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Short bio:

Dr Meryem Ayşegül Kozak Çakır is an academic with a dedicated focus on sociology and educational quality. With a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Minnesota and an ABD in Curriculum and Instruction minoring in Historical and Comparative Education from Indiana University Bloomington in the USA, her expertise spans topics such as comparative education, political sociology, gender studies and democratization. Currently serving as an Academic Expert and International Relations Coordinator with the THEQC, Dr Kozak Çakır has held both teaching and administrative roles at institutions like Bursa Uludağ University, the University of Minnesota and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Driven by a commitment to enhancing educational standards, a recipient of awards like the Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award from the University of Minnesota, Dr Kozak Çakır actively contributes to developing global methodologies in higher education quality assurance to shape and influence educational quality standards in Turkey and beyond.

Paper

Title: Enhancing Quality Assurance through Interdisciplinary Cooperation and Community Engagement: A Longitudinal Study of Turkish Universities' Service to Society

Abstract

Universities have always interacted with their surrounding communities and responded to societal change, a role often referred to as the "third mission of the university." Today, HEIs are increasingly expected to play an active role in addressing a range of social needs and problems, from the climate crisis to geopolitical tensions. These complex challenges make cooperation between disciplines, between institutions, and between institutions and enterprises or local communities even more urgent and relevant.

This longitudinal study explores how accredited HEIs in Turkey conceptualize and articulate their perspectives on "service to society" within the context of the THEQC accreditation framework. The study aims to understand how these perspectives have evolved over the years, specifically examining changes in randomly selected 20 THEQC-accredited HEI's yearly institutional self-assessment reports (ISERs) to see if and how cooperation and coordination efforts have enhanced their realization of this specific THEQC criterion.

By examining ISERs, the study investigates how HEI's understanding and implementation of community engagement have changed and whether these changes reflect improved interdisciplinary cooperation and integration with local communities and enterprises. By doing so, the paper aims to answer the question of what role quality assurance plays in fostering these different types of cooperation, including interdisciplinarity, combining the different university missions for quality education and research, and innovative initiatives such as service learning.

The findings highlight the importance of integrated and cooperative strategies in enhancing the overall quality of higher education. The paper concludes by emphasizing the transformative potential of quality

assurance mechanisms in fostering a culture of collaboration and community engagement within universities.

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are called upon to address societal challenges beyond their primary missions of teaching and research. This additional mandate, termed the "third mission," underscores the importance of active community engagement. In Turkey, this mission is highlighted by the Turkish Higher Education Quality Council (THEQC), which includes "service to society" in its accreditation criteria. This study examines the approaches taken by THEQC-accredited Turkish universities in realizing their community service mission from 2021 to 2023. By analyzing Institutional Self-Evaluation Reports (ISERs), the study identifies prevailing trends, successful strategies, and the role of quality assurance in driving impactful community partnerships.

The Role of Quality Assurance in Community Engagement

THEQC's quality assurance framework is designed to support universities in aligning their missions with community needs through structured self-assessment and continuous improvement. This framework encourages universities to embed community engagement as a strategic objective. THEQC, an independent QA body, ensures quality in higher education by evaluating various university functions, including leadership, governance, teaching-learning, research and community impact. Its rubric emphasizes the integration of universities third mission activities under the heading of societal contributions into the institutional strategy through key sub-criteria like strategic alignment (D.1.1), effective resource management (D.1.2), and performance evaluation (D.2.1). These elements push HEIs to prioritize meaningful engagement with external partners and foster sustainable social impact.

Literature Review: Defining Community Engagement in Higher Education

The concept of the "third mission" of higher education institutions (HEIs) has gained significant attention globally, reflecting an evolving understanding of the role universities play in modern society. This shift highlights on the one hand an "international convergence of interest" in redefining the purpose of universities beyond their traditional mandates of teaching and research (Watson, 2007), while indicating how HEIs embrace isomorphism (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983, Schofer, & Meyer, 2005) and world polity (Boli & Thomas, 1997; Ramiraz et al., 2003) on the other.

The third mission encompasses activities that extend a university's contribution to society, positioning HEIs as pivotal players in socio-economic development. This mission has been described as multidimensional (Knudsen et al., 2019), ambiguous (Pinheiro et al., 2015), and open to varied interpretations (Vorley & Nelles, 2008). The core idea is to integrate teaching and research with societal engagement to foster community and socio-economic growth (Compagnucci & Spirarelli, 2020).

Initial understandings of the third mission focused predominantly on regional economic contributions (Berghäuser & Hoelscher, 2020). This economic perspective emphasized universities leveraging their expertise to drive innovation, technology commercialization, partnerships with industries, and knowledge transfer initiatives (OECD, 2007; Göransson et al., 2009). Activities such as licensing technologies and fostering startups stemming from academic research were highlighted as vital to boosting economic competitiveness (Molas-Gallart, 2004).

However, recently there is also a strong social dimension within the third mission that emphasizes enhancing quality of life and addressing societal challenges (Krčmářová, 2011). This approach includes promoting entrepreneurial capabilities, social innovation, and human capital development (Compagnucci & Spirarelli, 2020). Unlike the economic interpretation, this social focus may result in limited or non-monetary benefits (della Volpe & Esposito, 2020).

Definitions and Characteristics of the Third Mission

Definitions of the third mission vary across literature. Molas-Gallart (2004) described it as "the engagement of the university with societal needs" (p. 75), while Molas-Gallart et al. (2002) emphasized the application and exploitation of university knowledge beyond academic settings. Third mission definitions in the above stated literature underscores partnerships that transcend educational boundaries, involving collaborations with businesses, public services, and community organizations to extend learning and research impacts. Common themes in these definitions include the university's

proactive engagement beyond traditional roles and its aim to foster sustainable socio-economic transformation.

Community Engagement in Higher Education

Community engagement has become a key component of the third mission, encompassing diverse activities aimed at building symbiotic relationships between universities and external partners. Such activities can be classified as follows:

- **Service Learning:** Integrates academic learning with community service to enhance students' educational experiences and promote civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995).
- **Community-Based Research:** Collaborative research that directly addresses community-specific issues (Benneworth et al., 2018).
- **Public Outreach Programs:** Includes workshops, lectures, and training sessions aimed at disseminating knowledge to broader audiences.
- **Strategic Partnerships:** Joint projects with NGOs, government bodies, and businesses to achieve social and institutional objectives.
- **Sustainability and Social Responsibility:** Long-term projects that align with environmental and social goals.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative longitudinal analysis to examine how THEQC-accredited Turkish universities conceptualized and implemented the “service to society” criterion within their strategic frameworks from 2021 to 2023. The choice of a qualitative approach was deliberate, aiming to capture the detailed narratives, strategies, and reflections embedded within each university's Institutional Self-Evaluation Report (ISER). These documents were deemed appropriate as primary sources because they offer comprehensive, self-reported insights into the universities' strategic efforts, activities, and outcomes related to community engagement.

The sample consisted of 20 universities selected through random sampling to ensure diverse representation, including both public and private institutions across various regions. This diversity allowed the analysis to capture a wide range of approaches and strategies while maintaining a level of anonymity that encouraged objective reporting. The ISERs covered each institution's implementation of the “service to society” criterion under the THEQC framework, offering a longitudinal view of their progress over three years.

The data analysis involved a multi-step qualitative content analysis process aimed at systematically coding and categorizing the information presented in the ISERs. Initially, each report's “service to society” section was reviewed to identify recurrent themes and specific strategies related to community engagement. An initial coding framework was established to organize data into thematic categories, such as educational outreach, research partnerships, volunteer initiatives, and sustainability-focused projects. The use of thematic categorization helped in understanding shifts in focus, the emergence of new practices, and the general evolution of universities' community engagement strategies over the study period.

Despite the thoroughness of this approach, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations. The reliance on self-reported ISERs introduces potential bias, as universities may present their community engagement efforts in an overly favorable light to align with accreditation expectations. Moreover, while qualitative analysis allows for rich, in-depth exploration, it limits the ability to generalize findings to all Turkish universities. Future studies could include quantitative elements, such as surveys or interviews with faculty and community stakeholders, to provide a more balanced perspective and validate self-reported data.

Findings

While each HEI has its unique focus areas and strategies, they collectively highlight the importance of integrating community and define it as part of their core operations, stating that education serves not only the development of individuals but also contributes significantly to societal advancement. 18 out of 20 universities conceptualize service to society as an essential component of their institutional mission, while all integrate it into strategic goals that align with local, regional, and national development objectives. While 15 HEIs position community engagement as a core element of their mission statements, underscoring their responsibility to foster public engagement, civic values,

support cultural heritage, and contribute to social justice initiatives. All universities incorporate these values within their strategic planning documents.

General Trends (2021-2023)

The analysis revealed a clear progression in the types and breadth of community engagement activities undertaken by Turkish universities over the three-year period. The trends highlighted below illustrate a shift from basic outreach to more integrated and strategic community involvement:

2021: Initial efforts were primarily centered on traditional forms of public engagement, such as seminars and workshops, with 14 universities emphasizing these activities. Volunteer projects were also reported by 12 institutions, focusing on short-term initiatives like community clean-up events and educational support. Service learning was still in its infancy, integrated by only six universities, and interdisciplinary projects were reported in a similarly modest scope (six universities). Collaborative research partnerships addressing public health and urban development were limited, mentioned by only five universities. Partnerships with NGOs or businesses were sparse, noted by just four institutions, while sustainability-focused projects were minimal, with only three universities mentioning such initiatives.

2022: This year marked a notable expansion in the integration of service learning into university curricula, with 12 universities incorporating these programs. Public outreach activities continued to grow, reported by 17 institutions. Collaborative research efforts involving local partners nearly doubled, with a focus on addressing urban development and public health challenges. Nine universities highlighted interdisciplinary projects that combined different academic departments to tackle societal issues. Partnerships with NGOs and local businesses increased to eight universities, reflecting an enhanced focus on external collaboration. Sustainability projects began to gain traction, mentioned by seven institutions.

2023: The most significant evolution was observed in 2023, where community engagement became more embedded in university strategies. Eighteen universities reported conducting extensive public seminars and workshops, and volunteer activities were sustained or slightly increased. The integration of service learning was now mentioned by 16 universities, showcasing its solidified role in education. Collaborative research projects with local stakeholders grew to 14 universities, with many reporting comprehensive studies that addressed environmental sustainability and public health. Sixteen universities engaged in interdisciplinary projects that connected faculties across different fields, showcasing a commitment to tackling complex social issues. Partnerships with NGOs and businesses expanded substantially to 15 institutions, indicating stronger university-industry linkages. Sustainability projects were reported by 15 universities, signifying a significant strategic shift towards long-term environmental and social responsibility.

Types and Impact of Engagement

The diversity and impact of activities reported by universities provided insights into how community engagement has evolved:

- **Educational Outreach and Lifelong Learning:** This category remained a prominent aspect of community engagement. Universities expanded their educational offerings to include targeted courses and workshops addressing local issues.
- **Service learning:** The "Topluma Hizmet Uygulamaları" (Service Learning) courses were frequently highlighted as contributing to both academic learning and civic responsibility. Required course for School of Education only mentioned by 6 HEIs in 2021 but its mentioning was increased over time.
- **Collaborative Research and Innovation:** The growth in collaborative research was a standout trend, particularly in areas like public health, where universities partnered with local health departments to tackle community health challenges. Universities also reported partnerships focusing on sustainable urban development.
- **Interdisciplinary Projects:** By 2023, interdisciplinary initiatives became a defining characteristic of community engagement, with faculties from engineering, social sciences, and health sciences working collaboratively on complex projects. This approach not only maximized expertise but also produced innovative solutions to pressing societal issues.
- **Volunteer Activities:** Although volunteer programs were consistent throughout the three years, their scope expanded. Universities increasingly facilitated structured volunteer

opportunities that aligned with broader community service goals, such as mentoring and after-school programs.

- Sustainability Projects:** The significant increase in sustainability-focused projects was a testament to the growing emphasis on long-term impact. Universities reported initiatives that included renewable energy workshops, waste management programs, and community gardens.

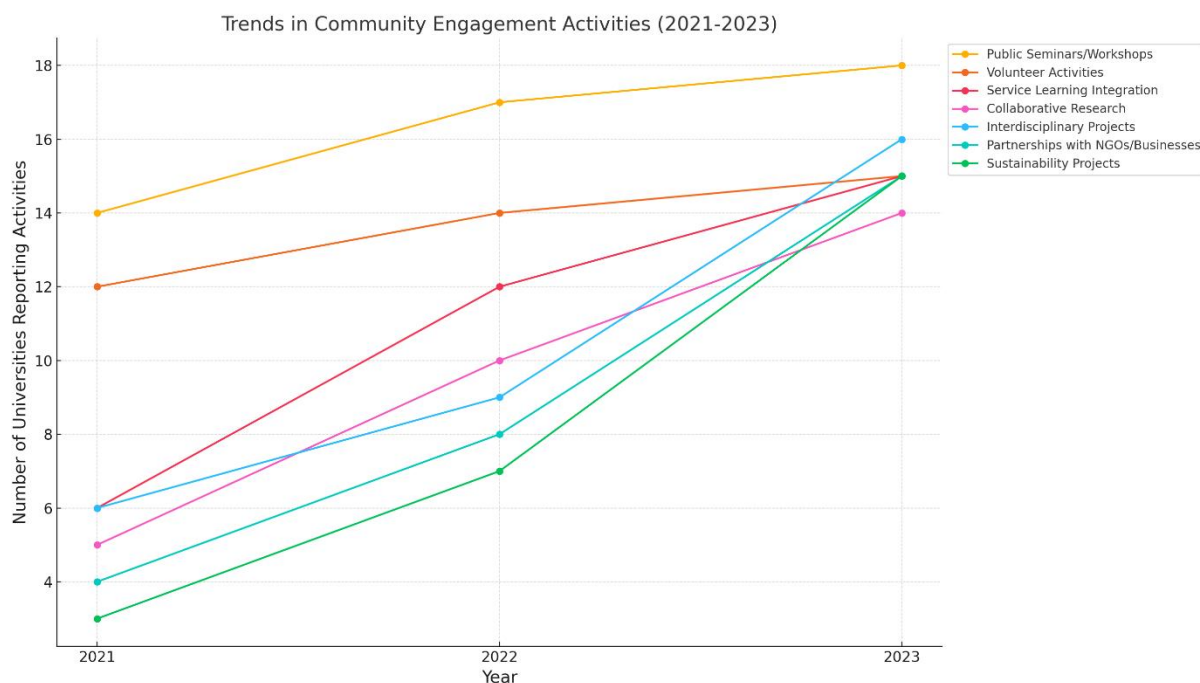


Table: Summary of Trends in Community Engagement Activities

The accompanying table provides a numerical overview of the findings, showcasing how different types of community engagement activities evolved from 2021 to 2023.

Challenges and Limitations

While progress was evident, challenges persisted. Resource limitations, particularly funding and personnel, were consistently mentioned as barriers to expanding community engagement. Integrating service activities into faculty incentives also remained a challenge, as academic structures often prioritize research and teaching over community involvement. Metrics for assessing the success and impact of engagement practices were present but varied in their alignment with academic priorities.

The Role of Quality Assurance in Driving Change

The Turkish Higher Education Quality Council (THEQC) has played a pivotal role in driving change within higher education institutions by embedding community engagement into its quality assurance framework. The trends observed from 2021 to 2023 provide a compelling narrative of how quality assurance mechanisms can guide and shape universities' approaches to fulfilling their third mission: service to society.

In 2021, many universities primarily focused on traditional forms of public outreach, such as seminars and workshops, which were foundational yet limited in scope. However, by 2023, the data revealed a shift towards more integrated and strategic practices, including interdisciplinary projects involving multiple faculties and external partners. This evolution highlights how quality assurance criteria encourage HEIs to move beyond ad hoc activities and adopt sustainable, institution-wide initiatives that align teaching, research, and community impact.

Driving Interdisciplinary Collaboration

One of the most notable trends from 2021 to 2023 was the substantial increase in interdisciplinary projects. Initially, only six universities engaged in these projects, but by 2023, this number had surged to 16. This growth underscores the influence of THEQC's framework, which encourages universities

to break down internal silos and foster collaboration across different departments and fields. The result is a more cohesive approach to tackling complex societal challenges that require expertise from multiple disciplines. The emphasis on interdisciplinary work has not only expanded the scope of community engagement but also enriched academic programs by providing students and faculty with practical, cross-disciplinary experiences.

Emphasis on Sustainability

The data also showed a significant trend in sustainability initiatives, which grew from being reported by only five universities in 2021 to 15 in 2023. This increase suggests that THEQC's quality assurance standards have played a crucial role in embedding sustainability as a key component of community engagement. The inclusion of sustainability in university projects reflects a broader global trend where educational institutions aim to contribute to environmental and social resilience. Quality assurance has pushed universities to align their activities with global sustainable development goals (SDGs), fostering long-term partnerships with local governments, NGOs, and community organizations that enhance environmental stewardship and resource management.

Service Learning as a Strategic Component

Service learning experienced remarkable growth during the study period, rising from implementation in six universities in 2021 to 16 by 2023. This shift highlights how quality assurance frameworks that prioritize "service to society" can incentivize universities to embed practical, service-oriented learning experiences within academic curricula. Service learning not only benefits students by enhancing their educational experiences and civic responsibility but also strengthens community ties through mutually beneficial projects. The growing integration of service learning aligns with THEQC's criteria for strategic alignment and effective resource management, illustrating how well-defined guidelines can lead to transformative educational practices.

Strategic Alignment and Policy Influence

The alignment of community engagement activities with institutional strategies is evident in the trends from 2021 to 2023. Universities increasingly embedded service to society as a core objective, which reflects the impact of THEQC's comprehensive approach to quality assurance. This strategic integration has encouraged HEIs to view community engagement not as an ancillary function but as an essential part of their mission. Policy support, in the form of quality assurance criteria, has provided the necessary structure and motivation for universities to expand their role as proactive agents of social change.

6. Recommendations and Future Directions

Enhancing Impact Assessment

One of the most critical steps for universities is to develop comprehensive and robust frameworks for assessing the impact of community engagement activities. This process should include both short-term and long-term metrics that can capture the tangible and intangible benefits to the community and the university alike.

Strengthening the Visibility of Service Learning

To amplify the role of service learning, universities should incorporate these programs more visibly within their strategic documents and academic offerings. This inclusion not only underscores the importance of community engagement but also signals to both students and faculty that these programs are valued components of their educational journey. Universities could host annual service learning showcases or conferences that highlight successful projects, share best practices, and encourage cross-departmental collaboration. Additionally, integrating service learning outcomes into students' academic records can elevate the importance of these activities, incentivizing broader participation.

Broadening Faculty Engagement and Incentives

Expanding faculty involvement in community engagement efforts requires a strategic shift in how these activities are recognized within academic evaluation systems. Revising promotion and tenure criteria to include community engagement efforts can significantly motivate faculty to participate more actively. Universities should consider workshops and training programs that help faculty members align their research with societal needs, enabling them to balance traditional academic pursuits with impactful community service. Mentorship programs pairing experienced faculty with new staff can also help disseminate best practices and foster a culture of engagement.

Future Research Directions

While this study focused on Turkish universities, future research could benefit from comparative studies that explore community engagement practices in other countries. Such research would provide valuable insights into how different cultural, political, and economic contexts influence the implementation and outcomes of community engagement strategies. Longitudinal studies that track the long-term impacts of these initiatives on both students and communities would also be beneficial. Furthermore, exploring the role of digital transformation and technological innovations in enhancing engagement efforts can provide new models for modern community partnerships.

Conclusion

This study underscores the evolution and current state of community engagement within Turkish higher education institutions from 2021 to 2023, highlighting the transformative role of quality assurance frameworks such as those provided by THEQC. The findings reveal a gradual shift from basic outreach initiatives to comprehensive, interdisciplinary collaborations that align educational and research objectives with community needs. By embedding "service to society" into accreditation criteria, THEQC has successfully motivated universities to integrate societal impact as a strategic priority, fostering more innovative and sustainable partnerships.

Looking ahead, longitudinal studies involving a broader range of universities and incorporating international comparisons would deepen understanding of how cultural and policy differences shape community engagement. Moreover, exploring the long-term impacts of these engagement practices on both student development and community welfare will be crucial for assessing their true efficacy. In conclusion, while the study highlights significant strides made by Turkish universities in integrating community engagement as part of their strategic missions, it also points to areas needing further development, such as improved resource allocation, incentivizing faculty involvement, and refining assessment methods. By continuing to innovate and collaborate, HEIs can build upon this progress, creating a robust framework that not only meets accreditation standards but also genuinely enhances societal well-being.

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