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Egesu Sayar-Aydeniz*

"I used to ask the former rector questions, but I haven't even seen the current one": Students' campus experiences with university administration, the METU case

"Eski rektöre soru sorardım, yenisini görmedim bile": Öğrencilerin üniversite yönetimiyle ilişkili kampüs deneyimleri, ODTÜ vakası

Abstract

Students' interactions with university administration, particularly with the rector, significantly shape their campus experiences. The way a university is governed directly influences students' opportunities for democratic participation, political activism, and observing institutional responsiveness as newly enfranchised adult citizens. These interactions are crucial for students to freely learn and practice democratic principles on campus. Additionally, the rector's role as a representative of the university's identity and their authority in facilitating internal and external communication play a key part in how students connect with the university's name and culture. This study scrutinizes how students evaluate their academic, social, and political engagement on campus in relation to the rector's governance performance. It specifically explores the difference in their experiences under elected versus appointed (unelected) rectors within the Turkish context. The case of Middle East Technical University (METU) exemplifies the shift in rector appointment methods in Turkey, providing insight into its impact on students' campus life. Drawing on in-depth interviews with seven undergraduate and graduate students who studied between 2012 and 2020, this study reveals that the differences in campus experiences driven by changes in rector appointments indicate a decline in the university's academic opportunity structure.

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Öz

Öğrencilerin üniversite yönetimiyle, daha spesifik olarak da rektörle etkileşimi kampüs deneyimlerini şekillendirir çünkü üniversitenin nasıl yönetildiği, öğrencilerin demokratik katılım, siyasi aktivizm ve yakın zamanda siyasi haklara sahip yetişkin vatandaşlar olarak kurumsal duyarlılığı gözlemleme deneyimlerini etkiler. Bu etkileşim, öğrencilerin kampüste özgürce öğrenebilecekleri ve demokratik pratikleri uygulayabilecekleri alanlara sahip olabilmeleri için elzemdir. Aynı zamanda, öğrencilerin üniversite adını ve kültürünü benimsemeleri açısından da önemlidir çünkü rektör, üniversite içi ve dışı arasında temas ve iletişim kurma yetkisine sahip, üniversite organlarını ve kimliğini temsil eden bir role sahiptir. Bu çalışma, öğrencilerin kampüsteki akademik, sosyal ve siyasal katılımlarına ilişkin kampüs deneyimlerini rektörlerin yönetim performansı ile ilişkili olarak nasıl değerlendirdiklerini ve Türkiye bağlamında seçilmiş bir rektörle kıyaslandığında seçilmemiş (ancak atanmış) bir rektörün yönetimi altında öğrenciler için nelerin farklılaştığını incelemektedir. Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi (ODTÜ) örneği, Türkiye'de değişen rektör atamalarının tipik bir örneğini oluşturmakta ve bu değişimin öğrencilerin kampüs deneyimleri üzerindeki etkisini gözlemlemeye olanak sağlamaktadır. 2012-2020 yılları arasında lisans ve lisansüstü öğrencisi olan yedi görüşmeci ile yapılan derinlemesine mülakat verilerine dayanarak, rektör atamalarının değişmesiyle şekillenen kampüs deneyimlerindeki farklılıklar, üniversitenin akademik fırsat yapısında bir gerilemeye işaret etmektedir.

Keywords

Campus experiences, university administration, institutional responsiveness and inclusiveness, democratic participation, academic opportunity structure

Anahtar Kelimeler

Kampüs deneyimleri, üniversite yönetimi, kurumsal duyarlılık ve kapsayıcılık, demokratik katılım, akademik fırsat yapısı

* Bilkent University, egesusayar@gmail.com, ORCID: 0009-0003-5081-9428.

Research Focus

Universities, as key institutions shaping students' early adult citizenship experiences, play a pivotal role in fostering democratic participation, political activism, and observing institutional responsiveness. Interactions between students and university administration, particularly with the rector, are critical for ensuring campus spaces that support democratic practices and for strengthening students' connection to the university's identity and culture, given the rector's role as a representative and facilitator of internal and external communication. With the increasing number of cases where the rectors of Turkish state universities are appointed by presidential decree instead of elected candidates, the tension at university campuses has grown due to students' dissatisfaction with new administrations and their restrictive practices, fundamentally changing campus experiences. Under the neoliberal authoritarian rule of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-AKP), attacks on academic freedom are regarded as indicators of democratic backsliding in Türkiye (Göl, 2022). This erosion of academic freedom, alongside students' social, educational, economic, and political struggles, reflects broader Turkish political dynamics, notably the controversial appointment of trustees to local municipalities, which raises similar representation concerns among the public. Yet, the impact of students' campus experiences and their rights and representation in relation to appointed (unelected) rectors remains underexplored.

Prior to 2016, Turkish universities faced structural challenges regarding academic freedom and autonomy. The 2016 State of Emergency declaration worsened these issues, increasing self-censorship, restricting academic activities, and academic dismissals between 2016 and 2018 across universities (Taştan and Örddek, 2020, p.143; Hosoglu and Aktürk, 2023). Until then, the selection of university rector was based on the votes of faculty members by submitting a short list of rector candidates to the President of the Republic. The 2016 decree-law abolished this voting right, enabling the President to appoint rectors from three candidates proposed by the Council of Higher Education for public universities, or upon the board of trustees' proposal and Council approval for foundation¹. Even before this change, President Erdoğan, in office since August 2014, bypassed top-voted candidates at eight universities in 2014 and seventeen universities in 2015, raising concerns about faculty representation.² The 2016 decree-law's abolition of rector elections is widely regarded as a significant setback to university autonomy, reducing academics' decision-making roles (Ibid., 144). However, this incrementally increased regression also has implications for students' involvement as they are subjected to coercion and control under AKP governance (Alemdaroğlu, 2022). Post-2016 student protests against rector appointments and increasing restrictions on campuses have surged at institutions like Istanbul Technical University, Piri Reis University, Boğaziçi University, and Middle East Technical University³, with graduation ceremonies becoming sites of resistance and protest (Celik, 2023, p.525).

This study investigates how students evaluate their campus experiences—encompassing academic, social, and political engagement—in relation to the university administration, particularly by comparing their experiences under elected versus appointed (unelected) rectors. It aims to assess institutional responsiveness and inclusiveness within democratic practices at universities, while exploring the evolving political climate on campuses through field research on students' perceptions of elected and appointed (unelected) rectors. The Middle East Technical University (METU) serves as a representative case, where an appointed rector (Prof. Dr. M.V. K.) designated by a presidential decree has led from 2016 to 2024, succeeding an elected rector (Prof. Dr. A. A.) from 2008 to 2012. Notably, in 2016, METU's top-voted candidate was bypassed for the first time, marking a shift from prior presidential decree practices. Based on in-depth interviews with METU alumni who studied between 2012 and 2020, this study analyzes how students' relationships with the rector influence their campus experiences across their social, academic, and political dimensions.

Democratic Governance of Universities and the Role of Rectors

In political science literature, in examining state-society relations, institutional responsiveness, inclusiveness, representativeness, and effectiveness play a primary role in determining democratic governance. This can be applied to university structures in terms of university administration and students' relationships. Students' demand for democratic representation and involvement is associated with the rector's responsiveness and effectiveness in addressing students' problems and demands. Universities and, consequently, their administration are required to have an independent role in contesting and reframing social phenomena by the nature of their institutional mission and vision. However, they are not exempt from the political context in which they reside. In a political setting where institutions are argued to be weakening and becoming less inclusive (Esen and Gümüşçü, 2016; Freedom House, 2022), with the appointments of rectors by a presidential decree regardless of their election success, universities become subjected to the same trajectory in Türkiye.

Universities, as sites of not only learning but also practicing civic culture for newly adult citizens, are required to be models of democratic governance to enhance social capital among members of society. Also, it is not a coincidence that the cause célèbre of social movements and youth activism in the 1960s sprang from universities. Universities are sites of political struggle and the emergence of counter-conduct. As the existence of inclusive institutions allows for the persistence of democratic rules and principles in a country (Acemoğlu and Robinson, 2012), it is safe to argue that inclusive practices of universities can contribute to the protection of democratic rules and principles at both the country and campus levels. Furthermore, students' political struggle contributes to democratization in general. Student empowerment in the literature is grouped under the three interconnected types of engagement: social, academic, and

political; the university is an important agent for student empowerment, which “is directly related to democracy, participation, fight for rights, and enhancing capacities” (Şeref and Mızıkacı, 2022, p.20).

Academics and administrators play a central role in forming ways to enhance student empowerment for their social, academic, and political engagements on campus. In this regard, students’ relationship with the administrators is important in shaping their campus experience to engage with democratic practices. From the point of university students, rectors can be held accountable and demonstrate such responsibility for protecting university integrity as well as democratic principles and rules. In political terms, it can be regarded as similar to expected positive citizen perception about government policies when institutions are responsive to policy preferences of the members of a society (Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2005). The responsiveness to students’ preferences about campus life by the university administration determines students’ perception of the deeds of administration. Moreover, as the erosion of contestation and inclusiveness leads to a decline in democracy (Dahl, 1971), at the university level, students’ decreasing opportunity structures to engage in political action and the exclusion of students’ claims and demands lead to the erosion of democratic culture at universities.

While the positive relation and necessary link between democratic governance of a university and academic freedoms is emphasized in the literature (Giroux et al., 2015), it is also significant to underline and remind that democratic governance may nourish democratic culture at campuses, impacting students’ social, academic, and political engagements at campuses. Fostering campus activism to enhance student development and learning not only meets with democratic values and ideals but also “helps campuses meet their mission of political engagement and democratic involvement and participation” (Kezar and Maxey, 2014, p.40). As the study (Bäckman and Trafford, 2007, p.11-12) suggests, democratic governance of schools improves discipline, enhances learning, reduces conflict, makes schools more competitive, and secures the future existence of sustainable democracies. Even responsiveness to student needs outside campus should be in the scope of democratic governance of the universities by: “effective institutional programmes which facilitate a dialogue on student expectations and needs outside the classroom, universities, faculties and departments” (Bateson and Taylor, 2004, p.481). Democratic governance of universities is also important for students’ identification with the university because: “It is through a shared involvement at every level of the university structure that students may succeed in identifying themselves with their institution and in attaining their highest levels of academic and personal development.” (Bateson and Taylor, 2004, p.481). Consequently, in terms of democratic governance of a university, along with inclusiveness, responsiveness, and effectiveness of the institution, factors that impact student identification must also be regarded while examining students’ campus experiences with university administration.

The governance of universities is embodied in the representative role of the rectors. The rector's discourses, deeds, behaviors, and identification play a central role in students' perception of the university and in shaping students' campus experiences because leadership also matters "to nurture an institutional culture of inclusion" in the higher education environment (Felten et al., 2016). Rector, as the highest representative of a university, is the key figure in maintaining and promoting an institutional culture. For this reason, among qualifications for leadership of the university, apart from scientific success, sociodemographic characteristics, career development, the value of rectors' administrative expertise and experience are also emphasized (Karadag, 2021; Mahlamäki-Kultanen and Majuri, 2013). However, in the Turkish context, it is argued that the majority of administrators in higher education lack sufficient managerial competency (Balyer and Özcan, 2017). By noting the influence of politicians and interest groups in the selection and appointment of rectors in Türkiye, Balyer (2020) suggests the selection of rectors by accounting for their administrative skills by academic staff, representatives of administrative staff, and students along with a set of administrative approaches and skills that can contribute to democratic governance of universities. In this regard, selection procedures are not only important but also effective in determining the representativeness of rectors.

Moreover, in Türkiye, student participation in higher education institutions is limited due to multiple barriers, including student apathy, structural and functional insufficiency of existing student councils, lack of information provided by institutions about student rights, and unresponsiveness of the Senate to student needs (Kuruuzum et al., 2010). Therefore, students' relationship with the university administration is a critical factor in the academic opportunity structure, shaping on-campus experiences. The METU case sets a typical example to observe the change in academic opportunity structure along with the change in rector appointments in Türkiye. However, METU is distinctive due to its unique culture, which shapes students' perceptions and reflections on their relationship with the rectors. METU inherits a subculture that reinforces demands for equality, merit-based administration, and democratic student involvement. This subculture shapes students' expectations that rectors uphold an autonomous, democratic university while protecting its identity and culture. In this regard, rector governance within the context of the university subculture is a key factor for understanding the relationship between students and university administration.

This study enables a comparison of students' campus experiences under an elected and an appointed (unelected) rector by examining how changes in rector appointment shape the academic opportunity structure for students. Brower and Upchurch (2023) identify the typology of four types of academic opportunity structure and explore their impact on the academic environment. The institutional responsiveness to activism and the role of subcultures of activism are examined to assess the difference between constrained and open regimes of universi-

ties. More specifically, “(1) how malleable or rigid the organizational structure is to institutional change and (2) the broader political climate and activist subcultures of an institution” are examined as two important qualities in determining academic opportunity structure for college activism (Ibid., p.1896). These opportunity structures range from highly constrained to highly open regimes, including *authoritarian*, *passive*, *democratic*, and *equitable structures*.

In an authoritarian structure, decision-making is confined to a small group of people, and the institution is characterized by a political culture of obedience (Ibid., p.1896). Consequently, activism is met with oppression. In a passive structure, the institution is often open to activism but lacks the resources or subcultures to support student activism, while its decision-making process and political culture remain inconsistently engaged. In a democratic structure, the institution offers numerous opportunities for student activism through its enforcement of equality principles, promotion of civic virtues, and provision of institutional leadership for students. This structure enables students to engage freely politically and directly influence the institution. Lastly, in an equitable structure, akin to a democratic one, student activism is welcomed, and the structure is flexible. The university emphasizes the differences among students, and politically engaged students frequently advocate for procedures and laws that enhance resources and influence for underprivileged groups on campus. These structures are applicable not only to political activism but also to students’ social and academic engagements of students at campuses, as they mainly reflect institutional variations in responding to students’ democratic involvement. In light of the literature, this article’s findings contribute to understanding the impact of democratic or undemocratic university governance, elected or unelected rector administration, and rectors’ administrative skills on academic opportunity structure and students’ campus experiences.

Research Design and Methodology

While the METU case exemplifies the typical shift to an appointed (unelected) and rising campus tensions due to shrinking freedom spaces, it stands out for its unique culture, beyond its status as a leading and prestigious university in Türkiye. METU students are historically linked to leftist, oppositional, and progressive stances in Turkish politics, marked by their active political engagement and a culture fostering egalitarian social relations across campus life and the city of Ankara. This culture is effective in students’ reflections on changes in their campus experiences, particularly while framing their demands for democratic involvement.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven METU undergraduate and graduate students in 2023, both face-to-face and online. The names of the participants are anonymized for confidentiality. This study excludes the period after 2020 for two reasons: first, the sample targets students who experienced campus life under both elected and unelected (appointed) rectors; second, the COVID-19 pandemic reduced students’ campus interactions due to the shift to online and hybrid education, limiting their ability to engage with campus life, interact

with university administration, and observe its actions. I employ thematic analysis to identify key themes shaping students' reflections on their changing campus experiences and the changing academic opportunity structure for their academic, social, and political engagements.

The interviewees are predominantly alumni of METU who actively participated in campus protests. Student interviewees reflect on protests occurring between 2011 and 2020. Interviewees primarily joined protests against road construction projects on METU land, while also engaging in various on-campus protests, including those against Prime Minister Erdoğan's visit to campus in 2012, the 2013 Gezi Park Protests, the 2019 Kavaklık Resistance, Devrim Marches, graduation ceremony protests, and feminist and LGBTIA+ movements over the years. Participation in campus protests is a key sampling criterion, as political engagement highlights both significant student demands for campus life and freedom, and the university administration's immediate responses, as perceived by students. Direct interaction between the administration and students is not always evident in daily life, but protests necessitate a response from the administration. For this reason, interviews explore interviewee's day-to-day experiences, past memories, and their experiences and reflections on protesting on campus. Finally, students' memories and reflections on protest experiences on campus provide insights into the impact of Türkiye's general political context on student experiences, shaping their demands and claims directed at the university administration.

Background Information about METU History and Culture

METU was established during the period of 1953-1959. It has been influenced by socio-political and economic changes in Turkish history. Yet, it is widely regarded as a distinctive university due to its prestigious status and rich cultural background. Beyond its high-quality education and societal contributions through training students in diverse professional fields, METU plays an important part in the development of the capital city, Ankara, and shaping its cultural landscape. The campus is located centrally in the city, facilitating students' interaction with Ankara. METU, a large and vibrant university, hosts over 100 diverse student communities and provides a campus with dormitories and living spaces, making a hub for cultural exchange and student opportunities. The university is recognized not only its academic achievements and pioneering role in scientific developments but also for its values of inclusiveness, diversity, meritocracy, equality, and respect for nature, which transcend the university's borders. For example, the term 'hocam' (my professor), reflecting mutual respect for everyone's potential to teach and learn, prevails among university members. METU students have broadened the use of this term to include university staff in general such as bus drivers, cooks, and civil servants. Notably, the commitment to values of meritocracy and equality is shared among faculty, students, and workers becoming a significant norm passed down through generations.

In this section, I briefly examine the university's history and culture by analyzing the website named 'Yaz Hocam'⁴ (Write My Teacher), established by a student community

(METU Media Community), which reflects METU students' perspective, collective memory, and discourse on university culture. The website documents the university's history, providing guidance, campus news, reviews and columns on cultural activities, and assessments campus life challenges and needs. The university's history highlights its commitment to meritocracy in university administration is emphasized through the first example of 'the first non-appointed department head' by quoting the interim rector in the 1970 Mustafa Parlar: "I believe in democracy, choose your own department head, he declared, which stands as one of the clearest examples of METU's stance against the entrenched culture of appointments and assignments that has now become routine⁵. Similarly, the emphasis on equality among members of the university is emphasized by Ural Akbulut, METU rector from 2000 to 2008, stating that: "I learned at METU that a student can interrupt even the rector"⁶. This emphasis on equality is considered operative not only among faculty members but also in the instructor-student relationship.

METU is recognized for its political dynamic, distinguished from that of many Turkish state or foundation universities. Following particularly the burning of the American ambassador's car in 1969, views on the political engagement of METU students gained greater prominence. In the 1970s, METU hosted many prominent left-wing radical figures, amid escalating tensions with right-wing radicals and the army. On May 6, 1972, three young people faced execution following the parliament's approval of the death penalty. To memorialize these individuals and their struggle, the METU Revolution March continues to be held by students every May 6. A striking example of the '68 generation's influence on METU culture is the painting of the stadium with the inscription 'Devrim' (Revolution) and its subsequent naming. This history shapes the identity of the university and its students, reflecting their alignment with the left movement in Türkiye. With the closure of student associations due to conflicts and political instability in Türkiye, a new structure emerged, leading to de facto establishment of the METU Council of Student Representatives (Öğrenci Temsilcileri Konseyi-ÖTK) in January 1976. At Yaz Hocam, the gains of ÖTK in METU history are celebrated as "the first building blocks of the struggle for an autonomous democratic university," regarded as a legacy for new students.⁷

The commitment to university autonomy is also conveyed through the recollection of the stance of founding rector Kemal Kurdaş, who was critical of potential police intervention on campus: "I don't allow the police to take even one step into the university. If you enter, you will find me in front of you" (Kurdaş, 1998). On the website, it is argued that: "Unlike today, METU Rector Kemal Kurdaş barred police entry to the campus, even during an incident with potential diplomatic repercussions, nor did he claim a lack of authority, instead standing before the Minister of Interior to prevent police access."⁸ In this respect, the commitment to an autonomous democratic university is interlinked with METU's historically rooted culture of equality, merit-based administration, and critical political stance by students. Moreover,

students' comparison of the university autonomy with the past reveals a tension between university members –the bearers of the university culture—and authorities seeking to expand their influence over the institution. The author builds on this historical narrative, stating: “On that day, METU also sowed the seeds of a culture of fighting against the enemies of life and their Trojan horses on campus.”⁹ The university culture is defined by resistance against interventions that undermine university autonomy, and it is considered unaligned with the latter administration.

METU has a longstanding history of protests, with its culture and political engagement evolving over time and across contexts. Yet, it is important to consider the historical background and the social, cultural, and political relations interplaying between university members and official actors. The range of protests has been diversified in the last two decades. There have been protests regarding interventions on campus life, minority rights, feminist and LGBTIA+ movements, as well as opposition to the appointed (unelected) administration. Opposition to the appointed (unelected) rector is particularly evident in graduation ceremonies, a key platform for student-administration interaction, where the rectorate and government are criticized through banners and slogans. Student protests at graduation ceremonies extend campus culture beyond its boundaries. During graduation ceremonies, student-administration interaction attracts both students' families and the media, becoming a focal point in the national agenda. Recent resources and political opportunities in Turkish politics have shifted, warranting further examination in future research. However, as reflected in Yaz Hocam's discourse, METU students continue to approach events through lenses shaped by a commitment to an autonomous democratic university, a culture of equality, a merit-based administration principle, and a critical political stance. These lenses are evident in their reflections on their campus experiences in relation to university administration during interviews. Both on banners, slogans, the website, and during interviews, students use the term ‘kayyum¹⁰ rektör’ (trustee rector) to emphasize their perception of illegitimacy and to imply the overriding of the will of the university constituents regarding the appointment. The website features a series of reports on the appointed rector's actions and related student concerns, which largely align with interviewees' statements¹¹.

Findings

In interviews, many students construct a narrative that traces the university's transformation over time, closely tied to the shift in rectors. They interpret interventions in campus as extensions of the government's broader efforts to regulate social life across the country. The university's identity emerges as a significant counterforce to the culture and approach that external authorities seek to impose, not only on the institution but also on society at large. Within this framework, the latter rector—appointed by presidential decree despite placing sec-

ond in elections—is perceived by student interviewees as either a representative or an imposed authority figure. In contrast, while the former rector is not necessarily acknowledged as the ideal representative for students regarding all aspects of his governance, students often recall their experiences under his administration with a sense of bewilderment, highlighting relatively higher representation and freedom during his tenure. Students who have lived through the administrations of both an elected and unelected rector draw clear distinctions between the two, focusing on three key dimensions: representativeness, responsiveness, and identification. These dimensions are explored in detail in this section, drawing directly on students' statements and memories to illuminate the comparison between the rectors and its impact on their campus experiences.

In interviews, students highlight 2016 as a critical turning point, marking a profound shift not only in campus life at METU but also in the national context of Türkiye. They attribute this change to a series of pivotal political events, describing a steady erosion of freedoms, liberties, and opportunities for campus activities and political engagement. Many students specifically refer to the impact of the 2015 general election results, which they believe dampened the oppositional momentum that had been gaining strength since the 2013 Gezi Park Protests. Recalling the pre-2016 period, they describe a relatively freer campus atmosphere, characterized by a high volume of social activities and greater ease of political engagement. However, they consider the repeated 2015 elections as discouraging factor for their political engagement, a sentiment intensified after 2016 due to the prolonged state of emergency following the failed coup attempt on July 15. This period, students assert, witnessed a decline not only in political engagement but also in all forms of social and academic activities across campus life.

In line with this perspective, students link the 2016 appointment of an unelected rector to METU by presidential decree to a significant shift in campus dynamics. They contrast this with the tenure of the previous rector, which they recall as freer and more liberal, fostering multiple campus activities such as organizing conferences, supporting student club initiatives, holding public forums, and enabling political protests. Under the appointed rector, however, students perceive a marked reduction in their freedom, the liberal atmosphere among students and university members, and opportunities for social and academic activities. While comparing the rectors and assessing their campus experiences, students emphasize key criteria that constitute the main themes in their reflections: having or lacking direct contact with the rector, observing the rector's reconciliatory role, having or lacking a sense of security and trust, and ideational closeness or polarization. These themes are instrumental in understanding the evolving campus experiences and academic opportunity structure, as articulated by interviewees in relation to the rector's representativeness, responsiveness, and identification with the student body.

Direct contact with the rector

METU students have a long tradition of organizing campus forums, open to all, where participants can deliberate about campus issues and collectively shape the campus agenda. These forums play a crucial role in providing students with direct opportunities to voice their concerns and connect with other university members (including faculty, staff, and alumni) particularly when student councils fall short in identifying, gathering, and addressing student issues and demands. Additionally, forums serve as an alternative mechanism for democratic participation, enabling students to engage in political mobilization on campus, a connection many students draw between their memories of campus forums and campus protests. Given this significance, students frequently recall the former rector's involvement in these forums when reflecting on their campus experiences under his administration. A student identifying as a 'leftist' reflects on the former rector's engagement: "He was a respectable figure. During the protests, I recall him negotiating. Today, we hold him in higher regard—as leftists, we attended his funeral. Looking back, he was present at campus forums, and I used to ask him questions directly." (Interview with Berk, April 11, 2023).

The former rector's responsiveness often surprised students, given his official position. One interviewee notes: "There were several protests in front of the Rectorate, regarding the road protests and the spring festival. We never imagined that he would join us and listen to our demands. I was genuinely surprised." (Interview with Açelya, April 9, 2023). Similarly, another student expresses amazement at her past interactions with the previous rector during campus forums: "He was someone who strove to keep the libertarian spirit alive. His participation in forums feels unbelievable now. I am saddened that his name isn't on my diploma" (Interview with Aylin, April 14, 2023). The opportunity to establish direct contact with the rector emerges as a critical factor for many students. As evident from these reflections, the former rector's active participation in campus forums stands out as a key indicator of his responsiveness to student concerns. Moreover, his direct engagement with students aligns his identity more closely with the university's values, particularly in fostering equality among members, where mutual listening is prioritized, and upholding the principle of freedom that accommodates diverse voices and opinions.

Rector's conciliatory role

Students articulate the rector's role in mediating between authorities and themselves as a significant responsibility, often recalling the former rector's efforts to facilitate dialogue during conflicts. The student identifying as a 'leftist' emphasizes this conciliatory role by recalling about the former rector's effort to conduct meetings with students for a solution: "We occupied the rectorate twice during his term; he was caught in the middle of fights and yet

somehow managed to mediate” (Interview with Berk, April 11, 2023). By referring to the occupation-style protest, Berk underscores the relative freedom they experienced in political engagement on campus at the time, a level of autonomy they believe is unlikely to be seen again. Açelya shares a similar perspective, linking the shift in administration to broader political changes: “The university administration appeared more conciliatory back then, but this approach diminished with the appointment of the new rector, a change inseparable from Türkiye’s political climate—marked by the declaration of the State of Emergency, revised criteria and procedures for rector appointments, among other factors” (Interview, April 9, 2023). The emphasis on the former rector’s conciliatory role highlights students’ need for recognition and responsiveness to their demands concerning campus life. This role also reflects the rector’s broader representative performance, not only toward external institutions and actors but also within the university, particularly in fostering dialogue with students.

Sense of security and trust

Drawing from the rectorate’s critique of police intervention during student protests in 2013 on METU campus made in the rectorate statements¹² and the former rector’s contributions to the oral history study titled *Protest is Democratic a Right* (Bürkev, 2016), it can be argued that the former rector placed significant emphasis on university autonomy, the safety of university members, and freedom within campus life. In terms of the rector’s representative performance in dealings with the external entities, many students recall the previous rector’s attempts to shield students from police violence and intervention. One student notes: “I remember him saying: As long as I am the rector, the police cannot enter the campus. But that doesn’t mean the police can’t enter.” (Interview with Berk, April 11, 2023).

At times of heightened conflict and tension, exacerbated by police presence on campus, students identify the rector as the primary figure responsible for their campus security and a source of trust. Azra (Interview, April 17, 2023) shares her experiences that bolstered her trust in the rector and her sense of relative security with room for maneuver amid police violence, recalling how the rector patrolled the campus borders to demarcate limits for police and arranged for an ambulance to evacuate an injured student for medical care following police intervention. These actions and statements and actions are deemed critical to students’ experiences of social, academic, and political engagement on campus, particularly at times of conflict. While articulating their stories of protests and encounters with police, students portray the former rector as “on the same side as” them (Interview with Burak, April 11, 2023), a perception reversed with the appointed (unelected) rector, whom they view as a government spokesperson. Consequently, students’ trust and identification with the rector emerge as pivotal factors in shaping and perceiving their campus experiences.

Absence of direct contact with the rector

In interviews, students tend to reflect positively on their campus experiences before 2016, contrasting these with more negative perceptions of later years. While the former rector is associated with greater visibility on campus, a stronger focus on campus life, and higher responsiveness to student needs, the latter rector is mostly associated with lesser visibility, concern, and responsiveness. One interviewee expresses his frustration: “I used to ask the former rector questions; it was perfectly normal. I haven’t even seen the current one” (Interview with Cenk, April 12, 2023). Other interviewees illustrate this disparity by recounting rare sightings of the rector on campus and a lack of response when attempting to engage him directly. Notably, many students use strikingly similar sentences about the latter rector: “He cannot walk comfortably on his own campus,” emphasizing a sense of detachment and a tense, conflictual relationship with the administration. The absence of direct contact with the rector amplifies students’ demands for enhanced representation and institutional responsiveness.

Lack of sense of security and trust

Students attribute a decline in security and trust to the appointment of the new rector as well as the evolving political climate in Türkiye after 2016. They express concerns over the reduced number of student activities, diminishing levels of freedom, and a loss of recognition from the university administration.

Many students underscore the increased police presence and deployment on campus after 2016, drawing comparisons to Istiklal Street in Istanbul—known for its intense police surveillance—and expressing their shock at witnessing mounted police officers on campus during student protests such as those on March 8 or the Pride Parade. The new rector is perceived as a key contributor to the heightened police presence, with one student suggesting, “He would have called the police himself”, given his reputation as a “collaborator” (Interview with Berk, April 11, 2023). This association underscores how the intensified policing and oppression are associated with the administration of the latter rector.

Beyond police presence, students report unease due to the increased number of private security personnel, which erodes the campus’s “home-like” feel and leaves them feeling “less safe” on campus. Therefore, this increasing securitization and surveillance shape a negative perception of the new rector, contrasting with students’ identification with the university’s culture. Moreover, students highlight a stark contrast in social and academic activities on campus, as well as student agency, between the periods before and after 2016. In response to a question about changes in campus activities under different rectors, Deniz states: “The biggest difference between the two rectors is that the current rector has actively undermined campus life since taking office. He canceled the Spring Festival in his first year, and many communi-

ty events, including the AKEK¹³ and METUCON¹⁴, were prohibited” (Interview, April 14, 2023). Deniz perceives these changes, such as closing, underfunding student communities and clubs, and restricting their activities, as “an active sabotage of campus life,” while favoring pro-government student groups, a practice absent before 2016. METU students articulate the impact of the administrative change on the university culture as a troubling erosion of the university’s culture and its spirit of resistance. Authoritative and exclusionary practices, particularly the support for pro-government student communities, are seen as discouraging political engagement among students.

Polarization between the rector and students

Students frequently critique the rectorate’s decisions, resulting in restrictions on academic and student activities along with the police intervention during student protests on campus. In 2018, students were taken into custody for displaying politically charged banners during the graduation ceremony. A student community was initially suspended for publishing footage of the police intervention against students, deemed to “humiliated METU”¹⁵. In 2019, students who participated in the Pride March encountered police intervention, detentions, and legal proceedings¹⁶. The Spring Festival, reduced to a single day under the 2018 State of Emergency for security reasons, was canceled by the rectorate in 2019¹⁷. That same year, the Kavaklık Resistance—sparked by the allocation of university forest land to the Credit and Dormitories Institution for dormitory construction—met with police intervention, leading to further student trials¹⁸.

An alumnus argues on the escalating oppression, extending beyond students to alumni: “In general, a political climate of fear has begun to prevail. In 2018, the last of the graduation ceremonies at Devrim Stadium occurred during my time; none followed. The protests against the trustee rector and the Pride March marked my final year. These events are now largely organized more by alumni than students, as the trustee rector blocks our campus access to hinder our efforts.” (Interview with Azra, April 17, 2023). Azra frames these restrictions on ceremonies, marches, and protests as “a political climate of fear”, viewing them as integral to the university culture under siege by the new rector’s decisions. In this regard, students’ concerns with the interventions on such activities also foster their concern for the loss and transformation of university culture because students’ social and political engagement with these activities allows them to maintain and transmit university culture.

Açelya cites the 2018 graduation ceremony as a stark example of the polarization between the rector and the students: “He sought to impose a more oppressive mechanism by further distancing himself from the students. The clearest instance was our 2018 graduation ceremony. Before that, measures like locking lecture halls after 5 p.m., restricting student activities, and shutting down Devrim Stadium with event censorship were evident. Yet, police

intervention during the Pride and Revolution Marches was the breaking point. When we protested the rector at the graduation ceremony, private security targeted students with banners, while the rector stood by, arms folded, visibly pleased” (Interview, April 9, 2023). Açelya’s account suggests that this oppression underpins polarization between the rector and students. The rector’s passive observation rather than protection in the face of intervention against students undermines students’ sense of trust and identification with the rector.

METU graduation ceremonies have long featured a tradition of students’ politically critical banners spanning over a decade, typically challenging government policies and official misconduct. As sites of politicization, protest, and confrontation with the university administration, these ceremonies underscore the rector’s responsiveness to student activism. Preventions of organizing graduation ceremonies at Devrim Stadium, censoring politically contented banners, and violent intervention on students have curtailed spaces of freedom on campus, fueling dissatisfaction with the appointed rector. Similarly, suppression of community activities is regarded as an attempt to undermine students’ agency on campus and their potential for political engagement. The cancellation of academic events (e.g., the Evolution Conference, Spring Festival) is considered an unprogressive assault on academic freedom and culture, while blocking students’ political engagement (e.g., Pride Parade, Revolution March) is seen as an extension of the government’s oppressive, authoritarian rule, given its ideological and symbolic opposition.

In contrast, the role of the former rector is remembered for effectively mediating and prioritizing the university’s interests, such as protecting students during the 2012 police intervention during Prime Minister Erdoğan’s visit¹⁹. The latter rector, however, is perceived as lacking a mediating role and acting as a collaborator in the external intrusion of the government, unfit to represent the university as an autonomous entity or to administer campus life inclusively. In the face of the perceived danger of intrusion into their university and attack on its culture, students frequently recall their Kavaklık Resistance in May 2019 as a victory of showing their will against the protocol signed by the Rectorate and KYK (Credit Dormitories Agency) with the assumption that it was a dormitory plan that would make it easier to establish the oppressive environment that had been trying to be established for years by the government.

In interviews, the metaphor of the “Trojan horse” frequently emerges to describe the appointment of the unelected rector and the construction plan of a state dormitory as attempts of intrusion, highlighting an ideological antagonism between students and the authorities. The ideals of the university culture are perceived as under attack, with the new rector, who is held responsible for students’ representation, regarded as an actor facilitating this situation. It is also important to note that, in comparison to other cases where rector appointments could be made regardless of membership to that university, students of METU point out the new rector’s membership to METU as a pro, and how they do not see major problems regarding

merit. Yet, the reason for the distance between students and the new rector emerges as rather political. Students' emphasis on the asserted discomfort of the new rector regarding walking on campus implies a political divergence. Many students expressed their discomfort with the new rector's close ties to the government and images of officials celebrating the road construction protocol on the METU land.²⁰ This political divide hinders students' identification with the rector and strengthens their demand for democratic involvement in decision-making for higher education and campus life.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that whether the rector is elected or appointed (unelected) significantly influences students' social and political activities on campus, the opportunities and constraints they encounter, their sense of trust in the university administration, and their sense of belonging to the institution. At METU, representativeness and inclusiveness within the university structure emerge as critical concerns shaping students' relationships with the rectorate. The rector's representativeness, responsiveness, and identification with the student body play an important role in shaping students' perceptions of their campus experiences, as these factors facilitate student participation, inclusion, and democratic involvement, while sustaining and transmitting a democratic culture on campus.

METU students assess their changing campus experience by comparing rectors across several dimensions: visibility on campus, efforts to address student problems and generate solutions, responses to police intervention, mediatory role during crises, levels of campus securitization, support for student activities, adherence to the university's established values and principles, and prioritization of university autonomy. When the rector is elected and exhibits a responsive and mediating role—listening to students' grievances and demands and acting to protect university autonomy—students tend to hold positive perceptions about their campus experiences, enhancing their sense of belonging to the university. Conversely, when the rector is not elected but appointed, whose role is perceived as unresponsive and oppressive—ignoring student demands, failing to protect autonomy, and neglecting the broader university community—elicits negative reflections and dissatisfactions with academic, social, and political engagements on campus.

Students' perception of the responsiveness of the university administration is closely related to their sense of security, especially at times of student confrontation with potential police intervention on campus. As Caliskan et al. (2020) note, "the sense of security is an essential aspect characterizing a democratic university environment." The attitudes, responses, and deeds of rectors during conflict articulate students' sense of security. Additionally, students' trust in the rector to safeguard students' rights, well-being, and the university's integrity and autonomy shapes their reflections. As Acun (2020) argues for the impact of the students' trust in political institutions on citizenship behaviors for the contribution to the accumulation

of social capital, it can be argued that students' trust in the university rector, the representative of the institutional body of a university, also play a role in creating and accumulating social capital that enhances students' democratic engagement beyond graduation. Conversely, a lack of such trust and relationships with the administration diminish social capital, undermining incentives for democratic participation post-graduation. Critically, the findings highlight that trust and responsiveness, such as through direct contact with the rector, can significantly contribute to the democratic culture at universities.

In the METU context, the unelected rector is considered less representative than the former elected rector, despite his METU affiliation being an asset compared to other cases like Boğaziçi University, where an unelected rector who was not a member of the university was appointed. The unelected rector's lack of responsiveness to students and his close ties with the government are regarded as causes for limiting opportunities and freedom on campus. In terms of identification with the university, for METU students, the commitment to the ideal of an autonomous democratic university, a culture of equality, and a principle of merit-based administration alongside a critical political stance are considered as central determinants for the assessment of rectors. Although students raise no major concerns about the new rector's merit, his perceived indifference to university autonomy (e.g., permitting police intervention and adhering to government policies) and lack of an egalitarian approach to students underpin students' dissatisfaction with his administration.

The ideological framework, where students antagonize the government's authoritarian and conservative rule, significantly affects students' assessment of the unelected (appointed) rector. Ideology may act as an independent factor shaping their campus experience perceptions. However, university culture and identification with the institution are equally vital in shaping students' expectations of the rector's conduct and responses. This study reveals that students' campus experiences are mainly shaped by the rector's attitudes, responses, and deeds in their relationship with students. Students' dissatisfaction with an appointed (unelected) rector extends beyond an ideological explanation to unmet expectations of direct contact, an inclusive approach, protection, and mediation. The former rector's relative success and appreciation, earning students' trust, stemmed from perceiving student activism as non-threatening, protecting democratic rights during crises, and prioritizing university interests. This enabled students to experience and transmit an egalitarian and free university culture. In contrast, the appointed (unelected) rector's perception of activism and academic initiatives as threats, his failure to protect democratic rights, and his prioritization of external agendas have hindered this cultural transmission, reflecting altered opportunity structures at METU.

Higher education environments may have differing political subcultures and opportunity structures similar to social movements and governmental institutions (Brower and Upchurch, 2023, p.1888). Political subcultures are cultivated by higher education institutions that "signal to students, administrators, and faculty what types of political behavior are accepted on campus" (ibid.). As Cho (2020) also argues, institutional responses matter for student activism;

they can minimize students' concerns, co-opt initiatives, criminalize activism, offer symbolic support without action and changes, or result in changes in institutional policies and protection of students through new strategies. For the METU case, students recall the former rector's term with appreciation for the support for the right to protest, student meetings, and activities. However, after the appointment of an unelected rector in 2016, these rights and activities are regarded as largely constrained by the new administration. Additionally, the university culture, once acknowledged and nurtured, is expressed as heavily suppressed.

Brower and Upchurch's analysis of four types of academic opportunity structures is pertinent for making a comparison. The findings suggest METU has shifted toward an authoritative structure, where subcultures of activism become diffused and weakened, and institutional responses to activism regulated through punitive policies, unilateral responses to activism, lack of support and engagement with protestors, and suppression of free speech (Brower and Upchurch, 2023, p.1895). However, whether the university operated in response to student activism within a passive or democratic structure (rather than authoritative or equitable) under the former rector warrants further exploration. The institution was supportive of student activism (e.g., attending student forums); however, whether it leveraged and helped student activism to form new policies, practices, and institutional structures is a subject to be further investigated in future research.

This study concludes that the METU students' campus experiences are profoundly influenced by their relationship with the university administration, particularly the rector's responses, actions, behaviors, and identity. The unelected rector's appointment reflects escalating national oppression and control, eroding university autonomy and integrity, which he fails to protect. This dynamic underscores the critical role of rector election status, whether the rector is elected or appointed (unelected), in shaping student and administration relationships and opportunity structure for social, academic, and political activities. Undemocratic governance of universities and a limited academic opportunity structure mirror the country's political climate.

At the conjuncture of neoliberal authoritarianism, universities as critical social institutions serve as arenas for democratic struggle, as Gökarıksel (2022) argues in the case of Boğaziçi University, where the 2021 student protests against the appointment of an unelected rector parallel METU's experience. While examining student participation in the administration for structuring democratic authority, Dunder (2013) finds that Marmara University students demand "a democratic life space" through greater representation, participatory democracy, and reduced institutional barriers at universities (p.874). Accordingly, the recent form of student involvement in the administration of higher education institutions via participation in student councils remains rather limited and requires more democratic authority for students.

The increasing demand by university students in Türkiye to remain universities autonomous and to enhance democratic culture is significant, as the findings of this study also sug-

gest. This study reveals that METU students seek democratic inclusiveness and responsiveness from the university administration to enhance students' involvement.

Conclusion

Although the literature extensively examines the administrative performances of rectors, a significant gap persists in understanding how their democratic or undemocratic performances influence students' campus experiences. This gap is particularly pronounced in contexts like Türkiye, where scholars debate the regime's competitive authoritarian nature (Özbudun, 2015; Esen and Gümüşçü, 2016; Castaldo, 2018; Ugur-Cinar, 2023), highlighting its weakening effect on a broad range of institutions, including universities. Far from being immune to these political transformations, universities reflect them, rendering democratization within these institutions increasingly imperative. This study addresses this lacuna by exploring the relationship between university administration and students through the lenses of inclusiveness, responsiveness, and identification, offering critical insights into how these dynamics shape the academic opportunity structure within Turkey's broader political context.

The findings demonstrate that METU students assess their campus experiences based on their relationship with the rector, whose democratic or undemocratic governance significantly impacts their social, academic, and political engagements. Specifically, METU students assess governance performance of the rectors through several pivotal themes: First, the presence or absence of direct contact or meaningful interaction with the rector. Second, the rector's reconciliatory role and capacity to mediate crises and foster dialogue and solutions. Third, the sense of security and trust, the extent to which students feel safe and supported. And lastly, the ideational closeness or polarization, in other words, the degree of alignment or discord between students' values and those of the administration. These themes collectively illuminate students' perception of the administration's representativeness and responsiveness, as well as their willingness to identify with the rectors and the university. Based on the students' reflections on their changing campus experiences, this research reveals that under an appointed (unelected) rector, METU's academic opportunity structure has become increasingly constrained, evolving into an authoritative structure. This transformation, characterized by punitive policies, the erosion of activist subcultures, and restrictions on both political, social, and academic activities, mirrors Türkiye's broader political environment and underlines the urgent need for democratic governance in higher education.

While this study offers valuable insights, its focus on a single case limits its generalizability. Universities serve as crucial social institutions, not only promoting democratization but also equipping young citizens with the practical experience of democratic principles. Consequently, the role of rectors in shaping campus environments requires further investigation across other universities in Türkiye and globally. Such research could provide a more com-

prehensive understanding of how governance in higher education shapes students' experiences and their capacity to engage in democratic processes beyond the university, reinforcing the pivotal role of democratic administration in fostering societal progress.

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