

# The Internationalization of Higher Education in Turkey: Realities, Motivations and Opportunities

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**ABSTRACT** *The internationalization of higher education constitutes one of the essential components that countries pursue. As economic growth and qualified higher education are directly related, many countries in the global competitive environment are re-evaluating their higher education systems. After a brief examination of the situation in the world, this commentary focuses specifically in the Turkish case. It argues that Turkey has taken strategic steps in recent years to strengthen the internationalization of its higher education system. In this regard, the paper will deal with the main challenges and future possibilities for the Turkish education system.*

**T**he internationalization of higher education constitutes one of the essential components that countries pursue for their higher education systems. Higher education institutions are compelled to put effort into the international arena in accordance with their own priorities, due to financial considerations and other factors, such as increasing the quality of the education they offer; having more international students, faculty members, and higher international rankings; and increasing the quality of their research and their international recognition. International students and faculty members also offer significant opportunities in terms of public diplomacy and soft

power. Therefore, countries focus on the internationalization of their educational systems and revise their strategies dynamically.<sup>1</sup>

International students and faculty members positively affect education and research capacity and the quality of the higher education institutions with which they are affiliated.<sup>2</sup> In addition, higher education institutions can have multinational and multicultural campuses, owing to the international students and faculty members they host. According to UNESCO's 2013 data, there are approximately 4 million international students around the world.<sup>3</sup> The countries that have the largest numbers of inter-

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Every year thousands of students, from all over the world, come to study in Turkey with scholarships (Türkiye Bursları) provided by YTB, a Turkish governmental institution.

YTB / AA PHOTO



national students also entertain the largest economic income due to the international higher education they offer.<sup>4</sup>

### The Internationalization Strategies of the Leading Countries around the World

As economic growth and qualified higher education are directly related, many countries in the global competitive environment are re-evaluating their higher education systems in connection with their economic and social goals, and are establishing new objectives for themselves accordingly. Many countries which have significantly increased their enrollment rates in higher education aim to become hubs for education and research in the international higher education market. In order to achieve this, they allocate huge resources and undertake numerous large-scale and large-budget projects. The projects that China, South Korea and Singapore have implemented in their higher education systems over the last 10 years highlight the huge competition

going on in the world, not only in the economy but also in higher education. For instance, in 2008, with a total funding of \$800 million, South Korea launched a new, five-year education project in which only foreign scientists participated to carry out research in the country.<sup>5</sup>

Common features can be found when we consider the projects being applied by the countries that want to establish a strong position as a worldwide intellectual hub in the global academic market.<sup>6</sup> One common feature is the push to create projects which will transform the country's higher education institutions and research centers to attract the world's smartest and most successful students and scientists. For this purpose they are primarily developing projects to ensure that successful students in their own countries are prevented from leaving the country (reverse brain drain), especially for graduate studies. In addition, they make enormous investments in projects which entice successful international students to choose their country; at the same time they try to increase the flow of

post-doctoral international researchers to their country. Moreover, they are seeking ways to link their education and research with the most respected universities and scholars in the world and to transfer those scholars as part-time, short-term, or full-time academic staff.

Similarly, countries competing in this arena are trying to increase the number of international connections and to enhance their collaborations with top foreign higher education institutions and research centers. To this end, they focus on increasing bilateral cooperation with the world's outstanding universities and research centers. This includes a wide spectrum of activities, ranging from implementing joint undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate programs, to establishing international multi-partner research centers in their countries. These investments can have multifaceted benefits and act as a facilitating tool to attract the kind of internationally successful individuals mentioned above. Thus, they increase the quality of education and strengthen the research capacity of the countries. For this reason, they provide a dynamic background for the country's national economic development.

The election of Donald Trump as the next President of the U.S. has become an issue of hot debate in the context of both the U.S. and its effects on the world, and it has just begun to be discussed in terms of higher education as well. Trump's anti-Islamic and xenophobic statements in particular have made some American higher

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education experts pessimistic, as such attitudes could negatively affect the internationalization of American higher education institutions. Accordingly, it has been reported that some international academic staff currently living in the U.S. are reconsidering their career plans.

Recent research has pointed out three potential threats to internationalization in American higher education for the coming years.<sup>7</sup> These threats are as follows: the flow of international students to the U.S. could decrease, the attraction of the U.S. for internationally-qualified academic staff could diminish due to the political climate in the country, and finally a decrease could be anticipated in the grants universities receive from their international alumni, which constitute a significant proportion of the income of higher education institutions especially in recent years. When combined with the climate against foreigners in the country, the anticipation of stricter visa policies and, especially, an increasing level of investigation and scrutiny for Mus-

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lims, international students and academic staff will naturally be diverted to other destinations where they will feel more comfortable in terms of living conditions and academic environment. Although it is difficult to assess how much of the risks mentioned above are possible or to what extent they will be realized, when the fact that similar tendencies were witnessed in the UK after the Brexit is taken into account, this dismal forecast seems plausible. Moreover, given these political trends in the west, it is possible that other countries will revise their policies on internationalization in higher education as well.

The flow of international students is generally described according to the push and pull model. Although the U.S. currently hosts the highest number of international students in the world, the current political realities indicate the potential of push factors to increase, whereas pull factors were stronger in the past. Though this process may be slow, when its significance for international students is considered, it may lead to a new

breakdown of the current network of world higher education internationalization, followed by the formation of new attraction centers. Thus, countries whose higher education systems are advantageous in terms of internationalization will respond more actively from now on in order to pull the flow of international students and academic staff their way.

### **International Students in Turkish Universities**

The enormous growth, or better, the delayed massification in the Turkish higher education institutions after 2006 has facilitated access to and increased supply in higher education.<sup>8</sup> Today, the number of higher education students in Turkey is over 7 million. In conjunction with Turkey's growth in higher education, economic development, and international recognition, we have seen a remarkable increase in the number of international students and faculty members in the country. The Bologna Process, in particular, with its student and faculty exchange programs, has made significant contributions to the internationalization experiences of our higher education institutions, and public universities, in particular, have engaged in competition with each other. In this regard, Turkish higher education institutions have expended tremendous efforts and witnessed notable success.

Clearly, the number of international students in Turkey has been on the rise. According to data from the

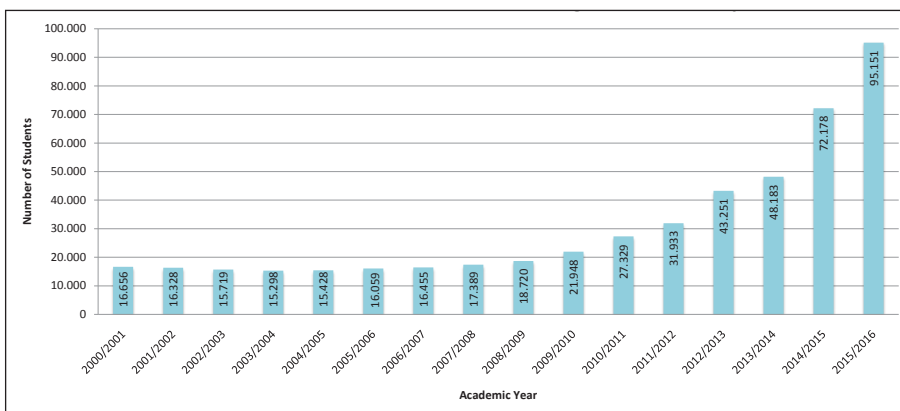
last 10 years, the number of international students remained level at about 15,000 until 2008. It dramatically increased when the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) actively took charge of the process and introduced regulations in procedures and implementations, and the uptrend continues. For instance, the number of international students in Turkish higher education institutions in the 2013-2014 academic year was 48,183; it jumped to 72,178 in the 2014-2015 academic year and increased by 1.97 times to peak at 95,151 in the 2015-2016 academic year.<sup>9</sup>

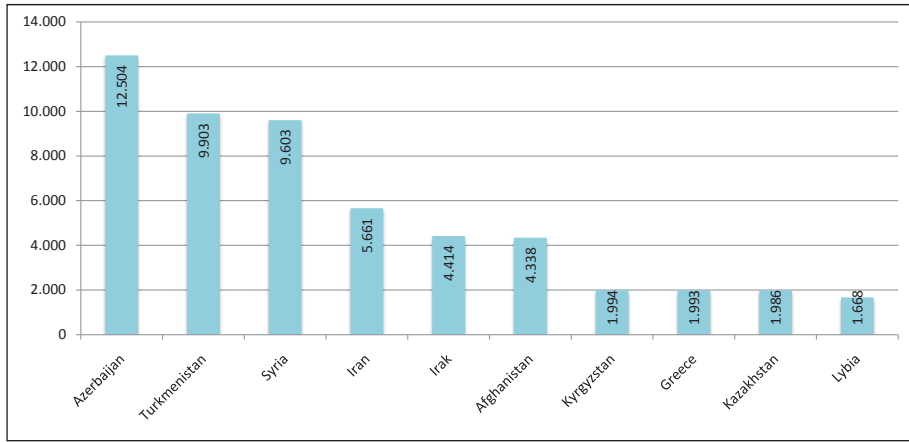
The number of international students enrolled in graduate programs in Turkish higher education institutions was 10,855 in the 2013-2014 academic year; the figure almost doubled, jumping to 22,721 in the 2015-2016 academic year. The ratio of international students to the total number of students enrolled in Turkish graduate programs increased as well. This ratio was 3.3 percent in the 2013-2014 academic year and improved to 4.5

percent in the 2015-2016 academic year.<sup>10</sup> Notwithstanding, the ratio of foreign students in total graduate programs across the world has hardly changed in the last years and remains at the level of almost 25 percent.

One of the most significant issues to be considered is the scarcity of international students and faculty members in Turkey's universities of good reputation in education and research capabilities. The number of international students in leading universities around the world has a good share in the total number of students. For instance, the ratio of international students to the total number of students is 62 percent at the London School of Economics, 33 percent at MIT, 21 percent at Stanford, and 17 percent at Harvard. In the academic year of 2013-2014, a sizeable portion of international students in Turkey (3,051 students, 6.33 percent) were enrolled at Istanbul University;<sup>11</sup> however, this figure amounts to only 2.37 percent of the total number of students enrolled at the same university.

**Graphic 1: The Number of International Students in Turkish Higher Education System**



**Graphic 2:** The Number of International Students in Turkey by Country in 2016

Source: OSYM, 2016

As it can be seen from Graph 2, A look at countrywide distribution reveals that international students in Turkey are mostly from neighboring and Turkic-language countries. Turkey receives very few foreign students from the countries sending the highest numbers of students abroad, and the ratio of the students Turkey receives from these countries is very low compared to the total number of students it sends abroad. The international fair promotion support provided by Turkey's Ministry of Economy should be used more actively and extensively, targeting these countries in particular.

### International Faculty Members

The number of international faculty members in Turkish higher education institutions continues to steadily increase. Still, it is a small number. According to the last 10 years' data, the total number of foreign faculty members stood at 1,057 in the 2006-

2007 academic year and increased by approximately 2.9 times, settling at 3,114 in the 2015-2016 academic year.<sup>12</sup> The number of faculty members coming from other countries to teach in Turkish universities is approximately 2 percent of the total number of faculty members. Turkey must urgently take measures in this matter. YÖK has recently launched the Foreign Academics Information System (YABSIS) to this end. This is a joint project run by YÖK and the Turkish Prime Ministry, primarily to create a database of international academics and researchers who were forced to immigrate to Turkey due to natural disasters or war, by compiling their job applications, and providing assistance to them to find employment in Turkish higher education institutions in accordance with the relevant procedures. It is reported that the scope of the online portal will be broadened to take in applications from all international academics and researchers who are interested in working in Turkey.



## Strategies to Increase the Number of International Students in Turkey

The Council of Higher Education has taken significant steps to transform Turkey into a hub for higher education. It has pursued an active agenda with international partners and developed joint projects with various countries. Similarly, the Turkish Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Development, the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), and the Yunus Emre Institute support projects related to international students and programs. To illustrate, the Ministry of Economy offers a support program for international fair promotions; the Ministry of Development prioritizes internationalization in higher education in its planning efforts; the YTB provides scholarships in addition to other opportunities; and the Yunus Emre Institute contributes to these efforts through its mission offices in different parts of the world.

Herewith, Turkey has taken strategic steps in recent years to strengthen the internationalization of its higher education system. The enrollment ratio in Turkish higher education has increased, together with recent, remarkable growth in higher education across the board; at present, Turkish higher education is addressing its internationalization phase in a similar fashion. Therefore, the state of higher education today is not independent from that of the past. Although Turkey falls behind other countries in

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terms of developments in higher education, it is extremely encouraging to see that higher education institutions attach importance to internationalization while competing with one another, and that they are eager to do so. From the Ministry of Economy to the Ministry of Development, from YÖK to YTB and the Yunus Emre Institute, all shareholders contribute significantly to the internationalization process of Turkish higher education, being aware of the importance of this process to our country.

## The Necessity of International Cooperation for Internationalization

Universities in Turkey are known to engage in international cooperation and almost every university puts effort into this. References to the numbers of foreign students and faculty members and of international agreements signed by each university are included in each institution's ad-

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vertising and promotion campaigns. However, these efforts are currently limited to programs involving the mobility of international students and faculty members, and there is a significant difference in the number of incoming and outgoing students. For example, the number of students in the Erasmus exchange program coming into Turkey is lower than Turkish students going abroad via the same program. In the last 10 years, from 2004 to 2014, a total of 23,109 Erasmus students attended Turkish higher education programs as opposed to 74,231 Turkish students who joined Erasmus programs abroad.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, similar exchange programs do not seem to boost joint research programs among universities, and problems exist in this regard. So, this needs to be investigated thoroughly. It is critical for national initiatives to take action in this direction. The Ministry of Development, regional development agencies, and new support programs of the Scientific

and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK) should provide more assistance to the process, develop more international projects, and make more contributions to the development of such projects. All and all, this will mean a crucial step in regional development. For sound management of the internationalization of higher education institutions, Turkey needs to put forth more effort and conduct studies to closely follow similar processes, developments, and good examples around the world, and to provide venues for constant improvement by taking the potential and opportunities of our country into consideration.

### **Challenges and Opportunities: What to Do?**

Turkey needs consolidation and rehabilitation in the internationalization of its higher education system. The internationalization of Turkish higher education lacks in-depth study, field studies in particular. Articles containing general assessments or short reports are more commonplace,<sup>14</sup> yet it is very difficult to administer the process of improvement without conducting field research and without observations from the field. More studies should be carried out in order to help policy makers to make the right decisions.

One of the most critical areas that needs rehabilitation, beyond the total number of enrolled foreign students, is the distribution of foreign students in undergraduate, graduate,





Yunus Emre  
Institute offers  
Turkish language  
courses in more  
than 40 countries.  
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and doctoral degree programs. International students in Turkey mostly concentrate on associate degree programs (approximately 6 percent) and bachelor's degree programs (approximately 69 percent). In developed countries, however, the ratios of foreign students in graduate degree programs constitute higher percentages. The OECD's *Education at a Glance 2015* report indicates that the OECD average number of international students enrolled in bachelors or equivalent degree programs stood at 6 percent in 2013, but rose as the level of education increased, settling at 14 percent for masters programs and reaching 24 percent for PhD programs. In Turkey, however, the numbers of foreign students enrolled in bachelors, masters, and PhD programs in 2013 were 1 percent, 4 percent and 4 percent, respectively. Enrolling qualified international students in graduate programs amplifies research capacities in higher education institutions as it posi-

tively contributes to a country's power of economic competition. Therefore, it is necessary for Turkey to concentrate more on the distribution of foreign students in higher education programs, develop new policies to this end, and accelerate the relevant implementations.

The percentage of foreign students in PhD programs in Turkey is one-sixth of the OECD average and this points to a significant issue. It seems that doctoral programs in Turkey are not attractive for international students. In fact, irrespective of the perceptions of the foreign students themselves, masters and PhD programs in Turkey need improvement. Although the problems of masters and PhD programs and solution recommendations are not the topic of this article, the situation involving these programs must be promptly addressed and remedial steps must be taken. The problems involving PhD programs in Turkey were presented in a report entitled, *Views*

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*on the Status of PhD Education* by the Turkish Academy of Sciences (TÜBA) in 2006. Apparently, the same problems still exist today. The number of master's students increased from 92,862 in the years covered in the report to 417,084, and the number of PhD students from 27,393 to 86,094 in the 2015-2016 academic year. The number of PhD graduates remained between 2,000 and 2,500 in the same years, and the current figure has risen to 4,500-5,000. However, the number of graduates has not increased as expected, though the numbers of masters and PhD students and faculty members have increased considerably.

PhD programs are the education programs that have the most significant and numerous effects. Quality and quantity problems in doctoral degree programs negatively affect many areas involving research and development activities in our higher education system and our country.

To maintain the enormous growth of recent years in our higher education system, an in-depth discussion of doctoral education is necessary. Additionally, the quality of these programs must be improved and immediate measures must urgently be taken in order to increase the number of PhD graduates. To this end, TÜBA must play an active role and develop solutions. In particular, opening graduate level courses with languages of instruction completely in English, French, and Arabic is a must. The international recognition of Turkish higher education institutions must be achieved and encouraged as well. Efforts in this direction will naturally have a positive effect on the number of international students enrolled in Turkish higher education, and increase their capability to conduct joint international research projects.

Turkey, which has emerged as a leading political actor with a strong economy both regionally and globally, and whose higher education system has recently undergone a positive process of transformation, has the potential to take significant part in attracting more international students. Turkey needs to develop urgent policies to turn this new global political situation in its favor, more than ever before. As a country which historically has had no xenophobia problem, Turkey has the potential to become a safe and reliable resort for all international students and academic staff, especially for Muslims. In this context, the fact that the current nationality distribution of international students in Turkey is more diverse than

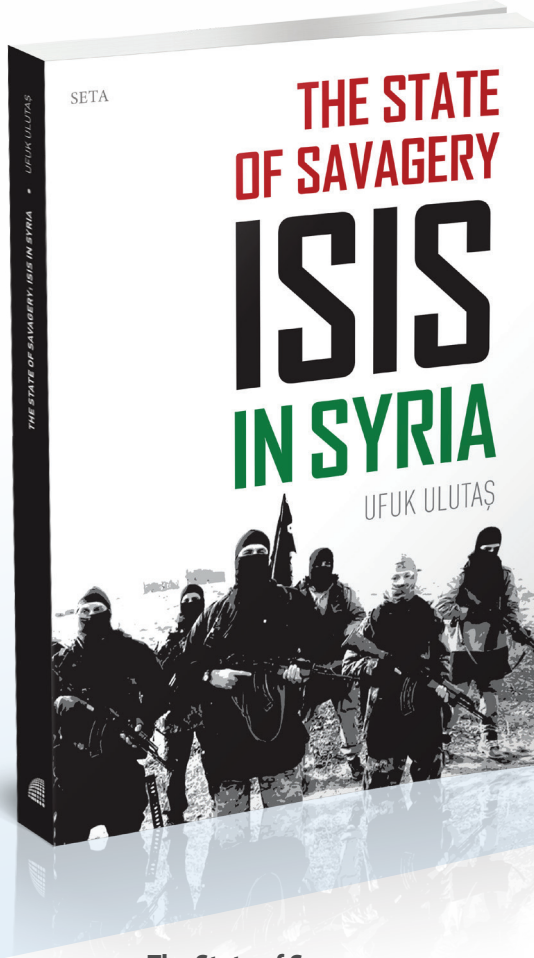
those of other countries can be seen as a great advantage. Turkey needs to benefit from the negative atmosphere for international students in the Western world. In addition, improvements to strengthen the status of Turkey as an attractive destination for both international students and academic faculty should be immediately and systematically be realized.

In conclusion, in the last decade of Turkey's history, the success stories in the field of higher education and especially the sincere efforts and positive trends detailed above show that Turkey has the potential to achieve its goal of becoming a hub for education and research in the international higher education market. On the one hand, Turkey has facilitated access to higher education for its own citizens; on the other hand, it has undertaken a number of projects for the purpose of becoming an important international hub in the international higher education network. In this regard, YÖK, universities, political leadership, and other institutions and sectors seem quite willing to engage in the hard work necessary to achieve success in this domain. This is very promising for the future. Considering the grand goals of Turkey as an important actor in the region and in the world, becoming one of the world's most notable intellectual centers is inescapable and essential. For this reason, while taking into consideration the international experiences of internationalization of higher education, it is necessary to initiate large-scale projects and upgrade Turkey's road map to include higher, though still achievable goals

for the growing success of Turkey's internationalization process. ■

## Endnotes

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**The State of Savagery:  
ISIS In Syria**

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*This book discusses ISIS within the context of violent non-state actors. It analyzes historical, ideological and operational roots and features of the group in Syria; and positions ISIS within the matrix of the conflicting parties in Syria.*