

Size Matters in Turkish Higher Education

Oğuz Esen

In 2018, 15 new public universities were founded in Turkey. At first glance, this seems to be another new wave of higher education expansion, as we have often witnessed since the 1980s. Three factors make this a compelling policy to examine. First is the way of establishing public universities by splitting existing ones, which was the case for 14 of the 15 new institutions. Second, this development coincided with a recent trend in higher-, lower- and middle-income countries to reorganize and restructure their higher education systems through mergers and consolidation, in the transition from mass to universal access—in other words, in Turkey, developments are defying world trends. In this large-scale restructuring operation, the splitting of institutions affected one third of face-to-face higher education students. Finally, to the best of my knowledge, there is no other country today conducting an operation of such significant size.

Turkey has the sixth largest higher education system in the world, with 7.8 million students in 2019, and 129 public and 73 nonprofit private universities. Smaller-scale private universities account for about 15 percent of face-to-face enrollments. Some prestigious private universities have reached standards rivalling the well-established public universities, but the majority serve as demand-absorbing institutions. The Turkish experience of rapid expansion of higher education with a lack of a broader vision has some implications for other countries facing similar challenges.

Rapid Expansion

In the 1980s, the Turkish higher education system could be described as elitist, with very few higher education institutions and a GER of less than 10 percent. The GER passed the 15 percent threshold in 1992 and reached 50 percent in 2010. Distance education made a major contribution to this enormous expansion. The share of distance learning has been continually increasing, from 11 percent in mid 1980s to 51 percent in 2019, averaging around 40 percent in the last decade. Even without taking distance education into consideration, however, the expansion of higher education is still remarkable.

The Turkish higher education system was radically reorganized just before the transition from elite to mass higher education. Two developments were important in preparing this transition. In 1981, relatively early compared to many other countries, a Council of Higher Education was founded as an autonomous body charged with overseeing all higher education institutions. Second, after the abolition of the binary system separating universities from academies, teacher training schools, and conservatories, some of these institutions were merged to form universities, while others were transformed into faculties (schools) and affiliated to universities in the regions; eight new universities were founded. This step led to the emergence of more comprehensive universities, in line with the dominant global trend of transition from elite to mass higher education.

Before the 1980s, Turkey only had a limited number of universities, all located in the main cities, with faculties and vocational schools as their regional branches, determined by local politics. In 1992, 23 new public universities were founded and the GER expanded, as mentioned above. In this second expansion wave, a different strategy was introduced: The government reorganized the faculties and vocational schools that had been affiliated with the existing universities, creating new, fully independent institutions in each city.

Moving from Mass to Universal

In the early 2000s, access was still a central issue in Turkish higher education. When the Justice and Development Party came to power in 2002, it set out a target of establishing

Abstract

In recent years, mergers and consolidation have been widely used in higher education to create stronger, more competitive universities in the transition from mass to universal access. In Turkey, however, developments have gone in the opposite direction. Initially, a number of smaller-scale, highly specialized public universities were founded, and recently new universities were established by splitting larger-scale, existing universities. Universal access requires a more comprehensive vision.

Turkey has the sixth largest higher education system in the world, with 7.8 million students in 2019

at least one public university in each province. At that time, there were only 53 public universities across the 81 provinces of Turkey. In the third expansion wave of 2006–2008, the government established 39 new public universities, increasing the public sector to 94 in total. New universities were located in relatively small and less developed cities. This created a new challenge because of overall faculty shortages, and it was difficult to recruit high quality faculty to the less developed locations. This expansion resulted in a 17 percent increase in the total higher education capacity.

The Bologna Process coincided with the transition of Turkish higher education to universal access. All public and private universities now have curricula in line with the Bologna goals. The Bologna Process improved some of the quality problems caused by rapid expansion. However, contrary to the needs of universal access, 20 new, smaller-scale, highly specialized public universities—focusing on areas such as fine arts, music, health, Islamic sciences, social sciences, and technical and applied sciences—were founded, increasing the higher education enrollment by only 3 percent.

Good-bye Rapid Expansion, Hello Consolidation

In 2018, 14 new universities were created by splitting existing universities, initiating a new era. This increased the number of universities without significantly increasing the overall capacity of the sector. What is the rationale behind this policy? What are the problems that these measures aim to address?

The first issue that comes to mind is efficiency of management, as a result of creating universities of a more manageable scale. However, this cannot be the case for Turkish universities, whose average enrollment, including private universities, is only 19,000 students. Over three decades, the number of face-to-face enrollment increased nine times, but the size of universities increased only 1.4 times.

Research on mergers in higher education has shown that greater size brings economies of scale, cost efficiency, research quality, an enlarged talent pool, and improved domestic and international reputation. It is, therefore, not clear how splitting Turkish higher education institutions into smaller units will increase the efficiency or quality of the system, or improve its reputation and competitiveness.

There are some indications that in the past five years, expansion in enrollments has entered a declining phase. It is possible that this slow-down will be permanent, mainly due to stagnation in growth of the university-age population. If this is the case, a lengthy period of consolidation awaits the Turkish higher education system.

Today, Turkish higher education is at a crossroads. The path to universal access requires a more comprehensive vision to ensure stronger, more competitive universities through consolidation, a reform of the curriculum to include general education, and the improvement of secondary education to create closer links with higher education. ▲

Oğuz Esen is professor of economics and former rector of İzmir University of Economics, İzmir, Turkey. E-mail: oguz.esen@ieu.edu.tr.