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A STUDY ON THE COMPETENCE LEVEL OF EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA IMPLEMENTATIONS*

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Abstract

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (formerly named as the Bologna Process) has still been discussing in Turkish and European higher education in terms of its competences and objectives. Although the Bologna Process Implementation Reports contain evaluations of Turkish universities, it is important that the issue is also must be evaluated by stakeholders, especially academic staff and students in universities. The main aim of this study is to reveal the views and perceptions of academic staff, one of the main stakeholders of higher education system, about the European Higher Education Area competences which are considered as an opportunity for Turkish universities in the process of change. The study is conducted in the descriptive research model which is one of the quantitative research models. In terms of EHEA evaluations, competence levels of a state university according to academic staff are examined. As a result of the factor analysis conducted, descriptive statistical methods are preferred in terms of the factors defined herein. The sampling of the study involves 1.756 academic staff of the university. According to the findings of the study, it is concluded that the university is not generally sufficient in terms of EHEA implementations. The participants expressed negative opinions about many competence levels except European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and three cycle system which Turkish universities are evaluated as good performances in Bologna Implementation Reports. The findings of the study are discussed in comparison with other studies in the literature and some suggestions are developed for following studies.

Keywords: European Higher Education Area, Competence, Academic Staff.

1. Introduction

The increasing importance of higher education in Europe has raised the need to consider this issue at the European Union level. In this sense, it is aimed to gain a status in order to modernize European universities. The emergence of universities in Europe has placed the idea that knowledge and prosperity can also spread to Europe through universities. It was deemed necessary to move towards a common field of education by eliminating national borders and barriers. The foundations of the idea of establishing European Higher Education Area (EHEA), between 2010-2012, started to be laid with these thoughts (Akbulut, 2009).

The EHEA is the current official name of the Bologna Process, which was initiated in 1999 by the Ministers of Education of 29 European countries to sign the Bologna Declaration, with the aim of establishing a European Higher Education Area. It is emphasized that the Bologna Process is completed and the field of higher education is established. The EHEA aims to increase the employment and mobility rates of people and to enhance the international competitiveness of European higher education. It also attaches great importance to quality in achieving this objective and in this sense, determines the improvement of quality as the primary target (Miraz, 2007).

* This study is derived from the doctoral thesis, titled The Perception of EHEA Qualification Level in The Context of Changing Values in Higher Education: A Survey On Academic Staff, conducted at Selçuk University Social Sciences Institution, Department of Business.

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The EHEA aims to increase cross-border mobility, coordinate national quality assurance, ensure transparency and recognition of skills and competences, and facilitate the recognition of mutual learning periods and degrees (Powell, Bernhard, & Graf, 2012).

There are many discussions and explanations in the literature about the EHEA targets and therefore the Bologna Process, which is the name of the previous process. The basic intellectual platform (components) of the structuring can be summarized as follows (Fejes, 2006):

1. Knowledge-based society, employment and mobility,
2. Lifelong learning,
3. Quality assurance,
4. Planning the future as a governance technique.

For instance these main principles becomes concrete with “learning and teaching, social inclusion and employability” concepts in the Yerevan Communiqué (2015) as the priorities of the Bologna Process. The Communiqué emphasizes the common aims and the basis of these reforms such as strong public funding, a common degree structure, quality assurance and recognition. It also reminds public responsibility to the countries academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and commitment to integrity for higher education systems (Eurydice, 2018).

The stages of the Bologna Process can be examined in two dimensions (Duman, 2002):

1. *Before Bologna Declaration*

a. Erasmus Programme (European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) (1987)

b. Bologna “Magna Charta Universitatum” (18 September 1988)

c. Socrates Programme (1995–1999)

d. Lisbon Recognition Convention (11 April 1997)

e. Sorbonne Declaration (25 May 1998)

2. *After Bologna Declaration*

a. Bologna Declaration (1999)

b. Lisbon Strategy (2000)

c. Prague Communiqué (2001)

d. Graz Declaration (2003)

e. Berlin Communiqué (2003)

f. Glasgow Declaration (2005)

g. Bergen Communiqué (2005)

h. Lisbon Declaration (2007)

i. London Communiqué (2007)

j. Leuven/ Louvain – la - Neuve Communiqué (2009)

k. Budapest-Vienna Declaration (2010)

l. Bucharest Communiqué (2012)

m. Yerevan Communiqué (2015)

n. Paris Communiqué (2018)

As seen above, the European Ministers meet every two or three years after the Bologna Declaration to ensure the functioning of the process and to discuss the reforms implemented. These meetings are published as declarations and new targets in line with the Bologna Process are set. In this sense, these declarations are the main soft-legal documents of the Bologna Process (Gümrükçü, 2011).

Bologna Process action plans describe the studies to be conducted in European higher education institutions to realize the process in terms of its purpose, also the direction of these studies and their scope. In this view, it is possible to evaluate the process under the following headlines (Eurydice, 2018):

- European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and learning outcomes approach (also including part-time study, learning in digital environments/online courses, teaching in new learning environments, teaching from students’ perspectives)
- Common degree structure (Three-cycle system), national qualifications frameworks, and diploma supplement
- Quality assurance (internal & external) and recognition of qualifications (automatic recognition)
- Widening access to higher education (expansion and enrollment) and diverse student population (also including lifelong learning)
- Enhancing graduates’ employability
- Internationalization and mobility of students and staff



European Higher Education Area has currently 48 member countries by year of 2019 and is a voluntary-based regional union. However, this union expanded by the participation of many countries from other locations in following years. Although this expansion has not been completed yet, the Bologna Process constitutes an example for the countries in other continents to establish such unions in their higher education systems (Süngü, 2009).

Turkey has been involved in this process in 2001. Turkey has made progress on many issues since 2001. Turkey ranks second in terms of the number of higher education students within the EHEA exceeding 8 million (corresponding to The International Standard Classification of Education-ISCED- levels 5-8 (tertiary education: short cycle, bachelor, master and doctoral or equivalent programs). Turkey, with number more than 200 universities, is among the top nine countries in EHEA. In this sense, it indicates that Turkey is substantial for EHEA and EHEA is a significant issue of Turkey for going through difficulties in changing higher education environment. Table 1 shows that Turkey has still some difficulties about the Bologna Process implementation even though it has achieved considerable success from the Bologna Process. In the relevant literature it is stated that Turkey's failure in this process is caused by the uncritical and unquestioned implementations (Günay, 2018).

Table 1: Scorecard of Turkey on implementation level of EHEA competences

Main theme*	Sub-theme (indicator)*	Score*
Learning and teaching	Monitoring the implementation of the ECTS system by external quality assurance	5
Degrees and qualifications	Stage of implementation of the Diploma Supplement	5
	Implementation of national qualifications frameworks	5
Quality assurance and recognition	Level of student participation in external quality assurance system	3
	Level of international participation in external quality assurance	2
	Stage of development of external quality assurance system	2
	Level of openness to cross border quality assurance of EQAR registered agencies	5
Opening higher education to a diverse student population (social dimension & life long learning)	System level (automatic) recognition for academic purposes	2
	Measures to support the access of under-represented groups to higher education	3
	Recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning	1
	Measures to support the retention and completion of students from under-represented groups	2
Internationalization and mobility	Portability of public grants and publicly-subsidised loans	1
	Supporting the mobility of students from under-represented groups	2

*Notes: (i) This score card is adapted from Bologna Process Implementation Report, 2018. In this report scores are designed with encolouring method such as green (excellent performance), light green (very good performance), yellow (good performance), orange (some progress has been made), red (bad performance).

Despite debates on it with the above mentioned reasons, the European Higher Education Area continues to be influential in countries' higher education systems. Deficiencies and developments in practice have been publishing in national and international continuous reports. However, in addition to these reports, which are evaluated from an external point of view, it is also important that this issue should be evaluated separately or comparatively for each university. Admittedly, these evaluations should be made by academic staff and students. The main purpose of this study is to reveal the opinions and perceptions of academicians as the main stakeholders of the higher education system in terms of European Higher Education Area Competencies, which is also regarded as a gate to new opportunities in the process of change by the universities. In this sense, the research questions are as follows:

- How does the level of EHEA competencies distribute according to the perception of academic staff?
- According to academic staff, which level of competence on EHEA implementations is more important?

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

In this study, descriptive survey design, one of the quantitative research methods, is used. The survey design is an approach that aims to describe a past or present situation as it exists (Krathwohl, 1993). Also survey design clarifications the opinions, perceptions, attitudes or the detailed characteristic of the group (Creswell, 2005). Single or relational surveys can be performed with general survey models. This study is designed in a single survey model to determine the occurrence of variables as species (Karasar, 2007). In addition understanding the academic staff's opinions on EHEA can increase the success of the implementations in the universities. So, it is significant to comprehend academic staff's opinions about the level of competence level of EHEA by survey method for realizing study purpose.



2.2. Participants

The sample in the study is selected by using convenience sampling method. A convenience sampling method is a non-probability sampling method in which the nearest and most convenient participants are used for the study (Creswell, 2005). It is possible to have such a framework for some populations (business, universities, trade unions etc.) (Altunışık, Coşkun, Bayraktaroğlu, & Yıldırım, 2007). So in current study academic staff in a state university is determined as the sample for understanding the issues on EHEA implementations in the universities.

In this context, the research is made at a state university from Turkey where is the second largest university in terms of the number of students and is located on the top ten ranking in terms of the number of faculty members. In order to determine the population of the research, data on the number of academic staff of the university are obtained from the relevant department. Also, the University's Strategic Plan data are used. As of 2012-2013 academic year, the university has 2,714 academicians. That is to say the population of the study involves the academic staff of the university. 1.756 academic staff participated in the study with a return rate of 65%. The detailed information on the characteristics of the academic staff taking part in this study is given in Table 2:

Table 2: Descriptive analysis of the participants

		f	%
Gender	Male	1.191	67,8
	Female	565	32,2
	Total	1.756	100
Age	≤25	101	5,8
	26-35	765	43,6
	36-45	524	29,8
	46-55	288	16,4
	56-65	72	4,1
	≥66	5	0,25
	Missing data	1	0,05
	Total	1.756	100
Title	Professor	180	10,3
	Associate Professor	198	11,3
	Assistant Professor	316	18,1
	Lecturer	486	27,7
	Research Assistant	507	28,9
	Specialist	40	2,3
	Other	24	1,38
	Missing data	5	0,02
Total	1.756	100	
Departments	Physical sciences	838	47,7
	Social sciences	608	34,6
	Health sciences	310	17,7
	Total	1.756	100

2.3. Data Collection Tools

The questionnaire used in the study is compiled from the theoretical and practical researches in the related literature, as well as the researches that opposed the Bologna Process (Dalgıç, 2008; Eurydice, 2012; Fejes, 2006; Gornitzka & Langfeldt, 2005; Gümüş ve Kurul, 2011; Miraz, 2007; Önal, 2011; Süngü, 2009; Weber & Bergan, 2005; Yağcı, 2010). In the EHEA competence level questionnaire, 4 questions are related to demographic information and 34 questions are related to competence level.

The questionnaires is sent to the academic units by internal mail. The participation rate of the surveys is increased by contacting the units according to the return rates of the surveys within a certain period of time. As a result of all these efforts, the survey implementation process is completed with the return of 1,772 questionnaires. However, it is decided to exclude 16 forms from the evaluation due to the lack of usable data and the number of questionnaires to be evaluated is determined as 1,756. With this number, the condition limit of at least ten times the number of variables in statistical analyzes is met and even the 50% level of ideal representative power for researches is exceeded (Altunışık, Coşkun, Bayraktaroğlu, & Yıldırım, 2007).

2.4. Data Analysis

The responses in the returning questionnaires are coded and loaded into SPSS 16.0 program and analyzed. First, Cronbach Alpha coefficient is used to evaluate the reliability (internal consistency) of the scales in the questionnaire form, and it is found to be "0,966" which is accepted high internal reliability (Altunışık, Coşkun, Bayraktaroğlu, & Yıldırım, 2007). Second the factor analysis is conducted, and descriptive statistical methods are used in terms of the factors defined herein.



3. Results

Factor analysis is conducted in order to determine how many different dimensions participants perceive in EHEA Competence Level scale. In order to test the consistency of data set into factor analysis, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test for sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity are applied. As a result of these analyses, KMO value is found to be over 0.50 with 0,963 and the tail probability of Bartlett test is also found to be significant, therefore indicating the conformity of data set with factor analysis. The results on the factor analysis of the scale are summarized as Table 3:

Table 3: Factor Structure of EHEA Competence Levels

Factor	Item	Factor Loads				Cronbach Alpha
		1	2	3	4	
EHEA Teaching Competence Levels(Input)	22	0,743				0,942
	23	0,733				
	24	0,705				
	19	0,674				
	26	0,667				
	25	0,659				
	27	0,644				
	20	0,563				
	18	0,557				
	21	0,553				
	29	0,549				
	30	0,532				
34	0,513					
EHEA Formation Competence Levels	15		0,769			0,927
	16		0,753			
	14		0,725			
	13		0,723			
	12		0,693			
	17		0,667			
	11		0,633			
	10		0,534			
EHEA Competence Levels of Transformation in Higher Education	4			0,771		0,873
	3			0,769		
	2			0,699		
	5			0,597		
	1			0,588		
	8			0,552		
	9			0,546		
	7			0,511		
EHEA Competence Levels of Internationalization (Output)	32				0,731	0,843
	33				0,639	
	31				0,636	
	28				0,610	
	6				0,594	
Eigen value		16,076	1,940	1,898	1,505	
Variance Explained %		19,719	16,537	13,631	13,112	
Total Variance %		62,999				

Notes: (i) Varimax Rotational Principle of Component Analysis (ii) KMO = 0, 963, Barlett Test = 37165,672; $p < .001$



The items are analyzed using basic components methods and Varimax rotation method. As a result of the factor analysis, it is determined that the scale of EHEA competence level involving 34 items is perceived in 4 dimensions. The factors are named respectively as EHEA Competence Levels of Teaching (Input) (13 items), EHEA Competence Levels of Formation (8 items), EHEA Competence Levels of Transformation in Higher Education (8 items) and EHEA Competence Levels of Internationalization (Output) (5 items). Total number of variance is defined as 62,999%. The contribution of EHEA Competence Levels of Teaching (Input) into this variance is 19,719%, the contribution of EHEA Competence Levels of Formation is 16,537%, the contribution of EHEA Competence Levels of Transformation in Higher Education is 13,631% and the contribution of EHEA Competence Levels of Internationalization (Output) is 13,122%.

When calculating the internal consistencies of factors, Cronbach Alpha coefficients are used. This coefficient is the consistency value of correlation between items. Cronbach Alpha values indicate the reliability levels of all items under the factors. As seen in the Table 3, Cronbach Alpha values indicate that all factors are perfectly reliable as they are above 70% in terms of 4 sub-dimensions of EHEA competence level scale.

Table 4: Participant Evaluations on EHEA Competence Levels of Teaching (Input)

EHEA Competence Levels of Teaching (Input)	Mean	SD
25- Implementation and relevance of three-cycle system (bachelor, master and doctoral programs)	2,95	1,12
27- Offering opportunities for individual learning	2,94	1,06
19- Teaching with student centered and learning centered methods	2,93	1,08
34- Foreign language levels of academic staff	2,90	1,02
26- Common degrees between universities (departments or faculties)	2,88	1,04
22- Relevance of courses in terms of national qualifications frameworks (European Credit Transfer System and modular system combined with elective courses)	2,87	1,09
23- Relevance of courses to international qualifications frameworks	2,87	1,06
24- Realism in European Credit Transfer System, individual studies and workload calculations	2,79	1,02
30- Quality assurance system	2,76	1,11
29- Accreditation	2,72	1,09
18- Curriculum in accordance with EHEA	2,69	1,03
20- Student participation in curriculum design and selection	2,63	1,12
21- External stakeholders' participation in curriculum design such as employers, non-governmental organizations and public	2,53	1,10

Notes: (i) n=1531, (ii) Scale refers to 1= Strongly Disagree and 5= Strongly Agree. (iii) According to Friedman two-way ANOVA test, $\chi^2=615,933$; $p<0,001$ these results are statistically significant.

When Table 4 is examined, it is seen that participants in this questionnaire stated "Implementation and relevance of three-cycle system (bachelor, master and doctoral programs)" as the most important expression and "External stakeholders' participation in curriculum design such as employers, non-governmental organizations and public" as the least important in EHEA Competence Levels of Teaching (Input). Besides, the Table 4 involves ranking of all expressions in terms of their significance level.

Table 5: Participant Evaluations on EHEA Competence Levels of Formation

EHEA Competence Levels of Formation	Mean	SD
12- Implementation of European Credit Transfer System	2,71	1,21
17- Integration of learning outcomes with programs	2,66	1,07
14- Comparable graduation system in conformity with European member countries	2,64	1,11
16- Learning outcomes in conformity with EHEA (modular system condition)	2,62	1,06
13- Diploma supplement written in foreign language (other than the transcript)	2,61	1,17
15- Program outcomes in conformity with EHEA (modular system condition)	2,60	1,08
10- Informing about EHEA implementations	2,48	1,17
11- Active participation into EHEA implementations	2,37	1,14

Notes: (i) n=1588, (ii) Scale refers to 1= Strongly Disagree and 5= Strongly Agree. (iii) According to Friedman two-way ANOVA test $\chi^2=303,924$; $p<0,001$ these results are statistically significant.

When Table 5 is examined, it is seen that participants in this questionnaire stated "Implementation of European Credit Transfer System" (ECTS) as the most important expression and "Active participation into



EHEA implementations” as the least important expression in EHEA Competence Levels of Formation. Besides, the table involves ranking of all expressions in terms of their significance level.

Table 6: Participant Evaluation of EHEA Competence Levels of Transformation in Higher Education

EHEA Competence Levels of Transformation in Higher Education	Mean	SD
2- Training skilled labour	3,27	0,97
4- Development of social responsibility (such as sensivity to the environment)	3,24	0,99
3- Contribution to social development	3,22	0,95
8- Student oriented	3,18	1,12
1- Scientific research	3,12	0,92
5- Cooperation with business, non-governmental organizations and public (external stakeholders)	3,12	1,02
9- Academic staff oriented	3,05	1,09
7- Competition with other universities on international level	2,79	1,13

Notes: (i) $n=1635$, (ii) Scale refers to 1= Strongly Disagree and 5= Strongly Agree. (iii) According to Friedman two-way ANOVA test $\chi^2=437,469$; $p<0,001$ these results are statistically significant.

When Table 6 is examined, it is seen that participants in this questionnaire stated “Training skilled labour” as the most important expression and “Competition with other universities on international level” as the least important expression in EHEA Competence Levels of Transformation in Higher Education. Besides, the table involves ranking of all expressions in terms of their significance level.

Table 7: EHEA Competence Levels of Internationalization (Outcome)

EHEA Competence Levels of Internationalization (Outcome)	Mean	SD
6- Cooperation with international universities especially in Europe	2,85	1,13
31- International student mobility (such as Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci)	2,77	1,13
32- International academic staff mobility	2,61	1,13
28- Distance learning	2,47	1,10
33- Foreign language levels of students	2,38	1,12

Notes: (i) $n=1608$, (ii) Scale refers to 1= Strongly Disagree and 5= Strongly Agree. (iii) According to Friedman two-way ANOVA test $\chi^2=392,209$; $p<0,001$ these results are statistically significant.

When Table 7 is examined, it is seen that the participants in the questionnaire stated “Cooperation with international universities especially in Europe” as the most important expression and “Foreign language levels of students” as the least important expression in EHEA Competence Levels of Internationalization (Output). Besides, the table involves ranking of all expressions in terms of their significance level.

4. Discussion & Conclusion

Participants find the EHEA teaching competence level (input) fairly enough in general sense. The most competent area in EHEA applications of universities is found to be the implementation and relevance of three-cycle system at universities. Results of this study coincide with the findings of Dalgıç (2008) which emphasizes this competence as the best successful implementation at universities. As a matter of fact, Turkey's implementation of the three-cycle system comes at the beginning of the best ways in 2012, 2015 and 2018 Bologna Process Implementation Reports (Eurydice, 2012; Eurydice, 2015; Eurydice, 2018). However, in a study on Russian academics, some technical arrangements of the Bologna Process are considered as positive improvements, while two-three cycle system is criticized negatively (Egorov & Sukhova, 2006). This idea is one of the main topics that the Bologna Process places emphasis in terms of the relevance of the bachelor, master and doctoral education periods and recognition of the degrees between countries.

The least competent area is found to be the participation of employers, non-governmental organizations and public into curriculum design. In fact, this issue is seen and criticized as a controversial field in relation to institutional autonomy and academic freedoms in European countries (Eurobarometer, 2007). However, Turkish higher education law drafts or reports, which have put the forward the structure of American universities as a new model for more than thirty years, have expressed this issue many times. As in the findings of this study, the suggestion of the participation of external stakeholders in curriculum and even in steering committees of universities has not received much positive feedback from the academia (Yükseköğretim Kurulu [YÖK], 2012).

When participants are asked about EHEA competence levels of formation, it is found that application levels of European Credit Transfer System is fairly competent in parallel to similar studies when compared to



other points. Implementation level of ECTS is seen as a supplementary issue of English courses in Akbuz (2009) study. Also it is one of the high scorecard indicators of Turkish universities in 2012, 2015 and 2018 Bologna Process Implementation Reports (Eurydice, 2012; Eurydice, 2015; Eurydice, 2018).

It is seen that the participants stated more positive opinions in terms of transformation in higher education competence levels when compared to other competence levels. The participants, stating more positive opinions about competence levels of providing qualified labour, expressed more negative opinions in terms of competition with other universities. According to similar studies emphasizing the importance of qualified graduates (Süngü, 2009), it can be stated that increasing the collaborative efforts and graduate tracking systems of universities is effective in reflecting a more positive opinion of the participants in this study.

It is also determined that participants found the mobility such as Erasmus and cooperation with international universities more competent in terms of EHEA competence levels of internationalization (outcome). This finding is also included in the study of Dalgıç (2008) and this issue is a main discussion subject to negative criticism as it is not sufficiently developed in EHEA.

The least competent issue on EHEA outcome competence level is determined by the participants as distance learning and foreign language levels of students. As in this study, Turkey is shown that there is not a national strategy on the use of new technologies in teaching and learning in higher education in reports of Bologna Process (Eurydice, 2018). In addition to this, foreign language is a difficult problem that Turkish universities and education system hasn't still solved (Coşkun Demirpolat, 2015; TEPAV, 2015).

In conclusion, EHEA implementation level of the university has been determined insufficient by the participants as it mentioned in the Bologna Process Implementation Reports for Turkish higher education system. In this sense, the expressions that the participants attach importance to their competence levels are in the top titles of the Bologna Process. However, it should not be forgotten that the competency/incompetency elements of EHEA and even the priorities of the process are frequently criticized in the literature. For example, the bureaucracy, which is composed of ECTS and quality assurance systems, is thought to uniformize, standardize and commercialize the learning and teaching process and also to cause the regression on academic freedom and institutional autonomy aspects (Appleton, 2009; Grove, 2012; Keim & Keim, 2010). Nevertheless, it is a dilemma that these comments are not considered more by Turkish academicians in the meaning of critical thinking.

This study has, of course, certain limitations. The competence levels in EHEA are reflected from the framework of academic staff in a university. In order to reach detailed results, more academic staff in different universities should be reached with quantitative and qualitative study methods. Most importantly, it is quite essential to include the opinions of other internal partners (such as students) and external partners in the comments on this issue.

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