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Positive or Critical?

The Economics Network Student Survey assesses the state of teaching and learning in Economics

Our main article in this issue focuses on the Network's third student survey for economics students 'Economics Students 2006: More Positive About Learning, More Critical About Teaching.' This year's survey received 1,930 responses across 69 departments. Many students thanked the Network for consulting them:

"I'm glad you are taking the time to think of our feelings, economics

is an important subject and I hope you can use this to improve the quality of the learning for future students." (Survey respondent, April 2006).

An aggregate report is available from our web site, and confidential reports have been sent to relevant departments.

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2006 Learning and Teaching in Economics Awards: Winners Announced

The winners of the sixth Learning and Teaching in Economics Awards can now be announced. The scheme, run by the Economics Network, seeks to recognise and reward exemplary practice from within the academic economics community.



The centre received a record number of nominations across the three categories of Outstanding Teaching, eLearning

and Student Nominated. The judging panel expressed their delight at both the number and high quality of nominations.

The **Outstanding Teaching** prize was awarded to **Dr. Dean Garratt** from Nottingham Trent University. His commitment, innovation and quality of teaching across a range

of economics courses was highly praised.

The **eLearning** award was given to **Dr. David McCausland** at Aberdeen University for his innovative use of eLearning including his role in the development of the LiveEcon interactive courseware.

The **Student Nominated** award was shared between **Dr. Maksymillian Kwiek** from the University of Southampton; **Prof. Robin Naylor** from Warwick University; and **Mrs Alison Wride** from Exeter University.

The panel also awarded two **special commendations** to **Dr. Ben**

McQuillin from the University of East Anglia and **Ms Juliette Stephenson** from Exeter University.

We received over 20 nominations for the Student Nominated Award. The decision to award commendations reflects just how narrow the contest was.

The centre and judging panel would like to congratulate all of those nominated for an award. The nominating statements were uniformly persuasive and it was tremendously difficult to make comparative judgements between them. They would also like to thank those that took the time to bring their lecturers or a colleague to the attention of the wider community.

Economics Students 2006: More Positive About Learning, More Critical About Teaching

Following the success of our 2002 and 2004 Student Surveys and as part of our research programme into teaching and learning in economics, the Economics Network conducted its third national online survey of economics students in March–April 2006. Nearly two thousand students from sixty-nine departments took part in the survey, including both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

We changed the questions in the survey this year, as many of them were duplicating the ones included in the National Students Survey, which has been offered to all undergraduate students in the UK since 2005. The Economics Network's Advisory Group was in favour of having a subject-specific, qualitative survey, that will provide information on students' perceptions of studying economics at various levels of study. The survey was intended as an observational study and not as a controlled experiment.

John Sloman and Inna Pomorina designed questions for the survey, which consisted of 2 sections (*About you* and *About your degree course*) and included 30 questions, both quantitative and qualitative. All quantitative questions were mandatory, but open-ended questions were optional, which has affected the number of replies for each question. At least a third of the respondents answered all questions, with some questions answered by all respondents. Our respondents were predominantly male, aged from 18 to 21, with A-levels in Maths and Economics, with English as their first language and Economics being their first choice of course.

General impressions

Three quarters of the students say the degree course has met their expectations. Those who answered negatively to this question were asked to explain in what ways the course differed from their expectations. Among the most frequent themes mentioned were: Maths and A-level Maths; course content (and its relevance to the real

world); the quality of teaching; and the level of support for students. *'A lot more maths than expected'* is one of the most frequent comments. Another *'Teaching quality is not as good as I expected.'*

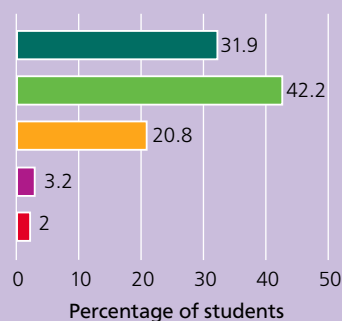
Overall, about three quarters of respondents were satisfied with the quality of their degree course. Among the comments - *'Very very satisfied, this is one of the best economics departments'; 'Not dissatisfied but feel that easily more could be done to improve it.'*

When asked how their course has changed them, many students gave positive replies - *'For the better. I look at everything in the world, and think economics. It changes the way you think, into a more rigorous analytical mindset;'* or *'It made me realise that there's a great deal of pleasure in actually understanding something.'*

Among the most frequently mentioned best aspects of courses are the quality of staff, the variety of modules to study and future job prospects. *'Some of the lecturers are really good, they encourage you to learn and understand and are very good at explaining difficult concepts.'*

The quality of teaching is also a major factor drawing negative comments. *'Bad lecturers should be trained.'* *'I am not choosing some of the modules next year specifically because of who is teaching them. The subjects interest me, but I don't think I could handle another year of these 2 particular lecturers.'*

Overall, are you satisfied with the quality of your degree course?



Specific issues

We gave students a list of activities, from formal lectures to informal work with other students, and asked which they find useful in supporting their learning. Most of the activities were rated *'useful or very useful'* by at least half the respondents. For a breakdown of these responses, see the full report.

Most students reflect on their learning and are very articulate about it. They recognise the problems that staff are facing, with pressures of doing research and teaching large classes, but they also want their critical voice to be heard: *'Better lecturers, who are able to speak eloquently so you can understand, especially seeing the amount of money we pay.'* *'Lectures should be held by researchers who have an inclination for teaching. Lectures held by professors that are interested just in their own research are quite unuseful and unsatisfactory.'*

'I believe that all lecturers should participate in some form of teacher training. This would benefit the students, as the lecturers will be

communicating their ideas with a more patient approach and be able to express their ideas in different ways. This may help people who do not have conventional learning styles and increase the approachability of the lecturers.'

In seminars/tutorials/small classes, a vast majority go through pre-prepared problem sets or worksheets. At the same time more than 80% rarely or never have experiments, simulations or role-play in seminars. Those who do have them rate them highly: *'I quite enjoy role-plays, exercises in class;'* *'Best activities – role play and games'.*

When asked how the seminars could be improved, students suggest running seminars more frequently and interactively, making groups smaller and organising them according to the students' ability levels, as well as changing the content/structure of seminars.

The quality of teaching is mentioned very often, especially with respect to Graduate Teaching Assistants, where issues around their English language and pedagogical skills are raised: *'Less of a language barrier with seminar teachers to provide a greater understanding.'*

Many students also stress that they do not have seminars in their second year, so *'More of them would be a start!'*

The issue of teaching maths and stats for economics students continues to be a controversial one. About half of the respondents find the teaching of maths and stats in their course to be good, another third say *'some good, some not so good'* while one in ten perceive it to be *'poor'* and one in twelve to be *'generally not very good'*. A typical comment is *'The quality of teaching of maths and stats varies greatly in my course. There are lecturers from both end of the spectrum.'*

A majority of respondents found the content of the degree largely relevant to the real world and the workload about right.

Students also agree that the assessment on their degree accurately tests the level of their knowledge and understanding of the learning outcomes. Among the different forms of assessment, essays in the students' own time are frequently used by the majority of respondents. Many students rarely or never encounter essays done in class (9 out of 10 say *'rarely or never'*), online assessment (7 out of 10) or group work projects (half of respondents say *'rarely or never'*).

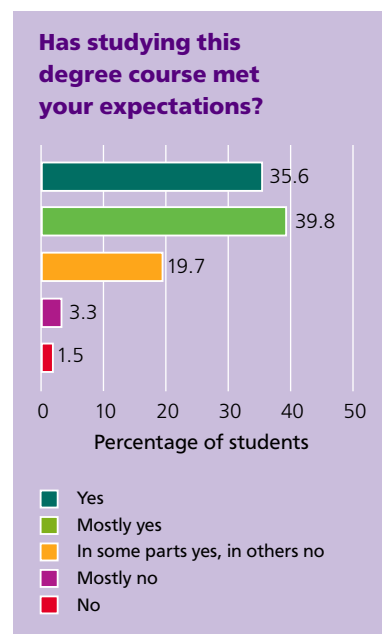
A large group of students has yet to experience e-learning. One in five report that online learning using the Web is not available in their courses, while two fifths do not use economics software and two fifths also do not use (formative) online questions or tests.

Use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) is spread more widely: more than nine out of ten respondents have access to materials posted by the lecturer on a course VLE or website. Students find VLEs useful and the only complaint they have about them is lack of interactivity: communication tools (e.g. discussion boards) are not available to every third respondent. A typical comment is, *'It has been effective in providing lecture and other materials. Further to this there is no other use.'*

'Improvements could be made through making use of other tools, such as discussion boards, possibly with lecturers allocating some time for an online questions and answer session, but also for students to be encouraged to use discussion boards, as they are left unused.'

When asked about aspects of the degree that could be improved, respondents again raise their concerns about teaching quality.

They would like to see more interested lecturers, better explanations of the material, fewer language-related barriers. Among the comments: *'Better lecturers that can hold your attention and make you look forward to your lectures.'* *'Some lecturers just do not care, they won't help you with work and some seem annoyed when you go to them for help. Others are very helpful though.'* *'The lecturers interest in teaching?'* *'Hope this survey results will reach my teachers.'*



You can read the full national report at: www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/surveys

Confidential reports for each participating department were sent to Heads of Departments and to Economics Network departmental contacts.

If you have any specific query regarding the survey please contact **Dr. Inna Pomorina** inna.pomorina@bristol.ac.uk

New Internet Economist tutorial

A new edition of the 'Internet Economist' online tutorial has been released in the Intute Virtual Training Suite.

The tutorial, which teaches Internet research skills for students, has been completely updated and revised by Dr. Martin Poulter of the Economics Network.

The tutorial recommends key Internet resources for education and research; offers advice on Internet searching, with improved

interactive exercises; and has a new section called 'Success Stories' to illustrate how the Internet can be used effectively to support education and research.

The tutorial adopts a new pedagogic and Web design, giving it a new look and feel with improved graphics and interactivity.



www.vts.intute.ac.uk/he/tutorial/economist

intute: the Best of the Web

intute is the new face of the Resource Discovery Network (RDN), and is a free national service enabling lecturers, researchers and students to discover and access quality Internet resources.

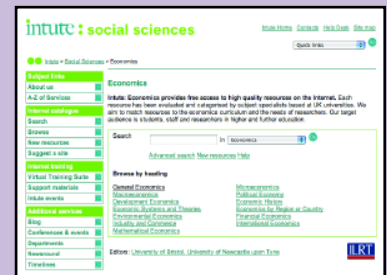
intute: Economics has been created by bringing together two of the Hubs of the Resource Discovery Network: Altis and SOSIG. The new service provides information and tools to help you access the best of the Web in the social sciences.

It covers the main subject areas taught in the Economics curriculum - macroeconomics, microeconomics, economic theories, financial economics,

international economics, and development economics.

intute: Economics also provides:

- Listings of Economics conferences and events
- Links to University teaching departments in the UK
- Subject news via the Intute: Economics blog
- MyIntute for email updates on new sites



- Newsround service from other Economics sites

www.intute.ac.uk/socialsciences/economics/

The Sustainability of a Market Town

As part of the Higher Education Academy's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) theme, university students are being matched up with community projects in the Gloucestershire, Bristol and Cardiff area to help embed sustainability into the curriculum.

Coordinating the pilot project is Heather Witham, currently on secondment from the Economics Network. The first major event for this project occurred on the weekend of 21-22 October when 30 planning and architecture students from Cardiff University and an economics student from University of the West of England arrived in Thornbury to meet residents, hear their concerns and tour the town.

The Cardiff students then worked in multidisciplinary groups to

choose feasibility projects for the term based on local issues. The topics chosen were: 1) the sustainability of the trading estate, including the social needs of employees; 2) the provision of affordable housing and the re-opening of a rail link in the outskirts of Thornbury; and 3) the integration of primary school children into the community, particularly through their teaching of sustainability practices to residents. The students will present

their preliminary findings to the community on the evening of 16th December. Donna Humphrey, an economics student, is looking at local food issues and using an ecological economics problem-based learning workbook to focus her activities. Her work and findings will serve as the basis for another Economics Network ESD Focus Group next year.

For further information, see: www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/esd

Network-funded Projects

This year the Network received a record number of bids for Mini-Project funding. The following 14 projects will be undertaken over the coming year:

- Introducing Problem-Based Learning to a First-Year Curriculum, University of Ulster
- Talking Economics: Digital Audio Collections in the promotion of 'conversations' on economic issues, Glasgow Caledonian University;
- Presentation skills for Economics Students (Undergraduates), Oxford Brookes University, University of Wales, Swansea
- Economics teaching and learning through the arts: the contribution of literature and cinema, London Metropolitan University
- Writing for Economists, London School of Economics and Political Science
- Embedding a generic ePortfolio/PDP tool in a basic skills module for Economics and Business students, University of Wales, Swansea
- Assessing the effectiveness of heterodox economic concepts in understanding real world issues: an international survey of students, University of the West of England
- An evaluation of the challenges MBA students encounter in acquiring and applying threshold concepts in Economics, University of Coventry

*Dr Inna Pomorina
(Economics Network)
and Dr Tommy Tang
(Queensland University
of Technology) at DEBE
2005 Conference*



- An interactive approach to the Teaching and Learning of the IS-LM and Mundell-Fleming models, University of East London
- Microeconomic Case Studies, University of Northampton
- Making Economics more accessible - Creating a template for an alternative methodology in teaching Economics, Green Economics Institute
- An Investigation into the Application of Economics Threshold Concepts using WinEcon via a VLE for Business Students, University of Coventry
- An Investigation into the Impact of Classroom Experiments on the Understanding of Threshold Concepts, University of Coventry
- PBL at Londonmet: (1) Why do students prefer 'chalk and talk'? and (2) assessing PBL with a control group, London Metropolitan University

The Mini-Project scheme is now in its third year and has produced many valuable resources including learning and teaching materials and resources and case studies. For more information please visit: www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/mini

Network Staff News

Jessica Lincoln, our Project Assistant has left her role to complete her PhD in War Studies and to take on a Visiting Lectureship at the Defence Academy, Shrivenham – we wish her the best of luck in both pursuits.

Luckily, Jessica will still be working with us one day a week on our Subject Census. She will gather information relating to economics higher education teaching such as curriculum design, assessment, learning and teaching practices, recruitment, retention and employability.

We also wish **Heather Witham**, our Project Officer the best of luck in her new seconded role as Project Coordinator for the Higher Education Academy's Education for Sustainable Development theme.

We are very pleased to welcome two Associate Directors to the team – **Rebecca Taylor**, Nottingham Trent University and **Wyn Morgan**, University of

Nottingham. Both Wyn and Rebecca will be inputting into the strategic direction of the Network as well as taking a lead on the Network's programme of departmental visits and workshops.

We also welcome **Vicky Mukhaydli** as our new Project Assistant, who previously worked at Oxford Brookes University.



The Economics Network team at a recent Away Day

New Maths for Economics Formulae Sheet

The past decade has seen a serious decline in students' basic mathematical skills and level of preparation on entry into higher education in the UK.

Many students now embark on degree programmes in economics without the necessary maths skills and teaching mathematics to economics students has become increasingly challenging for universities across the sector, regardless of entry qualifications.

In light of these developments we now have a dedicated maths support section on our web site that provides, and links to, a wide range of resources that might help lecturers tackle some of these issues:

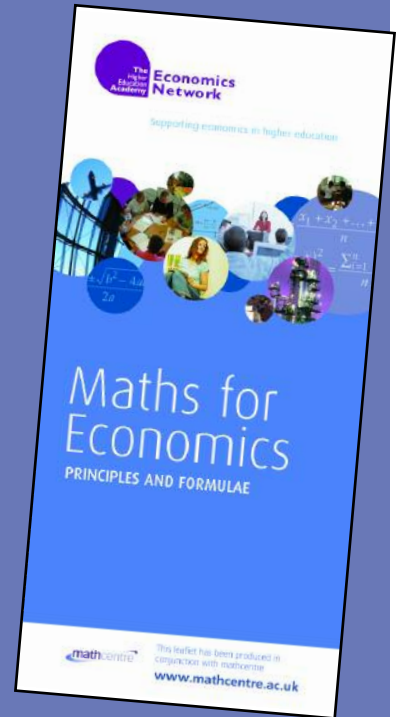
www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/themes/maths

We have recently produced an A4-folded Maths for Economics formula sheet to help economics students with their revision of arithmetic, algebra, calculus and common functions. Sample copies will be sent to heads of department and contacts shortly. A PDF version can be downloaded from:

www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/themes/maths_formula_sheet.pdf

We can also supply multiple copies. There will be no charge to departments other than standard postage and packing.

All requests should be submitted to Bhagesh Sachania (email: b.m.sachania@bris.ac.uk) by 28th February 2007. Orders will be despatched by March 2007.



New on Our Web Site

PowerPoint without torture

Nobody likes to see an interesting topic reduced to a dull recitation of bullet points. Used imaginatively, however, PowerPoint allows you to organise animations, videos and other media. This new section of our site links to case studies and other resources.

www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/themes/powerpoint

Of course, making animated graphs can be time-consuming, so we have made some slide shows to illustrate models in core intermediate macro. These are free for you to adapt and use how you want. Slides for micro are in preparation.

www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/slides/macro

Departmental contacts

These new pages describe the role of our departmental contacts around the UK.

www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/contact/keycontacts

Support for teaching assistants and new lecturers

A new section of the site collects tips, case studies and first-hand accounts aimed at GTAs and new staff.

www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/themes/gta



Why Study Economics?

This site entuses school-leavers to consider applying for an economics degree, and answers their questions. It has recently been given an overhaul with a more colourful design and new content.

www.whystudyeconomics.ac.uk

Workshops for New Lecturers and GTAs

We recently ran two workshops for new staff. The first was for graduate teaching assistants and was held in Nottingham. The day-long workshop focused on seminar management, under the assumption that most GTAs would be taking seminars whose content has already been decided by the module leader.

The second was a two-day residential workshop in Bristol for new lecturers and focused on lecturing, taking seminars and workshops, module design, assessment, the use of VLEs and classroom experiments.

Nearly 30 new lecturers attended the workshop and we had good feedback. The event allowed new lecturers to discuss teaching and learning issues with other economists and they found this

valuable given that university PGCHE courses are generic.

We plan to run the same two events next year in mid September and mid-October respectively. There is no charge for the workshops and we will cover reasonable travel expenses as well as provide accommodation for the residential workshop.

Further details will be available on our web site early in the New Year.

Economics Network Contacts: First Annual Meeting

The Economics Network has established a network of key contacts throughout UK Higher Education Institutions. Every economics department or business school that teaches courses with an element of economics has been invited to nominate a key contact.

Contacts have a vital role in helping share good and innovative practice in learning and teaching across departments, as well as providing a voice for their department and the subject as a whole, and informing the national strategy for supporting economics education.

The first annual Contacts Meeting was held during May. The meeting, a two-day event held in Bristol, focused on raising and discussing current issues in teaching and learning economics; sharing ideas and experiences; and examining how the Economics Network can support the economics teaching community. Thirty contacts from economics departments/schools attended

the meeting, which included an evening boat trip around Bristol Harbour and dinner.

Feedback on the meeting from delegates was extremely positive, with everyone appreciating the opportunity to network with other contacts, and share issues and ideas. Outcomes from the meeting include a new Economics Network

Contacts web section, new planned themed sections for the website and a commitment to meet annually.

To find out more about Economics Network Contacts and who each contact is in each institution please visit: www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/contact/keycontacts



Economics Network Contacts, May 2006

"An excellent event, well-led and designed. Good atmosphere created to discuss a range of important topics. Looking forward to the next one already." Delegate.

dee⁰⁷ conference

DEVELOPMENTS IN
ECONOMICS EDUCATION

The 2007 Developments in Economics Education Conference

(formerly known as DEBE)

University of Cambridge, UK

Thursday 6th and Friday 7th September

The fourth international DEE Conference will showcase the best of economics education. It will provide delegates with information on the latest research into pedagogy in economics; practical advice and guidance on balancing competing work interests and ideas for engaging students in the subject. The conference will be a mixture of paper, workshop and poster sessions, and a call for papers will be issued in February 2007.

For more information please see:

www.economicnetwork.ac.uk/dee2007



Photos from the DEBE Conference 2005, Cambridge (from top):

Sir John Vickers delivering his keynote speech

Conference dinner entertainment

Delegates enjoying pre-conference drinks at King's College

Session on supporting maths teaching in economics

www.economicnetwork.ac.uk

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