

**THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF UNIVERSITIES TO SOCIETY  
AND A REVIEW OF THE EVOLUTION OF TURKISH  
HIGHER EDUCATION DURING THE PAST EIGHT CENTURIES\***

**İhsan Dođramacı, MD, DSc, FRCP (Lond), LLD  
President, The Council of Higher Education, Turkey**

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\* Address delivered on January 18, 1989, at Ain Shams University, Cairo.

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Esteemed President of Ain Shams University.

Excellencies, Distinguished Colleagues, and Guests.

It is with particular pride that I receive the honorary degree which you are bestowing upon me today. It is very special to receive the degree from such a prestigious institution of higher learning as the Ain Shams University, which enjoys international eminence. It is even more special to receive such an honor from Egypt, with which Turkey has close ties based on our common heritage going back many centuries. These bonds of friendship, or more accurately, brotherhood, are very deep-rooted.

In my statement this morning I would like to start with the question of the relations of universities with, and their responsibilities to, the community.

There is no question that education is the foremost factor in the development of countries, and higher education is one of the most important stages of education.

Contributing to science, and subsequently transforming the knowledge thus gained into technology, is the fundamental strategy of development, the ultimate purpose of which is to make society prosperous. For this reason, taking a leading role in the world economy through the efficient use of resources has been a major strategy in the achievement of socioeconomic and technological superiority. Because there is a great need for qualified manpower in the formulation and the implementation of such a strategy, societies presently hold high expectations of their universities.

As we all know, in their history of nearly a millenium, universities have undergone significant structural transformations in accordance with the increase in their functions. Universities, which were initially only teaching institutions and small communities of teachers and students, have, starting with the beginning of the nineteenth century, come to realize that teaching and scientific research are inseparable. Since the middle of the twentieth century, student numbers have increased tremendously and such community services as applied research, consultancy, patient care and therapy,

short refresher courses, and open and adult education have started to take on an increasingly important place among the functions of the universities. These institutions have thus evolved into the highly complex organizations of today which are continuously interacting with every section of society through various service, research and development units as well as through the technoparks established for industrial cooperation that are now incorporated into their structures alongside the classical educational units.

All of these developments have stemmed from the necessity of the universities to respond to the needs of the society. It is no longer possible to view the university as an ivory tower and unaccountable to society.

And now I turn to the history of Turkish higher education and its evolution during the past eight centuries as far back as I can trace it.

When it comes to the history of higher education, we certainly cannot compete with your Al-Azhar University, dating back more than a millenium. Rather we share your pride in its prestigious past and present, because it is an honor for the Islamic World of which Turkey is a part. On our side, we can only go back 800 years, beginning with the Seljuk period.

In the Gevher Nesibe complex, where not only Islamic theology but also philosophy, arithmetic and astronomy were taught, medicine had the paramount place. The medical school was attached to a hospital, Darulshifa. At the end of the 12th century the Seljuks were ruled by Kilij Aslan II, who had 12 children, only one of whom was a girl, Princess Gevher Nesibe. When Kilij Aslan died, he was succeeded by his son Giyaseddin. It so happened that the princess fell in love with the Commander of the Palace Cavalry and set her heart on marrying him. When her brother, the ruler Giyaseddin, forbade this marriage, the princess refused to eat or drink, grew consumptive and died at the age of 39 years. Her brother established the hospital and medical school in her memory, and ordered the complex to produce physicians who could cure patients with complaints like those of his ill-fated sister.

Construction of the hospital and medical school lasted from 1204 to 1206, and the construction covered 2800 square meters. The medical school

was built as a rectangle 40 × 28 meters, the hospital being a near square measuring 40 meters on one side and 42 along the other. The present day Erciyes University in Kayseri has its origins in that medical school.

The complex in Kayseri was soon followed by a similar medical school in Sivas, established in 1218 by the Seljuk ruler Izzeddin Keykavus I. That school became a full-fledged madrasa in 1755. The Seljuks also established a medical school in Konya. The latter two discontinued their existence for several centuries. Now again we have a university in each of those cities, although they cannot be considered to be the continuation of the old madrasas. The Ottoman Turks established institutions similar to Seljuk madrasas late in the 14th century.

The real origins of the modern Istanbul University are traced back to the madrasa which was established by the Sultan Muhammad II following the conquest of that city by the Turks in 1453. It took eight years, from 1463 to 1471, to build this school with its eight college buildings covering 108,000 sq. metres of land. Each of these buildings had 19 rooms, making a total of 152 in all. A hundred and forty four students were housed in single rooms. Other rooms were occupied by professors. There were also classrooms, a library, refectories, a hospital, a guest house for visiting scholars and *hammams* or Turkish baths.

Later, eight additional buildings were constructed for students to undergo a preparatory education in order to qualify for a place in the classes of the upper madrasa. The number of students in the preparatory school, or the lower madrasa, was around 600 and these were taught by instructors; professors taught in the upper madrasas. In the preparatory school three students shared a room. All those who taught in the madrasas also lived in the school buildings making these institutions of learning completely residential.

Islamic theology, canon law and letters were all taught in this school, which must have been one of the largest of its kind in that age. Even so Muhammad II's activities did not end there for he attached great importance also to music and in 1476 established a school for music, comparable to a conservatory, within the Palace School.

Under Suleiman the Magnificent, in the middle of the sixteenth century, new buildings were added and also courses in natural sciences, mathematics and medicine were included in the programmes.

One of the interesting, and as I believe, important aspects of these Ottoman schools, as well as of the earlier Seljuk one, was that they were not directly financed by the state. They were, in fact, established by *waqfs*, which were foundations, and their operating expenses were met by the revenues from their endowments. The students not only paid no tuition fees; they were also lodged and fed free of charge and received handsome stipends as well.

This meant, naturally, that the autonomy of these schools was guaranteed. The story goes that Muhammad II, the founder of the school, asked for a room in the complex. The school board met to discuss the request and returned the answer that the Sultan could only have the right to a room if he were either a student or a teacher, and to become either, he would have to pass an examination.

The professors and instructors of the madrasa held a very respected position in Ottoman society. Moreover, it was customary for the Sultan to consult, or more properly, to seek the approval of the scholars before making major decisions.

By the time we reach the 19th century the picture was far otherwise. At that period these institutions were quite incapable of keeping pace with the scientific, social and technological developments that were changing the face of Western Europe. The cause was not far to seek. During the late 17th and early 18th centuries fanaticism had dominated the madrasas and turned them, eventually, into bastions of resistance to Ottoman attempts at modernization. This led to a decline in the quality of education just when universities in Western and Central Europe were flourishing.

Subsequently new types of educational institutions came into being. The Naval Engineering College, established in 1773 to train officers for the Ottoman Navy, represents the first diversion from the traditional type of higher education offered in the madrasas. In the second part of the 19th

century, Robert College, a private institution in Istanbul, started offering the bachelor's degree along the lines of North American liberal arts colleges. At about the same time state schools for the training of civil servants and other professionals, including physicians and engineers, as well as institutions for the study of fine arts, were also established.

Istanbul University, modelled on Western European lines, was Turkey's first modern university but its early years were stormy ones. Owing to the resistance of reactionary groups it took seventeen years before it could be inaugurated and it was closed and reopened twice, in 1871 and again in 1874. Though all had been ready in 1846 it was only in 1900 that it could be established. This same university then underwent a series of reforms in 1908 and 1919 to adapt it to the patterns of teaching and research of the contemporary European universities.

Following World War I, Turkey began its struggle for independence under the leadership of Kemal Ataturk. Even during that fight for independence Ataturk took every opportunity to emphasize the need to raise the level of education at all stages and bring it up to contemporary world standards. In 1923, Turkey was declared a Republic, and during that same year Istanbul University also underwent some minor changes, but it was in 1933 that the first sweeping changes were made.

During the first 10 years of the Republic, Istanbul University was left to its own devices, and during that period research received little in the way of attention. The university and the community had a separate existence. Ataturk in his drive for reform in many areas, invited Professor Albert Malche of Switzerland to evaluate Istanbul University, and in line with his recommendations Istanbul University was more or less shaped into the pattern of the Swiss universities. From that period on there was a great influx of European professors who were fleeing the Nazi regime. During the period 1933 to 1946 research received a boost, postgraduate studies were emphasized and a vitalizing rapport grew up between the universities and society so that this was indeed a golden age for the universities.

Prior to the founding of the Republic, Istanbul had been the capital of the country and the educational centre. Ataturk, however, made Ankara the

capital, and then proceeded to make it a seat of learning. An institute of agriculture was presently established and also faculties of Law, Letters and Political Science; these were to prove core institutions from which the Ankara universities would later emerge.

In 1946 a multi-party political system came into being in Turkey, and the political parties competed in promising non-interference by the government in university affairs. As a result a new system of administration in higher education brought the universities back to more or less the same situation as had prevailed before the 1933 reform.

This state of affairs continued until 1980, with only minor modifications. By and large, between 1946 and 1980, the progress of higher education was sluggish and the level of research fell far short of the potentials of the country. The universities frequently developed into closed shops promoting teaching staff members from within, until inbreeding was so much the order of the day that outside applicants, however well-qualified, were rarely, if ever, appointed. In addition, certain regulations made it extremely difficult for the younger generation to become university teachers. Everyone, irrespective of incentive and merit, had to wait a minimum of four years after receiving a doctoral degree before being eligible to enter upon a series of examinations – which incidentally covered a period of at least nine months – leading to what was known as the "docentship certificate". Only on receipt of this certificate could one apply for membership on the teaching staff of a university. Many people were, understandably, put off by this procedure, and as a result the universities were deprived of many teachers of high potential.

As the universities were pursuing their own activities and priorities as they saw fit, it was only natural that they should be unresponsive to the needs of the society which they were supposed to be serving. For example, in a country where half the population was under the age of 30 one might expect a rapid expansion of the universities. This did not happen. The system prior to 1981 afforded at best minimal incentives for recruitment of faculty to universities away from the major urban centres. The consequence was an alarming geographical imbalance in the higher education system.

There was a surplus of professors in the more established universities to the point that there were not enough courses to go round, and some actually had no teaching duties at all. In stark contrast was the intolerable dearth of faculty that characterized the institutions in the outlying regions. Teaching in these institutions was carried out by so-called "flying instructors" who delivered their lectures and returned immediately to their own cities, making them totally unavailable to students in need of explanations outside the classroom.

It is paradoxical that some 95% of the funding of the institutions of higher learning was coming from the State, but they were not accountable for their activities to any authority whatsoever.

It should be acknowledged, however, that during this period, too, between 1946 and 1980, there certainly were a fair number of outstanding scholars and researchers as well as institutions such as the Middle East Technical University and Hacettepe medical school that were no lower in academic standards than their contemporary counterparts; these, however, were exceptions, thanks to the different statutes governing them, and there was a clear need to reform our system of higher education.

In the years 1980 and 1981, a new system of higher education was sought. The European continental model, and the British and North American models, in all their variations, were studied. The new Turkish model was intended to respond to critical public and social needs.

In the Anglo-American model, universities are governed by a comparatively strong chief executive and academic officer, a president or chancellor in the U.S, a vice-chancellor in the U.K. That officer is usually appointed by an institutional governing board. These boards are variously called the board of regents or board of trustees in the U.S, council in England and court in Scotland. The board is responsible for setting policy for the institution, governing it, and for the institution's relations with the government and other external constituents. The president is appointed by and serves at the pleasure of the governing board. Faculty members participate in the search for and selection of presidents, and support from

the faculty is critical to a president's leadership. Yet it is the board or the council and not the faculty that plays the dominant role in presidential appointment, retention and evaluation. The board, not receiving instructions from political authority or other sources, is more able to withstand inappropriate intrusion into the university from outside, and to be responsive to public concerns and therefore more likely to avoid any interest in such intrusions. The model of the present Turkish system of higher education has been much inspired by the Anglo-American experience.

While drafting the new system of higher education, the understanding and support of Kenan Evren, the President of Turkey, was most generous and continues to be so. Very recently, in a statement made before an assembly of Turkish rectors as well as university presidents and vice-chancellors visiting Turkey from abroad, he said, and I quote:

"I am firmly convinced that for a university to be able to carry out its functions effectively in an uninterrupted manner, it must be structured so that it will not be affected by changes in government or the political party in power. For this reason, the university must have a distinct status unique to itself among the legislative, executive and judicial powers."

Thus Education Act No. 2547 was enacted at the end of 1981 to improve the quality of teaching, research and community service in Turkish institutions of higher education without bringing them under any ministerial control. At this point the Council of Higher Education was set up.

This Council, which is now made up of 24 members, serves to coordinate the activities of institutions of higher education across the country. Among its other functions it gives its approval to the budgets proposed by the universities, and sets the minimum degree requirements. Attached to the Council is the Student Selection and Placement Centre, which is responsible for the preparation and evaluation of the centrally administered entrance examination for the universities.

During the past seven years there has been a remarkable improvement in student achievement and in admissions to higher education as well

as in the number of publications of the academic staff. The annual publication of papers has almost doubled, going from 9,000 to 17,500. In 1979 the number of scientists and scholars from Turkey cited in the publications of the Institute for Scientific Information in Philadelphia was 315; in 1987 the number was 1,451.

The teaching position of "assistant professor" was established so that those with doctorates could apply for teaching positions; this contributed to the increase in the number of teaching staff which went from 4,900 in 1980 to 9,100 in 1988.

Alongside these changes and improvements of an academic nature came another much needed change: the universities are now open to the society, and allow their full-time teaching staff to spend time in their own areas of expertise in both public and private sectors. Time spent in this way is counted as time spent in the university.

I believe that such a remarkable change has come about with the encouragement of the Council, which serves in a sense as a national board of trustees. In no way does it interfere with the autonomy of the universities, each one of which is free to design its own curricula within the minimum of required credits and to make its own regulations, which are sent directly to the *Official Gazette* for publication and not via the Council of Higher Education. This permits differences between the courses of study in the different universities in the same discipline, differences which I consider wholesome.

This summarizes our present system of higher education in Turkey. As a result of our search for the system that will best serve our society and its needs, we believe that we have established one appropriate to present-day Turkey, in its social, political and economic context. We have also become convinced that just as that context is continuously evolving, so must our system of higher education have the capacity to change and adapt to new conditions and needs. And from my experience, I see that other countries, too, are continually experimenting and trying to improve their systems of higher education within their own sociopolitical system and in accordance with their own society's needs.

