Equity, quality and efficiency effects of reform in Turkish higher education

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Abstract

This paper summarizes the major findings of recent studies dealing with the equity, quality, and internal efficiency effects of higher education reform in Turkey. It uses these findings to examine whether public policies formulated by the central government in 1982, in fact made progress on their intended purposes. Such information should assist policy makers in Turkey to better understand tradeoffs in terms of costs and outcomes between equity policies and points of quality and internal efficiency. © 1999 International Association of Universities. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades economic growth and strong social demand in Turkey have fueled massive increases in university enrollments along with a large expansion in the number of institutions and programs in its higher education system. As a consequence, the government enacted a set of national plans to expand the higher education sector in 1982. This legislation expressed plans to enhance system-wide planning for greater efficiency, expanding the quality of instruction, and increasing greater access for all students including those...
traditionally perceived as disadvantaged. The number of universities increased from 8 in 1970 to a country-wide network of 28 public universities by 1992. New campuses were created throughout the country and system-wide enrollments rose from 160,000 to 460,000 between 1981 and 1991 (YOK, 1991). Since 1992, the country has experienced another unprecedented expansion. Today there are 54 public universities in Turkey.

2. An expanding university system driven by equity concerns

Since the early 1960s the supply of higher education in Turkey has failed to meet an increasing social demand for higher education. In spite of major expansion attempts, the system has never been able to meet the needs of more than one-third of all applicants. Higher education access or admission is determined by centrally administrated meritocratic entrance examinations to which all high school graduates are eligible to apply. The shortage of higher education spaces and the importance of the entrance examinations for admission to higher education in general, and to the most prestigious universities and programs in particular, have produced intense competition for admission.

More importantly, that such an allocation process results in considerable inequities in access to and choice in higher education remains a matter of concern. The central rationale behind the expansion of higher education has been that expansion will lower the barriers to access and thus provide greater opportunity to a larger segment of the population than would otherwise have access to higher education. The government of Turkey has addressed equality of educational opportunity in higher education largely by dealing with the “supply side” of the problem and paying little attention to the “demand side”. Expansion of “the higher education pie” has simply been assumed to automatically improve access to higher education for a larger segment of all groups, including those historically disadvantaged. Following the 1982 reforms of higher education, strategies followed five major tracks: (1) sharp increases in enrollments in the existing institutions; (2) establishment of new universities; (3) expansion of two-year vocational colleges within the universities; (4) expansion of nonconventional approaches to higher education such as distance education and evening programs; and (5) the development of non-profit private universities.

2.1. Expansion of existing universities

At the beginning of the 1982 reforms, the capacities of all universities were increased by an average of 16% in 1983–84 and to 24% in 1984–85 (Kaptan, 1986, p. 94).

2.2. Establishment of new universities

The number of universities increased from 19 to 27 in 1982, and to 29 in 1987