

Turkish academics sound alarm over gender segregation plans

Presidential push for women's universities accompanied by scrapping of gender action plan by regulator

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Turkish academics have sounded the alarm over government plans to introduce gender segregation at university level and the scrapping of key gender equality commitments by the country's Council of Higher Education (YÖK).

In its latest annual report on academic freedoms in Turkey – where scholars perceived as critical of the government have already been [dismissed](#) and even [jailed](#) – one of the country's scientific academies says gender equality in higher education is increasingly threatened.

The government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has swung away from the country's secular constitution and towards conservative Islam, for example by removing the theory of evolution from its school curriculum in 2017.

During a visit to Japan in July, Mr Erdoğan alarmed women's rights activists by praising the country's women-only universities and arguing that they should be introduced into Turkey.

The proposal is part of a wider move against gender equality in Turkish higher education, says Bilim Akademisi, a scientific academy [set up in 2011](#) after members feared that the established academy had lost its independence from the government.

The women's university idea "segregates women at university level, constitutes a denial of egalitarian and secular education [and] is without foundation because female students are already more successful than males in university entrance exams", the academy warns in its [latest report](#).

Japanese women's universities were created in the 19th century to bolster female access to higher education, but are now [falling out of favour](#) in Japan and elsewhere, the academy argues. To adopt them in Turkey, it says, would be to follow "an example that the world is gradually leaving behind".

But the government remains committed to establishing women's universities, having examined Japan's example, according to its [latest development plan](#),

which sets out goals for the next four years. The president of YÖK – which is responsible for strategic planning in the sector – has [met Japan's ambassador](#) to Turkey three times this year to discuss higher education, according to the council's website.

Although no concrete moves have been made to set up new institutions, “they can be established at any time with a presidential decree or statutory legislation without prior notification and consultation with the stakeholders”, said Bertil Emrah Oder, dean of [Koç University](#) Law School, and one of the authors of the report.

Bilim Akademisi's report also raises concerns about the removal from the YÖK website in February of a 2015 plan to promote gender equality in Turkish higher education, including adding courses to university curricula, introducing measures to prevent sexual assaults, and funding research centres.

There has been no official explanation of why the plan was taken down, said Professor Oder, but the removal followed criticism by Islamist and pro-government media of YÖK's support for gender equality research centres.

Since the 1990s, YÖK has approved the establishment of 31 gender or women's research centres, she explained. So far, their activities have remained unchanged, she said. However, since the document was taken down in February, no new centres focusing on “gender” have been approved; instead, new centres researching “women” or “family” have been given the green light, Professor Oder continued.

YÖK did not reply to a request for comment from *Times Higher Education*.