An Analysis of Current Trends in Higher Education: The Place and Importance of Students' Learning Experiences in Quality Assurance

Yükseköğretimdeki Güncel Yönelimlerin Analizi: Kalite Güvence Uygulamalarında Öğrenci Deneyimlerinin Yeri ve Önemi

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ABSTRACT

Asking for students' feedback concerning different constituents of learning is regarded as an important indicator of quality in today's higher education. As higher education has become more internationalized, quality assurance and its implementation in different forms have gained significance. This study explores current trends in higher education which developed as a consequence of globalization and internationalization. Accordingly, the study analyzes the driving factors behind the current state of accreditation as a widely utilized quality mechanism leading to an emphasis on student evaluations. Relevant literature was reviewed to offer a comprehensive analysis of the role and importance of customer-orientation, quality, accreditation, students' learning experiences and student evaluations in higher education. The situation was specifically elaborated on for the Turkish context. Also, examination of standards of a number of programs with national and/or international accreditation in accordance with the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) regulations concentrating on student evaluations demonstrates that student evaluations are implemented as part of the quality criteria specified by accrediting agencies, and thus, they are already a constituent of quality assurance mechanisms for many universities. Therefore, it is of prime importance for Turkish universities to eliminate any potential irregularities with regard to different aspects of student evaluations to enhance the transformative power of higher education as well as assuring quality for higher education as a whole.

Keywords: Accreditation, Higher education, Student evaluations, Student feedback

ÖZ

Öğrencilerden öğrenme süreçlerine ilişkin geribildirim talep etmek, günümüz yükseköğretiminde önemli kalite göstergelerinden biri olarak görülmektedir. Yükseköğretimin uluslararasılaşması, kalite güvence ve çeşitli şekillerdeki kalite uygulamalarının önemini artırmıştır. Bu çalışmada, yükseköğretim kurumlarında küreselleşme ve uluslararasılaşma ile birlikte ortaya çıkan güncel yönelimler incelenmiştir. Bir kalite güvence mekanizması olarak gün geçtikçe yaygınlaşan akreditasyon ve akreditasyon sürecinin önemli bileşenlerinden olan öğrenci değerlendirmelerine yapılan vurgunun arkasındaki unsurlar ele alınmıştır. Yükseköğretimde müşteri odaklılık, kalite, akreditasyon, öğrenci deneyimleri ve öğrenci değerlendirmelerinin yeri ve önemi kapsamlı bir literatür taraması aracılığıyla sunulmuştur. Durum, Türkiye bağlamında özel olarak irdelenmiştir. Yükseköğretim Kurulu (YÖK) düzenlemeleri gereğince ulusal ve/veya uluslararası akreditasyon almış olan bazı programların öğrenci değerlendirmelerine odaklı standartlarının incelenmesi, birçok üniversitede öğrenci değerlendirmelerinin akreditasyon kuruluşları tarafından öngörülen standartlara göre uygulandığını ve halihazırda önemli bir kalite güvence unsuru olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu sebeple, Türk üniversitelerinde öğrenci değerlendirmelerinin farklı boyutlarına ilişkin potansiyel düzensizlikleri ortadan kaldırmak hem genel olarak üniversitede öğretim kalitesini güvence altına almak hem de yükseköğretimin eğitim yoluyla öğrenciyi dönüştürme gücünü artırmak için büyük önem arz etmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Akreditasyon, Öğrenci değerlendirmeleri, Öğrenci geribildirimi, Yükseköğretim

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INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed a shift in higher education stemming from the changes in accordance with globalization of the world and thus internationalization of universities. Within the framework of the current state of higher education, and together with the increasing learner demand from different parts of the globe in parallel with the shift in perceptions on life-long learning, borders between countries have been removed, which resulted in increasing access to higher education. In this context, Özer emphasizes the significant increase in the number of international students and universities' efforts to recruit those students (2012) to compete and maintain their existence in the globalized world.

The increasing demand for higher education across the world comprised the basis for emergence of issues such as quality assurance and competition (Günay, 2008), which, in turn, led to market-orientation, where the students are seen as customers paying fees in return for provision of education. Accordingly, Özer, Gür and Küçükcan highlight the expectations regarding transparency and accountability of higher education institutions to prove public sources are used efficiently (2011), which gave rise to an increasing demand for quality assurance processes and practices across the world. According to Belenli et al., quality assurance contributes to a competition-based environment in terms of distribution of public sources as well as attracting international students by means of recognition, reputation and improvement of international qualifications (2011). Universities therefore started to adopt and implement various quality assurance strategies to prove and improve their quality towards their stakeholders including their prospective students as the primary beneficiaries of higher education. Therefore, "collecting feedback from students on their experiences of higher education has become one of the central pillars of the quality process" (Williams and Cappuccini-Ansfield, 2007, p. 159).

Through a review of related literature, this research investigates the recent trends in higher education which emerged as a result of the globalization and thus internationalization of the universities. Within this framework, the study examines the quality movement together with the customer-oriented view of students, accreditation, the place and role of students' learning experiences in quality assurance, and student feedback on teaching quality as the outcomes of aforementioned trends. The potential drawbacks of those trends are provided in discussions based on international literature to help see conflicting perspectives, which, in turn, is expected to contribute to a general evaluation of the topic and points to be considered and avoided during planning and implementation. Furthermore, the state of Turkish Higher Education in terms of quality assurance and quality improvement along with existing practices concerning the implementation of accreditation are discussed, and the study investigates the extent to which student feedback is considered as part of quality assurance together with the relevant research in the field on a national level.

Being considered a relatively new form of practice, student evaluations have caused many debates and discussions not only for researchers and practitioners but also for instructors, who are or will be subject to the practice across the world. Much research has been conducted on particular constituents of accreditation and student evaluations in separate forms concerning higher education in different countries including Turkey; however, there is no single research concentrating on the state of student evaluations utilized as part of accreditation practices and analysis of current practices based on quality criteria as specified by national and international authorities. To that end, this study seeks to respond to the following research questions: 1. What are the recent international trends in the field of higher education? 2. To what extent are student evaluations utilized as part of the quality assurance mechanisms in Turkey within the scope of current tendencies in higher education sector? An analysis of national and international literature on the topic is expected to contribute to higher education institutions in Turkey while developing strategies with regard to accreditation and student evaluations as part of their quality assurance mechanisms.

The Quality Movement and Student as a Customer

According to Kerridge and Mathews (1998), "A customer is one to whom we supply goods and services to satisfy their needs and/or wants" (p. 73), a definition used for a student in higher education along with market-orientation, yet the perception has broadened recently to include employers, professional bodies, the government and its surrounding community (Jacobs and Toit, 2006). The marketization of higher education and student as a customer view has been a controversial issue. According to Molesworth et al., in such an environment where student as a customer approach is valued, the focus naturally turns from teaching quality to the culture of student as a customer (2009). This approach primarily applies to countries where the students pay high tuition fees for university education. Still, Atalay's study emphasizes its negative influence on the relationship between students and instructors in terms of student demands especially in foundation universities in Turkey (2018).

Fairchild and Crage claim students with a consumer attitude are more inclined to feature university as an institution, the main role of which is to equip students with necessary skills and abilities for professional life instead of offering a learning community of academics (2014). This may also result from the policies adopted by universities. For example, Molesworth et al. mention a campaign in a UK university promoting a master's degree as an example for the increase in market orientation in the UK (2009). The primary purpose of such campaigns is to receive funding from the government and, similarly, Minelli et al. emphasize universities' need for accountability for their performance to receive funding that is essentially provided by the government (2008). It is further argued that "universities or courses that are deemed to be higher quality should receive more funding" in places like England, where undergraduate fees are controlled by the government (Gunn, 2018), which may be regarded as a proof that the perception of higher edu-

cation as a public good and private benefit has been changing (Eaton, 2018).

Despite its potential impediments asserted to negatively influence the provision of education, the customer-oriented view of higher education is an important factor in terms of protection of the stakeholders' rights as consumers, specifically students being actively involved in the education process. Douglas and Douglas (2006) explain five basic consumer protection principles to be taken into consideration in the provision of higher education. Accordingly, people must have access to the benefits of a particular product or service; people should have as many options as possible; people should have access to as much information as possible about the product or service; there should be a method in which people can complain about the product or service in case of a malfunction and people should have the right to give opinions to those who make decisions that affect them.

The consumer-oriented approach has contributed to higher education in terms of raising the awareness regarding the necessity of quality and accountability mechanisms in the changing world. "As the worldwide trend of lifelong learning across traditional boundaries is grasped and the importance of satisfying a selective market is increasingly realized, universities slowly began to adopt quality practices, based upon stakeholder and market views and feedback" (Jacobs and Toit, 2006, pp. 311-312). Gunn asserts that use of such mechanisms helps to improve quality and accountability processes in a more liberalized market (2018) and Tsiligiris and Hill (2020) mention the emphasis on quality assurance which can be realized through consumer protection practices for students. Similarly, according to Kerridge and Matthews, consideration of students as customers can bring accomplishment of top-quality performance in all areas of education (1998). Therefore, the quality of education is expected to improve as students as customers have a word in evaluating the provided services in accordance with their needs and expectations (Bunce et al. 2017).

Based on the consumer protection principles in the market-oriented view of higher education, students have the right to access information about a higher education institution, including the quality assurance practices in place to make sure that they will have access to quality education upon selection of a particular higher education institution. Yorke asserts that a basic customer model is not applicable in higher education due to such factors as the variety of backgrounds of students and their favored style of learning; therefore, they are both customers of services provided to them, namely education, and associates of the learning process (1999). As indicated by Gunn, giving the students the chance to evaluate teaching improves choice, enhances transparency and flexibility in learning (2018). Education is expected to contribute to creating major changes in student behaviors, which appears in Watty's research as "a unique, individually negotiated process between the teacher and the learner, where the participant is transformed" (2006, p. 294). Based on the definition of quality as transformation by Harvey and Green, as the continuous change process of the student, education leads to two types

of transformational notions: developing and strengthening the consumer, which can be realized through giving them responsibility for control by ensuring that minimum standards are met (1993). Therefore, to facilitate students' transformation process, higher education institutions are responsible for proving compliance with quality criteria through delegating power to students. It is a fact that quality and accountability have gained new meanings in parallel with the new environment where the students are considered customers. In this framework, Altbach and Knight contend, as a prominent form of quality assurance, accreditation guarantees high quality programs that institutions will offer to their students (2007).

Students' Learning Experiences, Academic Quality and Accreditation

"There has long been a tension between 'idealised' notions of the purposes of a university and the reality of students' experiences" (Molesworth et al., 2009, p. 278). Despite this belief, it is a fact that students can be assured of quality of a university when it is the result of a learning experience (Kohler, 2003). Therefore, teaching quality, learning environment, student outcomes and learning gains as a result of experiences lead to excellence in teaching (Gunn, 2018). Accordingly, academic quality can be described as concrete benefits gained as a consequence of university experiences (Eaton, 2007) and teaching quality could be considered one of the most prominent elements of academic quality.

Within the context of academic quality, Kuh (2009) emphasizes that student perceptions are not directly associated with how much they learn but the extent to which the students fall on experience and how much they are satisfied with their experience. Hence, student satisfaction and teaching quality are different concepts; student satisfaction is expected to follow a quality teaching experience (Gunn, 2018). In other words, a quality teaching experience leads to satisfaction of the students through their engagement in the learning process. Therefore, Zerihun, Beishuizen, and Van Os claim examining the students' learning experiences can be a contributing factor in the enhancement of quality of teaching (2012).

The focus of quality assurance has gone through a number of changes in time in accordance with changing contexts in higher education. Whereas the focus was more on quantitative data such as the number of books in the library or the number of students who graduated in the very beginning, it gradually shifted to the learning outcomes of the students. Later, Chaves (2006) and Zerihun, Beishuizen, and Van Os (2012) explain, the emphasis on learning outcomes shifted to students' learning experiences as part of the quality assurance processes. Within this scope, Özer, Gür and Küçükcan underline the significance of designating the learning outcomes in accordance with the feedback received from students in the form of student evaluations and redesign curricula accordingly with periodic updates for quality in higher education (2010). Under these circumstances, the emphasis should be on the extent to which quality assurance mechanisms impact the learning process of the students, and that this can be revealed in the most accurate way depending on the learning experiences acquired by

the students, and that the programs and institutions can prove and improve their quality in this direction.

This is the point where accreditation takes effect. In this context, Eaton (2012) describes accreditation as a mechanism to protect the variety of educational experience available to students in higher education institutions. Most of the review procedures and practices require universities to prove that they have appropriate evaluation processes and practices in use to assure their instructional quality (Kember et al., 2002). Also, Günay characterizes accreditation and accountability as constituents of quality assurance (2008). Accreditation is an external evaluation procedure and Dattey et al. assert that asking students about their experiences of quality education as mentioned in the accreditation standards is an appropriate way of learning about their perceptions regarding quality education (2019). Hence, as well as the institution's potential to raise graduates to meet academic standards or professional competence requirements, student evaluations are one of the general standards of quality assurance in which students are asked for their feedback on certain aspects of teaching, and many accrediting agencies have identified new accreditation evaluation processes accordingly (Dill, 2007; Harvey, 2004).

However, the experience of students in a higher education setting with relation to quality and their use in quality assurance causes controversy between academics and other stakeholders (Watty, 2003). According to some researchers, external evaluation is more difficult to be associated with learning and teaching (Harvey and Newton, 2004) because although it is considered by some to be the most desirable method of studying learning experiences (OECD, 2009), while regulating the existing circumstances, it fails to ask questions about the learning experience of students (Harvey, 2002) due to its lack or insufficiency of focus on teaching and learning. Also, as emphasized by Eaton, the shifts in higher education in parallel with the emerging trends as a response to the requirements of the current era may create difficulty for accrediting agencies (2018). Therefore, to meet the demands of the globalized world, accrediting agencies are in a perpetual process of revising their standards asking feedback from relevant stakeholders. Examining the issue from the perspective of students who are the main actors of learning experiences, Isaeva et al. contend that students feel their participation is limited by having to meet formal requirements set internally by the university management or externally by the accreditation body; they do not expect to be involved in discussions or treated as equal partners in the improvement processes (2020). However, being active participants in the quality improvement process of their university will trigger the transformative power of education for the students.

The definition of quality as transformation by Harvey and Green requires transformation of the student as a learner as a result of the education process (1993) and, accordingly, it is possible to strengthen the transformative power of quality in higher education through a shared view among stakeholders, which, otherwise, may lead to conflicts, thus diminishing the transformative potential of quality in higher education (Watty, 2003). Therefore, since learning is a complex process and the value of some educational experiences can only be understood and appreciated later in professional life, it is not appropriate to focus solely on student satisfaction to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning practices (Harrison et al., 2020). As academics play a significant role in the implementation of quality assurance systems, it is of utmost importance for the management to understand the organization of academic work to ensure continuous improvement in student experience (Newton, 2000).

Students' Evaluations of Quality

In addition to their right for access to information for processes and practices of a particular higher education institution, "students may expect to be asked their opinion of the varying aspects of their chosen higher education institution as well as to be informed what actions have resulted from the collection of their views" (Williams and Cappuccini-Ansfield, 2007, p. 167). With the growth of the university sector and increasing concerns about quality and the 'consumer protection' practices in enterprises in higher education, there have been significant developments in the processes designed to take students' opinions (Douglas and Douglas 2006; Popli 2005). Therefore, being the primary beneficiaries of teaching process, students have the right to evaluate its quality (Gosling and D'Andrea, 2001; Gunn, 2018; Watty, 2003). It is a satisfying experience for them to feel that their voices are being heard and taken into consideration, which influences their motivation in a positive way (Isaeva et al., 2020). Receiving feedback on students' attitudes of perceived teaching quality is considered as one of the most common quality improvement approaches in university education (Leckey and Neill, 2001). A considerable number of universities in the USA, UK, Australia and many countries in Europe utilize student feedback in teaching quality as a significant component of their quality schemes (Moore and Kuol, 2005).

In this era where higher education institutions face the tension of necessity of extra procedures for liability of instructors (Fairchild and Crage, 2014) as a result of the shifting focus in higher education institutions in accordance with globalization (Moore and Kuol, 2005), evaluating teacher perceptions of students, which is among the internal processes of the institution, is accepted as a proof of the quality of education (Zerihun, Beishuizen and Van Os, 2012). Thus, student evaluations due to the quality movement in education is becoming an increasingly important factor in providing quality higher education (Leckey and Neill, 2001). Therefore, despite resistance from the academic community, student evaluations have become an important element of the accountability mechanisms of many universities worldwide (Salmi and Saroyan, 2007).

"The analysis of student responses is as much about the students' engagement with the course and the success of their learning as it is about the lecturer's role in teaching and supporting learning" (Gosling and D'Andrea, 2001). Through student satisfaction surveys and involving students in the quality process, higher education institutions can attend to accountability criteria (Williams and Cappuccini-Ansfield, 2007) as a

response to requirements for liability of instructors. Moreover, some universities publish evaluation reports on their websites for their prospective and current students as the results are used for receiving funding for the university (Nair, Patil, and Mertova, 2011).

Students' evaluation of the teaching quality within the scope of quality assurance in higher education serves various purposes (Dunrong and Fan, 2009; Leckey and Neill, 2001). It can be used as diagnostic feedback to help academic staff improve the quality of their teaching performance; it can provide a teaching efficacy criterion for use in administrative decision making, it can help students make decisions while choosing lessons; it can assist students in becoming active participants in the learning process; thereby contributing to student autonomy. For example, making student views public may enhance student autonomy through provision of first-hand, transparent information on the courses and instructors (Harvey, 2003). Also, if designed correctly, student feedback may offer a valuable alternative to understanding and identifying learning outcomes that play an important role in quality assurance in higher education (Douglass, Thomson, and Zhao, 2012).

Within the framework of quality assurance, Kember et al. (2002) advocate the idea that feedback obtained from students through questionnaires contributes to improving the quality of teaching. After the evaluation, the lecturers who learn their deficiencies then try to improve their teaching. This contributes to the development of teaching quality over time. In addition, students' evaluation results can be used for contract renewals and promotions. All of this contributes to the improvement of the performance and thus the quality of teaching. Furthermore, through student feedback, it is possible for the universities to determine spheres of student experiences which need further elaboration (Nair, Patil, and Mertova, 2011) and institutions of higher education are interested in improvement over time and collecting student feedback will provide data for benchmarking to help institutions improve (Williams and Cappuccini-Ansfield, 2007).

As a constituent of quality assurance, it is important to receive feedback from students about instructors and lessons for developmental purposes. Getting feedback on teaching quality encourages more change compared to assessment surveys with a number of disadvantages and potential for misuse (Schuck, Gordon, and Buchanan, 2008). For example, in his research, Heffner (2013) revealed that meeting student needs and providing students with opportunities to express their opinions can play an important role in ensuring student satisfaction as included in academic quality criteria.

Critiques on Students' Evaluations of Quality

Despite various benefits articulated in the framework of potential contributions of student evaluations on teaching quality as an essential component of external quality assurance processes and practices, there have also been criticisms regarding the use of student feedback in quality assurance. Leckey and Neill assert that feedback from students is one of the most puzzling areas in quality assurance practices (2001). For example, with regard to student feedback on teaching quality in the context of market-oriented higher education, Molesworth et al. discuss higher education institutions' only praising satisfaction of a student as a consumer, which leads to preparation of university students for a well-paid job and thus consumer life (2009). Similarly, Darwin mentions the students' feedback on teaching quality in Australia as "strongly contested, with the seminal tensions between improvement of teaching increasingly being further challenged by the rising tides of internal and external quality assurance mechanisms" (2016, p. 430).

The insufficiency of definition of the customer and the stakeholder in the field of education may lead to a weakness of feedback collection system, which causes challenges in the interpretation of related results based on student evaluations (Keridge and Mathews, 1998). Within the scope, although the objective of student evaluations is supposed to be quality improvement, their use to determine poor teaching performance may cause the evaluations to lose their power to lead to improvement (Dunrong and Fan, 2009; Gosling and D'Andrea, 2001). Therefore, instructors usually express concerns regarding the use of student feedback for personnel decisions (Beran and Rokosh, 2009). If the objective of feedback collection from students is quality improvement, it is necessary for the institution to implement a systematic cycle for analysis of results, reporting areas for action to stakeholders (Harvey, 2003).

With regard to role of student feedback in improving teaching quality, there are some gaps in the design of the students' assessment of the quality of the education system. For example, in some higher education institutions, students are forced to evaluate all the courses they attend within a week. In this case, students may not reflect their true thoughts. Also, not consulting the students while creating the questionnaires to evaluate their real learning experiences may cause students to make assessments based on the opinions of others (Dunrong and Fan, 2009) as in this case students' prior skills and abilities are not taken into consideration as part of their experiences in the analysis (Wiers-Jenssen et al., 2002). Students complain about the design of evaluation system due to the fact that certain number of questionnaires need to be filled in so that they could plan the study load for the upcoming semester, which may limit their opportunities to suggest improvements for the quality assurance system (Isaeva et al., 2020). Besides hesitations regarding the time allocated for evaluations and the inclusion of students in the design process, Balam and Shannon highlight instructors' concerns regarding the validity and reliability of student feedback (2010), which may cause confusions on the side of the academics whether to take actions in accordance with the findings (Arthur, 2009), which has a potential of negatively influencing the improvement of teaching quality. Also, the importance attached to evaluation scores by universities may have a negative influence on instructors' careers in case students do not approve approaches for teaching adopted by the instructors (Chan, Luk, and Zeng, 2014). This situation may lead to compliance behavior, which is not in line with assumed roles and responsibilities of instructors (Schuck, Gordon, and Buchanan, 2008).

Despite their potential drawbacks, student evaluations, which many universities use as part of their quality assurance schemes, can be considered as an important means of improving quality practices because they give students the opportunity to articulate their needs and expectations in relation to their learning experiences especially at a time when quality assurance is closely associated with student-centered learning and the involvement of students as primary stakeholders in decision-making processes regarding instructional design.

The Turkish Context

YÖK has gone through a number of major phases with regard to quality assurance and quality improvement practices. Billing and Thomas (2000) mention the very beginning of the process with reference to the pilot project for establishment of a quality assurance system. They explain YÖK's concern at the time stemming from the transformation of quality assurance systems as a result of internationalization about leveling the views concerning academic freedom and liability. Therefore, a pilot project was initiated in 1997, the aim of which was to build a quality assurance system in Turkey which would be based on the United Kingdom model where research and teaching were examined and evaluated separately. This was specifically considered to assure the accountability for consumed resources and international acceptance of qualifications of graduates. There was a need for a national external quality assurance mechanism which would systematically check academic standards. As in most countries, it was research achievement, rather than teaching excellence, which led to promotion of the academics and departmental reputations.

The Bologna process has contributed to transformation of higher education in terms of the focus on quality assurance processes for ensuring that educational goals are met (Ek et al., 2013). This situation also applies to Turkish Higher Education concerning quality assurance processes and practices adopted and realized in parallel with Bologna process, which commenced in 2001. Accordingly, "First, educational policies were brought in line with the European Union integration process; and second, the government strategized on how to teach European levels of quality in higher education." (Emil, 2017, p. 189). It is stated on the official website of YÖK that following the legislation on academic evaluation and quality improvement in higher education institutions in 2005, the aim of which was to form quality standards in higher education and to contribute to international harmony in the field, The Commission of Academic Assessment and Quality Improvement (YÖDEK) was established. Later, with the publication of higher education quality assurance legislation in 2015, Turkish Higher Education Quality Council (YÖKAK), which is responsible for the coordination of academic assessment and quality improvement processes including internal and external evaluations of higher education institutions, was formed. Within this framework, Turkish higher education institutions are subject to annual internal evaluations and external evaluations taking place every five years. The system is also open to international evaluations (2020).

During this period, studies were conducted regarding different constituents of the quality system including student evaluations as part of the quality criteria. The studies mainly focused on instructor performance evaluations including collection of student feedback with relation to their learning experiences, which was relatively a new form of implementation for many higher education institutions, and which was in line with Günay's (2011) suggestion on consideration of students as the best referees in the evaluation of instructors. Billing and Thomas stated that at the time of the pilot project, although an increase was observed in the use of student feedback questionnaires, it was still insufficient to take actions to mitigate any issues (2000). As stated by Esen and Esen, students are the ones who get the service, namely education, to determine teaching quality, therefore, student evaluations require elaborate attention and thus teaching performance should be evaluated primarily by students (2015). Kaptanoğlu and Özok indicate that academic performance evaluation is conducted in three areas in Turkey: teaching, research and service. The criteria taken into consideration for teaching aspect of performance evaluation of instructors can be defined as the following: courses offered within the past four years, theses administered, jury memberships, and student feedback results (2006). Some studies were conducted whether student feedback was taken into account sufficiently in overall evaluations of instructors in Turkish higher education institutions. For example, more than half of the instructors taking part in Tonbul's study mentioned teaching is not sufficiently considered in academic promotions compared to publications, which was stated as a concern. Instructors accordingly suggested that teaching activities must be taken into consideration as much as publications as part of performance evaluation of instructors (2008), as confirmed in Kalaycı's study as insufficient consideration of teaching performance compared to that of research performance. The study conducted by Şenses (2007) revealed similar results in terms of specification of student evaluations for academic promotion as a concern. Similarly, Başbuğ and Ünsal's research emphasized instructor preference for inclusion of student feedback as part of the instructor evaluation criteria in addition to publications (2010). In the meantime, the system was already in place in some universities; for example, Çakır's research pointed out that the most significant criteria in the evaluation of instructor performance was the level of success in teaching, which was determined through student feedback, and a majority of instructors indicated their teaching performance was evaluated by students, which gave them the opportunity to improve their teaching practices and evaluate their system of teaching (2008). Atalay's research, however, criticized student evaluations in terms of positioning of the students as customers from the perspectives of instructors especially in foundation universities (2018). These studies together with the activities in higher education regarding quality improvement, accreditation and use of student feedback as part of the quality assurance schemes demonstrate the increase in awareness towards the system of quality.

It is a fact that the number of universities with national and international accreditation is gradually increasing in Turkey in

accordance with the significance attached to quality assurance in higher education. According to Infographic Report of YÖKAK, currently, a total of 160 external evaluations have been conducted in state universities, foundation universities and foundation vocational schools (2019c). Of the criteria concerning student evaluations within the context of institutional internal and external evaluation, the following are prevalent (YÖKAK, 2019a; 2020): inclusion of stakeholders in education, research and development and internationalization processes, which require involvement of students as well as other stakeholders in decision-making processes to turn their needs to objectives and goals, which in turn is expected to lead to quality; systematic monitoring and update of programs in accordance with student-centered teaching, learning and evaluation; establishment of competitive academic promotion criteria for instructors; systematic feedback collection mechanism from students for different constituents of the programs including the course instructors, which are utilized for improvement.

Concerning the increase in the number of accredited programs in Turkey, the current number of accredited programs is 671, which was only 433 in 2016. As of 2019, the number of programs accredited by national accrediting agencies is 508, which was only 340 in 2016. Also, the number of programs accredited by international accrediting agencies is 163, compared to only 93 programs in 2016 (YÖKAK, 2019c). According to general evaluation report of YÖKAK, in the year 2019, within the scope of accredited programs according to fields, it is observed that accreditation in the field of education is prominent compared to the other programs being granted accreditation in terms of the sharp increase within one-year period. As a consequence, while the number of accredited programs in the field of education was only 4 in 2018, it reached to 33 in 2019 (2020), which can be considered a significant increase.

In the self-evaluation report of YÖKAK, the pilot project for external evaluation of intensive English programs of Turkish universities was elaborated on due to lack of a national and independent accrediting agency in the field (2019b). Taking into consideration the rise in the number of accredited education programs and YÖK's special emphasis on intensive English programs, the standards of international accrediting agencies that granted accreditation to intensive English programs of Turkish universities is of prime importance concerning inclusion of student feedback as part of quality mechanisms. Currently, certain international accrediting agencies are prevalent in Turkey in terms of international intensive English program accreditation. As of the date, a total of 47 intensive English programs are accredited by three leading international accrediting agencies, which all include student evaluations as part of their quality standards in parallel with the importance of student experiences in the learning process.

In addition to quality assurance of Turkish higher education institutions, YÖKAK is also responsible for recognition of national and international accrediting agencies. Within this scope, the international accrediting agencies Agency for Quality Assurance (AQAS), Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and Foundation for International Business

Administration Accreditation (FIBAA) were recognized for a period of five years by YÖKAK (2020). Students' satisfaction with their programs and methods for data collection as well as evaluation of student expectations and needs; instructor evaluation and performance systems including contributions being incorporated into the evaluation of instructor performance and evaluation of instructor teaching quality through student feedback; involvement of students in the design of their learning process and assessing the quality of studies and teaching through evaluations and surveys, respectively can be counted as essential components of quality standards with regard to student evaluations implemented in aforementioned accrediting agencies. Also, one of the 12 YÖKAK recognized national accrediting agencies in the field of education, EPDAD, The Accrediting Agency for Teacher Education Programs Evaluation and Accreditation, puts emphasis on student experiences and thus collection of feedback from students regarding the quality of teaching stating the importance of student satisfaction surveys and use of teaching evaluation forms as a proof for existence of quality assurance and implementation mechanisms (EPDAD, 2016).

Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications for Turkish Higher Education Institutions

The main role of higher education is to contribute to transformation of the students as a consequence of the education process in which students must be given responsibility and assured that minimum standards for quality are being met, which is the main pillar for the definition of quality as transformation by Harvey and Green (1993). In this competitive state of higher education, it seems almost inevitable for universities to maintain their accountability towards their stakeholders through such quality assurance mechanisms as accreditation. It is a fact that accreditation enhances the institutional processes and practices of universities as well as attracting international students, which contributes to internationalization of universities. To improve the quality of teaching, it is of utmost importance to focus the institutional practices on students' learning experiences. The more students are included in quality assurance processes, the more they feel they belong and they are cared for, which promotes student engagement and active learning, which are indicators of teaching quality and transformative power of education. This will also change the students' perception of a higher education institution from a place functioning to prepare them for professional life into a learning community.

Students' learning experiences are generally included in accreditation standards in the form of students' evaluations of teaching. As a matter of fact, programs and/or institutions improve while going through the accreditation period in terms of focus on student experiences; they may initiate new practices to meet the standards or they may make modifications in their existing practices. Research suggests that students' opinions must be consulted in the form of evaluations. Here the issue lies in the methodology of collection of feedback from students. It is critical not to solely depend on student feedback while trying to improve teaching quality but to sup-

port it through some other means such as peer evaluations and self-evaluations to be conducted on a regular basis. Only then can quality as transformation be achieved and continuous improvement in student experiences be ensured.

In spite of their potential drawbacks, student evaluations are one of the most prevailing forms of quality assurance mechanisms of universities and they are thus included as constituents of quality standards of accreditation and evaluation schemes. This subject has attracted the attention of many researchers as quality and accreditation are at the core of higher education in accordance with the demands of the current era within the scope of emerging trends. This research has revealed that in accordance with recent trends in higher education across the world, the importance attached to quality along with the number of accredited programs are increasing in Turkey, and despite the controversy as also stated in the rest of the article, student evaluations are being extensively used as part of quality assurance practices of many Turkish universities, in line with relevant literature.

It seems that students' evaluation of teaching through student feedback will continue to be utilized as an essential component of accreditation, which is attracting more attention from universities worldwide not to fall behind in this competitive environment. Therefore, it is significant for Turkish higher education institutions to eliminate any potential drawbacks for the preparation, implementation and use of student evaluations to prove and improve quality. Through improvement of existing practices by taking good practices as examples from different parts of the world, the current state of student evaluations can be turned into a more prevalent means for quality improvement thereby contributing to transformative power of higher education on a national level. Future research will thus benefit from the analysis of the extent to which use of student evaluations as a constituent of quality assurance contributes to the improvement of teaching practices in Turkish higher education institutions.

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