



The Science Academy Statement on the Appointment of a new President to Boğaziçi University

The Science Academy of Turkey is very concerned about the events that followed the appointment of a new president to Boğaziçi University. The events have escalated to such a point that we felt the urge to evaluate the situation apart from [our annual reports](#) on academic freedom in Turkey.

The debate rests on a fundamental question: Why should universities be autonomous? This is certainly not only about the fact that Article 130 of the Constitution still foresees that they should be so. University autonomy is a necessity as it is an essential precondition for scientific progress in a country.¹ It is not a coincidence that the most advanced universities in the world are found in the countries where university autonomy is practiced to the utmost extent. There is an obvious relation of causality here. The aim and reason of autonomy are to form and protect a free and creative environment for research, education, and debate. And the prerequisites for these are freedom of thought, honesty, and merit.

What is meant by autonomy is the freedom of self-governance within a certain system of checks and balances. In universities, such autonomy entails that state intervention on the institution's academic, financial, organizational, and employment policies be set at a minimum level. Any arrangement that falls below this requirement would mean the direct involvement of the government in university administration. In the case of Turkey, that would mean the state to manage 203 universities, more than 160 thousand academics, and more than 8 million students: appointing the academic administrators from the rector to the institute directors, determining the number of students to be admitted, and faculty members or assistants to be employed in each department, deciding on the course schedules, examination systems, the use and audition of financial sources, and a long list of many other aspects of university life. In addition to all these, the centralized appointment of all academic administrators of the university would mean that the university's approach to scientific research would also be determined by the central government through a structure of bureaucracy.

However, with this centralist approach, it is impossible to conduct scientific research or provide high-quality education. Scientific knowledge cannot be produced by accepting what is told from above hierarchically, nor can new ideas flourish in such an atmosphere. In such a system that does not recognize the institutions, faculty members, and students' rights to take the initiative as free-thinking entities, what comes to the fore is not creativity but only imitation and plagiarism. Although indexes based solely on quantitative criteria are not always reliable

¹ Although autonomy *is* a prerequisite to increase the universities' outputs in science, it is not a sufficient condition on its own. Listing all the necessary conditions, however, is beyond the scope of this statement.

representations, it cannot be denied that in international rankings, the Turkish universities have been on a continuous and serious slide, even more so since 2015. This fact is a clear indication of how the conduct of scientific research has been hampered in Turkey.

Even without looking at any numbers, we can clearly see the problem when we attempt to answer this question in good conscience: Who would be more competent to choose the ideal candidate to steer a university: the university's academics or the president of a country? Being the cradle of science and the training place for the next generation of researchers, the universities are invaluable centres of a country's intellectual capital. Assuming that such institutions do not have the capacity to choose qualified academics as administrators – either through elections, a search committee, or other methods – and, furthermore, arguing that a single person, the President of the Republic, is better qualified to make the best selection for 203 different universities on his own simply contradicts reason and logic. This, however, is precisely what is foreseen by our legal system today. So long as this ill-conceived system of president appointment remains in place, Boğaziçi University's case will not be the last one, neither was it the first.

The debates on the media tend to reduce the whole issue to the appointment of the university presidents through elections and focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of this method. The election method is only one of the many alternatives to determine the directors or administrators in a university. There are a variety of ways to choose a university president who has both superior academic credentials and the qualifications sought in a good administrator. Instead, the debate should focus on the fact that at the moment, this task is carried out by third parties and eventually the President of the Republic, leaving the main stakeholders, which happens to be the university community, entirely outside this process.

Through the legal amendments in 2018, even the already problematic involvement of the Higher Education Board (YÖK) was bypassed, reducing the Board's role to information gathering on candidates -who apply with their resumes- and advising the President. In this process, there are many unknowns: who is making the short-list of candidates and upon which criteria of merit? How is the final decision made? What are the qualifications of the chosen persons as researchers and teachers that distinguishes them from others? What are their original ideas and scientific contributions, and how sensitive are they about the principles of academic integrity? What contributions have they made to the institutions they have previously managed? As questions may be proliferated, it is clear that the appointment process has no criteria but arbitrariness.

There is no evidence in history confirming that a single-person decision making has eventually led to a favourable outcome. We should all be open to take lessons from history. The Turkish higher education system is currently under tremendous pressure, to an extent that it has not seen in a very long while. The institutions of higher education need to take a breath and restructure themselves anew. If not, it would be hardly likely to put a halt to the brain drain the country has been suffering. We will only see worsening of the situation in our universities, our most-cherished intellectual assets. Governments come and go, but the politically-motivated harm inflicted on distinguished institutions, such as Boğaziçi University, will damage the quest for scientific knowledge in Turkey for many generations to come.

The current situation is not a problem of Boğaziçi University only. It is a major threat to all our universities and the country as a whole. Resisting against this unfortunate fait-accompli from above, Boğaziçi University is defending not only itself but our country's future. Finally, we would like to remind also that all parties that pointing out this dreary situation, expressing reactions peacefully, and organizing protests and marches are making use of their constitutional rights granted to all citizens of this country.

Respectfully announced to the public,

The Science Academy Board
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