Introduction

The original opening statement of this chapter was “The Republic of Turkey is a young country established in 1923”. After the night of Friday 15 July 2016, the unprecedented incidents that mainly happened in Ankara and Istanbul must be addressed. The failed military coup and the subsequent declaration of a three-month state of emergency have changed the direction of this chapter, and more importantly the direction of higher education in Turkey. The immediate influence of these incidents has been observed in the form of the closing down of 15 foundation universities, a request from the YÖK (Council of Higher Education) that all deans resign, and the removal or surveillance of numerous university faculty members and administrators on the suspicion of involvement with the
community the government claims, planned the failed coup. In the midst of this chaos, the effort to establish quality assurance and accreditations in Turkish higher education continues. In this chapter, information about the centralised and highly bureaucratic infrastructure of the higher education system will be provided along with information about its late historical development and an overview of quality assurance and accreditation work at the national and the international levels. The chapter will end with a brief overview of the current status of higher education in terms of quality, and how higher education institutions approach the establishment of quality assurance mechanisms and accreditation in Turkey.

Turkey is indeed a young republic, established in 1923 after the collapse of Ottoman Empire. Throughout its short history, there have been substantial reforms in the social, cultural, economic and political arena in the effort to construct a modern nation-state, and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk – the first president of the republic– was the main figure behind these modernisation reforms. Turkey has been an official candidate for European Union (EU) membership since 1987, a member of NATO since 1952, and a member of the OECD since 1961. It is a developing country with a population of 78.67 million in 2015, roughly 20 million of which falls between the ages of 15 and 34 (World Bank Country Profile 2016). The expected years of schooling is 14.9, whereas the mean years of schooling is 7.6 years (UNDP 2015); the Youth Literacy Rate is 99.2 per cent (UNESCO 2016); and the Adult Literacy Rate is 94.9 per cent (UNDP 2015). Public expenditure on education makes up 2.9 per cent of overall expenditures (UNDP 2015). Turkey’s labour force is characterised by a low level of schooling, despite the improvements among younger cohorts (World Bank Group 2015).

The UNDP Human Development Report (2015) placed Turkey under the High Human Development category. This report is based on the Human Development Index (HDI), which tracks three basic dimensions of human development: a long and a healthy life, access to knowledge and a decent standard of living. The report highlighted the progress Turkey has made by increasing its HDI value from 0.492 to 0.761 between 1980 and 2014, meaning that life expectancy, years of schooling and gross national income have also risen during this period. Nevertheless, the inequality adjusted HDI (IHDI) shows that there is unequal access to education, employment and other areas, which has resulted in a significant loss of overall HDI. It is fair to conclude that there are disadvantaged groups among the population due to socio-economic background, gender and ethnicity, and that these groups also experience inequality in access to K–12 education and higher education.

Bekir Gür (2012) identifies Turkish higher education as a growing industry, using a framework set out by Arthur Levine, the former president of Columbia University Teachers College, mostly because of the late development of modern universities in Turkey. In order to better understand the issue of quality in the Turkish education system, it is necessary to outline its historical development. In the next section, this historical development is categorised under the Single-Party era, Multi-Party era, the Military Coup era and Post 2000s.
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that it is the newer universities that are struggling in competition with the more established universities, and unfortunately QA work is low on their agendas. With the turmoil in the Turkish state after the failed military coup of July 15 2016, quality assurance and accreditation initiatives will surely be pushed further down in the agenda. Not only the state itself but also all government offices – specifically higher education institutions – are under close scrutiny. Within the scope of the state of emergency, the decrees administered by the YÖK so far have led to the resignation of the deans of almost all universities in Turkey, four rectors have also been removed from their positions, all permission to travel abroad were suspended for a week, and numerous faculty members were removed from their positions due accusations that they were associated with the coup attempt. In this high-pressure environment, centralisation of university administration is expected to be reinforced, and the notion of granting autonomy to universities seems an unrealistic goal.

It can be concluded that the campaign, whose motto is “One university in each city”, and which was initiated by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the 2000s, led to the establishment of numerous universities; whereas the number of universities was 93 when the AKP came to power in 2002, by 2014, there were 193 universities in Turkey. More than doubling the number of universities in a fairly short period of time naturally created a need for more academic staff, physical capacity, and social and cultural opportunities in the cities where universities were established. However, this campaign did not necessarily follow a strategic plan or a vision for higher education.

Altinsoy (2011) evaluated the development of new state universities with regard to these issues and suggested a set of policies to improve quality. Because the “One university in each city” goal has been achieved, she suggests that it is now the time to work on diversification, specialisation and quality. Further, she identified some specific areas for improvement among the newly established universities: specialise, increase quality, cultivate new faculty, plan the space, establish central classes, libraries and laboratories, improve location within the city, encourage community service, increase the number of students, and initiate new programmes. To summarise, Turkish higher education has achieved the quantitative increase in a fairly short period. However, during the planning phase, quality was not a priority, and quality and accreditation mechanisms did not become part of the institutional culture. Milan Kundera once said that “Culture is perishing in overproduction, in an avalanche of words, in the madness of quantity”.

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