



# ECONOMICS NETWORK NEWSLETTER

## Editorial

### The future of the Subject Centres



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As you may know, the Economics Network was formed in 1999 as one of 24 Subject Centres of the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN). In 2004, the LTSN was merged with the Institute for Learning and Teaching to become the Higher Education Academy (HEA).

The 24 Subject Centres were retained and have generally been seen as a successful innovation in providing support for learning and teaching in HE at discipline level.

In 2009, the HEA was informed by HEFCE that funding would be cut by 30% by 2012/13. The Economics Network, along with the other Subject Centres, instituted plans for managing such a cut, including the possibility of some sponsorship to make up part of the shortfall.

The HEA Executive considered various alternative models and in November 2010, following approval by the HEA Board, announced that it

would discontinue funding to the Subject Centres. The HEA would provide all future support for disciplines within a centralised organisational structure based in the head offices in York.

It is appointing discipline specialists and plans to make a 0.5 FTE appointment in Economics.

The Subject Centres have questioned the necessity and wisdom of these changes. Strong doubts have been expressed as to whether the centralised model will be able to deliver the depth and breadth of support at subject and discipline level.

With no public funding, virtually all Subject Centres will be forced to close at some point during the coming academic year, 2011/12.

#### The future of the Economics Network

At the current time, the future of the Economics

Network remains uncertain. We have funding from the HEA to allow us to continue until the end of November 2011. Until then we are committed to providing a full programme of events, projects and resources.

Whether we will be able to continue beyond that depends on funding. The Royal Economic Society and the Scottish Economic Society are willing to provide some financial support and we are in discussions with the University of Bristol about future hosting arrangements.

Nevertheless, we still face a large shortfall in funding. To continue we will need substantial sponsorship. We are pursuing this, but we may well be forced to close, either at the end of November or by the end of the academic year 2011/12.

### Thank you

We would like to express our profound thanks for all the encouragement and support we have received over the past 11 years.

The commitment to student learning in economics by colleagues throughout the

UK has been truly inspirational. This has been reflected in our student surveys and in our student nominated awards. We have seen many innovations and changes to the ways students are taught and a willingness to share ideas and practices with colleagues in the economics community.

We have witnessed the development of a vibrant community of economists of teachers of their subject. We hope that this community will continue to grow and develop.

## GTA and New Lecturers workshops

The Economics Network is pleased to announce its Autumn workshop series. The GTA workshops are specifically designed to meet the needs of Economics Postgraduate Teaching Assistants/Tutors with a focus on small-group classes, tutorials, seminars and workshops.

The following GTA workshops are planned for Autumn (dates are subject to change):

University of Cardiff	23 <sup>rd</sup> September
London School of Economics	26 <sup>th</sup> September
University of East Anglia	28 <sup>th</sup> September
University of Essex	30 <sup>th</sup> September
University College London	3 <sup>rd</sup> October
University of Nottingham	5 <sup>th</sup> October
University of Sheffield	6 <sup>th</sup> October
University of Glasgow	6 <sup>th</sup> October
University of Lancaster	7 <sup>th</sup> October
University of York	12 <sup>th</sup> October

Booking for the workshops will be available shortly. More information is available from [www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/events/gta](http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/events/gta).

### New Lecturers Residential Workshop

The New Lecturers Residential workshop is planned for the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of October. The workshop's main aim is to discuss and evaluate what makes effective teaching of economics: including lectures, seminars and small-group teaching, assessment and feedback, e-learning, module/unit design, classroom experiments and games.

The workshop is aimed at new and aspiring Economics lecturers. More information is available from [www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/events/newlecs](http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/events/newlecs)

Supported by the Royal Economic Society and the Scottish Economic Society.

## When Economics Meets Art...

### Student competition results

Anh Nguyen, Student Placement, funded by the Royal Economic Society



As part of the HE Academy Student Awards scheme, we held our annual Student Challenge between February and April 2011. Kindly sponsored by Baillie Gifford and PricewaterhouseCoopers, the competition offered students the opportunity to submit entries on the topic: *“Why Study Economics @ University?”*

Unlike previous years, this year’s entries could be submitted in any creative format (not just in writing). We believed that economics students can and want to express themselves in different ways. We even created a promotional cartoon video – shared through YouTube – to support the concept.

The entries we received from students all across the UK were certainly very enthusiastic. They included songs, poems, videos and comic strips among others. The quality was extremely high, proving that economics students are not only very clever, but incredibly creative too.

The winner of the challenge is Joevas Asare (University of Surrey), who wrote a poem and recorded it in the form of a rap. He receives £500 and is attending the annual Higher Education Academy Conference.

We also have two runners-up who will receive £200

each. Anu Omotunde-Young (Lancaster University) wrote a poem about Nigeria followed by creative analytical writing. You can read her poem on the Economics in Action blog.

Daniel Derbyshire and Alex Grindulis (University of Manchester) created a cartoon video. Due to generous support from our sponsors, we have managed to further award ten commendations to other outstanding entries.

All the winning entries will be published on the Why Study Economics and Studying Economics

websites (see the box on the next page). Below are the best quotes from this year’s entries.

*“Economics you can apply to life*

*And I reckon having economics can get me a wife*

*I can think more logically about strife*

*Poverty and subjects that relate to my life”* – excerpt from Joevas Asare’s rap.

*“For us, I do a degree that gives me the skill and passion to make our motherland prosperous.*

*For us, I work towards being the change we need”* – Anu’s passionate poem about Nigeria.

*“From economics you find out why you are unemployed  
And even when you have a job, there’re things you can’t avoid  
The externalities like air pollution are harmful to us all  
But if we learn about social costs, then we can make them fall”* – a verse from Kristina Kovalenko’s song.



*“I study economics because I am angry, and because I am no longer young enough to be angry without it.”* – excerpt from Gavin Leech’s creative essay.

*“Do you like Brahms? I think yes. But what would Brahms have to do with economics? He was after all just a composer, who wrote and left behind music for people to enjoy. ...See the point now? He was a composer, but in essence, his talent is human capital, his music a positive externality and the enjoyment we derive from it consumption.”* – excerpt from Mihai Paraschiv’s essay.

## Student Focus Group report 2010-11

Miriam Best, The Economics Network

Following on from the success of last year's student focus group scheme the Economics Network ran focus groups during the 2010/11 academic year in ten Economics departments across the UK. These are a way to find out how the student experience (and resulting NSS scores) can be improved. Two predominant themes emerged from all the groups; 1) assessment and feedback and 2) teaching.

Assessment comments focused primarily on exam weightings and the general dissatisfaction the students felt:

"[There are] too many exams that are 100%."

Students felt that having some form of assessed coursework allowed them some margin of error:

"It's kind of good this year because most of our modules have 20% which will be coursework or an in class exam so it kind of takes pressure away from the end if you work."

One department had altered its assessment method to reduce the pressure. This was clearly appreciated by the students:

"They gave the students the choice to take on some

pure assignment modules and it just laid off the pressure of the exams."

**"I'd like someone senior from the department to sit in a lecture and see if they enjoy it because some of them are really dire."**

Feedback was discussed in all of the focus groups. When asked what feedback they would like students agreed on three main things:

"What is good, what is bad and what could be improved."

The most important aspect of feedback seemed to be how they could improve their work:

"You can get an essay with two completely different marks on like a 51 and an 84 and they can say the same thing...we hardly actually get any constructive feedback."

Teaching standards were discussed in all of the focus groups:

"I'd just like someone senior from the

department to just sit in a lecture and see if they enjoy it because some of them are really dire."

The amount of material to cover was also an issue:

"It was a 30 capped module and they made it a 15 capped module, but he didn't reduce the materials, he just tried to teach all the stuff at twice the speed which is crazy!"

The other teaching issue that came up was the standard of spoken English by staff:

"Some teachers are quite hard to understand because they're not English. I found it really hard to understand what they were saying."

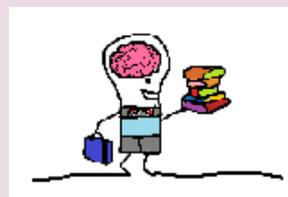
"Sometimes you go to a seminar and they cannot speak very good English. It's annoying for me and I'm Italian! You just look at the lecturer and think I cannot understand what you are saying."

One student summed up the feeling that all of the focus groups and economics students seemed to have, when asked if they were happy with their choice of institution, they replied, "I mean, if I get a job, I'm happy."

### Student focused websites

WhyStudyEconomics.ac.uk is aimed at students who are thinking about studying economics at University, offering advice, expectations and possible careers within Economics.

StudyingEconomics.ac.uk is aimed at undergraduates of Economics, helping with module choices, revision techniques as well as links to maths resources and data sets.



## Project-based learning of econometrics

Steve Cook, Swansea University

Recent decades have witnessed enormous developments in the computational power and facilities available to undertake econometric analysis. The impact of these upon the nature and volume of empirical research is immediately apparent from even a causal inspection of the econometrics literature.

However, it might be argued that the teaching of econometrics has failed to develop at similar pace, with the benefits of user-friendly software and the extensive availability of data not yet fully utilised. This observation provided the motivation for *Project-based learning of modern econometrics*, an Economics Network funded project with two clear objectives. First, it sought to develop a new *Applied Econometrics* module to provide an alternative approach to the presentation and assessment of econometrics for final year undergraduates at Swansea University. Second, it aimed to evaluate the changes to student experience resulting from the introduction of the above module.

Considering structure, econometrics modules are frequently assessed via a mixture of coursework and a heavily weighted standard examination. However, given the inherently practical nature of econometrics, the newly proposed module instead has ‘learning and

assessment by doing’ at its heart. Consequently, this 30 credit module is assessed purely by coursework with students required to undertake six projects to demonstrate their mastery and understanding of the different topics covered. In terms of the nature of the work involved, this has been primarily data-based, with students provided with a range of alternative national, international and artificial data sets with which to perform and report upon a collection of empirical exercises, including the replication of published empirical results.

**“the newly proposed module has ‘learning and assessment by doing’ at its heart”**

Throughout, the importance of clearly explained motives and methods is emphasised, along with the necessity of a complete interpretation of all results derived. In addition to undertaking independent research, assessment also involves the production of summarised reports of published econometric research and the creation of hypothesised examples to illustrate econometric issues. This assessment provides an opportunity to develop and demonstrate

the practical skills required for econometric analysis in a manner which cannot be achieved via paper-based assessment in an examinations hall. Similarly, the module is also very ‘applied’ in terms of its delivery. Aside from an increased number of computer workshops and surgery hours, student-led computer workshops have also been introduced where students determine the complete structure of the session undertaken.

Turning to evaluation of the module, this involves multi-level examination of student performance and feedback obtained from a series of structured questionnaires and an Economics Network focus group focussing specifically upon the module. Although the analysis required for evaluation of this ongoing module is currently incomplete, the initial results suggest increases in marks and engagement have occurred, and that students feel a range of transferable and subject specific skills have been developed. These findings are supported by the anecdotal evidence obtained by lecturers and indicate the module has led to very positive effects in terms of the student experience. Further and more complete information and evaluation of the module is to follow in the module via Economics Network outlets.

# All change! In Teaching Economics

## A short summary of the 2011 Lecturer Survey

Inna Pomorina, The Economics Network

In March and April of 2011 the Economics Network conducted its sixth biennial Survey of Economics Lecturers.

This is an observational survey and was conducted online for ease of use and low cost. The majority of questions (18 out of 21) were used in the 2009 survey and were divided into 3 sections, including free-text commentary.

There were 145 respondents from 57 HE institutions across the UK.

The survey confirms the tendency for increasing numbers of lecturers changing their teaching practice in the last two years as a result of: changes in students skills and abilities (46.2%); feedback from students (44.8%); support to large number of students (40.0%); suggestions from workshops (25.5%); colleagues' suggestions (24.8%).

When questioned about the 'most important issues' in their current teaching, more than two thirds of the respondents

pointed to the lack of students' motivation and to students' deficiencies in maths skills, whilst more than half pointed to plagiarism, large number of students in lectures and tutorials and an increase in the number of overseas students:

Students' motivation and attitude: *"Difficult to motivate students and to engage them as their main focus is the exam".*  
*Difficult to get them to participate in the classroom"*

Students' deficiencies in math skills: *"At BSc level the clear problem is that an A grade in Maths doesn't signify very much nowadays. At MSc level, large numbers of overseas students just aren't at the UK level (although the best overseas students are outstanding)"*

Plagiarism: *"Plagiarism is a major issue with overseas students"*

Large number of students in lectures and tutorials: *"Undergraduate and postgraduate numbers in the department have*

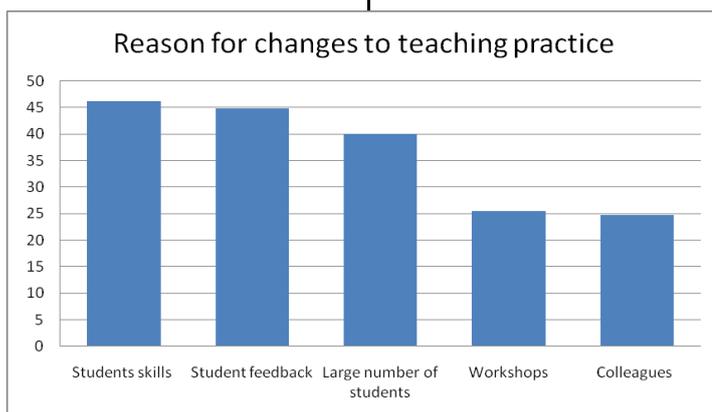
*roughly doubled in three years; Student numbers get ever larger and time gets more pressured"*

**Overseas students often struggle with English and find participation in seminar discussions challenging.**

Increase in the number of overseas students: *"One of the greatest areas of difficulty is related to the huge increase in overseas students. The English skills test seems inadequate in some cases which makes it difficult for lecturers, but also for the students themselves whose English skills impact their success".*  
*"Overseas students often struggle with English and find participation in seminar discussions challenging."*

More than half of the respondents (57.2%) have used Economics Network services and resources and positively assessed their value.

A full report will be available on the site [www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/surveys](http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/surveys)



## Blended learning approaches

### Enhancing first year students' assessment experience

Shaista Minhas and Simon Starr



The overall aim of the project was to assess the potential of blended learning to aid the improvement of the learning process experienced by widening participation students who had been motivated to enrol on a BSc in Business Management Degree Programme at Canterbury Christ Church University, Broadstairs Campus, and were required to take the Introduction to Economics and Statistics Module as part of their first year undergraduate programme.

“Widening Participation is central to the Mission of the University which is ‘to pursue excellence in academic and professional higher education thereby enriching both individuals and society’. This focus includes a commitment to enabling suitably qualified individuals to access the potential benefits and rewards of higher education and to fulfil their potential whatever their background.” (Canterbury Christ Church University online, 2010, p.4)

Assessment in the module involves: a group essay which discussed the

impact of the credit crunch on a region; and an hour’s time- constrained assignment of thirty objective test questions regarding everything studied in the module.

Three objectives were identified to explore the potential for “blended learning” approaches to enhance the students’ assessment experience, specifically in the areas of guidance and flexibility for the two assessments.

1) the introduction of the new blended learning approaches in support of the two module assessments: audioslides (PowerPoint with tutor’s narration) as additional guidance to help students better understand and prepare for both assessments, and Wimba (a web-based video conferencing and collaboration system) to enable greater flexibility for the students to engage in the group essay remotely rather than having to travel.

2) the evaluation of the impact of the new approaches on the assessment performance and group dynamics and cohesiveness between 2009/10 and 2010/11 cohorts.

3) the evaluation of 2010/11 student cohort’s perceptions, attitudes and satisfaction towards new and existing approaches

with regard to the introduction of audioslides and Wimba, and the continuation of open access to online test questions and feedback provided by the publisher of a key Economics text for the time-constrained assignment.

Our methodology combined quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data came from surveys completed by both cohorts, mapping of the movement of the group dynamics in each year, and the performance of the two cohorts through the assessments. Qualitative data came from interviews with students during seminar activities and individual tutorials. In order to make a valid comparison of performance the assessments were identical for the two cohorts.

The students’ perception of the audioslides was very positive. With regard to Wimba, some students were interested in working collaboratively online, at a distance, but did not find Wimba convenient because it was student-focused rather than being tutor-led learning. For a student-focused forum, some students suggested the application of social networking websites like Facebook.

In a free one-day workshop, you will have an

opportunity to hear from Shaista Minhas, Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, and Simon Starr, Member of the Association for Learning Technologists, from Canterbury Christ Church University, who will be

presenting their findings. There will also be the opportunity of some hands-on “taster” activities regarding audioslides and Wimba. It will take place on 29<sup>th</sup> June 2011 at Broadstairs Campus, Kent CT10 2WA

The workshop is aimed primarily at facilitators of learning and is open to all. Lunch will be provided. As there are limited spaces, early booking is advised. Please email Claire Haines ([claire.haines@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:claire.haines@canterbury.ac.uk)).

## Enhancing the Use of International Data by Students of Economics

Dean Garratt and Stephen Heasell, Nottingham Trent University

This new learning and teaching project adds an international data dimension to a successful earlier one and continues to be inspired by principles and practice of issues-based learning.

A total of eight concise case studies will enable first-time students of Economics to engage purposefully with empirical data. The project addresses a gap in the resources currently available for adopting an issues-based or problem-based approach for teaching data analysis in the light of economic principles, particularly in the later stages of HE Level 1 Economics.

Each case study introduces aspects of what professional economists do and how they use methods distinctively associated with their discipline. It offers a solution to what might otherwise be a block on students learning how

to manipulate or transform data and then interpret them to purposeful economic effect. The latest three studies aim to promote student confidence in doing so for the purpose of studying an international economy.

*The project addresses a gap in the resources currently available for adopting an issues-based or problem-based approach for teaching data analysis*

The studies feature international comparisons of housing markets, government finances and rates of economic growth. These enable students to blend empirical data with

economists' standard concepts and analytical techniques. The studies offer students an opportunity to see how professional economists use distinctive combinations of empirical methods, supported by theoretical frameworks, and then to try doing this for themselves

The case studies have been produced from ongoing classroom experience. This bottom-up approach is supported by subject specific and pedagogic principles but also by experience of textbook writing and of working as a professional economist beyond academia. The imperative has been for the activities to seem worth the effort of consistent engagement, by a range of students from across the world whose consistent first priority might - but might not - be rigorous study of the Economics discipline.

## The Everyday Economist

Wayne Geerling, La Trobe University



One of the many privileges an academic receives is: the ability to take “sabbatical” or study leave every three years: to travel to different institutions and universities, network with peers, give seminar and conference presentations, carry out research, and ultimately, further one’s own career.

Economic education is one of my main areas of research and as part of my study leave, I was invited to spend 2 months at the Economics Network in Bristol: mid-April to mid-June. To be honest, I had no idea what to expect when I arrived. My brief was to help develop “teaching resources”. After discussions with the Economics Network’s John Sloman, Martin Poulter and Ros O’Leary, we decided that I would write 2 case studies based on my own teaching interests, which would

subsequently be uploaded onto the network’s website as teaching resources: “The Economic Naturalist Writing Assignment” and “Using Popular Culture to make Economics more engaging”. Both case studies deal with one of the most important issues facing lecturers today: student engagement (or lack thereof).

The writing assignment differs from standard assessment techniques. Students formulate their own essay question based on a real-life observation and are then asked to solve this question with basic economic principles in no more than 500 words. Furthermore, they are encouraged to write free of algebra, graphs and complex terminology, in a manner understandable by someone who has not studied economics (the so-called Grandma test).

The case study on multimedia looks at how lecturers can overcome the stereotype of economics as the “Dismal Science” by using mediums of popular culture such as commercials, films, television, music and YouTube in their teaching.

Both studies can be used to liven up the classroom: to make learning fun, interesting and relevant, while developing intuitive and critical thinking skills in students.

*Students formulate their own essay question based on a real life observation*

Encouraging students to apply economics in an unconventional setting should be taught across the undergraduate level, indeed even expanded into postgraduate studies to give the graduates of tomorrow an intuitive understanding of economics.

The beauty of this work is that: the teaching-research nexus reinforces itself. By reflecting on my own teaching practices while writing for others, I develop new ideas, which I will soon trial in the classroom. I have learned more about teaching in the last 2 months than I did in 5 years as a lecturer. I wish I could stay here!

### Cost-Benefit Analysis



**CBA Builder** is a new web site loaded with freely available text and interactive resources to support the teaching of Cost Benefit Analysis. It has been produced by Dan Wheatley of Nottingham Trent University in an Economics Network-funded project. The site includes basic and advanced interactive spreadsheets for performing Cost Benefit Analysis. Visit the CBA Builder at [www.cbabuilder.co.uk](http://www.cbabuilder.co.uk)

# Developments in Economics Education Conference 2011



5<sup>th</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> September, London School of Economics and Political Science

The sixth international DEE conference will present the latest developments in economics higher education.

## Monday 5<sup>th</sup> September: Key Contacts Conference

This day is designed for Key Contacts but is open to all academic staff. Today will include sessions on *Designing Induction Programmes* and *Using Games and Experiments*.

## Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> September: Main DEE conference

Sessions will include a mixture of keynotes, papers, posters and workshop sessions.

Keynote: Diane Coyle, OBE is the author of *The Soulful Science: What Economists Really Do and Why It Matters* and *Sex, Drugs and Economics*.

## Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> September: Internationalisation in Economics workshop

Attracting and supporting international students is an increasingly important aspect of higher education Economics: this workshop offers the opportunity to discuss, share and explore issues and practice to support internationalisation.

### Conference Themes:

- Engaging and motivating students
- Assessment and feedback
- Games, experiments and simulations
- Problem-based learning and cases studies
- Linking research and teaching
- Pedagogical research in economics

For more information and to book online visit [www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/dee2011](http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/dee2011)

We are very grateful to the London School of Economics and Political Science for their generous sponsorship of this conference.

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