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Quality Economics Education for Sustainable Development: An Analysis Based on the Public Personnel Selection Exams (KPSS) in Türkiye

Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma için Nitelikli İktisat Eğitimi: Türkiye'deki Kamu Personeli Seçme Sınavları (KPSS) Temelinde Bir Analiz

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Quality Economics Education for Sustainable Development: An Analysis Based on the Public Personnel Selection Exams (KPSS) in Türkiye

ABSTRACT

Teaching a discipline in which debates over its scientific identity and definition remain ongoing inherently involves various challenges. Beyond these debates regarding its definition and scientific methodology, economics actually forms the intellectual foundation of resource management, which is the cornerstone of sustainable development. However, in countries like Turkey, which struggle to internalize the methodological language of this science, the educational process proceeds with difficulties; the quality of economics education, meanwhile, faces structural issues such as a disconnect between theory and policy, a lack of analytical depth, and incompatibility with the labor market. Students' tendency to interpret economic phenomena solely within a narrow economic framework while disregarding interdisciplinary connections, as well as their inability to relate theoretical knowledge to policy and everyday life, are key indicators of this decline in quality. Furthermore, the employment problem experienced across all universities is causing serious anxiety among graduates and leading to a loss of productivity regarding the sustainability of human capital. In this context, Turkey must urgently seek solutions to the question of "how should a new economics education be designed?" A quality economics education should not be limited to the mere transfer of technical knowledge; it must focus on cultivating a competent workforce capable of ensuring the efficient allocation of resources and analyzing social costs. This study analyzes the outcomes of economics education in Turkey through the results of the Public Personnel Selection Exam (KPSS) Subject Knowledge section, within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal on "Quality Education" (SDG 4). Current data indicate that graduates fall significantly below the expected proficiency threshold in basic economic competencies. Accordingly, this study aims to examine the shortcomings of the education system through KPSS economics test results and to propose structural solutions in the context of the sustainability of human capital.

Keywords- Economics Education, KPSS, Sustainable Development, SDG 4, Human Capital, Higher Education, Turkey

Highlights

- Despite four years of intensive economics coursework, KPSS Subject Knowledge exam data indicate that Turkish Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences graduates correctly answer fewer than 25% of economics questions, exposing a systemic quality crisis in economics education that undermines the sustainability of human capital development.
- The rapid and unplanned expansion of universities under the "a university in every province" policy has produced an inflationary supply of graduates while eroding institutional academic quality, disconnecting economics education from both the labor market and UN SDG 4 objectives.
- Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences graduates' inability to pass core subject exams without costly post-graduation preparatory courses demonstrates that human capital investment is being wasted and that this structural shortcoming originates in pre-university education.
- This study proposes structural reforms — including curriculum integration with real-life economic phenomena, active and interdisciplinary pedagogy, evidence-based enrollment planning, and redesigned assessment tools to realign Turkey's economics education with sustainable development and quality education goals.

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ÖZ

Bilimsel kimliği ve tanımı konusunda tartışmaların hâlâ sürdüğü bir disiplini öğretmek, doğası gereği çeşitli zorlukları beraberinde getirir. Tanımı ve bilimsel metodolojisiyle ilgili bu tartışmaların ötesinde, iktisat aslında sürdürülebilir kalkınmanın temel taşı olan kaynak yönetiminin entelektüel temelini oluşturur. Ancak, bu bilimin metodolojik dilini içselleştirmekte zorlanan Türkiye gibi ülkelerde eğitim süreci zorluklarla ilerlemektedir; bu arada iktisat eğitiminin kalitesi, teori ile politika arasındaki kopukluk, analitik derinlik eksikliği ve işgücü piyasasıyla uyumsuzluk gibi yapısal sorunlarla karşı karşıyadır. Ekonomi eğitimindeki öğrencilerin, disiplinlerarası bağlantıları göz ardı ederek ekonomik olguları yalnızca dar bir ekonomik çerçeve içinde yorumlamaya çalışması ve teorik bilgiyi politika ve günlük yaşam uygulamalarıyla ilişkilendirememesi, bu kalite kaybının temel göstergeleridir. Ayrıca, tüm üniversitelerde yaşanan istihdam sorunu, mezunlar arasında ciddi bir endişe yaratmakta ve insan sermayesinin sürdürülebilirliği açısından verimlilik kaybına yol açmaktadır. Bu bağlamda Türkiye, "yeni bir iktisat eğitimi nasıl tasarlanmalıdır?" sorusuna acilen çözüm aramalıdır. Nitelikli bir iktisat eğitimi, yalnızca teknik bilginin aktarılmasıyla sınırlı kalmamalı; kaynakların verimli dağılımını sağlayabilecek ve sosyal maliyetleri analiz edebilecek yetkin bir işgücü yetiştirmeye odaklanmalıdır. Bu çalışma, Birleşmiş Milletler'in "Nitelikli Eğitim" (SDG 4) Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma Hedefi çerçevesinde, Kamu Personel Seçme Sınavı (KPSS) (A Grubu) bölümünün sonuçları aracılığıyla Türkiye'deki iktisat eğitiminin çıktılarını analiz etmektedir. Mevcut veriler, mezunların temel iktisat yeterliliklerinde beklenen yeterlilik eşiğinin önemli ölçüde altında kaldığını göstermektedir. Buna göre, bu çalışma KPSS (A Grubu) iktisat sınav sonuçları aracılığıyla eğitim sisteminin eksikliklerini incelemek ve beşeri sermayenin sürdürülebilirliği bağlamında yapısal çözümler önermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler- Ekonomi Eğitimi, KPSS, Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma, SDG 4, Beşeri Sermaye, Yükseköğretim, Turkey

Öne Çıkanlar

- Dört yıllık yoğun ekonomi derslerine rağmen, KPSS (A Grubu) sınav verileri, Türkiye'deki İktisat ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi mezunlarının iktisat sorularının %25'inden azını doğru cevapladığını göstermektedir; bu durum, insan sermayesi gelişiminin sürdürülebilirliğini tehlikeye atan, ekonomi eğitimindeki sistemik bir kalite krizini ortaya koymaktadır.
- "Her ilde bir üniversite" politikası kapsamında üniversitelerin hızlı ve plansız bir şekilde genişlemesi, mezun sayısında şişkinliğe yol açarken, kurumsal akademik kaliteyi aşındırmış ve ekonomi eğitimini hem iş piyasasından hem de BM SDG 4 hedeflerinden koparmıştır.
- İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi ve muadili fakülte mezunlarının, mezuniyet sonrası hazırlık kursları olmadan temel ders sınavlarını geçememeleri, insan sermayesi yatırımının boşa harcandığını ve bu yapısal eksikliğin üniversite öncesi eğitime kadar dayandığını göstermektedir.
- Bu çalışma, Türkiye'nin iktisat eğitimini, sürdürülebilir kalkınma ve nitelikli eğitim hedefleriyle yeniden uyumlu hale getirmek için müfredatın gözden geçirilmesini, aktif ve disiplinler arası pedagojik yaklaşımın benimsenmesini, özellikle İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi ve muadili fakültelerde verilen eğitiminin kalıcılığını sağlayacak yöntemlerin tartışılması gerektiğini önermektedir.

I. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development refers to a multidimensional process that ensures not only the conservation of ecological resources but also the transmission of social well-being and economic stability to future generations. One of the most fundamental components of this process, the fourth United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4), emphasizes the necessity of an inclusive and equitable education system under the heading of "Quality Education" (UN, 2015). The discipline of economics, by virtue of its structure based on the principle of the efficient allocation of scarce resources and the maximization of social welfare, holds a critical position in the construction of a sustainable economic model. Consequently, the process of transmitting this discipline to society holds strategic importance in terms of development goals. However, in recent years, the quality of economics education offered at higher education institutions, its delivery methodology, and the outcomes achieved at the end of this process have been the subject of debate within academic and professional circles.

The decline in quality observed in higher education institutions in Turkey is having a direct and negative impact on graduates' standing in the labor market. The chronic employment problem that has persisted for a long time in Turkey, regardless of the institution, is driving graduates of the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences (FEAS) into deep anxiety about the future and forcing individuals into employment in fields that do not align with their education. This situation constitutes a significant loss of efficiency in terms of the resources allocated to educational processes and the sustainability of human capital.

The conceptual link between KPSS (Group A) results and sustainable development is grounded in the human capital theory systematized by Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964), which posits that investment in education directly determines the productive capacity and adaptive potential of a society. Within this framework, SDG 4 is not merely an educational target but a prerequisite for the broader sustainability agenda. A labor force that cannot demonstrate competency in core economic reasoning is structurally ill-equipped to support evidence-based policy-making, efficient resource allocation, or long-term economic stability — all of which are foundational pillars of sustainable development (UNDP, 2016). Accordingly, a standardized, publicly administered examination in which a baseline level of knowledge is sufficient to succeed may be regarded as a measurable indicator of the human capital output of economics education. The failure observed in this context points not merely to individual academic underperformance but to systemic deficiencies within higher education.

In summary, this study aims to analyze the quality of economics education in Türkiye, based on the results of the Public Personnel Selection Exam (KPSS) Group A — the most fundamental employment threshold in the public sector — in light of the aforementioned issues. Success rates in the exam and performance data of candidates will be employed as an analytical instrument to demonstrate the shortcomings in the quality and retention of the education provided. In this context, the study aims to examine the bottlenecks in the current education system with a focus on sustainability and to propose structural solutions for a more qualified and analytically competent economics education model. This study employs a descriptive-analytical approach based on secondary data. KPSS Group A Subject Knowledge examination statistics published by ÖSYM are used as the primary data source, and the findings are interpreted within the theoretical framework of human capital theory and SDG 4.

II. THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL EXPANSION OF ECONOMICS EDUCATION IN TÜRKİYE

Economics education at the university and college levels first began to be included in the curricula of disciplines such as philosophy, theology, law, and history in the mid-1700s in England; in the rest of Continental Europe, it was referred to as "political economy" starting in the 1750s (Uygur and Erdoğdu, 2012; 3).

In the case of Turkey, economics education has been a field that became institutionalized at a later stage in the historical process. For instance, it is known that no independent course under the heading of economics was taught in Ottoman madrasas. In Miftahu's-Saade, the comprehensive work by Taşköprüzâde—one of the prominent Islamic-era thinkers—in which he classified and explained all known sciences up to his time, the discipline of "economics" was not included among the headings, despite the sciences being divided into seven main categories and over three hundred subcategories (Atay, 1983; 60 - 72).

Economics-focused written materials in the Ottoman Empire began to appear in the literature from the mid-19th century onward, influenced by developments in Europe; during this period, translations of European economic works were followed by articles on economics serialized in newspapers and magazines (Çakır, 2004;1). The inclusion of economics as a course in university curricula, however, dates back to the late 1850s. Although the discipline became widely organized as an independent department at the faculty level after World War II, Turkey's first Faculty of Economics was established in 1936 within Istanbul University under the leadership of scholars who had left Nazi Germany (Şiriner et al., 2005; 133).

Driven by increasing societal demand for higher education, particularly after 1950, the number of universities gradually increased; the number of departments offering economics education gained momentum, especially with the establishment of new universities in the 1990s. Indeed, the total number of universities, which stood at 70 in 2003, rose to 116 in 2012 and is projected to reach 208 by 2026. Today, more than 190 of these universities have a Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences (İİBF) or an equivalent academic unit (YÖK, 2026).

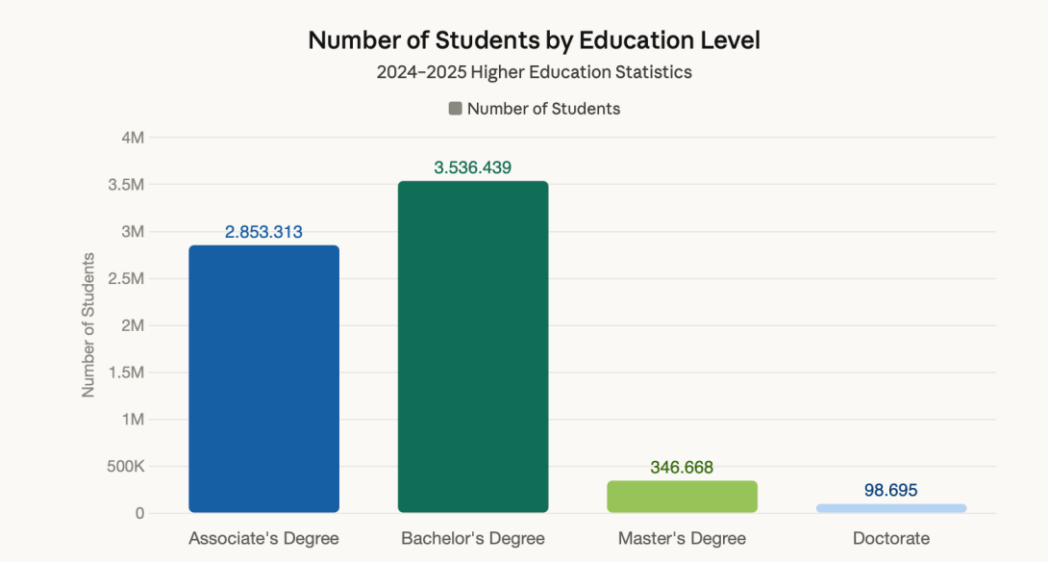


Figure 1. Number of universities in Turkey (2003–2026)

Table 1. Core economics courses by year in FEAS programs

Semester / Year	Core Course Groups	Course Content and Focus
1st Year	Introduction to Economics I-II	Supply and demand curves, market equilibrium, basic calculation methods
2nd Year	Microeconomics, Macroeconomics	Consumer and producer theories, national income calculations.
3rd Year	Monetary Theory, International Economics	Monetary policy tools, theories of international trade.
4th Year	Turkish Economy, History of Economic Thought, Development Economics	The Turkish economy from the Republic to the present, schools of economic thought, growth models.

An examination of the educational programs offered by Faculties of Economics and Administrative Sciences in Turkey and their equivalents reveals that students are exposed to at least one core course directly related to the discipline of economics at virtually every stage of their undergraduate studies. Beginning with "Introduction to Economics" courses in the first year, this process deepens with each semester, offering a continuous academic progression from micro- and macroeconomic theories to specialized fields such as money and banking, international economics, and growth and development. This indicates that students are constantly exposed to theoretical economic knowledge over the course of four years and re-engage with the discipline's fundamental concepts every semester. However, despite this periodic continuity in the curriculum and the quantitative intensity of the courses, the fact that the outcomes—particularly the success rates reflected in KPSS results—do not follow a parallel trajectory with this intensity points to a critical issue regarding the methodology of knowledge transfer and the sustainability of educational quality.

III. GRADUATE PROFILE AND EMPLOYMENT CHALLENGES: THE LOSS OF HUMAN CAPITAL

Despite rising unemployment rates among graduates of the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences (İİBF), the expansion of enrollment quotas has created an "inflationary supply of graduates" in the labor market. The fact that the number of unemployed Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences graduates has reached a scale exceeding the population of many countries (Bülbül, 2014) indicates that higher education planning

has strayed from a focus on sustainability. One of the key avenues for this graduate cohort is to enter public sector employment through the Public Personnel Selection Examination (KPSS).

IV. ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC PERSONNEL SELECTION EXAMINATION (KPSS) DATA AND EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

The Public Personnel Selection Examination (KPSS) is designed to determine eligibility for the entrance examination—to be organized by institutions in accordance with their own regulations—for candidates to be appointed to positions designated as Group (A) under the "General Regulation on Examinations for Those to Be Appointed to Public Offices for the First Time," to determine eligibility for the entrance exams that institutions will organize in accordance with their own regulations for positions designated as Group (A), and to provide the scores used for the placement process serving as the basis for appointments to positions designated as Group (B). Placements for certain positions and posts in public institutions and organizations are made by the ÖSYM in accordance with the provisions of the "General Regulation on Examinations for First-Time Appointments to Public Offices." The Regulation classifies positions for initial appointments to public service into two categories: Group A Positions and Group B Positions (ÖSYM, 2026).

A. Group A Positions

Positions and duties related to professions within ministries, presidencies, and affiliated or related institutions at the level of independent general directorates, as well as their affiliated joint ventures, which are filled through a special competitive examination and require candidates to pass a qualification examination following a specific training program; and positions on the inspection boards of provincial special administrations and municipalities.

B. Group B Positions

Positions listed in the annexes to Presidential Decree No. 2 on General Staff and Procedures, including general and supplementary budgeted institutions, their affiliated revolving-fund entities, funds established by law, and guarantee funds, provincial special administrations and municipalities, the unions established by provincial special administrations and municipalities, and their affiliated revolving-fund entities, as well as other public institutions and organizations, for positions and duties other than those specified in subparagraph (a) above, intended for those to be appointed to public service positions and duties for the first time.

C. KPSS Subject Knowledge (Group A) Exam

The KPSS Subject Knowledge exam is administered once a year and is required for positions at the Presidency, Ministries, their undersecretariats, presidencies, and independent general directorates, as well as their affiliated and related organizations and joint ventures, for positions requiring a specific training program followed by a qualification exam, and for appointments to the inspection boards of provincial administrations and municipalities (ÖSYM, 2025).

In the four-session exam, students are first asked questions from the general aptitude/general knowledge area, followed by questions from the fields of law, economics, business administration, finance, accounting, labor economics and industrial relations, econometrics, statistics, public administration, and international relations. According to ÖSYM data as of 2025, a total of 402,103 people applied for this exam, and 51,667 people specifically applied to answer the subject-specific questions.

In this exam, the average raw scores achieved by students in the general aptitude/general knowledge section—which they must answer to earn a meaningful score—and in the four main fields of law, economics, finance, and accounting are as follows:

- General Aptitude average: 17.42 (60 questions asked)
- General Culture average: 14.30 (60 questions asked)
- Law average: 10.95 (40 questions asked)
- Economics average: 8.5 (40 questions asked)
- Finance average: 6.73 (40 questions were asked)
- Accounting average: 6.06 (40 questions were asked)

As can be seen from the results obtained here, students who have taken economics courses for four years and are expected to possess at least a basic level of knowledge are unable to answer even 25% of the questions correctly.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These findings, as reflected in the KPSS results, clearly demonstrate that the quantitative growth strategy of Turkey's higher education system has not been implemented in accordance with principles of sustainability and quality-focused planning. As a result of the "a university in every province" policy, the establishment of hundreds of Faculties of Economics and Administrative Sciences (FEAS) and equivalent academic units in institutions with inadequate academic infrastructure, limited library resources, and incomplete faculties of qualified faculty members has led to a crisis of "quality sustainability" in education.

In this climate of unchecked expansion, students are completing a diploma-oriented programme rather than developing the discipline of economic thinking and analytical skills. The KPSS may be regarded as one of the objective indicators of this decline in quality. Whilst students who have completed at least four semesters of foundational coursework would be expected to answer at least one-third of the questions correctly on a standardised subject-knowledge examination, the data reveal that the majority fall significantly short of this threshold.

ÖSYM data indicates that candidates tend to avoid microeconomics questions requiring mathematical calculations and macroeconomics questions focused on model interpretation. Exam-focused and high-cost supplementary education obtained through informal post-graduation institutions (cram schools) is insufficient to bridge the significant gap created by the four-year undergraduate program. This situation demonstrates that investments in human capital are being used inefficiently and that a sustainable educational outcome cannot be produced.

As a result, higher education in Turkey not only fails to sufficiently produce the qualified human capital demanded by the private sector but also fails to foster the entrepreneurial skills that would enable graduates to carve out their own paths within the economic system. Furthermore, the fact that students exposed to an intensive curriculum for four years cannot succeed on an exam based on core subjects without external assistance is a significant indicator of the magnitude of the problem. The rote-learning mentality carried over from primary education and finding its counterpart in academia, coupled with an assessment system focused on numerical performance rather than quality, fuels this cycle of failure. According to data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2023), the fact that students with low proficiency in their native language and basic math skills are able to gain admission to Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences programs—whose entrance scores have been declining annually—confirms that the structural problem in the system stems from the pre-higher education stage.

It should nevertheless be acknowledged that the KPSS Subject Knowledge examination, while constituting a significant and objective indicator for evaluating the quality of economics education, cannot be regarded as an absolute or exhaustive measure representing all dimensions of undergraduate economics education. Factors such as graduate career trajectories outside the public sector, applied research competencies, entrepreneurial outcomes, and international academic performance fall beyond the scope of what a single standardized examination can capture. This study therefore does not claim that KPSS results alone fully characterize the state of economics education in Turkey; rather, they are employed as one analytically tractable and publicly verifiable lens through which systemic deficiencies may be examined.

To address these systemic deficiencies and achieve the "Quality Education" (SDG 4) goal under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the following recommendations have been developed:

- Integration of the Curriculum with Real Life: Economics education should be freed from the abstract and mechanical framework of the Neoclassical paradigm and linked to current economic events and local dynamics. A "living economics" approach should be adopted, emphasizing the real-world applications of theoretical models.
- Active Learning and Methodological Transformation: The passive learning model based on monologue-style instruction must be abandoned; a participatory culture should be built where students can engage in analytical inquiry, express themselves, and "learn how to learn."
- Interdisciplinary Approach: Economics should be reintegrated with disciplines such as psychology (behavioral economics), sociology, and history, enabling students to analyze social costs and economic sustainability from a broader perspective.
- Academic Inventory and Planning: The academic and physical resources of existing faculties should be assessed based on sustainability criteria. Instead of unplanned increases in enrollment that lead to a decline in quality, higher education planning should be based on the skill sets required by the labor market.

- Revision of Assessment and Evaluation: Exams should be redesigned to measure not only knowledge levels but also the ability to interpret information and apply it to solve problems. Data on student failure rates should be used as a "quality control" mechanism for universities, and structural reforms should be implemented to improve underperforming departments.

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