

EDUCATION: AN OVERARCHING 'ACQUIS' FOR TURKEY

*Turkey aims to transform into a knowledge society with a highly competitive economy capable of sustainable development and eventually become a member of the European Union. Education is of strategic importance in pursuit of these challenging goals, urging constant progress in equity, quality, education for democratic citizenship and formation of social capital. In case of failure, risks could emerge, specifically as regards social inclusion and integration, competitiveness and implementation of legislative reforms. This article argues, while education is a not an *acquis per se*, these risks could undermine Turkey's accession to the European Union and threaten the likelihood of membership.*

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Current demographic trends in Turkey, namely a young population, especially compared to the European Union countries, increasing life expectancies and decreasing fertility rates, constitute a window of opportunity for social and economic development. However, this opportunity will be available for a limited time and its realization depends on the provision of quality education for all. The ratio of the working age population to the general population is expected to reach 69 percent by 2020 and decrease gradually after 2025. Time has already been ticking for providing quality education to the 12 million young people who will reach working age by 2020. Education is critical for Turkey's integration with Europe. Some of the challenges ahead, such as increasing the quality and effectiveness of education, are overarching; their depth varies among member and candidate countries. There are other challenges, in particular those related to equity, which are unique to Turkey. Throughout the next decade, Turkey must plan, undertake and accomplish a colossal education reform to assure that all children have access to quality education that the labor force acquires skills and competencies needed for a competitive economy and those adults benefit from life-long learning opportunities. The success of these reforms would foster Turkey's economic and social development, thereby advancing its accession to EU membership.

However, risks could also emerge in case of failure, more specifically as regards social inclusion and integration, competitiveness and implementation of legislative reforms. This article argues, while education is a not an *acquis per se*, these risks could undermine Turkey's accession to the European Union and threaten the likelihood of membership.

There are two reasons a global framework is adopted in this paper to make this argument: Firstly, none of the education-related issues Turkey faces are country-specific. Regardless of their development levels, many countries struggle with these issues. There is an ongoing international effort, even a competition, to provide higher quality education for more people. Secondly, local and international conditions and actors interact to shape national education policy.¹ To that extent, it is meaningful to trace Turkey's policy reactions back to different emerging trends since the early 1990s.

Global Context

Since the early 1990s, education has been subject to increased global attention. It can be argued that this attention has been twofold. On the one hand, the global community realized that the world could no longer *tolerate* having millions of children around the world without access to basic education. A major manifestation of this understanding was the and the subsequent global campaign, which has continued to date.² In 2000, the United Nations incorporated

¹ Batuhan Aydagül, *The Nation-State Strikes Back? The Expansion of Secular Compulsory Education in Turkey*, (Stanford University: Unpublished Monograph, 2002).

² *Education for All Conference* The Education For All Conference was convened in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 by the United Nations Development Program, UNICEF and World Bank and brought together governments, international governmental organizations and non-governmental organizations.

the goals of *Education For All* into the ‘Millennium Development Goals,’ which aim to eradicate poverty. The same year, the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal commemorated the tenth anniversary of *Education for All* goals, renewing dedication to achieve these goals by 2015. Accordingly, UN bodies, developed countries sitting on OECD Development Assistance Committee, and international NGOs have channeled their resources towards increasing access to basic education in developing and third-world countries.

On the other hand, globalization has changed the nature of economic competition, making the depth and quality of human capital in countries more significant determinants of productivity, innovation and growth. More specifically, rapid advances in science and technology, the increased weight of knowledge in production and greater movement of labor, capital, goods and services pressured industrialized and emerging economies to refocus on education and to improve its quality.

Some South East Asian countries, such as Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan, realized these trends in the 1960s and, in absence of natural resources, benefited from their favorable demographic trends in terms of economic and social development. Lately, as other Asian countries, such as China, Malaysia, Thailand followed the same track, the global competition got even more challenging, especially for United States and Europe. For these two, a critical success factor in increasing competitiveness is improving the level and quality of the educational attainment of its labor force.

European Dimension

During the 1990s, the European Union focused on tackling its unemployment problem. The intellectual exercise that was initiated by then-Commission President Jacques Delors in 1993 to formulate structural and comprehensive policy responses and the subsequent building of a political coalition through summits eventually led the way to the Lisbon Declaration in 2000.³ The Lisbon European Council set an ambitious, overarching goal of “*becoming the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion.*” Investment in education was among the strategies prioritized to achieve this goal by 2010.

This emphasis on education was up-and-coming in Europe prior to the Lisbon Declaration. Human resources was on the top of the agenda during the 1990s and “a much stronger conviction emerged and took root within economic and social policy that education and training were the keys to the lifelong chances of every citizen.”⁴

³ Hywell Ceri Jones, *Lifelong Learning in the European Union: whither the Lisbon Strategy*, European Policy Center Issue Paper No. 34, 2005.

⁴ Jones (2005), p.4.

However, not all member states, which were responsible for the education domain nationally, succeeded in translating this conviction to more effective policies. In addition, cooperation and coordination within Europe was narrow. It was only community programs, such as SOCRATES and ERASMUS, which helped construct the limited engagement of the European Commission in education.

The Lisbon Declaration was expected to bring a momentum to the modernization of education through its open method of coordination, a central component of the overall strategy. "The concrete future objectives of education and training systems" report, prepared by the Education Council, provided the Directorate General of Education and Training and member states with a common framework for cooperation and coordination to increase the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems in the European Union, to facilitate the access of all to the education and training systems and to open up education and training systems to the wider world. In this way, the EU acquired a common framework with clear goals, strategies and action plans to complement their universal belief in the potential of education.

However, the progress has not been very promising so far. In terms of the broader picture, the European Union is likely to fail to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010. Economic growth lags behind the United States. According to Jean-Philippe Cotis, OECD's chief economist, "the GDP per capita in France, Germany and Italy is 30 percent below U.S. levels and, at current trends, this gap will increase in the foreseeable future."⁵ To overcome this challenge, Cotis suggests raising labor utility and productivity.

In view of this economic picture, William D. Green, CEO of Accenture, emphasizes "the critical role that investment in human capital plays in enabling a more productive and competitive workforce."⁶ This statement finds echoes in a recent publication where Andreas Schleicher, head of the Indicators and Analysis Division in the Directorate of Education at the OECD, argues, "Education and skills will be the key for Europe to achieve its ambitious goal."⁷ However, as PISA results indicate, education in many European countries fails to provide skills for the new economy. Schleicher warns "The time when Europe competed mostly with countries that offered low-skilled work at low wages is gone. ... Europe's school systems will have to make considerable headway if they are to meet the demands of the modern societies."⁸

⁵ Jean-Philippe Cotis, *Getting the Agenda Right: Strategies for Spurring Growth and Creating Jobs* (The Lisbon Council Young Leaders Congress: Brussels, 14 March 2005), p.1.

⁶ William D. Green, "Foreword," in *Jobs of the Future* (Accenture, 2005), p.2.

⁷ Andreas Schleicher, *The Economics of Knowledge: Why Education is Key for Europe's Success* (Lisbon Council Policy Brief, 2006), p.8.

⁸ Schleicher (2006), p.4.

Turkish Paradox

Turkey is a country of economic and social paradoxes. On the one hand, Turkey is a member of the world's elite clubs. The Republic, founded in 1923, has been a member of OECD since 1961 and associated with the European Economic Community since 1963. Its economy is among the 20 largest economies in the world according to 2004 World Development Indicators figures. After four years of consecutive growth, the GNP reached 360.9 billion dollars in 2005 and per capita income finally passed the 5000 dollar watershed. Competitiveness also increased, Turkey went up seven ranks to 48th place in The World Competitiveness Scoreboard in 2005 leaving countries such as Greece, Slovenia, Italy and Poland behind.

On the other hand, Turkey is ranked 94th in the World Development Index 2005, based on 2003 figures. That is almost half-way through countries ranked under Medium Human Development, where there is no other OECD and EU country, except Romania. Given the indicators, its economic performance is way better than its overall human development. This development gap has been caused by two major factors. The first one was the high population growth during the last quarter of the 20th Century: The population doubled to 70 million between 1970 and 2003. Turkey's economic development was not strong enough to accommodate this population growth. The second factor has been a lack of political commitment to and the corresponding failure of social policies in health and education development, especially considering the population growth.

This paradox can be traced in education as well. Some of Turkey's challenges are particular to low-income countries. Take disparities in education for example. An important "social equity" problem exists with respect to equal access to education and training. Another example is access to preschool. The gross pre-school enrollment rate was around 15 percent in 2005, which is far below of the average of low-income countries (23 percent).

There are also challenges that are more similar to ones EU and OECD countries face. Among some of these topics are life-long learning, vocational and technical education, tertiary education, teacher policies, information and communication technologies in education and the quality and effectiveness of education.

Finally, there are two challenges especially critical for Turkish democracy. One concerns education for democratic citizenship, an issue which has been subject to international emphasis since the mid 1990s through the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004), the "Education for Democratic Citizenship" project of the Council of Europe (1997-2004) and finally "European Year of Citizenship through Education" in 2005. The other concerns adult education. The current average educational attainment of Turkish citizens is 6.8 years for males and 5.3 for females.

The following sub-sessions will elaborate further on four issues, namely equity, quality, education for democratic citizenship and social capital, which are vital for Turkey and its social and economic integration with the EU.⁹

Equity

There are severe disparities between genders, regions and social economic classes, which tend to increase from the northwest of Turkey towards the southeast. Girls and women in Southeast Turkey constitute the most disadvantaged group. Overall, one out of five adult women in Turkey is illiterate. One out of ten girls do not attend compulsory primary school, three out of ten do not attend secondary school.¹⁰ These gender disparities make Turkey, together with Equatorial Guinea, exceptional cases, as all other countries where gender disparities favor boys are low-income countries. Yet, even more terrifying are projections, even though national authorities challenge these. The Education for All Global Monitoring Report places Turkey among the 20 countries at risk of achieving adult literacy and among the 24 countries at risk of achieving gender parity in primary and secondary education by 2015.¹¹ It is worth noting that Turkey is expected to become a full member of EU by then.

Disparities also exist among regions and social classes.¹² Tens of thousands of children from poor households are not enrolled in basic education; access to secondary and pre-school education is even more unequal. Enrollment rates in the northeast, the east and the southeast Turkey lag behind other regions. Nine out of ten provinces with the lowest spending on education per student are located in east and southeast Anatolia. The tenth city, Istanbul, has been the primary magnet of migration for decades. Disparities in achievement also exist. According to PISA (OECD's Program for International Student Assessment) results, the variation of performance among schools in Turkey is highest among OECD countries. Socio-economic levels of schools and students explain two-thirds of this variation.

Quality

Turkey must work hard to make progress in quality of education. According to the latest PISA results, Turkey ranks last among EU countries and only passes Mexico among OECD countries on assessments of mathematics, literacy, science and problem solving skills. The results also demonstrate that while a tiny proportion of students in Turkey, 2.4 percent to be exact are placed among the best of seven proficiency levels on the mathematics scale, 75 percent are at the

⁹ For more detailed analysis of the education sector in Turkey, please see World Bank Turkey Education Sector Study (www.worldbank.org.tr/ess), reports of the European Training Foundation and the forthcoming OECD Review of National Education Policies for Education: Basic Education in Turkey.

¹⁰ Turkish Statistical Institute, *Population and Development Indicators* (Ankara: 2006).

¹¹ UNESCO, *Education For All Global Monitoring Report 2006* (Paris: 2005).

¹² World Bank, *Turkey Education Sector Study: Sustainable Pathways to an Effective, Equitable and Efficient Education System for Preschool through Secondary School Education* (Washington DC: 2005).

bottom three levels as compared with the OECD average of 47 percent. In terms of students performing well, Turkey ranks higher than the U.S. (2.2 percent), yet, still below the OECD average of 4 percent.

National assessments and university entrance exams support the findings of international assessments. The likelihood of students that are not enrolled in one of the elite high schools, i.e. science, Anatolian or private high schools, entering a good university program is very low. Only 10-12 percent of primary school graduates can enter these elite high schools following a highly competitive entrance exam. The rest are left with no alternatives but to attend general public and vocational high schools, which unfortunately neither provide them with skills needed for the knowledge society nor give them any hope for the future. In short, it can be said that Turkey educates a handful of good students through an elitist approach and fails to deliver a quality education to the rest.

Education for Democratic Citizenship

According to the Council of Europe, ‘education for democratic citizenship’ includes all practices and activities designed to help young people and adults participate actively in democratic life by accepting and exercising their rights and responsibilities in society.

The international focus on education for democratic citizenship has also driven Turkey to plan and adopt its own Human Rights Education Program. Under this program, the Ministry of National Education introduced human rights education to primary and secondary education curricula and has undertaken many programs to improve rights issues. The legislation on students’ discipline in secondary schools was adapted to the rights of children in 2002, the new primary legislation was prepared with a relatively more progressive rights-based approach in 2003, and “Democracy Education and School Assembly Project” was kicked off in 2004.¹³

In addition to these initiatives, Turkey needs a more fundamental change in the general curriculum and in classroom practices: one that will enable children to be critical thinkers. Critical thinking is essential to both individualization and citizenship.

Individualization: Critical thinking is essential for the human being in generating the right solutions and making the right decisions in his/her own life. It is also essential for him/her to be a free and genuine individual capable of thinking independently.

¹³ Batuhan Aydagül, “The Impact of the ECHR on Rights In and To Education in Turkey,” in Jan De Groof and Gracienne Lauwers (eds.), *No Person Shall Be Denied The Right to Education: The Influence of the European Convention on Human Rights on The Rights To Education and Rights In Education* (Netherlands: Wolf Legal Publishers, 2004), p.529.

Citizenship: If the individuals needed by contemporary democracies are people who are sensitive to public issues, socially responsible, distant from dogmatic thinking, effective, capable of participation and willing to participate, capable of informed and wise participation, able to form one's own opinions and evaluate others' opinions using the criteria of consistency and soundness based on information and evidence, equipped with skills of empathy, discussion and compromise, then critical thinking is the focal point of being a citizen.¹⁴

However, the present legislation, curriculum, instruction materials and even school buildings in Turkey do not support the development of critical thinking skills and attitudes among students. Weaknesses in teacher training and the lack of quality teachers also have profound effects on critical thinking.¹⁵

At the start of the 21st century, Turkey can no longer afford to neglect this issue. As the country is consolidating its democracy according to EU norms, a new type of citizen is required, a citizen who will be able to operate in and contribute to a democratic framework where respect for human rights, pluralism, freedom of thought, freedom to organize, political participation, and the like are the rules of the game.

An on-going curriculum reform since 2003, undertaken by the Board of Education within the Ministry of National Education, aims at tackling this urgency by transforming the curriculum so that learning can respond to the emerging needs of democracy and economic development. According to a recent report evaluating the reform, "The new programs [stressing skills such as critical thinking...] represent a great step in supporting the multifaceted development of students and laying the foundations for the transformation from 'passive citizen' to 'active citizen'."¹⁶ However, the report adds, "... implementation of these changes is even more vital ... and requires the effort and patience of every stakeholder," emphasizing comprehensive and well-organized teacher training.

Social Capital

According to the 2000 census, there were 29 million people aged between 25-64 in Turkey, representing 43 percent of the general population. Among them, 17 percent were illiterate, 20 percent finished an upper-secondary school and only eight percent possessed a higher education diploma. In addition to an overall low educational attainment, most of those who possessed a diploma were educated as "passive citizens" without critical thinking skills. As a result, Turkey and its democratization process suffer from a low level of social capital, as indicated by a recent research conducted among the population aged 18 and over.¹⁷ Findings

¹⁴ Çpek Gürkaynak, Füsün Üstel and Sami Gülgöz, *Eleştirel Düşünme* (İstanbul: EĞitim Reformu Girişimi.2003), p. 12.

¹⁵ Gürkaynak, et. al. (2003).

¹⁶ Curriculum Review Commission, Report on the New Curricula (Education Reform Initiative: İstanbul, 2005).

¹⁷ Infakto Research Workshop, (ARI Movement, Turkish Society and Social Capital: İstanbul, 2006).

point to limited participation in civil and political life, a lack of trust and intolerance among people, and unquestioning obedience to authorities.

This assessment is especially worrying in terms of the policy and practice gap that has emerged during the rapid transformation of legislation in many domains during the last couple of years. This gap could further extend, as more changes will follow as Turkey proceeds towards EU membership. Already, when and how these policy changes will be translated into practice concerns many in Turkey as well as in Brussels. Political will is the foremost requirement in order to overcome some of the barriers, such as the resistance of bureaucracy to change. In addition, more dedicated and persistent efforts to invest in human capital can foster the implementation of reforms. In-service training of public personnel has been continuing for some time. However, in order to obtain results, more training of better quality should be accessible to more people.

Conclusion: Risks for the Integration

Turkey aims to transform herself into a knowledge society with a highly competitive economy capable of sustainable development and eventually to become a member of the European Union. The above-mentioned challenges could impede this transformation by causing economic and social crises in the future.

The first risk could be the failure of assuring social inclusion and cohesion both in Turkey and Europe. All children have a right to a quality education that should provide them with skills and competencies that they can use to fulfill their potential and allow them social mobility. Without access to such an education, millions of children can end up as unskilled, unemployed and most importantly discontented youngsters. That is the perfect recipe for social disorder, as the latest riots in France illustrate.¹⁸ Such incidences also occur in Turkey yet other factors always overshadow the state's failure in education for almost half-a-century. Youth unemployment poses a huge social risk both for Europe and Turkey. Education is one of the policy responses required to deal both with the symptoms and with the root causes of youth unemployment.

The second risk could be the failure of Turkey and Europe to sustain and increase competitiveness and economic growth. To prevent such a failure, they need to increase labor utility and productivity. In terms of labor utility, while Turkey suffers from low labor force participation rate (LFPR), mainly due to very low urban female LFPR, Europe is faced with an aging population and a shrinking workforce. Turkey has to increase the educational attainment of women in order to reach a higher overall LFPR, certainly together with other social policies facilitating their participation. Europe needs to increase its employment rate to

¹⁸ Extensive unemployment was considered as one of the major causes of the riots that took place in France in October and November 2005, which was the worst urban violence to hit France since the student-worker riots of 1968 according to BBC.

70 percent from the current 63 percent “to avert a catastrophic decline in economic growth and simply sustain current income levels.”¹⁹ To accomplish that, Europe seeks to include previously disadvantaged groups, such as immigrants and the handicapped, in the labor force and to come up with innovative policies to keep its older citizens working. In addition, Turkey’s young population is considered by many as a possible remedy to Europe’s employment problem.

This argument is one of the strongest ones used by those who favor Turkey’s full membership in EU. However, its realization will depend on whether or not education and training provides skills relevant to international labor markets. This is also important as regards labor productivity. Continuous productivity increase is made possible through technological development, which in turn depends on the quality of human resources. Both Turkey and Europe have to provide higher quality education and training in order to have a more dynamic and competitive labor force and to be able to compete with other industrialized and emerging economies.

A third risk concerns social integration. The free movements of labor within the EU and member countries’ immigration policies have brought people of different races, nationalities, ethnicities, religions and cultures together. However, the integration of the old inhabitants and the newcomers has proved to be a very daunting task, as illustrated by the incidents which have taken place in Europe during the last couple of years. Fostering European citizenship is still a major challenge for many countries. Two projects undertaken by the Network of European Foundations on Integration and Immigration and on Initiative for Learning in Democracy in Europe are evidence that this challenge is being taken seriously by many in Europe.

Within this perspective, Turkey’s full EU membership is not welcomed in some member countries, although the final decision is at least a decade away. As a matter of fact, this time period could be what Turkey and EU need to prepare their people for integration and gradually make it happen. Education for democratic citizenship could be one of the tools governments can use.

A final risk is the capacity of Turkey to digest the rapid and radical transformation to become a more civilized and democratic society. All public opinion surveys show that the majority of Turkish people favor EU membership and welcome changes accompanying the accession. However, these changes have to be implemented and contribute to the citizens’ quality of life. An overall low educational attainment could threaten this process by impeding the demand and supply of newly acquired rights and liberties.

¹⁹ Accenture, *Jobs of the Future* (2005), p.12.

To sum up, the quality and effectiveness of education has to be improved in order for Turkey to become a more dynamic and competitive society and for the citizens of the country to improve their skills and fulfill their potential.

Turkey need not worry about the future if it manages to educate citizens who are skilled enough to compete in international labor markets and able to operate in and contribute to a democratic framework where respect for human rights, pluralism, freedom of thought, freedom to organize, political participation, and the like are the rules of the game. Otherwise, even compliance with all *acquis* chapters might not grant Turkey a seat in the EU. It is often said that every risk involves an opportunity; however, there are few countries such as Turkey where both risk and opportunity are at extreme levels.

