

Chapter 7

Vocational Education in Turkey: Past and Present

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ABSTRACT

With the emergence of nation states in the 19th century, schools were transformed into platforms not only for building modern citizens, but also for gathering the manpower needed by various industries. Turkey was one of the countries where educational institutions were structured in accordance with the construction process of the nation state. Modern Turkey was founded after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1923, and education became instrumental in the process of reconstructing its society in a transforming world. In the early Republican period, reference was made to Europe in the main. From the 1950s onwards, however, it is possible to observe a shift in the educational center of reference towards the USA. This background to the historical process is critical for understanding the current form of vocational education in Turkey. In this chapter, the story of vocational education in the historical process is told, and the current state of formal secondary and post-secondary education institutions is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In the 19th century, the nation-state became the key political structure in transformations taking place around the world. Thus, a new era started in which the level of development of societies was correlated with their education systems. An indicator for the level of development was the percentage of qualified manpower. Therefore, in this period, schools were transformed into platforms not only for building modern citizens, but also for preparing the manpower needed by various industries. In this regard, vocational education became especially critical.

Turkey was one of the countries where educational institutions were structured in accordance with the nation-state construction process. Modern Turkey was founded after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1923, and education was instrumental in the process of reconstructing its society in a transforming world. In fact, Turkey's endeavor to be prepared for developments then emerging can be traced back to the Tanzimat (Reorganization) reform era which had started in 1839. In this period, which is also

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called the Ottoman Reform Period, many arrangements were made in imitation of European models, in particular the French and German educational systems, and new schools were opened.

In the 20th century, the goal of achieving development via rational production systems captivated Turkey alongside the USA and Europe (İnal, 2008, p. 13). For this purpose, more radical steps were taken to educate and train the human resources needed by the country. During this period, the educational system was transformed through a correlated trilogy of industry, development and education. In the early Republican period (1923-1946), the main reference was to Europe. After the 1950s, however, a shift in the educational center of reference towards the USA can be observed, especially in relation to educational policies and in new models for schools. This shift also shaped higher vocational education in Turkey. In that period, to a certain extent, Turkey adopted the American community college as a model. The Turkish government established its community college model, called Meslek Yüksek Okulu (Vocational/Technical Tertiary Education, or post-secondary vocational schools), with emphasis on vocational education, responding to the educational needs of workforce development and training for high school (secondary level) for graduates not going on to pursue a college education. Post-secondary vocational schooling lasts two years.

Even though post-secondary vocational schools are considered to play the role of community colleges in the Turkish education system, these schools have gained unique characteristics because of the political, educational, and socioeconomic context in Turkey (Wang & Seggie, 2013, p. 18-31). Therefore, there are both differences and similarities between post-secondary vocational schools in Turkey and community colleges in the USA.

First of all, whereas undergraduate study prevails in post-secondary vocational education in the USA; in Continental Europe, precedence is given to secondary education in the structuring of this area. In Turkey, however, although vocational schools at secondary education level are more common; to a certain extent, vocational education is also given at post-secondary level, as in the American example. The majority of students at post-secondary vocational schools are graduates of vocational high schools in Turkey. Which means that in higher education, the type of secondary education students graduate from is decisive. That is why the history of vocational education at secondary and post-secondary level is important for understanding the recent state of higher vocational education in Turkey today.

To summarize, vocational education is a mixture of international and national experience in Turkey. For that reason, this chapter deals with the issue of the continuity of vocational education in Turkey, from the period of the Ottoman Empire through the years of the Republic. It is also relevant to an understanding of both modern Turkey and the persistence of issues in education across changes in its political structure.

To be able to present the continuity between attempts to develop vocational education in the late period of the Ottoman Empire and in the Republican period, an historical analysis has been applied. Through this historical analysis, the story of vocational education in the historical process is told, and the current state of formal secondary and post-secondary vocational education institutions is discussed. The discussion here is based on a wide literature review of key policies, strategy documents and policy master documents provided by the state institutions in Turkey; on relevant projects and research related to the history and the current state of vocational education; along with descriptions of example institutions.

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