

## **Comments on Prof. Colander's Paper, "What Should Turkish Economists Do and How Should They Do It?"**

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### **1. Introduction**

The evolution of economics as an academic discipline has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years, marked by highly critical assessments of its education as well as its research aspects. The current state of these two aspects of economics has also drawn the interest of Turkish stakeholders, not only in the economics community but also in the broader realm of the social sciences.<sup>1</sup> But now, perhaps for the first time, an internationally renowned academic in our field has written on the subject and directly focused on the Turkish case. Prof. Colander addresses himself to two specific and interrelated questions: What should Turkish economists do and how should they do it? He argues that the research Turkish economists carry out contributes far less than it should to the solution of Turkey's economic problems. He offers two suggestions: i) To evaluate research, Turkish universities should develop a new journal-ranking method focusing on a particular research niche, and ii) a voucher system should be introduced that would give Turkish demanders of Turkish economic research more direct control over what research is done.

Let me give my overall view of Prof. Colander's insightful paper right at the outset. He deals with a subject of immense importance but covers insufficient ground and thus misses out some of the more fundamental issues. Moreover, his thoughtful recommendations, while valuable for generating a lively debate on the subject, do not fully take into account the intricacies of the Turkish experience. I shall devote the rest of this commentary to articulating my points of agreement and disagreement with him. At the end, I shall put forward answers to the questions that he poses.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Şenses (2004), Tekeli and Teymur (2004), Uygur and Erdoğan (2005), and (Şenses, 2007).

## **2. My points of Agreement and Disagreement with Prof. Colander**

Prof. Colander makes a significant contribution to the field when he observes that economic research in Turkey does not sufficiently concern itself with the problems that the country faces. Without denying the large number of useful studies done by Turkish academics of problem areas like labor markets, industrialization, poverty, and income distribution, I find myself in general agreement with his assessment. However, Prof. Colander fails to explore the main reasons for this state of affairs and instead rushes forward to suggest ways and means of dealing with it. To use a medical analogy, his diagnosis is right, but his prescription (in the absence of an in-depth analysis of the causes of the illness) only alleviates the symptoms, never treating the underlying disorder. A more complete picture is necessary and could only emerge from intensive interaction with those in the social sciences in general. In addition, it is a given that the research and education aspects of economics should be viewed as interdependent and interactive problem areas.

Unfortunately, economics as an academic discipline has been dominated by the notoriously apolitical and ahistorical neo-classicists, who have succeeded over the past 30 years-plus in elevating their world view to the status of the dominant narrative, pushing all alternative approaches to the side. This rise of neoclassical economics and the accompanying spread of neoliberal economic policies to many parts of the world during this period, with their emphasis on free markets and liberal international trade and finance, have been mutually reinforcing whirlwinds.

Part of this trend has been the greater emphasis on quantitative techniques in both the education and research spheres of economics, to the detriment, if not the neglect and total disappearance of, the tradition of considering economic phenomena from the perspectives of history and politics. Indeed, in many established universities, economics departments have tended to eliminate from the curriculum essential subjects, such as the history of economic thought, economic history, labor economics, and economic development. Going hand-in-hand with this shift in focus have been the decision-makers in economics publishing: articles built around highly sophisticated quantitative techniques are sure to be featured in their journals, giving one the impression that economics is fast becoming a sub-branch of advanced mathematics. This cultural transformation started in the United States and soon spread elsewhere; the United Kingdom, continental Europe, and even parts of the developing world, including Turkey. Now, following in the West's footsteps, developing-country universities (especially English-medium ones) have, in effect, made

the very concept of quality in both teaching and economic research synonymous with allegiance to quantitative treatments. This new world of economics is now so entrenched that a qualitative paper does not stand a chance of getting published in one of the so-called quality journals, no matter how important a contribution it makes. The ever-rising insistence on quantitative techniques has been so irresistible that one wonders whether even the work of the founding fathers of our discipline could get published in those journals or offered a post in one of the top-ranking US universities.

The problems caused by this wide-ranging mindset are self-perpetuating. Academic economists who were trained in their formative years at home and abroad in mainstream economic theory, with a heavy dose of quantitative techniques added on, often fail to come to grips with the challenges typical of a developing country; to do so requires a deep understanding of the political, social, and institutional settings underlying those challenges. The best and most capable minds spend a great deal of their time and considerable effort building complex econometric and macroeconomic models and engaging in absurdly arcane debates over the most detailed technical issues imaginable. There is no denying the academic value of such exercises, and there is nothing wrong *per se* with using the most advanced of quantitative techniques. Nevertheless, there is also the concept of too much of a good thing. We have now reached the inevitable stage where attention is being diverted away from the real economic issues at stake, thus hurting the country. Government policymakers are more likely to find little of value for their purposes when they look at the latest economic research in print. Nor is there much worthwhile waiting for them on the shelf. For his part, the university researcher manages to get himself published, but that career-boosting feat does nothing to tackle the country's economic problems. This, in a nutshell, is the supply bottleneck. However, another, perhaps more fundamental, bottleneck lurks on the demand side; this is so because even if problem-solving economic research exists, complete with obvious policy relevance, the supply of it does not necessarily create its own demand. Prof. Colander optimistically talks about the demands of economic research as if they were readily available. If Turkish economic planners and policymakers could come up with well-defined problems, I believe that the supply of research with satisfactory answers and solutions would be forthcoming. In a way, it is more likely that "demand will create its own supply" rather than "supply will create its own demand."

There are other issues at stake. As Prof. Colander rightly notes, in Turkey like elsewhere, "publication has become an end in itself." This has no doubt played a major role in eroding productive cooperation among researchers, discouraging multi-disciplinary research, and diverting the attention of re-

searchers away from problem-solving activities. Another factor instrumental in distancing the academic researcher from the problems of his or her country has been the basis on which many universities make appointments and promotions. One common criterion is publication of articles in journals covered by the Social Science Citation Index. There is something fundamentally wrong with this, not least because research results are published there in a language other than the native one, most often in English. This means that such research findings are not accessible to a large segment of the relevant country's population. Moreover, to get published in such a journal, the researcher is often forced to choose a subject that is of little relevance to his developing country. Instead, he will scrutinize the type of papers published in these journals. Then he will find himself being forced to incorporate the highest-level quantitative techniques in any manuscript he sends in, as the editors of these journals will look the other way if such techniques are not front and center. Even worse, a researcher may devote several years of his life to writing a book on an important problem that his country faces, but it will be valued far less than an article published in a top-ranked indexed journal.

I shall present my more detailed comments on Prof. Colander's observations and proposals under four main headings.

i) I would like to challenge Prof. Colander's reading of the utility function of academics, based as it is on "survival within the institutional structure" and "finding and holding a well-paying position." This is altogether too narrow a perspective to bring to bear on our profession; it wrongly portrays the most highly educated and, supposedly, one of the most dynamic sectors of the population as being aloof from the economic difficulties of their countries, instead seeking their self-interest and career advancement. A more accurate picture consists of Turkish academics who work for very low salaries, much lower than they could earn elsewhere, either in or outside Turkey. Most of them take joyful pride in learning that the starting salaries of their students upon graduation are often a multiple of their own. The hypothesis of equal net advantage applies here. It must be the high non-pecuniary advantages that explain their choice of an academic post and their refusal to move elsewhere, despite the considerable hardships they face, especially in the newly established universities in the less developed regions of Turkey. These non-pecuniary advantages include enhancing one's own knowledge and understanding of the world around him, passing on one's experience and knowledge through fruitful interaction with students, doing research, and contributing to the community at large.

ii) I also have several objections to Prof. Colander's more specific reading of the Turkish case. In citing the language barrier as one of the obstacles con-

fronting Turkish economists seeking to get published in top international journals, he overlooks the fact that there are a large number of economics departments in Turkey where the medium of teaching is English; likewise, he disregards the tradition of Turkish economists, especially those serving at universities with a longer history, closely interacting with their counterparts in other countries through international conferences at home and abroad and over the Internet. I also find it hard to understand why Prof. Colander mentions Islamic tourism and Islamic finance as the first two possible niche subjects for Turkish economic researchers. Economics teaching and research in Turkey has reached a level, one would have thought, where it deserves niche areas of specialization with much wider appeal. It is worth remembering that Turkey is a country that has yet to complete its industrialization and is bedeviled with pressing socio-economic problems, most notably deep distributional dysfunctionalities at different levels.

Starting from the premise that economics is also a science of trade-offs, I would like to take issue with the proposals of Prof. Colander in response to his second question: what is to be done to make economic research more relevant for Turkish economic problems.

iii) The first of the two proposals that Prof. Colander makes has some merit for Turkey, but with some caveats. Its manifold disadvantages notwithstanding, the unduly rapid expansion of the Turkish system of higher education in recent years has produced a situation that offers a golden opportunity for the many new universities. These institutions would do well to heed his suggestion and specialize in certain niche sub-disciplines within economics. Likewise, his proposal for developing a “new journal-ranking method focusing on a particular research niche and to use that ranking to evaluate research” addresses one of the central objections to the current evaluation system, not only in the field of economics but also in the social sciences as a whole; in effect, this system puts all disciplines and sub-disciplines in the same basket. Having long advocated the need for the creation of niche areas of teaching and research in the newly established Turkish universities (which often give the impression of being “jack of all trades, but master of none”), I find myself in agreement with this Colander proposal for the field of economics. However, I am concerned about the difficulties of identifying and classifying the niche areas to serve as the new metric for evaluating research. Moreover, pushing this specialization objective too far, as I suspect Prof. Colander does, would create a closed shop, with the staff members in such a department preoccupied with the same set of issues. I fear that this would lead to overspecialization and, by and large, close the channels of productive interaction among academics specializing in different sub-branches of economics. Simi-

larly, journal ranking for each niche would have the disadvantage of confining the peer-refereeing process to a specific area and further restricting this interaction. Last but not least, Prof. Colander's emphasis on research being directed toward community problems would divert the attention of economic researchers away from issues of national as well as global concern. In other words, this would carry the danger of the mission of universities narrowing down to their local areas, academic interests becoming increasingly parochial, and academics swimming against the tide in a globalizing world.

iv) The second proposal of Prof. Colander is even more problematic. His idea of taking away the research portion of academics' salaries and paying it back only after relevant research output is presented is a *non sequitur*, not least because such a deconstruction of education activities is difficult to make, and academic salaries are very low in the first place. According to the stick-and-carrot analogy, this proposal represents the stick. I believe the "carrot" aspect is what should be at center stage, featuring academics who are doing relevant research being rewarded on top of their basic salaries. In fact, several universities in Turkey have introduced various schemes acting upon this principle.

Prof. Colander's suggestion for a voucher system that "would give Turkish demanders of Turkish economic research more direct control over what research is done" looks interesting on first sight. However, it raises two disturbing questions. First, would such a control mechanism not put researchers in a straitjacket and, more fundamentally, even interfere with academic freedoms? Would such a proposal lead to the productive cooperation among economic researchers being replaced by destructive competition? Second, this proposal does not take into account the fact that there is already some market-based activity in the research sphere, with a number of academic researchers in Turkey engaged in project work in collaboration with domestic and international institutions. Third, if implemented, would this control mechanism further deepen the ongoing privatization/marketization process affecting the system of higher education in Turkey and elsewhere—a process about which some of us are greatly concerned?

### **3. What is to be Done?**

Making economic research more relevant to the shortcomings unique to the Turkish economy is not an easy task. It requires deeper analysis of the existing bottlenecks and more substantial efforts than Prof. Colander's two proposals entail. Within the limits of this brief commentary, I can only point in the direction that these efforts should take, rather than make more specific

proposals. The education and research components of economics should be tackled comprehensively, with full recognition of their close interaction. Curricula should be revised with more emphasis placed on currently neglected subjects, such as the history of economic thought and economic development, with a spotlight on the Turkish economy. It is anomalous that the Turkish economy course should be limited, as an afterthought, to a one-semester course in the final year of a four-year undergraduate program in some universities and altogether excluded from graduate programs. Students should be acquainted with the problems of the global and the Turkish economy right at the start and encouraged to write essays and position papers on the troubled areas of the Turkish economy. Graduate programs in Turkey should be strengthened with a view to reducing dependence on foreign programs. As a first step in this direction, there should be more programs allowing doctoral students to begin and complete their graduate studies in Turkey while giving them the opportunity to participate, say up to one year, in a relevant program abroad. The cooperation among academics at different Turkish universities should be strengthened so as to develop a dynamic academic community with close interaction amongst its members.<sup>2</sup> Complementing this would be a new era of greater collaboration between academic researchers and planning and policymaking bodies in Turkey, thus boosting both the demand and supply sides of relevant economic research. Comparative studies of the Turkish economy versus other countries' economies should be encouraged. Finally, appointments and promotion criteria should be revised to reverse the current obsession with citation-indexed publications and to give far greater weight to the problem-solving type of research, specifically Turkish economic problems. Bearing in mind the misgivings I have voiced above, Turkish universities, especially those in the less-developed regions, should be provided with various incentives to specialize in relevant niche areas of economic research, as outlined by Prof. Colander.

#### 4. Conclusion

I welcome the contribution made by an academic of Prof. Colander's stature to the extremely topical issue of current economic research's relevance to the problems afflicting the Turkish economy. This will no doubt go a long way towards overcoming the first and most formidable hurdle in front of us, namely making the Turkish academic community—in the social sciences in general and economics in particular—recognize that there is a “relevance of research” problem. Once this hurdle is behind us, the second pressing issue to

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<sup>2</sup> See Şenses (2007:98).

resolve will be finding a solution to that very problem. Prof. Colander's treatment of this challenge, while presenting various interesting proposals, falls short of providing a lasting solution—not least because it fails to consider the root causes. I have shared my reservations about certain of his proposals for a solution (which he himself finds impractical), especially in the Turkish context. I have, however, strong expectations that his paper will stimulate the existing debate on the subject (hopefully in this journal) and be instrumental in coming up with a productive solution in the future. My recommendations should also be seen in the same light: as a modest contribution to this debate.

## **References**

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