

# Examining the Branding of Turkish Universities in the Context of Socio-economic Development of Their Cities

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the branding processes of universities in Turkey with the consideration of the context of cities where the universities are located. This research is conducted to respond to this question: How is the branding process of Turkish universities in the context of the branding of their cities? Data constructed in accordance with qualitative approach were collected through document analysis technique. The study is structured based on a descriptive method. In the study, universities' branding process is assessed based on the related literature, the ratio of being chosen, base points for entry, and the number of students, faculty staff and faculties. According to the result of the study, the branding processes of Turkish universities are overshadowed by the branding of their cities. In addition, factors, including universities' faculty sources, the number of students and base point for entry, which are considered to be important for the branding of universities, are differentiated depending on the context of the cities.

**Keywords:** University, Branding, Branding of universities, Socio-economic development, City brand

## 1. Introduction

In 21st century where knowledge-based economic order and intense competition is dominant, firms have been in search for diversifying their products and services from their rivals in order to survive. This search has brought firms face to face with branding competitions. The concept of "brand" may refer to different meanings for firms as each firm serves in different ways. Brand, from customers' perspective, is seen as a factor facilitating the selection of a product, signifying a certain level of quality, decreasing product risks and increasing sense of trust (Keller and Lehmann, 2004). Brand is a combination of abstract and concrete elements that differentiate firms and products, manifest differences among them, influence the way consumers perceive firms and products (Kavak and Karabacakoglu, 2007). In Delegated Legislation regarding Protection of Brands numbered 556, the concept of brand is defined as "including names for people, any type of sign that can be displayed through words, shapes, letters, numbers, the shape or package of goods provided that an enterprise's goods and products are discerned from another enterprise's goods and products."

Branding, which refers to high rates of market share, sales and profit (Ayvaz, 2005), plays a significant role in determining the efficiency of firms' market activities. Viewed from this perspective, it is possible to note that brand serves as a financial source of existence for firms (Keller and Lehmann, 2004). It is also known that brand has various functions such as differentiating a certain product from others, increasing competition among firms, working as an advertisement and publicity tool and constituting an element of quality (Ak, 2009). In addition to brand's benefits in terms of producer and product, various other benefits for consumers like providing an assurance for quality, defining products' features, providing guarantee for the product, continuation of this process following the purchase of a product and maintaining the demand for the product are also stated (Ak, 2009; Türk, 2004).

Universities have been seeking a substantial position to draw attention from students, academic personnel, and financial sources by emphasizing their differences from other universities (Waeraas and Solbakk, 2009). Effective realization of roles expected from universities has brought a concern for branding in today's world where internationalization and competition have become a prominent factor. Research on educational branding has yielded its initial results through universities (Arenson, 2004; Chapleo, 2003). The branding, from an educational standpoint,

is considered with the academic reputation of the institution and for an educational institution to become a valuable brand, its mission and fundamental values should be clearly defined (Popescu, 2012). Branding from the perspectives of universities refers to differences a university owns compared to other universities and is viewed as a factor increasing students' interest in universities (Bennett and Ali-Chouldry, 2007). According to Black (2008), the branding of higher education institution is highly related to the people, is not constrained with a product or is not a service provided in the market. The intensification of national and international competition in higher education has led some universities to allocate ample budgets for branding activities (Chapleo, 2010). In addition to the idea that the universities which have a good brand attract more qualified students (Sevier, 2007), strong feelings and a unique communicative identity formed through branding (Bulotaite, 2003) encourage universities to embark on important initiatives towards branding. Likewise, since image and reputation are seen as more important factors than teaching quality for some universities (Mazzarol, 1998), this necessitates governance of universities as corporate brands (Whelan & Wohlfeil, 2006).

A university's brand is seen as an expression of features that differentiate a given university from others, of sense of trust indicating that higher education service is rendered at a certain level, of students' capacity for satisfaction and of helping potential candidates make wise decisions during registration process (Bennett and Ali-Choudhury, 2007). According to Lamboy (2011), the branding of higher education institutions represents the power that refrain prospect students from selecting other universities in the process of university selection. The branding strategies affect the process of registrations, institutional identity, and marketing strategies. Nardali and Tanyeli (2011) stressed that the main need of universities for branding is to draw attention from students, parents, and business sector. As emphasized by Abbas (2014), if universities need to differentiate themselves from others, they need effective marketing and branding management strategies. Popescu (2012), who consider branding as the guarantee for high quality, asserted that the strong university brands promote internationalization of universities. Doyle (2001) emphasizes that a successful brand has three main characteristics; effective products, a distinguishing identity, and added value. Considered from this perspective, brand universities might bring in added value to its graduates in their work life and help them become more employable as opposed to graduates of other universities.

In today's society, universities have been in a continuous competition in terms of their sources, rankings, reputation, students and academic staff (Kizilbash, 2000). Sevier (2007)'s contention that a good university brand would attract more qualified students gives rise to the thought that universities whose base points are high has a long way towards becoming a brand university. Similarly, in studies on branding in higher education, it is emphasized that brand universities have strong faculty staff and that students have higher level of interest towards university (Bennett and Ali-Chouldry, 2007; Bhyani, 2010). In addition, important components of branding such as sources for academic staff (Black, 2008), the reputation of the universities (Keling, Krishnan & Nurtjahja, 2007; Popescu, 2012), educational and other facilities on campus (Absher & Crawford, 1996; Hossler & Gallagher, 1990; Nardali and Tanyeri, 2011), employment opportunities (Băcilă, 2008; Tekelioğlu, Başer, Örtlek & Aydınli, 2012; Yıldız, 2014), and financial assistance offered by university (Yusof, Ahmad, Tajudin & Ravindran, 2008) have an effect on students' university preferences. Within this context, the current study attempts to assess universities branding processes through the evaluation of base points for student entrance in the university, the number of faculty staff and capacity of scientific research (based on URAP ranking list) and these parameters have been discussed by taking into consideration the socio-economic development of city where the university is located.

### *1.1 Turkish Higher Education System*

Considering the development process of higher education in Turkey, it is seen that there has been an increasing social demand in higher education since the 1960s. Various development strategies have been adopted to address such demand. However, a substantial proportion of these strategies were carried out starting from 1980s (Özoğlu, Gür & Gümüş, 2015). The most obvious development step was taken in 2005 with the government's policy of "a university in each city".

There has been a significant quantitative development in Turkish higher education since the government's decision to establish a university in each city. From 2006 to 2011, a total of 88 new universities, including 50 state and 38 foundation universities were established as a result of that policy. These numbers correspond to an about 115% increase in the number of higher education institutions only after 2006 (Günay&Günay, 2011). By 2015, there were 175 universities in Turkey. 114 of these universities were state and 61 were foundation universities. By 2016, higher education institutions have a total of 3,900,601 students and 146,124 instructors (YÖK, 2016).

Universities in Turkey provide various alternatives in order to attract the attention of students, families, and faculty staff. However, these opportunities seem to fall behind the brand of the city in which the universities are located. As

emphasized by Bhayani (2010), based on a university's established historical development, among the features that make a university attractive, the profile of graduates, campus location, natural beauties, historical buildings, art centers, internationally renowned faculty, and researchers and public opinion are the most important ones. When these factors are analyzed in Turkey's context, belief that these services could be better provided in metropolises which has a lot of opportunities seems to have brought universities in small cities to a disadvantageous position in terms of competition.

## 2. Method

This study is an attempt to assess Turkish universities' branding process through base points of universities, the number of faculty and students, their rank in international universities' list and their general scores. To achieve this purpose, the study is structured as a descriptive qualitative design. The descriptive design is to describe a phenomenon as its current and old forms (Karasar, 2012). In this way, it is intended to define the structures and operations of objects, communities and institutions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

## 3. Population and Sample

The sample group of the study was comprised of 114 state universities located in Turkey. 14 universities were selected through using criterion-based sampling technique. The following criteria were considered for the selection of universities and cities:

- For cities: Being at the top and lowest position of a geographical region in 2013 Turkey Socio-Economic Development List.
- For universities: Being a university located in a city selected from geographical regions (In cases where there is more than one university in a city, the university that was established first was included in the study).
- For departments: Being a department that has the highest acceptance score in Faculty of Education, Faculty of Science and Letters, Faculty of Administrative Sciences and Engineering in the year 2014-2015.

## 4. Data Collection and Analysis

The data of the study was collected through document analysis technique of qualitative research. University entrance base points were obtained from "The Base Points for Universities that Admit Students through Centralized Admission" revealed by ÖSYM in 2015 (ÖSYM, 2015). The numbers of students and faculty staff were taken from "Higher Education Statistics" revealed by Higher Education Council in the 2014-2015 academic year (YÖK, 2015). Finally, the data for universities' international ranking, based on their scientific publication performance, was acquired from "URAP 2014 World Raking." As for "Universities General Raking", that data was gained from "2014-2015 The General Point Table of All Universities" (URAP, 2014). Finally, the socio-economic development rankings that were used for all sub problems, such as socio-economic, demographic, employment, education, health, competition and innovation capacity, economic, accessibility, and life quality indicators were obtained from The Ministry of Development (The Ministry of Development, 2013). In order to analyze the data, universities' base points, the number of students and faculty staff, and international raking were compared according to the economic development raking of the cities in which the universities are located. This provided us with the information of how the economic development of the city in which university is located has associated with branding of the university.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Findings and Interpretation Regarding Base Points of Faculties within the Context of Cities' Socio-Economic Development

In line with the first sub problem of the study, universities' branding process was analyzed through the evaluation of base points of faculties and the socio-economic development of cities in which universities are located. Table 1 presents cities that are at the bottom and top of the list in terms of socio-economic development ranking based on geographical regions and base points in various departments gathered from 2015-2016 YGS central exams in these universities and cities.

Table 1. Turkey's SEGE ranking and the universities' base points in 2015-2016 year

Region	City	2013 SEGE Ranking	University	Faculty	2015-2016 YGS Base Points
Mediterranean	Antalya	5	Akdeniz University	Faculty of Science and Letters	396,48 (Psychology)
				Faculty of Education	401,34 (Turkish Education)
				Faculty of Administrative Sciences	330,33 (International Relations)
				Faculty of Engineering	360,72 (Civil Engineering)
				Faculty of Medicine	472,54
	K. Maraş	60	S ü t ç ü İmam University	Faculty of Science and Letters	337,47 (Geography)
				Faculty of Education	336,19 (Primary School Teaching)
				Faculty of Administrative Sciences	290,41 (Health Management)
				Faculty of Engineering	302,58 (Civil Engineering)
				Faculty of Medicine	448,01
East Anatolia	Elazığ	39	Fırat University	Faculty of Science	225,21 (Maths)
				Faculty of Education	384, 61 (Turkish Education)
				Faculty of Administrative Sciences	282,70 (Politics and Public Management)
				Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	339,25 (Geography)
				Faculty of Engineering	321,78 (Civil Engineering)
	Muş	81	Muş Alparslan University	Faculty of Engineering	444,93
				Faculty of Medicine	-
				Faculty of Science and Letters	323,83 (Literature)
				Faculty of Education	373,34 (Turkish Education)
				Faculty of Administrative Sciences	257,28 (Politics and Public Management)
Aegean	İzmir	3	Ege University	Faculty of Engineering	234,21 (Computer Engineering)
				Faculty of Medicine	-
				Faculty of Science	316.83 (Bio-chemistry)
				Faculty of Education	420,92 (Turkish Education)
				Faculty of Administrative Sciences	345,66 (International Relations)
	İzmir	3	Ege University	Faculty of Letters	414, 51 (Psychology)
				Faculty of Engineering	397,50 (Electrical-Electronics Engineering)
				Faculty of Medicine	484,17

	Afyon	43	Afyon Kocatepe University	Faculty of Science and Letters	339,21 (Turkish Language and Literature)
				Faculty of Education	383,73 (Turkish Education)
				Faculty of Administrative Sciences	279,09 (Public Management)
				Faculty of Engineering	362,95 (Biomedical Engineering)
				Faculty of Medicine	448,72
South East Anatolia	G.Antep	30	Gaziantep University	Faculty of Science and Letters	346,83 (Geography)
				Faculty of Education	390,89 (Guidance and Counselling)
				Faculty of Administrative Sciences	271,11 (International Trade and Logistics)
				Faculty of Engineering	
				Faculty of Medicine	335,78 (Electrical-E.E.) 453,83
	Siirt	77	Siirt University	Faculty of Science and Letters	333,02 (Geography)
				Faculty of Education	377,34 (Turkish Education)
				Faculty of Administrative Sciences	224,80 (Business)
				Faculty of Engineering	246,18 (Electrical-Electronics Engineering)
				Faculty of Medicine	-
Central Anatolia	Ankara	2	Gazi University	Faculty of Letters	373,93 (Turkish Language and Literature)
				Faculty of Science	272,63 (Maths)
				Faculty of Education	423,79 (Turkish Language and Literature Teaching)
				Faculty of Administrative Sciences	357,58 (International Relations)
				Faculty of Engineering	413,74 (Electrical-Electronics Engineering)
	Yozgat	65	Bozok University	Faculty of Medicine	482,95
				Faculty of Science and Letters	327,99 (Turkish Language and Literature)
				Faculty of Education	340,10 (Preschool Education)
				Faculty of Administrative Sciences	230,11 (Economics)
				Faculty of Engineering	286,12 (Civil Engineering)
			Faculty of Medicine	454,18	

Black Sea	Bolu	11	Abant İzzet Baysal University	Faculty of Science and Letters	389 (Psychology)	
				Faculty of Education	387,03 (Guidance and Counselling)	
				Faculty of Administrative Sciences	292,07 (International Relations)	
				Faculty of Engineering	325,06(Electrical-Electronics Engineering)	
				Faculty of Medicine	452,61	
	Bayburt	64			Faculty of Science and Letters	-
					Faculty of Education	375,87 (Guidance and Counselling)
					Faculty of Administrative Sciences	252,50 (Public Management)
					Faculty of Engineering	272,57 (Civil Engineering)
					Faculty of Medicine	-
Marmara	İstanbul	1	İstanbul University	Faculty of Letters	423, 35 (Psychology)	
				Faculty of Education	417,19 (Turkish Education)	
				Faculty of Administrative Sciences	365,43 (Politics and International Relations)	
				Faculty of Science	370,49 (Molecular Biology and Genetics)	
				Faculty of Engineering	399,14 (Industrial E.)	
	Bilecik	27		Bilecik Şeyh Edebali University	Faculty of Science and Letters	338,115 (Turkish Language and Literature)
					Faculty of Education	-
					Faculty of Administrative Sciences	270,15 (Politics and Public Management)
					Faculty of Engineering	305,14 (Civil Engineering)
					Faculty of Medicine	-

(SEGE: Socio-Economic Development Ranking/Ministry of Development)

The table shows that base points of universities located in all cities which are on top ranking in the socio-economic development list are higher than base points of universities located in cities which are on lowest ranking in the socio-economic development list. For example, while base point of Turkish Education department of Firat University ranking 39th in socio-economic development ranking and located in Elazığ in the East Anatolia Region is 384,61, base point of Turkish Education department of Muş Alparslan University being in the lowest rank in socio-economic development list and located in Muş city in the same region is 373,34. Similarly, the base point of department of Turkish Language and Literature in Gazi University in the city of Ankara which ranks 2th in terms of socio-economic development is 373,93, while base point of the same department in Bozok University that is located

in the city of Yozgat which ranks 65th in terms of socio-economic development is 327,99. Base points of the departments in the faculties are determined by using the previous years' data on the rate of students' preferences of universities. In this context, it is seen that the socio-economic development of cities is one of the important factors in terms of not only branding of universities but also students' preferences of universities.

### 5.2 Findings and Interpretation Regarding the Number of Instructors and Students within the Context of the City Universities Are Located

In line with the second sub-question of the research, the number of instructors and students in 2014-2015 academic years are presented on Table 2 based on SEGE rankings of cities where universities are located.

Table 2. The number of instructors and students in 2014-2015 academic year based on 2013 SEGE rankings of some cities

City	2013 SEGE Ranking	Then Number of Instructors	The Number of Students in 2014-2015 Academic Year (Vocational+Bachelor+Master's)
Antalya	5	2526	56598
Kahramanmaraş	60	1242	29216
Elazığ	39	1687	36043
Muş	81	474	9086
İzmir	3	7731	130868
Afyon	43	1333	38982
Gaziantep	30	1576	40053
Siirt	77	406	9130
Ankara	2	12421	214042
Yozgat	65	704	12095
Bolu	11	1295	24270
Bayburt	64	313	6433
İstanbul	1	14633	273450
Bilecik	27		13863

(The number of instructors and students was retrieved from <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/> on 01.10.2015).

As shown on Table 2, the number of instructors and students of universities differ according to socio-economic development of cities where universities are located. In a region, the number of instructors and students in universities located cities in the top ranking of socio-economic development list is higher than the number of instructors and students of universities located in cities in the lowest ranking of socio-economic development list. For example, while there are 1575 instructors and 40053 students in Gaziantep University located in Gaziantep which in on the top ranking according to SEGE list (South-East Anatolia), there are 406 instructors and 9130 students in Siirt University located in Siirt city.

### 5.3 Findings and Interpretation Regarding the Scientific Publication Capacity of Universities (URAP World Rankings)

To answer the third sub-question of the problem, scientific publication capacity of universities is analyzed based on the cities they are located (Table 3).

Table 3. Findings and interpretation of analyses of university rankings according to the city

City	University	2013 SEGE Rankings	URAP Rankings	General Point Ranking
Antalya	Akdeniz	5	1160	575.50
Kahramanmaraş	S ü t ç ü İmam	60	1619	497.12
Elazığ	Fırat	39	1055	570.85
Muş	Alparslan	81	-	215.47
İzmir	Ege	3	487	735.77
Afyon	Afyonkocatepe	43	1515	450.65
Gaziantep	Gaziantep	30	831	644.15
Siirt	Siirt	77	-	243.60
Ankara	Gazi	2	532	696.74
Yozgat	Bozok	65	1836	352.41
Bolu	Abant İzzet Baysal	11	1464	480.30
Bayburt	Bayburt	64	-	211.99
İstanbul	İstanbul	1	489	740.41
Bilecik	Şeyh Edebali	27	-	170.88

As can be seen on Table 3, URAP rankings of Akdeniz, Fırat, Ege, Gaziantep, Gazi, Abant İzzet Baysal and İstanbul Universities that are on the top in terms of socio-economic development in their region are higher than S ü t ç ü İmam, Muş Alparslan, Afyon Kocatepe, Siirt, Bozok, Bayburt ve Bilecik Şeyh Edebali Universities that are on lowest ranking in their region. Furthermore, it is observed that Muş Alparslan, Siirt, Bayburt ve Şeyh Edebali universities that are ranked lowest in terms of socio-economic development in their region are not even ranked in the first 2000 universities list. Thus, it could be maintained that universities' scientific publication capacity and their international ranking have high association with socio-economic development of the cities they are located at.

## 6. Discussion, Conclusion and Suggestions

The study showed that the branding process of universities in Turkey has been overshadowed by the socio-economic development of cities they are located at. Based on the first sub-problem of the study, it could be noted that base points of universities in socio-economically developed cities are higher than those of universities in less developed cities. In the light of the fact that base points of universities are determined through generated demand for universities by students, it was concluded that level of socioeconomic development and facilities in the city have an effect on students' preferences of universities. For instance, research on the reasons of students' preferences of universities carried out by Korkut-Owen, Kepir, Özdemir, Ulaş and Yılmaz (2012) concluded that the main determiners are students' interest in their professions, the expectations of families, entrance points of students to universities and teachers' recommendations, as well as location, popularity, social, cultural and educational facilities of universities. Soutar and Turner (2002) also found that the social facilities of the cities in which universities located have an important effect on students' university preferences. There are also other important factors rather than the socioeconomic development of the city in the context of branding. Indeed, Abbas (2014) propose that for universities to be a strong brand, they need to create "we together" culture, foster interdepartmental commitment, establish creative department so as to survive in the new world order, form an information desk to give people correct information about university, design souvenirs such as files, pen and watch, advertise on newspaper, billboards, buses and web marketing milieus, organize various cultural, national and regional or non-academic activities, form sport teams in different branches, publish a university magazine, increase their graduates' employment rates through collaboration with professional associations, come up with a slogan, design stickers/labels, create classroom that could increase sense of ownership in students, develop alumni portal, press greeting/celebration cards and invitations, have a TV channel, have a sense of responsibility at corporate level and create a school where candidate



students can have easy access. Similarly, Droiri, Delmestri and Oberg (2013), express that symbolic expressions and creation of an organizational culture is of high importance for the branding of universities. However, the fact that most universities with high brand ranking in Turkey are mostly located in socio-economically developed cities should be considered with the reality that these universities are older than others that are located in low socio-economic cities. Such reality is also a limitation of the present study. Future studies could focus only on recently established universities and examine how branding of the cities where the universities are located influences their branding.

In line with the second sub-problem of the study, it could be stated that the number of instructors and students is dependent on the socio-economic development of the city universities are located at. The number of instructors and students in universities in cities that are in higher level of socio-economic development of a region is higher than the number of instructors and students in universities in cities that are in lower level of socioeconomic development. Supporting this finding, Baker and Brown (2007) and Lamboy (2011) found out that the number of students registered to a university is positively correlated to the brand of that university. Consistently, given the thoughts of the number of students change in reference to the rate of preferences made by students, the city students live in is an important factor on students' preferences of universities, according to the research in related literature (Briggs and Wilson, 2007; Moogan and Baron, 2003; Soutar and Turner, 2002). Bharti and Purohit (2015) suggested that universities should focus on improving their branding in order to satisfy student demands and receive increased attention from students. Chen and Chen (2014) investigated the effects of branding on students satisfaction and found that the performance, symbol and functionality components of branding were related to increased student satisfaction. Similarly, Jillapalli and Jillapalli (2014) and Dennis, Papagiannidis, Alamanos and Bourlakis (2016) stated that components of branding are keys to student satisfaction and commitment.

Based on the third sub-problem of the study, it was revealed that universities' URAP ranking changes according to socio-economic development indicators of the city where universities are located. In addition to the results reached in the studies, as stated in the literature, universities sources of academic staff that determine the rankings of the universities in the URAP (2010) list and both the quality and quantity of publications of academic staff have an effect on universities institutional image (Akar, 2012). Considered that prevalence of a city over another in terms of socio-economic development is interdependent on several factors, such as economic, social, cultural, technological and population density, it could be asserted that universities should make a difference to break this vicious circle. Supporting this result of the study, Brown and Oplatka (2007) also stated that universities should resort to marketing and brand management strategies to gain a competitive advantage.

Based on the results of the study, several recommendations can be made: First of all, the results indicated that the branding of universities has substantially been influenced by the socioeconomic development of the city in which they are located. Considering this finding, it makes sense to recommend that universities must carry out various academic and social activities for prospect students, in order to draw more attentions from students and consequently to rescue themselves from being overshadowed by the socio-economic development of their cities. The second finding of this study was the positive relationship between the number of academic personnel and students, and the socioeconomic status of the city where the university is located. Therefore, facilities and opportunities provided for students and instructors in cities and universities must be increased in order for creation of universities with high brand value. Lastly, it is evidence that there is a need for improving the ranking of universities. One way of doing this can be achieved through additional funding necessary to build better social and academic environment for students and academic personnel. Funding allocated to universities with low brand value must be increased in order to turn them into universities with high level of brand value.

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