

Economics Network Census of Teaching

Focusing on Core modules on Undergraduate Economics Degrees in the UK

Introduction

The purpose of this census is to report on various aspects of economics degrees in the UK (both single and joint honours). It examines the structure of the academic year, teaching methods, the types of classes, class contact, the amount and type of assessment, the use of textbooks and the composition of the lecturing team delivering specific modules.

The study focused on core subjects studied on virtually all economics degree. These include first-year modules in microeconomics and macroeconomics, either where these are taught separately or as a combined module, first-year quantitative methods, intermediate microeconomics and intermediate microeconomics.

The census is designed to provide information, not currently available from a single source, that is useful for programme and module planning. The reports from the census are descriptive and not evaluative. They present the aggregate results and no individual institution is named. A key reason for this is to avoid the data being used for league tables.

The data were largely gathered from the websites of UK universities offering modules leading to qualifications in Economics. Such data can thus be accessed by prospective students. The list of universities included in the study came from the website of the Economics Network¹ of the Higher Education Academy.

Students' choice of course

For the majority of students, with tuition fees to pay and no maintenance grants, studying at University involves a substantial investment. For international students, who represent an increasing percentage of UK university students, the costs faced by students are much higher, since tuition fees are substantially higher than the fees charged to domestic students². Non-EU international students constituted 22.3 per cent of acceptances for economics degrees in 2006. This compares with 8.7 per cent for all degrees. Information plays a key role in the decision making process³.

School careers advisors, teachers, university open days, career exhibitions, university publications and university websites provide information that an intending student may use to select a university and to choose a module offered by that university. League tables also provide rankings of universities and their programmes (see for example the QAA Subject Review reports⁴ and University Guides from newspapers such as the *Guardian* and *The*

¹ www.economicnetwork.ac.uk/links/depts.htm

² Al-Eyd estimated in 2005 that with the fee structure proposed for 2007, the rate of return to university education for males is 7.3 per cent annually, while for females, the rate of return is 10.3 per cent. The qualification they attached to these estimates is that these are the returns that graduates could expect to achieve provided they have chosen their module of study carefully. Al-Eyd, Ali, *The Return to a University Education in Great Britain*, *National Institute of Economic Review*, Number 193, July 2005

³ UCAS online datasets at www.ucas.ac.uk

⁴ For Economics reports see www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/reports/archive/oldSubjReports.asp?subjID=1

Times). Despite the availability of this information, there is evidence to suggest that students sometimes make incorrect decisions about university study. UK research by Yorke⁵ and reported by James et al⁶ traced non-completion partly to poor advice and decisions on modules and institutions⁷. This may be due to prospective students not accessing all information available, an inability on the part of prospective students to use this information or the incomplete nature of the information provided.

The data

The data were assembled from the web pages of UK universities where degree programmes in economics are offered. They were also supplemented by data provided directly from some universities. The data were collected in the period March to 2007 to January 2008 and related to the 2006/7 and 2007/8 academic years. The information gathered was the type thought to be of interest to a prospective student faced with a choice between different institutions and academics involved in module or programme planning.

The web pages of most of the Universities included in the study contain information on generic factors associated with the university, some of which relate to lifestyle (accommodation, geographic location, sporting facilities) and others related to the research intensity of the university (numbers of research grants and publications) or the teaching performance of the university as judged by quality monitoring agencies.⁸ Information on quality of the living environment and the availability of extra-curricula activities were not included since it was felt these were very subjective.⁹ Similarly, research and teaching performance were not included in this study since they are evaluative and hence beyond the scope of this survey. Also, they do not relate specifically to the modules for which information was being obtained.

⁵ Yorke, Mantz, *Leaving Early: Undergraduate Non-Completion in Higher Education (Managing Colleges Effectively)*, Routledge: 1999

⁶ James, Richard, Baldwin, Gabrielle, McInnis, Craig, *Which University? The factors influencing the choices of prospective undergraduates*, Department of Training, Education & Institutional Affairs Report 99/3, August 1999.

⁷ This is also confirmed by Lowe, Houston and Cook, Anthony, *Mind the Gap: are students prepared for higher education*, Journal of Further and Higher Education, Vol. 27, No.1, 2003, pp. 54-60, 71-75, and Mackie, Sarah E., *Jumping the Hurdles – Undergraduate Student Withdrawal Behaviour*, Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 38; 3, 2001, pp. 267-269,273. Mackie also looks at how much feedback contributes to a student's experience in the first year and their commitment to leaving or staying. This is beyond the scope of the present study but is an area where little is known and is a suggested area for further research. The study by Lowe and Cook considers the 'complex interplay of personal, practical as well as academic factors into a students decision to leave or stay'. The findings show that all factors play an important role in student retention but also highlight the fact that lack of information prior to starting the course leads to unrealistic expectations about what is expected once at University.

⁸ Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and Research Assessment Exercise scores

⁹ The studies mentioned above by Mackie and Lowe and Cook look at these aspects of a student's experience. They also consider the impact this makes on their decisions prior to joining a University and during the course of the first year. Also see, Johnes, J and Taylor, J, *Undergraduate non-completion rates: differences between UK Universities*, Higher Education, 18, 2, pp.209-25