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The Quality of Teaching in Higher Education According to the Rectors

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Abstract

This study seeks to establish the viewpoints of former university rectors regarding prevalent instructional challenges in higher education. Moreover, the research aims to assess how these challenges are being addressed. Technical terms are explained upon first use, and the writing style is objective, clear, and formal, adhering to consistent language usage and grammatically correct structure. The findings do not exhibit bias and adhere to a conventional academic structure with clear logical progression between statements. The study employs a phenomenological design, a qualitative research method, and involves a mixed sampling of 19 participants. The data were analyzed using an artificial intelligence-based algorithm. The study identified three categories of instructional problems described by the rectors: instructors, students, and curricula. Among these, the rectors' identified problem areas related to teaching staff were employment and promotion, staff quality, economic problems, excessive workload, qualified publications, ethical violations, personal rights, image and reputation, academic freedom/autonomy, and job satisfaction. Problem areas concerning students include socioeconomic issues, student quality, counselling services, and student numbers. As for the curriculum, drawbacks have been identified in the foreign language programmes, applied courses, unplanned teaching, ineffective training of teaching staff and an outdated curriculum. Despite the rectors' awareness of such problems, they have hesitated to address them or have postponed their resolution. At this stage, it can be concluded that rectors' managerial abilities, particularly in delegation and time management, are inadequate. The significance of merit, which is often disregarded in rector appointments, is emphasized in this study, suggesting potential contributions to research in higher education.

Keywords: Higher education, quality of teaching, rector, teaching, university

Introduction

The higher education system plays a crucial role in society's ethical, aesthetic, and intellectual growth, while also providing support for economic stability and productivity. To gauge a society's progress, the focus is on higher education enrollment rates, academic and scientific production outputs, and the capacity to train qualified personnel. In managing crucial institutions that shape society, such as higher education, it is crucial to have meritorious, experienced academic leaders with advanced management skills. Management of a higher education institution involves internalizing the mission for students and teaching, as well as overseeing financing, personnel, and structural affairs. As per Warner and Palfreyman (1996), the fundamental elements of teaching can be identified as curriculum, students, learning environment, and instructor. A rector who manages a higher education institution is expected to have a comprehensive understanding of the institution's students and faculty profile, curricular scope and limitations, and teaching environment opportunities. It is impossible for an administrator without this knowledge to make strategic decisions about managing the institution effectively (Uygun & Gupta, 2020). Furthermore, when assessing the quality of teaching, it is important to consider objective factors such as leadership abilities. These may include the ability to make the most of available resources and to maintain a keen focus on the future.

The quality, development, and future of universities is crucially important for human development, social welfare, and public happiness

worldwide. Numerous administrative, economic, educational, and political factors contribute to this equation. The viewpoints, issues, and experiences of all university stakeholders, particularly the rector, hold significant relevance in the context of matters pertaining to educational services that can be deemed as the most crucial parameters impacting the destiny of the university institution.

To test the prediction of a significant gap between societal expectations of higher education and current realities, this study aims to identify factors affecting teaching quality in higher education and how they vary based on rectors' perceptions of their institutions' management. While the rectorate is considered to hold an important position that should entail an understanding of the higher education system's overall operations, the primary focus of this study is the hypothesis that rectors possess knowledge of methods for improving instructional quality, which can be applied through the influence of teaching processes within their respective institutions. However, implementation of such practices may be impeded by various factors.

Although the rectorate holds senior management and supervision authority in higher education, it is based on principles of autonomy and election among personnel. However, varying methods have been applied in electing rectors in our country, depending on the political context. Presently, candidates for rector are selected and appointed directly by the president (Erat, 2019). The rectors' powers entail presiding over university boards, coordinating between university institutions,

submitting the university's investment programs, budget, and staffing needs to the Council of Higher Education, and overseeing university units and personnel at all levels (Staley, 2019).

Since 2007, when the number of universities in Türkiye experienced rapid growth, debates have continued regarding the authority of the rector's office. In particular, the selection and appointment criteria for rectors, the office's relationship with politics, autonomy, transparency, accountability, and equal opportunity have all been subjects of discussion. The studies conducted by Yaman and Özdemir (2016) on rector opinions, Erdoğan and Esen (2014) on rectors' demographic characteristics and career goals, Günay and Kılıç's (2011) research on rector appointments, Mutlu's (2009) investigation of rector elections in state and foundation universities, and Alpar et al. (2001) analysis of the communication language employed by rectors' merit attention. However, while these studies incorporate direct interviews and discussions with rectors, it is necessary to reassess the rectors' perspectives and the difficulties they encounter during their tenure in light of the changes and transformations in Türkiye's political and social structure since these studies were conducted.

The quality of higher education teaching largely relies on the content of the courses being offered. A curriculum is deemed inclusive when it imparts the latest knowledge and experiences necessary to develop a qualified workforce that caters to the economy's and industry's needs (Green, 1994). Moreover, academics play a pivotal role in directing teaching activities in higher education, through their research and development efforts and the courses they lead. In addition, improving the teaching process can be achieved by directing qualified students to the system. Additionally, the quality of education depends on factors such as student interest, as well as their maximum attendance levels, as determined by Chua (2004). Overall, successful instructional quality in higher education requires effective leadership to mobilize and organize these factors. At this stage, it can be inferred that rectors who are responsible for managing higher education institutions also need to fulfill the role of instructional leaders.

One quality indicator of a higher education institution is the maximization of teaching services provided to students. To achieve this goal, the rector ought to possess basic conflict and problem-solving skills. Conflict management can be effective in interpersonal relationships, while problem-solving skills involve knowledge, skills, and experience to recognize issues in nearly all areas and to take timely measures or solve the existing problem completely. While awareness of the issue is one aspect of the skill, analysis of the problem and formulation of potential resolutions comprise the other aspects (Carvalho & de Lurdes Machado, 2010). It is crucial at this stage to ascertain the phenomena that rectors recognize as hindrances to teaching services. This study aims to determine the extent of overlap between current issues and those identified by administration, as well as the level of administration's awareness of the institution's operations. While there exist distinct studies pertaining to rectors in literature, this study diverges by focusing on the perception of teaching quality issues. It is anticipated that the findings from this investigation will provide insights for the creation of novel policies and topics for discourse concerning the composition, organization, and advancement of higher education.

Method

The purpose of this study is to identify the instructional challenges encountered by rectors who have managed higher education institutions for at least two years, and their approach toward resolving these issues. The study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What specific challenges do rectors face during their tenure? How do rectors tackle these problems, and what approaches do they use for solving them?
2. According to the rectors, chronic instructional problems exist in higher education in general. The rectors propose solutions to these problems.

The study aimed to determine the perceptions and experiences of rectors regarding the instructional problems they faced during their tenure, as well as the alternatives they recommended for solutions.

Pattern

Phenomenological design, a qualitative research model, was employed in this study to gain an in-depth understanding of the diverse experiences during the rectorate process and to derive distinctive forms of meaning from them. Phenomenological studies aim to uncover intricate patterns of meaning concerning a given phenomenon or event. They emphasize depth and intensity of meaning and endeavor to discern the various methods by which the experiencing subject imbues it with sense (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Patton, 2014).

Participants

Phenomenological studies require a study group composed of individuals possessing knowledge about the subject under investigation and the capability to express it in detail, as these studies are sensitive to experience (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The 19 faculty members who served as rector at least once between 2016 and 2023 and held the positions for a minimum of two years comprised the study group from which this study's data was collected. A mixed sampling strategy was utilized in identifying the participants for the study (Baltacı, 2018). Four participants are retired and work across various fields of science, including health, engineering, education, social sciences, natural sciences, law, and theology, among others. Among the 19 rectors who composed the study group, 18 were men and one was a woman. The study ensured a balanced representation from different science fields. The participants had a minimum age of 63 years, with an average rectoral tenure of 6 years and an average professional seniority of 32 years. To maintain confidentiality and enhance reliability, pseudonyms beginning with "R" were used to refer to each participant in the findings section.

Data Collection

Interviews, a commonly used data collection tool for qualitative research, were employed in this study. To optimize interview effectiveness, the researchers developed a semi-structured interview format. During the preparation of the interview questionnaire, the relevant literature was reviewed and focus group interviews were conducted with three faculty members who previously held the position of rector. The questionnaire primarily consisted of open-ended and opinion-based queries. After conducting focus group interviews, two faculty members conducting academic studies in the field of higher education provided appropriate opinions to prepare the interview form for field application. All technical abbreviations are explained on first use. Citations and formatting adhere to the appropriate style guide. The resulting semi-structured interview form includes 18 questions, consisting of eight main, five exploratory, and five probing questions. Participants received comprehensive information regarding the research and were notified that their identity and opinions would remain confidential. A mutual consent form was executed. The interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis either in participants' offices or online, authorized by the Artvin Çoruh University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee (Approval No: 68861, Date: 01.11.2022). Some participants filled out the interview form via email to obtain more detailed information. Technical term abbreviations were explained when first used. The data collection process commenced in September 2022 and

concluded in August 2023. The data set included both audio and video interview recordings which lasted an average of 146 minutes and a combined total of 53 hours and 46 minutes, and 89 pages of email messages equaling a total of 34,567 words. The entire data set was transcribed by an AI dictation program for thorough analysis. To confirm with participants, we emailed them the interviews and requested that they review their statements to identify potential misunderstandings. We enhanced the validity, consistency, and credibility of the study by incorporating participant feedback and adding various statements to the data set (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Data Analysis

To standardize the qualitative data collected through interviews, a researcher utilized an AI-based data analysis algorithm in the analysis phase. The algorithm was integrated into MaxQd software to conduct content analysis of the qualitative data. In this study, the objective was to analyze the data's meaning patterns using a multiple coder triangulation technique enhanced by artificial intelligence. This approach aimed to reveal sub-meanings within the data and enhance the credibility of the results. To achieve this, the AI was trained on the coding patterns of more than one coder, enabling it to predict how different coders would approach each interview. This procedure effectively minimized coder errors and optimized coding diversity. The researcher reviewed the analyses of artificial intelligence multiple times to mitigate potential errors caused by machine learning. Through the coding process, distinct themes were identified, and diverse code structures amalgamated to optimize participant perspectives. The resulting data patterns were integrated into meaningful wholes and presented in the study's findings section.

Results

As a result of the analysis of the research data, three themes (academic staff, students, and curriculum) were obtained. The situations that the participants identified as problems and the opinions on the solution of these problems were evaluated together.

Problems Related to Academic Staff

All the participating rectors in the research view academics as a problem source for the listed reasons. Even R5 employs an ironic expression, “universities would be managed so well if it weren't for these academics,” and indicates that the teaching staff represents a unique problem source. It has been determined that academics' personal rights—such as quantity, employment, and promotion—constitute an important problem area.

One of the primary concerns confronting rectors is the recruitment of academic staff. Rector 4, who was interviewed, articulated the issue as follows: “The number of academic staff has consistently been insufficient... Despite my attempts to implement merit-based strategies to remedy this, I encountered limited success, as our country tends to prefer an employment policy reliant on connections rather than merit.” Participant R13 stated that most departments lacked sufficient academic staff, despite his efforts to implement employment policies. He acknowledged the quantitative scarcity of academic staff. Another participant, R11, noted, “the difficulty in ensuring full employment and promotion of teaching staff. I prefer recruiting academic staff based on references related to academic, political, and social groups.” This draws attention to the promotion process.

Rectors perceive the quality of academic staff as a problem. R8 expressed the quality problem as follows: “Even though we found faculty members, we faced serious academic problems because they were not qualified. It is ‘unfortunately’ very difficult to solve this problem; however, when I left office, I handed over a file of unqualified academics to my successor and asked him to get rid of them.” “Recruiting

qualified faculty members was perhaps the most difficult problem for me. None of the professors' resumes showed who they really were. Even if their resumes were perfect, once they started working, we realized that these resumes were inflated documents. Over time, we moved to a personnel system based on references and more in-depth interviews rather than CVs, and we were successful...” R4 draws attention to the ethical dimension of the recruitment process by pointing out the gap between the curricula vitae prepared by the faculty members and their professional qualifications. R2, who approached the problem of qualifications from a different perspective, said: “The civil servant mentality, arrogance and presumption among academic staff is very common... There is a significant number of academically weak academic staff who have poor communication with students but are competent in gossip and other mischief. My biggest regret is not being able to fire these people, but I think that during my tenure I at least disturbed them with excessive constant control and made them work at least a little...,” he identifies a problem related to personality and character.

One of the problems perceived by the rectors regarding academic staff is the economic difficulties experienced by academics. In this context, R1 stated: “There is an inverse relationship between the salaries of academic staff and the work they do. Unlike in the public sector, where those who work and those who do not receive the same salary, in the foundation or private universities there is a slight difference between those who work and those who work hard. Very few” academics in the public sector can withstand the economic and academic working conditions in foundation or private universities...”, R7 pointed out the difference in working characteristics between public and foundation universities, while R7 addressed the economic problem in terms of travel and salary: “Travel expenses, salaries, and other economic problems are quite common... The salaries of academic staff are also inadequate. This is a public employment policy, although there are some improvements, because we are affiliated with the central government, we cannot transfer from the budget to the academic staff... But of course, I knew that academics had economic difficulties in every period”. Another participant, R1, stated: “Although I provided various scholarships or grants, etc., to encourage academics to be productive, I realized that after a while these incentives always went to the same people. This situation has not changed over the years, solving economic difficulties should not be the primary task of a rector...” As can be understood from his statements, economic difficulties are one of the most important factors that consume the motivation of rectors.

Rectors have highlighted the workload of academic staff as a significant issue facing universities. R19 argues that claims of excessive workload are unfounded. They state that, “While academic staff may complain about their workload, very few of them are actually busy. Most spend their time leisurely, watching TV shows, movies, or videos, or reading poetry books until the evening. Despite my efforts to supervise academic and administrative units, I have been unable to prevent this behavior.” R4 stated that only 10% of academic staff experience an excessive workload, while the majority are either writing theses for financial gain or preparing for associate or professorship positions. R4 contends that those who report an increased workload are being dishonest, as the speaker and their colleagues are well acquainted with the realities of academic life. Since increasing the workload is not a viable solution and may elicit unfavorable responses from academics, the participant expresses a pessimistic outlook regarding the workload issue in academia. Another participant, R10, points out that academic staff may not be as diligent as expected, in alignment with the opinions expressed by the other two rectors on the same matter. “Our scholars do not appear to prioritize scientific, technical, or artistic pursuits, as they mainly seem to hurry through corridors to create an impression of busyness. Many of their assignments, coursework, and other obligations appear ostentatious. Although I tried to increase their workload

by organizing workshops and directing panels, my efforts were ineffective. In fact, my attempts to contribute to academia have only resulted in deeper rifts and more significant boundaries between myself and the scholars.”

The issue of qualified publications, which serves as a quality indicator for a university’s rank among other institutions, was brought to the attention of participating rectors. R6 stated, “The majority of our academics publish solely for the purpose of seeking tenure, securing a position, or promoting themselves through impressive advertisements.” In fact, some academics may prioritize the appearance of productivity over actual productivity, and while their efforts are appreciated, it is important to maintain objectivity in evaluating their work. Various training sessions have been conducted to improve productivity, including academic writing and techniques for international publication. However, there have been challenges in galvanizing broad support for these initiatives. R6 highlights concerns over the quality of publications in higher education institutions. R7, however, approaches this issue from a different angle, stating that “universities become more active during the academic incentive period, leading to an influx of academic productions onto the market. Unfortunately, many of these publications lack quality and often receive little to no readership. Academic professionals may establish citation and referee groups to demonstrate the importance and productivity of their publications, but a truly productive output is a rarity.” Since academic incentives were insufficient, I implemented various reward systems; however, they failed to produce the desired outcome. The issue of productivity in higher education is highlighted by R18’s observation that many academics occupy positions for several years and work diligently only during the period leading up to academic promotion. Upon completion of their thesis or promotion to the level of associate professor or professor, they tend to become inactive once again. My attempts to motivate them through training sessions, conferences, and international travels proved fruitless.

In the context of the scientific ethics principle that underpins the university’s idea, the observations of participant rectors are noteworthy. The assertion that a large majority of academics engage in plagiarism or unethical practices is made, and only a small minority adhere to ethical values of the academic and professional kind. While I typically protected individuals who faced ethical sanctions until the last feasible moment, I had to discard the ones I could not safeguard. R3 discloses their perspective on ethical values, while R6 states, “Although ethics serve as the foundation of Western academics, our academy centers on translation and plagiarism. In our country, where proficient translators also act as productive academics, academic and professional ethics only function as legal regulations. We have conducted training sessions to advocate for awareness among academic staff and caution them of the potential dangers, yet our efforts proved futile.” The quote, “The bad-tempered do not give up their bad habits” highlights the ineffectiveness of current measures implemented to address this issue. In contrast, participant R11 raises concerns over the moral implications that extend beyond scientific ethics, stating, “It is a well-known fact that academics face ethical issues. However, higher-level management is unaware that a majority of them engage in various forms of harassment and insults towards each other and students... I took action against such behavior by expelling those responsible from my institution.”

Due to its esteemed position in society, universities and academia face fierce competition when it comes to appointments, promotions, and individual rights. In an interview with R9, one of the rectors, they remarked that certain academics, due to their ideology, religion, or political identity, may be given less consideration in academic promotions, as academia discourages extreme views. “They do not receive tenure, coursework opportunities, or consultations for graduate theses,

and are all but ignored. As for myself, I also chose to overlook these academics, as offering support to radicals would have put my career on the line.” Through these words, he honestly conveys a perspective that impacts his own position and personality. This emphasizes that issues of personal rights ought to be considered among the most damaging problems the academy faces. R15 acknowledged, “Several issues related to personal rights arise, including assignments, transfers, and payments. Within this community, acquaintances play a dominant role in promoting one’s career, regardless of one’s qualifications. Despite the number of transfers that I was unable to prevent, I did not impede the progress of an academician who had made contributions to the university.” Such remarks demonstrate R15’s ethical stance and constructive disposition in contrast to R9. R17’s statements highlight the ethical challenges that the rector’s office, the highest-ranking office at the university, encounters: “Despite prioritizing the value of academic excellence, political, religious, and economic pressure groups have influenced the office and caused various forms of inequality. I tried to formulate a policy, especially on tenure and appointment issues, but to no avail.”

“Academia is a respected profession that garners much attention, in terms of personal fulfillment and job prospects. While traditionally revered, recent ethical and moral violations, harassment, and other misconduct have led to a decline in public trust. Although I attempted to restore my institution’s reputation by removing unethical individuals, I was unable to attain the high standards I sought due to various reasons.” R8 highlights the decline of academic prestige in recent times and conveys a sense of powerlessness in the face of the ethical breaches that diminish the profession’s standing. From the statements of R9, it is evident that academic issues extend beyond scientific ethics and other crimes: “There are also pedagogical problems present. It is not possible to make significant progress in a university where academics dominate and only read lectures from books or slides, fail to engage with students, neglect research activities, and fail to renew themselves. Motivational speeches or training sessions do not necessarily lead to the desired outcomes”. “Despite their high social status, academics in terms of their profession are ranked relatively low” according to R5. R5 also pointed out that “academic staff in most universities have a bureaucratic mindset, making it hard to expect productivity from those who have gained tenure and title through paid journals or insiders. We cannot make progress as a country if we continue to employ academic staff solely based on nepotism. Unfortunately, my attempts to prevent this have been unsuccessful.” These statements highlight the dysfunctionality of bureaucratic mechanisms in addressing professional ethical issues within higher education.

In this context, what R19 asserts is significant as it highlights the inadequate comprehension of academic freedom and autonomy, a feature that has been emphasized throughout history as distinct to universities. R19 contends that academics naturally have ideological biases which influence their discourse either in support of or against the government. A segment of academia, politics, or industry represses certain professors and hinders them from conducting studies that could reveal unfavorable outcomes. Consequently, any critique is subtle and lacks strength. However, the academic liberty present in the West is well-known. R3’s elucidations and specific illustrations concerning academic autonomy further highlight the problematic mindset within higher education: “It can be challenging to pursue innovative research in universities due to budget constraints, insufficient infrastructure, and a lack of resources. Moreover, deviating from conventional approaches may be met with resistance from colleagues, department, and faculty administrators. To ameliorate the state of universities plagued by envy, defamation, and hearsay, I propose implementing the Western model, which separates research and teaching duties and restricts certain individuals from teaching at all. Of course, I received immediate criticism. While respecting every academic’s subject of study or right of

expression, I also prevented any attempts that could harm me or the institution.” R13’s negative attitude towards academic freedom draws attention: “There is no such thing as freedom in the academic world; autonomy, etc., are all a big deception. I avoided any work that could cause difficulties for others. I made it difficult for certain companies to purchase academic support through financial incentives and promotion of their own products. I implemented stringent ethical and work permit standards, and I acted against those who violated them or exceeded their scope. I acknowledge my authoritarian approach, but I believe it was necessary to ensure fairness and impartiality.”

In the context of job satisfaction, which is essential for a university with an instilled culture, R7 portrays a bleak outlook, stating that academics exhibit low job satisfaction: “They lack dedication to their work, and only a handful showcase the drive and determination to set an example. Chronic negativity is evident in some faculties. An unproductive academic who prioritizes personal financial gain, engages in political discussions during working hours, has a pattern of tardiness or absenteeism, does not enhance institutional operations.” As R11 highlights from a related standpoint, the academic field embodies passion and devotion: “To reduce the presence of such individuals, we actively seek out and employ diligent and dedicated individuals. Effective communication is a necessary skill, as one must take responsibility for one’s work. However, one significant issue faced by universities currently is the ideological division of academics who solely attend lectures, failing to conduct research or produce output. We couldn’t do anything with this lazy mass and the near future of the country is full of such academic candidates... I oversaw a university populated by academics who purportedly had high job satisfaction on payday but engaged in tea-drinking and idle chatter on other days. I conducted weekly visits to the various departments to identify deficiencies. Despite widespread contentment, subsequent surveys revealed that many faculty members were dishonest with me. In truth, the majority despised their work and harbored negative feelings towards the work environment, resulting in frequent absenteeism. Regrettably, I departed prior to addressing these issues, leaving considerable disorder in my wake.”

The study indicates that students are perceived as a significant problem area, in contrast to the pessimistic views towards academic staff held by rectors, who are the main constituents of higher education. The following section presents rector views on students, who are one of the primary components of higher education.

Problems Related to Students

According to the rectors, socioeconomic issues faced by students are a significant component of student-related problems. R10 articulated this concern by stating, “Students are the group most impacted by the rising economic and social issues. Naturally, this situation has a negative impact on their mental wellbeing. Numerous universities fail to offer a social atmosphere, resulting in students constantly commuting between dormitories and campus. Many students are unable to study in a favorable environment due to economic challenges and ultimately withdraw from school. As an administrator, I have primarily focused on addressing fundamental issues like lodging and transportation but have not made significant progress. It is difficult to claim complete success in these endeavors.” The rectors’ thoughts on this topic revolve largely around the economic obstacles faced by students, including housing and transportation. R16, a participating rector, expressed that nearly all students face challenges during their university experience. “Graduating with ease is a rarity. The economy is a main contributor to issues related to housing, nutrition, and transportation. Without assistance from family, scholarships, loans, and other means, many students wouldn’t be able to overcome these problems. Most students spend their free time working, which is beneficial for their future business endeavors. However, it is unfortunate that they must work to support

themselves financially. Although I made every effort to provide scholarships to all students, it was not feasible to do so.” Addressing this ongoing problem is a significant challenge for individuals and institutions. Meanwhile, R1 found that a significant proportion of students resort to psychiatric drugs due to difficulties they experience. Most individuals experience familial issues amidst the economic instability. It is crucial for all parties to collaborate towards a resolution. Addressing this necessitates significant policy reform.

The intensive university expansion that has been observed in Türkiye since 2007 has led to some quality issues. According to R12, the removal of the score threshold for university entrance has resulted in a decline in student quality. R12 stated, “The quality of students has been decreasing every year, and the exam race they are in negatively affects their psychology. We are producing generations who are better at solving tests but lack moral, humanitarian, and communication skills.” “Education must be restructured, with a significant shift in mentality” according to participant R5, “students desire quick graduation and possess numerous skills due to developing technology before entering university. Unfortunately, many have severe qualification issues. We must teach and inspire students to become well-versed and passionate in their chosen fields so they may effectively solve the country’s problems.” R13 expresses pessimism regarding measures taken to address the quality problem, stating, “A generation in universities has high anxiety about the future and has lost hope. It is crucial for them to obtain employment after graduating; however, the pre-university period is unqualified, leading to a lack of preparation for the real world.” Unfortunately, the academic standards have declined consistently over the years in Türkiye. Attempts to mitigate this issue, such as organizing career days and alumni meetings, have been made. However, such events were met with disinterest from alumni and businessmen who were apprehensive about being solicited for funds. As a result, the desired outcomes were not achieved.

Qualified students for higher education require appropriate guidance and counseling during their high school years. R13 expressed a solution proposal for correct vocational guidance, stating that most students are disappointed in their first year and few study willingly, indicating a serious orientation problem in high school: “Consider individuals who choose to attend university for various reasons, such as academic pursuits or temporary respite from unemployment. To address this issue, I proposed that university departments provide clearer explanations of their programs and opportunities for post-graduation employment, as well as utilize various media channels to promote the university. While certain initiatives were undertaken, they were unfortunately short-lived. Following my departure, this practice was discontinued due to the rising workload of academics.” Although students often prioritize higher education for job and career prospects, according to R9, selecting a career-oriented department can result in placement in undesired departments. R9 notes that orientation presents a significant issue, with students focusing on post-graduation job prospects rather than considering lifelong career fulfillment. A similar observation is noted by R14, who states that many students are compelled to pursue a degree in a field they dislike and express their unwillingness to pursue a career in that field later. To address this issue, counseling services were provided on preference days which proved to be successful. Support for these efforts is necessary.

Some of the education leaders interviewed for the study voiced concerns regarding the quantitative imbalance and inadequate quality of higher education students. According to them, certain departments have not accepted new students for years while others are overcrowded. The leaders lamented the closure of departments that were once established with considerable effort and called for higher education to implement more rational methods to address quota issues.

R3 emphasized the need for proper planning to tackle this problem. R17 also commented on this issue in the same context: “Although the population is decreasing, the number of students is increasing due to the involvement of immigrant and international students in the system. Several departments have backlogs, and some quotas remain unfilled. Not all students must attend a university, but due to families’ desire for their children to obtain a higher education degree, we observe students who possess the potential to excel in other fields squander their prime years in universities where they are unwillingly enrolled. While quotas and field-specific thresholds may provide a remedy, relaxing them to satisfy political interests can lead to an increase in the number of students per instructor in certain departments.” Addressing this issue requires a collective effort beyond the individual will of a single university administrator. According to R16, one of the rectors whom we consulted, several departments have not enrolled any new students despite decades of existence. Other departments are currently facing difficulties due to overcrowding in their physical facilities. The increasing number of underqualified students each year poses a significant threat to our future, exposing the troubling issue of quantity in higher education.

A higher education institution comprises departments that offer contemporary academic education across various areas of study. Each department is responsible for designing a distinct curriculum and updating it based on current trends. However, curricula represent one of the principal challenges in the higher education system. In the section that follows, we identify existing curriculum-related issues and potential solutions based on participants’ perspectives.

Problems Related to the Curriculum

A curriculum comprises the fundamental components of education, including goals, objectives, content, methods, and evaluation criteria, and it presupposes that teaching will be conducted in accordance with this framework. A competent curriculum, which is clearly articulated and disseminated, and serves as a standardization tool, embodies the underlying educational philosophy by outlining what ought to be. In this regard, the curriculum must be current and aligned with the needs of the industry and the expectations of society towards higher education. In contrast to the curriculum, the program highlights diverse teaching approaches within a scientific field and encompasses all teaching activities at an undergraduate or graduate level. Similarly, different departments in an engineering faculty define their programs’ distinct curricula.

The use of mother tongue as the primary language for teaching is prevalent in curricula. However, some are designed to teach subjects in a foreign language. It is worth considering multilingual teaching programs based on the field of science. The Turkish education system has faced persistent issues surrounding foreign language teaching throughout its history and education levels. At this juncture, foreign language proficiency holds immense significance regarding both academic personnel and curriculum. According to R1, one of the rectors interviewed, “The instruction provided in foreign language programs is comparatively less effective than that in Turkish programs; comprehending concepts in the native language is always simpler, while the foreign language proficiency of our professors is limited.” R10 expresses the issue of foreign language education from a different viewpoint. According to R10, “despite efforts to teach foreign languages, students cannot fully benefit from these programs due to various factors, such as the specific jargon used in certain programs and the faculty’s inadequate command of the language. While attempting to compensate, the institution directed students to take critical courses in Turkish, but the desired outcome was not achieved.” At this point, it is evident that the majority of participants consider foreign languages to be a significant issue.

Universities are institutions where knowledge is not limited to theoretical understanding but is realized through practical application in fields such as education, medicine, and engineering. A commonly discussed issue is the insufficient accessibility of applied education and effective internship opportunities. Rector 6, as mentioned in the interviews, articulates this issue as, “Many students overlook internships and practical training in certain programs, and instructors do not emphasize their importance enough. Consequently, we are producing graduates who lack the necessary skills for the workforce.” Participant R4 also expressed their concern, stating that “Most of the practical training is done on paper, resulting in low-quality training.” R14 similarly addresses the issue: “We are far from adequately training the workforce that the industry demands—it is simply an illusion. We are content with the occasional triumphs of some exceptional students and educators on a daily basis. However, the state of applied educational departments is lamentable.”

It is widely known that Türkiye’s higher education policy since 2007, wherein a university was established in every province, was heavily criticized for its lack of adequate planning. However, the rectors are cautious when commenting on such criticisms. R18 emphasizes that “although there has been a quantitative increase in higher education, the desired level has yet to be reached...Our enrollment rates in higher education are significantly low; this exacerbates the regional inequalities sheds light on the concerning situation”. R10 and R18 share a similar viewpoint as both mention the rising representation of older adults in higher education, although they acknowledge that the country still lags behind developed nations. Meanwhile, R15 tackles the issue of schooling from a broader perspective. According to R15, “the enrollment rate has been gradually increasing, while in the past, male students enrolled to evade military service, and currently, the trend persists to defer unemployment. Students are enrolling in academic programs to both prevent unemployment and secure higher-paying jobs. Nevertheless, some departments still experience significantly low enrollment rates...”

Obviously, establishing a strong higher education system in a country requires a qualified teaching staff. R2 commented on this issue, stating, “Training lecturers is not feasible. Most individuals aspire to ascend rapidly. Quality necessitates time. Few professors have adopted this concept. In the East, qualified professors migrate to institutions in the West or metropolitan areas, instead of staying. Despite our investments, they are futile.” R13 noted the consequences of establishing universities in underdeveloped regions of Türkiye. According to R13, “The problem of training quality faculty members has been experienced in every period, and it is becoming more evident. Many attempts have been made to overcome this problem, but they have all failed. Academic life is a demanding, time-consuming profession, particularly if you want to become a qualified academic.” Balancing work and personal life can be challenging for academics. It is important to prioritize objective academic pursuits over subjective activities like gossiping and political discussions. R11 suggests that higher education policy makers prioritize the training of lecturers, directing qualified graduate students towards academic careers. Of course, creating conducive academic living conditions and safeguarding personal rights can enhance the quality of education. However, the current situation is suboptimal. The academic staff is barely coping, relying on short-term planning, and contemplating relocating or switching careers.

In the context of higher education issues, R7 highlights the lack of currency in curricula with the statement, “In some departments, the curriculum has not been updated in years despite the education system’s need for flexibility to respond to changing life needs...” Similarly, R1 addresses the curriculum issue with the following sentences: “Course materials often lack updates, as many academics teach the same course

each year without revisions. This may not be detrimental to fields resistant to change, like history and theology, but engineering and medicine require frequent updates to stay current.” R12, who approached the curriculum problem from a unique perspective, highlighted the disadvantages of burdening students with a heavy course load and stressed the importance of a more concise and adaptable curriculum for societal advantage: “The curriculum is overly complex, and the length of education can be shortened.” There is a subset of students who prioritize courses with direct career implications and disregard others. Additionally, some students overly prioritize standardized tests such as KPSS (Centrally Administered Employment Exam) while eschewing courses that may not have direct application in their careers. Furthermore, most content covered in these courses, regardless of relevance, is antiquated. Consequently, students are being raised without a proper sense of ethics and aesthetics, leading to the degradation of society. However, an up-to-date and aesthetically rich curriculum, coupled with perseverance, can bolster the development of a better society.

Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

The study aimed to ascertain higher education teaching quality from the standpoint of rectors. Factors influencing teaching quality were faculty, students, and curriculum. Figure 1 illustrates the identified problematic areas.

According to Figure 1, rectors have identified problem areas regarding academic staff, including employment and promotion, staff quality, economic problems, excessive workload, qualified publications, ethical violations, personal rights, image and reputation, academic freedom/autonomy, and job satisfaction. Problem areas related to students include socioeconomic problems, student quality, guidance/counseling services, and the number of students. Issues with foreign language programs, practical limitations, unplanned education, instructor training, and outdated curriculum can be deemed as problems related to the curriculum. This aligns with the category discussed by Kil et al., (2021) in their meta-synthesis study.

In the context of the problem addressed in the study, it is evident that faculty member issues overlap with previous research. When examining the literature on teaching quality in higher education, studies tend to focus on employment, inadequate teaching staff, promotion injustices, and merit concerns (Acer & Güçlü, 2017, Akyol et al., 2018; Anık & Özkan, 2016; Arslan, 1999; Cingi & Güran, 2003; Demirel, 2018; Ertepinar, 2014; Gedikoğlu, 2005; Günal, 2006; Günay, 2011; Kılınç et al., 2017; Tuğlu, 2009). Moreover, this study highlights the problem of quality in higher education as well as the professional

inadequacies and foreign language difficulties faced by lecturers. Other studies have similarly found similar issues (Akyol et al., 2018; Anık & Özkan, 2016; Bahşi, 2011; Göктаş, 2008; Küçükcan & Gür, 2009; Tuğlu, 2009). Among the challenges encountered by instructors, economic problems also play a role (Arı, 2007; Çeçen, 1977; Doğan, 2013; Türkoğlu, 1987; Ünver et al., 2009), as well as excessive workload (Doğan, 2013; Ertepinar, 2014). Gündüz (2013), Kılınç et al. (2017), and Yıldırım et al. (2019) have explored professional dissatisfaction and burnout; productivity has also been found to decrease (Akyol et al., 2018; Cingi & Güran, 2003; Çeçen, 1977; Kılınç et al., 2017; TÜSİAD, 2008; Ünver et al., 2009).

It was determined in this study that the challenges faced by students mainly stem from their socioeconomic status. Multiple studies in the literature (Akyol et al., 2018; Cingi & Güran, 2003; Söyler, 2008; Şahin, 2011; TÜSİAD, 2008) support this finding. Furthermore, research indicates a consistent increase in the number of students each year; however, corresponding growth in their academic qualifications has not been observed at the same rate. This disparity is reflected in various scholarly works (Akyol et al., 2018; Anık & Özkan, 2016; Cingi & Güran, 2003; Demirel, 2018; Ertepinar, 2014; Şahin, 2011; Tuğlu, 2009). It is well-known that higher education has been primarily developing quantitatively. As shown in Table 1, the enrollment of students in the higher education system has been increasing exponentially over the past 8 years, while the number of academic staff has remained relatively stable.

Based on Table 1, the number of higher education institutions increased from 183 in 2013 to 204 by 2021. Likewise, the number of academic staff also rose significantly from 142437 to 184702 while the number of students increased from 2763194 to 3761637 over the same period. However, the number of students per academic staff increased from 19.3 to 20.4, leading to an increase in the workload of the lecturers, given that the increase in the number of lecturers did not proportionately match the rise in the number of students. Due to the heavy workload faced by academic staff, self-development in academia, including foreign language learning, remains unsatisfactory. The participants suggest that a low number of academics speak foreign languages and that curricula taught in a foreign language lack contemporary knowledge and experience, which negatively impacts teaching quality. This finding aligns with previous studies in the literature (Çeçen, 1977; Demirel, 2018; Doğan, 2013; Gündüz, 2013; Okçabol, 2015). Additionally, in line with the literature, the majority of participants recognized deficiencies in program implementation and instructor training as problematic areas (Anık & Özkan, 2016; Arslan, 1999; Kılınç et al., 2017; Tuğlu, 2009).

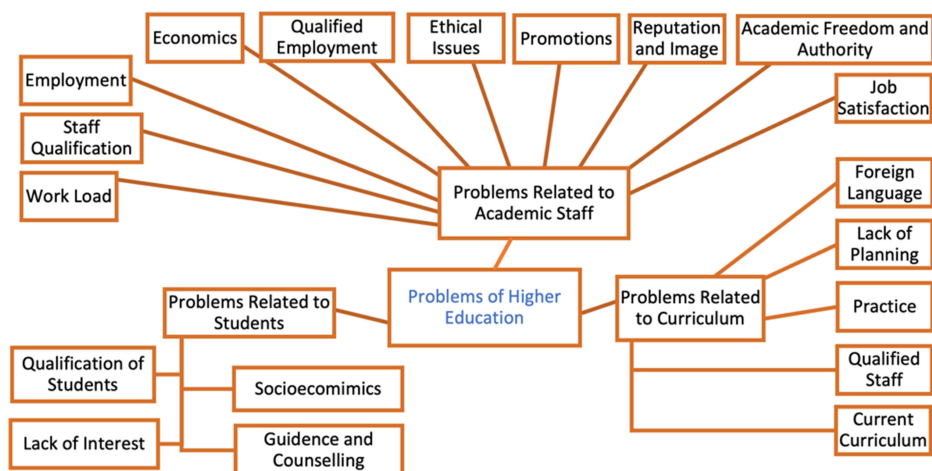


Figure 1. Participants' Findings on the Problems of Higher Education.

Table 1.
Higher Education Statistics (2013–2021*)

Years	Number of Universities	Number of Academic Staff	Number of Students	Number of Students er Academic Staff
2013	183	142 437	2 763 194	19.3
2014	184	148.903	3 200 545	21.5
2015	193	156 168	3 536 787	22.6
2016	183	151 763	3 800 310	25
2017	186	158 098	3 887 682	24.6
2018	206	166 225	3 777 114	22.7
2019	209	174 494	3 740 332	21.4
2020	204	179 685	3 801 294	21.2
2021	204	184 702	3 761 637	20.4

*These statistics are taken from the Higher Education Management Information System. <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>.

Since most of the world's scientific research is conducted in English, it is crucial that faculty members have adequate English proficiency to keep up with the latest scientific advancements. YÖK, the Council of Higher Education, acknowledges this inadequacy and has implemented policies like the Academic Foreign Language Support Project to address the issue. However, there is insufficient evidence to support the effectiveness of this project. Critics argue that exams like YÖKDİL, designed to evaluate foreign language proficiency in Türkiye, lack the ability to assess essential skills like speaking and listening, instead concentrating solely on reading, writing, and English grammar (Dinçer, 2019; Polat, 2020). The implementation of these exams for academic promotions raises questions about merit within academia. The elimination of associate professorship interviews and the decrease in foreign language score requirements for associate professorship have caused the public to question the caliber of academics (Alpaydın & Demirci, 2021; Baltacı, 2022).

Most rectors believe that academic quality is dependent on academics and that enhancing the personal rights of academics will enhance their work efficiency. Although this assertion is essentially accurate, the link between expanding autonomous research opportunities and the operation of democratic mechanisms and academic productivity must not be overlooked. Democratizing universities requires more than participating in limited decision-making mechanisms. An autonomous university is established through the active involvement of academics in their personal rights, promotions, and administrative procedures. It is worth noting that rectors often overemphasize the academic staff's workload. Academic life encompasses not only teaching specific courses but also consulting and research activities that add to the workload of academics. For many academics, concepts such as overtime, annual leave, or summer vacation involve work-related activities. Thus, academia promotes a lifelong development process. Based on extensive research in the literature, including studies by Kahraman & Çelik (2018) and Okray (2018), the workload of academic staff leads to decreased work efficiency and commitment, as well as increased levels of burnout and alienation. Preventing counterproductive behaviors is closely linked to cultivating a healthy work environment. A high-quality education can only be achieved if the university administration ensures a favorable working environment for faculty.

Although the participants' views on the problems of higher education are noteworthy, it is important to highlight the absence of self-criticism within these views. While rectors are interviewed by the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) during their appointment process and their plans and goals for the university or how they will modify the university they will be appointed to are assessed, the lack of any audit system during and after their term of office implies that the rector's office is not

accountable. It is evident from this study that rectors often evade their responsibilities by making excuses and attributing problems to external sources. Drucker (2009) argues that the inability of administrators to generate solutions despite their authority and responsibilities indicates a lack of merit. It may not be feasible for the rector's office, given the inclusion of non-academic religious/ideological elements, as well as factors such as personal relationships and political bias, to develop effective policies for addressing the challenges at hand. Most of the rectors attributed their lack of efficacy to external factors, stating they struggled with time management, employee selection, and organization. From this perspective, it appears that the university administration recognizes teaching challenges but refrains from establishing solutions. Instead, they opt for temporary fixes or delay addressing issues since they anticipate no repercussions.

Rectors in Türkiye are typically elected from faculty members who have a say in university affairs. Unfortunately, this practice has resulted in the appointment of rectors from fields that lack direct management and organizational skills, such as medicine, theology, and engineering. The ability to manage effectively and implement policies is paramount in making sound pedagogical decisions. However, rectors who are appointed without prior management experience and are evaluated based on subjective criteria lack the capacity to enhance the university's academic success (Akçığıt & Özcan-Tok, 2020). The study found that rectors possess a strong ability to identify problems, but they are not adequately skilled in developing and implementing solutions. This circumstance is likely due to the absence of a merit-based system for selecting and appointing rectors. However, it is worth noting that in both Western and Far Eastern contexts, serving as a rector is generally a profession attainable through administrative experience. Implementing a merit-based selection process would aid in achieving the desired educational outcomes at the higher education level.

Since this research relies on data collected from a restricted sample group during 2022–2023, changes in social and economic conditions may render the research data invalid. The study did not address the management policies in higher education, the strategic allocation of economic resources, the widespread opening of programs in declining fields by almost every university, the imperative for universities to specialize, or the student-centered approach to management and education. Furthermore, various issues were identified including the divide between higher education institutions and the sector, insufficient synergy between research and education, students' inability to utilize research findings, and low graduate loyalty. However, these matters cannot be condensed into a singular article. Only additional studies can address these limitations. Further quantitative and qualitative studies on diverse samples are necessary to improve the quality of higher education. Additionally, future research can be suggested to examine the administrative and financial challenges experienced by rectors, which remain unclear due to the limited scope of this study on teaching.

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Informed Consent: Written informed consent was obtained from participants who participated in this study.

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