Normative isomorphism: The patterns of profession of academics at Turkish higher education

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Abstract

Normative isomorphism is derived from professionalization. Professionalization is a collective effort of the members of a profession to define their practices of the members and also to control the services provided within a jointly agreed framework. Its legitimation is based on its power and status of the profession. In line with this framework, the profession of academics relies on the existence of teaching, research, and community engagement. Thus, normative isomorphism is represented by a variety of activities including bureaucratic control, assessments, publishing, and rankings. This paper aims to explain normative isomorphism through the profession of academics and gives evidence of normative isomorphism patterns based on examples from the Turkish higher education system.

Keywords: Isomorphism; normative isomorphism; professionalization; profession of academics; higher education; Turkey.

1. Normative Isomorphism

Normative pressures, one of the elements of isomorphic organizational change, have emerged as a source of professionalization (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Professionalization is a collective struggle of its members of the profession to define the conditions and methods of their work and to control the production of producers (Larson, 1977). The main goal of the professions is to monopolize services, in other words, to control services through collective effort. Professionalization becomes the essential tool by which privilege including status, high income, and autonomy is obtained in a hierarchy in the work environment. Because the development of a stable and viable market in which service can be provided ensures the continuation of status and privilege (Gitlin, 1982). According to Larson (1977), a key element that distinguishes a profession from the rest of the professions, is based on its power and status. Therefore, specialist knowledge and altruistic practice are perceived as part of the legitimating ideology adopted by the members of the profession as to obtain influence and establish authority. In this regard, ethical codes of a profession provides good practices, others outside the profession are unskilled to assess the tasks related to the profession because of the complexity of the profession. It can be seen that there is an effort to secure the special power of a profession by the professional groups (Malcolm, Pinheiro, & Pimenta, 2014).

There are two important sources of normative isomorphism. One of them grounds on the formal education and cognitive legitimacy produced by academics; the second is the growth of professional networks (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). First, controlling over the production of the academics themselves and their knowledge bring about the standardization of educational training and licensing of the service. Improvement of educational processes and the standardization of educational training produce the universal equivalent in the market creating value-in-exchange (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Larson, 1977). Homogeneous educational training and common membership in professional associations are pivotal in terms of developing shared professional norms (Pouder, 1996). At the academia, professional norms and shared academic culture play an important role as to ensuring the continuation of academic research. Norms created through the social interaction among academics are tools of collegial control over teaching and learning, research, and community engagement. These interactions including formal and informal conversations provide repeated self and cross evaluations on research and effective instruction throughout the academic departments (Dill, 2021). The latter aspect of professionalization is based on its marketability. The professional group must promote the profession in public as necessary which can only be provided for by its members. Besides the peer recognition (Hamann & Beljean, 2020), symbolic capital embedded in power relations (e.g. mass media) provides public recognition of expertise and professional status of professions which have greater authority and less autonomy such as medicine, law, economics, and political science (Arnoldi, 2007). Image of performing for the sake of public confirms the validity of the profession and justifies its monopoly over its

services (Larson, 1977, 69). At the academia, the peacebuilding image of an academic position is effective because it connects the top and bottom levels, and binds various groups, institutions, associations, and organizations to each other (Janke & Medlin, 2015). A scientist has a responsibility to improve understanding; communicate the technological, humanitarian, and economic benefits of science; and contribute to better-quality public and private decision-making (Culum, 2020).

One of the important mechanism of normative isomorphism is filtering of personnel. It occurs through the hiring of employees within the same industry, through common promotion practices, and from skill-level requirements for certain jobs (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The other mechanism of normative isomorphism is socialization in a variety of topics including personal behavior, dress code, performance proficiency, politics, language, history, addressing others, and organizational values (Chao et al. 1994; Välimaa, 2020). In the absence of normative structure, employees in the profession would act freely, deciding for themselves whether what behaviors are appropriate or not (Rumyantseva & Caboni 2012). In academia, normative isomorphism is significantly represented by professionalization (e.g. professional associations, conferences) and publications (eg. journals, government publications) (Burruss & Giblin, 2014). Top-down bureaucratic control, students' evaluations of modules, citation metrics, journal, and universities' rankings have been described as powerful disciplinary mechanisms (Gendron, 2015; Espeland & Sauder, 2016).

2. Normative Isomorphism Patterns at the Turkish Universities

2.1. Profession of Academics in Turkey

The administration of higher education in Turkey was restructured by Higher Education Law No. 2547 in 1981. Two institutions were founded in accordance with Law No. 2547. First, the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) was established as an autonomous regulatory body which is responsible for regulating the higher education activities and coordinating the operations of higher education institutions. Second, the Inter-University Council (IUC) was founded to coordinate and evaluate teaching, research, and publication activities of universities, making regulations on teaching, scientific research, and publication activities that concern all universities, determining the principles related to doctorate, and awarding the academic titles and degrees.

Turkish higher education system has become a large ecosystem in recent years. By January 2022, there are 207 higher education institutions, including 129 state, 74 foundation, and 4 foundation vocational schools. By February 2022, in Turkey with a population of more than 84 million, the number of students in associate degree is 3,114,623; 4,676,657 in bachelor's degree programs; 343,569 in Master's degree, and 106,148 in Ph.D. programs. Out of 182,483 academic staff, including 31,918 professors, 19,350 associate professors, 41,106 assistant

professors, 37,994 teaching assistants, and 52,115 research assistants, work at public and foundation universities. In addition to that, the decreasing availability of public financial resources and triggering movement for internationalization have forced Turkish universities take part in global rankings. Thus, academics have started to adopt strategies to improve the quality of the publication, and research (Kondakci, Zayim-Kurtay, Kaya-Kasikci, Senay, & Kulakoglu, 2021). According to Scimago Journal & Country Rank (2021), Turkish scholars published 650,228 articles between 1996 and 2020, and received 11.85 citations per paper on average.

2.2. Scientific Institutions Established by Law

The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TUBITAK), the first important institution that plays a role in determining the science and technology policies of Turkey, was established with Law No. 278 on 17/07/1963. TUBITAK was established in line with the transition to the planned economy period in Turkey. Its essential tasks at the establishment stage are to support basic and applied academic research, especially in the natural sciences, and to encourage young researchers. In Law No. 5376 entered into force on 07/07/2005, social and human sciences were also included in the mandate of the work program of the institution, and provisions were introduced to enable the use of effective mechanisms that will improve university-industry cooperation. TUBITAK provides research and development support to academia, industry, and the public; provides scientific event organization support; supports the projects of primary school students to higher school students within the scope of science fairs; provides support to associate degree, undergraduate and graduate students, post-doctoral researchers, and foreigner researchers. Second, Turkish Academy of Sciences (TUBA) was established as Turkey's autonomous and national academy with Decree No. 497 on 13/08/1993. TUBA carries out the studies ıntended to give direction to science policies and provide science-based consultancy service; regulates award schemes for distinguished scientists.

2.3. Ethics Committees of Universities

Ethical behaviour in the public sector has increased its importance with the enactment of the Law on the Establishment of the Public Servants Ethics Committee on 25/05/2004. The CoHE has made it mandatory for universities to establish their own ethics committees and prepare their guidelines. In this direction, the CoHE published the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive of Higher Education Institutions with the decision of the General Assembly taken at its 23rd session dated 10/11/2016. This directive is declared to determine the ethical rules to be followed in scientific research, study, publication, and activities, and to regulate the duties, authorities, and responsibilities of scientific research and publication ethics committees of higher education institutions established by, as well as working

procedures and principles. The Directive is based on Articles 24, 42, and 65 of the Higher Education Law No. 2547. These articles refer to the principles of the title and appointment of associate professorship, intra-organizational scientific supervision, and the issues of Higher Education through by-laws adopted. The directive defines actions that are contrary to scientific research and publication ethics, the formation of scientific research and publication ethics committees, their duties, working procedures and principles, and supervision. In this context, each university has its own Ethics Committee directive that it has issued on its structure, duties, authority, and working principles (reconvention, operation mode, and evaluation of applications). Additionally, these directives consist of the qualifications, and incumbency of members; and unethical practices including plagiarism, fabrication, distortion, republishing, slicing, unfair authorship, ethical violation, and ethical carelessness that are contrary to ethical principles and values.

2.4. Units

Coordinatorship is an administrative unit created to carry out the studies and practices on various subjects within the university and/or coordinate with other institutions/organizations headed by the coordinator authorized by the rector. For instance, Accreditation Academic Evaluation and Quality Coordinatorship, Scientific Research Projects (BAP) Coordinatorship, and Bologna Process Coordinatorship are some of the 20 coordinatorships at Ankara University. University centers are units responsible for postgraduate courses, and they show entrepreneurial behavior by cooperating with industrial organizations and companies (Bozkurt, 2012). For example, the European Communities Research and Application Center (ATAUM), Continuing Education Center (ANKUSEM), and Earthquake Research and Application Center are a few of the 47 centers established within Ankara University. In addition, a support unit, established based on a policy document, is an application center where students and employees can receive legal, psychological, medical, physical, academic, or social support (Senol Cantek, 2013). Ankara University Support Unit Against Sexual Harassment and Assault is one of the examples of a support unit. The support units of universities in Turkey correspond to the structure on equality, differentiation, and inclusion in universities abroad.

2.5. Accreditation

Only academic programs were accredited in Turkey until 2001 when Turkey joined the Bologna Process. Since then, institutional external evaluation practices have been improved (Uludag et al., 2021). Within the scope of Law No. 7033 dated 18/06/2017, the article on the establishment of Higher Education Quality Board with administrative and financial autonomy, public legal entity, and private budget was included in the Higher Education Law No. 2547. Its purpose is to make evaluations according to national and international quality standards regarding the quality levels of education and research activities and administrative

services of higher education institutions, to carry out internal and external quality assurance, accreditation processes, and authorization processes of independent external evaluation institutions. The Higher Education Quality Assurance System includes the principles regarding the internal and external quality assurance of higher education institutions' educational and research activities and administrative services, accreditation processes, and the authorization processes of independent external evaluation institutions. The decisions made by Turkish Higher Education Quality Council (YOKAK) within the scope of The Institutional Accreditation Program (KAP) are full accreditation (for five years), conditional accreditation (for two years), and providing support to the higher education institution in the context of quality assurance practices. The ratio of accredited undergraduate programs to all undergraduate programs was 8.84 %. In addition, the number of institutions with accredited programs increased by 72 %, and the number of accredited programs increased by 83 % in 2020 compared to 2016. The number of accredited programs in engineering is higher than in other fields. The ratio of accredited programs among the total graduate engineering programs is approximately 35 % (YOKAK, 2021).

2.6. Unions

Unions' interest in economic and professional issues and their search for solutions to social and political problems enable their members to learn about and improve in those issues (Buyruk, 2021). The number of studies in Turkey revealing the union activities of the academic staff is limited. The most important of these is Karakutuk et al.'s (2008) research that unveils a profile of the academic staff of education faculties in Turkey. According to the research findings, the rate of those who are not members of any union among the academics is 77.2 %, and the rate of female academics who are not members of a union is higher than the rate of male academics. Associate professors have the highest rate among those who are members of a union, while research assistants have the lowest rate. 95.2 % of the academics indicate that unions are insufficient in performing their functions in the field of education. 69.5% of the academics stated that unionization could not resolve the problems experienced.

2.7. Associations

The advice of professional associations lead to normative isomorphic responses (Bellé, Belardinelli, Cantarelli, & Mele, 2019). Professional associations play an important role on knowledge development, engagement, collaboration, community building and a sense of professional identity (Huang, King, & Law, 2021). Associations operating in Turkish higher education are established based on Law No. 5253 on associations dated 04/11/2004. Except for revenue, associations are groups of persons with legal personalities created to realize a specific and common purpose that is not prohibited by law. The general aim of associations established in the field of educational sciences is to conduct studies to meet the social, cultural, economic, and professional needs of their members, to carry out activities that serve

the public interest in education and training, and to develop cooperation with institutions/organizations.

2.8. Professional Network

Researchers have been using academic social network sites to contact the other researchers, share research output, and follow other researchers' studies (Jordan, 2019), join in topic-based discussions (Goodwin, Jeng, & He, 2014), disseminate CV, search for a job, find collaborators for research projects, disseminate teaching material, and sign up because other researchers have already signed up (Nández & Borrego, 2013). Among the academic social network sites (ASNS) leading the higher education market, the relatively most widely used ones are academia.edu, ResearchGate (RG), Mendeley, Google Scholar, and Zotero (Williams & Woodacre, 2016). According to Isik (2021), 62.5 % of 128 academicians working in the field of Information and Document Management in Turkey had a RG profile. This rate was lower than the rate of the Google Scholar profile, and the use of these platforms depends on the university, title, and gender.

3. Conclusion

At the micro-level, individuals who have the same educational background and are filtered on a particular set of attributions, tend to view the problems and approve policies, procedures, and structures at a similar level and thus, make their decisions in the same way. At the macro level, as the level of professionalization increases, the amount of institutional isomorphic change gets stronger. Normative isomorphism, resulting from professional training and education, compels organizations to perform their duties and to benefit from professional practices leading to the survival of the organizations. The differences between the educational background, and work experiences may bring about differences of opinion between the bureaucrats and the experts, thus causing the two groups to conflict in decision-making. Also, it can be said that the competitiveness of universities in global rankings and publications shapes the profession of academics regarding in a normative context.

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