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Section for Higher Education | Division for Education 2030

Higher Education Report: Türkiye
UNESCO National Commission in alliance with Higher Education Quality Council

Ankara, 30/3/2022

Abstract

The Turkish higher education system is very dynamic in nature, rapidly expanding in numbers as well as in terms of its impact in the region and around the world. There are more than 8 million students and approximately 180 thousand academic staff at Turkish universities. Türkiye has the highest number of higher education students among the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) countries and has been showing notable success in the implementation of the Bologna reforms which is a concrete sign of her dedication to offer quality higher education in accordance with the European standards.

In the last 20 years, the number of higher education institutions, academic staff and access to higher education, as well as student and academic staff mobility promoted by the national and international partners tremendously increased, making Türkiye more visible at the global higher education arena.

Türkiye aims to strengthen the quantitative growth of the higher education sector by adopting a quality-based development policy. The Turkish Higher Education Quality Council was established in 2017 to contribute to the establishment of quality culture in the higher education ecosystem.

An inclusive higher education is a global challenge. The number of refugees is increasing around the world. Türkiye, as a consequence of her geographical location, is one of the countries facing it closely. Located at the immigration routes and neighbouring ongoing Syrian war, Türkiye welcomes a large number of displaced people. Large-scale policy measures have been taken to include vulnerable young populations in the higher education system. Leaving no one behind in higher education is of great importance. Access of the students with disabilities to higher education is another important component of all inclusive education. In

this context, several measures have been taken to promote the access of the students with disability to university education.

COVID-19 pandemic, on the other hand, raised great concerns for the future of higher education as it interrupted the studies of millions of students around the world.

This report describes the structure of and quantitative changes in the higher education in Türkiye discussing the current challenges and Türkiye's response.

Content

Acronyms

CoHE   : Council of Higher Education of Türkiye

THEQC   : Turkish Higher Education Quality Council

TQF-HE   : Turkish Qualifications Framework for Higher Education

Presentation

This report is a compact introduction to the Turkish higher education system pointing out the current global challenges faced by Türkiye and policy response of the Turkish higher education stakeholders. The statistical data given in the report is taken from the Council of Higher Education database, Turkish Quality Council and Bologna Implementation Report 2020. The report tracks the expansion of higher education in Türkiye by sharing higher education numbers of the last ten years. Structure of and the bodies responsible for higher education in Türkiye is depicted in detail. By sharing primary challenges of higher education and Türkiye's reflection on them, this report attempts to make a national contribution to the global challenges facing the higher education community.

Current situation of higher education

The Turkish Higher Education system constitutes an important part of the European Higher Education Area since 2001. Bologna Process' goals, like in the other member states, offer appropriate tools such as ECTS, DS, qualifications frameworks, etc. for Turkish HE as well. The Council of Higher Education (CoHE) is primarily responsible for the implementation of the Bologna process in the Turkish higher education system. In terms of the number of students enrolled in tertiary education, Türkiye is in the first row among the Bologna Process Member States.

Turkish Higher Education, with 207 higher education institutions, more than 8 million students, and nearly 180 thousand teaching staff, is growing day by day both quantitatively and qualitatively and is becoming highly competitive at the global arena.

According to 2018 UNESCO data, Türkiye is among the top 10 host destinations for international students. The number of international students was 16,656 in the 2000 - 2021 academic year. In the past twenty years, with the effective and target-oriented internationalisation policies adopted, international student numbers have shown significant increase. Today, Türkiye hosts more than 260,000 international students coming from 182 different countries.

Student and academic staff mobility has also substantially increased in recent years as a result of various exchange programs, scholarships and other opportunities offered by national institutions and international stakeholders. Türkiye, member of the European Higher Education Area, is an active implementer of the Erasmus Exchange Program. As a national initiative, Mevlana exchange program, launched by the Council of Higher Education, has been an important tool in internationalisation since 2013 as well.

Türkiye shows important development in the implementation of Bologna Reforms. According to 2020 Bologna Process Implementation Report, Türkiye's scorecard in the fields of "Monitoring the implementation of the ECTS system by external quality assurance"; "Stage of Implementation of the Diploma Supplement"; "Implementation of National Qualifications Frameworks", "Level of openness to cross border quality assurance of EQAR registered agencies", "System level (automatic) recognition for academic purposes", "Level of student participation in external quality assurance system", "Level of international participation in external quality assurance", "Recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning" are green.

1.1 Historical enrolment and graduation rates

With the establishment of the Council of Higher Education in Türkiye in 1981, the number of higher education institutions increased rapidly, thus higher education became accessible for a wider group of people. Parallel to the developments around the world, transformation in the Turkish higher education system began in the 2000s and the higher education sector expanded at a fast pace since then. The number of students at all levels was just around 1.5 million in 2000. Since 2008, the system became nationwide and at least one university was founded in every city. The number of state and foundation universities increased and students from different backgrounds entered the higher education system.

Today, the Turkish Higher Education Area has a large structure covering 8,240,997 students (see Figure 1). Majority of students in higher education are at undergraduate level. The gender distribution of students at all levels is almost equal.

Figure 1 - Total Number of Students Enrolled in Higher Education (2020-2021)

Türkiye ranks first in the European Higher Education Area in terms of the number of students enrolled in higher education according to the 2020 Bologna Process Implementation Report.

The distribution of new enrollment, total number of students and total number of graduates by gender of the last decade is as follows;

Table 1 - The student enrollment and graduate distribution numbers (male/female/total)

NEW ADMISSIONS			TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS			TOTAL NUMBER OF GRADUATES		
Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
2011-2012						2010-2011		
454.187	424.641	878.828	2.335.804	1.967.746	4.303.550	276.571	241.475	518.046
2012-2013						2011-2012		
496.491	468.782	965.273	2.666.039	2.257.901	4.923.940	307.810	284.238	592.048
2013-2014						2012-2013		
664.284	583.909	1.248.193	2.964.442	2.508.079	5.472.521	357.142	331.295	688.437
2014-2015						2013-2014		
724.675	658.557	1.383.232	3.276.658	2.786.228	6.062.886	372.194	361.043	733.237
2015-2016						2014-2015		
823.176	712.233	1.535.409	3.621.517	3.067.668	6.689.185	407.610	393.888	801.498
2016-2017						2015-2016		
737.130	697.459	1.434.589	3.886.107	3.312.880	7.198.987	397.808	405.014	802.822
2017-2018						2016-2017		
703.175	679.414	1.382.589	4.047.302	3.513.069	7.560.371	389.492	414.943	804.435
2018-2019						2017-2018		
745.102	747.175	1.492.277	4.064.516	3.675.986	7.740.502	405.610	440.249	845.859
2019-2020						2018-2019		
733.922	782.365	1.516.287	4.108.571	3.831.562	7.940.133	417.009	474.449	891.458
2020-2021						2019-2020		
843.735	936.753	1.780.488	4.191.572	4.049.425	8.240.997	530.566	582.181	1.112.747

Table 2 - Graduation rates by year

Total Number of Graduates		Four-Year Graduation Rate	Five-Year Graduation Rate	Six-Year Graduation Rate
Year	Total			
2010-2011	518.046	80,51%	83,57%	80,11%
2011-2012	592.048	69,31%	92,01%	95,51%
2012-2013	688.437	82,82%	80,60%	106,99%
2013-2014	733.237	89,54%	88,21%	85,84%
2014-2015	801.498	91,20%	97,87%	96,43%
2015-2016	802.822	83,17%	91,35%	98,04%
2016-2017	804.435	64,45%	83,34%	91,53%
2017-2018	845.859	61,15%	67,77%	87,63%
2018-2019	891.458	58,06%	64,45%	71,42%
2019-2020	1.112.747	77,57%	72,47%	80,45%

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1.2 Academic Staff in Higher Education Institutions

There are around 180.000 academicians working under different titles within Turkish higher education institutions. The definitions of the titles alongside with the distribution of numbers and titles take place below:

Academic Staff: *They are faculty members, lecturers and research assistants working in higher education institutions.*

1. Faculty Members

Professor:
Professorship is the highest academic title among faculty members.

Associate professor:
Associate professor is a person who has the academic title of "associate professor" given by the Interuniversity Board.

Faculty Member PhD:
Faculty Member PhD is a person who has successfully completed his doctorate studies and has an academic title of specialisation in medicine, dentistry, pharmacy and veterinary medicine or has gained proficiency in one of the certain branches of art determined by the Council of Higher Education upon the recommendation of the Interuniversity Board.

2. Lecturer:
A lecturer is responsible for giving, practising or having the courses taught in higher education institutions.

3. Research Assistant
Research Assistant is an academic staff who assists in research, examination and experiments in higher education institutions and performs other related duties given by authorised bodies.
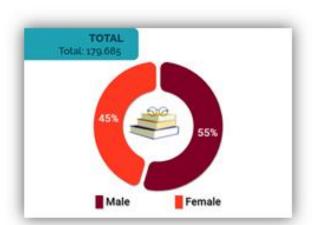
Figure 2 - Total Number of Academic Staff (2020-2021)

1.3 Quantity and types of higher education institutions

There are 207 higher education institutions in Türkiye (see Figure 3):

- State (Public) Universities: 129
- Foundation (Non-profit) Universities: 74
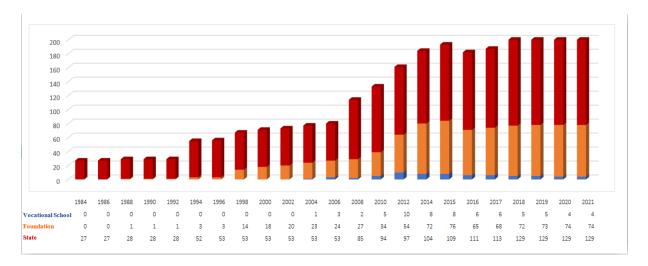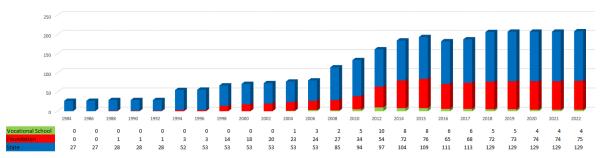- Vocational Schools of Higher Education Institutions: 4

Figure 3 – Number of Higher Education Institutions By Year:

	1984	1986	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Vocational School	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	2	5	10	8	8	6	6	6	5	5	4	4
Foundation	0	0	1	1	1	3	3	14	18	20	23	24	27	34	54	72	76	65	68	72	73	74	74
State	27	27	28	28	28	52	53	53	53	53	53	53	85	94	97	104	109	111	113	129	129	129	129

	1984	1986	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Vocational School	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	2	5	10	8	8	6	6	6	5	5	4	4
Foundation	0	0	1	1	1	3	3	14	18	20	23	24	27	34	54	72	76	65	68	72	73	74	74	75
State	27	27	28	28	28	52	53	53	53	53	53	53	85	94	97	104	109	111	113	129	129	129	129	129

The types of the academic units are as follows;

Faculty (College): A division conducting higher education, scholarly research and publication. Various departments and programmes may be connected to it. Students earn a Bachelor's degree at the end of an educational programme that lasts for at least four years.

Graduate School: An institution in universities concerned with graduate education, scholarly research and applications. Graduate schools award MA, MSc or PhD degrees.

4-year School: An institution of higher education which is mainly concerned with providing instruction for a specific profession. It lasts for eight semesters.

Conservatory: An institution of higher education in which artists are trained for music and the performing arts. It lasts for eight semesters.

Post-Secondary Vocational School: An institution of higher education that is aimed at training human capacity in specific professions and provides instruction lasting four semesters.

Research and Application Center: An institution of higher education carrying out research and applied studies to meet the applied study needs of various areas and to provide preparatory and support activities for various professional areas to support education in institutions of higher education.

There are a total of 1916 active faculties, 583 graduate schools, 349 4-year schools, 53 conservatories, 1008 post-secondary vocational schools, 4093 research and applications centers in Turkish higher education institutions.

Considering the number of programs in higher education institutions there are 7.785 Associate Degree, 8.872 Bachelor's Degree, 15.312 Master's Degree, 11.171 PhD Degree and 144 Proficiency in Arts Degree Programs in Turkish institutions (Figure 4).

Figure 4-The number of programs in Turkish higher education system

1.3 Legal and Institutional Framework of Higher Education

1.3.1 General Structure of Higher Education:

In 1981, in accordance with the Higher Education Law (No. 2547), the administration of higher education in Türkiye was comprehensively restructured. This law commenced the restructuring process of academic, institutional and administrative aspects in higher education. The system thereby became centralised, with all higher education institutions tied to the Council of Higher Education (CoHE).

Academies and educational institutions were transformed into universities and educational faculties, respectively, and conservatories and vocational schools were affiliated with universities.

After this restructuring, all institutions of higher education were designed as universities. Expansion of higher education throughout the country was achieved, application to higher education was centralised, and a central university exam and placement were introduced. In addition to public universities, the first nonprofit foundation university in Türkiye started to provide education for students in 1986.
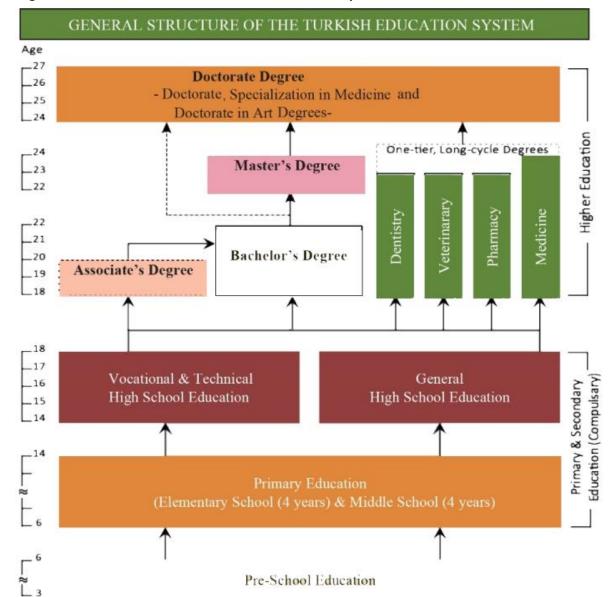
Figure 5 - General Structure of the Turkish Education System

GENERAL STRUCTURE OF THE TURKISH EDUCATION SYSTEM

1.3.2 Institutional Framework of the Council of Higher Education (CoHE):

The Council of Higher Education (CoHE) was established by Law No. 2547 dated November 6, 1981. Council of Higher Education is an autonomous and constitutional body consisting of 21 members. Nine of them are elected among the members to form the Executive Board. The President and two Deputy Presidents are at the head of the Executive Board. The Council is responsible for planning, governing and auditing of the Turkish Higher Education System.
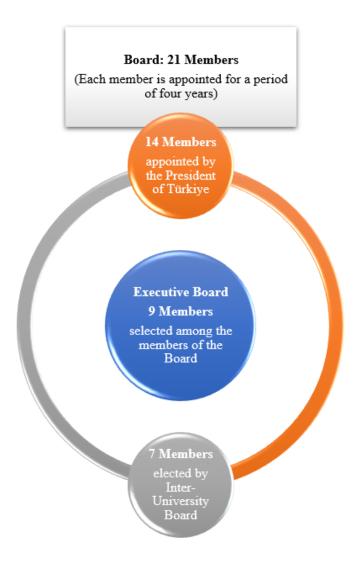
Figure 6 - Structure of the Council of Higher Education

Board: 21 Members
(Each member is appointed for a period of four years)

14 Members appointed by the President of Türkiye

Executive Board
9 Members
selected among the members of the Board

7 Members elected by Inter-University Board

CoHE is responsible for all higher education institutions as an institution that has autonomy and public identity within the framework of powers and duties given by Article 130 and 131 of the Constitution and the said provisions of the Law. CoHE is authorised for the strategic planning, coordination, supervision and monitoring of higher education as well as establishing and maintaining quality assurance mechanisms in Türkiye.

The main focus of CoHE is to improve the quality of education and develop social and economic relations through higher education.

The recognition and equivalence procedures of qualifications (diplomas and degrees) received from higher education institutions abroad are under the responsibility of the Council of Higher Education in accordance with Article 7/p of the Higher Education Law No. 2547. The recognition and equivalence procedures, which are regulated by the regulations updated when needed, are carried out under the framework of the Regulation dated December 5, 2017, which was prepared by considering the "Recognition of Documents Regarding Higher Education at European Region" (2017), also known as the Lisbon Convention.

1.4.1 Bologna Process/European Higher Education Area

Türkiye has been a full member of the Bologna Process/European Higher Education Area since 2001. Bologna Process' goals, like in the other member states, offer appropriate tools such as ECTS, DS, qualifications frameworks, etc. for Turkish HE as well. The Council of Higher Education (CoHE) is primarily responsible for the implementation of the Bologna process in the Turkish higher education system. In terms of the number of students enrolled in tertiary education, Türkiye is in the first row among the Bologna Process Member States.

CoHE carried out the project "Implementation and Sustainability of EHEA Reforms in Turkish Higher Education System" (TURQUAS) between 2016 and 2020 which was accepted by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ Programme. The main target groups of the project are HEIs (faculty members, students and administrative personnel), employers, related departments of CoHE, and accreditation agencies. Other potential beneficiaries are the Ministry of National Education, Vocational Qualifications Authority (VQA) and Turkish National Agency. [1]

The number of Turkish universities having received the European Credit Transfer System Label (ECTS Label) is 31 which is the highest within EHEA countries since 2009. The number of Turkish universities having received the Diploma Supplement Label (DS Label) is 73.

Establishment of Turkish Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (TQF-HE) was initiated with the decision of the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) in 2006. The work was organised and conducted at the national level by a Commission and Working Groups under the coordination of the CoHE. Qualification framework for associate degree, undergraduate, graduate and doctoral degree is identified by General Assembly decision of CoHE dated 21.05.2009. The design for the framework of TQF-HE in line with EQF was completed in 2009. Consultation processes and national discussions involving higher education institutions, representatives from NGOs, trade unions, ministries and student councils were carried out in 2009. The framework was approved in 2010 by the CoHE General Assembly Decision.

Work on regulations on TQF started in 2014. The Regulation of Turkish Qualifications Framework is published in the official gazette 19.11.2015.

The Turkish Referencing Report introduces our education system and TQF to the international community, proves the compatibility between TQF and EQF, presents true and explicit answers related to the criteria of referencing which is published by the EQF Advisory Group and includes plans for the TQF implementation process.

The Turkish Qualifications Framework points out the national qualifications framework which was designed in harmony with the European Qualifications Framework and displays all qualifications gained through vocational, general and academic programs including primary, secondary and higher education or other learning environments.

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[1] More information about the project can be found at http://www.yok.gov.tr/web/turquas.

Türkiye shows important development in the implementation of Bologna Reforms. According to 2020 Bologna Process Implementation Report, Türkiye's scorecard in the fields of "Monitoring the implementation of the ECTS system by external quality assurance"; "Stage of Implementation of the Diploma Supplement"; "Implementation of National Qualifications Frameworks", "Level of openness to cross border quality assurance of EQAR registered agencies", "System level (automatic) recognition for academic purposes", "Level of student participation in external quality assurance system", "Level of international participation in external quality assurance", "Recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning" are green.

The quality assurance system in higher education institutions in Türkiye was first based on the "Regulation on Academic Evaluation and Quality Improvement in HEIs" in 2005 under the Council of Higher Education. Within the responsibilities set forth by the regulations, an independent Commission for Academic Assessment and Quality Improvement in Higher Education called "YÖDEK" was established. After The Higher Education Quality Board was founded on 23 July 2015 within the framework of "The Regulation of Quality Assurance in Higher Education", YÖDEK was repealed.

1.4.2 The Turkish Higher Education Quality Council (THEQC)

The Turkish Higher Education Quality Council, which was founded in 2017, is a public legal entity with administrative and financial autonomy, and has a private budget. Its mission is to contribute to the continuous and quality-oriented development of higher education institutions, the achievement of universal qualifications of graduates, and the internalisation of the quality assurance culture by all stakeholders in the field of higher education in the Turkish higher education system. The fields of study of THEQC are grouped under three categories; carrying out the external evaluation processes of higher education institutions, authorization of national program accreditation agencies and recognition of international accreditation agencies, and dissemination and internalisation of the quality assurance culture.

In addition to the Institutional External Evaluation Program (IEEP), important milestones of 2020 are the Institutional Accreditation Program (IAP), which will further strengthen the national quality assurance system, and the Follow-up Program (FuP), which has been implemented to monitor the progress in institutions evaluated within the scope of the IEEP. Institutional external evaluation processes of THEQC are carried out with 22 criteria and 58 sub-criteria with a holistic perspective under the headings of "Quality Assurance System, Learning and Teaching, Research and Development, Service to Society, and Governance System". THEQC Rubric, which is the main tool used in evaluation processes, is a rubric-style measurement tool used in the internal evaluation works of higher education institutions and in the writing of the Institutional Self Evaluation Reports (ISER), as well as in the external evaluation processes. Developed in 2019 to increase clarity, objectivity, accuracy, consistency and transparency in institutional evaluation or decision-making processes, this tool was improved and updated in 2020.

The year 2020 was also a year in which important developments about THEQC's internationalisation efforts took place. One of the most important achievements of the year is THEQC's being accepted as a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). Furthermore, the full membership processes regarding the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN), the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation/International Quality Group (CHEA/CIQG) have been completed. These memberships contribute significantly to THEQC's international visibility and they are considered as important accomplishments in achieving the Council's goal of structuring a strong

quality assurance system that responds to the needs of our country and speaks to the world at the same time.

THEQC takes into account the Sustainable Development Goals such as quality in education, reduced inequalities, industry, innovation and infrastructure among others through the criteria it uses in its external evaluation and accreditation processes. Particularly, the criteria about the mission and vision of HEI's put special emphasis on SDG's which is evaluated under the leadership, governance and quality heading of the criteria. In addition, in the forthcoming evaluations (2022 and after) THEQC included the disadvantaged, vulnerable and underrepresented groups in the learning and teaching approaches of HEIs in its external evaluation and accreditation criteria. This criteria is devised as a result of the update and improvement works of THEQC on its previous criteria which was solely addressing people with disabilities. In brief, THEQC serves as a driving force with these criteria which serve as a guide to higher education institutions in reflecting the SDG into the processes and practices.

Current challenges in higher education

Challenge 1. An Inclusive Higher Education For All

1.1. Refugee Access to Turkish Higher Education System

For the last decade, escalation of violence, never-ending wars and regime changes in the different parts of the world triggered the massive flow of immigrants and the number of displaced people boosted in a short period of time. As a result, vulnerable populations expanded at a rapid pace. It is vital to include vulnerable groups in education in order to prevent lost generations. Geographically, Türkiye is located at the centre of the immigration routes and hosts displaced people from vast ethnic and religious backgrounds. Türkiye took all the immediate measures to include vulnerable groups in the education system, including higher education.

Türkiye hosts the largest number of refugees/displaced people compared to the rest of the world. Around 3.75 Million Syrians are living in Türkiye under temporary protection. The number exceeds 4 million with Afghan, Yemeni, Egyptian and refugees from other nationalities. More than 480 thousand of the Syrians under temporary protection in Türkiye are at the age of higher education. Türkiye offers access to tertiary education to a significant part of this age group. More than 48 thousand of these young Syrians under temporary protection benefit from higher education opportunities in Turkish universities. According to UNHCR data, overall refugee access to higher education is %5 whereas this percentage is as high as %10 in Türkiye.

Since 2013, the Council of Higher Education has been taking various decisions in our meetings to ensure the integration of students coming from the countries where education was unsustainable due to war, violence and crises to our higher education system.

In order to prevent any interruption or gap year, CoHE offered Syrian students the opportunity to transfer their studies to Turkish universities. Under normal circumstances, transfers could only be made in 2nd and 3rd grades in bachelor education, but CoHE has given this right to first and last year students as well. CoHE enabled those who had problems in obtaining documents to receive education at our universities under *"special student statue".* Thus, interruption was prevented in their educational life.

CoHE has introduced various regulations facilitating the procedures of equivalency and recognition, especially in confirmation and document submission processes. Through the Diploma and Degree

Determination Commissions, established in our universities, it became possible to determine the previous education of the students who do not have a certificate or document. Thus Syrians under temporary protection could both continue their higher education and work in our country. Türkiye put in action all the possible governmental tools to facilitate the access of the affected groups to higher education and the job market in Türkiye.

As a part of this motivation, the Turkish government provided a tuition fee waiver for the Syrians under temporary protection. In this context, the tuition fees of Syrian students studying at state universities were covered from the state budget annually. In addition, with the contribution of national and international stakeholders, Türkiye placed more than 5000 Syrian students in our universities with full scholarship status. The scholarship covered the tuition fees, accommodation, health insurance and monthly stipend.

As a part of the immediate response plan, CoHE allowed Turkish universities in the region close to the Syrian border to open programs in Arabic language.

As a result of these decisions, the number of Syrian refugees studying at Turkish universities, which was only one thousand at the beginning of the massive migration flow, exceeds 50 thousand today.

Last but not the least, CoHE has taken various measures to promote the recruitment of Syrian academics at our universities. CoHE also established the Foreign Academician Information System (YABSIS). Through this system, higher education institutions were brought together with the Syrians academics seeking employment in our universities. Syrian academicians with different academic titles work in Turkish universities. Latest number of Syrian academicians in the Turkish higher education system is 300.

1.2. Disabled Student Access to Higher Education

The Council of Higher Education and higher education institutions take all kinds of supportive measures for disabled students to promote access to higher education, participating in the processes of education and training and social, cultural and sports activities, continuation and completing higher education, benefiting from the internal and external mobility available in higher education. Monitoring, evaluation and reporting are made for these students by taking into account their disadvantages and disabilities in the education and training processes. Higher education institutions give priority to disadvantaged students in the financial support and scholarships they give to students.

The total number of disabled students in Turkish Higher Education system is as below:

Table 3 - Number of Disabled Students in Turkish Higher Education

YEAR	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
2020-2021	17.855	36.377	54.232
2019-2020	16.471	35.176	51.947
2018-2019	14.807	32.944	47.751

2017-2018	11.911	27.332	39.243
2016-2017	12.759	27.263	40.022
2015-2016	4717	8262	12979
2014-2015	5014	8221	13235

In order to take the necessary measures and make arrangements to facilitate the education life of the disabled students in higher education, the Disabled Student Commission was established by the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) within the scope of the "Higher Education Institutions Disabled Counselling and Coordination Regulation" prepared by CoHE in accordance with the Law No. 5378 on the Disabled. The Commission has been continuing its work since 2006.

The selection and placement procedures of disabled candidates, who cannot benefit from educational services sufficiently due to severe and continuous functional loss or impairment in their physical features (for example, complete or significant deficiency in their body parts, audiovisual impairment and hearing loss, resistant to treatment) are evaluated and the type of disability, and the degree of disability are also considered during university entrance exams and calculation of the admission scores to the universities. The degree of disability specified in a medical board report is evaluated by the Measurement, Selection, and Placement Center of the Republic of Türkiye (OSYM) and it is determined whether candidates will be subjected to a separate selection and placement process due to their disabilities or not.

CoHE provides special quotas for those students in each program and also opens related programs (special education, sign language, ergo therapy, autism spectrum disorder, etc.). There are specific coordination units for disabled students within universities. The rectors of the universities are completing a form about their activities and policies about their universities annually. Disabled students' situation in higher education institutions are also added to this form and it became one of the success indicators of the authorities of higher education institutions.

CoHE aims to raise awareness and make higher education institutions more accessible to all our students with the works it has done under the titles of "Accessible Campuses and Barrier-Free Education"[2]. In this context, the Barrier-Free University Awards, which were given for the first time in 2018, have been encouraging our universities to create accessible campuses in physical spaces, education and socio-cultural activities. While there were 318 applications from 41 universities in 2018, when the awards were first given, this number increased to 947 from 116 universities in 2021. Apart from awards, CoHE organises periodical workshops to discuss the current situation of the

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[2] The award-winning universities, the decisions taken by CoHE, current news and announcements can be accessed on the website of the Working Group for Disabled Students: http://yok.gov.tr/web/engelsizyok/anapage.

services provided for students with disabilities in the context of qualified access and the prospective projects.

Last but not the least, the Turkish government provides specific job opportunities at some positions in public institutions for disabled people after graduation. Thus, this vulnerable group has a good chance both to continue their lifelong education and get a job opportunity.

2. Impact of Covid-19 on Higher Education

The first COVID-19 case was confirmed on March 10, 2020, in Türkiye. Even though there have been no cases of COVID-19 at the beginning of the spring term, the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) asked all universities to be prepared for COVID-19 and to take all protective measures on February 4, 2020.

After the rapid spread of the pandemic throughout European Higher Education Area, CoHE took immediate action under three titles, "Travel and International Meetings," "Meetings with International Participation," and "Measures to be Taken Against Discrimination," and communicated them to all universities on March 6, 2020, which happens to be five days prior to the confirmation of the first COVID-19 case in Türkiye.

On March 10, 2020, the day the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in our country, a meeting on COVID-19 was held at the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) with the participation of the rectors of Turkish universities with large number of students and international students and distinguished scientists in the field of health. The participants carried out a comprehensive assessment of the measures to be taken in our higher education area within the scope of the pandemic. A direct communication channel specific to COVID-19 was established between CoHE and universities. The Council of Higher Education immediately notified all universities of its decisions regarding the higher education in Türkiye during the COVID-19 pandemic through this channel and answered the questions received from the universities.

Starting from March 16, 2020, face-to-face education has been suspended in all Turkish higher education institutions for a week. Distance education opportunities and capacities of universities were identified during this period.

CoHE established a commission of experts on March 17, 2020, and prepared the Road Map for Distance Education in the Turkish Higher Education System. The following five basic areas were worked on in the road map:

• Legislation,

• Infrastructure,

• Human Resources,

• Content,

• Practices.

Necessary measures and regulations in these five areas were implemented through rapid decision-making and fleet management, and infrastructure deficiencies were eliminated.

In order to meet the content needs of universities, the courses of three universities with long years of experience in open education were opened to the public on the platform 'Courses for Higher Education Institutions', which was formed under CoHE.

Thus, all universities have been allowed to switch from the face-to-face education model to the distance education model as of March 23, 2020.

The 'Digital Transformation in Higher Education Project' was initiated by the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) in late 2018. Within the scope of this Project, nearly 6 thousand academic staff were offered the course 'Learning and Teaching in Higher Education in the Digital Age' and more than 50 thousand students were offered the course 'Digital Literacy' at 16 universities, some of which are located in relatively less-developed regions of our Türkiye. This project turned out to be highly instrumental during the pandemic. In addition, more than 120 distance education centres, which have been opened at our universities in recent years, also facilitated the switch to online education.

Considering that some students at associate and undergraduate level may not have the chance to resume their studies through distance education, students were granted the opportunity to freeze their studies for the spring term of the 2019-2020 academic year.

CoHE has also taken other decisions to avoid any adverse effects on students in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. These decisions, which are limited to the spring term of the 2019-2020 academic year, are as follows: If the remaining education in certain programs, where practice is needed such as education faculties that train teachers, nursing, dentistry, pharmacy, and engineering, is less than the education received, it was decided that the remaining part would be compensated with activities such as courses, homework assignments, and projects. We did not resort to early graduation, and it was decided to monitor the course of the disease.

Since the announcement of the suspension of face-to-face education on March 16, 2020, by the Council of Higher Education (CoHE), Turkish universities have quickly adapted to the distance learning process. All universities have switched to distance education, albeit at different rates. Distance education was offered synchronously and asynchronously. Academic staff, who were going to use distance education for teaching, were also being trained. The authorised boards of the universities were granted permission to decide on the evaluation of exams during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the coronavirus epidemic, decisions have been taken to ensure that programs are accessible according to disability groups, to take opportunities and precautions in online exams, to take care not to disconnect students from higher education, and to contact students with disabilities and their families regularly. Recommendations on taking the necessary measures to make distance education accessible to students with disabilities are also included in the 'Guide for the New Normalisation Process in the Global Epidemic' and the 'Guide for the Development of Healthy and Clean Environments in Higher Education Institutions in the Context of the Global Epidemic'. In order to evaluate the measures taken for disabled students during the global epidemic process and the current situation, a survey was organised by CoHE Disabled Students Study Group and the results were published on CoHE website.

Challenge 3.
Dissemination of Quality Assurance Culture Across Higher Education Institutions

THEQC as an important actor in Turkish Higher Education has the mission of strengthening the quality assurance system, the continuous improvement of the institutions and of contributing to the universal competence of individuals and stakeholder at large, thereby facilitating the internalisation of quality culture in Turkish higher education. One of the tools in achieving this mission is the THEQC Rubric which bears an extensive list of criteria that comprises many SDGs.

As a comparatively young quality agency, THECQ has been establishing innovative modalities and spaces in shaping the quality assurance systems across higher education institutions. THEQC has been a dynamic and agile body in introducing novel approaches and thereby guiding higher education institutions in their journey towards excellence in their practices which will impact the overall quality of higher education with all of its components.

In realising these goals in a complex and diverse higher education ecosystem like Türkiye, some challenges are inevitably encountered. One of which being dissemination of quality assurance culture across higher education institutions. It has been observed that some higher education institutions have not completed the PDCA cycles for some areas yet and therefore they haven't reached the maturity level to complete a well functioning quality assurance system. These maturity levels include, but are not limited to, diversification and flexibility of curriculum, programmes and courses, expanding use of ICTs and AI to enhance learning and collaboration, and quality assurance of innovative higher learning modalities and spaces which are reflected in the THEQC rubric criteria mentioned above. As a result, follow up and improvement works are not at the desired level yet. Considering the short time passed after the establishment of these QA practices led by THEQC, we believe that all HEIs will reach their goals in due time.

Another possible challenge we have noted is related to institutional accreditation which has been made compulsory by law as of 2022 in Türkiye. HEI's need to undergo the Institutional Accreditation Program (IAP) within five years following the enactment of the law (until the end of 2027). We foresee that some HEI's might have difficulty in fulfilling the criteria set out by THEQC but also maintain that this will force HEI's to act in an agile manner and invest more in their internal quality assurance models, trying to spread the quality culture across the entire institutions, which will cater for the needs of the evolving workforce in the long run. The external evaluation criteria used in the External Institutional Evaluations (IEEP) carried out by THEQC are also extensive and although they provide a reliable and strong support to the HEIs, they might require agile leadership and fast transformation on part of the HEIs.

As stated above, fostering ownership, raising awareness and instilling internalisation of quality culture by HEI's particularly in relation to diversification and flexibility of curriculum, programmes and courses, expanding use of ICTs and AI to enhance learning and collaboration, and quality assurance of innovative higher learning modalities and spaces, stand out as major challenges for THEQC but we are taking necessary steps to eliminate these challenges that we have envisioned in the very near future.

Towards 2030 and beyond: recommendations for the future

Recommendation 1.

In light of the above mentioned challenges, efforts to strengthen and facilitate dissemination of quality culture in higher education institutions need to be prioritised. As an agency which has the mission of strengthening data driven and outcome based quality assurance in the higher education

area, THEQC will continue to encourage national and international collaboration between universities and quality assurance agencies to foster learning, sharing and disseminating best practices of quality assurance to effectively serve all stakeholders by also considering SDGs within all layers of the higher education system. To this end, THEQC strives to diversify its training activities and introduce regional training programs which will cater to the needs of a diverse cohort of higher education institutions. Furthermore, extensive data collection and feedback channels need to be diversified and increased and new criteria addressing the goals need to be created.

In our rapidly changing world higher education systems with all its actors are evolving and transforming the higher education area. Agile leadership is a key ensuring that Turkish higher education is moving forward with such changes and challenges while preserving and enhancing quality in higher education. Future effectiveness and reliability of quality assurance relies, first and foremost, on the capacity of creating a culture of quality among its stakeholders. Thus, THEQC needs to keep working on building and shaping a quality culture across diverse HEIs and stakeholders while remaining committed to change in order to improve quality through training programs at regular intervals.

Recommendation 2.

Quality requires that higher education should be characterized by its international dimension: exchange of knowledge, interactive networking, and international research projects. Therefore, it is thought that regional/international meetings on higher education should be encouraged. Representatives of countries can also share their ideas on higher education via these meetings.

Co-operation should be conceived of as an integral part of the institutional missions of higher education institution. In line with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal 4, portals through which best practices on the education of displaced people are shared, should be created.