

Participant Perceptions On Career Fairs: The Case Of Dakaf'22

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to reveal the perception of public and private sector institutions/organizations and NGOs within the target group of Regional Career Fairs (RCFs), organized with the motto of "Talent is Everywhere" in Türkiye, through Atatürk University and its students, and Regional Career Fairs and Eastern Anatolia Career Fair-2022 (DAKAF'22). It will also help employers provide feedback to the RCFs held regularly at the national level since 2019 and contribute to the still-developing national literature based on the DAKAF'22 example.

A university hosted the RCFs under the coordination of the Presidential Human Resources Office (PHRO) and with the fellowship of other universities designated by the PHRO within the region. Its objective was to bring together students from RCFs, public and private sector institutions/organizations, and host and partner universities, thuswise facilitating students' access to job and internship opportunities, regardless of the advantages and disadvantages associated with the regional disparities of the universities they receive an education. The purposes of this research, designed based on the objectives of RCFs as outlined by the PHRO, were to identify the perceptions and assessments of participating employer representatives towards Atatürk University and its students, RCFs, and DAKAF'22 using that year's event as an example. In line with the research objective, 123 employers that participated in the DAKAF'22 and completed the Likert-type scale, specially developed for the current study, during the fair days provided quantitative data. The study analyzed the collected quantitative data through simple and complex statistical techniques. As a result, the study concluded that participants considered career fairs essential in accessing skilled labor and that the fairs potentially offer substantial employment opportunities to students.

Keywords: Regional Career Fair, Eastern Anatolia Career Fair-2022 (DAKAF'22), Atatürk University, Employer, Perception.

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I. Introduction

Choosing a profession and a job is undoubtedly one of the most crucial elements that substantially impact human life. A poorly made decision at this critical stage may adversely affect a person's entire life (Greenhaus and Callanan, 2006). The time spent in higher education seemingly stands out as the most decisive period in choosing a job or career in this context. However, a formal education that focuses solely on occupational standards is insufficient to open the door to a successful future career that individuals expect to pursue. Keeping up with the rapidly changing business life and making a successful career plan is only attainable through pursuing an education supported by practical experiences.

With a traditional strategy, providing such practical experiences to the students is possible with numerous internship programs and applied training. However, nowadays, the Career Fairs organized regionally also offer critical opportunities that bring together students, new graduates, and employers. In this context, Regional Career Fairs (RCFs), organized by the Presidency Human Resources Office (PHRO) in Türkiye since 2019 under the motto "Talent is Everywhere," stands out as organizations providing critical opportunities to students. Every year, RCFs are held at a university, coordinated by the PHRO, in collaboration with universities designated by the PHRO in the region. The key intention of the RCFs is to bring together public and private sector institutions/organizations and students, thereby facilitating university students' access to job and internship opportunities (www.cbiko.gov.tr).

With this in mind, this study will primarily discuss the Career Fairs, which are regionally held in Türkiye under the coordination of PHRO, from the perspective of employer representatives in the example of the Eastern Anatolia Career Fair-2022 (DAKAF'22), and by doing so, it will strive to identify the areas that, if any, require

improvement. Studying in this manner will allow us to understand the perception of employer representatives towards Atatürk University, its students, regional career fairs, and the Eastern Anatolia Career Fair-2022 (DAKAF'22). In this context, the following sections below will initially outline the conceptual framework for the topic in a way that summarizes relevant national and international literature. The subsequent text will cover the 'material and method' and 'results' sections, respectively, discussing the study-related findings. Finally, the study will end with a conclusion and discussion section.

Conceptual Framework

This section will summarize the career concept and its significance, which serves as the basis of the research, career centers and their roles in the career planning process, and the Career Fairs organized by the Human Resources Office of the Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye will be presented relying on the relevant literature.

II. Career Concept and its Significance

The term 'career' refers to a conceptualization as step-by-step and continuous progression, attaining expertise and skills in any business domain during the employment course (Taşlıyan, Arı, Duzman, 2011: 233). According to another conceptual definition, the term 'career' indicates individuals' employment histories, the sequences and patterns in occupations and employment positions, and typically upward progression in their profession and personal life (Greenhaus and Callanan, 2006). The aspects of a career as a concept describing a process, not a point, come to the fore in all varying definitions of the career concept.

The career development process that should be considered in this context refers to all the actions taken to ensure harmony and development among the roles undertaken by a person throughout the lifespan (Güldü and Kart, 2017: 378). The process of career development begins with career choice. Individuals make career decisions in various settings (space and time) with the influence of several factors. Four factors basically influence career choice. These are the individual's area of interest, self-acquaintance, personality, and social environment (Wilton, 2011). Individuals strive to choose the domain they wish to pursue a career, develop personally, and progress under the guidance of these variables. In other words, individuals experience career planning in various circumstances, influenced by both personal and societal perspectives.

Career planning is a process that applies the responsibility of organizations as well as individuals, and an organization should provide prospects for its employees to actualize their career plans and equip the necessary information, including skill improvement opportunities for their career development. The most fundamental way of offering such opportunities is to provide training within the organization (Güldü and Kart, 2017: 380). In this context, university students and fresh graduates are exceptionally perceptive to career opportunities, although they retain little experience in career planning. All kinds of activities that potentially raise awareness about career planning and enable students to establish various connections are vitally valuable for university students who can be defined as yet to begin their career planning process and graduates who have yet to involve in business life.

III. The Role of Career Centers in the Career Planning Process

Studies focusing on training skilled personnel in the business world have recently grown in popularity due to the competition in higher education brought on by the expansion of education and training services. In universities, the significance of education, one of the factors influencing personal career planning, has increased dramatically. Within the context of support services, especially in these institutions, career development, and consulting services—both components of education—have also begun to be offered (Cevher, 2013: 170).

As a tool for career management, career centers are intra-organizations that enable people to assess themselves and offer training and consulting services. In addition to organizing courses, facilitating career planning and counseling, these centers also assist individuals in locating relevant employment opportunities. They also plan internal and external training programs and announce job openings (Ünver, 2005: 42).

Businesses employ a variety of methods while selecting their personnel. These methods correspond to benefitting from internal and external resources (Akbaba and Günlü, 2011). The promotion or transfer of the currently employed staff in the enterprise refers to a method of internal resources usage. It is not always possible to provide all personnel needs from internal sources. The outsourcing method is necessary at this point (Şahin, Kafa, and Korkmaz, 2021). The most frequently used outsourcing components include getting a CV, using intermediaries, and acquiring assistance from İŞKUR, the Internet, or educational institutions. Career day activities and career fairs organized by universities at various times especially offer significant opportunities for businesses or institutions to find staff and address the demands of students in search of internships and jobs. Local university career centers also host career fairs under the coordination of PHRO. By serving this crucial purpose, career centers act as a bridge between employers and students.

In the time leading up to graduation, there should be more emphasis on students utilizing internship opportunities and learning about real business life. At this point, career fairs present significant prospects for both students and recent alumni. An in-depth evaluation of career fairs, which include applications such as various

promotions, seminars, and interview simulations, in terms of both effectiveness and participant perception, contributes to the efficacy of all future fairs.

IV. Career Fairs Organized by the Human Resources Office of the Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye

Career fairs offer significant benefits in learning about various job opportunities for students, familiarizing themselves with diverse sectors, providing tips on transitioning from school to work environment, and setting up networking opportunities with professionals (Silkes et al. 2010). In addition to guiding students and participants, fairs also offer very significant prospects for the city and even the general public to benefit from new resources, invest in infrastructure by building new facilities, and strengthening the social life of the geographical region in which they are held (Binbaşıoğlu and Gültekin, 2017).

Talent is Everywhere - Regional Career Fairs are hosted in 11 provinces of Türkiye, coordinated by the PHRO with the collaboration of university career centers. Regional Career Fairs support students and recent alumni who pursue higher education to get acquainted with the business world, improve their employability, raise the awareness of employers in the sector, especially public institutions, and provide the necessary human resources.

The objectives of the career events, the first of which was held in 2019, supported by the PHRO and organized with the cooperation of universities, public-private sector institutions, and professional chambers, are as follows:

1. Making all young individuals feel talented regardless of the university they attend and providing equal employment opportunities,
2. Increasing public institution awareness among the skilled labor and employer brand value and bringing qualified students and graduates to institutions,
3. Raising awareness about human resources and talent acquisition processes in SMEs.

Career fairs are held nationwide, including the Thrace, Aegean, Southern and Central Anatolia, Silk Road, Southeast, Eastern, Northeastern, Eastern Black Sea, and Central Black Sea regions. Bringing together institutions from the public and private sectors that can offer job prospects for university students and new graduates is the primary objective of career fair organization. The Eastern Anatolia Career Fair (DAKAF), which the PHRO initially began to organize in 2019 under the motto "Talent is Everywhere," was held in Erzurum on 7-8 March 2022, hosted by Atatürk University. This study aimed to measure participant perceptions about career fairs, fair organizations, and Atatürk University students by administering a questionnaire to public and private sector organizations that participated in the aforementioned fair organization.

V. Material and Method

DAKAF'22 constitutes the core material of this study to set out to measure participants' perceptions of the Eastern Anatolia Career Fair, organized by Atatürk University on March 7-8, 2022, regarding the career fairs, DAKAF'22, and the students and graduates of the Atatürk University. In line with the study objective, researchers collected quantitative data by applying the Likert-type scale, specifically designed for this study, to 123 employers, the DAKAF'22 participants, during the fair days. The collected quantitative data were analyzed with simple and complex statistical techniques. Of the 200 participants, 123 returned the provided questionnaires; hence, they were included in the analyses.

Within the scope of this study, designed as an interpretive case study, the participants (employers) in DAKAF'22 consisted of the study population. Since the number of employers to participate in the DAKAF'22 was uncertain when designing this study, the study sample comprised 200 employers identified from the list of 400 participants who already attended the DAKAF'20 held by Atatürk University in 2020. However, the study projected the potential number of participants in DAKAF'22 as 500 employers (for 500 research universe size, the determined sample size was 81 by using the following formulation $N.P.Q. Z^2\alpha / (N-1). d^2$ with a ± 0.10 sampling error (d) ($p = 0.5, q = 0.5$)) considering the actual number of participants in DAKAF'20. A 5-point Likert-type scale was designed to apply to the specified sample. This scale included 16 statements in total and asked respondents about their previous participation, satisfaction levels with DAKAF'22, perceptions about Atatürk University students and graduates, and their intention to re-participate in future career fairs (Table 2).

Of the 300 participant employers in the DAKAF'22, 200 voluntarily responded to the queries and returned the questionnaire during the data-collection process. Of the 200 collected questionnaires, however, only 123 were complete; as a result, these complete questionnaires consisted of the study's quantitative data used in the analyses.

The collected quantitative data were subject to frequency analysis, reliability analysis, and correlation analysis within the scope of the study, aiming to reveal the relationship between participant perceptions, their satisfaction level, and re-participation intention. The following section will exemplify the findings of these analysis results.

VI. Results

Table 1 displays information related to the scope of the participation and the cities from which they attended.

Table 1. Information on Institutions Participating in the Study

ATTRIBUTES		F	%
Scope of Participation	Private Organization	68	55,3
	Public Institute	50	40,7
	NGO	5	4,1
Province	Erzurum	77	62,9
	Ankara	22	17,9
	Erzincan	6	4,9
	İstanbul	5	4,1
	Ağrı	5	4,1
	Tekirdağ	3	2,4
	İğdir	2	1,6
	Kars	1	,8
	Bitlis	1	,8
	Nevşehir	1	,8

Table 1 indicated that 55.3% of the participants were private institutions, whereas 40.7% were public institutions and 4.1% were NGOs. Yet again, 62.9% of the participants attended from Erzurum province, and there were participants from 10 cities. This data is significant in terms of expanding the scope of the fair. Table 2 lists the statements asked in the survey and the statistical rates of the participant responses.

Table 2. Survey Statements and Frequency Values

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. We participated in career fairs organized in Türkiye before	F	12	5	3	56	47
	%	9,8	4,1	2,4	45,5	38,2
2. We participated in career fairs organized in Erzurum before	F	24	9	1	47	42
	%	19,5	7,3	,8	38,2	34,1
3. We provided internship opportunities to students with whom we communicated through career fairs	F	22	22	18	32	29
	%	17,9	17,9	14,6	26	23,6
4. We employed graduates with whom we communicated through career fairs before	F	22	18	28	34	21
	%	17,9	14,6	22,8	27,6	17,1
5. We find career fairs beneficial	F	1	1	6	42	73
	%	,8	,8	4,9	34,1	59,3
6. We believe the career centers play a significant role in organizing such fairs	F	3	2	10	41	67
	%	2,4	1,6	8,1	33,3	54,5
7. We found the DAKAF'22 fair organization to be successful in general	F	7	12	21	41	42
	%	5,7	9,8	17,1	33,3	34,1
8. We received the necessary amenities during the DAKAF'22 registration and preparation process	F	5	11	17	46	44
	%	4,1	8,9	13,8	37,4	35,8
9. We believe that the promotional activities for the pre-DAKAF'22 period were adequate	F	4	16	25	43	35
	%	3,3	13,0	20,3	35	28,5
10. The figures for visitors' attendance and profile in DAKAF'22 were satisfactory to our institution	F	1	9	18	57	38
	%	,8	7,3	14,6	46,3	30,9
11. We intend to re-participate this fair next year	F	2	8	10	49	54
	%	1,6	6,5	8,1	39,8	43,9
12. We attended this fair on a purely voluntary basis	F	4	7	8	47	57
	%	3,3	5,7	6,5	38,2	46,3
13. We have adequate information about Atatürk University	F	1	7	19	45	51
	%	,8	5,7	15,4	36,6	41,5
14. We have a favorable perception toward the students at Atatürk University	F	1	3	12	57	50
	%	,8	2,4	9,8	46,3	40,7
15. We provided internship opportunities to Atatürk University students in the past	F	18	16	26	31	32
	%	14,6	13,0	21,1	25,2	26,0
	F	14	15	25	33	36

16. We have employed Atatürk University graduates before	%	11,4	12,2	20,3	26,8	29,3
17. We would like to employ the graduates from Atatürk University	F	2	4	5	59	53
	%	1,6	3,3	4,1	48,0	43,1

Considering the responses to the statement **"We participated in career fairs organized in Türkiye before,"** 83.2% of the participant employers indicated that they attended career fairs before. This data implies that the majority of participants have a fair attendance experience. Correspondingly, analysis of the responses to the statement **"We participated in career fairs organized in Erzurum before"** revealed that 72.3% of the participant employers previously participated in Erzurum fairs, indicating that a sizable portion of the participants had a fair experience in Erzurum.

With regard to the responses to the statement **"We provided internship opportunities to students with whom we communicated through career fairs,"** 49.6% of the participants claimed to provide internship opportunities to students through fairs. The fact that almost half of the companies' favorable answers confirm that career fairs serve as a critically significant platform for internship opportunities. Similarly, evaluation of the responses to the statement **"We employed graduates with whom we communicated through career fairs before"** revealed that 44.7% of the participants claimed to employ students through fairs. As a result, this figure is also remarkable as it proves the criticalness of career fairs.

Regarding the responses to the statement **"We find career fairs beneficial,"** 59.3% and 34.1% of the participants replied as "strongly agree" and "agree," respectively, proving that almost 93.4% of the employers favored career fairs. Analysis of the responses to the statement **"We believe the career centers play a significant role in organizing such fairs"** demonstrated that 54.5% and 33.3% of the participants replied as "strongly agree" and "agree," respectively. This data also revealed that the perception of employers toward career centers is quite positive.

Considering the responses to the statement **"We found the DAKAF'22 fair organization to be successful in general,"** 34.1%, 33.3%, and 17.1% of the participants replied as "strongly agree," "agree," and "neutral," respectively. Analyzing the responses to the statement **"We received the necessary amenities during the DAKAF'22 registration and preparation process"** revealed that 37.4% of the participants replied "agree" and 35.8% "strongly agree," indicating that almost 73.2% of the participant employers enjoyed the services given through the career fair.

Assessment of the responses to the statement **"We believe that the promotional activities for the pre-DAKAF'22 period were adequate"** revealed that 35%, 28.5%, and 20.3% of the participants replied as "agree," "strongly agree," and "neutral," respectively. This data implied that career fair management should put more emphasis on promotional activities. However, the responses to the statement **"The figures for visitors' attendance and profile in DAKAF'22 were satisfactory to our institution"** were highly favorable, indicating that 77.2% of the participants rated the fair positively since 46.3% and 30.9% of the participants scored "agree" and "strongly agree" options, respectively.

When participant employers asked, they responded to the statement **"We intend to re-participate in this fair next year"** as 43.9% "strongly agree" and 39.8% "agree," signifying that a sizable portion (over 83%) of the participants would prefer re-participation into future career fairs. This data is significant in terms of measuring the effectiveness of the fair. When the responses given to the statement **"We attended this fair on a purely voluntary basis"** were evaluated, 46.3% and 38.2% of the participant replied as "strongly agree" and "agree," respectively, expressing that they voluntarily attended the career fair.

Considering the responses to the statement **"We have adequate information about Atatürk University,"** 41.5%, 36.6%, and 15.4% of the participants replied "strongly agree," "agree," and "neutral," respectively. The data presented by the "neutral" option demonstrates that giving more priority to the promotional activities of the University is necessary, especially during organizing career fairs. When the responses to the statement **"We have a favorable perception toward the students at Atatürk University"** are assessed, 46.3% and 40.7% of the participants replied as "strongly agree" and "agree," respectively, indicating that a sizable portion of the employer participants retained positive observation toward the University.

With regard to the responses to the statement **"We provided internship opportunities to Atatürk University students in the past,"** 51.2% of the participants claimed that they provided internship opportunities, whereas 27.6% replied that they did not offer such an opportunity to the students. However, considering the responses to the statement **"We have employed Atatürk University graduates before,"** 56.1% of the participants replied that they provided employment opportunities to graduates, while only 23.6% of them responded as contrary. Finally, when the replies to the statement **"We would like to employ the graduates from Atatürk University"** were analyzed, 91.1% of the participants expressed a positive opinion on this issue. This data is an explicit indication that career fairs strengthen positive perceptions about universities and their graduates.

Table 3 includes the regression analysis outcomes to determine the effect of participants' satisfaction with DAKAF'22 on their intention to re-participate in future career fairs.

Table 3. The Effect of Satisfaction Level on Intention to Re-participation

Dependent Variable (Intention to Re-participate)	Independent Variable (Satisfaction Level)		
	B	t	p
	.652	8.259	.000
R ²	.361		
Adjusted R ²	.355		
F	68.216		

The study results indicated that the level of satisfaction has a considerable and favorable impact on the intention to re-participation. Given that career fairs are continued activities, it is possible to assert that attendees' satisfaction with the current fairs also encourages them to participate in future fairs to be held in the same or different regions, and this positive cycle reveals the significance of the successful completion of each fair.

VII. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study aimed to measure participants' perceptions of career fairs through the example of DAKAF'22. For this purpose, it conducted a survey among the private sector and public institutions, the key participants of the DAKAF'22.

The study findings revealed that a sizable portion of the participants had fair experience in Erzurum, expressing that 44.7% of them previously employed students through career fairs. This context highlighted the significance of career fairs for institutions searching for qualified workforce and students and graduates seeking employment opportunities they desire. In light of the study results, it is possible to conclude that numerous participants perceived the fairs and career centers positively. As a result, these outcomes inspire career centers to put forth great effort in organizing future career fairs.

The fact that DAKAF'22—one of the Regional Career Fairs in Türkiye— was selected as possessing the highest level of satisfaction in terms of student participation in 2022 demonstrated how participant employers positively replied to the statement "The figures for visitors' attendance and profile in DAKAF'22 were satisfactory to our institution" (Statement 10 in Table 2). Furthermore, the vast majority of the employers emphasized that they participated in the career fair voluntarily and reported that they found the organization generally successful.

The confirmatory responses to the statements on providing internship opportunities to students connected through the fairs and employing Atatürk University graduates indicate that career fairs are successful organizations in achieving their goals intended and offer the chance to interact with a wide range of participants. Additionally, the favorable aspects, such as staying on the top of the host and partner universities, being closely acquainted with their students, and even including students in the talent pools through applications such as interview simulations, especially in terms of institutions participating in career fairs from different cities, emerged as the significance replies of the participants in parallel with the fair objectives.

The fact that numerous respondents favorably replied to the statement "We would like to employ graduates of Atatürk University" indicates how effective the fair was in promoting the university and its students to the participant institutions. In light of all these findings, the study explicitly proved the vitality of career fairs, the critical function that career centers play in their organization, and the revealing of significant opportunities for employers and students to operate a win-win mechanism.

This current study aimed to contribute to the related literature. The original value of this study is that it is the only attempt at the DAKAF'22 sample as a research subject. However, focusing solely on employers might be considered its limitation; as a result, future studies on career fairs may also include students or graduates in the participating list for the survey analyses.

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