

# THE GOVERNANCE ROLES OF TURKISH PUBLIC UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

*This study identified a model made up of 10 Turkish public university president governance roles. The significance of a Turkish model of governance derived from gaps in the Turkish literature, new educational trends, Turkey's signing of the Bologna Declaration, and Turkey's European Union (EU) accession negotiations. Documents, observations, interviews, and opinionnaires comprised the qualitative data collected in Turkey from 16 Turkish public university presidents and 32 key individuals. Data analyses included both qualitative and quantitative procedures (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).*

*The Turkish model of governance roles includes: (a) the council role, (b) the interuniversity role, (c) the career role, (d) the government role, (e) the sociability role, (f) the academic administrator role, (g) the ceremony role, (h) the nationalism role, (i) the intellect role, and (j) the public affairs role. Findings of this study may be applied to the effectiveness of Turkish higher educational governance and planning at: (a) organizational, (b) institutional, (c) positional, (d) constituency, and (e) candidacy levels.*

## INTRODUCTION

As economic, social, and political systems continue to be transformed and become more integrated by the onset of information and communication technologies, 21st century university presidents face far more complex governance roles compared to their past-century counterparts. In addition to the administrative and organizational structures of their institutions, today's university presidents have to cope with new trends like *globalization in higher education, internationalization, global knowledge economy, massification, and transnational universities* (Collis, 2004, Gumpert & Chun, 1999; Marginson, 2004; Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2001; Santos, 2006; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004; Survey of Higher Education, 2005; Tierney, 2004; Tilly, 2004; Van Der Wende & Westerheijden, 2001; World Bank, 1994, 2006) as these leaders try to "sustain the institution's momentum and its sense of direction" (Fincher, 2003, p. 13).

Turkish Universities too are being challenged, threatened and redefined by the impact of massive changes resulting in endless debates among Turkish educational decision makers (Dalat Ward, 2006). Together with these global challenges, Turkish universities since 2005 have been transformed by two additional major forces related to European integration: (a) the signing of the Bologna Declaration (European Universities Association [EUA], 2005; Yükseköğretim Kurumu [YÖK], 2005); and (b) Turkey's European Union (EU) accession negotiations (European Commission [EC], 2005; European Union, 2005; Straw & Rehn, 2005).

Turkey, having participated in the Bologna Declaration or *the European Higher Education and Research Areas* act (EUA, 2005, ¶ 3) as early as 1991, made a pledge by formally signing the declaration in 2005 and is now in a binding agreement with the newly defined EUA policies for a more powerful system of European higher education. The aim of the Bologna Declaration is to bring the European partners of education together in a collaborative way, demanding more responsibilities, more competencies, and more resilience of the university presidents by the year 2010. With this declaration, the 45 signatory higher educational institutions in Europe, including Turkey, are not only improving their internal qualities but also converging for a number of external quality assurance agreements (Reichart & Tauch, 2005) as they collaborate for a powerful and competent higher education. As stated by EUA: "Higher education remains first and foremost a public responsibility so as to maintain core academic and civic values, stimulate overall excellence and enable universities to play their roles as essential partners in advancing social, economic, and cultural development" (EUA, p. 7).

The EU accession negotiations make up the second major force transforming Turkish higher education. In fact, although the official date marking the start of the negotiations for the accession to EU for Turkey was October, 2005, the EU process had already been the driving force behind the changes

in the Turkish political, social, economic, and educational structures for decades (EC, 2005; EU, 2005; Straw & Rehn, 2005).

Today, enormous political, social, and economic transformations, challenges, and crises suggest further need of interconnectedness and interdependence among and between all governing bodies, including educational institutions. The interconnections are felt not only in the exchange of policies, techniques, ideas, or educational activities, but also in the creation of transnational policies for quality improvement, going beyond national governments and borders (Marginson, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004; Survey of Higher Education, 2005; Tierney, 2004; Van Der Wende, 2001; World Bank 2006). These changes in policy, along with a scarce literature on governance roles of Turkish public university presidents, led to the need for this study.

## DESCRIPTION OF DATA RESOURCES

This study was guided by one research question: What are the governance roles of Turkish public university presidents? Qualitative methods were utilized to collect and analyze data; however, as the findings yielded textual constructs convertible to numbers, qualitative findings were quantified (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) to obtain further findings. Data sources consisted of authentic documents, interviews, and observations collected from the Turkish public university presidents to gain insight into the governance roles of Turkish university presidents. Additional data from interviews and opinionnaires, collected from internal and external key individuals related to presidencies, supplemented the findings.

This study was undertaken after a feasibility study was conducted in Turkey (Dalat Ward, 2006). The study was “a first attempt as an exercise in learning by doing as well as exploration into the feasibility of doing a study” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 51). Subject matter experts were contacted in Turkey to: (a) judge the feasibility of this study, (b) set up criteria for a sample, and (c) identify appropriate data collection methods which would not only conform to the Turkish culture but also yield credible and dependable findings.

Because the purpose of this study was to describe the governance roles of Turkish public university presidents, a small sample was needed by means of purposeful sampling (Merriam, 1998) to “develop a deeper understanding of the phenomena being studied” (Patton, 1990, p. 165). In addition, four criteria were employed in the purposeful selection process by means of homogeneous sampling so that the data would be “information rich” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003; Merriam, 1998), these criteria included: (a) the establishment date of the universities the presidents governed; (b) the location of the universities the presidents governed; (c) the full EUA memberships of the universities the presidents governed; and (d) the years of experience of the presidents, corresponding to their current presidencies. As the last criterion, if the president lacked two years of experience, the previous vice presidential experience of the president was employed as a substitute, allowing for a wider choice of university presidents for the sample. As a result, from an entire population of 53 Turkish public university presidents, 21 presidents matched the criteria. Considering the expected response rate of the presidents, all 21 university presidents were contacted. Sixteen presidents who responded to the feasibility study made up the sample of this study.

## CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The Turkish public university system is similar to the U.S. state university “six-rung ladder system” (Cohen & March, 1986). The hierarchy of the university begins with the president who governs the university under the Turkish Council of Higher Education, *Yükseköğretim Kurumu (YÖK)*, within the provision set forth by the constitution and higher education law § 2547, *Yükseköğretim Mevzuatı (Yükseköğretim Mevzuatı, 2005)*. The president of the university occupies the highest position of the six-rung ladder. The vice president or vice presidents, and presidential consultants are located under the president. The deans are situated under the vice presidents and the department chairs under the deans. The professors are located on the next level down, and the students are found at the bottom level. Turkish public university presidents are legal representatives of the institutions they lead, acting as chief academic officer and chief executive officer (*Yükseköğretim Mevzuatı, 2005*). Article 4 of the Turkish higher education law strongly stresses the principles and reforms of Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, as well as loyalty to the Turkish nation (*Yükseköğretim Mevzuatı*). Thus, one of the

major responsibilities of the Turkish public university president is to be loyal to the principles and reforms of Kemal Atatürk, the founder and the first president of Republic of Turkey, and to ensure that these principles, coined as *Kemalism* (Atay, 1990) are protected throughout the term of the university president's governance. In addition, the aim of higher education is to lead students so that the students "put the common good above their own personal interests and have full devotion to family, country, and nation" (*Turkish Council of Higher Education, 2002, p. 4*). This is achieved by enhancing the welfare of the Republic of Turkey as a whole. Furthermore, the aim of education is to create students who are "objective, broad-minded, and respectful of human rights" (*Turkish Council of Higher Education, p. 4*). The aims of higher education clearly define the path to the presidency. Candidacy for a Turkish public university presidency requires loyalty to Atatürk and Kemalism as a chief personality trait. The absence of this trait prevents a presidential candidate, no matter how popular, from being qualified for hire (Dalat Ward, 2006).

Other presidential responsibilities are typical in that the president chairs the university senate meetings as well as the administrative board meetings; implements the policy decisions taken by the Turkish Council of Higher Education; makes recommendations to this council; accepts and reviews the minutes of the university council meetings; makes internal decisions; provides progression data on the research activities and publications of their university faculty; manages budgetary and personnel issues; is responsible for the education, the learning, and the research in the institution, in compliance with the Council of Higher Education and higher education law; and assumes other responsibilities as required. As the president chairs the academic board as well as the administrative board, the president is also responsible for making and implementing general policy decisions (*Turkish Council of Higher Education, 2002; Yükseköğretim Mevzuatı, 2005*).

Turkish public university presidents are equipped with two major responsibilities vested to the president by the government. One responsibility is the management of the appropriated university budget, and the second responsibility is the dispensing of academic positions, and hence titles, allocated to the teaching staff. Both resources are left to the discretion of the president, conferring a great deal of power on the position. According to the interviews, these duties are subject to exploitation (Dalat Ward, 2006).

## METHODS

Document, interview, and observation data were collected directly from the purposefully selected presidents. Additional data were collected through interviews and opinionnaires from key individuals by means of snowballing referrals by a set of highly qualified subject matter experts in Turkey. Collection of additional data provided maximum variation (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003) resulting in a "multi-pronged approach to data collection" (Picciano, 2006, p.50). The key individuals interviewed were either internal individuals in the standard six-rung ladder system of the university (Cohen & March, 1986) or were external key figures who had experience and knowledge of Turkish university presidents. These key figures were asked to provide their views and experience regarding the governance roles of Turkish public university presidents in their own words by means of unstructured interviews and written opinionnaires. To provide reliable data, it was imperative to ensure the authenticity of the documents as well as the validity of their content. The documents, which included a two-week schedule of activities of each university president, were collected from the appointment books of the presidents with the help of the executive assistants, acting as key informants (Creswell, 1998). These documents reflected the actual activities of the Turkish public university presidents related to their governance, defined as a "complex set of relations, powers, and influences embedded in a broader, more general campus culture" (Foote, Mayer, & Associates, 1968, p. 160); or as the "structure and process of decision making" (Keller, 2004, p. 21) together with the affiliated entities, purposes of the activities, and time of the activities. As confirmed by subject matter experts, these appointment books were authentic and the contents revealed the detailed data required for the purpose of this study, enhancing the content validity of the instrument.

Table 1.

*Data Collection Sources*

Participant	<i>N</i>	Instrumentation
President	16	document
President	5	interview
President	4	observation
Executive assistant	2	interview
Vice president	1	interview
Consultant to the president	1	interview
Dean	2	interview
Chair	1	interview
Faculty member	1	interview
University press officer	1	interview
Student government general secretary	1	interview
Student	18	opinionnaire
Official of council of higher education	1	interview
Director of an international office	1	interview
Vice chancellor for U.S. university international affairs	1	interview
Journalist	1	interview

Note: The participants are listed according to the order of data collection.

The collection of written documents was supplemented by interviewing the Turkish public university presidents in their own surroundings. Although “. . . the interview method is offset by some limitations . . . it is difficult to standardize the interview situation” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003, p. 223), the unstructured conversational interviews provided a context. These findings were discussed and shared with other university presidents, giving the study an interpretive validity. Table 1 displays the data sources used in this study.

*Reliability and Validity*

The required internal and external validities for the study were established based on three criteria (Merriam, 1998). First, the findings provided rich, thick descriptions which matched the reality of Turkish higher education and were enough to be transferred to other similar situations and settings. Second, role categories describing the governance roles of the 16 presidents were enough to make comparisons to other universities. Third, because our findings provided enough diversity of the phenomenon by maximization, generalizations of role definitions could be made. Knowing that no previous study of this type was undertaken, this study filled the gap in the limited Turkish literature at a time when massive global transformations were taking place in higher education. As there were gaps in literature, this area of university governance needed attention in the face of rapid transformations (Collis, 2004), adding to the significance of the study.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

The data analyses consisted of a framework (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutman, & Hanson, 2003; Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie, 2003) made up of a four-level process, including a total of 30 steps as indicated in Figure 1. The first-level analysis included interview, observation, and opinionnaire data. These data were analyzed initially as they were employed iteratively throughout the process to provide additional knowledge, insight, and key words on the governance roles of the Turkish public university presidents. The second-level data analysis included all documents collected from the Turkish public university presidents and formed the foundation for examining governance roles of Turkish university presidents. Because these documents yielded data regarding interpresidential governance roles, we

developed a Turkish model of public university president governance roles. The term *interpresidential* was coined in reference to Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie (2003). The results of the second data analysis led to the third level of data analysis. At this point the newly-identified Turkish model was compared to the Cohen and March model of governance roles (Cohen & March, 1986) as their model was the only existing model comprised of metaphors describing governance roles of university presidents. Finally, in the fourth-level data analysis, each document ( $n=16$ ) was reanalyzed to determine the intrapresidential and interpresidential governance roles. Throughout the process of the data analyses, the subjects in Turkey were consulted to form a clearer picture of the emerging codes regarding the governance roles of the Turkish public university presidents.

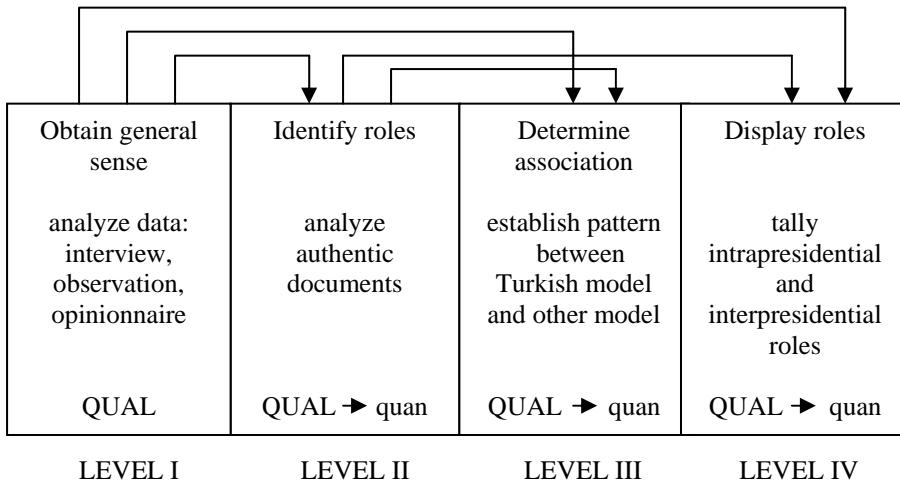


Figure 1. The four-level data analysis process.

### FINDINGS

Data were collected from 16 presidents resulting in the identification of 1096 activities. These activities were narrowed down to 206 themed activities and/or performances. The categorization of the 206 thematic activities led to 10 governance roles which made up the Turkish model of public university governance. All underlying assumptions of the study were met accounting for trustworthy data which yielded a deeper insight into the governance roles of the Turkish public university presidents. As confirmed by two independent raters, the Turkish public university governance roles were identified and a Turkish model was determined. The Turkish model of governance roles included: (a) the council role, (b) the interuniversity role, (c) the career role, (d) the government role, (e) the sociability role, (f) the academic administrator role, (g) the ceremony role, (h) the nationalism role, (i) the intellect role, and (j) the public affairs role. A description of each of these roles appears in Table 2.

Table 2.

*Turkish Model of Public University President Governance Roles*

Governance Role	Description
Council role:	Consists of performances based on the jurisdiction and principles of Turkish Higher Education Law indicating a clear line of authority and role expectancies.
Interuniversity role:	Consists of performances based on Turkish as well as international university collaborations and agreements. The role also includes the binding agreement made with EUA.
Career role:	Consists of performances of presidents continuing their professions as part of life-long learning or enabling the president to contribute to the welfare of the university or the community.
Government role:	Consists of performances based on national governmental relations because universities are part of a centralized system.
Sociability role:	Consists of internal and external representational performances.
Academic Administrator role:	Consists of performances indicating presidents governing their institutions within a system and employing organizational facts and decisions.
Ceremony role:	Consists of occupying a special place of honor in certain assemblies and ceremonies and of addressing issues in certain distinctive ways.
Nationalism role:	Consists of performances aimed at fostering nationalistic feelings through connection to the principles and reforms of Atatürk.
Intellect role:	Consists of performances related to the use of knowledge for the good of the public, and the welfare of the nation in accordance with the general provisions of the Turkish Council of Higher Education.
Public Affairs role:	Consists of performances related to both community welfare and public relations, indicating community and university partnership, and external relations to improve the university.

These role definitions revealed usage of scripts (Biddle & Thomas, 1966, p. 4) and were categorized as formal or informal roles. Formal roles were based on constraining role expectancies while informal roles allowed options with flexibility, depending on the degree and level of superordination or supraordination (Mitchell, 1978). The findings indicated that the council role, the nationalism role, and the ceremony role were formal roles and allowed minimal or no variations as these roles required strict adherence to the Turkish higher education law (Council of Higher Education, 2002; *Yükseköğretim Mevzuatı*, 2005). Contrary to these constraining formal roles, the informal roles offered degrees of variation and flexibility “attributable to his familiarity with the ‘part,’ or his personal history in general, and more significantly, to the ‘script’ which others define in so many ways” (Biddle & Thomas, p. 4). Moreover, related to the governance roles of Turkish public university presidents, roles also revealed interactions and behavior of other entities as “these individual variations in performance, to the extent that they do occur, are expressed within the framework created by the factors” involving “social prescriptions and behavior of others” (p. 4). The findings related to these roles also revealed individuals with which the presidents came into contact and their degrees of interactions with these individuals. The degree and level of relations also revealed the superordination and supraordination status of these relations.

## COMPARISON OF TURKISH AND U.S. ROLES

Because Turkish and U.S. universities consisted of a similar structure and system, it was almost expected that they shared high levels of commonalities regarding their governing models; however, four important differences became apparent as a result of data analyses.

First, the Turkish Council of Higher Education is the ultimate authority in supervising the Turkish public universities. All public university presidents have civil servant status, and thus, are expected to comply with this authority, consciously carrying out Turkish Council of Higher Education-coordinated activities as part of their governance roles in a complex hierarchy. As opposed to U.S. public university presidents, the Turkish public university presidents are primarily obligated to protect parts of the constitution of Republic of Turkey as well as contribute to the welfare of the nation as they serve students.

Second, unlike the U.S. public university presidents, in Turkey, political and social issues are an indispensable part of the lives of Turkish public university presidents. Turkish public university presidents frequently find themselves pulled into unavoidable political upheavals due to the political structure and geophysical location of the country. Experience in Turkish higher education indicates that any political disturbance in the country or region is likely to have a significant impact on the universities, and as a result, the governance roles of the presidents.

Third, as opposed to the typical U.S. university with a campus identity, the typical Turkish public university is a large institution with 7 to 17 faculties and 20,000 to over 85,000 students scattered around a huge metropolis rather than located on a central campus. Governing of these large, scattered institutions adds more responsibilities to the presidents, transforming their roles beyond their presidencies, making them more like mayors or governors of local jurisdictions.

Fourth, as opposed to U.S. university presidents, with their competitive market or entrepreneurial role (Cohen & March, 1986), Turkish university presidents collaborate with each other, providing solidarity when required, because the system of admitting students to the public universities is not competitive. As potential students continue to increase at a faster rate than the number of available seats at universities, all public universities are fully-, if not over-, enrolled. Certain universities are more in demand than others due to their prestigious and successful academic programs. As interview data revealed, universities make an attempt to attract students with the highest marks, as determined by the student selection and placement exam. This process, however, does not push universities into a competitive mode, as is more characteristic of U.S. universities.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The description of governance roles of Turkish public university presidents provides clues to the internal structures and processes of the university, and the relationships of the presidents to the broader environment of which they are a part. Yet, further research is recommended because: “As far as public bureaucracies are concerned, the environment within which they operate may contain the most critical of all variables affecting their activity” (Peabody & Rourke, 1965, p. 817). Some of the recommended research areas are: (a) an exploratory study to define how Turkish public university presidents learn about their role; (b) a comparative study to determine the governance roles of both public and private Turkish university presidents to understand better how the role of president might be differentiate within the same system; (c) a descriptive study regarding the governance roles of European university presidents to help form a global framework of governance roles, providing more transparency for more uniformity; and (d) a comparative study to determine the significant differences among the governance roles of Turkish, European, and U.S. public university presidents, contributing to the establishment of a stable global framework as indicated by Marginson (2004).

## CONTRIBUTION TO THEORY AND PRACTICE

The findings of this study provide a common language for effectiveness and planning at the: (a) organizational, (b) institutional, (c) positional, (d) constituency, and (e) candidacy levels. Gaining insight, understanding, or *verstehen* (Huberman & Miles, 2002; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990) on the performances of the presidents contributes to the transparency of the system, as these roles are “dominated by organizational characteristics” (Fincher, 2003, p. 37). By reflecting on presidential role

definitions, not only relations but also issues could be remedied more effectively as institutions are in continual interactions by means of building networks, connecting, collaborating, and planning with one another. By identifying presidential roles, presidents are better able to reflect on their daily activities. As interactions occur, a platform is created to share role expectations, role overloads, role extensions, and role conflicts (Heiss, 1981, p. 115). In fact, as the group members start to acquire a history, they also acquire a culture (Schein, 1985), creating a unity amongst the world of the presidents. By gaining insight into the roles of the presidents, the individuals who make up the six-rung ladder system can better make sense of the ambiguities and conflicts at universities. By exposing presidential roles to institutions, potential candidates running for presidencies are able to understand what the position entails and plan accordingly. Likewise, such an understanding may allow novice candidates to determine their fit for the position.

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