

Comments on Prof. Colander’s Paper, “What Should Turkish Economists Do and How Should They Do It?”

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Professor Colander’s highly topical assessment relies on his observations of Economics departments in the US. He aptly observes that departments and scholars in second-tier schools there may be more successful by focusing on topics/fields that are locally important instead of trying to be generalists, like the researchers in first-tier schools. In this way, they can transform themselves into top research and education institutions, each in a focused research area (as in the example of Oil Economics), and have their students and faculty sought after. I fully agree with this assessment.

Extending this idea to the situation of Turkey’s research institutions relative to the rest of the world, he proposes that Turkish economists focus more on national-regional topics that would create value for Turkish society and that Turkey develop new research-ranking metrics instead of using the global metrics. Specifically, he offers a market-based mechanism that would incentivize researchers to work on problems whose solutions are demanded by the market, which could be presumably determined by funding agencies.

First of all, for a developing country like Turkey, any sort of research activity that later results in an appearance in an SSCI-rated publication should be seen as a positive and value-adding achievement, one that contributes, in and of itself, to the development of human capital by improving the methodological training of graduate students and faculty. Further, similar to building a pyramid, all research showing up in SSCI-rated journals goes toward building the base of Turkish economics research.

Secondly, it is currently doubtful whether Colander’s idea of a research marketplace can be implemented in Turkey: there is insufficient demand that would be willing to pay for such university research. To give an example, at

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Dokuz Eylül University's Social Sciences Institution, we have required since 2007 that all graduate theses (from approximately 500 PhD candidates) be funded by projects, but only about 5% of them have met this criterion. As a result, faced with its dysfunctionality, we recently did away with that regulation. Frankly, I don't believe such a market for university research exists anywhere, even in the developed countries.

Hence, the role of the market will have to be taken over by the funding agencies, such as Turkey's Tübitak (the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey) and YÖK (the Council of Higher Education) and the US's National Science Foundation.

Meanwhile, Tübitak, YÖK, and TEK should form a committee to evaluate the state of this country's economic journals and research productivity and then develop a strategy that 1) sets out priority research areas that are consistent with Turkey's strategic plans and 2) establishes an incentive system to spur researchers in our field to raise both the quality and the productivity of their efforts up to global standards.