A New Vision in Turkish Education

by Anindita Sarkar

"In every country you have fanatics and fanaticism. It's a negative force, but you can't stop positive development in a country because of them."

AS the newly-elected rector of Dokuz Eylul University, the second largest university in the Aegean region, Professor Fethi Idiman unfolds the projects that he will undertake in his four-year tenure in office. A medical doctor and professor of neurology, he is of the opinion that the "university should be a leader and example for the community." In keeping with this vision, he will oversee the construction of a techno-park, establish a more democratic process in the university, strengthen ties with the region's private sector and improve the libraries and the education system.

The foundations of the techno-park in Kaynaklar, a small town a few kilometers from the university campus in Buca has already been laid in May this year. This is the third such enterprise in Turkey but it has a different structure and a different level of cooperation with the private sector.

Four partners are involved in this project — Dokuz Eylul University, the Governorate of Izmir, the private sector under Yasar Holding and an Israeli company. The techno-park has three different stages — the first is an "incubator" site, where new projects can begin. When these ventures grow into viable business projects they move on to the second stage, the "mid-production site", and the final stage sees them as independent enterprises which are in a position to move away from the park.

"Projects," says Idiman, "will concentrate on attractive high-technology that can easily be applied to day-to-day life."

Initially, however, university projects related to electronics, computers and physics will move to the site.

As the park starts functioning, the university will move away from conducting research purely on an academic and theoretical level. "It will be a marriage of the practical and the academic. The university will open its research and development capabilities to the private sector and both will transfer their knowledge and information in a two-way street." says Idiman. This will help researchers, who will not be members of the university, to move away from their scheduled daily lectures and concentrate fully on their projects through the provision of funds with optimal credit terms and as a joint-venture with the techno-park.

Once the techno-park starts operations all partners are expecting some financial gains. However, they are realistic in their approach and have kept a gestation period of ten years till it gains market acceptability.

Idiman believes that Turkish universities have three main duties: "education, research and service." Keen to make the educational centres active rather than passive he feels that "universities have to present their research findings and information to the society of which they are a part." The new academic session starting next year will see centres such as the European centre offer special lecture programmes to related parties in Izmir and its surrounding areas.

In the past, these centres based their programmes on popular request and according

to Idiman were not "disciplined." "The centres themselves are not new. What is new is the centralising body which will coordinate all activities of these centres and promote lectures and special programmes to business and technical circles in the area." The budget allocation of the university's libraries has been increased more that threefold from TL 18 billion to TL 56 billion. The serious business of stocking the library has been entrusted on 10 library and documentation experts who have already submitted proposals. Four of these are high quality projects with modern ideas. In the next stage a working group with four university staff and an outside documentation expert will be established.

Idiman, however, warns that results will not be visible immediately. "By early next year we should start to see the fruits of these studies. It's not just a matter of finances, knowledge is an important guide for us and we will build from a solid foundation. Hopefully next year, even if sources are not available in the libraries, they can be found through the Internet."

At a time when the existing education system is being widely debated throughout the country, he has already taken measures to have active and modern education in this university. And the medical school will be the first beneficiary where teaching will be more "interactive" and less "passive". A three-day-long symposium to this effect — "What Kind of Education System? Daily Practise and Proposals for the Future" has already been held in Izmir in April this year.

Aware of the criticisms that the accompanied his policies, Idiman says that changes is the most resisted force in humanity. "Opposition is natural in every area and is part of democracy." The present higher education regulations he feels, allows leaders to become less democratic and more autocratic. He is eager to show that with democratic auto-control methods in the university the management can be more democratic. And the most glowing example of this process was the recent student election. The last one had been held in the early 1980s.

Talking about the rising Islamic radicalism in the country he says, "in every country you have fanatics and fanaticism. It's a negative force, but you can't stop positive development in a country because of them." Explaining the choice of an Israeli partner for the techno-park he says, "this particular company has a lot of experience from which we can benefit." Choosing his words carefully he adds, "it's not possible to combine radical Islamic approach with the university mentality. The university mentality is science and objectivity and religion is subjective. He believes that this scenario is bound to change with improvement in education and economic standard of the people.

As a leading educator and manager, Idiman sees his leadership as directing the transfer of information from the university to society and the production of science and technology as it is reflected in society. "To my mind society and education should work hand in hand."