

Interview with Emre Hasan Akbayrak, Library Director, Atılım University

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INTRODUCTION

Atılım University (AU) was founded in 1996 with the mission to “provide quality education, produces science and technology, conducts research and enlightens the future of Turkey.” AU currently ranks 4th among the Turkish Universities in Times Higher Education (THE) World Universities on the basis of research, education, internationalization and industrial income. Emre Hasan Akbayrak (Figure 1) has been serving as the current Director of the Atılım University Library (Figure 2).

Prior to AU, Emre Hasan Akbayrak joined the Middle East Technical University as a librarian in 2001, and continued to serve as the Associate Director from 2006 to 2015. In the following interview, Akbayrak discusses the special roles that University Library plays in shaping the brand identity for the Atılım University, as well as other inspiring stories related to his work as the Director of the AUL.

In the context of higher education, “Information literacy (IL) is a set of abilities requiring individuals to “recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information.”¹¹ Most successful academic libraries are involved heavily in the delivery of IL training to their end-users (students, researchers, and academic staff). Such IL training workshops carried out by the librarians would usually include: (1) addressing access and connectivity to resources (both printed and electronic), (2) designing for online education and fostering the development of digital literacy of students and academic staff. In the current digital environment, not only the end-users must become media literate with respect to traditional media, but they must also become media literate with respect to the wealth of new digital and mobile technology available and the development of applications allowing entirely new ways of transmitting information. In fact, ongoing collaborations between librarians and academics are important to ensure the effective delivery of IL training and service provision to both students and the academic community. Indeed, successful collaborations between librarians and academics always begin with effective marketing, branding, community engagement, etc. Effective marketing, branding, and community engagement always go hand-in-hand, and there is no exception for academic libraries. According to Emre Hasan Akbayrak, good brand identities play a very important role

1. <https://alair.ala.org/handle/11213/7668#f1>

in terms of communicating the value and relevance of the libraries to their end-users – in fact, this is considered a major component of the successful promotion of library services (including IL training workshops) to the campus community as a whole.

Could we begin this interview by first introducing yourself, for example, your professional training and educational background? For example, what did you study at university? Do you come from a family of librarians or educators? What motivated you to pursue a career in academic librarianship?

Hello, first and foremost, thank you so much for inviting me to such a significant occasion. I received my bachelor’s degree from the Hacettepe University Librarianship Department in 1995, and in 2005 I completed my master’s degree there. I held various roles in a variety of sectors, including the construction and tourism fields, before I began working at the METU (Middle East Technical University) Library in 2001. I worked at METU Library, one of Turkey’s most prestigious universities, from 2001 to 2016, and I am now the Library Director at Atılım University.

My professional development has been tremendously aided by both of the institutions I have worked with. I did not grow up in a family of educators or librarians, yet I believe that my personality—one that has always been questioning, inquiring, and attempting to find what I was looking for—forced me to become a librarian. I am a person who believes in the superiority of three occupational groups in the world: medical professionals (such as doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and so forth), educators, and librarians. In particular, university librarians; I may characterize them as the individuals most closely associated with academic staff and researchers, given their positions at the center of the work, constant research, and attempts to apply the most recent technology. Over the years, this has been enough to greatly inspire me.

Could you provide a brief introduction to the Atılım University Library (AUL)?

Since Atılım University’s founding in 1996, it has grown alongside the university and is now one of Ankara and Turkey’s largest and most impressive university libraries.



Figure 1. Emre Hasan Akbayrak



Figure 2. Atılım University Library

The Kadriye Zaim Library (<https://www.atilim.edu.tr/en/library>) offers a modern approach to librarianship to all of its users as well as scholars, with a staff who are well-trained and adhere to international standards. In an area of 8,108 square meters and with its cozy rooms, Kadriye Zaim Library serves its readers. In order to give users quick access to information, our library uses the SirsiDynix Symphony Library Automation System, which is preferred by the majority of university libraries worldwide. The subscription or purchased electronic information resources can also be safely accessed from locations outside of the university. All of our electronic resources can be accessible through the OpenAthens system, which we subscribe to, without the requirement for proxy settings, allowing our users to access information regardless of time or location. The Library quit using batteries, and measures were taken to become a green library, thanks to the battery-free life initiative for scanning computers.

Our library has 200 person study rooms available around-the-clock, remote access to library materials via OpenAthens without proxy settings, an updated version of the Ankara Digital City Archive (ADKA) <https://arsivankara.atilim.edu.tr/?wsName=GAMOS&Tab=DLV> powered by the GAMOS software, a movie viewing area, Media Centre free Internet service for Eduroam members, book disinfection device, 12 single-person study rooms, 8 group study rooms, 5 Media

Centre movie rooms, Arabica café, conference and exhibition hall for 150 people, book borrowing/return terminal, 25 scanning terminals, face-to-face/remote user trainings, scheduled cultural and artistic events.

Our national and international memberships include IFLA (The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions), ANKOS (Anatolian University Libraries Consortium), LIBER (The Ligue des Bibliothèques Européennes de Recherche/Association of European Research Libraries), TKD (Turkish Librarians' Association), ÜNAK (Association of University and Research Librarians), and IATUL (International Association of Technical University Libraries)

Kadriye Zaim Library is best described by its numbers, which include around 64,000 electronic journals, 846,000 electronic books, 125 databases, 3,750 multimedia, 6,660 periodicals, almost 90,000 printed volumes, and 13,600 collections from the Ankara Digital City Archive.

What are the missions, visions and working philosophy behind the services and operations of the AUL?

The mission of Atılım University is to “raise competent people who are equipped at the national and global level by generating areas with high performance in the production and application of scientific knowledge within the framework of social sensitivity and sustainability.”

“It is to be among the top 10 universities in Turkey and the top 500 universities in the world in education and research,” is how Atılım University describes its vision.

In accordance with the objectives of Atılım University, to which we are affiliated, and in line with the aforementioned mission and vision, we seek to offer our users a continuous and high-quality service by utilizing the most recent technologies and trends.

What role does the AUL play in brand identify building for the Atılım University as a whole?

Within the framework of the Atılım University brand concept, the Kadriye Zaim Library of Atılım University makes beneficial contributions to the institution to which it is associated. The Atılım University Kadriye Zaim Library's distinctive structure, ergonomic design, collection, and technology are regularly cited in promotions for the university. We conduct our business with an understanding of the 3rd space, trying to give our users from 65 different nations of the world a pleasant, comfortable, and continuous service.

Could you provide a general profile of the end-user community of the AUL?

Undergraduates, graduate students, full-time and part-time academics, administrative personnel, and outside users make up the user base of the Atılım University Kadriye Zaim Library. The academic staff of Ankara's universities, experts from government agencies, lawyers getting ready for bar exams, members of professional associations like doctors, and other college students make up our external users.

Could you describe your career path to becoming the Library Director of AUL?

I worked in the tourism and construction businesses prior to starting my job at the Middle East Technical University Library at the age of 33. Both industries have made significant contributions, and my career in the service sector has given me a set of unique crisis management expertise. At the METU Library, I began to acquire some extremely significant experiences in 2001. ANKOS (Anatolian University Libraries Consortium) had only recently started to take shape, particularly during those years. Academic publishing companies, university libraries, and international and local agencies led the way in collaboration and consortia. Prof. Dr. Bülent Karasözen, the director of the METU Library, taught me a lot during those years, and I put his teachings to good use for many years.

Today, I have 21 years of consortium experience, and Bülent Karasözen and ANKOS are to thank for that. The METU Library hired me as a deputy librarian in 2006, and I remained there till 2016. I transferred to Atılım University as library director on March 1, 2016, and I still hold this post now.

What is the definition of successful “Strategic Community Engagement” in the world of academic librarianship?

In recent years, academic librarianship has come to value the idea of “Strategic Community Engagement” greatly. When we take into account the significance of universities for the society they are a part of and what they can contribute to that society, the necessity of strategic community engagement increases significantly. According to its mission, vision, and goals, our university decides on its actions within the framework of strategic community engagement and upholds its social responsibility. In this regard, Kadriye Zaim Library plans its activities expressly for Strategic Community Engagement based on the corporate culture in line with the objectives of Atılım University, to which it is attached.

What is the definition of successful “marketing” and brand building in the world of academic librarianship? Effective marketing/branding & successful community engagement - do they always go hand-in-hand?

In the field of academic librarianship, effective “marketing” and “branding” are crucial for ensuring that users of university libraries have the right perception of and usage for the services given by these institutions. The full implementation of the appropriate marketing and branding strategies will enable successful promotion of the services provided and the development of other services by accurately evaluating user expectations. Concepts that work together in contact with one another include good community engagement, branding, and marketing strategies.

Does the University Library play any role in building the brand identity for Atılım University?

The Kadriye Zaim Library has been a crucial part of developing the brand identity of Atılım University. While Atılım

University promotes itself through various media, it specifically highlights the importance and standout qualities of its library. The Library serves as the primary supporter of research activities, in keeping with the university’s mission and vision.

How do you communicate the values and relevance of the services of your Library via its brand identity?

In order for Kadriye Zaim Library’s services to be comprehended correctly and clearly by its users, it is essential and valuable to evaluate them in the context of brand identity, in terms of values and relevance. Given that Generation Z and subsequent Alpha Generation make up the majority of our users, in particular, we work to make sure that they can understand and effectively use the services we provide. In particular, we work to maintain regular communication using the appropriate and efficient communication channels we have selected. We are attempting to be more active, especially in the social media spaces where our younger users are present.

Is there a trend amongst academic libraries to hire professionals with business and marketing backgrounds, but not necessarily library-degree-holders to design and perform marketing, branding, and community engagement programs for them?

Unfortunately, academic libraries in our country do not follow this trend. Generally, we conduct these initiatives through the marketing and corporate communication departments of the university to which we are affiliated. It is true that marketing, branding, and community engagement design and performance should be organized according to the categories and subcategories needed for academic libraries.

Is it difficult to find seasoned or young professionals with marketing and business backgrounds to come to work for academic libraries in Turkey?

Unfortunately, it is uncommon for young or experienced marketing and trade professionals to work at university libraries in Turkey. But there have been significant advancements in this area at reputable foundational institutions. They specifically maintain their path by hiring professionals with master’s degrees in business administration.

As the Library Director of AUL, could you describe your typical day at work? Is there ever a typical day at work?

In fact, there isn’t a regular workday for a university library director. In the very first place, I regularly monitor the work being done to improve the service quality and diversity of our library. I provide the broad guidelines in the collection development studies of ADKA (Ankara Digital City Archive), one of our library’s most unique departments. I deal with circumstances where I need to step in that are not part of my daily plans. I make sure the Annual

Budget Plan is implemented. I actively participate in both domestic and foreign company alliances. Such activities are part of my daily job schedule as vice president of the Turkish Librarians' Association, where I have worked for many years. ANKOS (Anatolian University Libraries Consortium), where I have worked for 21 years, is also a part of my daily work schedule.

As the Library Director of AUL, could you describe your main roles and areas of responsibilities?

My main responsibilities as the director of Kadriye Zaim Library at Atılım University are to expand and diversify the library services we provide in response to the demands of our users, to raise the caliber of our services to standards acceptable to both international bodies, to pursue chances for regional, national, and international collaboration, to create cooperative working methods, and to stand by and assist our users in keeping with the objectives of the University to which we are affiliated.

Additionally, it entails keeping up with trends and adjusting them to our library in order to make the best and most efficient use of our budget for publishing purchases.

Profit-making versus non-profit organizations (e.g., academic libraries) - what are the major differences in terms of strategies used for marketing and branding between these 2 types of organizations, as well as their different attitudes, approaches and beliefs towards marketing and branding?

University libraries utilize far gentler and less forceful marketing and branding techniques than profit-making businesses, which is the main distinction between them as a non-profit institution and profit-making organizations in terms of marketing and branding. As a non-profit, we connect with them in accordance with their needs and in the language of consensus they understand, especially when dealing with Generation Z. We then develop our tactics in line with these needs and language of consensus.

As the Library Director of AUL, could you describe your management and leadership style? Would you describe yourself as a servant leader or participative leader?

I am a participative leader who manages and leads. Together with my assistant manager and unit managers, I handle all the work, and then we take action as a consequence of a shared strategy. I make an effort to provide multiple routes for all of our employees to express themselves. Every year and all year long, we act in accordance with the Performance Management System. Prior to the start of the fall semester, we define the five performance goals for each member of our staff, and we stick to them all year. Finally, based on the PYS points they receive, the wage rise rates for the following year are calculated.

What are the latest trends in marketing and branding amongst public and academic libraries in Turkey? With the convenience brought by Internet connectivity and other mobile technologies, have you witnessed and experienced any major evolutions in terms of marketing and branding, particularly in the world of academic librarianship?

The most recent developments in branding and marketing for Turkish public and academic libraries include acting as a 3rd venue, offering makerspace services, announcing 24/7 service delivery via social media accounts, and interacting with users, particularly in virtual settings. With the development of technology, mobile technologies are being used more effectively due to the increase in Internet speed and the broad availability of free, swift Internet in all libraries.

What are the current difficulties and challenges in marketing and branding faced by a majority of academic librarians in Turkey?

The majority of university librarians in Turkey face the same marketing and branding challenges, and the most difficult of these is that libraries are unable to take independent action and do not have their own marketing funds. The requirement to comply with the decisions made by the university with which they are affiliated in terms of marketing and branding impair libraries' originality and causes them to withdraw from such works.

When people talk about the AUL, what is the very first image that comes to their minds?

A creative and useful library should be the first thing that people envision when they think of Kadriye Zaim Library. These are the items that over the years, we have made an effort to build. We work particularly hard to accomplish the impossibly difficult because without it, we cannot discuss success or success.

What parts of your job as the Library Director of AUL, do you find most rewarding? And which do you find most frustrating?

As the director of the Kadriye Zaim Library, the most rewarding aspect of my job is connecting an academic or doctoral student who is stuck or lost in their study with the article, book, or thesis they require, as well as sharing their excitement. Really, this is priceless. The shifting currency rates over many years have been the most difficult component of my job as library director. Our budgets are in Turkish Lira, which is unfortunate, yet practically all of our broadcast purchasing expenses are in USD, EUR, GBP, and other currencies. Thus, the Turkish Lira's constant depreciation against these exchange rates leaves us devastated, and the costs we must pay grow larger and larger every day. We are unable to create a very efficient and effective budget strategy under these circumstances. As an example, 1 USD was 8.30

TL on 31 August, 2021, and as of today, 25 August, 2022, 1 USD is 18.15 TL. As library administrators, these exchange rate changes worry us.

COVID-19 has turned the world upside down. How have the AUL, and you (as the Library Director) been coping with COVID-19?

Despite how challenging the pandemic time was, our university acted by taking all required measures. We kept our library closed during the pandemic and provided service from our homes. First off, we made practically all academic publishing firms' content available to our readers for free. By adhering to the pandemic guidelines, we have made an effort to avoid the pandemic's negative impacts as much as we can. By acquiring the Effective and Safe Libraries Certificates, we were able to continue providing for our users and earn their trust.

For politicians and other people who say libraries will become obsolete soon, what do you have to say to respond to that?

I've never agreed with the claim that libraries would soon be outmoded, useless, and abandoned spaces. For a very long time, libraries have been undergoing significant change and transition. In light of the 3rd space phenomena, they are en route to becoming unique locations that pique the interest of Generation Z and Generation Alpha and provide for their needs. With the help of formations modelled after maker-spaces, we are moving closer to establishing appealing communities with strong technological infrastructure and fast Internet that can nearly completely cover all of the needs of the society to which they belong. In other words, by using museums as an example, not everything that is outdated or old disappears. In particular, our libraries have a critical role to play in the preservation, repair, digitalization, and transmission of works of cultural heritage to future generations.

What would you like to be remembered for when you retire?

When I retire, I want to be remembered with impartial and good remarks especially in any sector where I contributed professionally. In addition to my work with TKD in non-governmental organizations, I want to be known for my contributions to ANKOS, as well as for the conflicts and agreements I have observed and handled as a mediator.

Any other interesting and inspiring stories regarding your work as the Library Director of AUL that you wish to share with the readers?

Being able to empathize with library customers, completely comprehend them, and recognize their needs is the most crucial skill my more than 21 years of experience and professional expertise have taught me. The most significant thing I can recall in this context was the fight between two groups of students holding opposing viewpoints. One group was far bigger than the other, and they had a lot of power over the pupils in the other group. As soon as I learned about this situation, I hurried to the appropriate location, went among the students, and advised them to maintain their calmness. I spoke to the large group frequently in the meantime, hoping to divert them so I could get the other small group into a secure location. I took the small group to a secure location after a short while and called the security personnel.

The most crucial factor in this situation is for the manager to maintain control and be able to handle a crisis. If you succeed in doing so, you will find it simple to work with your other managerial skills in relation to the five components of librarianship—building, collection, budget, user, and personnel. My suggestion for aspiring young co-workers is to always develop oneself by reading reputable blogs, websites, and publications that will keep them updated. Additionally, I've been publishing on my blog, <https://bluesyemre.com/>, since 2011, and it keeps me incredibly up to date.