WHAT'S HAPPENING TO HIGHER EDUCATION OF ECONOMICS IN TURKEY?

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Introduction

Despite academicians are all educators, the great majority of academicians does not engage with educational sciences, unless they are members of education departments. Therefore it may look quite strange that a professor and a research assistant from department of economics attempt to write an article for a conference on educational sciences. In this respect, the authors of this paper frankly declare that they are neither specialist in educational sciences nor have a strong academic interest in the field. But they are tired of complaining about higher education of economics and are concerned about transformation of student profile of their discipline, and are in effort to understand what happens or what should happen to education of economics in relation to transforming profile of students.

Departments of economics in Turkish universities have had to accept enrollment of undergraduate students from lower success groups for about one and half decade. This has been a consequence of ultra-centrism of Turkish examination system that makes placements of students to the departments according to preference of the students. As the students with higher success in national centralized university exams have priority to choose their future departments, departments that are more popular in public opinion attract higher success groups. The popularity of departments could fluctuate in the course of time and such a change triggers the transformation of student profiles of department. This paper, therefore aims to measure effects of such a change in popularity of department of economics at Yıldız Technical University (YTU). Another aim is to make some recommendations for departments of economics to get a better position in conditions of changing student

profiles. Our research based on a sample[1] of undergraduate students of department of economics of YTU shows us that the decline in success is accompanied by decline in income and education level of parents.

Exam Success of YTU Economics Undergrads

The Table 1 presents us the basic information on success level of YTU economics undergraduate students, by giving the marks of the last accepted undergraduate student:

Year	Academic Field	Point	Rank	Percentile	Students Enrolled
2007	EA-2[2]	323,167	**22.355**	5,15	82
2008	EA-2	317,478	**28.795**	3,930	103
2009	EA-2	315,583	**39.014**	6,320	103
2010	TM-1	425,644	**40.899**	N.A.	103
2011	TM-1	413,357	**53.077**	N.A.	103
2012	TM-1	379,21685	**48.803**	N.A.	108

Source: Yıldız Technical University, Student Office Data, 14.11.2012 update.
[Online] http://www.ogi.yildiz.edu.tr/category.php?id=23 01.06.2013

Table 1 - Success of Undergraduate Students of YTU Economics

Till 2007, the examination system has been modified twice, in 2010 and 2012. It makes it difficult to observe decline in success, especially in terms of point and percentile data. It seems us reasonable to prioritize rank of the last accepted undergraduate student to observe decline in general exam success of accepted students. It is observable in the table that, the popularity of departments of economics at YTU has declined in the last five years. This is in part a consequence of central decision of Council of Higher Education (*Yükseköğretim Kurulu* or *YÖK* in Turkish) to increase quota of department against the will of the department, which is a very common practice in Turkish universities. The popular opinion about departments of economics is in that way the amount of people graduated from economics is more than the need of job market.

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[1] The sample excludes students of evening program (*ikinci öğretim*), because of possible fluctuating effect of the higher economic capability of students of evening program who pay higher tuitions than the students of day program (*birinci öğretim*).

[2] EA is an abbreviation for "*Eşit Ağırlık*", which is synonymous with TM (*Türkçe-Matematik*). This academic field aims to measure success of students in mathematics, geometrics and Turkish language. To get a high point in this field student should answer most of mathematics, geometrics and Turkish language questions in tests of university entrance exam. Questions of natural sciences and social sciences have minor contributions to point in this field.
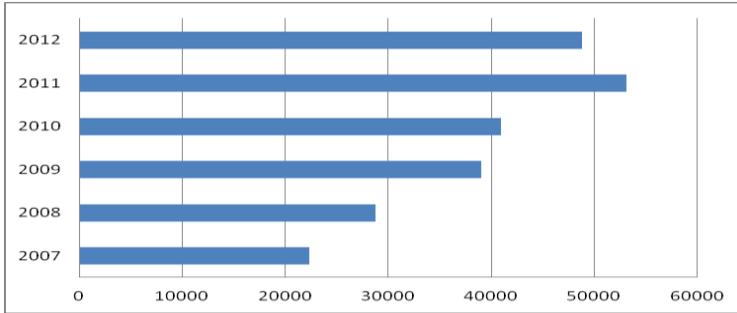
Figure 1 – Rank of the Last Accepted Undergraduate Student

As is apparent from the Figure 1, the success rank of undergraduate students enrolled in 2007 is better than of those enrolled in 2011 and 2012. As a consequence, it seems us reasonable to form our sample as consisting of two groups, the first is "2008 and earlier" and the second is "2011-2012". The groups are chosen anonymously from a poll conducted at YTU in June 2013. The first group includes 38 IDs and the second 40 of those. Following figures and paragraphs aim to expose the contrast between two groups in terms of education and income of parents, as well as the differences in factors affecting the preference of department of economics.

Education and Income of Parents

In this section we show that, declining success of the students transforms the socio-economic profile of undergraduate students. Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 supplies proof for such an argument. Figures 2 and 3 expose the contrast between the groups in the terms of education level of parents. The wider difference between the groups is percent of BA degree. While %41,66 of fathers of students entered in 2008 and before have BA degree, it is %35 for students entered in 2011-12. The percentages of BA degree mothers are %25 for the first group and %17,5 for the second. Such a decrease in the ratio of university graduation possibly means that, an increasing amount of students are the first generation that had a chance to enroll higher education. That may cause additional adaptation problems, and should be countered by better orientation.
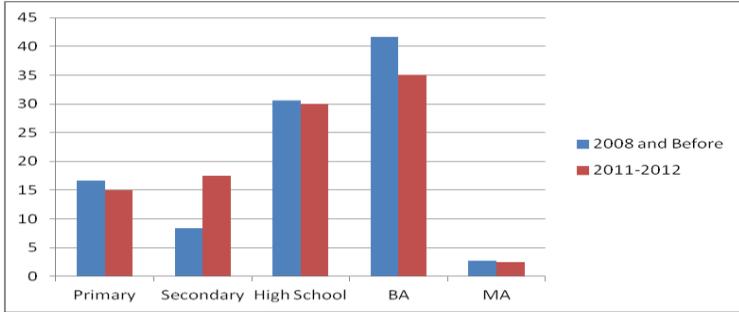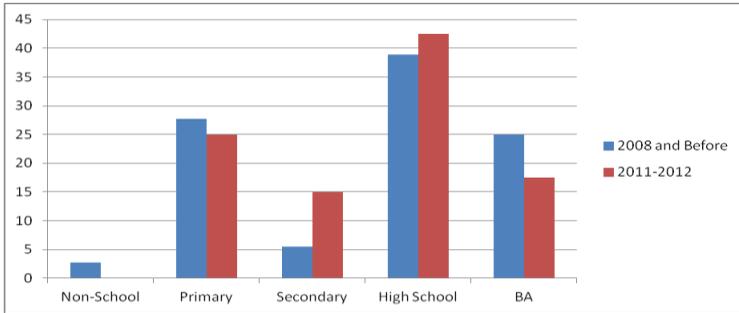
Figure 2 – Education Group of Father, %

Figure 3 – Education Group of Mother, %

Figures 4 and 5 depict the distribution of parents to the income groups. It is clearly observable that the late comer students are from lower income segments of society. Although %60 of fathers of the first group has a monthly income more than 2.166 TL, only %35,15 of fathers of the second group have such an income. The divide becomes even deeper in terms of monthly income of mothers. While %77,77 of mothers of early comers have a monthly income more than 891 TL, it is only %29,41 for late comers. It is somewhat clear that the students from 2011-2012 group belong to lower income segments of the society. Although %60 of fathers of the first group has a monthly income more than 2.166 TL, only %35,15 of fathers of the second group have such an income. The divide is deeper in terms of monthly income of mothers. While %77,77 of mothers of students from 2008 and Before group have a monthly income more than 891 TL, it is only %29,41 for students from 2011-2012 group.
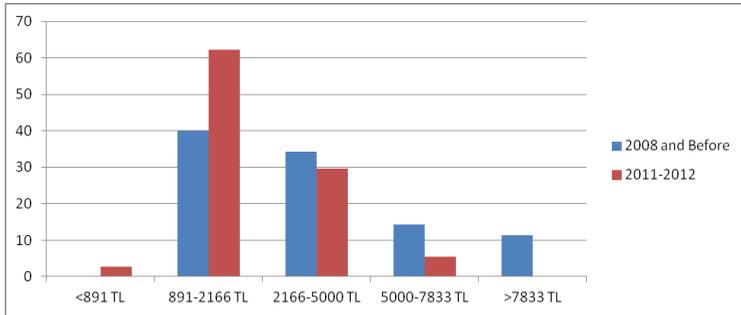
Figure 4 – Income Group of Father, %
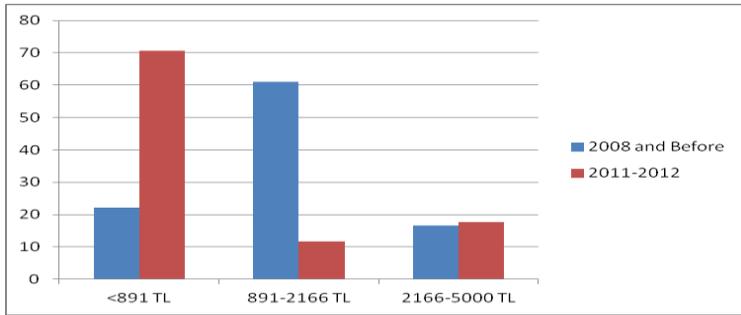
Figure 5 – Income Group of Mother, %

The possible effects of such a decline in income of parents on students could be various. 2011-2012 students may have harder economic shortages that force them to join the labor force earlier. As a consequence, this group may be more prone to absenteeism. In addition, they might be unable to purchase course materials, in need of better scholarship and accommodation conditions. Another possible consequence is that, expectations of students from 2011-2012 group about education of economics may be more job market oriented. This transformation of student profile should be countered by facilitating scholarship and accommodation. In addition, a revision of curriculum should be made, in order to clear the path for students with an expectation of quick access to the job market. If it is possible, it should be an alternative to shift to the management BA program, which is more job market oriented. Such a revision would also let academic staff of economics to focus on research and training of academic oriented students, rather than forcing academically unmotivated and unskilled students to learn complicated mathematical and theoretical topics.

Other Differences of 2011-2012 Group

The undergraduate students who entered in 2011-12, have a higher percentage in terms of "*Sayısal*"[3] academic high school background. The recent modifications on examination system facilitated the entrance of students from *sayısal* background to BA programs that accept students with *EA* point. Therefore, an increase in the percentage of students with *sayısal* background is observed in Figure 6. The percentage of the *sayısal* students mounted from %15,78 to %37,5, while *EA* decline from %84,21 to %62,5. However, as observable in percentages, students with *EA* background still predominate. One may argue that, mathematical capability of students is better in late comers because of this change. On the other hand, general decline of ranks is hand to hand with decline in mathematical capabilities more than all, as the correct answers of mathematic questions is the basic distinguisher between success levels in Turkish examination system.
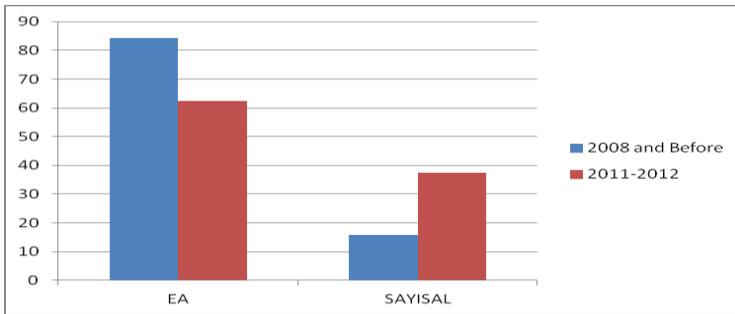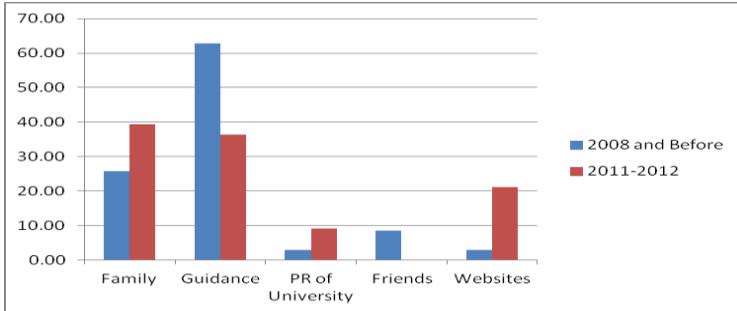

**Figure 6 – High School Academic Background of Students, %**

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[3] "*Sayısal*" means "Quantitative" in English. This academic field of high school is more concentrated on mathematics and natural sciences rather than Turkish language and social sciences.

Figure 7 – Information Sources That Determined Preference

To answer the question that, from where students got informed about their department preferences, we may take a look at the Figure 7. As is apparent from the figure, students from 2011-2012 group are less informed by guidance units of high school and private *dershane[4]*, and more informed by family, PR of university and websites. The most notable increase is observed in websites, from %2,85 to %21,21. This means that, recently increased efforts of universities and departments to inform students about themselves by some PR activities and websites are getting more and more important. It is crucial to inform students about content and nature of discipline of economics, as the public opinion perceive departments of economics and management very similar. It is a common phrase in Turkish when talking about university departments, *iktisat-işletme*, despite the existence of clear differences between these departments. As the graduates work for similar companies at similar positions, the false perception of homogeneity of economics and management departments persists. That makes students expect from economics a more direct contribution to job market competition, as the *iktisat* also means daily operation of material life in Turkish. Besides efforts of departments of economics to inform students, it may be an effective solution to the problem to include elementary economics courses in curriculum of high schools and university entrance exams, as well as other social sciences.

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[4] Private education institutions that academically support students for various exams, including university entrance exam in exchange of fees.
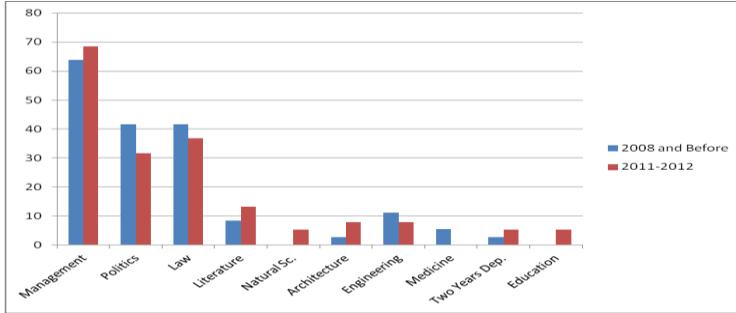
Figure 8 – Simultaneous Preferences of Students of Economics

The figure above is an extension of the arguments at paragraph above. It is obvious that the highest simultaneous preference of economics students has been management departments, and it is an increasing tendency. Despite the fact that other preferences of students entered in 2008 and before concentrates on management, politics and law, 2011-12 entrants have a more dispersed variety of preferences. This is in part a consequence of central decision to facilitate students from different high school academic backgrounds to enter economics. (Also take a look at Figure 6.) High percentages of simultaneous preferences show that, students who are composed to be economist since early ages are really few in number. The great majority of students prefer economics as a result of inadequacy of their success for their original preferences like politics and law departments. That causes a cultural divide between academics of economics and students, as the generation of current academics entered economics departments in years economics departments have a far better rank and reputation relative to politics and law. Besides better informing the audience, a reasonable response of departments of economics may be to increase courses that interact with other disciplines, to revive early cross-disciplinary nature of political economy.

References

Yıldız Teknik Üniversitesi. (2013). "Yıllara göre Üniversitemiz Lisans Programlarına Yerleşenlerin Başarı Sırası" 14.11.2012 update. [Online] http://www.ogi.yildiz.edu.tr/category.php?id=23 01.06.2013.