality emerged as a concept that was continuously negotiated among institutional policy makers, actors, and practitioners. Participants indicated that administrators, quality coordinators, and academics often attached different meanings and priorities to teaching quality, and that these differences sometimes produced differences in institutional practice. As one participant observed,

*“Different people (administration vs. practitioners) within the university understand teaching quality in different ways, and these meanings are constantly negotiated.”*

Another participant similarly noted that

*“For some, quality means compliance with procedures; for others, it means the actual depth of student learning.”*

Some participants also emphasized that quality is rarely defined once and for all, but instead takes shape through ongoing discussions, interpretations, and institutional expectations. For example, one participant remarked that

*“Teaching quality is not a single definition that everyone agrees on; it changes depending on who is speaking and from which position.”*

Parallel to this, another stated that

*“Sometimes academics focus on pedagogical value, while coordinators have to think in terms of indicators, documentation, and evaluation criteria.”*

These excerpts suggest that teaching quality is not experienced as a fixed construct, but as an ongoing process of meaning-making shaped by institutional roles, interactions, and context. In this sense, the findings highlight

the importance of sensemaking in mediating between quality structures and actual academic practice.

## 4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine how teaching quality is interpreted and constructed by institutional actors within the Turkish higher education system. Using a qualitative design, the study explored how formal quality assurance expectations, institutional priorities, and everyday academic practices intersect in shaping meanings of teaching quality. Rather than treating teaching quality as a predefined set of indicators, the study approached it as an interpretive and socially constructed phenomenon.

Understanding how teaching quality is interpreted constituted the central focus of this study and findings revealed three main themes: *measurable performance, compliance and pedagogical practice*. Firstly and most commonly, teaching quality was frequently associated with measurable indicators, such as learning outcomes, course–program alignment, student evaluations, accreditation evidence, performance indicators, and institutional reports. These indicators were addressed as making teaching quality visible within institutional quality assurance systems and allowing universities to demonstrate that teaching-related processes are planned, monitored, and improved. This finding is consistent with broader discussions that define quality in higher education as a contested and multidimensional concept rather than a single observable standard (Green, 1994; Harvey, 2005; Harvey & Williams, 2010; Trow, 1996, 1998). Second, teaching quality was interpreted as compliance with external quality expectations. Participants often referred to national standards, accreditation requirements, external evaluation criteria, and reporting obligations to define teaching quality. This shows that teaching quality is shaped by academic and pedagogical concerns as well as by institutional expectations of accountability and alignment. Similar findings have been reported in the Turkish context, where quality is often associated with program qualifications, national and international standards, and student-centered learning, teaching, and assessment (Sipahi Mencet & Akar, 2022; Yıldırım & Çakır Aydın, 2025). However, the findings also show that teaching quality cannot be reduced to measurement or compliance. Participants also emphasized classroom interaction, feedback, student engagement, academic judgement, disciplinary differences, and the relational dimensions of teaching by underlining pedagogical dimension of teaching quality. Studies focusing on student experience support this interpretation, showing that students’ perceptions of quality are

strongly shaped by pedagogical competence, communication, active learning, feedback, participation, and theory–practice integration (Kaynaradağ, 2019; Üstünlüoğlu, 2016, 2017). Likewise, Akyürek et al. (2025) found that lecturer competence mediates the relationship between service quality and students' academic engagement, while Abbas (2020) identifies instructors' knowledge, communication skills, mentoring style, course content, and support for students as central components of teaching quality. Overall findings related to meaning of quality teaching suggest that it is best understood as a multidimensional construct. It includes formal indicators and standards, but it becomes educationally meaningful only when connected to pedagogical competence, student engagement, institutional support, and the actual conditions of teaching and learning.

The second major finding concerns the institutional pressures that shape how teaching quality is interpreted and enacted. Participants indicated that teaching quality in Türkiye is strongly influenced by external evaluation, accreditation expectations, performance indicators, institutional reporting, and quality assurance procedures. In some cases, they suggested that assessment and reporting may even overshadow instructional processes. While these mechanisms create a common language for quality, they may also narrow what counts as teaching quality by privileging what can be documented. New Institutional Theory provides a useful framework for understanding this pattern. In pursuit of legitimacy, higher education institutions are shaped by coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures that encourage them to adopt structures and practices considered legitimate in their field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In this study, coercive pressures were visible in national quality standards and accreditation requirements; mimetic pressures appeared in the tendency to follow accepted quality practices; and normative pressures were reflected in the professionalization of quality assurance roles and procedures. Thus, teaching quality emerged as a pedagogical concern that is also shaped by institutional demands for legitimacy and accountability.

This interpretation is supported by studies showing that quality practices in Turkish higher education are increasingly mediated through external evaluation, accreditation, regulatory expectations, and institutional quality processes (Çakmak & Kayabaşı, 2023). Yıldırım and Aslan (2021) found that external evaluation reports often emphasize formal reporting, input-based criteria, and procedural compliance, while offering limited insight into classroom processes and student learning. Similarly, Yıldırım and Yenipinar (2022) argue that external evaluation in Türkiye remains relatively weak in

relation to student learning, programme development, and pedagogical processes. However, participants did not simply reproduce external quality expectations. Despite coercive pressures related to accreditation, external evaluation, reporting, and accountability, they constructed their own institutionally situated meanings of quality. This process is closely related to Sensemaking Theory, which explains how actors interpret external demands through local priorities, professional judgement, and everyday academic experience (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). In this respect, teaching quality is not merely imposed through formal quality assurance structures; it is actively interpreted, adapted, and reconstructed by those who manage and enact quality processes within institutions.

This finding also indicates that the meaning of quality is shaped by how individuals responsible for quality processes understand quality at personal and professional levels. Individual sensemaking may guide, transform, or redirect institutional sensemaking, particularly when quality coordinators and related personnel act as mediators between external standards and internal academic practice. This is also consistent with Taştan and Yılmaz's (2021) argument that coercive and mimetic pressures may, through appropriate "institutional sensemaking", be transformed into normative pressures that support more meaningful quality practices. In this sense, external demands do not necessarily lead only to procedural compliance; when interpreted constructively by responsible actors, they may also become catalysts for quality enhancement. In this sense, the selection of personnel responsible for quality processes becomes a critical institutional issue. These individuals should be familiar with formal quality assurance procedures and capable of interpreting quality in relation to the institution's mission, pedagogical priorities, and improvement needs. Otherwise, quality work may remain limited to procedural compliance rather than contributing to a more meaningful and context-sensitive quality culture.

The third key finding concerns the gap between formal quality procedures and the pedagogical contexts in which teaching actually takes place. Participants acknowledged that teaching quality is mainly related to what happens in classrooms and learning environments. However, they also noted that, due to their institutional responsibilities, they are required to follow formal quality assurance procedures, prepare documentation, and demonstrate accountability through reports, evidence files, alignment documents, evaluation forms, and observable indicators. In this sense, teaching quality is positioned between pedagogical practice and formal accountability.

This gap reflects a broader risk within quality assurance systems. Although such systems may strengthen transparency, monitoring, and accountability, they may also encourage bureaucratic routines and symbolic compliance (Harvey & Newton, 2004; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Newton, 2002). Participants indicated that many quality-related practices may remain “on paper,” yet institutions are still expected to explain how students achieve specific competencies and learning outcomes. This finding resonates with Meyer and Rowan’s (1977) concept of decoupling, where formal structures are adopted to secure legitimacy but remain only loosely connected to everyday practice. In the present study, teaching quality was sometimes performed through documentation, while being experienced differently in actual academic settings.

Participants also emphasized that academics do not engage with quality processes in the same way. Universities include many faculty members with different levels of commitment, belief, and capacity regarding quality-related expectations. Some academics may internalize these processes and connect them to teaching improvement, whereas others may approach them as administrative obligations. This raises an important question about internalization of teaching quality. If teaching quality is enacted primarily through classroom practice, then its improvement depends heavily on lecturers’ ability to communicate effectively, design meaningful learning experiences, provide feedback, encourage participation, and respond to students’ learning needs (Abbas, 2020; Kaynaradağ, 2019). This interpretation is supported by studies showing that lecturer competence is closely related to students’ academic engagement and perceptions of quality (Akyürek et al., 2025, Harrison et al., 2020). Also, studies on how students perceive quality teaching highlight importance of student feedback, academic staff development, lecturer competence, learning environments, and institutional conditions in shaping quality experiences (Çonoğlu et al., 2025; Smirnova & Döş, 2021; Toraman et al., 2020; Yıldırım & Çakır Aydın, 2025). Accordingly, the central issue is not whether quality assurance is necessary, but whether it can move beyond procedural documentation toward quality enhancement through institutional sensemaking and quality culture. Otherwise, it may become institutionally visible but pedagogically limited.

The final finding concerns the negotiated nature of teaching quality. Findings showed that teaching quality is not implemented uniformly across the institutions. Instead, it is interpreted through institutional missions, academic cultures, disciplinary priorities, leadership styles, academics’ competence, student profiles, available resources,

and organizational capacities. This means that each university makes sense of quality in relation to its own context. This finding is important because universities differ in their histories, missions, resources, academic traditions, and regional responsibilities. From this perspective, teaching quality cannot be meaningfully developed through a single standardized model. Formal standards may provide a shared framework, but quality work needs to be adapted to institutional purposes and capacities. In this sense, institutional distinctiveness should be preserved rather than weakened by excessive standardization.

As Sensemaking Theory put forward, institutional actors interpret external expectations through their local contexts and professional understandings (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). This explains why the same quality assurance language may produce different meanings and practices within the institution. Çakmak and Kayabaşı (2023) show that academics define quality teaching through physical learning conditions, student-centered environments, affective and social climate, instructional preparation, and active student involvement while Karaaslan and Akın (2019) state that department heads may wish to exercise instructional leadership, but heavy administrative workloads limit their capacity. Kalaycıoğlu (2009) argues that teaching performance has not historically been evaluated with the same rigor as research performance, while Başkır et al. (2017) emphasize the need for integrated and multi-source evaluation approaches. When compared to findings of this study, it could be suggested that quality improvement requires more than external standards; it requires institutional capacity, leadership, academic support, and meaningful evaluation practices.

When overall findings are taken together, it is clear that quality work should begin from institutional self-understanding. Universities need to ask what teaching quality means for their own mission, students, academic fields, and social context. A research-intensive university, a regional university, a professionally oriented institution, and a recently established university may all need different approaches to teaching quality. The goal should not be to abandon national standards, but to interpret them in institutionally meaningful ways. Therefore, teaching quality should be approached as a negotiated meaning rather than a fixed compliance process. The long-term development of teaching quality depends on universities’ capacity to transform external standards into locally owned, pedagogically grounded, and context-sensitive practices. From this perspective, the central challenge is not simply to comply with quality assurance requirements, but to build authentic quality cultures that pre-

serve institutional distinctiveness while strengthening teaching, learning, and student engagement.

## 5. Conclusion and Implications

This study examined how teaching quality is interpreted and constructed by institutional actors (quality coordinators) within the Turkish higher education system. The findings show that teaching quality is not understood as a fixed or universally defined concept; rather, it emerges as a multidimensional and context-dependent phenomenon shaped by formal quality assurance structures, institutional priorities, and everyday academic practice. While quality assurance systems frame teaching quality through compliance, indicators, and standardized procedures, results point to more pedagogical, relational, and context-sensitive understandings of quality.

A key contribution of the study is that teaching quality cannot be fully explained through formal quality frameworks alone. By combining New Institutional Theory with Sensemaking Theory, the study demonstrates that teaching quality is shaped both by institutional pressures and by the interpretive work of actors who negotiate and translate those pressures into practice. In this respect, teaching quality appears not simply as an auditable outcome, but as an ongoing process of interpretation, negotiation, and enactment within or across institutions.

The findings further suggest that policymakers and institutional leaders should move beyond narrowly compliance-driven approaches and develop quality assurance processes that are more sensitive to pedagogical practice, student experience, and institutional context. Existing evidence from Türkiye similarly shows that formal reporting mechanisms often capture procedural compliance more effectively than the realities of teaching and learning, thereby limiting the developmental potential of quality assurance.

The study is limited by its focus on quality coordinators in institutions with established quality assurance practices. Future research could include other stakeholder groups, such as academics and students, and compare different institutional contexts. Overall, the study concludes that strengthening teaching quality depends not only on accountability mechanisms, but also on creating institutional conditions in which quality can be meaningfully interpreted, discussed, and enacted as an academic practice rather than treated primarily as a reporting obligation.

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## Research Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Boğaziçi University Social and Human Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee, with the decision dated 18/04/2024 and numbered 2024-22.

## Artificial Intelligence Use

Yazar, bu çalışmanın hazırlanması sürecinde yalnızca dil düzenleme amacıyla üretici yapay zeka aracı (örneğin ChatGPT) kullanıldığını, içerik üretiminde bu araçlara başvurulmadığını ve tüm bilimsel sorumluluğun kendilerinde olduğunu beyan eder./The author states that generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT) were used only for language editing during manuscript preparation. No AI-generated content was used for analysis or interpretation. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the content.

## Author Contributions

The author has accepted responsibility for the entire content of this manuscript and approved its submission.

The author solely conducted all stages of this research.

## Competing Interests

The author states no conflict of interest.

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## Data Availability

The raw data can be obtained on request from the corresponding author.

## Peer-review

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