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autonomy and international cooperation in higher education**

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Short bio: Ece Alara Özdarendeli is a senior Law and Business Administration student at Koç University, Türkiye. She was selected as a member of the Turkish Higher Education Quality Council (THEQC) Student Commission for 2024, where she led the Program Accreditation Unit and the International Relations Unit. She is an evaluator for THEQC and Social, Humanities and Basic Sciences Accreditation and Rating Association (STAR), taking part in program and institutional evaluation processes. Since 2023, she has been a member of the European Students' Union (ESU) Quality Assurance Student Experts Pool and a reviewer for the European Council for Business Education

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Paper

Title: Complex Dynamic of Student Integration in QA: Innovative Insights from Top Management in Turkish Higher Education

Abstract

This paper explores the complex dynamic of student integration in QA in Turkish Higher Education. Student participation in internal QA is widely recognized as a cornerstone of inclusive and effective governance. This qualitative exploratory study investigates how top-level university management across six diverse Turkish HEIs perceived and managed student integration mechanisms under typical operational conditions and during recent large-scale systemic crises, specifically the COVID-19 pandemic and the devastating 6th of February earthquakes. Drawing on structured interviews with Vice-Rectors and QA Coordinators, the study aims to identify innovative policies employed to move beyond passive participation and ensure proactive QA, and lessons regarding QA structures that can be transferred to strengthen resilience in other EHEA contexts. The findings reveal a systemic strategic commitment, with student integration placed at the strategic level and representatives incorporated at every level. During crises, management demonstrated remarkable agility, utilizing online tools to maintain continuity while deliberately shifting from analysing feedback "as an unit" to providing personalized, one-by-one resolutions. The study concludes that the Turkish QA management culture offers a practical model for building resilient and inclusive QA systems, demonstrating that robust formal integration must be complemented by dynamic leadership capable of agile adaptation during profound external disruptions. This approach provides valuable lessons for quality policy and practice across the EHEA.

1. Introduction

Quality assurance in higher education serves as a critical mechanism for maintaining institutional credibility and academic standards across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). In quality assurance (QA), one of the most important stakeholders are students, in that, this paper aims to highlight the methods utilised by various Turkish universities to thoroughly integrate students to QA processes. Moreover, Quality assurance systems must be proactive and agile to navigate macro-level disruptions, which increasingly include profound crises such as pandemics, natural disasters, and geopolitical or economic turbulence. In that regard, the methods utilised to maintain or orientate student participation in times of crises is an important instructive point.

A core principle of modern QA governance is the integration of the student voice, as students are recognized as primary stakeholders and quality measures should be benchmarked against their interests (Uludağ et al., 2021). Yet, institutional crises challenge this ideal: when resources are strained and decisions must be made rapidly, the degree to which student voices are meaningfully integrated can fluctuate significantly. This study investigates this complex dynamic by focusing on the perspectives of top-level university management in Türkiye, a country which recently faced major systemic disruptions including the global COVID-19 pandemic and the devastating 6th of February earthquakes.

The Turkish higher education context is particularly illuminating, characterized by the well adapted EHEA QA policies alongside the high number of higher education institutions. Formal structures for student participation exist, but research suggests that these often result in implementation-based passive participation rather than decision-based active participation. By examining the management decisions and policy adaptations made by institutional leaders in response to these recent, large-scale crises, this paper seeks to provide innovative insights into maintaining meaningful student involvement when institutional autonomy is under external pressure.

Drawing on structured interviews with top university managers, this study aims to answer:

1. What innovative policies and management insights were employed to move beyond passive participation and ensure proactive QA?
2. How did institutional leadership in Turkish HE adapt student integration mechanisms during recent large-scale crises (COVID-19 and the 6th of February earthquakes)?
3. What lessons regarding QA structures can be transferred from the Turkish management experience to strengthen resilience and inclusive governance in other EHEA contexts?

The findings offer practical reflections from those most responsible for steering quality strategies during disruption.

2. Conceptual Framework & Literature Review

This paper utilizes a conceptual framework encompassing the function of quality assurance, the spectrum of student engagement, and the critical role of institutional leadership in translating policy into practice, particularly under times of crises.

Quality assurance systems function within a constant tension, required both to provide accountability (demonstrating fitness for purpose) and drive improvement (fostering enhancement internally) (Westerheijden et al., 2007). In a turbulent environment, QA must foster institutional robustness and resilience by employing flexible and adaptive approaches that can quickly adjust to crises and emerging

challenges. The objective of studying QA in challenging times is to reflect on how it has fostered the sector's ability to evolve and integrate new practices that initially emerged as emergency measures but have since become permanent features.

Student contribution to QA is recognized as a cornerstone of inclusive HE governance, requiring mechanisms to ensure the student voice is considered seriously (Dill, 2010). This contribution exists across a spectrum of complexity, generally categorized into three ascending dimensions in the literature:

1. **Participation:** Focuses on the teaching and learning process, primarily through feedback collection mechanisms, such as satisfaction surveys and module evaluations (Serrano et al., 2025). At this level, students provide quantitative data that serves as 'evidence' of performance.
2. **Involvement and Engagement:** Centres on formal governance and decision-making processes. Students act as active partners in decision-making processes and governing bodies, requiring genuine dialogue between students and the university. In the Australian context, involvement includes representation at institutional boards and committees that oversee internal QA (Serrano et al., 2025).
3. **Commitment:** Represents the deepest level, where students demonstrate a commitment to QA and possess the necessary quality literacy to function as effective change agents or co-creators. This requires that students are recognized as experts in their learning experience and that their input is seen as constructive feedback from an expert (Naylor et al., 2021).

A crucial challenge observed globally is the tendency for student input to remain "tokenistic" (Eggins, 2014), limited to collecting formal feedback at the end of a course, thereby failing to advance students from passive data providers toward active partners in quality enhancement. In the context of this paper, any solution that extend the extent from which student feedback is collected, is a welcome development.

Top management, including Vice-Rectors and QA Coordinators, are the key actors in translating macro-level policies (like the ESG requirements) into institutional quality strategy (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010). They are the decision-makers who steer resource allocation and organizational change.

While higher education institutions' quality commissions are mandatory and include student members for internal QA, the system has historically faced challenges due to the centralized nature of the HE system (Bugday Ince & Gounko, 2014). Students perceive challenges related to institutional support, including feeling that their opinions are not taken into account and that institutional reluctance impedes participation. This context of institutional and political constraints makes the study of how Turkish managers navigated major crises highly relevant for understanding proactive QA leadership. More importantly, this study highlights the mutual constructive aspect of student integration as it discusses student integration with vice rectors and QA coordinators.

3. Method

The research adopted an exploratory qualitative case study approach, focusing on the perceptions of institutional leaders in the specific context of Turkish HE. This qualitative methodology allows for the investigation of complex phenomena (Maxwell, 2012)—the nuanced perceptions and adaptive strategies used by top management in the context of complex dynamics of student integration and the time pressure created by crises.

The study participants were six top university managers (Vice-Rectors and/or QA Coordinators) selected from six diverse Turkish higher education institutions: Başkent University, Hacettepe University, İstanbul Arel University İstanbul University – Cerrhpaşa, Karadeniz Technical University and

Turkish Aeronautical Association University. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure representation across different types of HEIs (including public and private institutions) and to focus specifically on senior leaders most responsible for steering quality strategies during disruption.

Primary data were collected through structured individual interviews. The interview questions also included specifically targeted questions regarding the impact of recent major crises—the global COVID-19 pandemic and the 6th of February earthquakes—on student integration mechanisms, asking managers which strategies were developed to sustain or increase student participation during such challenging periods. All in all, three main topics were questioned and analysed by the interview questions: methods for active student integration, QA leadership in times of crises and transferrable resilient and inclusive policies as presented in the introduction section. The questions are presented in Appendix 1.

The interview transcripts were analysed using content analysis (Maxwell, 2012). This method involves using existing theoretical knowledge to guide the analysis, providing a framework for coding and interpretation. In this study, the analysis framework was primarily guided by the established multidimensional model of student contribution (Participation, Involvement, and Commitment) (Serrano et al., 2025), linking the managers' perceptions and crisis adaptations directly to the theoretical constructs of student engagement levels, and focusing on observed phenomena such as the shift from passive participation to active partnership. This structured approach ensures a rigorous analysis tied to recognized theoretical models of quality assurance effectiveness (Moyo & Boti, 2020). This study's ethics approval was issued by Başkent University Social and Humanities Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (17162298.600-303).

4. Findings

The findings, derived from structured interviews with top university managers across six diverse Turkish higher education institutions, offer insights into maintaining meaningful student involvement in QA during periods of stability and systemic disruption. This section synthesizes the results in response to the core research questions. The overall management insights reveal a robust commitment to student integration, mechanisms for fostering a shared institutional culture, and agile strategies for crisis adaptation in Türkiye.

A primary and consistent finding across all institutions interviewed is that every university places student integration at the strategic level. This strategic focus is essential for ensuring that QA aspects regarding students functions proactively. The commitment goes beyond token gestures, as evidenced by the structural embedding of the student voice: Every university integrates student representatives at every level. Programs and faculties have committees with student representatives, rectorate and senates have student representatives elected annually. Another strong point of Turkish HEIs is that 170 HEIs out of 208 have a student society dedicated to quality assurance (Öğrenci Toplulukları Listesi, 2025).

This comprehensive representation mechanisms ensure that students act as active partners in governance and decision-making processes, moving participation toward the 'involvement' dimension of student engagement models. The presence of student members in institutional bodies, such as quality commissions, is mandatory in the Turkish system for internal QA, and involvement in institutional boards and committees that oversee internal QA is characteristic can be considered one of the best practices to be applied other contexts.

A significant management insight related to shifting from passive to proactive QA involves successfully managing the cultural dynamics of implementation. While incorporating students is widely supported in policy documents (e.g., by the Bologna process and the ESG), internal resistance is a known barrier to QA implementation.

The interviews confirmed this initial tension: Most of participants said that student integration in certain levels caused disturbance in the beginning. However, leaders overcame this by cultivating an environment of mutual understanding: this dissipated when the importance and the function of student participation was understood by the academic personnel. Seeing students as future colleagues.

This transformation highlights the central role of institutional leadership in translating macro-level policies into effective practice. By ensuring that academic personnel understand the value of student participation, which provides unique insights into the teaching and learning experience, institutions foster a quality culture where faculty show a positive attitude toward change and improvement.

Institutional leadership demonstrated high adaptability in maintaining student engagement amidst macro-level disruptions, specifically the COVID-19 pandemic and the 6th of February earthquakes. To ensure continuity of student integration mechanisms during crises, every participant university utilised online tools to continue student integration during times of crises. The use of information and communication technologies has long been noted for increasing engagement, enhancing delivery efficiency, and adapting education to student needs. Digital tools for collecting feedback, such as online surveys, are a standardized national practice in many HE contexts, contributing to the QA agency's focus on student experience. Leveraging digital technology is considered a necessary practice to expand the reach of student involvement, especially during remote teaching and learning necessitated by crises.

A critical adaptive measure involved changing how student feedback was processed during crisis periods. The focus shifted from quantitative holistic analysis to personalized response mechanisms: Due to the nature of the situation, while the feedback is analysed as an unit in normal times, in times of crises the feedback was much more personal issues and related and they were taken care of one by one.

This managerial adaptation recognizes that during large-scale crises, student feedback often revolves around immediate and deeply personal challenges, such as student wellness, family morbidities, or access to proper study spaces due to sudden displacement or remote learning. Handling feedback individually ensured that institutional management was responsive to the severe and complex needs of students during disruption, allowing the university to continue delivering pastoral support and guidance. This adaptive strategy directly addresses the need for QA systems to be agile and responsive to emerging challenges.

As a result of the interviews, multiple innovative practices utilised by the participant universities emerged. Başkent University founded a student commission under its Quality and Accreditation Coordination Unit before the pandemic. Said commission comprised only of students which held meetings monthly and provided feedback and activity reports to the rectorate. Hacettepe University has developed an online system that notifies students about every change made in the light of their feedback, this mechanism is deemed crucial for conveying the extent student feedback reaches. İstanbul Arel University utilises a reverse mentorship programme, in which the students provide guidance in university related topics and issues. Worth noting that this system includes the rector themselves. İstanbul University-Cerrahpaşa has dedicated certain sections to be written by the students in their institutional self-evaluation reports and unit evaluation reports. These reports are also made public in the respective web pages. Karadeniz Technical University has a dedicated quality commission that only consists of students and is directly in touch with the university's quality coordination. Turkish Aeronautical Association University integrated students to their academic personnel training session in which the students explained training and comprehension from their viewpoint.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study provided a closer look to student integration with a specific focus of innovative insights from Turkish institutional leadership. With the aim of describing how strategic commitment and adaptive management is leveraged to sustain meaningful student integration in QA. The findings confirm that Turkish HEIs operate under the core EHEA principle of embedding the student voice as a primary QA stakeholder, consistently emphasizing that every university place student integration at the strategic level. This demonstrated practice moves Turkish HE beyond symbolic or passive participation towards genuine engagement (Serrano et al., 2025). This aligns with international recommendations advocating for dedicated mechanisms for student involvement in quality enhancement, seeing students as co-creators and future colleagues (Asiyai, 2022).

Crucially, the success of this structural integration relied on addressing cultural barriers. The importance of institutional leadership in fostering a QA quality culture is deeply highlighted by our findings. This transformation involves shifting academic perception, ensuring that the structural, formal QA processes are matched by the psychological commitment of personnel (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010).

The managerial adaptation during large-scale crises (COVID-19 and earthquakes) provides compelling evidence for the agility of QA. The comprehensive use of online tools for continuity was coupled with a significant shift in feedback processing: moving from analysing feedback as a unit in normal times to handling increasingly personal issues one by one during crises.

This personalization represents a highly responsive, agile strategy. It ensures that QA functions support institutional resilience by recognizing the deeply personal challenges (e.g., wellness, displacement) students face during disruption. Such management focus enhances trust and ensures immediate institutional responsiveness, elevating the QA function from mere accountability to a holistic and inclusive process.

The Turkish experience offers clear lessons that can be transferred to strengthen resilience and inclusive governance in other EHEA contexts. The primary takeaway is that resilience in QA is achieved through two complementary pathways of structural embedding and managerial agility. By demonstrating that initial internal resistance can be overcome through promoting a culture of partnership and that structural QA mechanisms can be adapted to provide agile, individualized support during crises, Turkish HE management showcases a model for navigating institutional integrity when faced with profound external pressures. This holistic approach—combining formal structural compliance with a dynamic, human-centered management response—is essential for sustainable student-centered QA systems across the EHEA.

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Appendix 1 – Structured Interview Questions

Corporate Strategy and Vision

- How do you position student integration as a strategic priority in your university's quality assurance processes?
- Do you have corporate policies aimed at increasing student participation? If so, can you provide examples?

Structural and Operational Arrangements

- To what extent is the impact of students on decision-making processes felt?
- Through which mechanisms (committees, surveys, representatives) are students involved in quality processes?

Quality and Depth of Participation

- What are the greatest strengths you have observed in students' contributions to KGS processes?
- What aspects of your student participation level and scope do you consider unique?

Crisis and Flexibility Dimension

- How was the integration of students into KGS processes affected during times of crisis (e.g., pandemic, natural disasters, economic crises)? What strategies were developed to maintain or increase student participation during such periods?
- What kind of contributions did student feedback provide to university management during crisis periods, and what challenges did you observe in terms of the flexibility and rapid adaptation of these mechanisms? Were there any challenges that your institution overcame more easily than expected?

Stakeholder Relations and Networks

- How does the presence of students in QA processes affect the balance with other stakeholders (academic staff, administrative staff, external stakeholders)?

The Future of Student Participation

- What policy or structural changes are needed to ensure more effective student participation in QA processes?
- In the Turkish context, which aspects of student participation do you observe as strong compared to international examples, and which aspects are open to improvement?