

# Private University Students' Views on the Role of University Education\*

## Üniversite Eğitiminin Rolüne İlişkin Özel Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Görüşleri\*

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### ABSTRACT

From the perspectives of consensus or conflict approaches, the social role of education is defined in different ways. In this sense, consensus and conflict approaches can be considered as representing two ends. This study aims to reveal the role of university education for students who are the most important actors of education. Accordingly, private university students' views on the meaning and the function of university education were examined qualitatively. In the research, designed as a phenomenology, individual interviews were conducted with seven students using a semi-structured interview form and collected data was analyzed. Findings are grouped under four main categories which are 'mission of university education', 'socializing through university', 'career building and personal development', and several sub-categories also emerged. As a consequence, this research revealed two main themes which are 'limited correspondence between the meaning and the function of university education' and 'degrading the meaning of university education through career focus'. Students' views on university education under the category of mission seems in accordance with description of education by consensus approach. On the other hand, under the other three categories, the views on the function of university include examples for the shift defined by the conflict approach.

**Keywords:** Sociology of education, Higher education, Private university, Transformation in higher education

### ÖZ

Eğitimin toplumsal rolü farklı bakış açıları tarafından birbiriyle uyum veya zıtlık gösteren şekillerde tanımlanmaktadır. Uzlaşmacı ve çatışmacı yaklaşımların bu anlamda iki ucu temsil ettiği söylenebilir. Bu çalışmada, eğitimin en önemli aktörleri olan öğrencilerin bakış açısıyla üniversite eğitiminin üstlendiği rolün açığa çıkarılması hedeflenmektedir. Bu doğrultuda özel üniversite öğrencilerinin üniversite eğitiminin misyonu ve işlevine yönelik görüşleri nitel olarak incelenmiştir. Olgubilim olarak tasarlanan araştırmada, yarı-yapılandırılmış görüşme formu kullanılarak yedi öğrenci ile bireysel görüşmeler yapılmış ve elde edilen veriler analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular, 'üniversite eğitiminin misyonu', 'üniversitede sosyalleşme', 'kariyer yapılandırma ve kişisel gelişim' adlı dört kategori ve bunların altındaki çeşitli alt

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\*The words "university education" and "private university" are intentionally used instead of "higher education" and "foundation university"; related explanations and discussion are available in the article.

\*"Yükseköğretim" ve "vakıf üniversitesi" yerine "üniversite eğitimi" ve "özel üniversite" ifadeleri kasıtlı olarak kullanılmıştır; ilgili açıklamalar ve tartışma makalede yer almaktadır.

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kategorilerde toplanmıştır. Sonuçta ortaya çıkan iki ana tema, ‘öğrencilerin üniversite eğitiminin misyonu ve işlevine ilişkin ifadelerindeki sınırlı örtüşme’ ve ‘kariyer odağındaki artış ile üniversite eğitiminin anlamının azalması’ şeklindedir. Öğrencilerin üniversite eğitiminin misyonuna yönelik görüşleri, uzlaşmacı yaklaşımın eğitim tasviri ile uyumlu görünmektedir. Öte yandan, öğrencilerin diğer üç kategori altında toplanan üniversite eğitiminin işlevine yönelik görüşleri ise üniversite eğitiminde çatışmacı yaklaşımın tanımladığı türdeki bir kaymaya yönelik örnekler içermektedir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Eğitim sosyolojisi, Yükseköğretim, Özel üniversite, Yükseköğretimde dönüşüm

## INTRODUCTION

### Different Approaches to Education

#### Consensus Approaches to Education

It is self-evident that there are different interpretations on what the purpose of education is. A considerable number of people interpret education relating it to *consensus approaches*. The consensus approach sees *society as a social organism*. All parts ranging from family to state have a different function so that an organic social unity can be achieved. The role of the education within this context is the *socialization* and *selection* of children for their prospective roles in society (Parsons, 1959; Durkheim, 1956). First of all, people are *selected* through education. *Able* individuals are chosen to guarantee economic efficiency and social justice. Moreover, education is responsible for the adaptation of children to the society, so it gives people “the means to life”. That is why, it is “to remind teachers constantly the ideas and the sentiments to be impressed on the children to adjust to the milieu” (Durkheim, 1956).

It is highlighted that education is central to the formation of nation-states. First of all, nations are in a non-stop competition. Nations that would not like to be out of the race accept that there is a strong relation between economy and education (Green, 1997). The ones who are capable of creating technologies and innovation are the winners of this ongoing competition. At this point, education is fundamental to technologic development as a part of knowledge society (Berisha-Namani, Badivuku-Pantina, & Berisha-Shakiri, 2010). Education is *in varying degrees* responsible for preparing future citizens and workers. Many governments regard education as a pivotal factor in economic performance and global competition (Green, 1997, p. 195).

#### Conflict Approaches to Education

Although governments may seem to have good intentions for their people, there may be false implementations which are against the benefits of people in societies. Consensus approaches assume that people can self-realize as they are given equal opportunities. On the other hand, there are minorities, various groups with different ideals and values in a society. Their realities are most of the time forgotten, ignored and suppressed. That is why, the role of education needs to be questioned from a different perspective, as well.

Education systems not only include transformative but also reproductive elements. The balance between the two change across countries and regions over time. In an ideal world,

education should be able to reproduce the good and be able to transform the bad, (Desjardins, 2015). However, one has to answer this critical question: Whose bad or good do we mean? Are the good and the bad universal? Through the glasses of conflict approaches, these are critical questions to be answered. Available literature shows that different groups can describe the good and the bad from their venture points. There has always been a tension among such groups regarding the formation and implementation of educational policies. After all, those who have the power to define the terms are the ones who manipulate the education systems.

Educational policies are *shaped to shape people* in a society. Educational institutions are a part of the system created by the governments. Just as there can be problems in healthcare systems, there can be imperfect implementations in schools, colleges and universities. Education can be manipulated by the political regimes, because political regimes need citizens who are in accord with its fundamental principles (Bloom, 2006).

#### Actors with Different Visions

Various groups and political parties have different visions on the qualities of a desirable citizen. They portray *the ideal man* in many different ways. For this reason, education is affected by political and social conflicts all the time. The number one reason for such conflicts is this question: what types of people should education aim to produce? All actors have differences in terms of definitions and implementations in education and all take this debate seriously.

#### Neoliberals

One key actor shaping the politics of education is the one who internalizes *neo-liberal policies*. The emergence of neo-liberal forces, in line with countries that internalize OECD principles, has seen education as a struggle arena to maximize their power. For them, the role of the State has to be used for the sake of neoliberal policies. In their eyes, not the State but the markets should have the control over people in value formation through education (Desjardins, 2015). Neo-liberals is *one hegemonic bloc* and from their angle, school curriculum includes “economically useless” knowledge, (Apple, 2009). Instead of inducing such knowledge into students, competition must be reinforced between students and schools. Parents and students are given different roles in market-driven education. In lieu of the needs of students, student performance is taken into consideration. Schools demand students who can perform well (Apple, 2001).

### Multilateral Agencies

Other main actors that challenge educational policies are supranational organizations. World Bank, World Trade Organization and OECD are among the most influential organizations that introduce many developing countries with neoliberal policies in education, (Aksoy, 2005). Education - just as any other goods and services - is seen as commodity by neoliberals. That is why, through the General agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), privatization of education is on the front burner. WTO under the authorization of GATS has the potential to affect educational systems across with their binding rules (Robertson, Bonal & Dale, 2002). GATS has extended global markets to all levels of education. To illustrate, it has changed the nature of higher education profoundly in terms of funding, autonomy of academics, the way of teaching and learning (Lauder, Brown, Dillabough & Halsey, 2006).

Another supranational organization which has a huge impact on education is *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD). In Lingard's and Rizvi's words, OECD has "used the ideology of globalization to reformulate educational purposes and governance" (OECD, 1998, p. 247). The OECD has also an instrumentalist perspective regarding education. Education should contribute to human capital and economic growth. OECD has a pivotal role in educational policies because its work is widely used by national governments to regulate their reforms in education. For example, the document released in 1996, *The Knowledge Based Economy* is important in that it promotes the idea that economic goals of education is prioritized over social and cultural goals of education (ibid; p. 252).

There may be certain tensions among all these groups, but still, they can come together and make alliances. As well put by Apple, "their overall aim is to form educational conditions believed necessary for both increasing international competitiveness, profit and discipline" (Apple, 2009, p. 470).

### Globalization and the Challenge to Higher Education

One of the areas where the impact of globalization is evidently felt is education. There is a strong link between education and globalization. Through globalization, different power blocs have the opportunity to disseminate their ideological discourses into the educational systems of developing countries. The use of globalization as a tool leads to drastic changes in higher education. For example, higher education (HE), once regarded as luxury, has become crucial because of globalization. For a long time, for national governments, higher education was elitist. However, these governments in time have realized that globalization gives utmost importance on the skills and knowledge gained in universities (Bloom, 2007, pp. 72-73). Thus, higher education, becoming a key source of comparative advantage among nations, has caused countries to have a

masses of people with capabilities that are nearly impossible to gain in primary and secondary education.

As it can be understood, higher education is under the influence of interest groups and they *now* control universities which *once* regarded as an arena for critical thinking and for production of *based knowledge*. This means that there is now a change towards market values and neoliberal agenda in universities. Thus, universities are now the engines for economic productivity and competitiveness (Currie, 1998). Rather than curiosity-driven research, more applied research agendas, which are more beneficial for industry, are gaining popularity (Ginkel, 2003). In addition, universities increasingly find themselves unprotected and insecure in a highly competitive world. They have to strengthen and diversify their external relations with stakeholders to find sources of financing (ibid, 2003).

### Private Universities in Higher Education

The number of universities have increased drastically in the last decades. Under the influence of globalization that leads to profound changes in education, the demand for tertiary education is getting higher and higher and this could reach 263 million students by 2025. This is a huge number when compared to around 100 million students back in 2000 (Karim, 2011, p. 551). Such a worldwide demand among students which is called '*massification*' in tertiary education has led to dramatic novelties in educational field. In addition to state universities, other types of universities such as private universities and foundation universities have been opened. And Turkish Higher Education is not an exception. It can be said that, within this scope, foundation universities, in addition to state universities, are rapidly increasing in number. For example, in Turkey context, this number has reached 77 compared to 129 state universities. The number of students who study in private universities is 589 307 in comparison to 6 963 903 in state universities.<sup>1</sup>

More specifically, based on the Higher Education Act, following the 1980 military coup, Turkish higher education consists of two-tier structure. These are state universities and 'nonprofit' foundation universities. It can be said that there is no private university<sup>2</sup> in Turkish Higher Education. The main difference between state and foundation universities is that the latter has financial and administrative independence. Although foundation universities are considered as 'non-profit' organizations managed by independent foundations, some scholars are critical of these institutions. It is highlighted that foundation universities were established as non-profit organizations. However, they have become 'for-profit' institutions. It is underlined that financial systems at foundation universities are based on student tuition fees rather than foundation funds. The tuition fees of these universities are not affordable for a lot of students. The students who are able to pay the tuition fees

<sup>1</sup><https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>

<sup>2</sup>In Turkish Higher Education system, the term "private universities" and "foundation universities" can be used interchangeably because they are founded by the foundation of private enterprises mostly.

usually are from higher socioeconomic families (Erguvan, 2013). In addition to this, students at foundation universities are more exposed to external influences which are imposed by different stakeholders such as neoliberals. Thus, foundation universities are more often under the influence of neoliberal policies. Education has been experiencing drastic changes in line with the effects of neoliberal policies and globalization. This means that one has to know to what extent educational policies are manipulated by different agencies, because the students, the addressees of education are drastically affected by these changes and processes. Different ideologies of parties have been changing the university environment for all types of students coming from poor or rich families. The dominant ideologies now in force are the ones which support neo-liberal policies under the guise of globalization. They are in favor of privatization of education like all the services.

Undoubtedly, with the increase in the number of private universities, the number of the students placed by the university entrance examination has risen. Thus, private universities are functioning as the remedial institutions in the existing higher education system, (Altunay, 2010). Moreover, they have become widespread in higher education system for several reasons such as deterioration in the standards of public universities and the incapacities of state institutions to absorb the huge demand of students, (Altbach, 2003).

However, this drastic increase in their number and the excessive demands from these institutions brought some concerns to public attention. These include the quality of the services offered by private universities and the profile of the students who are admitted to the universities. Starting with their emergence in the system, private universities have been criticized in that they admit students with very low university entrance examination scores (Kisabacak, 2011; Okçabol, 2007). They are also defined as "demand-absorbing" schools which offer postsecondary degrees of *questionable* quality and uncertain usefulness in the market place (Altbach & Levy, 2005). Some go even a step further and claim that some private institutions are "pseudo universities" because they do not have the standards of a real university and they are profit-oriented rather than research-oriented (Currie, 1998).

Keeping all these profound changes in mind, it is necessary to ask how students, the addressees of education in HE, define the role of higher education in their lives, and to what extent, their ways of defining education are compatible with the discourse of approaches to education in the literature. To answer these questions, in this study, students' views on university education in terms of the mission and function is preferred as the research object. Namely, the research questions of the study are as following:

- What are the students' views on the mission of the university education?
- What are the students' views on the function of the university education?

## METHOD

### Research Design

This qualitative study is aiming to reveal the mission and the function of university education for university students. The researchers went for qualitative method because of the nature of the research issue. For university students, university education is an institution, an aim, a life experience and a set of expectations so they have many experiences provoking feelings and thoughts about it. In order to reveal these, the research is designed as phenomenology in which experiences are examined from perspectives of the participants (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). Here, university education is the phenomenon about which participant students' views are collected and analyzed.

### Participants

Participants of this study are the students studying in a private university for a long period of time. The students who are new starters are not included in the study because the researchers think that students who spend more time at university are exposed to all kinds of experiences and are able to think more analytically about their experiences. Also, to get maximum variation in data students from several departments are preferred and gender homogeneity is ensured to some extent. With these concerns, seven students from a private university were included in the research. Demographics of the participants are presented in table 1.

**Table 1:** Demographic Information of the Participants

Participants	Gender	Faculty
1	M	International Trade and Business
2	M	Industrial Engineering
3	M	Political Sciences and International Relations
4	M	Turkish Language and Literature
5	F	Philosophy
6	F	Political Sciences and International Relations
7	F	Psychology and Political Sciences

Data was collected via face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The interviews entailed two sets of questions: the first elicited personal information about the participants (gender, department, year experience as a university student). The other set elicited their perceptions about the role of university education in their lives. The interviews were conducted in Turkish. They were recorded during the interviews and then transcribed into written language. Responses selected for quotations in the study were translated by the authors into English.

### Data Analysis

For analysis of the data, a constant comparative method was used to identify recurring themes within and across data

sources. The two authors came together many times for the evaluation of the data. Based on the literature review and their expert discussion, they decided on the recurring themes within and across the responses. In the constant comparative process, content is divided into meaningful units, which are then grouped into categories and sub-categories providing answers of the research questions. As a last step, grouping, comparing and relating these categories and sub-categories resulted in two major themes presenting theoretical base for the further discussion about the role of university education.

### Credibility of the Data

While collecting data, the participants received an email explaining the purpose of the details of the study. They were sent a consent form with the questions. After the interviews, the transcripts of the interviews were shown to the participants to get their confirmation about their answers. In line with the comments from the participants, some parts were not included in the analysis. Moreover, an ethics committee approval was taken to be able to comply with ethical considerations about the research.

## FINDINGS

After the data analysis, in answer to the research question 'What are the students' views on the meaning of university education? And the function of university education?', four major categories have been formed: (1) Mission of university education, (2) socializing through university, (3) career building, (4) personal development. Among these categories, the first one is mostly corresponding the first research question while the remaining three is more related to the second research question. Also, the first three categories are somehow expected based on the interview questions but the last one emerged during the analyses of data. Moreover, under these four categories, several sub-categories emerged. Lastly, based the students' views two major themes emerged: 'limited correspondence between the meaning and the function of university education' and 'degrading the meaning of university education through career focus are presented in the conclusion.

### Findings about the Meaning of the University Education

The results to answer the first research question about students' views on the meaning of the university education are presented under the category named as *mission of the university education*. Although related data is gathered in one category, naming the category as meaning is not proper because of its sub-categories assigning several missions to university education.

#### Category I: Mission of university education

Participants of the study suggest different missions for the university education from their changing perspectives. In this process, themes, emerged under the category of mission are (a) qualifying people for social good, (b) necessity of having a diploma, (c) enrichment of experiences, and (d) empowerment.

**Qualifying people for social good:** As the mission of university, participants put forward qualifying people so that they can be beneficial for their community or the society. According to their views, this mission is realized as different processes, firstly, university education aims at making students gain knowledge and skills that help them contribute to social benefit.

*"It should train qualified personnel, university should work for this aim. ... primarily, they should become people who are useful and who can contribute to this country. Then for the whole world, whatever their expertise is... electronic, computer or another. This must be the main aim" (Participant 3)*

Participants, from their points of view, present some examples for this social benefit by referring to public services, e.g. infrastructure

*"Our universities raised for example men like Süleyman Demirel, Turgut Özal. There must be others we don't know. These men constructed barrages, roads, bridges. That's to say our universities were of good quality before." (Participant 2)*

Secondly, there are views about a transformation process during university education. Participants think that at the end of this transformation, students will be qualified and fit into society. A metaphor of making bread is used by one participant to describe this process.

*"I see university as a very important thing. Because, I see it as a place where we spend four years, make an effort, we enter as dough and exit as bread, and a place improving us" (Participant 1)*

Some participants think that transformation in university should ensure students' adaptation to the society and conventions of the community.

*"We learn relationship here. What being a human means, what is beneficial to humanity? Students coming here should know this. They should learn about "How to behave?"... morals and rules can be learned" (Participant 3)*

**Necessity of having a diploma:** Another sub-category is about having a university degree. This has become a necessity in today's world. Participants state this necessity and focus on having a degree as result of university education and this seems to be an indicator for degrading the meaning of the university.

*"In my opinion, it (university education) means only having a diploma or a label. I mean in these conditions" (Participant 2)*

*"University education is a necessity to complete. I mean now it is considered like that. Of course it changes from country to country. In a country where there are 45 million students it has already become a necessity from now on. (Participant 3)*

**Empowerment:** Although it is known that university education contributes to individuals' improvement in many aspects is a de facto, one participant's situation and statements required emergence of the sub-category empowerment under the category of mission. The participant defines her situation and people like her as disadvantaged, and she shows university education as a step forward to overcome barriers.

*"In one sense, I can put myself into two disadvantaged groups in Turkey. I am a 'woman' wearing 'headscarf'. Because of this, for me studying in university is a step forward to life and future." (Participant 7)*

Also, the participant's expectations from life would be trapped in a stereotype without the empowerment through university education. She mentions that without university education, she would get a job with low qualifications and end up with an early marriage.

*"If I do not study (in university), I don't know what would I do? Probably, I would work in a job which requires low qualifications. That process seems like getting married at an early age and being a house wife ... I would have to marry." (Participant 7)*

**Enrichment of experiences:** For the mission category, the last sub-category is enriching the experiences via university education. Most participants believe that university education provides them with various experiences. These experiences include encounter of life styles and cultures that are different than theirs. Therefore, university education helps the students to be open minded by having various perspectives and avoiding stereotypes in life choices.

*"We grow in our family and then have a standardized education. The aim of university should free students from this. I should be experiencing different cultures and life styles. I think if I don't study in university, I would have a very standardized life because I am now very different than who I was in high school. I mean my mind is changing. My perspective is broadening. Old me would spend time with similar people in all similar environment and continue to see life from the same perspective. Now I meet different lifestyles, very different people. This is very important. If I didn't come to university, I would be trapped in a small social circle. Probably I would get an ordinary job. And I think I would have a kind of unpleasant life." (Participant 6)*

This development in mind and perspective reveals in another participant's statement. He emphasizes that a person living in rural areas would be limited perception because of being a part of small environment around himself so he would end up with engaging in routines with lower mental responsibility.

*"A person in rural area, I mean not only me any person, especially if he doesn't read, he will not be more precisely aware, not have deep perception, he becomes what he perceives about the place and environment around him. I mean he does his job, for instance working in a store or another job. This is a life with lower responsibilities, I mean lower mental responsibilities and may be higher physically." (Participant 4)*

### Findings about Function of the University Education

Results to answer the second research question about students' views on the function of the university education are presented under three different categories.

#### Category II: Socializing through university

Under the second theme, three sub-categories emerged: (a)

opportunities for career, (b) social circle and (c) setting aside social activities.

**Opportunities for career:** The interviews with the participants show that those who take part in social activities at university believe that social activities provide them with various opportunities for their career. They attend activities conducted by social clubs because they can earn credentials which can help them to get into better jobs in the future.

*"I mean, university students, they attend social clubs to have more networking opportunities. Students participate in activities, programs and clubs in order to show this in their CVs in the future." (Participant 3)*

*"As an engineering student, when I look at the billboards I see very few one related to my area and most of them are speakers not the certificate programs I look for. Never!" (Participant 2)*

Also, they believe that the social activities in their academic environment enable them to build network for their future career. This network may include getting in contact with firms and companies or meeting experienced people from any related sector.

*"Social clubs organize field trips to the banks, to other companies. They (social clubs) not only talk about these banks or firms but also they take us to these places. Sometimes, when we go to such places, employers ask for our CV. These are very useful, I think." (Participant 1)*

*"If students become a member in such clubs, they have the chance of meeting experienced people. These people can guide such students and this is an advantage." (Participant 3)*

In addition to the courses that they take, they think that social activities in school environment give them the chance of learning for their professional life, as well.

*"When we go to the factories, they make presentations to us about working of the factory. For example, in a steel factory how the supply chain functions, where the production occurs. Or human resources, finance. Walking all around the factory, they gave information about how to work in every part. That was very beneficial" (Participant 1)*

Furthermore, Participant 7 explains that social activities, especially social clubs are important in that students can learn more about their future career. In the club, she attends, for example, she has an opportunity to learn more about her future profession:

*"My department is international relations. We have a simulation activity. Whatever they talk in United Nations agenda on a specific time and date, my friends and I discuss the same topics in our activity. Moreover, we follow the same procedures. This is related to my field. I learn a lot. And that is really enjoyable to present a solution on a topic discussed by United Nations." (Participant 7)*

**Social Circle:** University education presents a social environment for students. They come together at different times in different places within the context of university. One major

environment which encourages students to come together is social clubs. Social clubs function as a social milieu for university students. They can expand their social circle more easily.

*"I go to çayhane (teahouse) to socialize at school. I am really happy there. It's free. It belongs to students. We are comfortable, we have music and tea. We are in the garden. ... Moreover, there are many international students at school. You have an opportunity to listen to people with different experiences from different cultures in person. They have different cultures and languages. Most of them are coming from troubled areas." (Participant 5)*

Some participants also think that social clubs increase cultural encounter. They are a medium of gathering for different cultures.

*"I collected many valuable friends here. Both Turkish and international." (Participant 1)*

*"They (social clubs) try to establish a multicultural environment. They motivate both Turkish and international students to come together." (Participant 6)*

For Participant 3, in addition to social clubs which encourage people to contact with each other, the courses taken in various semesters help students to socialize:

*"I take courses and meet somebody. Then, he introduces you to somebody else. This way, you expand your social circle. You develop relationship with people. You become attached to school environment. Chit chat with friends... For example, I don't have a course on Friday, but I will come to the university, anyway." (Participant 3)*

Participant 4 believes that university environment is a facilitator to expand your social circle.

*"It is easy to find peers here, easy to meet people whom you can communicate easily. This must be the same for instructors, too. We have some kind of similar goals, we are here to study." (Participant 4)*

Participant 6 focuses on a different aspect of establishing a social circle at school. She observes some problems in her department and then, talks to her friends to be able to discover if they experience similar problems or not.

*"I try to communicate effectively with friends from my department because I sometimes see a problem in my department and I would like to learn: Do they share the same feelings with me? I am trying to discover this. I talk to them and then pass their ideas to the deputy manager or administrators. This is how I socialize at university. (Participant 6)"*

**Setting aside social activities:** While relating socialization with career opportunities and making new friends, some students pointed out that they had to set aside social activities for academic load.

*"I was in the theatre club for a year. After that, I had to drop it because of my loaded schedule." (Participant 1)*

*"I don't have enough time because of my lessons. I have to study. Also, I have other projects to do. I am interested in them." (Participant 2)*

### Category III: Career building

According to participants' views, under the category of career four themes emerged namely (a) career focused learning, (b) career focused network building, (c) relation with private agencies and (d) recognition in the market.

**Career focused learning:** First of all, participant students think that learning experiences they have during university education should help them in their career building and they value university or further education as much as its contribution to their career. In the interviews it is understood that here the most prominent factor is content of the education, in other words what to learn. For an engineering student participant, courses directly related to the future jobs are appreciated more even though it is not directly related to his major area.

*"You take management courses. How to manage a company, increase efficiency. Future foresights. Operation research courses. Some kind of growth can be provided in data based areas other than engineering, in general, CEOs are preferred among people acquainted with these. (Participant 2)*

On the other hand the participant sees courses about humanities useless, even harmful in terms of losing time and negative effect on career opportunities by decreasing grade point average (GPA).

*"I don't pay much attention on courses I don't want. For example, I take the course cultural encounter or I have to take understanding religion. I don't pay attention, I don't want. ... You will do homework etc. I don't have that much time to spend for this. And because I don't do these, these courses decrease my GPA and this will affect my future life really. ... I want to be in defense industry in future. But, because now my GPA is 2.1, I can't get any acceptance. (Participant 2)*

Another participant indicates increasing possibilities of better career and enterprising ideas as the main motivation for further education abroad after graduation.

*"Being abroad brings very different perspective to you. I mean when I come back with many different business ideas. ... I am saying that if I do a master or get any education in Japan or another country, I can be a very different person" (Participant 1).*

**Career focused network building:** Participants believe that network building during university education is vital for a better career. In order to build a career focused network, university provides convenient environment and opportunities and these become more advantageous when it comes to private university

*"People who prefer to study in university especially consider improving their network here and investing in future. ... I should have a broader network. It is better." (Participant 3)*

*“Actually, my score was sufficient for a public university. However, I preferred this university because its connections, opportunities to meet people are very attractive to me” (Participant 1).*

**Relation with private agencies:** Participants notify that studying in a private university is advantageous because it has some direct relations with private agencies. This helps students with their career building processes. From this view, it is understood that this help has two dimensions. One is underlying private university and company partnerships which enables students to have some opportunities such as finding a job and rising in the profession. One of the participants define this process as rationale of the private university.

*“Actually, as the rationale of a private university, after graduation, to continue your career in a particular way, this is the best way. I mean if you start your career in the company supporting the private university, it would be easier to rise in your profession to particular place. Also, the relevant company has a significant position in Turkey.”*

The other dimension is about integration of private sector into university by founding techno parks and practicing production in the campus.

*“X university opened a microchip process factory in its own campus. Engineering students make production while they are making their internship. ... At least getting these levels, establishing a techno park in the campus. ... I mean, in the future that would help me. Today very few companies know about this university” (Participant 2)*

**Recognition in the market:** Participants assert that graduating from a university provides them to get recognition in the labor market. Moreover, some area-specific recognitions are more likely to bring high paying and prestigious jobs.

*“Industrial engineering is good in terms of economic income. Because, after graduation, there are many opportunities. The area of profession is unlimited. And in general CEOs are from these departments. I mean generally their economic income is very high.” (Participant 2)*

Naturally, this means at the same time that it is difficult to get recognition in certain departments. This causes students to give up on their dream jobs and careers.

*“In our region, veterinary is seen as an inferior profession. Working with animals. Their economic status falls to middle level ... Maybe, in the future in my further years, say after age of 30-40, for my unfulfilled desire, I may study veterinary in university again. (Participant 2)*

*“Here (in the field of politics) I want to get some experience. Of course, in short term there must be a job to earn our bread. After that what will happen depends on at first the network we will get until that time. (Participant 3)*

On the other hand, even though all participants are aware of this recognition – prestigious job relationship, some of them resist and prefer the area or discipline they really desire.

*“I don’t want to work nine-to-five. This makes me seriously unhappy. At the same time, books are attracting me. Being stucked in office from day to night is an unattractive and non-sense environment. And frankly, in economical perspective, although it seems big from outside but in Turkey, simply it is possible to earn 8-10 billion in a few years. However, on the other side, there are people who are starving.” (Participant 4)*

*“I decided on my own. There were people who do not want me to study philosophy. They keep me asking : What will you do after graduation?” (Participant 5)*

#### **Category IV: Personal development**

For the participants, academia is a path to personal development. For them, it is a means of (a) skill development, (b) intellectual capacity building and being an (c) independent individual. On the other hand, in this path they may have to (d) set aside personal development because of academic burden. These four sub-categories are put together in this last category of personal development which is not a pre-determined category and emerged from the collected data during the analysis.

**Skill development:** The participants state that university is an environment that leads people to develop certain skills. The participants think that they are more able to think critically and express themselves effectively as a result of being a university student. Moreover, academic environment provides them with certain opportunities for their future academic career so that they can better improve and be an expert in their career. One participant believes that he can express himself more effectively now thanks to the skills he has developed at university:

*“I improve myself a lot and add many qualities to my personality. Especially I am able to think critically and know more about computer programs. ...I wasn’t one of those who could do any type of presentation. I did not know how to do it. But now, I can do any kind of presentation on any topic even on those about which I do not know much. I am comfortable with that.” (Participant 1)*

**Intellectual capacity building:** According to participants’ views, being a university student means that they can have a better intellectual capacity.

*“My department is in the field of social sciences, so we improve in different ways. The content of the courses help us to improve culturally and develop us in many ways.” (Participant 1)*

*“This is the place where I gain experience, and knowledge. ... The instructor I study with are highly qualified. I learn how to read a text or a book from them. I learn different dimensions on reading. This is really crucial, the environment and academicians.” (Participant 4)*

*“I am always confused somehow. This helps me to study in philosophy. I think philosophy makes me to think about a topic from different angles. I am aware of the fact that I cannot develop myself intellectually on my own. That is why I am in philosophy. ... University is at the center of my life. Intellectual capacity building is really important to me. I strive for it. I try to learn from anybody or from anywhere. I would like to stay in academia.” (Participant 5)*



"What does university mean to me? To be an expert in a field and to be able to relate it to other fields. This is what university means to me." (Participant 6)

**Independent individual:** Furthermore, for some participants, university education helps them to be recognized by their family and friends. They gain a higher status in their family life and become freer and more self-confident. University life gives them the chance of being recognized as an autonomous and independent person:

*My first goal is to be able to develop myself. If I did not go to university, my family members would nag me all the time. I prepared for the exam for a year. They nagged me in that summer. You could not do it, you could not manage it... If I had not been accepted to university in my second year, they would nag me more and more. They would picture me as someone unsuccessful in life. They would not trust me. But now, the picture is totally different. They can trust me more easily; they think that I can manage some thing in life. I am more effective now in the family. (Participant 1)*

**Setting aside personal development:** Although students regard university as a facilitator for personal development, some complain that they are obliged to set aside their personal development. They aren't able to be interested in their per-

sonal things or hobbies because of the courses. They have to spend too much time and make a great effort for the lessons.

*"Well, they say, first the lessons come. They are also right. I don't say that they are wrong. But because of this, I cannot develop my skills. There is no balance here. It is really difficult to adjust your courses and your own personal things. That is why you can either be good at your lessons or develop yourself in your interest or field. There are many friends who suffer from this. They would like to do different things but cannot allocate enough time for their own interests." (Participant 3)*

## CONCLUSION and DISCUSSION

This research aims to reveal private university students' views on the meaning and the function of the university education. It comes up with four categories including several sub-categories that emerged from the data. Also, two major themes constituted based on these categories and sub-categories. The summary of the findings and the way to create these themes are presented in figure 1.

In the research, the very first conclusion is that students think university education makes people more qualified for social good. This is also the subcategory referred in the views by the majority. This point which is common in the majority's view is

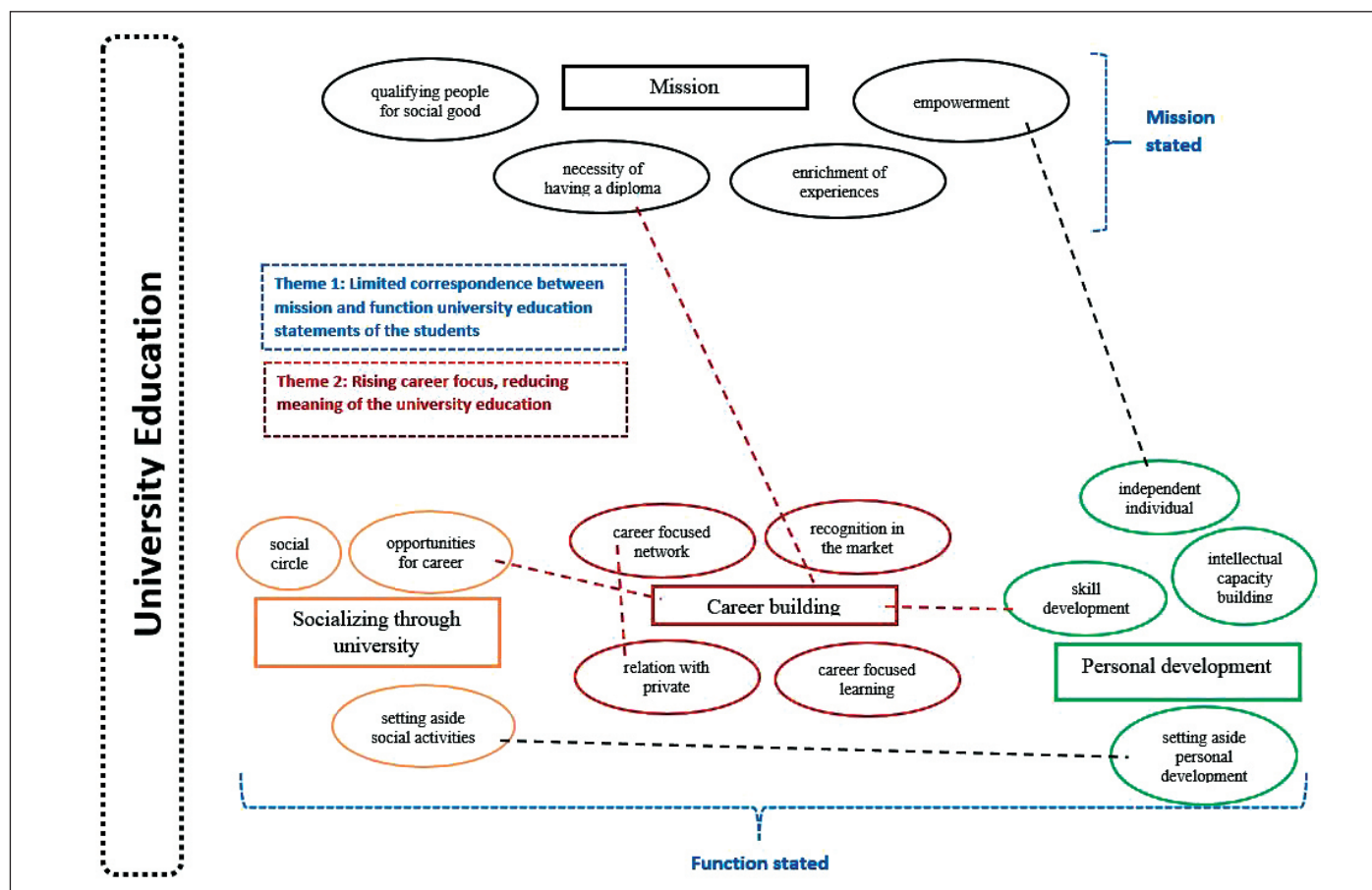


Figure 1: Sub-categories, categories and themes emerged in the study.

in line with the literature as the defining purpose of both education (Durkheim, 1956) and higher education (Bowen, 2018; Leslie and Brinkman, 1988; McMahon, 2009). Students' views of attaining knowledge and skills through university education to contribute society and of considering it as a process of transformation to fit into the society carry the spirit of voices that belongs to representatives of consensus approach, especially Durkheim (1956) and Parsons (1959).

Another result is that university education is seen as the door to a variety of experiences which help students to gain different perspectives such as being open-minded and avoiding stereotypes. Furthermore, empowerment is put forward by the students as showing university education as a chance for the disadvantaged groups to step forward. These results are both meaningful and they make sense because for any person to develop these traits and for the disadvantaged groups to empower is worthwhile. The actualization of these processes via university education is a widespread discourse (Bruhn, 2006; Gomez-Cervantes, 2010; Malik and Courtney, 2011; Stier, 2003). On the other hand, the questions of how these processes occur for students with different SES, to what extent students' potential of development and empowerment is reached, whether or not some other processes which can be criticized e.g. reproduction in education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 2014) take place and how some other traits are acquired through education (Willis, 2016) should be kept in mind.

The findings reveal that for some students, having a university degree is only a necessity and for some others, it is nothing more. This is a striking result because it can be taken as a confession for reduction in the meaning of the university which has been existing for some time defacto. Even if it is limited, in the literature, similar confessions are available (Kanellopoulos, 1996; Kim & Lee, 2006; Tomlison, 2008).

As for what students do in university for socializing and what they mean by socializing, two main results are revealed based on the students' views. The first one is that university provides opportunities to create and participate in a social circle. Social clubs and sometimes courses are the places where students come together and experience cultural encounter. This function of university for socializing is mostly accepted and normally common but the situation is not the same in the views analyzed in the research. When students talked about socializing in the interviews, a majority of them mostly concentrated on opportunities for their future career and jobs.

One of those opportunities that students referred, is collecting credentials and polishing their résumé by getting educational activities organized by social clubs. Also, network building by participating meetings as social activities, in which students can get in contact with companies, firms and business people is very important for them to get a better job in future. Moreover, social activities like field trips to workplaces and simulations provide them with the opportunity of professional learning. These results about students' views are compatible with similar studies in the literature (Roulin and Bangertter, 2013a; 2013b). Stating the obvious, career building efforts are neces-

sary and useful components of socializing process and newer studies show that extracurricular activities including social activities are associated with better job opportunities by both students and alumni (Lau, et al., 2014; Stuart et al., 2011) on the contrary of older ones (Astin, 1984). However, it is thought that career focus is becoming the major and only motivation for social activities and it is likely to be problematic because it may damage socialization role of education by transforming it into a 'networkisation' process in which the only thing that holds people together is profit.

Beyond social activity concerns, that students' associating university education with career focused network is an important result on its own. Students think that network building in university is a *future investment* which is vital for a desired job. This view is both compatible with (Kuijpers, Meijers, 2012) and supported by (De Vos, De Clippeleer & Dewilde, 2009; Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Meijers, Kuijpers & Gundy, 2013) the research in the literature. Furthermore, this network for career focus seems to be addressing Bourdieu's (2002) *Social Capital* concept. This means students, during university education, make an effort to build network to contribute their social capital rather than cultural capital traditionally. However, this effort may not be rewarded as expected because there are barriers and facilitators (Bathmaker, Ingram & Waller, 2013; Byrom & Lightfoot, 2013; Smart et al., 2009) that create an unequal competition in the labor market. For example, private university has a facilitator role in this process.

Students bring forward private universities in this network investment since they have direct relations and even partnerships with private agencies like companies and firms. Students' views on these relationships can be accepted because many private universities belong to strong companies which have also investments in other sectors and they need qualified employees. However, the aim of the companies with their higher education investments are various. They would like to raise qualifying students with various skills e.g. managerial, engineering and social. On the other hand, their quality and standards may deteriorate as some are established for purely making money (Altbach and Levy, 2005; Kısabacak, 2011; Okçabol, 2007). For public universities, this kind of integration with private sector occurs via techno-parks, project sponsorships and partnerships etc. In addition to its benefits, this kind of integration brings some costs like losing academic autonomy in terms of shift of research and curricula from foundational to applied areas (Ginkel, 2003).

It is truism that university education includes professional education, career path and networking so that it contributes to economic conditions of individuals and economic efficiency in general. For some, it is the primary goal of education after all (Bloom, 2007; Lingard and Rizvi 1998). Setting aside this discussion, career is a mostly referred issue in the students' views about university education, as well. They think that university education should contribute to their career building. Namely, it should provide professional learning experiences so its curriculum should be targeted to future career and jobs. The confusing part of their perspective is that some comments of

describing humanity courses as 'useless' and 'time-consuming' and even 'harmful' for future career. They believe that such courses cause them to get low grades and this results in low GPA. This concern by students is in parallel with the neoliberals' angle defined by Apple (2009). Moreover, students appreciate further education or education abroad mostly for career and enterprising opportunities. If the role of university education is to raise enlightened, cultivated, humanitarian people (Bertram, 20015; European Higher Education Area- EHEA, 1999; Yükseköğretim Kanunu, 1981) as stated in literature, then the points made by students seem to be problematic.

Another career related issue, emerged from students' views, is that university graduation enables students to get recognition in the labor market in which they compete for well-paid jobs. Although this is a common aspect of having a university diploma (Lauder et al., 2006), the qualifications related to the diploma such as which university or department a student graduates, which degree B.A., M.A., or PhD he holds are very important, as well. Therefore, it is obvious that the value of diploma at a specific degree is decreasing day by day and job candidates need to strengthen their hands (Roulin & Bangerter, 2013a; Tomlison, 2008) by struggling for higher degree graduations and additional credentials. This makes one to question the function of the university education as a career building process.

One last result is the contribution of university education to students' personal development. Students think that in this period of life, they need to improve their skills of critical thinking and self-expression. Also, they stated that their intellectual capacity is promoted thanks to courses, faculty and the environment as a whole. In addition to the importance of critical thinking and self-expression skills, that the words of "intellectual" and "university" coming together in statements of the students reminds very first aims of university education (de Ridder-Symoens and Rüegg, 2003) in the first place. Another development issue for the students is to become more modern. They think they turn into an independent and autonomous individual through university education. Independent from her / his career or education choices, development of personal skills is important for any individual interviewed and the fact that student refers to these skills is promising for both themselves and for the society they are part of.

Beyond all these results, two main conclusions of this study are the two themes shown in figure 1. Depending on two research questions, the first theme is based on the classification of the categories as 'mission stated' and 'function stated' *Mission stated* is considered as including more of idealized views of the students about the university education. Even though the questions are "what is" type, the answers are mostly 'what should be' type. This may be the result of that data in this category are about abstract issues like 'aim', 'importance' etc and students may have tendency of stating common sense about this issue instead of their own views. On the other hand, data in the remaining categories are about more concrete issues like 'activities' and 'job' and students have their own experiences, preferences and feelings about these issues. Therefore, like

other people, they can be more prone to state their own views about these issues. Comparison of these two category groups showed that they have limited correspondence. Therefore, it can be said that students' views about the university education are supported with abstract concepts and may be common sense. And they are parallel with their views based on real life experiences and preferences. This makes us think if there is a transformation in the meaning of the university education.

The transformation proposed above can be seen in the second theme which is career focus in every dimension of university education reducing meaning of the university. Preparing students for their future career is an obviously important part of university education but the student views' concentration on career leaves very little space for other important aspects, namely social, humanitarian and intellectual development. That career focus or professional training is dominating higher education area more and more can be obvious for many. However, revealing this issue via students' views and problematizing it in a broader discussion, the meaning of university education is important. University education is mostly seen as a means of getting credentials and establishing network by students. Students focus on career building but they tend to ignore what they can really get from university education for their expertise area.

Moreover, it seems that the dominance of career focus is not limited with university education. Professional orientation at lower school grades and attainment of skills having exchange value in the market are always popular debates in academic environment of education (Lauder, Brown, Dillabough & Halsey, 2006). Another fact is that these and other important debates shaping education are discussed mostly in economic efficiency contexts and by economics based institutions e.g., OECD, WB and WTO. And this reminds us of the two ends of education, i.e. social vs economic, suggested by consensus approach, the latter has often outweighed the former.

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