

Searching for Larger Status in Global Politics: Internationalization of Higher Education in Turkey

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Ersel Aydinli¹  and Julie Mathews²

Abstract

This work explores how a country's political status may impact its soft power policies, such as internationalization of higher education, through an examination of the Turkish case. Based on a survey of and subsequent interviews with actual implementers of policy, university international office heads and staff, the study draws on the theory of “status inconsistency” to contrast the country's willingness to internationalize, its attributed status as a global magnet for internationalization, and its actual capacity to meet its internationalization goals. It finds that the politicized, top-down policies designed by a status-seeking nation may lead to disconnects in practice that in turn can cause various problems, including misguided “vertical” loyalties; failure to design creative, needs-based institutional visions; and a lack of genuine feedback and evaluation mechanisms, all of which may inadvertently put at risk the very status that was seeking to be improved. Recommendations are made for greater sharing of ideas among the implementers and for more diversity in interpretations of how to achieve internationalization at the institutional level.

Keywords

higher education, Turkey, status inconsistency, practitioners

¹Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey

²Social Sciences University of Ankara, Turkey

Corresponding Author:

Ersel Aydinli, Department of International Relations, Bilkent University, Çankaya, 06800 Ankara, Turkey.

Email: ersel@bilkent.edu.tr

Introduction

Internationalization in higher education, both as a practice and as an area of research, has grown dramatically in the last few decades, as well attested to by both the launching of academic journals specifically focused on this topic and by various meta-analyses of the relevant literature (e.g., Bedenlier et al., 2018; Kehm & Teichler, 2007; Yemini & Sagie, 2016). Such studies have analyzed the development and maturing of the field, revealing important trends in the types of research being conducted. Recently, for example, by focusing on one critical journal, Bedenlier et al. (2018) observed a shift over the last quarter century from articles focusing on understanding and consolidating the scope of the field, to those focusing on first institutional- and then individual-level issues, and most recently to the transnationalization of the concept. Yemini and Sagie (2016) conducted a broad sweep of the literature between 1980 and 2014 and also highlighted a turn in recent years toward research from a broader geographical scope as well as noting increased interest in research about student mobility and multicultural issues.

Throughout this period, a number of works have sought to better understand how internationalization of higher education is understood and practiced, by conducting case studies of countries or of specific institutions. These studies have explored widely diverse cases from around the globe. They have included investigations into the practices of countries where expanding efforts of internationalization in higher education are relatively new, such as Ethiopia (Tamrat & Teferra, 2018), Slovenia (Komotar, 2019), Estonia (Tamtik & Kirss, 2016), South Africa (Kishun, 2007; Meda & Monnapula-Mapesela, 2016), or Colombia and Mexico (Berry & Taylor, 2014), as well as those where they are well established, such as Australia, where fee-paying international students make up a quarter of higher education enrollments (Marginson, 2007). These studies have also explored in detail the intentions and impacts of specific government policies aimed at internationalizing higher education in countries like Kazakhstan (Jumakulov et al., 2019), China (Huang, 2015), Japan (Rose & McKinley, 2018), and South Korea (Byun & Kim, 2011). Still others have focused on particular stakeholders' perceptions of internationalization, such as teachers and administrators in Holland (de Haan, 2014) and students in China (Ma & Yue, 2015), or have sought to apply models for more effective exploring of these stakeholders' roles, as Castro et al. (2015) do in the cases of Portugal, Brazil, and the Netherlands. The results of all these studies are both interesting and useful in showing the diversity that exists in how internationalization of higher education is interpreted and implemented, and have naturally also inspired efforts to understand the reasons behind these variations.

As part of the effort to make sense of this diversity, broader projects have been designed. One of the best known is the International Association of Universities (IAU) global survey on internationalization of higher education,

which has been conducted 5 times over the last 15 years, in the latest round collecting information from more than 900 universities in 126 countries. The results of this survey contribute to understanding overall trends in recent years of beliefs and practices of internationalization, and are very helpful for making regional comparisons. However, the survey's main takeaways are generally summarized and compared in terms of six broad geographical groupings (Europe, Asia and Pacific, Africa, North America, the Middle East, and Latin America & the Caribbean), and perhaps because of this, some of the resulting comparisons may raise as many questions as they answer, questions such as why there seems to be a decline in importance given in recent years to internationalization in some regions (Marinoni & de Wit, 2019).

There still remains therefore the need for deeper understandings of individual countries' experiences, and, moreover, for efforts to conduct studies that not only describe unique cases but also attempt to understand whether there are different *types* of country experiences, a categorization which may not correspond simply to where these countries are located on a map. For example, are there common patterns among countries of similar population size or of similar economic development level? Are there commonalities among countries with similar political or historical experiences, such as having been colonized, or having themselves been hegemonic powers in past centuries?

Questions like these are a reminder that internationalization of higher education is inevitably, at some level, a political issue. Although some studies have shown global and organizational contexts play a larger role than national context in affecting individual institutions' rationales for internationalization (Seeber et al., 2016), this obviously does not mean that national political agendas are irrelevant. To varying degrees, the connection between practice and national policies may be direct, as overt government policies may be put in place and expected to be followed. But even in cases where those policies are not the main motivation behind internationalization practices, and even when those activities are fully in the hands of individual institutions of higher education, governments still orient themselves and their policies to be a part of and take advantage of such activities.

Governments' use of or, at minimum, benefiting from the internationalization of higher education is hardly a secret. Various works have clearly shown, both conceptually (e.g., Bean, 2015; Wilson, 2015) and in practice (e.g., Wu, 2019), how internationalization policies can serve as another in a government's kit of foreign policy tools. Foreign policies are conceptualized, designed, and implemented to preserve and, ideally, to expand a state's national interests and power in the international arena. The power that is both expanded and expended has been conceptualized as being hard or soft—the former referring to using military or economic strength to convince others to act in certain ways, and the latter to attracting and shaping others' preferences and behaviors through the positive influence of your culture, values, or diplomacy (Nye,

1990). Returning to the various questions that might underlie differences found in states' educational internationalization practices, we might ask whether there are differences in approach to using a soft power tool like internationalization of higher education, among states that are not able to maximize their influence in international relations through "hard power" means, or among states that are experiencing an imbalance between the amount of power they wish to exert and the amount they actually have—a concept that has been referred to as "status inconsistency."

Theorizing Status (In)Consistency

The concept of status inconsistency has its roots in the fields of psychology and sociology, and can be linked to Weber's articulation of status as one of three parts of social stratification—the other two being class and power. In the field of international relations, the idea involves a gap between a state's self-conception of status, and the status ascribed to it by others. Status is distinguished from concepts like power or capacity, in that it relates not to elements of so-called "hard" power, but to "softer" values, like perceptions of respect within the international community. Status inconsistency in states is predicted to lead to more conflictual behaviors, as expressed through foreign policy activities.

The most significant theorizing of the last decade can be linked to the collaborative works of Volgy et al. (2011). Drawing particularly on social identity theory, their framework highlights the differences between self-attribution of status, attribution by the international community, and attribution by the existing major powers, and notes that motivation for a state to seek additional status may stem from a perceived mismatch between the status they are attributed and the status they feel they deserve—in other words, status inconsistency.

Volgy et al. write that to understand status, we have to consider a state's (a) capability: military and financial capacity to act like a major power; (b) willingness: desire to display an expansive foreign policy that extends beyond its own region; and (c) status: as attributed by the policymakers of other states and measured by factors like numbers of diplomatic contacts and state visits. Consistency ties in the idea of status with a state's capabilities and actual behaviors/willingness. In other words, states may be labeled as status consistent if their status attribution equals their power capabilities and behavior; status underachievers if they are not attributed the status proportional to their capabilities and their behaviors; or status overachievers if they are attributed more status than their capabilities and behaviors seem to warrant.

Status (In)Consistency and Internationalization of Higher Education

While Volgy et al. drew on the above framework to explore whether or not status inconsistency leads to more aggressive foreign policy behaviors in the traditional “hard” power coercive sense, a similar framework may also provide insights into assessing aspects of states’ soft power foreign policy behaviors, such as promoting internationalization of higher education. In this case, willingness would be displayed through active government declarations and policies to expand the country’s participation in international education activities, and attributed status could be reflected in numbers of incoming exchange students, as this type of attention and interest is the most concrete evidence of external recognition of a state’s international higher education quality. Perhaps the most complex factor to measure is capability, which could be considered as having the educational infrastructure in place to act like a major player in the international education realm. More specifically, however, capability must be evaluated at the institutional level based on such factors as how well the implementers of internationalization policies and goals understand and believe in those policies’ and goals’ appropriateness; are prepared and able to undertake what is involved in putting them into action (e.g., having adequate training, skills, and agency within the institution); and receive comprehensive support for enacting them (e.g., financial, logistical).

As part of this case study of Turkish internationalization of higher education, willingness of the Turkish government and attributed status of Turkey’s higher education system are first described in the next section below.

Turkey: A Middle-Sized Power With Great Aspirations

As a country “type,” Turkey can be considered a middle-size power (Susler, 2019)—broadly defined as a state that is able to exert influence on a regional and, to some degree, global scale (Organski, 1958). A prime characteristic of middle powers is exhibiting status-seeking behaviors, with status being linked to recognition (Wohlforth et al., 2017). A clear ambition of Turkey’s governing Justice and Development Party during its roughly 15 years in power has been to position Turkey as a regional power and to be recognized as a global actor (Egeli, 2018; Oğuzlu, 2018; Ovalı and Özdikmenli, 2019). Among other things, Turkey has tried to assume the role of mediator in various international conflicts, taken part in multilateral initiatives on peacemaking, and sought to develop its image as a leader in “humanitarian diplomacy” (Davutoğlu, 2013).

While such activities provide evidence of Turkey’s “willingness” to attain greater status recognition overall in its foreign policies, there are equal signs of the country’s expansive higher education ambitions. The Turkish Higher Education Council (YÖK) is the primary governmental institution for formulating and coordinating the conduct of all prime directives and strategies for

Turkish higher education. The Council was created following the 1980 coup, with a mandate of controlling the universities, which were seen as a main source of instability potential. YÖK remains in this role today, exercising strict, centralized control over the design and conduct of higher education policies and practices, including regulating the types of courses that may be offered and their content, the numbers of students university departments may enroll, and faculty hiring and promotion practices. Rather than decreasing over time, YÖK's power has increased even further recently with the 2019 decision to give YÖK responsibility over rector selection, thereby ensuring that university administrators' primary loyalties lie with YÖK.

By looking at reports prepared by the YÖK presidents in 2014 and 2018, the significance of internationalization in higher education is immediately evident. In 2014, internationalization is identified as a top official strategy for improving the quality of Turkish higher education. Moreover, the report draws parallels between Turkey's growing power and role in world politics and an "inevitable" internationalization of higher education within the country, implying that the two should mutually strengthen each other. In the 2014 report, the importance is again emphasized, and a strategy of internationalization is described in detail, citing two prime directives within the Council's strategic vision: "turning Turkey into an attraction point in higher education" and "increasing higher education capacity for internationalization purposes" (Çetinsaya, 2014, p. 51).

The Turkish government and President Erdoğan, in particular, have also directly underscored the importance of promoting internationalization. For instance, in a speech dating from May 12, 2018, Erdoğan (2018a) acknowledged the positive steps Turkey has taken toward helping international students obtain residence and worker permits, while also increasing the availability of health care options for them. In October of the same year, Erdoğan (2018b) not only praised the overall increase in international students but also boasted that the numbers were growing despite "mounting negative propaganda" against Turkey. Most recently, Erdogan revealed plans to roughly double the number of incoming international degree and exchange students to Turkey to 200,000 by the year 2023 (Aktas & Sahin, 2019).

Turning to the question of status attributed to Turkish higher education in general, the data show that foreign students are in fact increasingly pursuing higher education studies in Turkish universities, either full time or as part of short-term exchanges. According to UNESCO's Institute for Statistics, since 2013–2014, Turkey has become a net receiver of international students—in 2017, receiving more than 100,000 international students while sending 47,000 students abroad.

To fully interpret the idea of status, however, it is important to also specify the demographic makeup of these inbound students. Traditionally, Turkey receives most of its international students from neighboring countries and from the Turkic republics of Central Asia. In recent years, as an obvious

effect of the Syrian civil war, Syrian students have become the most populous group, with 15,024 enrolled students in 2017–2018. That same year, the next largest groups of tertiary international students were from Azerbaijan (14,878), Turkmenistan (10,418), Iran (6,099), and Afghanistan (5,251) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019). Conversely, numbers of students from North America in particular have taken a sharp turn downward. Following steady increases in the first decade of the 2000s, and peaking at 2,163 students in 2013, the number of U.S. students fell sharply in 2015 to 705 students, and then to just 46 in 2016–2017 (Open Doors Report, 2018). With this decline, Turkey fell to 117th position on the list of top destinations for U.S. students. The numbers of European students coming to Turkey took a similar downturn. Data from the Erasmus program show that numbers dropped from a peak of nearly 8,000 in 2014/2015, to just over 3,500 in 2016/2017. All of this presents a picture of definite willingness on the part of the Turkish state, but with a much more mixed one of attributed status, in terms of recognition from large powers like the United States or European countries.

The final step in assessing consistency is to investigate capability, which requires looking at the actual practitioners of internationalization. Specifically, how do those people in the “kitchen” understand the policies and goals their institutions have adopted? Do these implementers believe in those policies and goals, and are they ready, in terms of training, financial and logistical support, and organizational structure in their institutions, to put them into action?

This study provides an in-depth look at internationalization practices in 40 of Turkey’s higher education institutions and aims to present both a detailed look at the ways in which “internationalization” is envisioned and enacted, and insights into understanding these beliefs and practices in relation to Turkey’s political agenda. Specifically, by investigating the capability of Turkey’s internationalization efforts in higher education, it aims to explore how a country’s condition of status (in)consistency may be linked to and thus play an explanatory role in understanding its internationalization practices.

Method

Participants

This study was based on a survey of 40 people, using both a written survey and one-on-one interviews. All but two of the participants were either heads of or key staff members in their schools’ international offices, that is, the people generally in charge of implementing internationalization policies on a daily basis, and thus considered able to provide the most realistic and practical perspectives on what is actually being done rather than what might be envisioned—a critical perspective for understanding capability. The remaining two

participants were a Dean and a Vice-Rector. The participants could all be categorized as “experienced,” with all but three having worked at least 4 years in their current position. All were university graduates, with many (42.5%) holding MA degrees and over a quarter (27.5%) with PhDs. In terms of gender, they were fairly evenly distributed (24 women, 16 men).

Each participant represented a different university, with these 40 schools having been selected to represent the diversity of Turkey’s 180 universities on a number of measures. Thus, they were evenly divided between public and private; large, medium, and small institutions; and those from all regions of the country. They also represented a range in terms of year of establishment, excluding only the most newly founded schools, which had not yet begun admitting students or did not have established international offices.

Instruments

The first instrument for collecting data was very slightly modified¹ version of the IAU global survey (available at <https://www.iau-aiu.net/>) and consisted of 54 questions exploring a broad range of issues about the interpretation and practice of “internationalization” at the participants’ schools. Although this survey has been challenged for, among other things, failing to recognize unequal power relations (Buckner & Stein, 2019), it was felt to provide a reliable and comprehensive overview of different aspects of internationalization, and thus a good starting point on which to follow up with more in-depth interviews. For the purposes of this study, we report only on the results of those questions with particular relevance to issues of willingness, status, and capacity.

The second data collection instrument consisted of individual interviews conducted with 14 volunteers from among the original 40 participants. The interviewees again represented a mix of private (6) and public (8) institutions. The interviews, conducted in Turkish to ensure participants’ comfort and maximum response levels, were audio-recorded, transcribed, and then translated into English. Analysis of the transcripts involved repeated reading and then coding for themes, initially along the lines of the major sections of the survey, for example, goals and challenges of internationalization, and then according to emerging factors related to issues of willingness, status, and capacity.

Findings

Asked at the outset about their schools’ overall current degree of internationalization, the participants gave somewhat mixed reports but with a slightly positive tilt. Just over a quarter (27.5%) said low or very low, roughly a third (30%) said moderate, and a plurality (44.5%) said high or very high. While these numbers seem a bit cautious, the participants were almost unanimously confident that the rate of internationalization is generally on the increase in recent

years, with 90% saying either somewhat or significantly so. Only 5% said there was no change, and another 5% reported no change *because* their institutions were already leaders in internationalization.

Drivers of Internationalization

In terms of who or what is behind these internationalization efforts, responses on internal drivers were quite uniform. As an apparently positive sign of their own sense of empowerment, a large percentage (87.5%) selected their school's "international office" as one of the three top internal drivers of internationalization. However, only 17.5% said the international office was the *most* important internal driver, while nearly half (47.5%) allotted that role to the head of the institution. In total, 70% of all respondents selected the head of institution as a key internal driver and nearly half (45%) selected the "deputy head of institution," followed closely by "faculty members" (42.5%). The remaining choices received only minor importance, from "students" (10%) to "academic department heads" (7.5%) to "Deans" (5%).

In terms of external drivers of internationalization, responses were more diverse. A majority of the respondents (62.5%) marked "national and international rankings" as one of their three options, making it the number one choice. Three other factors, however, were also selected by over a third of respondents: demand from foreign higher education institutions (37.5%); government policy (35%); and business and industry demand (35%). A quarter of respondents pointed to regional policies as being key external drivers, and 17.5% noted societal expectations, followed by demographic trends (15%). Perhaps surprising for readers involved in internationalization efforts in North America or various other parts of the world, the idea of a "need to generate revenue" was the least selected item, with only 7.5%. This may reflect the fact that in Turkey, while international students generally pay slightly higher fees than Turkish citizens (if the latter pay any), the difference is not so significant that these students are likely to be targeted or desirable specifically for financial reasons.

Excerpts like the following from subsequent interviews reinforce the understanding that most respondents see themselves more as functionaries than as visionaries when it comes to the drive for internationalization at their schools:

We try to move in line with our macro strategies, which are the paths the university administration shows us.

We are the ones who deal directly with everything, and we work hard to follow the directives from our Rector's office, which provide us guidelines on how to proceed.

These international office staff members clearly recognize their role in the process, but as implementers of policies that come down from above, rather than as

creative catalysts for the directions those policies take. In this role as implementers, what do they think about their school leaders' vision or understandings of internationalization, and how they have been putting this vision into practice at their schools?

Values and Principles of Internationalization

The values and principles emphasized seem to spread widely across the range of options given, although half of the respondents selected "academic purposes" as being central to their institution's internationalization effort. The second most frequently selected value was about shared benefits, mutual respect, and fairness being the basis for international partnerships, which 40% of respondents chose at some level, followed by "social engagement and responsibility both locally and globally," and "equity in access to international opportunities," each selected by 35%.

While less than a third (27.5%) marked that their school's policy emphasized academic freedom and institutional autonomy, many of those who did so marked it as their first choice. Given certain sensitivities in Turkish higher education in recent years regarding freedom of expression and the dismissal of faculty members, it is unclear whether this result reflects the reality of the schools' policies or instead the respondents' personal opinions of what they think *should* be prioritized. A quarter of respondents also noted the importance of scientific integrity and research ethics in their school's policies. Among the least selected items, all being selected by fewer than 15% of respondents, were the rights of international students and scholars, the safeguarding and promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity, and shared decision-making.

Given the wide range of possible choices, all of which could be considered as important, these diverse results were perhaps not entirely surprising. It is worth noting, however, that in general, emphasis seems to be more on the rights of the institutions than on concerns at the community/society or individual student level, raising the possibility that these policy implementers feel a greater responsibility to their school administrators than to the students or society. In the interviews as well, while many speak of their desire to serve to the students' needs, they also admit that, for example,

When my superiors want something, reports, presentations, that is my primary job. I need to get things ready for the administration to use for their visits.

Others spoke about students, but specifically in terms of their schools' efforts to increase numbers:

Internationalization is really important for us. We are preparing a lot of MoUs, and we're bringing in a lot of students from abroad.

Our real emphasis at this time is finding ways to increase the number of students we can bring in as well as the diversity. We're also trying to make arrangements with schools around the world so that our students can study abroad.

While participants did also talk about certain activities more directly affecting students' experiences, the greater priority seems to be first on numbers, rather than on improving the quality of international students' or faculty members' lives, or drawing on those members of the institutional or surrounding community to support the internationalization of local students. This focus on quantity has been noted, and criticized, in other Turkish studies as well, for example, Selvitopu and Aydın (2018).

Prioritized Activities

Based on the reported values and priorities, it is unsurprising that the number one activity conducted under these schools' internationalization efforts is student exchanges. Approximately a third of participants (32.5%) chose this as their highest ranked option, and nearly two thirds (62.5%) selected it overall. This is considerable when you consider that the second most frequently chosen activity, developing institutional strategic partnerships, was selected by only 37.5% of respondents. The next most frequently chosen, both having been marked by 30% of the survey takers, were "international research collaboration" and "outgoing mobility opportunities for faculty and staff." Around a fifth of respondents noted their schools' participation in international events (22.5%) and recruiting fee-paying international undergraduate students (20%), and some (15%) pointed to marketing and promotion of the institution internationally. Overall, the findings emphasize activities related to student and, to a slightly lesser degree, faculty mobility. One surprising point regarding student mobility was that although the respondents were primarily international office heads, several reported not knowing the exact numbers of incoming or outgoing students. This was particularly true at the PhD level, where a full 35% said they did not know.

In terms of the different directions of student mobility, more than half of participants (56%) stated that their school has specific geographic priorities, with 35% reporting they do not, and 7.5% not knowing. Of those with geographic priorities, half checked Europe as one of their top three priorities. Close behind was Asia and the Pacific (45%), and in third place the Middle East, which was selected by 35%, but was overall the most likely to be chosen as the "most important" priority. Africa (22.5%) and North America (20%) were next, with no one selecting Latin America/the Caribbean.

The survey results suggest some degree of disconnect between the actual practices and the focus countries specified by YÖK, of which the top 10 are Afghanistan, Germany, Albania, Azerbaijan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, China,

Indonesia, India, England, and Iran. The implementers report an emphasis on Europe and Asia/Pacific, while the YÖK report aims at countries with cultural or religious ties to Turkey (Germany is included here due to its large Turkish immigrant population)—a position also reflecting the findings of an empirical study on the subject (Özoğlu et al., 2015). One interviewee raised an interesting point about determinants of geographical focus that may help understand this disconnect:

There seems to be a kind of interuniversity competition, to see who can get better students, like those from Europe and east Asia. This is controversial, maybe even race-related. There's some prestige in getting students from certain countries over others.

The survey and interview findings give a sense that the implementers in these universities have certain ideals of “status,” although government policy appears more pragmatic in focus, aiming not to compete as a destination country with places like the United States or the United Kingdom, but rather to serve as a “regional hub” for students from, primarily, the Balkans, Middle East, Caucasasia, and Central Asia (Kondakci, 2011).

Obstacles to Internationalization

From within the institution. The top obstacle noted was “insufficient financial resources,” which was selected by 47.5% of all respondents, and as the most important obstacle by 25%. This concern relates to the risk noted earlier of only students with sufficient financial backing being able to benefit from internationalization efforts, and clearly reflects Turkey’s financial instability of recent years. Also considered an equally significant obstacle (47.5%), was “lack of knowledge of foreign languages”—an issue of much discussion in Turkey, with several reports revealing the unsuccessful state of foreign language education in the country (British Council/TEPAV Report, 2015). When asked for follow-up on this issue, respondents noted that the language issue becomes a problem not only for Turkish students wanting to go abroad, but also locally:

At our school classes are taught in English, but sometimes when the level of students is not very high they may want the class to be taught in Turkish . . . Turkish students may then create problems . . .

Our international students don't mix with our local Turkish students, and I think that might be because of English language quality. We are a leading English-medium institution, but even here, our students don't seem as comfortable hanging out with the internationals.

Close behind, 42.5% of respondents also noted “administrative/bureaucratic difficulties.” In the interviews, considerable time was spent in describing how these participants deal with these difficulties. Despite it being a topic of considerable discussion, it is also the one major obstacle that international office staff actually have significant input in solving themselves (unlike financial or language problems), which may explain why it is not selected here as the number one obstacle.

Two other obstacles received some note (17.5% each): “international engagement not recognized for promotion or tenure” and “limited student interest/participation,” and the remaining choices received relatively minor note—whether it was criticism of the organizational structure, leadership’s vision, or strategic guidance (10%, 7.5% and 2.5% respectively); concerns about an overly rigorous or inflexible curriculum (10%); or concerns over the limited capacity of the faculties (5%).

From Outside the Institution

Both in terms of overall selection and as the obstacle most selected as “most important,” the issue of security was highlighted by half the participants. This is not surprising in a country like Turkey in which, just two years before this survey was conducted, there were a series of terrorist attacks and a failed coup attempt, leading to the loss of dozens of lives. To be fair, over the same period, large terrorist attacks in European countries also caused numerous fatalities, but only Turkey was branded with a travel advisory warning by various foreign state departments. Sensitivity over this issue and the reality of huge decreases in students coming from the West clearly prompted this response. Several other issues also were given significant importance, including limited funding in support of internationalization efforts (47.5%), the language barrier, and the issue of visa restrictions imposed on Turkish students (37.5% each)—all of which again reflect the primary focus on mobility (or limitations to it) in their understandings of internationalization.

Finally, the next two frequently selected obstacles both seem to again reflect the complications of finding and negotiating agreements between institutions which, like individuals, have certain ideas about their own status and would not want to appear to have entered into a relationship with a “lower status” partner. Nearly a third (30%) of respondents chose “difficulties of recognition and equivalence of qualifications, study programs and course credits,” and almost as many (27.5%) chose lack of interest in own institution by potential partners.

Discussion

YÖK’s internationalization of higher education strategy in Turkey is first and foremost characterized by political decision-making. The Turkish government

envisioning a much larger status for the country in international politics, and sees internationalization of higher education as one venue to reach this goal. To this end, internationalization is understood by the Turkish government and reflected in YÖK's reports as global recognition of Turkey's higher education system as an attraction point: the more students and scholars that can be attracted, the more evidence that Turkey has grown politically and has achieved its desired status as a "great power."

A direct implication of this politicization of internationalization is that the process and policies, rather than being institutionally needs-based and initiated, are instead conducted in a top-down manner. This top-down process occurs at three levels: from the government to YÖK, from YÖK to the university administrators, and from those administrators to the practitioners in the international offices. Translated through these layers, it is unsurprising that differing interpretations of "internationalization" may be understood and communicated, leading to the areas of disconnect that were observed in this study. The first of these is a perhaps inevitable disconnect between the university leaders and the government's vision. Because the government-sponsored YÖK reports offer a single, politicized, and, for many, unrealistic mandate for all schools to follow, university leaders must translate that directive into something that aligns with their particular institution's needs and realities. Unsurprisingly, this challenging task can result in visions and priorities that lack clarity, a shortcoming that is reflected in our study's finding of international staff members' own confusion, or reporting "not knowing" the responses to critical items on the survey.

More direct disconnects stemming from top-down policies were those noted between the university leadership and the implementers themselves. These seem to emerge as the international office staff try to translate their administrators' sometimes conflicted or vague visions into daily practices that mesh with the on-the-ground realities and needs of the people most directly involved, that is, the students, faculty, and staff themselves.

The findings also suggest that the top-down nature of internationalization policies has other implications as well. First, it seems to lead to misdirected loyalties among the implementers, as they feel compelled to pay more attention to the upper administration than to the students/faculty. While one might expect the primary discourse of international office staff members to revolve primarily around the needs, expectations, development, motivations, evaluation, assessment, and follow-up of the students and faculty, instead, a greater emphasis is on increasing numbers, combating inequalities and perceived unfairness in competing for "better" students or partnering institutions, and maintaining (or achieving) a better reputation for their school. In other words, we see a "vertical" loyalty based on satisfying the school leadership, rather than a horizontal focus on improving the conditions, performances, and outcomes of international students/faculty.

Top-down practices also negatively affect creativity, reducing the chance of custom-designed, niche-oriented internationalization efforts being implemented. Such a lack of creativity may begin with the university administrators trying to strictly follow YÖK's top-down mandate, but trickles down to the implementers, who, feeling that they are not a part of the vision-making process, either do not see the need or are not equipped to devise customized ways of conducting their job. The result is little diversification of practice, and a rather single-minded focus on student mobility, a goal which may or may not be realistic for all schools, and certainly fails to take into consideration wider interpretations of the internationalization concept.

Conversely, bottom-up, institutionally needs-based priorities and practices could potentially encourage universities to seek different angles of internationalization, for example, some emphasizing student and faculty mobility, others internationalization at home; some turning to transnationalization efforts, others introducing more internationalized curricular changes; and so on. A university in Southeastern Turkey, for example, could try to draw positively on the large Syrian population both in and outside the institution, while an established university in Istanbul could more efficiently work on growing its international student and faculty numbers, and a small rural university could perhaps emphasize de-Westernizing departmental curricula.

Finally, another result of the top-down disconnect is the lack of a healthy feedback mechanism for critical assessment. Perhaps the most obvious example emerging in this study is the taboo about honestly discussing the "numbers" issue. While authorities happily cite increasing numbers of incoming students, they avoid questions like, who makes up those numbers? Why are they coming to Turkey? Are their experiences here meeting everyone's expectations? What kind of impacts are these students having, for example, are there actual increases in "internationalization" in the sense of better intercultural understanding, broader professional prospects for local students, greater faculty collaboration, and so on?

Ultimately, it is ironic that internationalization policies that are seen from above as a way of dealing with status inconsistency may produce disconnects between the policy goals and actual capacity, which in turn ends up hurting status, and thus reinforcing the very inconsistency that was sought to be resolved in the first place.

While the situation may seem quite negative for states experiencing status inconsistency, the Turkish case shows at least one sign for positive possibilities, which also points to a concrete recommendation for moving forward. Despite the heavy state-centric and centralized internationalized efforts in Turkey, our interviews revealed there are a few examples of institutions trying to conduct needs-based, bottom-up, custom-designed, and thus more sustainable practices. In essence, a parallel internationalization process is taking place in some schools, and those institutions are, informally, recognized as "best examples"

for internationalization. These schools' experiences and practices must be further studied and recognized, and efforts to support diffusion of ideas and information-sharing among the actual implementers can strengthen their capacity to draw on these examples. Doing so could have benefits not only at the individual and institutional levels, but could ultimately even serve to the greater state-level aim of turning Turkey into a greater hub for internationalized higher education.

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ORCID iD

Ersel Aydinli  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8534-1159>

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Author Biographies

Ersel Aydinli is a professor of international relations at Bilkent University and has been serving since 2010 as executive director of the Turkish Fulbright

Commission, which oversees both student and faculty educational exchanges between Turkey and the United States.

Julie Mathews is a professor of Linguistics and former Dean of the Faculty of Foreign Languages at the Social Sciences University of Ankara. Among her publications related to international education is the volume *International Education Exchanges and Intercultural Understanding: Promoting Peace and Global Relations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).