

Internationalization of higher education in Türkiye: The process of isomorphism with the Bologna system

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Abstract: The primary purpose of institutional theories is to explain why organizations exhibit similarities. The common theme in all these studies is their sociological basis, the increasing importance of the environment, the necessity for organizations to resemble other organizations in their environment, and their perception of organizations as links in a chain. This study argues that, as suggested by institutional theories, the higher education systems of countries are becoming increasingly similar to each other thanks to the Bologna system. Efforts to align Türkiye's higher education system with the Bologna system are explored. The study concludes with a literature review using qualitative research methods.

Keywords: new institutional theory, isomorphism, Bologna system, higher education in Türkiye

Introduction

Research on institutionalization has been conducted to describe and explain the adaptation of organizations to their environment and to understand the relationship between the organization and the environment (Oliver 1988). The origins of institutionalization theory lay in the “natural systems model,” developed by Philip Selznick, a professor of law and sociology, in 1949. According to Selznick, organizations adapt not only to their internal structure but also to the values of the external society in order to survive (Scott 1995).

Although the foundations of institutional theory date back to Philip Selznick, its acceptance under the title of institutionalism came with Meyer and Rowan's article titled “Formal Structure as a Myth and Ceremony,” published in 1977. According to Meyer and Rowan,

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adaptation to the institutional environment is important for the survival of organizations (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Ritti and Silver 1986).

Institutional theory gained popularity with the 1991 study “The New Institutional Approach to Organizational Analysis” by DiMaggio and Powell. This study focused on the institutional pressures exerted by the environment on organizations and the issues of legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Within the framework of institutional theory, the issue of legitimacy and isomorphism is widely discussed (Greenwood 1996).

New institutional theory

The historical development of institutional theory can be categorized as the classical institutionalist period, the period when it began to be applied in organizations, the neo-institutionalist period, and the new approach period. However, in many studies, old institutionalism and new institutionalism are more prominent.

The most fundamental division among scholars arises in the definition of the concept of institution. Theorists of the old institutional theory define the organization itself as an institution, while those of the new institutional theory adopt the approach of expressing the environment as an institution.

According to Meyer and Rowan (1977), institutionalized products, services, techniques, policies, and programs are the organization's symbolic adaptation to its environment as a function of powerful myths. However, this adaptation sometimes conflicts with efficiency and effectiveness. Organizations conduct their activities not always for rationality, but rather to gain legitimacy and a place in society.

Meyer and Rowan emphasized that adapting to the institutional environment requires organizations to adopt legitimate institutional elements rather than relying on efficiency. They believed that using environmental values and criteria to determine the value of structural elements avoids environmental uncertainty by adapting to institutions, thus ensuring stability, and is a process that operates independently of organizational efficiency (Zucker 1987, 443-460).

The concept of fit defines the organizational environment and the characteristics of organizations. Burns and Stalker (1961) and Lawrence and Lorch (1967) view this fit between the organization and its environment as absolute. This emphasizes the decisive influence of the environment on the organization. The institutional approach conceptualizes the organizational environment as the organizational

field within which interacting organizations exert coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures (Palmer and Biggart 2002). Organizations copy each other's structures, processes, practices, strategies, and cultures, and adopt the behaviors of other organizations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Institutions operating within the same institutional environment exhibit significant similarities (Özkan-Canbolat and Çeliksoy 2018).

The new institutional approach views regulatory institutions, focal organizations, social pressures, partnership relationships, and social structural functions within the organizational field as the harmony between the organization and its external environment, and the pressures resulting from this harmony (Scott 2001). These pressures lead to the emergence of similar organizational forms, and similar organizational structures contribute to the homogenization of the field (Özkan-Canbolat and Çeliksoy 2018).

In their study, DiMaggio and Powell examined how organizations conform to social rules and conventions. They attempted to conceptualize the environmental pressures exerted on organizations. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), there are two primary sources of the process that drives organizations toward similarity: competitive pressures and institutional pressures. These pressures, over time, push organizations toward three types of similarity: coercive, prescriptive, and imitative similarity mechanisms. These include government regulations and legal obligations; prescriptive institutional pressures imposed by recommendations from professional organizations to which the organization is a member; and prescriptive institutional pressures imposed by the need for employee compliance after training; and imitative institutional pressures stemming from the desire to emulate other organizations. These three types of pressures exert pressure on organizations toward institutionalization (DiMaggio and Powell 1991, 149; Slack and Hinings 1994).

The environment has also been reconsidered within the framework of new institutional theory. New institutionalism prioritizes the institutional environment over the technical environment. This environment concerns the organization's compliance with social rules. Legitimacy is prioritized over efficiency. Organizations within the same environment have faced systematic and normative pressures. Organizations' adoption of an organizational form has been attributed to two factors: either the form is imposed by top management, or it is adopted because it is generally accepted in the field. Institutional

pressures have no productivity-enhancing effect (DiMaggio and Powell 1991, 361-365).

New institutionalists argued that institutional elements constantly come from outside the organization and that institutional elements coming from outside the organization initiate change in the organization (Zucker 1987, 443-446).

According to new institutional theory, social behavior requires observing what other organizations in the field are doing and adopting similar behaviors. One of the most important reasons for this necessity is the environment of uncertainty in which organizations operate and the constraints they face (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 147). The fundamental assumptions of the new institutional theory are that organizations reflect one another due to pressures and constraints. There is isomorphism among organizations. Organizational behavior is a result of habits and pressures. Organizations are viewed at the macro level. Accordingly, organizations are interdependent. Organizations must institutionalize to survive (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977).

Isomorphism

One of the concepts emphasized by the new institutional theory is “isomorphism.” DiMaggio and Powell (1983, 149) describe the process of homogenization in organizations with isomorphism.

Organizations may copy each other’s structures, strategies, and cultures, and even strive to adapt certain behaviors. Some believe that doing so will increase their chances of survival. These behaviors increase organizational isomorphism. Organizational isomorphism is the similarity between organizations within a system. Two primary factors drive organizations toward isomorphism: competitive and institutional pressures. Due to these pressures, organizations are forced to converge through three mechanisms: coercive, imitative, and prescriptive mechanisms (Scott 1995).

Isomorphism can be defined as the process of creating a uniform organization in which coercive institutional pressures, normative institutional pressures and imitative institutional pressures are effective on organizations within the same environmental conditions.

The reason for the similarity in organizational structures, processes, and practices is attributed to the various institutional pressures organizations within the same organizational field are subject to (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 150). DiMaggio and Powell (1983)

describe the reasons that push institutions toward isomorphism as competitive and institutional pressures. As a result of these pressures, competitive and institutional isomorphism occurs. What is important in a population of organizations is whether the number of organizations included in the population is a function of the organizational capacity of the environment (Ibid, 149). Here, isomorphism emerges more as a function of the environment.

Population ecology theorists Hannan and Freeman (1977) developed Hawley's (1968) definition of isomorphism and used the concept of competitive isomorphism for the first time.

According to population ecology, organizations within a population that face similar environmental conditions tend to be isomorphic in terms of the similar internal and external constraints they are exposed to (Chuang et al. 2000, 6).

Competitive isomorphism arises when an organization faces competitive pressures within the same environment. It is argued that market competition creates competitive isomorphism (Mizruchi and Fein 1999, 656-657). Competitive isomorphism occurs in areas where competition is open and free.

The desire to reduce risks in the technical environment leads to the emergence of competitive isomorphism. Organizations facing economic risk and their compliance with economic pressures to avoid the risk are examples of competitive isomorphism (Gürol 2005, 117).

Competitive isomorphism arises when organizations become more similar to each other in the process of meeting the expectations of the technical environment.

The concept of institutional isomorphism, first used by Kanter (1972) in organization studies, states that organizations become isomorphic with each other due to their institutional environments, and this is explained as the desire of organizations to gain legitimacy by adopting a common frame of reference.

Institutional isomorphism involves organizational competition. Similarity among organizations facilitates communication with other organizations. It facilitates the attainment of a special status in relations with other organizations in the field (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 153).

Institutional isomorphism encompasses similarity in both structure and application. Organizations in the same field, facing similar technical and institutional pressures, acquire structures and operations

that align with the expectations of their environment (Koçel 2001, 362).

DiMaggio and Powell (1983, 150) identify three mechanisms that bring about institutional isomorphism. The three mechanisms that fall under this classification are coercive/regulatory, mimetic, and normative institutional isomorphism: (1) “coercive/regulatory institutional isomorphism,” resulting from political influences and legislation; (2) “mimetic institutional isomorphism,” resulting from an environment of uncertainty; and (3) “normative institutional isomorphism,” related to occupational specialization.

Compelling factors can be defined as all pressures, primarily from government and international actors, that push organizations to be similar to one another (Slack and Hinings 1994). These pressures are exerted both formally and informally. The organization is driven to engage in certain behaviors against its will through forces such as coercion, persuasion, and invitation (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

Coercive isomorphism is authoritarian. In this context, legal regulations are a significant factor influencing organizational behavior. It addresses the effects of specific pressures on organizations and their behavior, reinforced by imposed punishments and rewards. Legal regulations are the most obvious example.

The regulatory nature of institutions indicates that organizational practices are orderly. Institutions shape human behavior through authority, ensuring its orderliness. At the same time, orderly processes monitor whether others are complying with these rules and, if necessary, intervene through punishment or reward, thus influencing the future behavior of organizations and states.

Institutional isomorphism cannot always be achieved through pressure and authority alone. Organizations seeking to overcome uncertainty often resort to mimetic isomorphism. They shape organizations and their behaviors by accepting assumptions based on common denominators.

According to Meyer and Rowan, the biggest factor causing isomorphism in organizations is the efforts to gain legitimacy. Normative isomorphism arises from specialization. The existence of professionals working in different organizations who are influential in their companies' practices, and the increasing similarity of these individuals across organizations, creates normative isomorphism through specialization (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). It is aimed to influence organizations and their behaviors in order to establish the

appropriate method that will lead organizations to success, taking into account social obligations and expectations.

The normative nature of institutions signifies the organization's formalism. Normative rules constitute the orderly, obligatory aspect of social life. Values and norms are the most important indicators of the normative nature of institutions. Values are a necessary element in establishing standards. Standards, in turn, serve to evaluate and measure behavior. Norms inform us about how things should be done, indicate the necessary paths to achieve goals and use legal terms.

Method of the study

Relevant legal regulations and activities in the public sector demonstrate the isomorphism within the field. Understanding whether institutionalization has occurred from the perspective of new institutional theory is possible by examining the structure, processes, and practices of organizations.

The study argues that the Bologna system has led to the isomorphism of states' higher education systems. Isomorphism, when evaluated within the context of the new institutional theory, can be defined as sharing the same characteristics. Türkiye's higher education system, when evaluated within the context of the new institutional theory, is becoming institutionalized and is striving to become isomorphic with the higher education systems of member states of the Bologna system.

The study utilizes a literature review technique, a qualitative research method. The legal, administrative, and structural reforms implemented by Türkiye to align with the Bologna system are examined.

Bologna system

The Bologna system is a reform process that began in 1999 and aims to create a European Higher Education Area. Its aim is to make higher education systems across Europe more harmonious, transparent, and competitive. It is so named because it began with a declaration signed in Bologna, Italy. The process's primary objective is to facilitate the mobility of international students and academics and increase the recognition of degrees earned within Europe.

The Bologna Process envisages some important changes in higher education systems in line with the determined objectives (<https://ec.europa.eu>): Three-Tier Degree Structure: Higher education

is divided into three main degrees: bachelor's, master's, and doctoral. This structure makes programs more understandable and comparable; European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS): This system expresses students' total workload in an academic year in units of credit. This allows students to easily transfer courses between universities in different countries and achieve diploma equivalence. An academic year is generally equivalent to 60 ECTS credits; Diploma Supplement: This document, issued in addition to the student's diploma, provides a detailed explanation of the program the student completed, the courses taken, their grades, and their qualifications; Increasing Mobility: This process encourages students and academics to travel from one country to another for education or research. Programs like Erasmus+ are important tools for this purpose; Quality Assurance: Higher education institutions must demonstrate that they provide education that meets established quality standards. This aims to continuously improve the quality of education.

Rather than a static system, the Bologna Process is dynamic and constantly evolving. It aims to improve the quality and competitiveness of higher education in Europe, while maintaining a balance of adaptability and flexibility rather than completely standardizing countries' education systems.

Expansion of the Bologna system

The Bologna Process was introduced in 1999. The Bologna Conference was held on June 19, 1999. With this conference, 29 countries joined the process. These initial countries were: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and Ireland (<https://bologna.deu.edu.tr>).

The system underwent its second expansion at the Prague Ministerial Conference held on May 19, 2001. With this meeting, four new countries joined the system, bringing the total number to 33. Croatia, Cyprus, Liechtenstein and Türkiye are the countries that joined the system at this meeting (Ibidem).

September 19, 2003, Albania, Andorra, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Vatican Republic, the Russian Federation, Serbia and Montenegro, and North Macedonia joined the process. With these participations, the total number of member states increased to 40. (Ibid.) Armenia,

Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine joined the system at the Bergen Ministerial Conference held on 18-19 May 2005. Thus, the number of member states became 45. (Ibid.) When Montenegro joined the system with the London Ministerial Conference in 2007, the number of member states became 46. (Ibid.) At the Budapest-Vienna Ministerial Meeting held on 11-12 March 2010, Kazakhstan joined the member states and the total number of member states became 47. (Ibid.) Belarus was added to the list of countries participating in the Bologna Process in 2015, and San Marino in 2020. The inclusiveness of the European Higher Education Area has now expanded to a very wide area, with 49 countries becoming members (<https://www.yok.gov.tr>).

The process has undergone various advances throughout history. Throughout history, the scope of the Bologna Process has continually expanded, and new objectives have been brought into discussion. These are, in order and in summary, as follows:

- Establishing a synergy between the European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area
 - Recognition of higher education diplomas and/or degrees and study periods
 - Strengthening the social dimension of the Bologna Process
 - Joint higher education programs, including doctoral programs
 - Creating flexible learning paths in higher education
 - To develop the applications of national qualifications frameworks
- (<https://hacibayram.edu.tr>).

European Qualifications Framework

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is a reference system created by the European Union to facilitate understanding and comparison of qualifications across countries and education systems. Its primary purpose is to support the mobility of individuals in education and employment and to promote lifelong learning. The EQF provides a common language for defining the value of diplomas, certificates, and other qualifications obtained in different countries. This makes it easy to understand what level an educational or vocational qualification in one country corresponds to in another European country.

The foundation of this process was laid with the “Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in the European Region,” signed in Lisbon in 1997, and the “Sorbon Declaration,”

published in 1998. The Council of Europe, together with UNESCO, concluded the Lisbon Recognition Convention on 11 April 1997 to recognize diplomas and degrees related to higher education in the European Region. The Lisbon Recognition Convention is a legally binding document that determines the procedures for the recognition of degrees and periods of study obtained from another country in the European Region. The Convention aims to determine the true place of foreign diplomas in the education system and/or business sector of the host country. In this context, the Convention covers not only higher education but also secondary education degrees that provide access to higher education and is directly concerned with academic recognition (www.yok.gov.tr).

Türkiye signed the Agreement on December 1, 2004, and it entered into force on March 1, 2007. The Sorbonne Declaration was published in 1998 following a meeting of the Education Ministers of France, Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom at the Sorbonne. The Sorbonne Declaration brought the idea of creating a common higher education area in Europe to the forefront, and the first steps of the Bologna Process were taken. (Ibid.)

Turkish Qualifications Framework

Türkiye has developed its own Turkish Qualifications Framework, aligned with the European Qualifications Framework. This enables the mapping of Turkish qualifications to the European Qualifications Framework and facilitates the recognition of Turkish citizens' qualifications in Europe. The Turkish Qualifications Framework is a national system developed to define, classify, and compare all qualifications in Türkiye (e.g., diplomas, certificates, and vocational qualification documents). Designed in line with the European Qualifications Framework, the Turkish Qualifications Framework covers qualifications acquired through all learning pathways, including primary, secondary, and higher education, as well as vocational, general, and academic education programs (<https://www.tyc.gov.tr>).

The Turkish Qualifications Framework consists of eight levels. Each level is defined according to learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills, and competencies. Level descriptors determine which level qualifications are placed at. The aim is to ensure that qualifications are transparent, comparable, and portable, to increase compatibility between education and the labor market, to facilitate the recognition of prior learning and the transition between qualifications,

and to increase individual mobility by supporting international recognition. (Ibid.)

The Turkish Qualifications Framework, implemented under the coordination of the Ministry of National Education, the Council of Higher Education, and the Vocational Qualifications Authority, includes all quality-assured qualifications. Over time, qualifications from other institutions will also be incorporated into the system (www.yok.gov.tr).

The Turkish Qualifications Framework includes education and training qualifications under the authority and responsibility of the Ministry of National Education, qualifications under the responsibility of the Vocational Qualifications Authority under Law No. 5544, higher education qualifications under the responsibility of the Council of Higher Education, and also qualifications under the authority and responsibility of other responsible institutions. Prepared in cooperation with public institutions and organizations, especially the Ministry of National Education and the Council of Higher Education, labor and employer unions, professional organizations, and relevant non-governmental organizations, with the participation of national and international experts and academics, the “Regulation on the Procedures and Principles Concerning the Implementation of the Turkish Qualifications Framework” was published in the Official Gazette dated 19/10/2015 and numbered 29537 by the Decision numbered 2015/8213 of the Council of Ministers and entered into force upon its publication in the Official Gazette dated 19/10/2015 and numbered 29537. The “Communiqué on the Turkish Qualifications Framework and its annex, the Turkish Qualifications Framework,” prepared in accordance with the aforementioned Regulation, entered into force upon its publication in the Official Gazette dated 2/1/2016 and numbered 29581. In line with the Regulation on the Procedures and Principles Regarding the Implementation of the Turkish Qualifications Framework, it is aimed to bring together the existing qualifications in our country in a comprehensive manner, to increase the quality of qualifications, to popularize and systematically support lifelong learning, to meet the highest level of national and international transparency and recognition, and to create education and employment opportunities for all individuals of the society. (Ibid.)

Qualification types represent qualification groups within the Turkish Qualifications Framework that are at the same level and are similar in terms of their functions, learning outcomes, credit values, or

general, vocational, and academic orientations. Qualification types are not associated with a specific learning field (<https://www.tyc.gov.tr>).

Conclusion

Institutional theory completed its institutionalization in theory and practice in the 1980s and made its impact felt. Institutionalization can be defined as the degree to which organizational decisions gain acceptance in the environment and as a process that ensures organizational cohesion. The fundamental problem of institutional theory is to explain why organizations resemble one another. Accordingly, organizations emulate one another through legal, imitative, and regulatory means to survive, gain legitimacy, avoid uncertainty, and succeed. Institutionalism is a theory that posits that organizations are constructed by the phenomena in their institutional environments and tend to resemble them, and that formal organizations adapt to their institutional environments through technical and transformational interdependencies. One of the concepts that new institutionalists emphasize is isomorphism. The process of homogenization can also be explained through isomorphism. Therefore, Türkiye has implemented legal regulations to align with the legitimacy of the Bologna system and other states. Isomorphism encompasses a complex of structures, processes, and practices. Participation in the Bologna system and the development of a Turkish Qualifications Framework aligned with the European Qualifications Framework are steps taken to achieve isomorphism within the same scope.

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