

Quality Assurance in Turkish Higher Education within the Framework of Policy Process Model

Süreç Modeli Çerçevesinde Türk Yükseköğretiminde Kalite Güvencesi

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ABSTRACT

Today, higher education is regarded as a field of public policy with its economic and social dimensions rather than being solely an education issue. In higher education sector, the role of non-state actors is increasingly expanding as well as the new policy contexts transcending national boundaries. Many actors at various levels, from international organizations to students as individuals are involved in the policy process. Therefore, the field of higher education policy represents a complex process where policy-making stages are intertwined with various actors and blurred boundaries. Quality assurance is one of the policy areas that best represent this complexity with many stakeholders on the international, national and institutional level. Globalization and international competition bring the quality problem to the forefront of many higher education systems. In the Turkish higher education system, as in other countries, quality assurance has become an important agenda item in recent years. The new higher education system approach of the Council of Higher Education has been defined as mission differentiation and diversity, flexibility and institutional autonomy which require a significant transformation in the current system. Thus, a new road map has been adopted by the formulation of new policies, legal frameworks and institutional structures. In this study, quality assurance policies in Turkish higher education are explored in accordance with the conceptual framework of the policy process/cycle model. Accordingly, the quality issue is handled in line with the basic stages of policy cycle which are agenda setting, policy formulation, implementation and evaluation.

Key Words: Higher education policy, quality assurance, process model, Turkish higher education, university

ÖZ

Günümüzde yükseköğretim, yalnızca eğitim konusu olmaktan ziyade, ekonomik ve sosyal boyutlarıyla bir kamu politikası alanı olarak kabul edilmektedir. Yükseköğretim sektöründe, devlet dışı aktörlerin rolü gittikçe artmakta ve ulusal sınırların ötesine geçmektedir. Politika sürecine uluslararası kuruluşlardan öğrencilere kadar çeşitli seviyelerde birçok oyuncu katılmaktadır. Bu nedenle, yükseköğretimde politika oluşturma aşamalarının iç içe geçtiği, çok aktörlü ve düzlemlili karmaşık bir yapıdan söz edilebilir. Kalite güvencesi, uluslararası, ulusal ve kurumsal düzeyde birçok aktörün etkileşimiyle oluşan ve bu karmaşıklığı en iyi temsil eden alanlardan biridir. Küreselleşme ve uluslararası rekabet birçok yükseköğretim sisteminde kalite sorununu gündemin ön sıralarına taşımaktadır. Türk yükseköğretim sisteminde de, son yıllarda kalite güvencesi önemli bir gündem maddesi haline gelmektedir. Yükseköğretim Kurulunun yeni yükseköğretim sistemi yaklaşımı misyon farklılaşması, çeşitlilik, esneklik ve kurumsal özerklik olarak tanımlanmakta, mevcut sistemde önemli bir dönüşüm gerektirmektedir. Bu kapsamda yeni politikaların, yasal çerçevelerin ve kurumsal yapıların oluşturulmasıyla yeni bir yol haritası izlenmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Türk yükseköğretiminde kalite güvencesi bağlamında yaşanan güncel gelişmeleri politika süreci modeli bağlamında incelemektir. Bu amaçla kalite güvencesine ilişkin gelişmeler politika döngüsünün temel aşamaları olan gündem belirleme, politika oluşturma, uygulama ve değerlendirme kapsamında ele alınmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kalite güvencesi, süreç modeli, Türk yükseköğretimi, yükseköğretim politikaları

Introduction

University is one of the few institutions that have survived since the Middle Ages. This is an indication of the ability of universities to respond to transformations not only during periods of stability, but also during times of crisis. In the 21st century, universities again reestablish their identities and redefine their mission with the paradigm shift in higher education. Massification and internationalization are the two dynamics that undermine the fundamental foundations on which higher education systems and institutions are based. Universities are no longer regarded as national institutions serving more to elites. Today, higher education is considered as an international sector where national borders and regulations are increasingly losing ground. Cross-border and transnational higher education, including the mobility of students, faculty and institutions, is growing.

In parallel, in the provision of higher education services, institutional diversity is increasing and new institution types such as company universities and virtual universities are emerging. The profile of the student population addressed by higher education also differs in terms of age and social status. The globalization of employment markets, flexibility, temporary and part-time employment require new qualities from the graduates. The widespread use of information and communication technologies and the digital revolution lead to extensive transformations in the educational activities of universities. On the other hand universities are criticized for not using public resources effectively and not responding to the needs of the society (Glaser et al., 2003). Accordingly, universities are regarded as service institutions that have to address the society, and academic freedom is replaced by accountability (Olsen 2000). These transformations bring the issue of “quality” to the focus of higher education systems and similar reforms are carried out throughout the world. Concepts such as “strategic planning”, “performance indicators”, “output measurement”, “transparency” are becoming more frequently used in the literature of higher education.

In this framework, stakeholder participation is highlighted and the role of stakeholders in the management of universities is increasing. Students, governments, national organizations, professional organizations, financiers, employers and different social sectors emerge as the actors of quality. Thus, quality assurance in higher education is regarded as a multi-level and multi-actor structure. This transformation is manifested in Turkish higher education, as well. In the current state of Turkish higher education, qualified growth and internationalization are considered as the most important agenda items. In this context, a new road map is drawn which focuses on diversity, flexibility and quality assurance. The purpose of this study is to analyze this road map as a public policy by employing the policy process approach as the analytical tool. To this end, a conceptual framework is presented in the first place and then the quality policy in Turkish higher education is examined within the framework of the process approach.

Approaches in Public Policy Analysis

Public policy has been defined in many ways by researchers with different perspectives (Yıldız & Sobacı, 2013, p. 19). For instance, Dye (1995, p.2) defines public policy as, what public administrations (or governments) choose to do or not to do. In this context, the ineffectiveness of the administration is also seen as public policy. Anderson (1994) defines public policy as “purposeful behaviors of administrations” and argues that the policy analysis should not deal with “what’s intended” but rather focus on what is actually being done. In this context, despite the lack of a common definition of public policy, there is a general consensus that the public policies express the preferences and actions of the governments towards certain issues and problems (Yıldız and Sobacı, 2013: 19). In general, public policies could be considered as the ways, methods, strategies, facilities

that public administration has chosen to do or not to do about public services (Çevik & Demirci, 2012, p. 5).

Today, public policies show a great diversity in many areas such as education, health, social security, justice, defense, and external relations. A wide range of internal and external actors, from politicians to international organizations, are involved in the process of creating, implementing and evaluating such policies. Some of these actors determine policies by making direct choices, while others try to influence preferences of the administrations. Thus, the public policy is often a complex and irregular process with various actors and dimensions (Yıldız & Sobacı, 2013, pp. 17-19). Policy analysis studies aim at understanding these processes by employing scientific means to obtain reliable information and to produce outputs regarding the policy-making. In most general terms, policy analysis focuses on the policy-making process by questioning why governments follow these policies, and what are the outcomes of the policies they implement (Dye, 1998).

Today, public policy analysis is a developing field with the claim of adding a new dimension to political science and public administration by improving scientific understanding, problem solving and producing more realistic recommendations (Demir, 2011, p.118). Public policy analysis is a complex area due the many aspects of public policy making and the dynamic factors affecting the process. Therefore, analytical tools and models have been developed to reduce the complexity of the public policy process to a manageable level. In public policy studies, one or more of these models are used together to form a systematic analysis framework (Cochran et al., 2009, p.6).

Policy analysis models¹ could mainly be categorized under five headings (Çevik & Demirci, 2008, p.138):

Institutionalist model

The institutional approach is the classical model that has been employed since the beginning of the 20th century when the science of administration began to flourish. The focus of this model is the institutional structures and relations. In terms of public policy, institutionalist approach focuses on the structural and legal aspects of the organizations involved in the process of policy formulation or implementation. Yet, institutional structures, regulations and operations can only explain a limited part of the policy process. Despite of the significant role of institutional structures and regulations in the policy process, it should not be ignored that these institutions and regulations are affected by their environment (Tamzok, 2009: 43-44).

Group model

Group theory argues that interaction among the social groups is the essence of politics and public policy is shaped by the struggle among these groups. In this way, public policies are the result of the equilibrium reached in the conflict among these groups. Therefore, public policy analysis should clearly reveal the goals of these groups and their roles in the formulation of respective policies (Çevik & Demirci, 2008: 139; Tamzok, 2009: 44).

Elitist Model

In this model, public policies are considered as the preferences and values of a ruling elite. It is acknowledged that citizens do not have sufficient knowledge and interest in public policies, and that

¹ For more information on policy analysis models please see Dye, 2002, p.11-30; Çevik & Demirci, 2008, pp.134-151; Tamzok, 2009, pp. 43-53.

policies are shaped by a certain elite population, not by the citizens. Despite the disagreements among the elites, they share a general consensus on the basic norms surrounding the social system and the rules of the game, thus the policy alternatives within this shared framework are implemented. Accordingly, this model focuses on how values and demands of the elites affect public policies (Tamzok, 2009: 45-46).

System model

In the system model developed by David Easton, the political system is handled as a whole with its environment. Accordingly, an entire policy process is in a continuous interaction with its environment. The political system consists of inputs (demands), outputs (public policy) and the environment. In this model, policy demands arise from problems and conflicts around the political system and are transferred to political system by groups, public officials or others. Public policy is considered as an output of these demands transferred to the political system (Tamzok, 2009: 53). Therefore, each public policy is regarded as a functioning system with its environment and elements. In this context, a researcher conducts his / her research by separating the public policy system, its inputs and outputs, and finally its environment and analyzing the connections among them (Çevik and Demirci, 2008: 150).

Policy Process model

Process model considers the public policy as a process comprising a comprehensive set of activities with certain functions. Policy process has certain stages as problem definition, agenda setting, formulation, implementation and evaluation. In this model, the researcher focuses on these stages and does not necessarily analyze the content of the policy (Tamzok, 2009, p.44). Although it has been criticized for this reason, the process approach has some advantages, as well. First of all, it provides a simple and practical framework for analysis which is applicable to the investigation of public policies in all areas. In addition, various actors and factors involved in each stage of the policy process are included in the analysis (Usta, 2013, pp. 87-88).

In this study, “process model” has been employed in order to analyze the quality assurance in Turkish higher education. Since quality improvement should be regarded as a continuous strategic process rather than being diverse series of activities, the process model is considered as an appropriate analytical framework. In this context, quality development process in Turkish higher education system has been analyzed in terms of agenda setting, formulation of policies, implementation of programmes and evaluation of quality facilities. To this end, the process model will be explained in more detail in the following section and then quality in Turkish higher education will be handled according to the stages of the model.

Process Model and Policy Cycle in Public Policy Analysis

In this model, public policy is adopted as a process and the analysis focuses on the stages of this process. The idea of simplifying public policy studies by dividing the process of public policy into different stages was first put forward by Harold Lasswell in 1956, in his book *The Decision Process: Seven Categories of Functional Analysis*. Lasswell divided the policy process into seven stages: (a) intelligence, (b) promotion, (c) prescription, (d) invocation, (e) application, (f) termination (g) appraisal. The stages of Lasswell paved the way for policy analysis and pioneered similar models. Different versions of this model include models developed by Brewer and de Leon (1983), May and Wildavsky (1978), Anderson (1975) and Jenkins (1978) (cited in Jann & Wegrich, 2007, p.43). Lasswell's gradual model, on the other hand, has been combined with Easton's system model (inputs and outputs) and transformed into a cyclic model. This model, called the policy cycle, emphasizes the

input-output relationship and draws attention to the fact that policy is an ongoing process with continuous feedback. The policy cycle model allows the researcher to analyze the whole process instead of focusing on a specific stage or actor of the policy and is therefore widely used in policy analysis (Jann and Wegrich, 2007, pp.43-45). In public policy literature, various academicians have categorized the stages of public policy process in different ways. Yet, in general, the public policy process consists of four stages (Yıldız and Sobacı, 2013, p. 24):

1. Agenda setting
2. Policy formulation
3. Implementation
4. Evaluation

In the initial stage of the public policy process the problem / issue is defined and taken into the agenda. In the second stage, policy formulation is implemented within the framework of legal structure, policy-related programs, budget, duty and power distribution etc.. Then the policy is put into practice through various programmes and facilities. At the last stage, the policy is evaluated according to the pre-determined criteria and available data. Upon the evaluation results, it is decided that the policy would be terminated, improved or kept as the same in practice (Usta, 2013, p. 86). Indeed these stages of the policy process should not be considered as separate and consecutive steps, but as inter-related, concurrent ones. In this context, it could be assumed that public policy is a gradual process where decisions and actions are intertwined. Public policy can be defined as a set of organic relations of decisions and actions that work in a dynamic and complex way rather than being a series of mechanically functioning consecutive stages (Bayırbağ, 2013, pp. 54-55).

Agenda Setting Phase

The first stage in public policy analysis is to investigate how the policy problem arises, how it comes to the agenda and how it mobilizes the administrations (Çevik and Demirci, 2008, p.57). Anderson defines the policy problem as a situation that produces the needs or discontent among people, and therefore requiring a cure or a remedy (Anderson, 1994, p.85). According to Dunn, policy problem is a defined need, value or opportunity that will be met by a policy implementation. With this definition, Dunn distinguishes from many definitions that define the policy process as problem solving and offers a wider perspective. In this respect, the policy process involves taking action not only to solve problems but also to assess possible opportunities (Dunn, 1981, p. 60). Quality in higher education can also be seen as a field of public policy that focuses on developing the current situation and evaluating opportunities rather than being a problem area.

The agenda-building phase requires choices among the problems and demands that exist in society. In every country, governments and policy-making public institutions generally raise issues of their own interest. However, the agenda is not only the work of governments or bureaucracy, but different actors are working to bring various issues to the agenda. The actors involved in the public policy process can be evaluated under three headings, official, informal and international actors. Main official actors are the parliament, bureaucracy and judiciary; whereas informal actors are citizens, policy entrepreneurs, political parties, pressure groups, consultants, media, think tanks. On the other hand, international organizations, multinational companies and international non-governmental organizations are becoming more and more effective actors. Therefore, public policy process is transformed into a complex structure in which different actors take part in each stage (Yıldız & Sobacı, 2013, p.19).

Policy Formulation Phase

The policy formulation requires a two-step operation in general terms. At the first stage, it is decided what should be done about the problem / subject and the appropriate legal and administrative framework is formulated. The development of plans, programs and projects, the determination of the necessary resources, the distribution of duties, authorities and responsibilities among the institutions and persons are carried out at this stage. Then, the legislation process begins where the policy draft is formalized and necessary legal arrangements are made. Such regulations may be in the form of laws, regulations or administrative orders (Tamzok, 2007, pp. 21-22).

Policy Implementation Phase

The implementation phase is realization of public policy, which is turned into a law or a program, by the responsible institutions. Dunn defines policy implementation as a process that involves the conduct and management of policy actions (Dunn, 1981, p. 60). The stages of this phase can be expressed as follows (Jann and Wegrich, 2007, p. 52): Identifying the details of the program, allocation of resources and taking decisions on how will this program be applied to individual events. Yet, it is not possible to say that the implementation phase has always been in this ideal framework. The bureaucracy, which plays a very important role in the implementation of the programs, can re-interpret, change or delay them (Yıldız and Sobacı, 2013, p. 25). On the other hand, Action-Oriented Public Policy Analysis model is based on the premise that the distinction between practitioner /decision-maker in public policy process is now ambiguous and all of the stages are realized almost simultaneously. Though a hierarchical link is established between the policy making and implementation, all the steps involved in the policy process may operate at the same time and in interaction with each other. For this reason, it is useful to place the phenomenon of "action", including the decision-making at the center of the policy analysis (Bayırbağ, 2013, p.60).

Policy Evaluation Phase

In the policy assessment phase, it is determined to what extent the goals and objectives set at the beginning of the process was achieved. In this respect, the degree and the extent to which the policies are applied are analyzed and the missing aspects are also completed and corrected (Kulaç and Çalhan, 2013, p. 214). The results of the evaluation could affect the policy process in different ways (Dunn, 1981, p. 341). Policy could be adjusted according to new conditions; policy implementation could continue without any adjustment; policy could be completely abandoned; the policy problem may need to be restructured.

Assessment should not be considered as the last stage of the policy process, but rather as a continuous activity that must be carried out throughout the policy process (Tamzok, 2007, p. 28). On the other hand, policy assessment should not miss the distinction between results and outcomes. Policy outputs are concrete and often quantitative issues that arise as a result of policy implementations. The policy results are the implicated or unintended effects of a specific policy (Anderson, 1994, p.238). In order to carry out meaningful assessment, there is a need for a transparent policy process, trust among the actors and well-functioning feedback mechanisms (Yıldız & Sobacı, 2013, p. 25). Pre-determined performance indicators and related data should be collected and disseminated on a regular basis.

It should be noted that the aforementioned stages of policy process are analytical tools for understanding and explaining public policies. Yet, in today's world it is not possible to think about a policy process with consecutive stages including definite list of actors. This multi-actor and multi-dimensional structure in the field of public policy is explained by the "complexity theory". Today, complexity of the state-society-market relationship, the involvement of many different actors from private sector to international organizations in the formation of public policies, and the uncertainty of

the relations among these actors cause the policy area to be more complicated. The incidents and problems in the world are complex and therefore could not be solved with simple conclusions, universal explanations and general theories. The reflection of complexity theory in public administration has similar characteristics with the governance approach (Gül et al., 2014, pp.103-104).

Besides “complexity theory”, another important concept related to the contemporary public policy is the “policy transfer”. Today it is accepted by anyone that the policy process can no longer remain within the national borders. The common problems require responses on a global scale where states and international actors cooperate in the context of mutual interdependence. In this regard, international organizations have increasingly expanded their role in shaping the national public policies (Yıldız and Sobacı, 2013, p. 19). Increasing role of international actors and other states in the policy formulation has been defined with the term “policy transfer”. Policy transfer implies that policy makers at the national level formulate their policies within the framework of formulated models abroad, due to various local or global impacts and requirements (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000, p.10).

Along with globalization, policy transfer has increasingly been utilized in the public policy making. Dolowitz and Marsh list the actors who are influential in the policy transfer process as following: Politicians, political parties, bureaucrats, interest groups, policy experts, multinational corporations, think tanks, intergovernmental organizations, international non-governmental organizations and international consultants. Among these actors, the role of international organizations is more prominent regarding the impact on national policies. International organizations such as the OECD and the IMF play an important role in the dissemination of ideas, programs and policies in the world. These organizations can directly affect policies in different areas through borrowing conditions or indirectly through reports and conferences. Moreover, international non-governmental organizations could shape international public opinion which has increasing impact on public policies. Today, policy transfer has nearly become a regular part of the policy formulation. The transfer process from one policy system to another may include policy objectives, content, tools, programs, institutions, ideologies, ideas and attitudes. Policy transfer can be of different degrees, such as copying, emulation or inspiration (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000, pp. 10-13).

Policy Process and Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Higher education policy could be regarded as a good example in terms of both complexity theory and policy transfer. In higher education sector, the role of non-state actors is increasingly expanding within new policy contexts transcending national boundaries. Many actors at various levels, from international organizations to students are involved in the policy process. On the other hand, the role of universities, which have traditionally been the implementers of higher education policies, is being transformed. Universities participate in the formation of higher education policies as both decision-makers and practitioners. They have been arising as global actors, sometimes crossing the national level and establishing relationships with international organizations. Therefore, the field of higher education represents a complex process where policy-making stages are intertwined through various actors and blurred boundaries in terms of relations, duties and authority.

“The policy process in higher education operates at multiple levels and also in different modes” (Scott, 2018, p.3). In the broadest context, higher education policies exist in global and international fields. Higher education, which is traditionally considered as a national policy domain, has increasingly been subject to the impact of global actors and fer. Global-scale institutions such as the World Bank, OECD and UNESCO are becoming leading players in the structuring of the knowledge economy and higher education. These organizations create new policies and ensure the global flow of these policies particularly through their reform programs. The World Bank and OECD reports form templates for

government policies in many countries, including education policy. In this way, similar higher education reforms are carried out in many countries (Peters, 2002). As stated by Scott (2018, p.3), “Although this policies do not take directly legislative, bureaucratic or managerial forms, it is highly influential in terms of policy borrowing –and plays a particularly important role in the legitimation of national policies”.

On the other hand, “cooperation within competition” results in the establishment of regional organizations with the aim of taking a stronger position in global competition. The most prominent example of these collaborations regarding higher education sector is the Bologna Process. The process is seen as a reform initiative of European countries to become a global actor in higher education by creating a European Higher Education Area. Bologna process could be regarded as the best example of policy transfer in higher education, as well. Although the the Process is defined as an intergovernmental cooperation based on volunteerism and respect for diversity, the common practice has increased over time through the use of various policy tools. Member states adapt their national policies to a common framework through open method of coordination, performance indicators, benchmarking methods and good practices. The increasing role of such policy tools signals a move ‘from voluntary participation to monitored coordination’ (Ravinet, 2008). As put forward by Torotcoi, (2017, p. 18):

A simple look at the Bologna Declarations and Communiques reveals that implementation is used when referring to reforms, goals, objectives, principles, recommendations, conventions, European standards, priorities, guidelines, strategies, tools, action lines, commitments, but also more concrete elements such as the Diploma Supplement, ECTS, mobility or quality assurance.

Quality assurance (QA) is one of the most intense areas of policy transfer among the Bologna reforms, since it is regarded as the basis for the creation of a European higher education area. It is one of the constituent pillars of the Bologna Proces since the beginning in 1999 and envisages the promotion of European cooperation in the field of quality assurance in order to develop comparable criteria and methodologies (EHEA, 2019). Quality assurance is implemented through common institutional settings and standards operating throughout the EHEA. In this framework, European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) was established in 2000 which acts as the umbrella NGO for European QA agencies in HE. ENQA is a membership association which represents its members at the European level and internationally. ENQA members are quality assurance organisations from the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that operate in the field of higher education (ENQA, 2019a). ENQA is the consultative member of the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG)² since 2005. The development of the Association actually gives clues about the roadmap of quality assurance in Bologna Process in that it was founded as a network in Finland in 2000, registered as an association in 2004 and relocated from Helsinki to Brussels in 2011. This evolution marks a

² The Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) is the executive structure supporting the Bologna Process in-between the Ministerial Conferences. BFUG membership is based on the membership of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The BFUG / EHEA members are 48 countries and the European Commission. Consultative members are non-voting category of members who represent stakeholder organisations and other institutions that have a European scope to their work and are instrumental in the implementation of the Bologna Process. The current eight EHEA consultative members are: Council of Europe (CoE), UNESCO, European University Association (EUA), European Association of Institutions of Higher Education (EURASHE), European Students’ Union (ESU), European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), Education International (EI) and BUSINESS EUROPE (BFUG, 2019). <http://www.ehea.info/cid101754/bfug.html>

transition from a looser intergovernmentalist approach in quality assurance to a supranationalist structure where the European Commission is more effective.

The second major component of the QA in the Bologna Process, is the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG) which was formulated in 2005 and revised in 2015 by the BFUG. The Ministers of higher education accepted the ESG as the norms for the methodology of QA in their national domains and it has been employed as one of the policy tools of the Process. ESG provides a framework for good practice shared in the whole EHEA to guarantee quality of educational activities of HEIs as well as organisation and evaluation of quality agencies. In general terms ESG envisages that internal evaluation is the corner stone of QA in HE. External evaluation is regarded as the condition of the credibility of the results of the internal evaluation and external evaluators (QA agencies) are accountable for the quality of their activities. In this way, ESG set the general principles for both internal and external quality assurance practises that will be implemented throughout the EHEA. The adoption of the ESG has been regarded as a significant achievement of the Bologna Process as a signal of the consensus among major stakeholders at the European level (ENQA, 2019b).

The afore mentioned pillars of the quality assurance in the Bologna Process indicate the increasing role of common standards and guidelines in national quality policies. Thus, quality assurance policies in higher education has begun to operate more at the supranational level regarding the member countries of the EHEA. As Enders & Westerheijden put it (2014, p. 174),

Coercive power within these processes was on the one hand exerted by the peer pressures of the Open Method of Coordination within the EU, and on the other by the move of Bologna from voluntary participation to monitored coordination. European QA became integrated into a system of reporting, benchmarking and stocktaking that signalled a competitive turn in the political management of the Process.

Bologna Process has also played a transforming role in Turkish higher education, which has recently been attempting to adjust to the global and regional developments. Quality assurance is one of the major policy issues in Turkish higher education due to the requirements arising from the rapid expansion and international competition. Qualified growth is considered as a priority policy of Turkish higher education and a new road map is implemented. In this road map, quality assurance in the higher education system emerges as a policy process that is guided by the public authorities including different actors and practices.

In the following sections, the quality assurance agenda in Turkish higher education is discussed in line with the conceptual framework of the policy process/cycle model. In the first place, the evolution of quality agenda as a public policy in Turkish higher education is explored. Regarding the second stage, the formulation and legislation of national policies and institutional strategies are discussed. In the third stage, programs and activities related to the implementation of quality policies are investigated. Finally, assessment of these policies and strategies are discussed.

Quality Assurance in Turkish Higher Education in the Framework of Process Model

Agenda Setting: Quality Agenda in Turkish Higher Education

Massification and internationalization are the two sides of the coin that constitute the challenging agenda for quality assurance in Turkish higher education. While universities are dealing with the pains of rapid growth, they have to keep up with the international quality agenda. Turkish higher education system witnessed a significant massification trend in the last thirty years, in terms of the number of

both universities and students. It has taken place among the largest higher education systems in the world with 206 higher education institutions³ and 7.5 million students as of the year 2018. Turkey is among the fastest growing countries in the world with 121% growth rate, becoming one of the largest higher education systems (CoHE, 2015, p.12). Demographic trends reveal that the young population is expected to remain at a stable level for at least thirty years in Turkey implying that the pressure for massification in higher education will continue (CoHE, 2015, p. 13). Thus, it is predicted that the massification trend will continue to be the most important item on the agenda of Turkish higher education as similar to the most of the other parts of the world.⁴

In general terms, it could be argued that Turkey succeeded in increasing access to higher education by growth policies designed to address the supply-demand imbalance (Gur & Özoğlu, 2015, p. 309). Increasing access to higher education used to be a priority in Turkey before the 2000s, yet the most significant quantitative progress has been recorded after the year 2003 which could be referred to as the “horizontal growth” (Saraç, 2016). However, parallel to this growth, universities have faced with significant problems in terms of infrastructure, finance and human resources. They struggle with the problems resulting from rapid growth while trying to improve the quality of their services due to the global competition. On the other hand, the problems stemming from the management structure of the Turkish higher education system strain universities.

Turkish higher education system is governed by the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) established in 1981 by the 2547 Higher Education Act. The planning, organization and supervision of higher education are under the control of CoHE, to a great extent. The main feature of this control mechanism is its centralized and solid structuring. The reason behind the centralized and bureaucratic structure of higher education system could be traced back to military coups, which had adversely affected the autonomy of Turkish universities. Universities were generally shaped by extraordinary regulations as a reaction to the political developments. Due to the military interventions, universities remained inward looking and distant from international developments, for a long time. This situation was further strengthened by the 1980 military coup. The Constitution of 1982, enacted by the military administration was formulated as a product of distrust to politics and other social institutions (Küçükcan & Gür, 2009).

The 1982 Constitution contained highly detailed regulations on higher education institutions with the aim of keeping them under the strict supervision of the state. Universities were designed as institutions that would train students in line with the state's ideology. With the Law No. 2547, Turkish higher education was separated from Continental Europe and based on the basic principles of the Anglo-Saxon model. Yet, decentralized and diversity-based structure of the Anglo-Saxon model was not applied to Turkish higher education system. A uniform university model was imposed and all universities were established as research universities (Vural Yılmaz, 2014, p.138).

This bureaucratic and centralized structure did not allow universities to establish a quality assurance agenda that fits their requirements. On the national level, although CoHE had some work on quality assurance, they have not been transformed into a coherent policy or strategy. In this respect, the major quality assurance mechanism was the criteria set by the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) for the

³ As of the year 2019 there are 129 state universities, 72 foundation(non-profit) universities and 5 vocational schools of HEIS (Elmas, 2019). Both state and foundation universities come under the supervision of the Council of Higher Education (CoHE). More on the Turkish higher education system: <https://www.yok.gov.tr/en/institutional/higher-education-system>

⁴ In China, which has the most comprehensive growth in terms of number of students, the tertiary education system has grown by 322% over a period of ten years. The growth rates in countries like Bangladesh, Iran, Brazil and India have been over 100%, as well. (CoHE, 2015, p.12).

opening of new faculties/programmes which could be considered as a kind of pre-accreditation (Özer et al., 2010). Another practise regarding quality development was that the engineering programs of some universities were accredited by Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) starting from the the first half of the 1990s.⁵ In the 1990s individual quality development activities carried out by the universities provided a basis for accumulation in this field. Yet, a national quality strategy for higher education system was not introduced till the 2000s. The introduction of the Bologna Process in the year 2001, brought the quality issue on the agenda of Turkish higher education system. Since then, policy transfer has been experienced intensively and common practices regarding quality assurance have been put into practice.

Quality assurance is one of the major policy areas of the Bologna Process which seeks to promote European cooperation to develop comparable criteria and methodologies. The goal is to improve the quality of education, training, research activities and administrative services of higher education institutions with the establishment of comprehensive, systematic and regular evaluation and development mechanisms. The quality assurance dimension in the Bologna process focuses on the establishment of independent agencies, the creation of internal and external evaluation mechanisms and the participation of relevant stakeholders. In this context, Bologna Process provided a comprehensive quality assurance framework for Turkish higher education system and the CoHE was authorized as the responsible institution for the coordination of the reforms. Yet, a national framework for quality assurance could not be created until the year 2005 when Turkey participated in the EU Education and Youth programs and official negotiation process started with the European Union.

Together with these developments the need for a legal framework increased and “Regulation on Academic Evaluation and Quality Improvement in Higher Education Institutions” entered into force in 2005. As the responsible body for the implementation of the Regulation, Higher Education Evaluation and Quality Improvement Commission (YODEK) was established under the CoHE. YODEK defined the processes and performance indicators required for the higher education institutions to carry out academic evaluation and quality improvement activities in a systematic way (YOK, 2014). In this context, it is envisaged that higher education institutions would conduct self-evaluation and review their strategic plans based on the Institutional Evaluation Model developed periodically by YODEK. Accordingly, The University Academic Evaluation and Quality Improvement Board (ADEK) established at each higher education institution responsible for the evaluation and quality development process (Kalaycı, 2009, p. 631).

Another development regarding the quality assurance was the enactment of Public Financial Management and Control Law No. 5018 in the year 2016, which introduced fundamental changes in the public financial management system (Durman, 2008). Along with the law, it is aimed to implement strategic planning and performance based budgeting for ensuring efficiency and accountability in the use of public resources. The law introduced a budgeting system based on the strategic planning and performance of public institutions, including public universities. Strategic planning includes the determination of mission and vision, the establishment of appropriate strategic targets, the planning of activities and performance measurement, and the continuous review and renewal of the strategies (Hastürk, 2006). Strategic planning and quality assurance are closely related processes that should complement each other and form a consistent road map for the universities. However, the impact of

⁵ This experience paved the way for the establishment of Association for Evaluation and Accreditation of Engineering programmes (MÜDEK) in 2002. The other agencies recognized as accreditation agencies by the CoHE are the Science, Literature, Language, History and Geography Assessment and Accreditation Association (FEDEK) and the Turkish Psychology Association (TPD), Association for Accreditation of Architectural Programmes (MIAK) and the National Medical Education Accreditation Committee (UTEAK).

strategic planning on Turkish higher education system remained limited since the Law was not binding for foundation universities.

On the other hand, despite the aforementioned regulations, some of the applications within the context of Bologna Process were carried out without a solid legal base from 2001 until 2011. Applications such as ECTS and Diploma Supplement were put into force by the CoHE, yet these practices sometimes contradicted with the provisions of Higher Education Law and left universities in a contradictory position. The work carried out within the scope of the Bologna reforms gained legal ground with the amendments made with the Law No. 6111 in the year 2011. With this regulation, the principles related to education were regulated in accordance with the Bologna process.

Indeed, the Turkish higher education system has already included some of the objectives of the Bologna process due to its Anglo-Saxon characteristics. Thus, the implementation of the Bologna reforms in Turkey has not required fundamental transformations in many areas. Yet, quality assurance has been depicted as the weakest performance in Turkey's Bologna scorecards. Discussions on external quality assurance focused on the independence of YODEK, acting as a national quality/accreditation body. YODEK was considered as incompatible with the principles of independent external quality assurance due to its wide authority over universities (Erdoğan, 2013; IPM, 2009). In addition, lack of efficient stakeholder engagement in external evaluation processes such as representatives of higher education institutions, academics and students led to criticisms (Erdoğan, 2013; YOK, 2008; YOK, 2010).

Thus, by the year 2015, although quality assurance had been on the agenda, it was not yet become a holistic and strategic policy field for the policy makers. In the year 2015, a more systematic quality approach was adopted in accordance with the new vision of the CoHE regarding the higher education system. In this context, a new quality policy has been formulated in the axis of restructuring the system.

Policy Formulation: A New Road Map in Quality Assurance

In the year 2015, the CoHE introduced a new higher education system approach which was defined as mission differentiation, diversity, institutional autonomy and flexible structure. As stated by Saraç (2016), the head of the CoHE,

As one of the fastest growing economies in the world, Turkey aims to sustain its growth in the following years so that it can rank amongst the largest ten economies of the world in line with its 2023 goals. In order to reach these aims, the two crucial instruments are knowledge generation based on innovation and qualified human resources in all levels, especially higher education graduates... As a rapidly growing country, our goal to take place among the top ten leading economies in the world by 2023 increases the amount of responsibility on our higher education system and institutions at all levels. This responsibility demands that we take a quality oriented approach to restructuring while also taking into consideration variety of missions our higher education institutions have taken upon themselves. In this respect a new regulation regarding quality assurance in higher education was published and relevant studies have gained momentum.

Accordingly, the vision of the Turkish higher education system beyond 2015 was introduced under 6 major headings by the CoHE (Mandal, 2015):

- 1.Mission Differentiation in HEIs
- 2.Qualifications and Employability

3.Mobility in all Levels

4.Focused Internationalisation Strategies

5.Quality Assurance and Accreditation

6.Coordination between Higher Education and Resarch Policies

The new quality vision has required significant changes in the existing higher education system with a long history of a centralized, uniform and bureaucratic structure. Thus, a new road map for quality assurance has been adopted by the formulation of new policies, the establishment of legal frameworks and institutional structures. The first step in this context was the enactment of a new legal framework in accordance with the policy change. Accordingly, the Higher Education Quality Assurance Regulation was issued in 2015⁶. The Regulation set rules on the internal and external quality assurance of the educational and research activities and administrative services of higher education institutions, accreditation processes and the authorization of independent external evaluation agencies (HEQC, 2019). The Regulation tackles quality assurance with a conceptual approach that is in line with the international standards. Quality assurance, accreditation, external assessment, internal assessment, self evaluation, strategic planning are primary building blocks of the quality policy formulation which are designed in line with the principles of the ESG.

Higher Education Quality Assurance Regulation has also led to the establishment of the Higher Education Quality Board in the year 2015. The Board was reorganized in 2017 as The Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) according to the Additional Provision No. 35 added to the Law No. 2547 on Higher Education. Through this reorganization the HEQC gained the status of an independent body with financial and administrative auonomy and a special budget (Elmas, 2019). The main responsibilities of the HEQC are determined as to increase the awareness on institutional external evaluation, registration of accreditation institutions and improving quality culture in order to regulate and conduct quality assessment and assurance in higher education institutions. Accordingly, the Council consists of the Corporate External Evaluation Commission, the Commission for the Registration of Quality Assurance Agencies and the Commission for the Promotion of Quality Assurance Culture. Higher Education Quality Council is made up of 13 members, including (HEQC, 2019);

- 3 members chosen by the Council of Higher Education General Board,
- 3 members chosen by the Inter-University Council,
- 1 member chosen by the Ministry of National Education,
- 1member representing the Vocational Qualification Institution,
- 1member representing the Health Institutes of Turkey,
- 1 member representing the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey,
- 1 member representing Turkish Accreditation Agency,
- 1 member representing the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey
- 1 student representative

⁶ The regulation was rearranged in 2017 according to the provisions of the Additional Article 35 added to the Higher Education Law numbered 2547.

This composition of the Council can be regarded as a significant development in ensuring stakeholder engagement, which has long been observed as a major deficiency of the quality assurance system in Turkish higher education. In the statements of Elmas (2019), the Chairman of the Council; “The HEQC must be understood as a tool allowing an ongoing improvement of HE within the national system, clearly identified by HEIs as well as the stakeholders and society as a whole”. Parallel to this approach, the basic working principles adopted by the Council are expressed as follows: “Colobaration with the HEIs to achieve the defined goals; networking in international setting; dealing with diversity; stakeholders’ growth and support; professionalism” (Elmas, 2019).

Statements of the Chairman imply that the HEQC is governed by principles in line with the international norms. In this respect, not only the existence of financial and administrative autonomy, but also the founding philosophy regarding the functioning of the Council is remarkable. The emphasis on the relations with universities, stakeholders and the society gives clues to a participatory understanding rather than a bureaucratic and mandatory structure. In fact, the principles that dominate the functioning of the quality assurance agencies rather than their independence from the political authority are more emphasized

With the enactment of Higher Education Quality Assurance Regulation in 2015, the initiation of Higher Education Quality Council and the new policies put forth by the CoHE, quality assurance in Turkish higher education have been accelerated. In accordance with the policy vision envisaged in the Higher Education Quality Assurance Regulation new mechanisms for internal and external quality assurance were introduced. The quality policy has been formulated as a three-legged structure based on self-evaluation, external evaluation and accreditation. While all universities are required to hold self-evaluation and external evaluation, accreditation is not mandatory at the current stage. While the internal quality assurance system focuses on the Self Evaluation Reports (SER) and its results every year, the external quality assurance system is projected as a process-oriented or result-oriented assessment through Institutional External Evaluation Program that will be hold every 5 years⁷ (HEQC, 2019).

Another important policy initiative in line with the new quality vision was the introduction of Mission Differentiation and Specialization Project in the year 2016. The Council of Higher Education has prioritized specialization and mission differentiation in universities that will provide structural change in the system. Within the scope of Mission Differentiation and Specialization Project the Council envisaged specialization of universities in three areas: education, research-technology and regional development. The first step in this process was the realization of the “Project for Increasing the Contribution of Universities in Regional Development”. Five universities among the universities established in 2006 were selected as the pilot universities as of the year 2016.⁸ In this context, it is expected that the newly established universities will contribute to regional development by specializing in the sectors specific to their regions. Regional Development Oriented Universities are expected to contribute to the development of their regions, to create jobs, and to work on the opening of campuses to the public, non-governmental organizations and industry. It is expected that these universities will be the institutions that contribute to the region with high competitive power that produce information and services as the tools for the development of the region.

⁷ A more detailed analysis of internal and external evaluations will be provided in the following sections.

⁸ Bingöl University, Düzce University, Kırşehir Ahi Evran University, Mehmet Akif Ersoy University, Uşak University

The second step in the framework of the Project was to identify Research-Oriented Universities. 10 universities were selected as research-focused universities⁹, while five universities were selected as candidate research universities¹⁰. These universities are considered as the ones that determined their road map in terms of research and implement their working plans accordingly. On the other hand, these universities are expected to target the best not only in the field of research but also in the production and transmission of knowledge. Universities are asked to develop their budgets with the value they produce, to get more share from existing research funds with efficient research and to contribute to the future of the society they are part of with their social value (YOKAK; 2018, pp. 47-48).

The aforementioned regulations signaled a new road map in terms of both internal and external quality assurance in Turkish higher education institutions. Accordingly, new mechanisms and instruments have been put into practice. The most important tool for the implementation of the quality policy is the The Institutional Evaluation Program which is a binding assesment mechanism for both public and foundation universities. Accreditation is another quality assurance mechanism, while it is left to the decision of the universities. In the following section, these two mechanisms will be investigated as the implementation tools of the recently formulated quality policies.

Policy Implementation: The Institutional Evaluation Program and Accreditation

CoHE's most important implementation tool for the quality assurance system is the Institutional Evaluation Program. The program is focused on Self-Evaluation and External evaluation. The Institutional Evaluation Program organized by the Higher Education Quality Council was put into force in the year 2016.¹¹ According to the Higher Education Quality Assurance Regulation, universities are preparing an Self Evaluation Report (SER) every year and they are subject to external evaluation at least once every five years. The program aims to evaluate the procedures related to education, research and administrative systems as well as quality development activities of the higher education institutions within the scope of the Institutional Evaluation Criteria. All higher education institutions are required to take part in the Program at least once every five years. The evaluation is implemented on the basis of the self-evaluation reports of the universities that are submitted annually as part of the Program. After the institutions to be included in the Program are determined, the evaluation teams that will carry out the evaluation process are assigned. The team members are selected from the Evaluator Pool of the HEQC. Throughout the Program, the team pays one pre-visit and one site visit to the evaluated institution. Following the visits, each evaluation team pens an Institutional Feedback Report, which is released to the public by the Council. Thus, the program comprises both an internal evaluaton carried out by the universities and external evaluation held by the Council (HEQC, 2019).

The internal quality assurance system focuses on the SER and its results every year. SERs are expected to include practices and improvements in the following areas (Vardar, 2019):

1. The institution's quality assurance policy,
2. Education-training standards,

⁹ Ankara University, Bogazici University, Cukurova University, Erciyes University, Gazi University, Gebze Technical University, Hacettepe University, Istanbul University, Istanbul Technical University, Izmir Institute of Technology and Middle East Technical University,

¹⁰ Cukurova University, Ege University, Selcuk University, Uludag University, Yildiz Technical University

¹¹ As of the year 2018, a total of 70 higher education institutions were included in the Institutional Evaluation Program, including 20 institutions in the year 2016, and 50 institutions in 2017.

3. Research standards,
4. Community service standards,
5. Internationalization standards,
6. Governance standards,
7. Academic life in accordance with these standards.

Within the scope of internal quality assurance, universities are expected to implement and continuously improve the mission, vision, target statements; quality assurance policy; quality management mechanisms, the reflection of institutional policies on faculty level; awareness of this policy and the functioning of quality assurance processes (Vardar, 2019). Self Evaluation Report is one of the most important tools that allow the organization to analyze and evaluate itself in all these aspects. The most important purpose of the SER is to ensure that the institution recognizes its own strengths and weaknesses and determines the processes of further improvement. Therefore, the institution should make as much use as possible from the report preparation process. The principle of inclusiveness and participation should be adopted in the studies and support the process through internal information meetings. In addition, statements on how performance indicators are monitored, how improvements are made, and how the cycles are closed are also expected to be included in the SER (Aksu Yıldırım, 2018).

A recently introduced tool for supporting the operation of quality assurance systems in the universities is the mentorship system which will be implemented from 2019 onwards. The mentorship program was established to guide the institutions that will be assessed within the Institutional Evaluation Program. In this regard, mentors were assigned to all the higher education institutions to be evaluated in 2019. The aim of the mentorship system is to contribute to the establishment of internal quality assurance system in institutions and the dissemination and internalization of quality assurance culture in higher education system along with providing guidance on the institutions within the program. As stated by the HEQC (2019):

Mentors will guide the institutions on the establishment and conduct of their education, research-development and administrative activities in accordance with quality processes, in addition to mentoring the institutions on the determination of the higher education institutions' future plans, formation of an alignment between the institution's administrative model and objectives, management of quality processes in line with institutional values and targets, adoption of a continuous learning and improvement culture by establishing necessary technological infrastructure and on the aspects to be taken into account during the site visits of the evaluation program.

Another important component of the quality policy in Turkish higher education is the accreditation. Currently, accreditation is not mandatory for universities but is encouraged by CoHE and HEQC. With this policy, while developing universities are making the necessary improvements in quality assurance system, the more established institutions and programs are directed to accreditation. In particular, the experience of the institutions involved in the external evaluation process provides a basis for accreditation efforts. As for the year 2018 there are 11 independent quality agencies approved by the HEQC¹². The national accreditation bodies are authorized by HEQC and the ESG standards are taken

¹² Association for Evaluation and Accreditation of Engineering Programs, Association For Evaluation And Accreditation Of Medical Education Programs, Science, Literature, Faculty of Science and Letters, Faculty of

into account in this Directive. In 2017, 6 national (MÜDEK, TEPDAD, VEDEK, FEDEK, HEPDAK, MİAK) and 8 international accreditation bodies (AACSB, ABET, AHPGS, AQAS, ASIIN, EQUIS, FIBAA, IACBE) carried out accreditation in Turkey. As of the year 2017, 504 undergraduate programs were accredited and program accreditation has been increasing (YÖKAK, 2018, pp.69-70).

Policy Evaluation: Reports on the Institutional Evaluation Program

Policy evaluation is a crucial stage of policy making. Yet, regarding the Turkish higher education, feedback mechanisms and assessments have not been adequately operated until recent years, and remained limited in terms of both data collection and evaluation. In this context, Bologna Process was the main source of information for the quality activities carried out at universities. Bologna Process Implementation reports that reveal information on the situation of countries in implementing Bologna action lines are the most important assesment tools for quality assurance. An investigation of the previous reports reveals that Turkey has recorded the least progress in the quality assurance action line. In the 2018 Bologna Process Implementation Report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018), Turkey was evaluated as one of the countries where quality assurance system is in operation but not aligned to ESG. In the light of the report, it could be inferred that Turkey has partially complied with the quality assurance indicators particularly regarding the student involvement and international participation in quality processes. Indeed although Turkish higher education system has tried to follow the quality assurance provision of Bologna Process, implementation has proven challenging due to the structural difficulties. Yet, it is noteworthy that the positive developments in this field have accelerated particularly with the policies and practices implemented after 2015.

On the other hand, two recent practises in terms of policy monitoring and evaluation are noteworthy within the framework of the Institutional Evaluation Program. The first one is the Higher Education Assessment and Quality Assurance Position Reports prepared every year by the HEQC. These reports are prepared through the evaluation of the Self Evaluation Reports of all universities and Institutional Feedback Reports of the evaluated universities. In order to determine the change in the level of awareness of the quality assurance in higher education institutions compared to the previous year, the SERs have been analyzed by the HEQC. The evaluation of SER was carried out qualitatively and quantitatively by questioning conformity with the purpose in the first 4 questions and conformity with the SER preparation guide in the last 3 questions (YOKAK, 2018):

- A clear understanding of the SER process
- Sufficient explanation available in the SER about how processes (quality assurance, training, research, management) are run in the organization
- Preparation of SER in accordance with institutional external evaluation criteria
- Applying the required evidence to the SER annex or directing them to the web pages with appropriate references

Languages, History and Geography Curriculum Programs Assesments and Accreditation Association , Association for Evaluation and Accreditation of Educational Institutions and Programs of Veterinary Medicine, Evaluation and Accreditation Association for Programs in the Faculties of Education, Association for Evaluation and Accreditation of Nursing Programs, Communication Education Evaluation and Accreditation Board, Health Sciences Education Programs Evaluation and Accreditation Association, Tourism Education Evaluation and Accreditation Board, Evaluation and Accreditation Association for Programs in the Faculties of Pharmacy, Turkish Psychological Association. (HEQC, 2019).

- Preparation of SER in accordance with the Institutional Internal Assessment Report Preparation Guide
- Consistency of SER in itself
- Release of SER on the web site of the institution

The main outcomes of the 2017 Higher Education Assessment and Quality Assurance Position Report (YOKAK, 2018) could be summed up as the following:

- Regarding the clear understanding of the SER process, the rate of not being understood among all institutions is relatively low (8%). Yet, 57% of the institutions stated that the process was partially understood. Thus, it could be inferred that the process is understood in the universities, particularly in the ones participated in the external evaluation. On the other hand, universities should better benefit from the SER preparation process.
- In terms of the explanation on how the quality processes operated, 41% of the SERs revealed sufficient explanations on the process management. The fact that the 50% of the universities could partially explained their quality management processes signals that there are aspects that are open to improvement in this regard. Considering the PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) Cycle, it is observed that planning and implementation parts are generally present in institutions, but there are deficiencies in the control and prevention part. Thus, approximately half of the universities focus on data collection and analysis during the SER preparation process, yet they do not adequately deal with the management of quality processes.
- Regarding preparation of SER in accordance with institutional external evaluation criteria, the report show positive results. It was seen that 57% of the institutions prepared their reports in accordance with the institutional external evaluation criteria. This can be seen as an indicator of the awareness and preparedness of universities regarding the institutional external evaluation process in its early stage.
- Obtaining clear information on the internal quality assurance system is made possible by evidence presented in the SER. Thus, universities are expected to publicize sufficient and concrete evidence on their quality management system. Implementation of the quality assurance processes should be concretely put forward with references such as annexes, regulations and directives, certificates, senate and academic board resolutions, web pages, survey results of the stakeholders, archive documents, work flow diagrams etc. This criteria was met in 51% of the SERs. Therefore, it is still open to improvement, despite the positive development in this area.
- The SERs should be prepared in accordance with the Preparation Guide published by the Higher Education Quality Board. In this context, 56% of the reports were found to be sufficient, while 41% of the SERs have some deficiencies. This situation can be considered as an indicator that higher education institutions have started to understand and implement the guide in preparing the SERs with some exceptions. In addition, 67% of the SERs was found consistent within themselves. SERs are required to be published on websites in order to be easily accessible for public opinion. The fact that 71% of universities placed SERs in their web sites signals an important development in terms of transparency and accountability of quality assurance processes.

The review of the SERs reveals that Turkish higher education institutions implement the principles in writing internal evaluation reports well, provide consistent information and share them with the public.

Yet, regarding the process management and implementation of PDCA cycle there are some areas to be further improved.

The second part of the assesment held by the HEQC is based on the examination of the Institutional Feedback Reports of universities participated in the Institutional External Evaluation Program. This evaluation helps to identify and improve the strong and recoverable areas of the quality assurance system in higher education institutions. In 2018, 45 higher education institutions were included in the institutional external evaluation program. In the 2018 report, the strengths and weaknesses of the institutions regarding the quality assurance system are determined as follows (Aksu Yıldırım, 2019):

Strengths;

- High level of awareness of managers about quality assurance
- The authority, duties and responsibilities of the quality commission have been defined
- Effective participation of all departments in quality management activities is provided
- Presence of internationalization strategy and prioritization of internationalization

Weaknesses;

- Lack of defined processes for the dissemination of quality culture in the institution
- Lack of effective participation of internal and external stakeholders in the quality assurance system
- Lack of effective implementation of the PDCA cycle
- Lack of well defined key performance indicators

These findings imply that Turkish higher education institutions do not have matured and institutionalized systems in the field of quality assurance, yet. It is observed that quality assurance has been interiorized as a policy area by the senior management and the institutional structures have been created. Again, it is observed that quality assurance studies have also been disseminated to the other units of the institution. In this context, there are positive developments regarding the structuring of quality assurance system. On the other hand, there is a need for improvement in the areas related to the institutionalization of quality assurance, such as the dissemination of quality culture, a clear definition of processes and a meaningful provision of stakeholder engagement.

Yet, despite the deficiencies, it could be argued that Turkish higher education institutions have made a significant progress regarding quality assurance. As a matter of fact, when the results of 2017 and 2018 reports are compared, it is observed that there is a promising development. In the year 2017, 64% of the institutions participating in the evaluation were considered to be moderate and 36% were poor, while 84% of institutions were recorded as moderate and 16% as good in the year 2018 (Aksu Yıldırım, 2019).

Another assesment mechanism regarding the Institutional Evaluation Program is the feedback provided by the managers of the institions that participated in the Program. This mechanism reinforces the participation dimension of the program and provides opportunity for continuous improvement. Main recommendations came out of the feedback on 2018 Institutional Evaluation Program are as follows (Aksu Yıldırım, 2019):

- Increased involvement of academicians with management experience in the process.
- Sharing of good practices in the process.

- A more flexible perspective in the assessment and more awareness of the differences between foundation / state university and between auditing / evaluation
- Presentation of evidence in a specific format.
- Providing universities with flexibility in order to highlight some aspects within the field visit plan.

Afore mentioned views of university administrators imply that they emphasize more flexibility and professionalism in relation to the Program. In this context, the management experience of the evaluators is highlighted. On the other hand, it is recommended that the Program should be maintained in a flexible manner in accordance with its purpose and should not create a pressure on the universities.

An overview of the feedback and evaluations made within the framework of the Institutional Evaluation Program reveals that awareness and efforts towards establishing a quality assurance system in international standards are increasing in Turkish higher education institutions. Applications in this direction provide significant mobility in the field of quality assurance in institutions. Although the Institutional Evaluation Program has been considered new, many institutions have passed the assessment and gained experience in this context. The establishment of a monitoring and evaluation system within the framework of the Program, regular data flow and reporting are vital implementations in terms of the assesment of the national quality policy and its reflections in the institutions.

Discussion

Higher education is no longer a solely education issue but rather a broader field of public policy with its economic and social dimensions. It has been transforming into a complex policy area where many actors and stakeholders play different roles at various contexts. Moreover, the mission of the universities have been redefined with a strong emphasize on concepts as knowledge production, public service, international competition and accountability. In this regard, the issue of quality has been emerging as one of the primary policy areas in higher education systems in all over the world.

Quality has recently been moved to the Turkish higher education agenda and brought to the attention of policy makers, as well. Qualified growth has been regarded as one of the important goals in the coming years and attention is drawn to the necessity of a new approach. Turkey, as a regional power, has the potential to become the center of attraction in higher education. Yet, the present centralized and bureaucratic management structure of higher education leads to a cumbersome system where universities could not adapt to the global developments. Due to the centralized structure of the higher education system in Turkey the policy formulation stage is often carried out by the bureaucracy and universities enter into the picture at the implementation phase. Thus, the impact of the universities on the decision making processes remains very limited which results in an incompatibility between formulation and implementation. In this context, a new legal framework and restructuring is required in order to create an environment in which universities can use their potential in line with their positions, traditions, missions and opportunities.

Another handicap is that while Turkish higher education system has witnessed a huge growth it has also faced with pressures from international quality assurance agenda. Formulation of the quality assurance system in international standards and in compliance with the EHEA will strengthen the Turkish higher education in the international arena. Yet, it might be quite problematic to implement quality assurance mechanisms applied in the mature industries. It should not be overlooked that the

majority of Turkish universities are struggling with the problems arising from rapid growth and therefore have their own specific conditions. When the current state of Turkish universities is considered, there is the risk of creating a new bureaucratic burden regarding the quality assurance. While trying to overcome the problems of growth, policy makers and university managements must determine the steps to be taken for quality assurance by taking this balance into consideration. In particular, quality processes in new universities need to be gradually and realistically constructed in accordance with these conditions (Özer et al., 2011,p. 63-65).

In this manner, the institutional evaluation program is a positive development which allows universities to recognize themselves and develop quality assurance systems in accordance with their needs. It is expected that both the internal evaluation process and the external evaluation program will provide an important experience for universities. As a matter of fact, one of the most important contributions of the institutional evaluation program is that the institution recognizes itself, presents its current situation, mission and objectives with the participation of its stakeholders. Institutional evaluation could be regarded as an important tool for ensuring continuity and institutionalization of quality assurance systems. However, it is also important to use this process as an opportunity for awareness raising at all levels without being converted into a bureaucratic process by the Higher Education Quality Council and university managements.

While the initiatives of senior management in quality assurance are very important, it is observed that these efforts are generally limited to personal vision and cannot move towards institutionalization. In the current situation, most of the quality studies are carried out by the commissions established in universities. However, due to the uncertainties regarding the status and authority of these committees, they could not function properly. Therefore, the status of the units and processes related to quality assurance must be clearly defined within the organizational structure of the universities. In addition to the inclusive strategies determined by the university quality commissions, bottom-up mechanisms must also be employed. The process has to be carried out with a democratic, participatory and flexible approach and transform into an organizational quality culture to make a real impact in universities.

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