

Project Funds As a Management Model and Alignment of EU Funded Special Education Projects with National Policies in Turkey

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Abstract

This study seeks to assess the extent to which EU-funded projects administered by schools and other institutions are aligned with the strategic priorities adopted by Turkey's Ministry of National Education (MoNE). With this objective in mind, the thematic distributions of projects in the field of special needs education were examined and the policy priorities stated in documents composed by MoNE were comparatively evaluated. The study followed a qualitative research model by conducting document analysis to inspect a total of 158 Erasmus+ projects funded by the EU between 2012 and 2017. The projects were analyzed according to their numerical and financial distributions by year, geographical region, institution type, and disabled groups within the target population. Furthermore, content analysis was applied to examine projects' thematic distributions. The study concluded that project funds are disproportionately distributed to institution types, target groups, and geographical regions and that projects' strategic alignment with Ministry policies needs to be strengthened, especially in terms of how project funds are used. Finally, it is recommended that the distribution and use of international funds be structured in line with the policy priorities adopted by the Turkish National Education System and that cooperation between policy makers and executors not only in the allocation of funds but also in their administrative, financial, and legal management processes be strengthened.

Key words: Project management, EU-funded projects, Erasmus+ projects, Special needs education.

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Introduction

Traditional public financing in Turkey is based on the principal of appropriating central funds to administrative bodies in order to execute specific standard duties defined by the central administration. In recent years, national and international project funds have emerged as a management strategy encouraged by original ideas and supported by innovative practices. Defined by general principles and strategic priorities, this new project-based financing model not only constitutes an alternative to overly centralized administrative approaches by supporting recommendations for solutions to local problems and needs but also engenders decentralization and increased administrative capacity. Beginning with membership negotiations with the European Union (EU) in general and at the dawn of the 2000s in particular, a wide variety of integration projects in harmony with the objective to ‘expedite the alignment process’ and financed by shared EU funds became widespread. Projects supported as part of the Erasmus+ Program may be grouped under the following three main types of activities, namely (i) *individuals’ learning mobility*, (ii) *cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices*, and (iii) *supporting policy reform* (Turkish National Agency [TNA], 2018). An examination of the total number and financial magnitude of such projects reveals that 21 thousand projects with a total budget of 2.2 billion Euros falling under the umbrella of Erasmus+ in which roughly 750 thousand students and 79 thousand institutions and organizations were either directly or indirectly supported throughout Europe in 2016. The predicted budget for the 2014-2020 implementation period of said program is 16.3 billion Euros (European Commission [EC], 2017).

Endeavors including specific goals and activities directed toward disadvantaged groups are given priority in projects receiving EU funds. As such, projects designed specifically for individuals in need of special education frequently receive support. Because the EU gives them strategic priority in funding, this study focuses on projects within the field of special education. The education of individuals in need of special education is coordinated by the General Directorate for Special Education and Guidance Services affiliated to MoNE. This study is restricted to EU-supported projects administered by the general directorate responsible for the coordination of special education services and its subsidiary organizations. Barring the exceptional situations, inclusive education in the same physical location as their peers exhibiting typical development is prioritized in education for individuals requiring special needs education. As such, statistics published by MoNE indicate that nearly 350 thousand students are identified as requiring special needs education (MoNE, 2018). Of these students, approximately 260 thousand, or roughly 75%, take part in inclusive education. Considering that approximately 18 million students receive compulsory education, including pre-school students, roughly 2% of students in Turkey are recipients of special needs education. As such, EU-supported projects address an important body of students and have wide sphere of influence.

An investigation of the priority problems within the field of special needs education reveals there to be a myriad of deep-seated problems ranging from teaching programs and materials to teacher education in a variety of areas. Upon the examination of MoNE's 2015-2019 strategic plan (MoNE, 2015) found that MoNE's strategic priorities in the field of special needs education fall under seven main areas: (i) *disadvantaged groups' access to education*, (ii) *strengthening pedagogical diagnosis*, (iii) *increasing the quality of human resources*, (iv) *strengthening gifted students' education*, (v) *updating teacher programs*, (vi) *increasing the employment capacity in special needs education*, and (vii) *improving the physical conditions of institutions providing special needs education*. The same plan emphasizes the urgency for project to be increased so that students in need of special services in education may attain greater access to high-quality education. MoNE-initiated projects funded by various financial sources, be they projects that MoNE administers within its own institutional body or projects administered by subordinate institutions, are expected to focus on the priority problems emphasized in MoNE's strategic plans. It is for this reason that a discussion on the degree of alignment between EU-supported projects in the field of special needs education and MoNE's strategic priorities is deemed important.

Supporting official and civil initiatives focusing on a wide target population ranging from pre-school to higher education and even including non-formal education, EU funds provide important opportunities to schools and institutions subordinate to MoNE. Constituting an important financial resource in and of themselves, these projects, more than being simply budgets allotted for standard expenses, offer novel opportunities to schools seeking to improve human resources and encourage innovative applications. Kesik and Balcı (2015) emphasize the benefits of EU projects for schools in the following areas: (i) institutional development, (ii) personal/vocational development, (iii) social development, and (iv) foreign language learning and cultural development. In a separate study, Küçük (2007) discusses how EU grant projects work to promote regional development in light of the NUTS-2 example. In addition to studies examining the effects of internationally funded projects on different aspects of the education system (Akyüz, 2012; Anıl, 2006; Demir, 2011; Topsakal, 2003), several researchers (Güler, 2011; Küçükler & Gürbüz, 2012) have conducted paradigmatic inquiries examining the effects of social transformation and political relationships.

Among the more distinct benefits that EU-funded projects in the field of education entail are (i) promoting civil society initiatives in education processes, (ii) helping different stakeholders in education (e.g., students, parents, teachers, and school administrators) take on active roles in solving education-related problems, and (iii) supporting diversity in education. There exists a limited number of impact analyses on EU projects and those that do exist have limited themselves to assessing the effects of these projects on staff members and institutions (TNA, 2017; EC, 2014). In addition, studies examining the development processes and priority problem areas of projects supported by EU funds

and evaluating strategic alignment from the perspective of efficient resource management are limited. With this in mind, we assert the importance of performing a macro-level assessments measuring the extent to which MoNE's short-, medium-, and long-term strategies align with the use EU funds. Considering that these funds are essentially not grants, but constitute shared funds provided by countries' own budgets, it is important to focus on whether they are used in line with MoNE's general policies and strategies. The current study, therefore, seeks to assess whether the use of funds by schools subordinate to MoNE is in line with MoNE's general policies and strategies, considering that these funds are themselves subject to the independent auditing of EU-dependent institutions. The conformity to regulations and cost audits of projects proposed to and accepted by TNA are undertaken by the European Commission under the jurisdiction of TNA without input by MoNE (MoNE, 2016). The fact that MoNE's hand is bound during the administration and auditing processes of these projects increases the importance of these projects' being assessed from a policy and strategic standpoint. Our review of the literature reveals the academic studies conducted thus far in these areas and the policy analyses done from a management sciences perspective to be insufficient. Considering the financial magnitude of the projects under examination in this study, we expect our study to make vital and original contributions to the relevant literature.

In the conceptual framework adopted, the fundamental objective of this study is to evaluate to what extent EU-funded projects carried out by schools and institutions are aligned with MoNE's strategic priorities. Bearing this objective in mind, we examined number of projects' and distributions by geographical region, institution type, and disabled groups within the greater target population. We furthermore examined the thematic distributions of projects and then comparatively evaluated them with the priorities delineated in MoNE's strategic plans.

Method

Research Model

The current study employs a qualitative case study design. Case studies allow researchers the opportunity to perform in-depth investigations of a previously untreated phenomenon or event by asking how and why. One of the main methods used in case studies is document analysis, which is based on the examination of written and visual resources related to the research topic (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). The current study used document analysis to examine a total of 158 Erasmus+ projects funded by the EU between 2012 and 2017. Based on data collected by both TNA and the General Directorate of Special Education Guidance Services, those projects administered by schools and institutions receiving support from TNA were subject to document analysis in the current study.

Data Collection Process

During the data collection process, we first listed projects that were part of Erasmus+ program qualifying for financial support and announced to the public by TNA during every project period between 2012-2017. In the second stage, we selected those projects prepared by schools and institutions that pertained to the field of special needs education among all of the projects earning funding. A total of 158 projects presented by the General Directorate of Special Education and Guidance Services and subordinate institutions to and accepted by TNA were examined in the current study. The websites run by the General Directorate of Special Education and Guidance Services and the schools and institutions that administered these projects provided us with detailed information on them. In the event that we were unable to access the necessary information from their relevant sources, we obtained the project's details by scanning through EU databases. We did not obtain specific permission from institutions when collecting the data used for the analyses because they were openly available to the public.

Data Analysis

The data were subjected to a qualitative content analysis. Following this analysis, the researchers coded the projects by theme after attaining their details from TNA publications and relevant institutions' websites. Because the projects generally included activities aiming to fulfill more than one goal, such as vocational development, cultural interaction, and sharing both information and experience, they were coded according to their most prominent goals after assessing their priorities and the frequency of their activities. Main themes were developed based on the codes described in the first phase and the percentages and frequencies of themes were analyzed. Furthermore, the projects and themes developed for this study were examined and assessed by year, region, institution type, disabled groups within the target population, and project budget. To ensure the study's validity and reliability, the researchers first coded the data separately and then compared their own codes. The researchers were also careful to include a wide variety of subject matters in the data. As a result, the researchers reached a consistency level of over 80% in the themes. To increase external consistency during the thematic coding phase, the researchers strove to ensure that themes formed a meaningful whole and included every data set (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). By presenting the data in the form of crosstabs during categorization, we were able to bolster the study's reliability even further. Experts on thematic grouping were also consulted to strengthen the study's validity further. In order to allow future researchers the ability to reassess the study's validity and reliability results, we defined in intricate detail the data sources, the data collection and analysis processes, and the other stages of the study.

Findings

The research data were first categorized based on year, region, institution type, and type of special education needs. The number of projects and their budgets were examined following this categorization. Table 1 shows projects' distributions by geographic region and year.

Table 1. Distribution of Project Funds by Geographic Region and Year

Region	Year						Total Projects		Total Budget	
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	N	%	N	%
Mediterranean	2	2	4	2	4	5	19	12.03	460,699	8.83
Aegean	-	-	-	1	2	6	9	5.70	261,676	5.02
Marmara	1	4	3	4	2	9	23	14.56	600,349	11.51
Black Sea	2	4	3	8	4	8	29	18.35	1,006,369	19.30
East Anatolia	2	-	-	3	-	3	8	5.06	135,307	2.59
Southeast Anatolia	1	-	-	4	1	-	6	3.80	175,280	0.34
Central Anatolia	3	7	1	8	6	3	28	17.72	1,401,000	26.86
Ankara	4	1	1	4	1	2	13	8.23	486,729	9.33
Istanbul	1	3	2	3	3	4	16	10.13	495,976	9.51
Izmir	1	-	1	2	2	1	7	4.43	191,753	3.68
Total	17	21	15	39	25	41	158	100.00	5,215,038	100.00

* Due to their being the largest industrial cities with the highest immigration rates and population density in Turkey, the three cities of Ankara, Istanbul, and Izmir were evaluated separately from the geographic regions of which they are a part.

The examination of Table 1 shows that, the Black Sea Region has the highest number of actual projects having received funds whereas Central Anatolia received the highest amount of money though funding. The number of supported projects and their budgets reveals that the population distribution of regions and counties is uneven. For example, despite the fact that Istanbul is nearly three times more populated than Ankara, the budgets and number of projects of these two cities are very close to each other. It would therefore be erroneous to state that project funds were equitably distributed throughout the various regions and provinces of Turkey.

Table 2 depicts project distributions by the type of institution providing special needs education and year.

Table 2. Distribution of Project Funds by Institution Type and Year

Institution Type	Total Number of Institutions	Years						Total Projects		Total Budget	
		2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	N	%	N	%
Applied Special Education School (I-II-III)	867	3	6	5	14	8	5	41	25.95	1,139,049	21.84
Science and Arts Center	135	3	4	4	9	8	12	40	25.32	974,756	18.69
Guidance and Research Center	238	4	6	2	5	-	1	18	11.39	686,847	13.17
Special Education Vocational School	149	3	3	1	7	7	20	41	25.95	1,477,561	28.33
School of the Hearing Impaired	35	2	1	3	3	2	2	13	8.23	775,640	14.87
School for the Visually Impaired	17	1	-	-	1	-	-	2	1.27	61,703	1.18
Vocational High School for the Hearing Impaired	20	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	0.63	50,031	0.96
Schools for the Orthopedically Impaired	3	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	0.63	23,000	0.44
General Directorate	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	0.63	26,424	0.51
Total	1,465	17	21	15	39	25	41	158	100.00	5,215,038	100.00

Table 2 illustrates that of all types of institutions, vocational schools receive the greatest portion of funds and that projects' numerical and budgetary distributions are not proportional. The number of projects funded in (i) Applied Special Education Schools, (ii) Special Education Vocational Schools, and (iii) Science and Arts Centers are nearly the same, with the first two receiving the highest number (n=41) of projects funded. Though not specifically reflected in Table 2, a close inspection of projects' distributions by institution type reveals that certain types of institutions benefited from an exceptionally high number of supported projects.

To reach a more lucid understanding of EU-funded project distributions by institution type, distributions for the type of needs addressed in special needs education were also examined. Table 3 presents the related findings.

Table 3. Distribution of Project Funds by Special Education Need and Year

Institution Type	Years						Total Projects		Total Budget	
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	N	%	N	%
Visually Impaired	1	-	-	1	-	-	2	1.27	61,703	1.18
Physically Impaired	-	1	-	1	-	-	2	1.27	56,150	1.08
Hearing Impaired	3	2	3	4	2	2	16	10.13	878,491	16.85
Intellectual Giftedness	3	4	4	10	8	13	42	26.58	1,074,481	20.60
Mentally Impaired	10	9	7	20	26	15	87	55.06	2,853,007	54.71

Other	-	5	1	3	-	-	9	5.70	291,206	5.58
Total							158	100.00	5,215,038	100.00

According to 2018 statistics (MoNE, 2018), 33,720 students studying in Science and Art Centers received supportive education in 2018. With this in mind, the data in Table 3 reveal that this particular group receives a relatively higher proportion of supportive education services than all other groups.

In order to examine projects' themes, the researchers coded the subject matter of each project and defined both themes and subthemes. Both the main and subthemes pertaining to projects are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Analysis of Project Themes

Main Themes	Sub-Themes	<i>f</i>	%	Budget (€)	%
Education Processes	Teaching Methods and Techniques	39	24.68	1,005,327	19.28
	Vocational Education	34	21.52	1,256,686	24.10
	Knowledge and Experience Sharing	11	6.96	219,308	4.21
	Teacher Qualifications	15	9.49	519,957	9.97
	Family Education and School-Parent Cooperation	4	2.53	189,023	3.62
	Pedagogical Diagnosis	3	1.90	142,350	2.73
	Inclusive Education	1	0.63	12,492	0.24
	Total	107	67.72	3,345,143	64.14
Social Integration	Communication	10	6.33	569,542	10.92
	Art Education	9	5.70	218,688	4.19
	Social Skills Education	4	2.53	207,437	3.98
	Social Awareness	8	5.06	342,271	6.56
	Total	31	19.62	1,337,938	25.66
Intercultural Interaction	Nature Education	7	4.43	167,620	3.21
	EU Awareness	3	1.90	69,000	1.32
	Communication	8	5.06	239,638	4.60
	Democracy Education	1	0.63	24,234	0.46
	Foreign Language Education	1	0.63	31,465	0.60
	Total	20	12.66	531,957	10.20
Grand Total		158	100.00	5,215,038	100.00

Table 4 reveals that funds were allotted to three main themes, namely (i) *education processes*, (ii), *social integration* and (iii) *intercultural interaction*. When the proportional distributions of the number of EU-funded projects are examined by theme, we observe that a significant proportion (i.e., 67.7%) is related to education processes. An examination of subthemes reveals that the greatest share of EU projects focus on (i) vocational education and (ii) teaching methods and techniques.

Discussion

A major imbalance is witnessed in the projects' distributions both at the regional level and in terms of population ratios. A similar imbalance is witnessed in how project funds are distributed to the various types of institutions and special needs types. For example, despite their large difference in population, the number of EU-funded projects in Istanbul and Ankara are roughly the same. In absolute terms, the Black Sea region had the highest number of projects whereas Central Anatolia alone received roughly 25% of the entire budget allotted to Turkey. An assessment of institution types shows that although there are a total of 135 Science and Arts Centers and 867 Applied Special Education Schools throughout Turkey, the same number of projects realized in both types of institutions was nearly identical (40 and 41, respectively). Furthermore, attention should be brought both to the high amount of support for projects received by certain institutions and to the disproportionate distribution of projects in terms of how project funds are used in favor of institutions with in-depth experience preparing and administering projects. Consequently, measures should be taken to ensure the balanced distribution of project resources. One such measure might be to increase publicity and awareness programs directed to education stakeholders in regions where both financial support and the number of applications are low. Türkoğlu and Türkoğlu (2006) state that programs publicizing EU projects are both insufficient in terms of quantity and quality. Furthermore, we recommend imposing quotas and that those institutions that have already received funding for more than one project be subjected to different assessment criteria.

Upon examination of EU-funded projects, the current study found that the three main themes of *social integration*, *education processes*, and *intercultural interaction* were given priority in funding. Those projects related to education processes received the highest proportion of funds and were followed by projects related to social integration and intercultural interactions, respectively. These results are partially consistent with the classification done by Yıldırım-Doğru, Özlü, Kaңeşme, and Doğru (2014). In their study, Yıldırım et al. (2014) examined the distributions of subject matters in national and international special needs education projects, stating that the two most frequently emerging themes were *education* and *social life*. There appeared to be several inconsistencies between the priorities that emerged as a result of the thematic analysis for projects and those stated in official documents by MoNE. The strategic priorities within the field of special needs education embraced by MoNE fall under seven main areas, namely: (i) *disadvantaged groups' access to education*, (ii) *strengthening pedagogical diagnosis*, (iii) *increasing the quality of human resources*, (iv) *strengthening gifted students' education*, (v) *updating teacher programs*, (vi) *increasing the employment capacity in special needs education*, and (vii) *improving the physical conditions of institutions providing special needs education* (MoNE, 2015). More specifically, MoNE's strategic priorities of updating teaching programs, increasing disadvantaged groups' access to education, and

strengthening pedagogical diagnosis have received little or no financial support from EU projects. However, EU projects do support some of MoNE's policies, like improving teacher qualifications and facilitating disabled individuals' active participation in social and professional life. Projects' strategic alignment with MoNE's policies needs to be strengthened, especially in terms of how project funds are used. The distribution and use of international funds needs to be structured according to the policy priorities of the Turkish National Education System. As such, considering the constraints on mechanisms coordinating and auditing the alignment between EU funds and general policies, we recommend that coordination between policy makers and practitioners in fund distribution processes be strengthened. We also recommend that the phenomenon of strategic dissonance discussed within the bounds of special needs education in this study be investigated more in-depth through research on different project areas. In the literature, one encounters studies investigating, among other effects, the academic, institutional, personal, professional, and social effects of EU projects in different areas (Aydoğan & Şahin, 2006; Demir, 2011; Güler, 2011; Kesik ve Balcı, 2015; Küçük ve Gürbüz, 2012; Topsakal, 2003),

Because there is no easily accessible central database containing information related to EU-funded projects, we experienced difficulty during the data collection process. We therefore recommend that in order to increase projects' sustainability and area of effect, the objectives, results, and basic information for all EU-funded projects be brought into a central database that allows policy makers and practitioners the functional access necessary to conduct more robust analyses and policy-related programs.

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