

Is there a job after college?: Higher education's impact on transition from school to work¹

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of the design/organisation of higher education system on the determination of the career paths, and thus the patterns of post-graduate unemployment, of university students. The findings of the article come from a field research conducted among the 2011 graduates of the Faculty of Economic and Administrative Sciences (FEAS) of Middle East Technical University (METU). The research results highlight the existence of four different strategies as students cope with the transition from school to work: "Career orientation", "Further investment", "Many eggs in many baskets", "Wait-and-see", and discusses the possible reasons behind post-graduate unemployment accordingly.

Keywords: Higher education system; Career paths; Unemployment.

1. Introduction

This article concentrates on the transition process of university students from school to work. In particular, it investigates the impact of the design/organisation of the higher education system on the determination of students' career paths, and on the patterns of post-graduate unemployment they face. It is argued that a higher education system aims to achieve equality of opportunity on the basis of a merit-based evaluation system that includes a centralized university entrance examination (Şenses, 2005: 197) and the design of university education are likely to produce unintended results, those that mostly contradict the original aims. To be more specific, standardisation and universalisation in the provision of higher education services, stemming from such concerns, results in two major problems: a mismatch between the career orientation of students and the professional

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formation they received during their university education; and relatedly, a prolonged period of voluntary unemployment on the part of the students before they can enter the job market. The findings of the article come from a field research conducted among the 2011 graduates of the Faculty of Economic and Administrative Sciences (FEAS) of Middle East Technical University (METU).²

Unemployment has always constituted a burning issue, especially for developing countries like Turkey, waiting to be resolved by policy-makers; and it has attracted the attention of scholars from various social science disciplines. The story is definitely not a new one (Carnoy, 1985). Yet, given the increasing amount of public investment into education, including the creation of many new universities across the country (Birler, 2012) and given the increasing number of unemployed university graduates in Turkey (see Görün, 1997), it becomes necessary to investigate what has gone wrong with the policies implemented and their social impacts. Hence, this study also aims to make inroads into a broader impact analysis of the higher education (HE) policy in Turkey and other developing countries, which increasingly invest into their own respective HE systems as a strategy to promote their overall socio-economic development.

Especially in developing countries like Turkey, channeling the labour supply into the HE system, i.e. the flow of individuals into HE institutions, emerges as a social justice problem. Not all high school graduates can make it into the level of education whose graduates are more likely to end up with relatively better-paying jobs and higher social status, especially in developing countries (Tansel, 2000: 6-7). In the case of Turkey, the policy developed to face this challenge was to establish a strictly monitored entrance mechanism whilst completely ignoring the exit point (graduation/transition to the job market). The exit is regulated neither by the HE institutions, nor by the the state. This of course, puts all the burden on the shoulders of the HE institutions to ensure that they enhance the level of match between the career aspirations of their students to their academic formation, so that they may end up with jobs that are best-suited to their academic formation. Therefore, there is a need to examine the impact of the intra-institutional design of university education (faculty-based vs department-based; inflexible curricula vs flexible curricula, etc) on the career prospects of students. This concern constitutes the centre of attention of the article's empirical analysis.

² Although considered an Ivy-League University in Turkey, METU and its graduates are not immune to the problems mentioned above. From many informal talks with his fourth year students and fresh graduates during the past seven years, the researcher has come to conclude that the unemployment problem is increasingly hitting METU graduates as well. In that regard, by examining how those tensions are played out in an established university it becomes possible to begin to formulate further questions about the problems that pervade in expanding higher education systems.

2. Theoretical framework

An individual's welfare is generated in three sites, namely, "social networks" (the family, ethnic ties, religious ties, etc), "public services" (including education), and the "labour market" (income earned) (cf. Mingione, 1996). Yet, the level and quality of education received has greater influence over the welfare prospects of individuals, especially in an urban context where generation of material welfare largely depends on employment-based income (Robinson, 2001). There is a need, therefore, to concentrate on the question of "access" to education, and thus to employment, if we want to understand how the design of an education system could redress or worsen social inequalities in an increasingly urban society.

A note of caution is due here. We need to go beyond the demand and supply curves as we discuss the unemployment problem (of university graduates), and the relationship between education and economy. This could be done by using qualitative data on the motivations for choosing a university/department and on how students behave during their studies to prepare themselves (or not) for graduation and the realities of the labour market. In other words, we need to take a closer look at what is going on inside. In theoretical terms, then, the study also aims to address an observed gap between two streams in the relevant literature on the relationship between education and welfare: the stream that formulates the research *problematique* mainly as a "labour market or economic development issue" (Allmendinger, 1989; Saint-Paul and Verdier, 1993; Görün, 1997; Tansel and Güngör, 1997; Adsera and Boix, 2000; Sparkes, 1999; Gangl, 2001; Tansel 1999, 2000; Sarı and Soytaş, 2006; Erdil, 2007; for a recent critical review see McGrath, 2010); and the stream that examines that relationship as a "social class and mobility problem". While the former's epistemology is built on macroeconomic analysis, the latter chooses to produce knowledge through either macro-level political-economic analysis (Ball, 1993; Marks, 2004; Brown, 1995; Lynch and O'Neill, 1994; Whitty, 2001; Popkewitz and Lindblad, 2000; cf. Bhalla and Lapeyre, 1997; Green et al, 2007; Tilak, 2005) or micro-level sociological analysis (Lynch and O'Orion, 1998; Hatcher, 1998; Halsey et al, 1997). Whereas the former concentrates on "access to the labour market", the latter concentrates on "access to both better quality education and employment".

What is more, structural analyses from both streams will not tell us the story of how perceived matches/mismatches between education (supply) and the demand for labour are experienced by real individuals who suffer the consequences of such structural mismatches. In that regard, there is a need to pursue a qualitative micro-level analysis (For similar studies, see Heinz, 2002; Schoon and Parsons, 2002; cf. Heckhausen, 2002). Thus, while the concerns addressed in this study are similar to the ones raised in the second stream, it also aims to concentrate on the question of how educational

processes themselves shape the employment process/prospects for the university students, which is understudied by the second stream (with the exception of Livingstone, 2009 – yet mainly concentrating on the post-employment period; cf. Hall, 2001).

Departing from the theoretical considerations discussed above, the higher education system (in any given country) could be defined as a processing mechanism that is hoped to match the labour supply with the demand for qualified labour, albeit with entry (acceptance into an undergraduate program) and exit points (graduation/beginning to work). Even though higher education (HE) institutions could try their best to be active at the exit point, by promoting their graduates (through career fairs, etc), it is really their control (or the lack of it thereof) over the selection of their students (the entry) and what they make of their students during their education that determines the success of their graduates in landing better-paying jobs that will suit their academic formation and career desires.

Of course, universities and other HE institutions do not simply function as vocational schools. They should be seen as venues of socialisation that (re)shape the social capital and worldview of their graduates, inherited from families and pre-university education. The students' perception of personal welfare and the significance they attach to different sectors of employment (public sector, private sector, academia, voluntary sector etc) tend to evolve during their university education (cf. Heinz, 2002: 226). Hence, the education and socialisation process they have gone through will turn their job-hunting strategies into a negotiation between their families' priorities, the job opportunities available (and the qualities expected from the university graduates) and the worldview they have cultivated during their university education (cf. Schoon and Parsons, 2002: 281; also see Heinz, 2002: 226, 231). These factors should also be taken into account once we set out to examine the impact of the HE system's design on the (un)employment of university graduates.

3. Analytical framework

To reiterate, the students' career orientations are not simply products of their own personal wishes/dreams. These orientations evolve during their education. Thus, they are heavily influenced by the policies implemented by a set of public institutions at different stages of the education process. Therefore, a data collection strategy should be based upon a time frame corresponding to these different stages of the education process, meaning the pre-HE stage, the HE stage and the graduation (transition to work) stage. And given the earlier emphasis on the need to take a closer look at the individual stories of how these stages have been experienced by the students, two methods were adopted to gather data: a structured questionnaire, whose content was developed to reflect this time-frame, was held with fourth year students of the faculty; and in-depth semi-structured

interviews (partly based on the survey questions) were conducted with a randomly selected set of fourth year students to understand the rationales behind their answers to the questions posed in the survey.

The findings came from 238 questionnaires filled by the students (during May 2011) and 21 in-depth interviews with students from all departments³ carried out by the researcher during May and June 2011. Nine students from Political Science and Public Administration, six students from International Relations, four students from Economics and two students from Business Administration departments were interviewed. The questionnaire had 80 questions covering the three different stages of the educational process mentioned above. More than 30 of those questions were posed to the interviewees. There were also extra questions introduced during the interviews, when needed. Before proceeding to the findings, I provide data on the composition of the respondents (Table 1; Table 2; Table 3).

Table 1
Respondents' Composition by Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Female	136	57,1	57,4
	Male	101	42,4	42,6
	Total	237	99,6	100,0
Missing		1	0,4	
Total		238	100,0	

Table 2
Respondents' Composition by Department

	Frequency	Number of graduates in 2010/11 Spring term
Economics	60	105
Business adm.	65	112
PoliSci PublicAdm	71	99
Int'l Relations	42	63
Total	238	379

Note: Only 7 students (out of 238 respondents) were expected to graduate at the end of the 2011/12 Fall term, i.e, they answered the questions as fourth-year students who miss one term. The number of 2010/11 Spring term graduates were obtained from the Dean's office.

³ Interviewees are coded by the order of interview and the student's department. I-9-ECON, for example, refers to interview number nine held with a student from Department of Economics (Political Science: POL; International Relations: INT; Business Administration: BA).

Table 3
Respondents' Composition by Duration of Education (Terms Spent)

Terms	Frequency	Percent
7	8	3.4
8	203	85.3
9-10	27	11.3
Total	238	100.0

4. Findings: Entering the university (the mismatch problem)

The design of the university entrance system is one of the most important factors in determining the nature of the problems faced by students and departments (Şenses, 2005: 197). Selection of the university and of the department of study are the most critical career decisions a student can make in higher education. And in the case of Turkey, it is not simply up to the student (nor is it up to her/his family) to decide on where to study. One must pass a very competitive nationwide university entrance examination held annually by the ÖSYM (Ölçme, Seçme ve Yerleştirme Merkezi – the Centre for Measurement, Selection and Placement). The reason d'être of this central examination system is to meet two targets, simultaneously: a) to observe the merit principle; and b) to maintain social justice on the basis of merit.⁴ One of the central issues here, then, is to examine whether, and to what extent, this allegedly merit-based entrance system relates the potentials of the students to the university system, and helps them to develop a career path.

The examination is a competitive one, placing the students to the departments and universities on the basis of a score system. The centre places the students to the departments/universities with reference to the exam scores, their preference rankings, and the departments' student quotas.⁵ As the placement is made, departments that fall within a subject area are also ranked, thereby resulting in a hierarchy of popularity. Thus, the examination works through a logic of competition and bidding. Yet, the system does not produce radically different results in different years. The rankings change only slightly, reflecting a rather established hierarchy of departments/universities in the eyes of the students and families. Thus, it

⁴ Nevertheless, despite the claims to be an objective examination, the centre's name has been associated with a number of big scandals recently, harming its credibility in the eyes of the broader public.

⁵ Students first receive their examination scores on different subjects like Math, Turkish Language, Sciences etc. Different departments accept students on the basis of a combination of branch scores. Students, having received their exam scores submit a preference list form, ranking the departments/universities, 1st choice, 2nd choice etc ... taking into account their own scores and the academic fields/departments they are interested in. Individual departments have their own student quotas.

functions very much like the price mechanism that reflects the socially perceived value of the departments and universities.

In that regard, it could be argued that as students and their families make their decisions for further education and invest in the university entrance preparation, their preferences are influenced by the overall social worth attached to different fields of academic and professional specialisation. This social worth is closely associated with the nature of the future employment expectations of students and their families. This is true both for the faculty-based divisions in a university (such as engineering vs social sciences vs natural sciences vs medicine vs education vs arts) as well as for the department divisions within a faculty. A major problem is that as the score system creates a hierarchy of departments and universities, it also leads to a perception in the public that higher exam scores and placement in a higher ranking department/university will increase the chances of a student to get better job and career opportunities. Yet, the story is not as simple as it seems. A number of other factors shape the degree of access to employment and the job-hunting strategies of prospective graduates, which can lead to unexpected results for students and their families. First and foremost of those factors is the examination system itself. Below, I will discuss the misplacement and mismatch problems caused by the examination system.

Yet, before I proceed, a brief note on the place of the Faculty of Economic and Administrative Sciences (FEAS) at METU and its departments in this national ranking system is due. The departments affiliated with FEAS attract students with remarkably high examination scores, and the preference rankings, at first sight, suggest that the students were placed in departments that they really preferred. For example, 70.2% of the students who entered the faculty were placed in one of their most preferred three departments (see Table 4). Given this picture, it becomes crucial to ask whether the students really entered the departments that are the most suitable to their own aptitudes and career expectations. It is also worth noting that, and as I will argue later in detail, the career expectations from the departments/university are raised due to this score-based ranking system, which ultimately creates career pressures on students and disappointment with the education they have received from their own departments.

Table 4

Preference Ranking of the Current Department on the Student's University Examination Ranking List (Faculty-Wide Values)

Ranking	Frequency	Percent
1	73	30.7
2 - 3	94	39.5
4 - 5	45	18.9
6 or lower	26	10.9
Total	238	100.0

Now, let's take a closer look at this problem. A number of questions need to be answered: "Does the examination place the students in the departments they really want?"; "How do they determine their own preference ranking?" In particular: "What is the place of career expectations in their preference formation?"; and "What is it that the students choose: the institution or the department?" One of the interesting findings is that students choose their university before they choose their department (Table 5). Two-thirds of them report that they take (the reputation of) the university into account initially. Despite the fact that these students enjoyed a chance to enter any department of their own choosing (given their academic capacity and the examination scores), the choice of a department and the associated professional orientations were not that influential in their preferences. The table indicates that this is more true for the Economics and Business Administration departments. As for International Relations and Political Science and Public Administration, I think, the political orientations/interests of the students (for the former) and the higher degree of professional specialisation (for the latter) could be put forward as reasons why there are lower values for those two departments. Still, it is striking to see that the university option has the upper hand. In that respect, it is also not surprising that about half (45.8 %) of the respondents gave a negative answer to the question: "Do you think that the examination placed you in a department you really wanted?" (Table 6)

Table 5

Which of the Following was More Important for You as You Ranked Your Preferences (Answers by Department)

		Department				Total
		Econ	BA	Pol	Int	
University	Count	42	47	43	24	156
	%	70.0%	72.3%	60.6%	57.1%	65.5%
Department	Count	18	18	28	18	82
	%	30.0%	27.7%	39.4%	42.9%	34.5%

Table 6

Do You Think that the Examination Placed You to a Department You Really Wanted?

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	129	54.2
No	109	45.8
Total	238	100.0

Apparently, that the students chose their university before they chose their department can be listed as one of the reasons behind this remarkable dissatisfaction expressed in Table 6. There is a need to further concentrate on how the department/university preferences were formed, and then on what bases the university preferences, in particular, were determined. One critical issue here is the field specialisation in high school. Selection of the academic field of specialisation in high school inevitably leads the student to pursue the same subject in the university examination. Then, how do the students choose their field specialisation in high school? Table 7 indicates that the student's self-perception (of her/his aptitudes) and her/his career expectations are the most important factors. Yet, even in those cases, only about half of the respondents had an idea about their area of study and future career when they were "teenagers". It is also worth noting that professional (teacher) guidance did not play a significant role at all in these decisions. Obviously, half of the students did not have an awareness about their own aptitudes and career expectations during high school, and also had almost no professional guidance on these issues. It is, therefore, quite unlikely that their department preferences are informed by their aptitudes or their career aspirations.

Another key question is that of "how university applicants shape their department/university preference list (for the examination) around a chosen field?" Family circles appear to be the most influential, with a cumulative 43% (the parents being in the first: 23.2%). Another 38.4 % answered the question as "no one". Help from professionals (teachers and professional guides) total up to 16.4%. These findings indicate that most of the students also did not count on professional help when choosing the departments/universities to include in their university exam preference list.

Table 7

Reasons for Field/Branch Selection in the High School (and University Examination)

Possible reasons (as proposed in the questionnaire: more than one option could be chosen)	Frequency (out of 238)
Because you felt that you were more talented/successful in that field	146
Because your family wanted you to pursue that field	14
Because your teachers guided you to that field	12
Because you thought that you would have a brighter career in that field	105
Because you thought that (the field) was more suitable to your worldview	49

A crucial point to be made here is that particular examination subjects correspond to particular fields to be selected in the preference list, which, in turn, correspond to faculty rather than departmental divisions.⁶ In the same preference list, thus, the student can include the departments of “Political Science and Public Administration”, “Business Administration”, “Economics”, and “International Relations” and so on from different universities - ranking them according to her/his priorities. In that regard, professional help is even more important as most of the students have no idea about the content of education given by particular departments, their academic traditions, and almost no idea at all about their future career prospects once they graduate from these departments.

Then, how do they choose the departments and universities? When I posed that question to the interviewees, I received a set of interesting answers that revolve around a number of key factors. First, given this lack of professional guidance, the influence of family circles assumes a more critical role in the determination of the preference list. Here, the social status of the “professions”, and especially how they are perceived by the public at large becomes important, rather than the availability of jobs or the amount of expected stream of future income.⁷ One interesting common answer from the students was that what they really wanted to study was “Law” and the most frequently cited reason was the social status of “lawyers” and “state attorneys”, most of them knew someone from this profession in person (fathers, cousins, close family friends, etc) (I-9-ECON, I-19-INT, I-20-ECON, I-6-POL, I-17-POL). I-6-POL, for example, cited an advice that she was given: “Become someone who does not knock on doors, but whose door is knocked”. Of course, it is also interesting to see that these students were not placed into a Law department, because of the score system (which I will discuss in detail below). Another status-oriented motivation was about the future position in a particular job, rather than the job itself. I13-POL, for instance, mentioned his (then) dream about becoming an

⁶ In other words, for example, a student who answers the questions on Mathematics, Turkish language and Social Sciences form the preference list for different departments affiliated with a “Faculty of Economics and Administrative sciences” or a “Faculty of Law”.

⁷ Here, of course, we should touch upon the families’ consent for the students’ preferences. Questionnaire results indicate that most of the students did not seem to get into conflict with their families about their preferences (only 23,5% faced this problem). And when they were asked about the possible reasons for the families’ objection, the most common answer given was their worries about the career prospects of the preferred departments/universities (there were 37 out of 56 responses to that question). Given the social prestige of METU, it can be argued that the families were more concerned about the job prospects of specific departments rather than job prospects of the university. This problem, for example, was mentioned by I-18-INT, who cited teasing jokes by his father and elder brother who also graduated from METU, both from the same engineering department (as well as other relatives who were engineers, too), about his ideals about pursuing a Master’s degree in history: “No worries. We can take care of the only T.M. guy in the family - (referring to the university examination subjects, Turkish-Mathematics on which basis the students are accepted to the FEAS departments)”.

administrator/manager, given the example of his elder brother having a similar status in the private sector.

Of course, status motivation, especially around the concern with becoming a top-bureaucrat/manager, also turns the FEAS departments into another natural choice for prospective students. But, what is striking here is that students did not seem to make a distinction between the FEAS departments. It was enough to study in any one of them (I-13-POL, I-20-ECON, I-3-INT). I-13-POL and I-20-ECON reported two different sorts of advice given by their own elder brothers (university graduates transmitting insider experience to their younger brothers) that there was no meaningful difference between the education given by the FEAS departments; or that they would be doing the same job once they graduated from any of these departments. Nevertheless, I-20-ECON reported his surprise, once he began his studies, that the department he was majoring in (Economics) and its curriculum bore little resemblance to the other departments in FEAS. The reason for this may have something to do with the increasing degree of disciplinary specialization and research orientation in the Economics department (cf. Şenses, 2005: 190-191). He explained that the advice he got prior to entering university was given to him from people who had experience from “small universities” where all of the departments, including economics, really did look alike. One other key issue is about the breadth of job opportunities/sectors of employment open to the graduates of the faculty, regardless of the department (I-3-INT).

Another key rationale for preferring the university before the department was the university’s profile and its social reputation. Four interrelated reasons may be mentioned in that regard: 1) the public perception that the students from this institution have less difficulty in getting a job once they graduate and are also expected to work in prestigious institutions (this was one of the most common explanations); 2) the social and political environment of the university (I-2-INT, I-18-INT, I-15-POL, I-14-POL, I-3-INT); 3) the student’s search for a lifestyle, rather than a job (I-15-POL; I-12-POL); 4) the academic tradition of the university (I-10-BA).

These comments indicate that the university is perceived as a package: as a place worth experiencing/discovering, as a place where a (new) life project is formulated, and as a place for personal development/character enrichment. Thus, receiving a professional formation is just one of the concerns and definitely does not occupy the top place in a student’s priority list. This finding also confirms one of the conclusions of an earlier work on the changing profile of the students of Economics department (of FEAS, between 1995 and 2004) that there had been a tendency to increasingly see the main purpose of higher education as “becoming a more social person and to increase cultural [capital]/knowledge accumulated [individually by the student]” (Şenses, 2005: 194). I will refer back to these rationales in the remainder of the discussion.

The score-based competitive bidding system underlying the university examination/selection process appears as yet another factor in determining the preference list. It seems that social signaling in the decision-making process plays a critical role in a competitive environment functioning without a sufficient information basis. I-21-BA mentioned the average acceptance scores of the departments as her criterion in structuring her preference list. Her argument was that “if students with high scores prefer this department, then so should I”. In other words, once she was supposed to form the preference list, all she had to do was to rank the departments (within FEAS) according to their past year’s average acceptance scores, and to go for the highest, then the second highest, and so on. Thus, for example, even if she could have been more successful in Economics (say, because of her analytical skills), she ended up in Business Administration where she did not perform that well academically, and was thus alienated from the department. This story suggests the parallels between the irrationalities of the score-based examination system and the crisis-prone free market system. Assigning a value to a department/university or a price to a product on the basis of other players’ behaviour could result in the wasting of resources. This creates excess pressure on the producer/department (where the student is placed) because of raised expectations from the product/job prospects, while keeping those who really need that product/or suitable for that department outside. Or, as exemplified by the story of I-9-ECON, the score system can place the student in a department she really did not want but was placed anyway only because she felt that she had to rank her current department above the one she really wanted to go (Law).⁸

The analysis, so far, indicates that the university examination transfers a host of problems prevalent in secondary education to tertiary education while rendering these problems even more complicated. In other words, this allegedly merit-based student selection and placement system betrays its own cause. There are two visible tensions: a) the mismatch between the aptitudes of the high school graduates and the curriculum they are exposed to in their departments at university; and b) the mismatch between their career ideals and the job/career prospects offered by their department. Crosscutting these two tensions is a third problem, that of the mismatch between the academic formation they receive in their departments and the jobs they pursue once they graduate. How these problems come to surface during the students’ university education and the kind of challenges they bring to departments are analysed in the following section.

⁸ Though, I should note that her view about Law, too also changed later, this time in favour of Political Science. Her story also indicates that once not given proper guidance, it could take four years of undergraduate study to find out what the student really wants to study. I will get back to this problem when I touch upon the motivations behind pursuing graduate studies.

5. Findings: University education (challenges, challenges!)

“To target, to achieve a certain thing, to venture a different life is a very hard thing” (I-11-ECON)

The preceding section indicates that students come to university with little idea about the path of their future career, and as total aliens to the curriculum of their departments, while having high hopes about their future careers given the reputation of the university. This creates two major challenges:

1) *“The alienation problem”*: The discrepancy between their academic formation, as well as their hopes/ideals, and what they encounter in university (content of the curriculum, the academic requirements of university education, etc) creates a deep motivation problem, alienating them from their own departments. This, in turn, shapes the path of their career choices, leading them to stay away from actively seeking a job, or putting pressure on them to sacrifice their own aptitudes and ideals in favour of the “realities of the market”. This amounts to a waste of time, energy and money invested in university education, on the part of both the students themselves and universities;

2) *“Eggs in different baskets”*: Given this alienation problem, and given that the students receive very little or no guidance, they begin to develop and pursue multiple strategies simultaneously in order to prepare themselves for future jobs, mostly through trial and error. This amounts to distributing their efforts around the priorities of different sectors (like the private sector, public sector and academe). This requires carrying out different, and sometimes contradictory, preparation strategies at the same time. For example, students have to prepare both for the KPSS exam (Public Personnel Selection Examination) that entails a lot of time and money to study for, as well as prepare themselves for acceptance to a Master’s program, which means taking demanding elective courses in their third and fourth year of study.

In the remainder of this section, I will analyse these problems in detail. One of the most frequently cited reasons for disappointment and alienation is the quite low GPAs that the students end up with during the first two years of their undergraduate study. But, this comes as no surprise. Table 8 indicates that half of the students view themselves as being less successful in university compared with their high school performance (53.8 %). Another 27.1% report that their level of success did not change. Only about one-fifth of students see themselves more being successful in university. These numbers suggest that academic success in university does not provide a source of motivation for most of the students to adapt themselves to the curriculum of their departments, and thus to the academic/professional formation that departments are seeking to impart on them. Questionnaire results lend further support to this conclusion in that for 44.1% of the students there was no stable temporal pattern regarding their

term GPAs; it was characterised by ups-and-downs. For another 43.3%, however, the tendency is that of an increase in the GPA score. Here, though, it should be noted that some of the students (and most of the students interviewed, with a current GPA score of about 2.70 out of 4) who sustained an increase in their GPA throughout 8 or more terms, started with low GPAs in the first two years, only to recover during the following years.

Table 8
Direction of Change in the Level of Academic Success
(From High School to University)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
More successful	45	18.9	19.1
Did not change	64	26.9	27.1
Less successful	127	53.4	53.8
Total	236	99.2	100.0
Missing	2	0.8	
Total	238	100.0	

Yet, once the low GPA issue is scratched, beneath the surface appears a set of major problems. First, the secondary school curriculum the students follow is totally different from the one they see at university (students unanimously agree on this). And this is especially true for the curricula of the FEAS departments. It was most interesting to hear, for example, I-20-ECON's observation that engineering students were more successful academically because of the fact that they repeat the high school curricula during the first two years of their study. Although this observation deserves further examination, nevertheless it gives the impression that the mismatch between the curricula of secondary and tertiary education is a greater problem for the social science fields. Of course, this observation could well stem from the academic tradition(s) developed by the METU-FEAS departments and may not necessarily hold true for the FEAS departments from other universities.

There is a similar problem regarding the methods of instruction.⁹ When students come to university, they are "left to their own devices" to find their way to academic success, whereas in secondary school they were exposed to a highly controlled instruction environment and a much different academic tradition. What is more, in high school, school attendance was

⁹ The medium of instruction, too, is critical. Students are not educated in their own mother tongue (the medium of education in METU is English). Some of the students are already shaken by their poor performance in the language preparation school (I-10-BA, I-19-INT). What is more, the grammar-intensive language education they receive in preparation school is not sufficient to meet the challenges of the curricula of the FEAS departments that require intensive reading and writing skills. This problem, in particular, seems to create a discrepancy between the academic performance of the students coming from public high schools, and those educated in private/foundation schools who have received a more intense English language education.

sufficient for success. But this is definitely not the case in university (I-6-POL, I-3-INT, I-11-ECON). Unlike secondary education, in university there is no effective, and external, monitoring mechanism that can follow the student's performance throughout the term. Thus, they have to learn to study by themselves and they can see the results of their efforts only at the end of the term. I-21-BA and I-6-POL, for example, explained the reason behind their academic failure during the early stages of their university experience was their lack of knowledge of "how to study" for university courses. Both respondents said that it was only after participating in friendship circles that they were able to learn how to deal with the coursework (to do research, go to the library, write papers, etc). Transmitted in this way, knowledge about the way to cope at university may be viewed as tacit knowledge that is passed from peer to peer. In that regard, the student's ability to establish friendships and to have access to friendship circles is a crucial key to academic success, and also a way to deal with the alienation problem in many ways. Of course, it should also be noted that – and as I will discuss later – students gain a set of analytical and research skills by the time they graduate. I-4-INT, for example, observes that university education gave him the "method of learning". But, this observation hides the fact that it is only after four years that the student is now ready to learn, in academic matters. And it is open to discussion whether these skills are sought after in the private or the public sector.

The perceived incoherence of the first year curricula seems to pose yet another problem. The logic of the "introduction" or "101" courses is quite similar to that of teaching someone a language by first introducing the words, and then letting that person discover the grammar. In line with this problem, another complaint raised by the students is about the content of first year courses. The complaint is that some of the courses are based on memorization and lack critical engagement; they often follow the logic of learning a new language, such as word memorisation (I-8-ECON, I-10-BA). So, it is no wonder that the GPAs of the students begin to improve remarkably in their third and fourth years of study when elective courses are offered.

Lastly, the measure of a student's success is based on the GPA, i.e, the score system, which creates yet another hierarchy among students. It should be noted that most of the students were in the "successful students class" during high school (I-6-POL). The sense of pride and self-confidence gained in high school disappears as soon as the student realises that she/he is surrounded by strong competitors at university. In other words, the evaluation system based on peer-comparison is especially harmful for students with successful academic pasts. This seems to result in two contradictory responses: i) to give up studying and engaging with the department (I-5-POL); and ii) to become even more ambitious (I-7-POL). The majority seems to fall within the first category.

What is more, the students have no choice but to learn to cope with the challenges of university education, because it is quite costly and risky, both in monetary and moral terms, to quit university education or to quit their department to re-enter the university examination once again (I-9-ECON, I-15-POL). In that regard, they have to develop a set of different coping strategies that, in turn, will determine the path of their career strategies. Before I proceed to discuss these strategies, I would like to say a few things about Table 9.

When they were asked what was it that they gained from university education, “the ability to do research/analysis”, “critical/creative thinking”, and “world view” were the most frequently chosen answers, while “professional specialisation” was chosen by only 30 students (out of 238). This picture gives a pretty good idea about the results of the curricula and methods of instruction adopted by the FEAS departments. It is obvious that students do not perceive themselves to be ready as professionals, when this amounts to having a grasp of practical aspects of the jobs they are supposed to do. It is possibly for this reason that despite the fact that a majority of the respondents (66.1%) mentioned that they would not choose to go to another university “if they were to enter the university examination again” (and only 21.4% would follow the opposite course); a great many would reconsider their faculty preferences. A little more than half indicated they would opt for a different faculty (51.7%), while 39.1% say they would not change their faculty.

Table 9
What Did the University Education Give to the Students?
(More than One Answer can be Given)

Possible reasons (as proposed in the questionnaire)	Frequency (out of 238)
Professional specialisation	30
The ability to do research/analysis	159
Critical/creative thinking	153
Work discipline	84
Entrepreneurship	53
Self-confidence	98
Socialisation skills	108
World view	133

Of course, there are other factors at work. One of them was already mentioned, that the students feel alienated from their own departments. This might well cause them to lose interest in the department’s curriculum, where professional orientation and formation is gained. Another reason, I think – and as I will discuss later - is the breadth of the sectors that they can apply to once they graduate. To put it simply, for example, a graduate of Political Science and Public Administration could apply to many different public and

private institutions. And even within the public institutions, there are many different sectors, such as central government offices, local governments, policy advocacy institutions, political parties, etc, which require different sorts of refined skills. Clearly, that requires a modular system or education under the umbrella of a department or the faculty, with modules offering specialised sub-curricula.

Table 9 further suggests that the education received in the FEAS departments prepare the students not for particular jobs but rather for top positions in large scale bureaucratic organisations, where the skills that are needed for decision-making are “the ability to do research/analysis” and “critical/creative thinking”. And this appears to be true for all departments. In that regard, it should come as no surprise that the students concentrate their job search efforts toward central administration, where for example there is a flow of information (I-5-POL) and large scale private companies rather than smaller scale institutions (See Table 10). In other words, their job hunting strategies cannot simply be understood in terms of their desire for (social) prestige, although this is an important motive as I explained earlier.

Table 10
Where The Job Applications will be Made
(More than One Answer can be Given)

Possible reasons (as proposed in the questionnaire)	Frequency (out of 238)
Not Planning to work	6
University	82
Think tank	31
Media	23
Public adm (central)	110
Public adm (local government)	56
Public adm (int'l organisations)	85
Private (Own business)	13
Private (Family business)	15
Private (Large scale company)	116
Private (Small scale company)	25
Political institutions (parties)	17
NGOs	19
Other	14

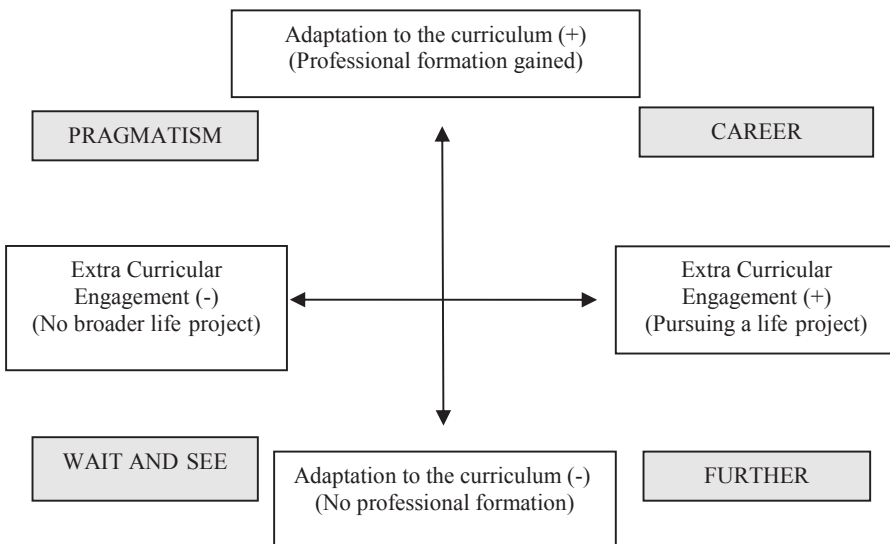
6. Findings: Career paths (the way ahead)

Given the alienation and disorientation problem described above, how do students determine their career paths? Findings from the field research point the finger at two cross-cutting tensions: a) the tension around the student's adaptation to the curriculum and the department; b) the tension

around the student’s involvement in extra-curricular activities (including intra-mural student groups as well as extra-mural activities, working during university education etc). Of these tensions, the former is about the extent to which a student can gain the professional formation through the department’s curriculum. The latter is about whether the student develops a life project around a future career, and whether she/he can clearly identify the future job(s) she/he intends to work in as a part of her/his broader life plan. Depending on where the student stands on these two different axes, we could identify four different patterns of career path formation during university education (Figure 1). Now let’s take a closer look at these strategies.

“Career orientation” (*Adaptation to the Curriculum (+) / Extra Curricular Engagement (+)*): The profile is that of ambitious and idealist students aiming at a single sector starting from their first year of education. These are students who have survived the alienation problem successfully or who were not affected greatly by the challenges of the transition from high school to university in the first place. Their efforts revolve around a single target, and for this reason their time, energy and resources are used more efficiently. Even if the department’s curriculum is not coherent or does not necessarily give the student much practical knowledge needed in a profession (also see Şenses, 2005: 190), the student compensates through extra-curricular activities (I-1-POL, I-7-POL). Here, the student is selective about the sectors to apply for a job and the major motive is to climb the career ladder.

Figure 1
Dynamics of Career Path Formation during University Education



“Further investment” (*Adaptation to the Curriculum (-) / Extra Curricular Engagement (+)*): This category includes the ambitious and idealist students who were shaken by the alienation problem during their first two years of study, but who then begin to discover what they want through extra-curricular engagement (activities such as taking elective courses from other departments to channel their efforts towards other curricula, including selection of a minor or doing a double major in another department - within FEAS or outside FEAS), active engagement with university student clubs that may eventually turn into a career option (sometimes totally irrelevant to the department’s curricula), or working during university education. It is especially in this case that pursuing a graduate degree appears to be a way to compensate for the years missed in undergraduate education. Here the students are also ready to sacrifice the immediate benefits of a stable, long-term job (that they could land in easily) and to spend a few years without monetary compensation. They are also selective about which jobs to apply for (I-12-POL). They make continual investments in themselves.

“Pragmatism” (*Adaptation to the Curriculum (+) / Extra Curricular Engagement (-)*): The student in this category shows academic success in departmental courses; yet given the lack of an initial life plan or an ideal (a problem transferred from high school and university examination) and given the time burden of coursework, they are not as socialised and do not establish strong ties with the university at large or other extra-curricular activities. There are two alternatives here: First, if the department has a coherent and specialised curriculum, the student is almost certain to focus on a single sector, and is simply satisfied with getting a job in that sector without necessarily having the desire to ascend the career ladder.

The second alternative is that if the department’s curriculum is broad and does not prepare the student for a particular profession in the first place, then the student tries to apply to jobs in every sector possible counting on the skills obtained from the department, such as Analytical/Research Skills or Critical/Creative Thinking. Here, of course, this results in a distribution of job preparation efforts around different sectors. This results in a greater psychological burden and greater investment of time and money. It was interesting to hear I-9-ECON, who follows the preceding strategy (concentrating her efforts on one field, not related to her undergraduate education) saying “I feel pity for those friends of mine who (frantically) apply for every job”. Moreover, the student is more open to disappointment and psychological depression. I-21-BA, gives the example of her cousin having health problems during the job hunting process, given that she/he will be ready to accept any job, which will lessen the probability of finding a job open to career progress, let alone the fact that it is not a dream job. In terms of the duration of unemployment, the student faces two alternatives: either to start looking for a job much earlier at the beginning of the fourth year, for example; or be ready to accept post-graduation unemployment.

Given this pressure, this puts the students in a situation in which they must divide their energy between courses and job-hunting related activities, creating another source of pressure.

“Wait and see” (*Adaptation to the Curriculum (-) / Extra Curricular Engagement (-)*): If the student is alienated to the curriculum/department and has no extra-curricular engagement, this results in postponing the time to start looking for a job. This alienation is closely associated with an indecision problem. It should also be noted that the “indecision” problem stems from a number of factors: i) The dilemmas felt by the student about the broader ideals she/he was exposed to during university education and the content of the job they will be doing (I-15-POL); ii) Resistance to working conditions (working hours, taking orders from a superior, etc); iii) Losing hope and self-confidence created by alienation (that they will not get a good/dream job anyway, that they will not be accepted) (I-21-BA).

This alienation and indecision problem, in turn, leads the student to feel unable to quit “student life” – I-6-POL, for example calls this “the unbearable lightness of being a student” (I-17-POL, I-16-INT, I-6-POL); and forces them to adopt a “wait-and-see” strategy. In this strategy, they take their time to see what their friends are doing (to minimise the risks) and decide to act later (I-21-BA).

To summarise, we see three different causes for the increase in the unemployment duration, assuming that the labour market is still open to students: i) some students find it necessary to make further investments in themselves in order to find a job that they really want; ii) some decide to distribute their eggs in different baskets so that they spend more time and energy in finding a job; and iii) for some their total alienation results in a “wait-and-see” strategy. The first is not the most common strategy. When students were asked “whether their ideal job is the one which they are most likely to get”, only 34.9% of respondents gave a positive answer. This conclusion is also supported by Table 11, where 73 students out of 238 attended extra-curricular training programs related to their department’s area of specialisation, indicating that about one third of the students take their department’s area of specialisation seriously as a career option. When it comes to the other strategies, the “wait-and-see” strategy does not appear to be a dominant pattern either. Table 11 indicates that only 39 students out of 238 say they would do nothing to prepare themselves for a job. And this is also true for the “further investment” strategy. Strategies such as “spending time for non-departmental courses” (64 out of 238), “attending extra-curricular training programs not related to the department” (34), “attending training programs like leadership-effective management (46), are pursued by not more than one fourth of students (I should note that the student could choose more than one option).

Then, we are left with the third option, which is that of “pragmatism”, or “many eggs in many different baskets”, where the students try to apply to as many jobs as possible in different sectors. And these are the students who

were successful in their courses, and did not have a problem in adapting themselves to the curriculum (or at least survived alienation), but their academic efforts simply did not translate into an easy transition to a job. Table 12 suggests that this frantic search for jobs channels the students to their second-best sectors. This is especially true for public institutions (central government), local government, private sector (large scale companies) and private sector (small scale companies).

The questionnaire results show that, with few exceptions, students from different departments give similar answers to the questions posed. In other words, students, regardless of their department, tend to concentrate on certain sectors, mainly their second-bests (those just mentioned). An average of 62.4% of the students say they will take the Public Personnel Selection Exam (55% of Economics, 70.3% of Business Administration, 69% of Political Science and 50% of International Relations students). This is despite the fact that the majority of students (51.1%) view the public sector as the sector where job applications are evaluated most unfairly (followed by the options, “political parties”: 15.7%; “private sector”: 15.3%; and “all of them”: 15.3%).

Table 11

Methods of Preparation to Find a Job (More than One Answer can be Given)

As proposed in the questionnaire	Frequency (out of 238)
No special preparation	39
Spending time for departmental courses	80
Spending time for non-departmental courses	64
Pursuing a minor or double-major degree	13
Applying for a master's degree program	83
Attending extra-curricular training programs related to the department	73
Attending extra-curricular training programs not-related to the department	34
Attending training programs like leadership-effective management	46
Learning a second language	69
Preparation for the Public Personnel Selection Exam (KPSS)	101
Working in an NGO	30
Working in a political party	4

Table 12
Ideal Areas of Work vs Where Job Applications will be Made

	Ideal areas of work (Q 61)	Areas where job applications are to be made (Q62)
Working is meaningless	7	6 (not planning to work)
There is no ideal job. Job is a job.	10	-
Home-based work	17	-
University	98	82
Think tank	49	31
Media	36	23
Public adm (central)	95	110
Public adm (local government)	35	56
Public adm (int'l organisations)	80	85
Private (Own business)	37	13
Private (Family business)	22	15
Private (Large scale company)	92	116
Private (Small scale company)	16	25
Political institutions (parties)	23	17
NGOs	34	19
Other	17	14

Note: Answer options are slightly different between these two questions. When different, it is stated for Q62.

This confusion, also leads the students to postpone job-hunting. A total of 55.9% of the students mentioned that they would start looking for a job, only after graduation. And I should note that 20.8 of the students started looking for a job just before their graduation (Table 13).

Table 13
When will You Start/Have You Start(Ed) Looking For a Job?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Not planning to work	4	1.7	1.7
I already have a job	4	1.7	1.7
At the beginning of my last year at school	47	19.7	19.9
Soon before graduation	49	20.6	20.8
Will start as soon as I graduate	35	14.7	14.8
After taking a short rest	15	6.3	6.4
I will prepare for KPSS and other job examinations	39	16.4	16.5
After compulsory military service	2	0.8	0.8
Having completed a master's degree	34	14.3	14.4
Other	7	2.9	3.0
Total	236	99.2	100.0
Missing	2	0.8	
Total	238	100.0	

This indecision and confusion problem also makes itself felt in the student's expected period of employment for their first job. Only 29.5% of

the students expect to have a long term career in their first job. Up to 57.7% of the students do not expect to work in the same job for more than 5 years. This suggests that there is a trial-and-error strategy at work. The first job is mainly seen as a temporary one. In other words, the duration of decision-making about the career plans of the student extends to 5 years and beyond.

7. Concluding discussion

This article aimed to investigate the impact of the design/organisation of the higher education system on the determination of the career paths, and thus the patterns of post-graduate unemployment, of university students. It is claimed that the lack of control over the entry into (student selection) and the exit from (student placement in jobs) the HE system places all the burden on the university (the faculty and the department). Thus, it is argued that the question of how students' career paths are shaped by the education process they are exposed to at university should come to the centre of our attention.

The results lend support to my earlier hypothesis that standardisation and universalisation in the provision of the higher education service, aiming to achieve equality of opportunity on the basis of a merit-based entrance and evaluation system results in two major problems: mismatch between the career orientation of the students and the professional formation received in the university; and relatedly, an increased period of voluntary unemployment on the part of the students before they can enter the job market. In that regard, transition from secondary education to tertiary education is where all problems begin. Due to the lack of orientation in high school, an allegedly merit-based university examination system betrays its cause, assigning students to departments that do not match their expectations and/or aptitudes.

This problem is further complicated by the mismatch between the university examination's content and the curriculum and instruction methods of the university (especially true for the FEAS departments). This results in the alienation of the student from their departments (especially in their first two years) and to the professional formation their departments are supposed to impart on them. To a certain extent, this problem could be overcome if the departments have coherent curricula and are specialised in terms of the sectors of work that their graduates can enter. When this is not the case, students are caught in the middle of a confusion about their prospective careers.

In such an environment, four different strategies emerge as students cope with the transition from school to work: a) the career orientation strategy: students concentrate efforts during their four years of study to a single target (job/sector) with the intent of climbing the ladders of their prospective career; b) further investment strategy: late-comers, who survive the alienation problem, especially during their last two years continue to

keep investing in themselves and pursue a single career or job goal that is not related to their own department; c) “many eggs in many baskets” strategy: students dedicate their time to become successful in their departments in academic terms, but do not try to specialize toward a particular sector of work (e.g., do not explore extra-curricular self-investment options) and instead go after many different job options. This results in a waste of time and energy and creates extra pressure on students; d) “giving-up and/or being cautious” strategy: those who are alienated from their own departments and are not involved in extra-curricular self-investment activities adopt a “wait-and-see” strategy. The findings of this paper indicates that it is the third strategy that is dominant. This means that academic success does not necessarily translate into success in finding a job that is suitable to the professional formation and aptitudes of the students. Students appear to postpone job-seeking activities and prefer jobs with short term career opportunities. This results in a longer period of voluntary unemployment in which students apply for jobs that they otherwise would not apply to and there is the prospect of job mobility (change) for most of the students in near future.

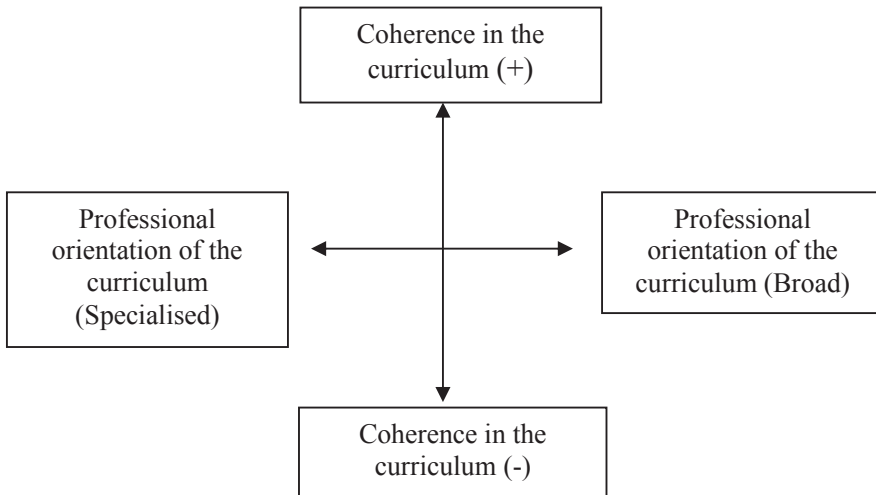
To summarise, “student’s adaptation to university education”, “content of the curriculum” and “investment in extra-curricular self-investment” appear as key analytical categories for further analysis of the transition from school to work and as potential concerns to be addressed by a future intra-university and broader study on HE reforms. Regarding the curriculum problem, under those conditions, an important challenge for the departments is to handle two crosscutting tensions, defined along two different axes: a) coherence in the curriculum; and b) professional orientation of the curriculum (specialised vs broad) (Figure 2).¹⁰ It could be argued that different faculties/departments could be placed on different points defined by the continuums on those axes. In the case of FEAS in general, and the departments in particular, the main challenges appear to be to find ways to enhance specialisation toward professional orientation and to design the curricula of the first two years in a way that helps students overcome the alienation problem more easily.

If the current HE system in Turkey will not change in the short run, a possible move might be to redesign the educational structure of FEAS on the basis of a faculty-based joint education for the first two years (or at least to encourage a convergence of the departmental curricula along those lines), and to encourage the departments to produce specialised (modular) sub-curricula for the 3rd and the 4th years that might be given by the departments independently and/or jointly (just like the inter-disciplinary graduate programs). Another alternative might be to increase the length of

¹⁰ Of course, measuring the coherence or professional orientation of the curriculum is a task that cannot be undertaken in this work. Nevertheless, there is a need to investigate these dimensions to the pressure – outlined in the paper - on university departments caused by the organisation of the HE system in Turkey.

education to five years (4+1), instead of four, to allow the students to further specialise with their career orientations in mind, while the final year's curricula might be designed to facilitate transition from school to work (engaging students more with practice).¹¹ Parallel to those suggestions, there is also a need to establish an administrative mechanism at the faculty scale to better monitor (and engage with) the above mentioned problems faced by the students during their university education.

Figure 2
The Challenge Before the Departments



Of course, the reader should be reminded that this research only concentrated on the departments of a faculty operating in the fields of economic and administrative sciences and does not give a full picture of the Middle East Technical University, and neither of other faculties and universities in Turkey, at this stage. Hence, the future research agenda will have to have a comparative focus, albeit elaborating upon the analytical framework built here. What is more, that sort of a research agenda will also have to address the social justice question more deeply, given that the level and quality of education offered in Turkey, mainly by the public sector, is differentiated around a hierarchy of educational institutions both at the secondary (high school) and tertiary (university) levels. While there is a universal, merit-based entrance system for these institutions, there is also an apparent class bias in terms of the access of students with different class backgrounds to those institutions. In its current form, the secondary and tertiary levels of education in Turkey are more accessible to the students

¹¹ Of course, this would be a viable option for a public university rather than private or foundation universities as students try to graduate early in order to pay less tuition.

from middle-class and, especially, higher-middle class families.¹² In other words, even if the students are exposed to the same level and quality of education, their chances of improving access to employment are not even. This unevenness is caused by three factors, namely, the “social/class background of the students” (cf. Wegener, 1991), “hiring procedure of the public sector, still the largest employer in Turkey”, and has been so since the early 1990s (Görün, 1997: 16) (forcing the students to attend the expensive cram schools – dershane - once again, as they did while preparing for the university exam), and the “demand structure in the labour market” (shaped by both the private and the public sectors).

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¹² For studies concentrating on the question of class backgrounds of students and their access to tertiary education, see: Gür and Çelik, 2009; Bayırbağ, 2010.

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Özet

“Okuldan sonra iş var mı?": Yükseköğretimin okuldan işe geçişe etkisi

Bu makale, üniversite öğrencilerinin kariyer güzergahlarının ve böylece mezuniyet sonrası işsizlik örüntülerinin belirlenmesinde yükseköğretimin tasarımının/örgütlenmesinin etkilerini incelemektedir. Makalenin bulguları Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi (ODTÜ), İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi (İİBF)'nin 2011 mezunları ile yapılan bir saha çalışmasından gelmektedir. Araştırma sonuçları, öğrencilerin okuldan işe geçiş süreciyle başa çıkma sürecinde dört ayrı stratejinin - “Kariyer yönelimi”; “İlave yatırım”; “Pek çok sepette pek çok yumurta”; “Bekle ve gör” – ortaya çıktığını vurgulamakta ve buna paralel olarak mezuniyet sonrası işsizliğin ardındaki olası nedenleri tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Yükseköğretim sistemi; Kariyer güzergahları; İşsizlik.