

Does Higher Education Change Value Perceptions?

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Received : 2018-06-10

Accepted : 2018-06-18

How to cite this paper: Yigit, M.F. (2018). Does higher education change value perceptions? *Journal of Culture and Values in Education*, 1(1), 1-8.

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to look at whether higher education has an effect on value perceptions of students. In particular, the researcher will examine the role of 'foundation' or 'private' universities on the priorities of value perceptions.

Keywords: Value perceptions, Higher Education, Foundation Universities

Introduction

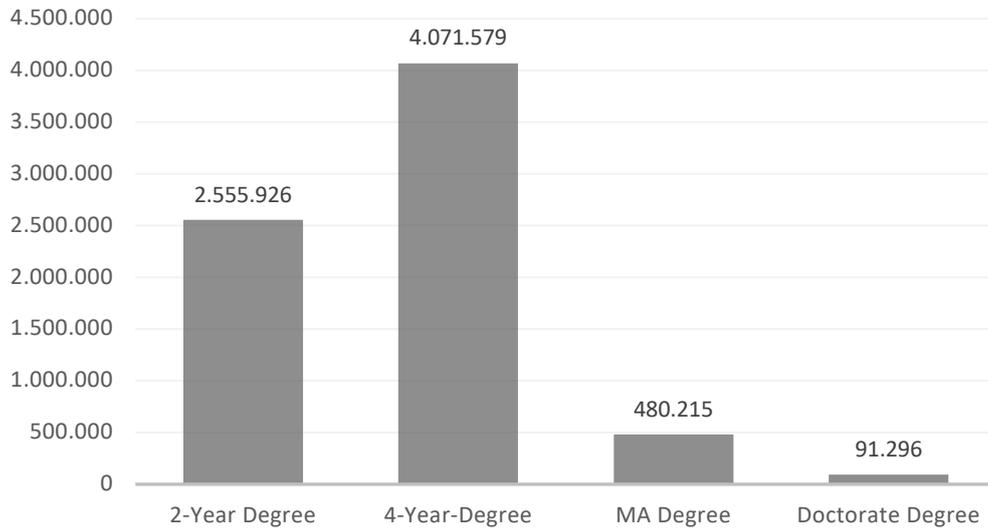
In Turkey, the state is responsible for the higher education. The Higher Education Council (YOK) is the department in charge of running higher education with universities and the Measuring, Selection and Placement Center (OSYM) is responsible for organizing the university entrance examination that all students are required to take before entering a university (YOK, 1981).

In Europe, the student population, like the young population, tends to decline in general (Alves, 2011). However the situation in Turkey is quite different compared to almost all European countries. The number of students taking university entrance exam in Turkey has increased dramatically since 1980. The data from OSYM (2010; 2016) show that in 1980, the number of students participating in the university entrance exam were 466.963 while it increased to 2.256.422 in 2016. As a result, the number of students studying at universities increased. In 2008, the number of students in universities was recorded as 2.532.22 while it increased to 4.071.579 in 2017 (Table 1). The increase in the number of students is mostly the result of increased number of universities in Turkey starting from 2006. As of the year 2011, the number of universities, including foundation and state institutions, was 165 that means each province has at least one university established by the state or foundations (Günay & Günay, 2011). In Turkey, the number of universities has increased more than 100% during the last ten years and also the number of students who want to get a university degree has increased dramatically.

The current trend in Turkey, for higher education institutions, is to attract more students by providing different types of scholarships especially for those who get good results from central university entrance exam. While this situation seems to be positive for those target students, it can be criticized in the way that the quality of those institutions decreases and the focus turns to be on quantity. On the other hand, some researchers claim that focusing on satisfying the needs of those students economically is not enough in today's world. They should also focus

on increasing the quality and respecting the perceived value of the students (Gounaris, Tzempelikos, & Chatzipanagiotou, 2007). International tests, like PISA, also aims at measuring quality of education (Lingard & Sellar, 2013).

Table 1: Numbe of Students Per Degree Type



Source: OSYM (2016).

Higher education is an important step for the students graduated from high schools. Especially in Turkey, it is where most of the students decide what to do and to be in future. It shapes the life of both students and their families. It is also an important step for the students to gain new perspectives and confirm or deny their value perceptions they have developed and gained until then. It is the reason that this research focus on the effect of higher education institutions on value perceptions, if there is any.

Higher education institutions have important roles on instilling values and shaping the character of students. However, research shows that schools usually fail to teach norms of ethical behaviors (Bennis & O’Toole, 2005). Higher education institutions fail especially while teaching the social responsibility values to students (Chapleo, Carrillo Durán, & Castillo Díaz, 2011). One of the reasons of this failure might be the mentality behind the management of higher education institutions. There is no doubt that the majority of those institutions approach the students as customers who should be satisfied from the service he/she receives (Eagle & Brennan, 2007). On the other hand, there are scholars who have criticized the conception of higher education institutions as a business and stated that students’ needs and expectations should come first not the organizational management of those places (Oldfield & Baron, 2000). How students’ needs and expectations are satisfied is a complex issue that is not easy to handle. While students expect high quality lectures from their professors (Hill, Lomas, & MacGregor, 2003), they also expect them to act as role models to shape their daily life (Moosmayer & Bode, 2010).

In literature, values are defined as conceptions that influence the decisions of individuals. They are regarded as stable over time (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987). However, this does not mean that

values do not change after they are established or gained. Values are more stable for uneducated or less educated people compared to the ones who have higher level of education (Peffley, Knigge, & Hurwitz, 2001). Value perceptions of individuals might change and this transformation results in behavioral changes. In other words, values motivate behaviors (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003). Literature on values shows that during higher education years, university education and policy of those institutions shape value perceptions of students (Inkeles & Smith, 1974). Some scholars have stated that as individuals gain more information, their value perceptions change depending on the nature of the knowledge they have (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004).

The self-enhancement values, such as power and achievement are known as economically oriented while self-transcendence values like universalism and benevolence are discussed to be socially oriented (Moosmayer, 2012). The economic environment of university students might not change easily from the first year to the last year of their study. However, the social environment of those students change since majority of the university students do not continue living with their family and start to live with their peers. Based on this two reality, the researcher assumes that the more university students stay at the university, the more self-transcendence values they prioritize and the less they prioritize self-enhancement values.

Self-transcendence values include universalism and benevolence while self-enhancement values are hedonism, achievement, and power. Each value is defined below (Schwartz, 2012).

- Universalism is “understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature” (p.7)
- Benevolence is “preserving and enhancing the welfare of those with whom one is in frequent personal contact” (p.7)
- Hedonism is “pleasure or sensuous gratification for oneself” (p.5)
- Achievement is “personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards” (p.5)
- Power is “social status and prestige, control or dominance over people and resources.” (p.5)

There is debate about whether higher education institutions should teach without imposing any values on students or not. While Weber talks about academic value of value freedom (Moosmayer & Siems, 2012), other scholars talked about the importance of teaching values in academy (Bennis & O’Toole, 2005). In today’s world, there are numerous factors affecting value perceptions of individuals, like family environments, friendships, social media, news, and so on (Yigit, 2016). However, the importance of Higher Education institutions comes from their being more scientific institutions compared to other factors that might result in changing value patterns using critical thinking skills and usually those are the individuals who rule their societies. In this sense, it is important to know whether higher education institutions have any effect on value perceptions of students. This study is important also for comparative and international education since there is no literature on this topic in Turkey. The results of the research will help researchers who want to study the effects of universities on value perceptions internationally by also taking the Turkish case into account.

Data and Method

The data for the study comes from a foundation university located in Istanbul, Turkey. In Turkey, there are state and foundation universities. The state universities are governed and funded by the state itself, while foundation universities are controlled by the state (YOK) but governed and funded by the foundation of the university established as a non-profit organization. In other words, the foundation universities do not aim making money from the students. However, while the students in state universities do not pay tuition fee, majority of the students in foundation universities are usually paying large sums of money if they do not have scholarships.

Quantitative method is adopted for the research. The researcher used the Schwartz's value survey (Schwartz, 1992) to collect the data from a foundation (private) university in Turkey. The data comes from first year students of 2010 and fourth year students of 2014. In other words, the data was collected from the same group of students in order to measure the difference in their value perceptions, if there was any. The 230 (115 for the first-year students and 115 for the fourth-year students) completed survey forms included 136 students from Faculty of Humanities and Social Science and 94 students from Faculty of Business Administration. In addition, 58,7% of the participants were female while 41,3% were male.

Results

One of the findings of the study is that students have less desire to have control over others when they come to the last year of university education. We found a significant difference between pretest and posttest scores. ($p < .001$). The crosstabulation tells us that while 82.2% of for first-year university students state authority as extremely important, it decreases to 17.8% when they come to the last year of university education. The level of desire to control others and command was recorded to be higher among first-year students compared to the last year university students. This result tells us that the university graduates loses their aspiration towards being a leader. The reasons of this findings are the subject of further studies and it should be analyzed in depth to find out what influence other factors have on this change.

The results for universalism value show that there is a significant difference between pretest and posttest results ($p < .001$). While 57.7% of the first-year students stated universalism as extremely important, it decreased to 42.3% when the students came to the last year of university.

The analysis show that the importance of benevolence for university students decreases over time as they approach to the last year of university education. The result is statistically significant ($p < .001$). While 61% of the first year students state benevolence as extremely important, it decreases to 39% for the same students at the last year of university education.

The results do not show a significant difference for hedonism ($p > .010$). The importance of pleasure or sensuous gratification for the participants do not seem to be very different when we compare the scores in pre-test and post-test.

The data show that the level of desire for achievement decreases over time for university students. While 60.6% of participants stated that they want to be successful in their life and achieve what they want, only 39.4% continue thinking the same way at the end of university education. The finding is also statistically significant ($p < .001$).

Discussion

First-year students are usually enthusiastic and have goals and aspirations about certain things. They are usually active in social life in Turkish context. They do want to satisfy their desires since university is an environment for majority of them where they feel themselves free in terms of parents' and friends' pressure. However, the results of this study tell us that the level of this desire decreases as they approach to graduation. There might be several reasons of this finding, including the pressure to find a job after graduation or having already satisfied their desires. This might be the subject of further studies, too.

One of the most important finding of this study is that last year students care for the stability of society less compared to their first year. This is an important finding because university education is expected to have graduates who care for the social stability of the society instead of the social uneasiness. However, for the reasons that are not the subject of this study, it seems that the university education do not work to meet this expectation for the students participated in this study. A more comprehensive study can be conducted in order to find out whether this is the case in all universities and if so, what influence other factors have on this result.

Freedom of action and thought is important in democratic societies. We cannot mention democracy without those characteristic features of democratic individuals. Educational institutions are the places where freedom of action and thought are taught to be important in having a democratic society (Facer & Selwyn, 2013). However, the results of this study tells us that students loses their aspirations for freedom of action and thought. This might result in accepting and doing what is being told as it is without questioning whether it is right or not. This would create new generations who do not think critically and act accordingly that is not desired in democratic nations. Further studies should be conducted in order to find out whether this is the case for the majority of the university students. The result of such a study would help policy makers to reform those institutions accordingly to make sure that those institutions are the places where the core features of being a democratic citizen are taught with the way that it should be.

Turkish society is known to be highly nationalist when it comes to protecting their lands and flag against the 'enemies' though the term is so vague and might change from person to person. The study finds that it is true for the first-year university students. More than 85% of the participants state that national security is extremely important for them. However, after getting

three years of university education, they seem to change their mind about the level of importance of national security. The rate of extremely important decreases to 52% for the last-year students. This might be the reason of gaining a global perspective in their courses since the curriculum is mostly western-based that helps students to have a more comprehensive way of thinking about global and national issues. It might be also the reason of changing concept of 'enemy' for the university students since 'enemies' might be more for less educated persons compared to highly educated ones. A more in-depth analysis adopting a qualitative approach would help us to explain the issue in the Turkish context.

An important function of higher education should be helping students to imagine. New ideas and critical thinking starts with imagination. However, the result of the study tells us that only 25% of the fourth-year students state imagination to be extremely important while this rate was 53% in their first-year of study. At this point comes the question whether education kills creativity or not. It is the matter of another study and a more comprehensive and generalizable study would help us to learn whether this is the case for the majority of students and what factors are there affecting the level of imagination to get higher or lower. However, for the present study, we can only claim that the participants care creativity and imagination less when they come to the last year of their study.

Among the most interesting finding of the study is that last year students care for the weak and correcting injustice less compared to their first-year of study. It is a dramatic change that they do not want to correct the injustice as much as they aspired in their first year of study. In a democratic society, citizens are important figures to force the governments to correct the problems and injustice. It is in democratic nations where people would ask for democratic way of life. Turkey is a democratic country governed by rule of law. However, governments sometimes may give unlawful decisions and create an atmosphere of injustice if governed by a small elite group that have the power in all areas. In those specific cases, the existence of critically thinking and questioning citizens should force the government to give the right decisions. However, the result of this study tells us that half of the last-year university students prefer to be neutral when it comes to have a voice in establishing social justice. The rate of students who stated it to be extremely important was recorded to be 82% in their first-year study but this rate decreased to 44% for the last-year students. Further studies should be conducted in order to find out the reasons and other factors having influence on this finding.

The results are limited to the 115 students participated in the study. In order to have a more generalizable and comprehensive analysis, large number of students from other universities should also be studied. That way we could have a more convincing claiming about whether university education have negative or positive effects on the change of certain values. However, for the current study we can claim that university education is changing the level of value perceptions of students mostly in negative ways.

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