



Review article

Thematization of University: A Quest for Establishing Agricultural Universities

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Abstract

Turkish higher education system with 209 universities, today, and many more on the horizon, demonstrates enormous quantitative development. During the last three decades, no city without a university approach resulted in a burgeoning higher education movement. Whether private or public this exponential effort to replenish cities with universities may be considered a positive impact. However, the positive impact of this numeric expansion remains a question to be investigated. This article does not just discuss positive or negative effects of establishing the very same style of universities in every neighboring city but concentrates on the ideas of a thematic university approach. Hence, instead of duplicating homothetic city universities, tendencies towards structuring specific sectoral universities may be a more efficient way of allocating resources accurately. Agriculture, for example, is one of the sectors that deserves free-standing universities.

Keywords: Thematic Universities, Agricultural Universities, Alternative Higher Education.

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INTRODUCTION

This review article aims to discuss the thematic university paradigm concerning agriculture and higher education relations. Education systems that train the human potential following the procedures for meeting the public demands and using existing resources properly are considered successful (Erdogan, 2016). Especially, higher education institutions play an active role in social development by providing the young generation with knowledge and skills and preparing them for life while ensuring the development of social responsibility and awareness. Higher education institutions that contribute to the current economic system with positive involvement generate strategic importance in the development process (Korkut, 2002). There is a fact that a dynamic relationship exists between economic theories and education. Education is the main actor in knowledge production, using knowledge efficiently, and adding value to economic systems. Institutions demonstrate great importance in terms of increasing the quality of human resources in economic development. The responsibility of producing scientific knowledge and training individuals for their future imposes many challenges on higher education (Kiraz, 2021).

In general, the role of universities is considered to process scientific inputs and resources and dispense them to the work environment as outputs. While students, academicians, and resources represent the inputs, qualified human capital, and new information are considered products (Celep and Tülübaş, 2015). In fact, “in knowledge-based development, producing knowledge and processing the produced knowledge as a product is the evidence of development” (Castells, 2008, p. 20). Today, in a global economy, there is more competition than collaboration. Areas of this competitiveness are mainly scientific progress, innovation-based value creation, and technology development. Thus, universities have always been in search of developing alternative educational policies as well as practices to be stronger in this global competitive environment (Sart, 2018). Being able to stand out in the global competition, and development of the human capital stock is the education system’s responsibility and, therefore, training qualified human resources is getting more and more complicated (Şimşek, 2014). However, whether higher education institutions or universities are strong enough in terms of producing knowledge, research, and developing products that create added value in global competition is the question to be discussed (Başar, 2014).

Friedland and Alford (1991) claim that societies consist of different logic and institutional orders regarding their understanding of education. Institutions, however, shape themselves based on this understanding. DiMaggio and Powell (1991) point out the term “isomorphism.” Organizations do identify similar organizational characteristics of isomorphism and become similar or certain similarities between common organizations exist. Nonetheless, it is not clear which characteristics should be homogenized in organizations. It is possible that different forces—political, economic, environmental,

technological, and many more—cause concerns for uniformity, despite the plural structure of educational organizations (Erden, 2006).

The same concern is also valid for Turkish Higher Education Institutions. Today, Turkish universities demonstrate robust similarities. Whether similarities or differences are more valuable for Turkish higher education is the question to be investigated. The need for reputation, for instance, is one of the factors that makes universities similar. Reputation provides marketing and competitive advantages for universities. In addition, institutions that are at the top in ranking reports attractive to top students.

The ranking placement of a university becomes a reference for the quality of education and students want to receive degrees from those top-ranked (McDonough et al., 1998). If an institution regularly occupies quite high ranks over time, this can be considered a good indicator of the quality of the institution (Birkenholz & Simonsen, 2011). Moreover, "...quality education basically involved compliance with government's policies, with regard to such aspects of school's operations as staffing, curriculum delivery, infrastructure, management, corporate life, laboratory facilities and library services being implemented" (Akingunloye et al., 2021, p. 46).

The prestige of universities is generally related to the quality of the education they provide. However, should the universities be preoccupied with these rankings and their numeric place on the list, or better to relinquish the idea of being numbered? Indicators, criteria, weighing, and many other factors make universities closer to each other since the battle is about to be in the same or upper category. Today, the challenge of being top on the list has become a confusing bottleneck for many universities and even for countries.

Henceforth, this review elucidates the thematic or sectoral understanding of higher education and, in addition to some existing *thematic* universities, proposes a free-standing agricultural university.

What is Thema and Thematic University?

Thema is the name of the administrative system, and the roots go back to the 5th and 6th Centuries. Briefly, with this system, Byzantines were able to administer a big empire by dividing into themas (small cities). The local citizens were provided with farmlands through the land grant system and they were allowed to be in charge of managing their own themas. Hence, local production ensured food and the strong army delivered safety for thema's citizens. It was one of the best functioning administrative and military systems of its period and continued its existence for centuries (Güçlüay, 2013). Since then, the term has been in use in different disciplines, especially in education, by dividing teaching, learning, and administration of institutions into manageable pieces. It was believed that the more autonomous structures with pre-established standards created the more organizational efficiency and originality established.

Turkish universities due to the population increase host a great number of students. This expansion creates many difficulties in terms of administration. An especially pertinent issue is the one that most of the universities have been established recently and are in the process of forming an identity in terms of creating organizational characteristics. The most important problem in this institutional identity formation process is the repetition of each other and the inability to refrain from monotony or imitating previously established universities. From this point of view, higher education institutions need to reconsider their situation as *thematic or sectoral institutions* rather than being in similarly focused constructs (Kiraz, 2022).

Examining Turkey's potential from the outside, Berichelea states that Turkey is a very large country that can provide jobs for everyone. There are extremely smart people in small villages and towns. He argues that not only the people in the cities but also the villages can complete university education and even graduate education to make significant contributions to the economy (2007). From these perspectives, crowded universities—with many faculties and departments that are compartmentalized in big cities—or universities that are compact and specialized—based on a specific sector—should be the main question. In the Regional Development Oriented Projects preface the former head of YÖK, Yekta Saraç, indicated that

“...It is expected that our universities will integrate with the city and region where they are located, and develop economic, social, and human capital. For this, our higher education institutions need to reconsider their missions, move away from uniformity to institutional difference and diversity, focus on their strengths, and make some of our universities stand out in certain areas without departing from the holistic structure of being a university...” (YÖK Projects, 2020).

In this context, the research can be useful in the emergence of a model with a perspective that the university phenomenon moves away from uniformity and towards institutional differences and diversity.

From this point of view, it is important to introduce several different models for higher education that increase competitiveness for holistic social development, encourage efficient use of resources, and convey future workforce appropriately. Moreover, in the Higher Education Reform Policy Document presented to the President by the Presidential Education and Training Policy Board, three new university models were included: ‘*thematic*,’ ‘*specialized in a limited field*,’ or ‘*multi-dimensional*’ university. The main goal of this new university models seems to integrate the academy with social life. Higher Education Reform Policy Document also says:

University councils will be formed at all state universities. The senior management will consist of the council and the rector, and the council will be appointed from among those who support the university, serve, and build bridges between the society and the university. In all appointments, including the rector, it will be one of the basic principles to seek stakeholder opinions to ensure that universities

carry out their duties by their missions and goals. The target will be a university that can meet the demands suitable for the diversifying student profile in higher education, contribute to social and economic development, respond to the diversified workforce of the markets, increase employment, and adapt to increasing competition.

This agenda resembles the ancient Thema system, giving duties and responsibilities to locals to create regional development. Consequently, based on the agenda presented by the Higher Education Reform Policy Document, examples of the diversification, differentiation, and automation of universities in our country are "Health Sciences Universities," "Technical Universities," "Universities of Applied Sciences," "Social Sciences Universities," "Ankara University of Music and Fine Arts," "Turkish Aeronautical Association University," "University of Health Sciences," "Konya Food and Agriculture University," and so forth. Konya Food and Agriculture University which is directly related to agriculture and food is an important example of an *agricultural-specific thematic university* for our country. In this institution, a special process is followed from student placement to employment of graduates in companies with which the university is affiliated. Due to this feature, this institution is an important gain for Konya and İçanadolu regions.

Turkish Higher Education and Agricultural Education

When we look at the history of higher education in Turkey, it is mainly structured on foreign institutional models. French models have been a reference in establishing universities since the second half of the 19th century (Erden, 2006). Also, The German Humboldt university model has been taken as an example at the end of the century and the influence of this model has been persistent for years. (Üsdiken, 2004).

In the 1930s and 1940s, we see that the foundation of the state university of Turkish higher education manifested itself in two different ways these were the classical university that included more diversified teaching fields and the technical university that represented the specialized structure (Üsdiken et al., 2013, Gürüz. et al., 1994 cited in Yılmaz-Yıldız and Kiraz, 2023). However, since the 1980s, universities have started to become similar to each other due to the centralized legal regime (YÖK, 2007 cited by Ergüder et al). Strategies, missions, and visions become homogeneous due to the concern of adapting themselves to widely accepted social and cultural norms and this revealed its effects as weak organizational identities (Eren et al., 2014).

In the 1970s, the change in social structures and technology and the change in the expectations of a university necessitated a mutual effort among companies and universities (Morey, 2004, p. 138). The concept of the corporate university approach, which was initially considered only as a new nomenclature, has conveyed discussions from knowledge production to the pragmatism of education that considers human capital in a strategic sense (Holland and Pyman, 2006, p. 19). Receiving

external training and support from companies and better applied educational methodologies from universities would help the qualified workforce to be educated in the fastest way possible. Motorola and Northwestern are examples of training programs made with this approach. Torino Polytechnic University and Uludağ University Automotive Engineering Department of Tofaş, establishment of industrial vocational high school laboratories by Fiat in cooperation with MEB, Pegasus' Flight Academy, Turkcell's Seven Regions and Seven University Projects, initiatives of Acıbadem University can be considered good examples of company university collaboration (Bozkurt and Yılmaz, 2008, cited in Yılmaz-Yıldız and Kiraz, 2023).

Important steps can be taken with diversification and differentiation by moving away from the uniform and centralized structure of the higher education system in Turkey (Çelik, 2016). One of the functions of higher education is to provide a professional workforce to the sectors. The university tries to meet this need by opening new departments. However, research and development functions should not be left behind to meet the demands of free market conditions (DPT, 2000). Gürüz (1995) mentioned that the paradigms are changing. Higher education paradigms of the Humboldtian model would need to be reconsidered. Today, important economic inputs that are sensitive to market conditions are the focus for improving higher education. Also, TÜSİAD (2003) stated that higher education should be consistent with market conditions. As mentioned earlier, in Turkey, the best examples of the diversification, differentiation, and automation of universities that are directly related to sectors are "Applied Sciences Universities," "Health Sciences University," "Technical Universities," "Social Sciences Universities," and "Konya Food and Agriculture University."

In Turkey, higher education has become widespread in the direction of social demand from universities, colleges, and regional centers since the 1950s. With this thought, some regional universities were placed into Turkish Higher education like Karadeniz Technical University, Ege University, Middle East Technical University, and Atatürk University (TUSIAD, 1994, p. 154). For example, Atatürk University, in Erzurum, was modeled after the Land-Grant University approach in the USA. In this model, local problems such as health, agriculture, and animal husbandry were the areas that university concentrates to provide both solutions and education. Atatürk University operated autonomously but later affiliated to the Ministry of National Education in 1976 (MEB, 1991).

Turkey is divided into nine regions in terms of agriculture (Özçağlar, 1993) Considering 9 regions with different agricultural and geographical characteristics, it is important to consider different types of agricultural universities so that every agricultural university can be a leader in agriculture and development in their own region. Due to the unique geographical and ecological construct of the regions, these universities would be named Regional Development-Oriented Universities that accelerate the development of the regions where they are located and spread knowledge to the masses.

The thematic education approach is not new but has been ignored for many years. A specific agricultural school example begun as Agricultural School in 1846 in Ayamama Farm (Istanbul-Yeşilköy) by the order of Grand Vizier Büyük Reşit Pasha. The model of the school was resembling the French Grignon Higher Agricultural School. Although the school in Ayamama Farm was active only for a short time, the importance of agricultural education was understood. Nearly after four decades, in 1891 Halkalı High School of Agriculture was started. Afterward, agricultural schools and practice-oriented institutions were opened in different regions (Eriş, 2004).

The most important step in post-republic agricultural education was the establishment of the Higher Institute of Agriculture in Ankara (1933). In 1948, this institution was affiliated with Ankara University and its name changed to the Faculty of Agriculture (Tekeli, 1995). The Faculty of Agriculture was enlarged after accumulating the Faculty of Natural and Basic Sciences, and the Faculty of Veterinary and Forestry. With this structure, it is possible to say that this institution is a good example of the "Agricultural University" approach (Eriş, 2004). However, renewing our agricultural education with a few formal changes to catch up with the standards of developed countries is not the solution (Eriş, 2004).

Following the abovementioned part, the Author proposes the idea of the thematic agricultural university approach or development initiatives by providing examples of agricultural universities.

Why Agricultural Universities?

There is a need to conduct research to what extent different agricultural universities are necessary for Turkey. New agricultural universities can be established by taking one or more examples from many different preestablished agricultural universities in the world, but it is important to reveal the phenomenon of agricultural universities specific to the agricultural regions and traditions of Turkey. For instance, Konya Food and Agriculture University may provide important support to its region, but the need for different agricultural university models for other regions still exists. Researchers and experts in the fields of agriculture and higher education should pursue new models and programs for agricultural higher education and thematic program development for agricultural development.

While determining the main points of causation, inevitable facts that the societies face necessitate modeling an agricultural higher education program. For example, even before the first quarter of the 21st century is over, the world has experienced economic crises, pandemics, food shortages, drought, and many more natural disasters. Also, coup attempts in countries, wars between countries, thoughtless use of nature, lack of resources, energy prices, food production and distribution, supply problems, and many more were faced by societies. The imbalance in agricultural production has enforced countries fight for nutrition. The aperture between food supply and food demand made life of the poor more

difficult. Experience in academic research of the agricultural education system may help in creating solutions to these problems.

As a developing country, Turkey should focus on how a higher education program should be designed to properly direct the agricultural production potential and human capital. In this direction, an independent or freestanding agricultural university or universities would be necessary to create a drastic change in agricultural education not only for students but also for the community. Contrary to popular belief, agriculture is a scientific area and one of the most important sectors. It is far beyond the conventional methods of farmers' and peasants' production activities. On the other hand, higher education systems, as comprehensive academic institutions, cannot be evaluated outside of social, economic, and technological developments and changes. Although the idea of an independent or free-standing agricultural university is very new in Turkey, it has existed in many countries for many years.

Table 1. Some Examples of Agricultural Universities

Sweden	Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences
Netherlands	Wageningen University
Slovakia	Slovak Agricultural University
Ukraine	Ukrainian National Agrarian University
Latvia	Latvian Agricultural University
Russia	Voronezh State Agrarian University
Poland	Warsaw Agricultural University
Czech	Republic Prague, Czech Agricultural University
Greece	Athens Agricultural University
India	Assam Agricultural University
China	Fujian Agricultural University
China	Beijing Agricultural University
Japan	Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology
Japan	Obihiro University of Agricultural and Veterinary Sciences
Malaysia	Agricultural University
USA	Florida of Agriculture and Mechanical University (FAMU)
USA	Alabama University of Agriculture and Machinery
Peru	Peruvian National Agrarian University La Molina
Kenya	Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology
Denmark	Royal Danish University of Veterinary and Agriculture
Norway	Norwegian Agricultural University
Bulgaria	Plovdiv Agricultural University

As can be seen in Table 1, there are thematic universities specialized only in agriculture in many countries. For example, "Wageningen University," which was established in the Netherlands in 1876, continues its activities in the region called the Food Valley whilst making significant contributions to the Netherlands' second place as an agricultural exporter after the USA. It ranks first in the world and

in the Netherlands in agricultural education. Economists and policymakers rather than professionals related to agriculture have brought the widespread opinion that agriculture is needed for development and Wageningen University has reached a prestigious position by helping agricultural projections for the Netherlands' future (Özer, 2021).

In addition to structuring agricultural education as an establishment of unique agricultural universities, faculty-based establishments are also providing agricultural education. In Turkey, there are 43 agricultural faculties and 174 departments providing diplomas in agricultural engineering. Table 2 presents some examples of faculty-based agricultural education in the world.

Table 2. Examples of Faculty-Level Structuring for Agricultural Education in Universities in Different Countries (Eriş, 2004)

Country	University	Faculty/School/Collge
United States of America	California Univ. (Davis)	Agriculture and Environmental Sciences
	Nebraska Univ.	Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources.
	North Carolina Univ.	Agriculture and Life Sciences
	Oregon Univ.	Agricultural Sciences
	West Virginia Univ.	Forestry and Consumer Sciences.
	Iowa State Univ.	Agriculture
United Kingdom	Michigan State Univ.	Agriculture and Natural Sciences
	Nottingham Univ.	Biological Sciences
	Reading Univ.	Plant Sciences
	Aberdeen Univ.	Biological Sciences
Germany	Hohenheim Univ.	Agricultural Sciences-I-II
	Bonn Univ.	Agriculture
	Göttingen Univ.	Agricultural Sciences
	Kassel Univ.	Ecological Agricultural Sciences
	Hannover Univ.	Horticulture Geological Sciences
Japan	Kyoto Univ.	
	Hokkaido Univ.	Agricultural Sciences
	Kobe Univ.	Agricultural Sciences
	Hiroshima Univ.	Applied Biological Sciences
Belgium	Chiba Univ.	Faculty of Horticulture
	Leuven Catholic Univ.	Agricultural and Applied Biological Sciences
Israel	Hebrew Univ.	Agriculture Food and Environmental Quality Sciences
	Ben Gurion Univ.	Environmental Sciences
Australia	Queensland Univ.	Natural Res., Agriculture and Veterinary Sciences
	Adelaide Univ.	Natural and Environmental Sciences
	Western Avustralya Univ.	Natural and Agricultural Sciences
	Bologna Univ.	Agricultural Sciences

Italy	Padova Univ.	Agricultural Sciences
	Milano Univ.	Agricultural Sciences
South Africa	Pretoria Univ.	Natural and Agricultural Sciences

As seen in Tables 1 and 2 there are different tendencies in providing agricultural education among countries. Which approach benefits most should be investigated. Since Turkey follows the faculty approach, a standalone agricultural university would be considered after a scientific judgment and justification.

To solve the food problem in Turkey and the world, radical changes are required. Unsystematic attempts will be short-term solutions. The establishment of functional agricultural higher education would only be possible through the effective organization of human resources.

In this study, agricultural education is considered as a social problem. The main philosophy behind the idea of agricultural universities is not segregating agricultural faculties from universities but providing some alternatives based on an economically sustainable model(s) that envisages a focus on individual and social development. In this context, the aim is to put forward suggestions about what the basic features should be in the agriculture-oriented university structure and discuss the socio-collectivist structure that comes to the front.

Discussions and Suggestions

Among the objectives of this study, what should be considered in the structure of agricultural education specific to our country and which model or models should be within the integrity of the construct are the two most important. Changing the way of agricultural higher education should not be in the means of what has been done by those developed countries in the name of development. Replicating or adapting organizational structures of agricultural education of a specific institution would not be profitable for our authenticities.

In general, this study discusses an agricultural university by considering the relationship between food, nutrition, agriculture, and higher education, which have become the focus of attention in recent days. Agriculture has been neglected to a great extent and affected all individuals in society. This paper is not an academic effort to bring back the known criticisms of the current situation of higher education, but rather an academic effort on how to realize a functionalized alternative higher education model.

There are 209 universities in total. 131 state universities (11 technical universities, 2 fine arts universities), 2 high technology institutes, as well as Gendarmerie and Coast Guard Academy, Police Academy National Defense University, and 78 foundation universities (YÖK, 2022). Apart from universities, there are 5 vocational schools. Every year, thousands of students study at these schools and

seek to graduate and enter business life. Although this numerical increase is perceived as positive for Turkey, it is an undeniable fact that a significant part of universities needs improvement in terms of quality and program diversity, namely in specializing in specific areas. From a more critical point of view, as mentioned before, it is obvious that these higher education institutions are a duplication of each other and remain far from the sectoral specialization approach. To be accredited, for example, creates anxiety and may cause similarity or uniformity rather than diversity in higher education.

Universities to be established as agricultural universities should be region-specific. The development of any region in Turkey will be difficult without understanding the significance of agriculture and it will never be possible without proper education. In that case, the creation of an educated population in agriculture and the preference of the educated population to deal with agriculture should be the primary goal of an agricultural university.

When discussing a good university, people think of universities and departments that receive students with high scores in national exams. The increase in the preference scores of the departments varies according to the response of the graduates in the labor market. However, this is a long and false process. Like university ranking, numeric placement of students' achievements based on an exam result is a primitive approach. It is not difficult to understand why so many high school graduates do not choose the programs of agriculture.

The university system needs reorganization. Instead of mass education or excluding some students from receiving a good education, we need reorganized *thematic* institutions. Agricultural universities with the following suggestions would be an example for regional and as well as wholistic development of both students and community.

- Both state and private agricultural universities (AU) should be backed by the Ministry of Treasury
- The Land-grant approach to establishing an AU should be reconsidered
- AU's should develop programs not only based on producing knowledge but also on producing products
- Many agricultural cooperatives such as Tariş, Marmara Birlik, Trakya Birlik, and so forth would establish Cooperative Agricultural Universities
- Agricultural universities should also be thematic with no replication of one another
- AU's curriculum should be developed based on production
- Community reach-end extension programs should be developed for civic
- Students who prefer AU's should be provided with scholarships

- AU's should be leading institutions in producing and distributing agricultural products and supporting regional development
- AU's academic calendar should be determined by the regional and geographical facts
- Instead of semester base academic year, quarter or modular system should be adapted based on regional characteristics
- After graduation students should not be jobseekers but entrepreneurs
- Faculty members and students should be provided with farmlands for a lifespan by the treasury for educated production

These suggestions could be numerous if an extensive search is conducted to establish thematic AUs. As mentioned in previous parts of this manuscript, we need drastic changes in agricultural education and bring experts in curriculum development, higher education specialists, and academicians from agricultural faculties together to develop different thematic models for agricultural education.

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