

Student-workers at the crossroad of neoliberal restructuring of higher education and labour markers in Turkey

Ph.D. Research Proposal

Introduction

The proposed research will explore the rising phenomenon of student-workers in higher education in Turkey, with a focus on its impact on their economic and socio-political subjectivity. Turkey is one of the rare cases where graduate unemployment was considerably higher than that of non-graduates until recently (Habibi, 2017; OECD, 2022a), yet higher education expansion continues on an unparalleled scale. Populist neoliberal policies promising upward mobility and regional development helped keep up the demand for higher education and its expansion. The concomitant high familial investment in higher education, lack of tuition policy in public universities (OECD, 2020), and increasing proximity enabling easier access (Polat, 2017) could be among the reasons explaining the relative novelty of the expansion of student employment in Turkey. However, the current cost of living crisis emanating from the spectacular rise in inflation rates has been leading to a rapid increase in the number of drop-outs and part-time/full-time workers among university students.

Universities and student activism have historically been significant drivers of change, sites of contestation and topics of academic and political debate in Turkey. However, the focus has so far been on the influence of political discourses and ideologies on subjectivity (Lüküslü, 2009; Lüküslü, 2016; Alemdaroğlu, 2022), rather than the material conditions under which young students live and/or work in the country. In contrast, the proposed study hypothesizes that the tension between the simultaneous expansion of paid work and higher education in Turkey has significant subjective implications overdetermining the economic and political landscape in the country. This hypothesis will be explored through a mixed qualitative methodology involving a) semi-structured interviews with student-workers studying and working in different contexts b) multi-sited ethnography aimed to understand this experience in relation to the larger context and related actors.

Literature Review

The phenomenon observed in Turkey has precedents unfolding differently in various geographies of higher education. In the UK, the steep increase in the number of student-workers was intensely studied in the 1990s, following the imposition of tuition fees, abolishing of public grants and the concomitant growth in the service industries demanding flexible and cheap labor power (Rikowski, 2000). In the USA, it was reported that 70% of college students worked to earn a living in the last 25 years, rendering it “the new normal” (Carnavale et al., 2015). More recent studies point to the rising component of international students in the labour market of several core capitalist countries (Ivancheva, 2007; Robertson, 2016). In Europe, on the other hand, the Humboldtian ideal of autonomy which led to the introduction of financial aid to prevent student-employment in post-WWII has scant remnants now, observable only in lack of tuition fees (Nugent, 2004; Hühter & Krücken, 2018). So, student employment came to be normalized in public and academic discourse, leading to the predominance of empiricist quantitative studies investigating the personal motivations for, the costs-benefits of “learning while earning” in different contexts (Beerens et al., 2011; Jach & Trolan, 2022; Roshchin & Rudakov, 2017) and inequalities in access to student employment opportunities (Jacob et al., 2020).

This privatization and personalization of access is accompanied by the growing evaluation of higher education based on its contribution to “employability” in the purportedly growing knowledge economy (Tomlinson, 2017a), while a growing mismatch and continuing stratification is noted in transition to labour markets (Brown & Heskestad, 2004). Turkey is one of the extreme cases in both regards since 42% of students study in two-year vocational higher education institutions (YÖK, 2022) and 45% of university graduates were either unemployed or

underemployed in 2014 (Habibi, 2017). This mismatch and the massive disillusionment sometimes have casualties, with graduates working in non-graduate jobs committing suicide or dying in occupational accidents, drawing significant public attention. The current expansion of term-time and seasonal employment in non-graduate jobs could be approached through the prism of this mismatch, pointing to the possibly contradictory affects structuring student-worker experiences. Student employment could have been regarded as a sacrifice to be paid for future upward mobility for previous generations; however, the recently growing un(der)employment rates among graduates seem to be undermining this sacrificial promise, raising the need for revisiting student employment for its impact on subjectivity.

In addition, the literature currently has scant empirical research about the different position of higher education in relation to labour markets and the state in emerging economies with more populist and/or authoritarian appropriations of neoliberal restructuring. Turkey is one of the interesting cases of uneven application of neoliberal policies (Brenner et al., 2010) since social spending by the state actually increased during neoliberal years (Yörük, 2022) and state intervention is pivotal for marketization. The simultaneous expansion of public and private higher education have two dimensions: a) the populist promises of upward mobility, which has been accompanied by the promotion of consumerism and expansion of household credits; and b) regional development plans which aimed to invigorate the service industries as the main drivers of growth (Boratav, 2015) and consolidate the political allegiance of these regions to the ruling party (Habibi, 2017). However, the current crisis of cost of living emanates from the crisis of this growth pattern, leading to more interventionist policies trying to decrease domestic demand while mobilizing a sort of “economic nationalism” (Bekmen & Özden, 2022; Madra & Erensü, 2022). As a result, Turkey currently has the highest inflation rates on food and housing among OECD countries (OECD, 2022), which affects students’ livelihood gravely and causes them to join the much sought after cheap labour force.

Research context and questions

Neoliberal policies could be applied in Turkey following the coup d’état in 1980, after which Higher Education Council (YÖK) was founded to centralize the decision mechanisms at universities. The first non-profit foundation universities and many public ones were founded in different periods during 1990s and 2000s, and by 2008, every city had a university. The impacts of this expansion and authoritarian restructuring on the quality of academic work and job security of academic labourers were explored in detail (Gezici Yalçın & Vatansever, 2015; Duran & Dönmez, 2020; Özdemir et al., 2019), while their implications for student experience await exploration. Universities were a site of anti-tuition fee activism in 1990s which yielded the result of abolishing of fees in public universities in 2011 (Fırat & Emiroğlu, 2014). However, the purportedly “non-profit” foundation universities, which actually make profit through indirect means such as renting foundation buildings and subcontracting work for unreasonable amounts (Gezici Yalçın & Vatansever, 2015), expanded faster overall and more recently. Also, although access to higher education increased via proximity, academic segregation continues due to the lower quality of the majority of institutions and a shadow education system based on private tutoring accompanies its state provisioning (OECD, 2020). Finally, the state provides bursaries and loans to cover cost of living expenses partially; however, their inadequacy undermines student mobility within the country and sometimes families even prefer to use credits or savings so that their children can study at foundation universities, instead of going to another city to study. The post-Covid 19 cost of living crisis in Turkey seems to render familial support inadequate, leading to a rapid push of students into the labour market, so more students work and do so at an earlier stage of their studies.

The predominant focus of the current literature in youth studies in Turkey is the impact of ideologies on political subjectivity of young people in education. The discourses and ideologies addressing them (Lüküslü, 2016) as well as their new conception of politics and political orientations (Lüküslü, 2009; Alemdaroğlu, 2022) are among some of the recurring themes. This focus is understandable due to the political missions attributed to the youth since the foundation of the Republic; however, it could also be held accountable for the lack of scholarship on student employment in higher education in Turkey. When political subjectivity is reduced to ideological

struggles, the literature ends up establishing a weak or no connection between the precarization of white-collar workers, higher unemployment rates among university graduates, decrease in quality education and the “new social movements” of young people, which drew the attention of scholars following the Gezi uprising in 2013 (Gümüş & Yılmaz, 2015).

The proposed research will aim for amelioration in that regard, drawing on the significant amount of qualitative scholarship on the higher education and labour market experiences of young people. The various aspects of higher education experience such as class differences (Bathmaker et al., 2016), emotional aspects of student mobility (Finn, 2017) or labour market transitions (Finnegan et al., 2019) continue to be subject of qualitative research with a focus on affects and subjectivity. In addition, a significant amount of scholarship explores graduate unemployment, underemployment and precarity in Turkey with a consideration of their subjective dimensions (Bora, 2011; Özkaplan et al., 2017, Yücesan Özdemir, 2014; Erdoğan, 2021). I contributed to this literature with my master’s dissertation which investigated the working conditions and political organization of freelancers in Istanbul, which was translated into and published in Turkish, leading to significant public attention and discussion (İlyas, 2022).

In my Ph.D. research, I aim to further contribute to this literature on ways of navigating one’s life through existing or impending forms of precarity and their impact on the economic and socio-political subjectivity of young people. The following set of questions will guide the research:

- 1) *Perceptions of higher education*: How can we explain the continuing demand for higher education despite the growing tension between the expansion of higher education and non-graduate job market in Turkey? How do the concomitant experiences of student employment affect perceptions of higher education?
- 2) *Navigating and perception of paid work*: Under which conditions do students work, manage the demands on their labour and attention, as well as their expenses? How do they narrate and justify their need for employment? What is the role and meaning of work in their lives? Does this meaning change depending on the kind of work? Does earlier entrance to the job market have an impact on their perception of it?
- 3) *Socio-political subjectivity*: a) *household relations*: How are the students’ social and familial relations affected by their employment? Is there a change in the familial discourse on higher education, given the long-held investment of families in it based on a sacrificial promise? b) *social relations*: How do students relate to the different contexts they inhabit and the colleagues and classmates they meet in time? c) *orientation to future*: Does student employment have an impact on students’ future plans and aspirations? Is there a concomitant change in the conception of and meaning attributed to being a student, or being “young”? d) *political*: What is the political framework they speak from to explain reasons for student employment? Does student employment affect political participation? Does it promote or undermine it? Or, does it lead to changes in the content of their political agenda?

Theoretical orientation

The research hereby employs a political economy perspective to accentuate the expansion of labour force participation to higher education students during a period in which graduate employment prospects decline (Tomlinson, 2017a; Habibi, 2017). I argue that we need to go beyond criticizing the ideologically reproductive function of education in relation to class inequalities (Giroux, 1983) and apply class analysis to this aspect of higher education transformation. As larger segments of the population previously supported by socially produced surplus enter the labour force (such as students, children or the retired), what we witness is a change in class relations as well as conditions of social reproduction. Feminists have long pointed to the “integrated” relation between social reproduction and production of capitalist commodities, and have recently expanded their analysis beyond the sphere of household to include health, education, public transportation and care (Bhattacharya, 2017). They hence criticize the undermining of public goods through marketization and connect struggles against privatizations with class struggles, a critique which could inform the analysis of education as a site of class conflict as well (Backer & Cairns, 2021).

The proposed study aims to provide a map of the student-employment in the emerging economy of Turkey while pointing to its subjective hold and consequences at the same time. For the first aim, a non-essentialist class theory that could take into account non-class processes structuring class experience is currently preferred (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Resnick and Wolff, 2006). Both the heterogeneity of the different sites student-workers inhabit in time and the hybrid position they occupy in these sites could hence be laid out without lapsing into economic determinism. In addition, the importance of political processes in the restructuring of higher education in Turkey also demands a class theory that could accommodate the role of non-economic processes in neoliberalization. In more liberal market economies, the marketization of higher education was analyzed within the context of rising concerns regarding “employability”, student consumerism (Tomlinson, 2014b) and growing indebtedness (Newfield, 2021). In comparison, emerging economies often undergo such marketization processes through growing state intervention, rather than its withdrawal on a large scale (Ong, 2006). In the case of Turkey, populist policies promoting upward mobility and regional development by invigorating service industries led to the opening up of a public university in every city, while authoritarian interventions to higher education institutions try to destroy critical scholarship and student movements, opening up the way for easier labour market-university partnerships. For instance, more recently students participating in protests against these interventions were punished by the withholding of their loans and scholarship by the state, leaving them no other chance than to work to study. So, political repression together with the cost of crisis contributes to the further expansion of low-paid, non-graduate paid work to university students.

As the current generations’ graduate employment prospects decline, it is crucial to revisit the impact of student employment in relation to economic and socio-political subjectivity as well. Do students learn to labour and accept the labour market conditions (Willis, 1978), or do they develop forms of resistance to it (Shukaitis, 2014)? Or, going beyond this binary, does student employment promote other affects or states, such as feelings of autonomy and independence, excitement, resentment, depression, aggression or fatigue, each with its ethico-political implications (Copjec, 2002)? Is there a resulting or potential change in student activism, relation to workplaces or higher education? These questions are inspired by the well-established Thompsonian tradition of studying working-class culture from below, while also informed by more recent studies taking affects into account in the shaping of experiences of precarity (Berlant, 2011).

Methodology, Fieldwork and Access

The research proposed aims to combine semi-structured in-depth interviews focusing on the life histories of students with ethnographic research to understand the larger context in which student-workers are embedded. In this way, the interaction between different discourses, attitudes and material conditions shaping student employment experience can be explored. The integrated assessment of the economic and political subjectivity of student-workers via interviews will be supplanted by multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in different higher education and industry contexts, involving the sporadic observation and semi-formal individual and group interviewing of other actors such as the academic staff, colleagues, class-mates, employers, and families as well.

As for the first set of research questions on higher education perception, a multi-sited fieldwork is needed to see the impact of regional differences in development and the academic segregation mentioned above. Three different kinds of urban contexts are planned to be visited to that end: 1) a metropolitan city such as Istanbul, which has the highest cost of living and number of public and private universities, 2) a non-metropolitan city such as Eskişehir, on which student majority population has long had a significant economic and cultural impact, 3) one of the Anatolian cities in which a university was founded for the first time in the mid 2000s expansion period. While private universities expanded more in metropolitan cities, public universities expanded in Anatolia, promising upward mobility and development to different regions. The changing relation to this promise hence requires a comparative analysis of the different geographies of higher education.

As for the second question on economic subjectivity, a survey of the different industries in which students work is needed: 1) part-time jobs in the service industries (retail and entertainment)

2) seasonal manual jobs in construction or agriculture industries and 3) part-time or full-time jobs in information-based industries (freelancing, start-ups or corporate jobs). The fieldwork will aim to explore student workers' conditions in these different industries to see if the kind of work done leads to differences in one's approach to labour markets. Istanbul is home to student employment in all the industries mentioned here, while other cities to be visited will be finally determined in time, based on the data collected in Istanbul.

In exploring the socio-political implications of student-employment in these different contexts, grounded theory's method that caters to theory construction will be of guidance. Its constructionist rethinking defended reflexivity with regard to one's theoretical preconceptions and criticized the possibility of value-neutral collection of data (Charmaz et. al, 2018). In line with this dialectical conception of fieldwork, I plan to conduct a pilot research involving semi-structured interviews with student-workers in service and knowledge industries in Istanbul. The aim of this pilot research will be to further clarify the research and interview questions, and draft a preliminary set of concepts, which will also be of great guidance during the ethnographic research.

I am currently embedded in a private non-profit higher education context as a language instructor, which enables me to have covert observations. For overt observations and interviews, I will seek to access to different higher education contexts via my current professional network. In addition, my network with different grassroot organizations, unions and student organizations will also hopefully provide access to the various contexts in which students work and study.

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