

BEING A MEMBER of METU

Every life has its milestones. The statement “Congratulations, you are now a member of METU” was the first step of my 50-year long METU life.

Dear administrators, lecturers, and fresh new additions to METU academic staff,

Today I wish to share with you my experiences as a METU member and how a quiet-flowing stream born in 1956 grew and cascaded into one of the greatest monuments of the Turkish Republic.

Today I am going to share with you my 50 years of teaching and learning which may sound like history to you. I will begin my talk by listing my priorities. However, I believe that life is hidden in the details, so I will not disregard the core details that support this story.

Let me start with the 1960s, when I started attending university. These were the initial years of METU, which was established as a public university. My years of study at the Department of Civil Engineering seemed never-ending to me. An old building and sheds behind the Parliament building...Sizzling hot summers, cool crisp mornings, exams, achievements, failures, panels, contests, early student boycotts, first excitements, my professors, classmates, courses, laboratories...Our department, which now has 5,000 m² indoor laboratories, only had a single 30 m² outdoor laboratory in those years. Experiments were to be conducted only as the weather allowed.

Those were the years when the total student body equaled what is now the size of the Department of Civil Engineering alone. Irrespective of their departments, all students used to have at least some familiarity with each other.

A huge family with young lecturers, students and administrators. It was in those years that the foundations of a strong scientific, cultural and social life were laid.

The year 1963 is another milestone. The thrill of moving to the new METU campus, intensive building works on empty hills in the steppe...The first building that went up was that of the Architecture Faculty...Under the leadership of architect Behrüz Çinici, simple and pioneering architectural designs using exposed concrete were started.

The campus was one big construction site, and most classes were held in sheds.

Before the blue buses which are today a symbol of METU, ancient buses were used for transportation to campus...Private cars were a luxury that few lecturers, administrators, and students could afford...

Barren hills were forested with tree planting festivals. What remains in my memory from those days is a very rich social life with sundowners over the saplings in the steppe together with our lecturers between two classes, going to Eymir for lake events (we could swim in the lake in those days), festivals, architecture department balls (which were fancy dress parties for the most outrageous designs to be displayed), theater performances, and poetry evenings...

And those summer internships... They generally took place abroad, and mostly in European countries. This was a privilege earned by speaking English. It was thanks to these summer internships that we were able to catch up with not only scientific developments but also the rising social and cultural values of Europe in the 1960s.

Naturally, these opportunities enabled young METU graduates to start life ahead of others.

The main reason behind the international relations that METU established and maintained from its earliest times to our day was the existence of international students particularly from the Middle Eastern countries of Iran and Pakistan, whose number exceeded that of our day (between 10-15 percent).

These foreign graduates later played key roles in their countries as ambassadors of METU. Can there be a better way of promoting one's country and running successful international relations?

During the same years, the graduation ceremonies held in the small flag decorated square outside the architecture faculty building filled both young graduates and their families with pride. In these ceremonies, graduates would be offered the first harvest of the cherry trees they planted themselves.

Over time...the trees grew... and the first generation of METU youth graduated...

Now, let me come to the young teaching staff – the knowledgeable, responsible, hard-working visionaries who swore by the mission of their new university and became the driving force behind METU's success. Offices whose lights never went out, pioneering projects that were born out of hardships, classes that were at the same level as international knowledge, and a teaching staff that befriended and protected the students. The lecturers and assistants in the frontline transmitted their enthusiasm to the youth and transformed the quiet-flowing waters of METU to a roaring river.

In the cold of the shed classrooms, they kept writing on the chalkboards to educate us. They taught us how to reach information, how to learn, question, and consider different solutions and options. In those pre-computer days, whole classes of peers would sit up all night to compete against time and meet project deadlines by using calculators and creative powers.

The foundations years of METU from 1956 and through the 1960s were the years of hardening cement... At the very core lay the effort for and belief in teaching, learning, sharing and achieving goals successfully. As the 1960s drew to a close, METU was already a modern and pioneering public university with its academic staff, students, administrators, cultural and social activities, scientific work, and national and international achievements.

METU had become a lifestyle, and being a METU member was an honorary gain.

The burning of the American ambassador Komer's car was the milestone for long-term resistance...

Thus came the 1970s with revolution songs...Raised fists, parkas, gendarmerie, flames, riots, declarations, meetings, random bullets, falling carnations, tears, rage, fear, the indelible writing

'REVOLUTION' in the stadium, boycotts, interrupted instruction, lost semesters, cancelled on campus. But METU became one with its teaching staff, students and administrators and resisted against all odds.

METU became the national symbol of republican principles in a Turkey whose social values were changing rapidly. The tumultuous, stormy years extended into the 1980s as well. Despite the interruptions, METU never gave up on educational principles and standards. It continued its pioneering role by combining its high-level scientific platform with the cultural, social and sports activities of student clubs.

The spring festival organized by METU was a first in the country. The "circle of love" formed on the ring road hand-to-hand by lecturers, students and staff (which we no longer do), lake events, book and theatre festivals, Radio ODTÜ, and welcome-to-campus activities were all emulated by other universities.

As the 1990s gave way to the 2000s, METU graduates are sought after by the public and private sector, and assume key positions.

Inside the METU forest, the Culture and Convention Center and buildings of new departments now stand. Graduation ceremonies are now held in the stadium, with hundreds of torches from Edirne to Ardahan. It is now time to sow the seeds we once planted...

METU is stronger than ever in the 2000s and it is now reaching new horizons with its new-generation of teaching staff, new areas of education, its TECHNOPARK, continuous education center, and national and international projects.

METU is not only an educational brand on the scientific platform today; it is also a leading flag in every social responsibility activity, every rally in Anıtkabir.

This leading position comes with the responsibility of always being "the best and the first", and contributes to the essence of the democratic structure of METU by creating a space for questioning, defining vision, and self-criticism.

The histories of the Turkish Republic and METU influenced one another and converged in all democracy trials, coups, revolutions, rallies, and social uprisings since the 1960s...

With its breath-taking ardent flow, METU has become one of the masterpieces of the Republic... It was not easy to earn this honor. It was not easy to make METU the heart of the Republic that beats in the Anatolian steppe....

I firmly believe that your participation will make this heart beat more strongly. You will protect this masterpiece and your republic.

Thus, you need to accurately evaluate national and global changes, and identify with precision your future goals.

For the earth to be a sustainable place, you need to systematically question your thoughts and actions.

I will, in the rest of my talk, try and look at the social processes in our country from a universal perspective without limiting myself to the conditions in our day. Instead, I will consider the next two decades and beyond in order to focus on the issue of guiding and shaping the future.

Social processes are long term, dynamic, chaotic, and complex. They are problematic in their nature. Now let us focus immediately on major problems.

The first major problem: Economic fragility; in other words, poverty, hunger, inequality.

The second major problem: Global fragility; in other words, global warming, environmental hazards, depleting resources, natural disasters....

The third major problem: Administrative fragility; in other words, administrative weakness, deficient political systems, laws, failure in democratic institutionalization.

The fourth major problem: Energy security; in other words, energy policies, new energy resources, and balance dependence between countries.

For sustainable social and economic development in the presence of these problems, our goal should be to become an “information society” with the ability to transform technological advances into social and economic benefit. This can only be done with an education that produces knowledge in basic sciences and practice, systematically teaching thought and action that can enable the use of this knowledge for the benefit of society.

This can only be done by having “educated human power” that can guide social processes and dynamics. Naturally, the main element of this power is human beings. The power, then, is that of thought and the human brain. The basic principle of education should be to condition the human mind in such a way as to use this brainpower. The goal of a university education should be to open the boundaries of original and creative thinking power...

The knowledge that results from this creative power will be the beacon that leads to social development. Effective educational methods and technology are the tools we will use to reach this goal.

Such a thought and action system should be formed under a global umbrella. Becoming a capable actor is only possible by becoming a country that contributes to global management...Only societies that produce knowledge can have global power and lead universal development. In short, those that produce knowledge will shape the future.

In every country, unique roadmaps should be developed for educational processes so that knowledge can be produced particularly in technological fields.

In our country, METU should lead the way by fostering visionary work in critical fields such as genetic sciences, food technologies, micro-nano technologies, informatics technologies, international education (distance education...), use of renewable energy sources (such as wind and water...), international water use policies, and environmentally friendly construction technologies.

It is not easy... but METU should achieve this. It is only possible if we look for the extraordinary, the novel, and the original.

The main policies of the state, which is the governing power and the implementer, should be aligned with the power that produces creative scientific, technical and social knowledge.

But what could be a potential risk here? We should consider this...

The risk is the possibility that the well-educated knowledge-producing group stops considering the benefits of the country and humanity, and starts looking only to their own benefits. This risk can only be discarded if knowledge enlightens the society, creates social awareness and ethical values, and promotes equality, justice and solidarity.

Yes, the transformation of information and technology into social and economic benefit is only possible if social awareness and sensitivity is the driving force in our country.

I have naturally focused my talk on my fast-developing Turkey. The love in our hearts, the yearning for modern life, the fury at moving away from the principles, but still our hope for the future is our beloved country... Aristotle defines hope as "a daydream". I daydream about a Turkey that is in harmony with the environment, democratic, knowledge producing, transparent and happy ... I hope that all this is not merely a dream...

I was lucky enough to grow up in Ataturk's Turkey. As his children, we were blessed with the light of reason in the Turkey that he had established with his self-confidence, dynamism and foresight. We walked on a path that was cleared by this miracle. We had an unwavering fire burning inside and we welcomed every new day with the students that we educated.

The saplings that we planted, that I salute on both sides of the road every morning as I enter my campus, are now huge trees and I take this as a symbol of the many contributions METU has made to the country, and a symbol that the roots of METU extend from the past to the future.

Half a century ago, there was a white thorn tree on the barren hills in the steppe....it then turned into thousands of trees grown by our collective effort and contribution.

In this relay race, you are now in the frontline. You will make this masterpiece even stronger. Aware of your responsibility, you will become the stepping-stones in a higher, a different scientific platform...I trust and believe in you.

I am positive that you will make it your principle to love without fear of losing; to have the courage to think rationally and independently without conceding; to be honest, knowledge-producing and creative human beings; to question and criticize yourself.

Ataturk said that "Those who set off without rest on their minds never grow tired."

You will never grow tired.

Ayşen Ergin