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Source: *Higher Education*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Sep., 2005), pp. 197-221

Published by: [Springer](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25068096>

Accessed: 04/07/2013 09:48

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## Communication in an academic context

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this qualitative case study is to investigate the most common communication problems from the views of faculty members at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey. The sample of this study consists of 50 faculty members including professors, associate professors, assistant professors, and instructors from five largest departments representing five colleges at the Middle East Technical University. The data were gathered by utilizing interview method, including 19 interview questions which were developed by the researchers. The data collected through interviews were content-analyzed including the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns of data. The results of this study provide evidence that faculty members perceive a number of significant communication problem areas regarding work-related communication and overall departmental communication. Furthermore, although there are some similarities among the faculty members in identifying communication problems as well as the ways of solving these communication problems, some significant differences are also observed among the departments. In addition, analysis of the data revealed that there are some similarities and differences between hard science and soft science departments in defining communication problems and possible ways of solving these communication-related problems.

**Keywords:** academic context, academic culture, disciplinary culture, faculty members, organizational communication, university departments.

### Introduction

Communication takes place a central position in organizational action, control, coordination, and organizational survival. Communication is said to be the “lifeblood of every organization”. Communication has an important role in organizational processes by increasing agreement on organizational ideas, norms, values, behaviors, and goals.

Like other organizations, effective communication plays a vital role in universities. Moreover, a university is a very complex organism. As an open system, university has permeable boundaries and many kinds of interaction occur between the environment and many of the system elements. Furthermore, a university has much more complex inputs which cannot be clearly assessed or controlled, such as people, ideas,

tangible resources, and involvement with other institutions or systems (Birnbaum 1988). In addition, university systems are composed of many semi-autonomous or loosely coordinated sub-systems, and tasks and workers are grouped according to bundles of knowledge, that is, the sections of university vary in the qualities of the bodies of ideas and skills with which they work (Trow 1977; Weick 1976). This type of division by the fields of knowledge helps to carry out basic tasks of the university, teaching and research. The broadest groupings are known as faculty, school, and college and the narrowest grouping generally known as chair, institute, or department encompassing a speciality within basic profession or an entire discipline (Clark 1983; Lockwood and Davies 1985). In the literature, department is defined as the central building blocks or operating unit of the university housing a community of scholars which are responsible for teaching and research within a specialized field of knowledge (Lockwood and Davies 1985).

Disciplines are the lifeblood of higher education institutions as their main organizing bases and their main social framework (Becher 1994). Clearly divided disciplines enact across and within departments. Becher and Trowler (2001) state that disciplines are identified by the existence of relevant departments, but every department does not represent a single discipline. In the related literature, various writers mentioned that academic disciplines have their own distinct culture (Turner et al. 2002). For example, Becher (1994) claims that each discipline that is defined as organized social grouping has its own set of concepts, methods and fundamental aims. Each of these disciplinary groupings has a distinctive culture including attitudes, activities and cognitive styles of academics which are bound up with the characteristics of the knowledge domains (Becher and Trowler 2001; Trowler 1997). According to Becher (1981)

...disciplines are also cultural phenomena: they are embodied in collections of like-minded people, each with their own codes of conduct, sets of values, and distinctive intellectual tasks (p. 109).

In a similar way, Toma (1997) states that disciplines producing and embodying a culture determine the substantive knowledge with which scholars work, how they organize that knowledge, how they may draw on other disciplines, what type of their colleagues value, and the language and symbols they use. Moreover, Birnbaum (1988) argues that academic disciplines have varying cultures having the potential to differentiate campuses. The reasons of cultural differences among academic disciplines are differences in their research techniques and methodologies, common vocabularies, membership in learned societies,

membership requirements, codes of ethics, and similar substantive and symbolic perspectives.

Besides disciplinary culture, Masland (2000) mentions other cultural spheres affecting academic life. They are the culture of academic profession, institutional cultures, and the cultures of national systems of higher education. Like Masland, Toma (1997) states that scholars work within several cultures, including those defined by the discipline, institution, profession and society. He claims that with rise of new paradigms, scholars working in the same university departments increasingly find themselves grounded within different intellectual traditions and distinct academic cultures. In sum, universities are composed of multiple cultural configurations that are dynamic in character, that is, the universities are not homogeneous organizations and cultures included in the universities cannot be viewed as something static.

As mentioned before, universities are open systems and many kinds of interaction occur between the environment and many of the system elements. So, cultural characteristics of a university are deeply influenced by both national and international social, economical and political developments. In his study on changing nature of academic work and academic profession in Australian universities, Marginson (2000) mentions four overlapping dimensions of the process of transformation and crisis in academic work:

- Globalisation and the problem of strategic response to the pressures and opportunities created in a more intensive and extensive international environment;
- The decline of governmental commitment to, and funding of, higher education;
- The crisis of values and university identity in the era of corporate reform, the emergence of more professionalised management, and the slippage of collegial ideals and collegial systems of governance;
- Tendencies to the deconstruction of academic professionalism itself (p. 23).

Related with the last dimension, Clark (1994, p. 9) states that "...it is premature to conclude that the profession is irrevocably on the road of self-destruction", and he mentions about a "new academic culture" paradigm involving "less commitment to the local academic community and to citizenship obligations within it" (p. 9). He claims that knowledge is not only power for faculty members, "it is also money-and it is both power and money as never before." For him, faculty members have a tendency to attach to economic opportunities off campus, and,

...the new academic culture places more emphasis on individual and group advantages and concerns, and less on the overall welfare of the college and university as a self-governing community concentrated on advancing knowledge (p. 9).

### **Perspectives on organizational communication**

The questions organizational communication researchers choose to explore are direct extension of the perspectives that researchers use to view human communication. Krone et al. (1989) adopted various perspectives in the form of (1) mechanistic, (2) psychological, (3) interpretive-symbolic, and (4) systems-interaction perspectives. Although the four perspectives draw from different assumptions about communication, they emphasize different concepts and relationships as being critical to the communication process, and potentially made unique contributions to an overall understanding of communication in organizations. The great quantity of theoretical and conceptual scholarship in organizational communication reflects combinations of the perspectives (Fulk and Boyd 1991).

Although *the mechanistic perspective* emphasizes the channels that connect communicators, *the psychological perspective* deals with how characteristics of individuals affect their communication. Furthermore, from the *interpretive perspective*, organizational communication is composed of patterns of coordinated behaviors that have the capacity to create, maintain, and dissolve organizations. This perspective also emphasizes how cultural factors affect the interpretive process, since the meaning of various symbols is affected by context. Smircich and Calas (1989) define culture from interpretive perspective as “the process through which social action and interaction become constructed and reconstructed into an organizational reality” (p. 234). Moreover, some researchers studying on cultural variability in communication states that individuals are socialized in a culture by the way they communicate, and this way can change the culture they share over time (Gudykunst 1997). Hall (1959) also equated culture with communication, and he believes that “culture is communication and communication is culture” (p. 169: cited in Gudykunst 1997). The last perspective is *the systems-interaction perspective* concentrating on external behaviors as the fundamental units of analysis, unlike the interpretive-symbolic perspective.

## Purpose, problem and sub-problems

The purpose of this paper is to define communication problems and the ways of solving these communication problems from the views of faculty members of a large, Turkish public university, The Middle East Technical University. To provide valuable information to the researchers studying organizational communication in university setting, we attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. How do the faculty members define communication?
2. What are the most common communication problems from the views of faculty members with respect to:
  - their departments,
  - their departments and other departments in the same faculty (college),
3. What would be the ways of solving these communication-related problems from the views of faculty members with respect to:
  - their departments,
  - their departments and other departments in the same faculty (college),
4. Are there any similarities and differences in identifying communication-related problems between hard science and soft science departments?

## Methodology

A qualitative case study design was used to answer the research questions presented above. The phenomena to be studied were complex human and organizational interactions, so qualitative method was more preferable to quantitative methods, and also such phenomena were not easily translated into numbers (Skrtic 1985, cited in Peterson and Spencer 1993).

In Turkey, there are 53 public and 23 private universities. With the establishment of the Higher Education Council (HEC) in 1982, the universities were put under centralized machinery of HEC. After 1982, with HEC's policy on higher education, the number of universities, the number of faculty members, the number of universities increased substantially (Gürüz 2001). For example, the number of publicly founded universities was 27 in 1982, while this number is 53 today. At the same time, the first private university, Bilkent University, was opened in 1986, and the number of private universities in the country is 23 today. A total

of 22,669 faculty members are currently employed in these universities (8361 professors, 4912 associate professors, and 9396 assistant professors (total % of females is 27.2)).

The promotion system within universities is a mix of centralization and autonomy. Assistant professorship is a contractual status both in public and private universities. The minimum requirements for all titles (assistant, associate and full professorships) are defined by the Interuniversity Board, the academic arm of the Higher Education Council. Universities recruit candidates by announcing the positions in national newspapers. Assistant professorship is contractual and renewed every three years (up to four times). Universities themselves recruit and employ these individuals, but it requires the approval of HEC. Promotion to associate professorship is two phase process. If an individual satisfies the minimum requirements of associate professorship defined by the Interuniversity Board, he/she makes an application to the Board. The Board organizes a jury of five professors among the available national pool of professors in the field the candidate applies. The candidate's academic work (national, international publications, teaching, thesis advising, service activities) is independently investigated by the jury members. Each jury member writes a detailed evaluation report to the Board. The candidate who gets a favourable vote from at least three jury members is called for an oral examination by the same jury. After this second phase is completed successfully, the candidate is granted the title of associate professorship and applies to his/her own university for promotion to an associate professor position. If there is a vacant associate professor position within the candidate's own faculty, the University Governing Board finalizes the process. Tenure status in public universities starts with the University Governing Board's approval date of promotion to the associate professor position. Promotion to full professorship is done by each university. In order for a person to apply for a full professorship, the person must actively serve for five years as associate professor. Each university has its own academic promotion criteria beyond those specified by the Interuniversity Board. The application process starts within the person's own faculty and is again finalized by each university's governing board.

The Middle East Technical University (METU) which is one of the 53 publicly founded Turkish universities was selected as the case for this qualitative study by using convenience sampling strategy. METU was the most convenient case for this study because it is available and familiar for the researchers. Besides its availability and familiarity for the researchers, METU is a well-known university with respect to its

leading role in science and technology, its cultural configuration and distinctive campus image in Turkey.

### **The case: Middle East Technical University (METU)**

METU located in the Turkish capital, Ankara, was opened in 1956. METU serves nearly 20,000 students from all parts of the world with nearly 2000 academic personnel. When compared to other universities in Turkey, it has facilities of the highest quality, for instance, 36 research centers, a library of 301,551 books, 138,024 bounded periodicals, 1957 currently received periodicals, an Audio Visual Center including 550 films and 229 video cassettes. A computer center with campus-wide extensive network capabilities connects the institution to national and world wide research networks.

The institutional objectives of the University were stated in the University's strategic planning document as follows (METU 1995): To contribute to the advancement of science and development of technology, to contribute to national development by mobilizing and effectively using the resources of the University, to manipulate applied research as a means of stimulating and inspiring basic research, to prepare the necessary background for interdisciplinary approaches and cooperation in research and to lead to the result of research to the stage of application.

In their study on strategic change efforts at METU, Simsek and Aytemiz (1998) analyzed the data obtained from six diverse stakeholders (college deans, department heads, faculty members from different colleges, students, unit heads, and administrative personnel). According to the authors, although METU has been continuing its leading role in science and technology and its distinctive university culture in the country, the University has a number of strategic difficulties stemming from economic and budgetary issues because of the heavy dependence on public resource and lack of autonomy, inability to compete with private universities, decline in the faculty quality, financial, and psychological dissatisfaction of faculty, limited research facilities, problems in the promotion system, in adequate time for research and publication because of heavy teaching load, lack of communication among students, faculty members and administrative personnel and deterioration in traditional METU culture and its distinct campus image (pp. 164–167). Simsek and Aytemiz (1998) claimed that "METU culture used to be more informal, humane and democratic whereas now

it is more identified with impersonal campus climate in which students feel more detached from each other” (p. 165). They also pointed out that METU has more of a “functional solidarity” type culture rather than a “communal solidarity” as it used to be. Moreover, according to the authors, this cultural transformation has created communication and coordination problems in the university affairs and activities.

METU has five colleges: Faculty of Education, Faculty of Economic and Administrative Sciences, Faculty of Architecture, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, and Faculty of Engineering. A total of 802 faculty members are currently employed in these five faculties (362 professors, 144 associate professors, 146 assistant professors, and 150 instructors).

The population of this study consists of all the faculty members employed in METU, except foreign faculty members, faculty members employed part time, faculty members who have administrative duties, teaching staff at English Preparatory School, and research assistants.

By using stratified random sampling procedure, first, five departments, which are the largest departments with respect to total number of faculty members employed, were selected from five colleges (one from each), then a sample of 50 faculty members (10 faculty members from each department) was drawn from five departments. These departments were Department of Physics (Faculty of Art and Sciences), Department of Architecture (Faculty of Architecture), Department of Economics (Faculty of Economic and Administrative Sciences), Department of Foreign Language Education (Faculty of Education), and Department of Electrical and Electronics Engineering (Faculty of Engineering). Then, the proportions of faculty members were calculated with respect to their academic status/titles and gender for each department. After this, a random sampling strategy was used to draw names from each stratum. Distribution of the sample by academic status and gender was as the following: 19 Professors (6 female, 13 male), 16 associate professors (7 female, 9 male), 5 assistant professors (3 female, 2 male), and 10 instructors (5 female, 5 male); a total of 50 faculty members (21 female, 29 male). In the sample, number of professors alone constitutes 40% of the total sample. This is quite consistent with the faculty profile of METU where number of professors (362) is higher than the sum of assistant and associate professors (146 and 144 respectively).

In addition, the departments included in this study were categorized as “hard sciences” and “soft sciences”, since at the departmental level faculty members in a given scientific field must operate at the level of predictability permitted by the structure of knowledge within the field (Clark 1983). Becher and Trowler (2001) ranges disciplines from hard to

soft and from pure to applied by taking into consideration their characteristics in terms of the objects of enquiry, the nature of knowledge growth, the relationship between the researcher and knowledge, enquiry procedures, extent of truth claims and criteria for making them, and the results of research. Moreover, professional areas of research, teaching, and service also create disciplinary sub-cultures reflecting the different technologies, work patterns, values, and norms (Clark 1983).

Departing from these theoretical distinctions, the Department of Physics and the Department of Electrical and Electronics Engineering were categorized as hard sciences. These disciplines were categorized as hard sciences since they have relatively “well-developed and relatively clear structures of knowledge” (Clark 1983, p. 38), as well as having a set of “criteria for knowledge verification and obsolescence”, and “consensus over significant questions to address” (Becher 2001, p. 36). On the other hand, the Department of Architecture, the Department of Economics,<sup>1</sup> and the Department of Foreign Language Education were categorized as soft sciences with the rationale that these disciplines do have relatively “poorly integrated and ambiguous bodies of thought” (Clark, 1983, p. 38), and disputation over criteria for knowledge verification and obsolescence, and not having a consensus over significant questions to address (Becher 2001).

In this study, a semi-structured interview guide including 19 open-ended questions was used for collecting data. A number of open-ended questions were prepared by the researcher and were tested by means of a pilot study in terms of their sequence, content, wording, and approximate length of interview time.

Before making appointments with the interviewees, a letter was sent to all the sampled participants to inform them about the research. A typical interview took nearly 45 minutes. Analyzing the qualitative data included the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the masses of information obtained during data collection. After rounds of reviewing and processing the raw data, the researcher was able to reduce the data into major analytical categories. To analyze the qualitative data, the researcher firstly categorized the raw data by taking into consideration the research questions for each department separately. As a result, five main categories emerged: The definition of communication, the most common communication problems experienced within interviewees’ own departments, the most common communication problems experienced between interviewees’ own departments and the other departments in the same faculty, the ways of solving these communication-related problems experienced within the departments,

and the ways of solving these communication-related problems experienced between the departments and other departments in the same faculty. These emerged categories were then reviewed separately for each department. Next, the emerged sub-categories for each main category for every department were compared. As result of this process, some common and distinctive patterns related with the communication process began to appear. For example, after rounds of reviewing, it appeared that the communication problems from the views of faculty members with respect to their departments were categorized mainly as 'work-related communication problems' including such sub-categories as "*alliances, high individualism, lack of common goals, lack of motivation and inadequate exchange of scientific knowledge*" and 'overall departmental communication' including such sub-categories as '*alienation, age profile of faculty members, alliances, atmosphere, and conservatism*'.

At the same time, to triangulate the data analysis in order to increase validity and reliability, 10 interview transcripts were randomly selected and given to a second person for analysis. After comparing the categories drawn from the second person and last reviewing, final categories were constructed.

## Results

The results provide evidence that faculty members in five departments representing five faculties in the Middle East Technical University perceived a number of common problems associated with communication process including work-related communication and overall departmental communication. Beside the similarities in identifying communication-related problems and proposing solutions to these problems, some differences are also observed among departments. The identified issues and factors will be presented under five headings.

### *How do the faculty members define communication?*

Analysis of the data revealed that all interviewees from all departments defined communication similarly. However, the interviewees from the Department of Electrical and Electronics Engineering and the Department of Physics as considered hard science departments saw scientific knowledge and organizational information as main messages, and defined communication as "informing others about your work" and

“exchange of knowledge to do common scientific studies, while those in the Department of Foreign Language Education, the Department of Architecture, and the Department of Economics considered as soft science departments gave emphasis not only on knowledge and organizational information, but also on ideas and emotions in defining communication, and defined communication by using some words and phrases, such as interaction, trust and empathy, sharing, and understanding. Moreover, the difference in defining communication between hard science and soft science departments was also valid between males and females. Like soft science departments, females gave more emphasis on ideas and emotions, while males gave more emphasis on scientific knowledge and organizational information as main messages in defining communication.

*What are the most common intradepartmental communication problems from the views of faculty members?*

#### *Work-related Communication Problems*

The results indicated that *alliances (unities formed by people holding similar or same qualifications), high individualism, lack of common goals, lack of motivation, inadequate exchange of scientific knowledge* were the most common issues regarding work-related communication experienced by all faculty members interviewed in five departments in METU. In addition, except faculty members interviewed from the department of Electrical and Electronics Engineering, the issue of *competition* was also one of the most common issues raised by faculty members interviewed regarding work-related communication within the departments. On the other hand, the interviewees in the Department of Architecture, the Department of Economics, and the Department of Foreign Language Education, which may be considered as soft science departments, raised the issue of *criticism*.

Analysis of the responses indicated that there were different forms of *alliances*, such as project-based, discipline-based, age-based and title-based. Age-based communication, for example, occurs in an alliance that is formed by faculty members in approximate age group. In the same way, project-based communication occurs in an alliance that is formed by faculty members coming together to work on a project. Likewise, discipline-based communication occurs in an alliance that is formed by faculty members from the same field of study, whereas title-based communication occurs in alliance that is formed by faculty

members having similar academic titles. Responses also indicated that an academicians could be part of more than one alliance at the same time. So, this makes communication more difficult as one of the interviewed academicians mentioned:

...you must join a group, otherwise you are alone; for example, if you think that projects are important, you must either join an ongoing project group, or you have to create one by yourself. Also, members of these groups are almost at the same age, I do not know why, but, generally academicians in the same age group prefer to work together. This situation certainly affects communication since you are forced to draw a borderline, even two borderlines at the same time with other academicians.

Moreover, some faculty members pointed out that joining a group based on a project is not a problem, even sometimes it is necessary to exchange scientific knowledge with other members of the group, whereas communication occurs more frequent and intense within group while inter-group communication was superficial.

Related with the aged-based communication alliances, an interviewee noted that "there is not an effective scientific communication between old and young academicians because of the age differences, even if there is, it is very hard to come to an agreement on terms and basics in terms of communication."

The finding regarding alliances formed by faculty members holding equal academic titles, having similar age, or being in the same field of study is supported by the results of a similar study by Zenger and Lawrence (1989). The results of their study indicated that employees having similar age or average tenure tend to communicate more with one another, and this tendency facilitates to produce a common language enhancing their communication both in and out of workplace. Similarly, McCain, O'Reilly, and Pfeffer (1983) mentioned that employees have a tendency to communicate with others having the same or approximate similar tenure due to the experiencing similar events in their organisation. They also stated that in a six or seven-year period, perceptions, values, and beliefs differ more. Thus, communication between different tenure groups becomes more difficult, and encourages conflict and power struggles.

In addition, although there are some differences in reported causes of it, *high individualism* is one of the most common issues regarding work-related communication within the department. High individualism seems to be caused by the feelings of domination or possession of

knowledge. In the mean time, it leads to inadequate exchange of scientific knowledge in the department. One faculty member said, "we cannot conduct collaborative scientific works because of high individualism. The case reminds me the 'prisoners' dilemma:' There are two prisoners in the same cell and they have got a great chance of getting away. But they cannot for the fear that when one of them got away, the other can snitch. In fact, if they agreed on getting away together, they would get away easily". Clark (1983) relates individualism with the nature of academic work. He mentioned that the favourite doctrines of faculty members, freedom of research, teaching and learning, are heavily individualistic.

Moreover, the interviewees in all departments, except those in the Department of Electrical and Electronics Engineering, related high individualism as a consequence of competition among the faculty members. Most of the interviewees believed that competition has negative effects on the overall work environment within the department. Almost half of the faculty members interviewed stated that there was little collaborative scientific work in the department because of high individualism caused by competition among faculty members. As one faculty member complained, "...there is individualism in our own department, everyone wants to hit the goal alone". Also, high individualism seems to be a source of lack of sharing work results or scientific knowledge. Some faculty members indicated that they do not share many things including academic work at all in the department. The relationship between individualism and competition may be acceptable when competition is seen to require working individually to protect what one knows from the others.

*Lack of common goals* as one of the frequently expressed factors negatively influencing communication process within departments was stated as other cause of high individualism by the interviews. Related with this issue, the interviewees noted that faculty members do not agree on some important organizational issues, and each field of study within departments has their own goals, even every member has their own goals in their departments and they try to achieve these goals by themselves.

Furthermore, *lack of motivation* is raised by all interviewees from all departments as a factor negatively affecting work-related communication among the faculty members. In this study, the issue of lack of motivation mainly refers to the faculty members not having much enthusiasm to conduct scientific research, to improve their intellectual qualities and to teach the students. Age profile of faculty members,

inbreeding, and being together with the same people in the same place for a long time were related with the issue of lack of motivation and also stated as issues affecting communication among faculty members. Age profile of the faculty was considered a problem area in the departments by the interviewees. It is clear that professors are considered aged academicians by some faculty members interviewed when taking into consideration their use of “professors” and “aged academicians” synonymously during the interviews. In the sample, number of professors alone constitutes 40% of the total sample. One of the faculty member interviewed related lack of motivation with the age profile of the faculty members within her/his department in such a way that “...almost everyone in this department is professor, that is, there are a lot of aged academicians, and they have done nearly everything that could be done as they say, so they do not need to work any further.”

Zenger and Lawrance (1983) stated that the demographic composition of organizations including age, tenure, and gender influences communication within the organization. Also, McCain et al. (1983) mentioned that the large gap between tenures of employees lead to communication failures in organizations.

To interviewees, especially professors hold their position for long without retiring, and there is not enough turnover of faculty members in the university. This again seems to be related with the nature of academic work. Tenured senior faculty members commit their lifetime to serving knowledge, youth, and the general welfare, avoiding the crass materialism of the market place and they also reach high degree of competency in their field of study (Clark 1983).

Moreover, the issue of *inadequate exchange of scientific knowledge* becomes quite acceptable when taken into consideration the department whose faculty members are individually oriented and having low scientific motivation. The interviewed faculty members pointed out that they do not adequately share their scientific knowledge and work results with each other because of competition, high individualism, and lack of facilitators. Regarding the former, one faculty member said, “...we do not know the scientific works of other faculty members, although we have good informal communication.” Moreover, faculty members argued that high individualism is caused by their field of study: They believe that their field of study requires creativeness which makes them introvert and individualistic. One faculty member remarked that “there is individualism due to the characteristic of our own field of study, that is, we do not exchange our knowledge and ideas, since we do not want our ideas to be used by others”. The interviewees also believed that

inadequate exchange of scientific knowledge among faculty members negatively influences non-work-related communication among them. It seems that work-related communication appears to facilitate non-work-related communication among faculty members. Similarly, non-work-related communication also facilitates work-related communication, that is, there seems to be mutual relationship between work-related and non-work-related communication (Zenger and Lawrence 1989).

However, *criticism* was pointed out only by the faculty members interviewed from the Department of Architecture, the Department of Economics, and the Department of Foreign Language Education as a factor negatively influencing communication, especially work-related communication within their departments. One faculty member said, "...when you criticise an academician's work, s/he thinks that these academic criticisms target his/her personality. This certainly affects academic communication since they do not ask for your opinion anymore, and even they stop communicating with you". It seems that criticism made for exchanging scientific knowledge and experiences among faculty members is taken personal, that is, academic and personal issues are not clearly separated. In other words, task-related and non-task-related issues are mixed which, in turn, inhibits effective communication.

This finding may be explained with disciplinary culture or the nature of these departments that cover soft science disciplines having relatively less predictable level of operation or having relatively less structured body of thought. Soft science is also characterized by lack of agreement on what knowledge content is basic and how it ought to be thought (Clark 1983).

#### *Overall departmental communication*

Along with the communication problems experienced by the faculty members on the issues of teaching and research, the same faculty members interviewed also raised some other issues affecting non-work-related communication among faculty members within their departments, which was previously named as "overall departmental communication". *Alienation*, *age profile of faculty members*, *alliances*, *atmosphere*, and *conservatism* were seen as issues negatively effecting communication within departments.

The issue of *alienation* was raised by almost all faculty members interviewed. One of the faculty members interviewed explicitly stated that "we are alone in the department, we do not know anything about other academicians' works except a few; we do not deal with others'

problems; we do not know newcomers, I generally meet them by chance.” All faculty members interviewed mentioned some communication problems stemmed from alienation that may be caused by high individualism. This may be a result of previously mentioned factors such as alliances based on age, disciplinary orientation, and academic titles. There seems to be other factors besides alliances formed in the departments such as promotion and its pressure on individuals to do more work and work harder. An academician’s words are instructive: “They (the faculty members) close themselves to their offices to get an academic title because of the promotion system based on publications and other criteria, so they do not have enough time to get into more communication, then, the result is alienation”.

In addition, *age profile of faculty members* was raised as an issue by the interviewees from the Department of Electrical and Electronics Engineering and the Department of Physics, which are considered as hard science departments. Analysis of documents about the Department of Electrical and Electronics revealed that professors alone constitute 30% of the total faculty members, whereas associate professors, assistant professors, and instructors constitute 26% of the total faculty members in the department. The remaining 44% is composed of research assistants. There is also a large amount of gap among the average tenure of faculty members. For instance, the average tenure of professors interviewed is 25.8 years, while the average tenure of associate professors interviewed is 10.5 years. Almost all of the interviewees from this department raised the tenure issue and related this with high conservatism. The overall idea is resistance to change especially by the aged faculty members that was expressed by a faculty member as such that “there is resistance to new things because of conservatism, the new things can be a new methodological technique or can be a service to the students” and “old academicians are conservative”. As a result, faculty members see the age profile as the main cause of conservatism in this department. Also, this issue was related with the number of professors holding their position for a long time and inbreeding within the departments as mentioned before. Clark (1983) stated that academic inbreeding may lead to harden the arteries of academic work.

*Alliances* are another frequently raised issue affecting communication process in the departments by almost all faculty members interviewed. It seems that there is a certain relationship between alliances based on age, disciplinary orientation, academic titles, political opinions, gender or projects and communication process within the departments. Interviewees stated that communication occurs more frequent and intense

within groups while inter-group communication was superficial. Also, some of the interviewees mentioned that members within different groups do not only exchange scientific knowledge, but also communicate informally. It seems that alliances negatively influence both work-related and non-work-related communication within the departments. Regarding age based communication, Zenger and Lawrance (1989) and McCain et al. (1983) mentioned that age and tenure influences communication since people in similar age or approximate similar tenure hold similar attitudes, interests, beliefs and experience similar events in their organization. These similarities produce a common language, unique interpretations, understanding, and encourage communication.

It is also stated that political opinion-based alliances strongly emerged in the Departments of Economics and the Departments of Architecture. It was mentioned that the faculty members as being a member of related trade unions or being leftist or liberal generally formed these political opinion-based alliances.

Interviews from the Department of Physics and the Department of Foreign Language Education mentioned about *atmosphere* in the department as not warm enough to facilitate communication, and they also labeled it as “cold, artificial, or boring”. Some of them believed that the causes of such an atmosphere were having a lot unsolved problems, alienation, and high individualism. Moreover, communication problems related with *conservatism* were only mentioned by the interviewees from the Department of Electrical and Electronics Engineering. As mentioned above, the interviewees mentioned about a resistance to change especially by the aged faculty members.

*What are the most common inter-departmental communication problems within the same faculty from the views of faculty members?*

The results regarding interdepartmental communication in the same faculty indicated that *only personnel contact*, *introvert characteristic*, *inadequate collaboration in scientific work* were issues negatively affecting inter-departmental communication process within the faculty.

The issue of *only personal contact* is common to all departments included in this study, introvert characteristic is also common to all departments (except the Department of Electrical and Electronics Engineering). This may be because of organizational divisionalization based on disciplines. Each discipline has its distinctive culture caused by its intellectual tasks, a knowledge tradition or categories of thought, and

related codes of conduct. In other words, each discipline has a culture through faculty members share beliefs about theory, methodology, techniques, and problems (Becher and Trowler 2001; Clark 1983).

Thus, there seems to be many sub-cultures which are developed by each department in the university and these sub-cultures make up the overall campus culture which is defined as the collective, mutually shaping patterns of norms, values, experiences, beliefs, and assumptions guiding the behavior of individuals and groups in a university and providing a frame of reference which appear to facilitate similar interpretations, the meaning of events and actions on and off campus (Clark 1983; Kuh and Whitt 2000). These different sub-cultures may cause difficulties in interdepartmental communication since it requires a certain degree of shared meaning and frame of reference. As a result, differences in cultures are seen as barriers for interdepartmental communication, and may cause the departments to be introvert.

Furthermore, while collaboration in scientific work was seen as inadequate by all faculty members interviewed from all departments, the interviewees complained about the administrators for their lack of attention in setting an effective communication network in the faculty, except the interviewees from the Department of Economics.

*What are the ways of solving communication-related problems from the views of faculty members?*

It was found that there are some similarities and differences in proposing solutions to administrative issues, work-related, and non-work-related communication problems within and between departments. Interdisciplinary studies, seminars, symposiums, co-teaching, co-advising, Minor-Double and Minor-Major Undergraduate Programs are common solutions that are thought to facilitate work-related communication. In addition, attractive social activities were also among commonly proposed solutions by almost all interviewees from all departments to enhance non-work-related communication within departments. Furthermore, the interviewees from the Department of Economics also proposed that there should not be hierarchical relationship among the faculty members within the department to enhance non-work-related communication.

However, regarding interdepartmental non-work-related communication, social activities, such as sports competitions, trips, reading days, cinema days, dance, and concerts were common solutions generated by

the interviewees from the Department of Electrical and Electronics Engineering, the Department of Physics, and the Department of Foreign Language Education, while the interviewees from the Department of Architecture and from the Department of Economics did not propose any solutions in this respect.

*What are the similarities and differences in identifying communication-related problems between hard science and soft science departments?*

Analysis of data revealed that there were similarities and differences between hard science and soft science departments in defining communication-related problems and proposing solutions to these problems. The first difference was observed in their definition of communication. As previously mentioned, for the interviewees in the hard science departments, “scientific knowledge” and “organizational information” are the main messages and communication is an essential process for operating their main tasks in their departments, but besides scientific knowledge and organizational information, the interviewees from the soft science departments saw “ideas” and “emotions” as main messages and define communication by emphasizing on the words of interaction, trust and empathy, sharing and understanding.

Regarding intradepartmental work-related communication, the results indicated that alliances, lack of motivation, high individualism, inadequate exchange of scientific knowledge, and competition (except the Department of Electrical and Electronics Engineering) were common to both hard science and soft science departments. However, *criticism* as a factor negatively influencing communication was only raised by the interviewees in the soft science departments. Clark (1983) claimed that disunity within the fields of soft science on grounds of basic approach, theory and methods, social scientist and humanists are rendered more vulnerable to specific political views or world views brought into one’s work from outside sources. Like Clark, Becher and Trowler (2001) mentioned about the existence of limited standardization of cognitive objects and work processes and the ambiguity in meaning and significance of results in human sciences. So, different understanding of field, dissensus may be more likely to reign between faculty members in soft science departments.

Furthermore, related with the overall departmental communication, alienation was frequently raised by the interviewees in the hard science departments and the Department of Foreign Language Education. In

addition, the interviewees in the hard science departments raised age profile of their departments as a cause of communication problems within their departments, but it was not the case for soft science departments.

## Discussion and conclusions

Overall, the issues raised seem to reflect some distinctive features of university organizations, such as academic culture, academic work, and organizational division of the university. Social entities have a symbolic side, a culture as well as social structure, some shared accounts and common beliefs that help to define for participants who they are, what they are doing, why they are doing it. The cultural side of human affairs includes construction of shared meaning, shared ideas, values, practices, ideologies, and philosophies (Clark 1983; Peterson and Spencer 1993). As previously mentioned, how each department develops its own culture is mainly influenced by the type of discipline and separates it from other sub-cultures in the university, but at the same time, it is also a part of the overall campus culture (Becher and Trowler 2001; Dill 2000). Introvert characteristic of the departments and inadequate collaboration in scientific work among departments raised by all interviewees from all departments as issues negatively affecting communication may be reflections of each department having relatively distinctive sub-cultures within a single organization, the university.

Furthermore, high individualism and lack of motivation were mentioned by the interviewees from all departments and they seem to be related with the nature of the academic work. Clark (1983) mentioned that the academic work is naturally individualistic. He stated that this idea seems to be atomistic, because each person is to judge and choose for him/herself. Yet, individualism remains very much a shared value, some faculty members sense they share, while some inculcate respect for the choices and actions of others. Clark also stated that values do not produce similar behaviors to be integrated, that is, faculty members acting differently according to their individual judgment and dictate, while they may also be aware of moral bases for such actions, share attachment to the premises, exchange respect, and grant authority accordingly. It seems that individualism is a flexible pattern through one that has an elective affinity for the evermore variegated nature of academic work, that is, it may cause to legitimate and rationalize so much variety, at the same time to operate as a shared perspective. In sum,

although faculty members go down different disciplinary paths, they belong to the academic profession, and also academic systems are increasingly pluralistic in the production of patterns of thought and in the precise definitions of proper behaviors (Becher 1994; Becher and Trowler 2001; Moses 1990).

Furthermore, lack of common goals raised as an issue may be caused by the tasks of higher education being both knowledge-intensive and knowledge extensive. Clark (1983) stated, "goals are so broad and ambiguous that the university or system is left no chance to accomplish the goals, or to fail to accomplish them. There is no way that anyone can assess the degree of goal achievement" (p. 19). In a similar way, Baldridge et al. (2000) claimed that the goal ambiguity is one of the chief characteristics of academic organizations.

In sum, there seem to be many factors both positively and negatively influencing communication process in an academic context. Factors enhancing communication process within and between departments are named "enablers" as depicted in Table 1. Enablers in an academic context are listed as follows: Interdisciplinary studies, co-teaching,

*Table 1.* Communication in an academic context: Enablers and inhibitors

Enablers	Inhibitors
Interdisciplinary studies	Disciplinary culture
Co-teaching	High individualism
Co-advising	Inadequate exchange of scientific knowledge
Seminars	Lack of motivation
Symposiums	Competition
Minor–Double Undergraduate Programs	Alliances
Minor–Major Undergraduate Programs	Alienation
Common goals	Criticism
Disciplinary culture	Administrative issues
Collaborative studies	Lack of common goals
Social activities	Age profile of faculty
	Only personal contact
	Introvert characteristic of the department
	Inadequate collaboration in scientific work
	Promotion system
	atmosphere

co-advising, seminars, symposiums, minors programs, double major undergraduate programs, collaborative studies, common goals, disciplinary culture and social activities.

On the other hand, factors negatively influencing communication process within and between departments are named “inhibitors” as presented in Table 1. Inhibitors are listed as follows: Disciplinary culture, high individualism, inadequate exchange of scientific knowledge, lack of motivation, competition, alienation, alliances, criticism, lack of common goals, age profile of faculty, high degree of personal contact, introvert characteristic of the department, inadequate collaboration in scientific work, administrative issues, promotion system, atmosphere. Disciplinary culture, for example, seems to be both an inhibitor and an enabler. Disciplinary culture may be seen as an enabler in communication within department, whereas it may also be seen as an inhibitor in interdepartmental communication in the university.

As can be seen in Table 1, the numbers of inhibitors are more than the numbers of enablers. Such a situation may indicate some problem areas in communication process in an academic context. Thus, it may be proposed that to enhance communication process in an academic context, enablers should be increased, while inhibitors are decreased simultaneously.

In addition, it is evident that findings of this study explaining communication in an academic context are rather different compared to the findings of similar studies in business enterprises. University organizations are different with respect to their structure of authority, mission, performance appraisals, type of specialization regarding work activities, employees, and hierarchy line (Besse 1973; Birnbaum 1988; Blau 1973). For example, alienation, high individualism, conservatism, criticism, and some administrative issues, especially the issue of *only personal contact* reflecting lack of formal channels are rarely found in findings of studies done on business enterprise, because organizational communication studies on business enterprises generally focus on superior-subordinate communication, leadership styles and subordinate satisfaction, amount of information, job types and communication, the relationship between communication and satisfaction, and performance (Courtright et al. 1989; Daft and Machintosh 1981; Gioia and Sims 1986; Huber 1982; Snyder and Morris 1984). It needs to be mentioned here that there are few organizational communication studies focusing on university systems and academic culture. However, some results of organizational communication studies on business enterprises well supported the results of this study as mentioned earlier.

## Note

1. In general, Economics as a field of study may be categorized as hard science because this field is based on integrated body of knowledge and numbers, but in METU, this field relatively concentrates on economic administrative sciences in multi-disciplinary manner.

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