

# Teaching practice in Economics HE - Results of the 2007 Economics Network Survey of Lecturers

In February – March 2007 the Economics Network conducted a National Survey of Economics Lecturers. The main objective of this survey was to identify current practices and issues of Economics lecturers and their students. The survey also aimed to provide the Economics Network and its funders with information about how economics lecturers use our services and what impact they have on their teaching. This survey is the third national biennial lecturer survey and thus its findings are compared to the two previous sets of results (2003, 2005) to identify any trends or significant changes. The survey is part of the Network's research programme into teaching and learning economics, which also includes surveys of students, alumni and employers. This year, in order to encourage higher response rates we decided to go for a short questionnaire focussing on changes in teaching practice over the previous two years, use of Economics Network services and current important issues in teaching.

The survey was conducted online for ease of use and low cost. 193 respondents completed the survey, compared to 185 in 2005 and 125 in 2003. It was intended as an observational study and not a controlled experiment. The respondents do not constitute a random sample of all economics lecturers in the UK, but a self-selected group. As a result, their views may not fully reflect the opinions of all economics lecturers. The survey results will allow the Economics Network to focus its efforts more effectively in support of economics lecturers.

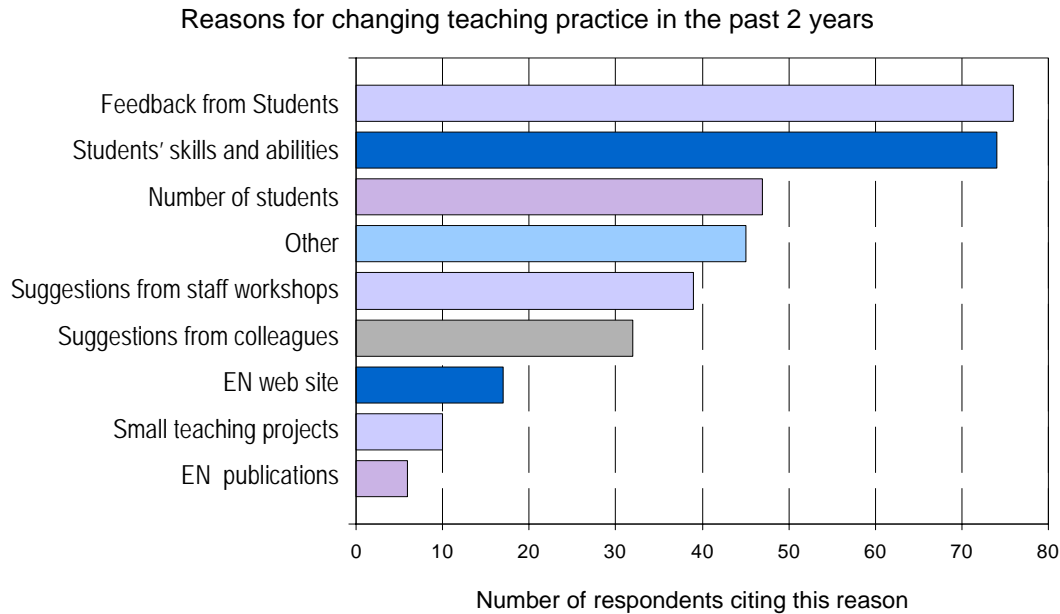
The survey consisted of 5 questions and benefited from free-text commentary by the respondents to the questions. Representative quotes from these responses are included in the report in italics. A group of the Economics Network Associates took part in the focus group and trial of the survey and help to reformulate some questions.

## Change in Teaching Practice

In the 2003 survey, nearly half of the respondents mentioned that they had changed their teaching methodology. Unfortunately no comments were left to explain the reasons for this change. In 2005 that number rose to 56.0%, while two out of five said that they have not done so, with 6% having taught for less than two years. In 2007 this number rose again to 72.5%, with additional 6.7% saying that even though they haven't changed the practice, but would have liked to and only one in five saying that there were no need to do that. We acknowledge that the results of the survey could be biased towards lecturers with an interest in teaching and learning issues, as they were more likely to complete the survey and hence the proportion of those who have changed their practice could be smaller among all economics lecturers. At the same time the results of all three surveys show that there is a significant trend for a change or a desire to change teaching practice due to various reasons, which increases the demand for services and resources provided by Economics Network.

Among the reasons for change respondents name 'Feedback from students' (76), 'Student's skills and abilities' (74), 'Number of students' (47) and 'Suggestions from teaching

workshops' (39). Other reasons include colleagues suggestions, change in technology, new courses, pedagogic literature, Network resources.



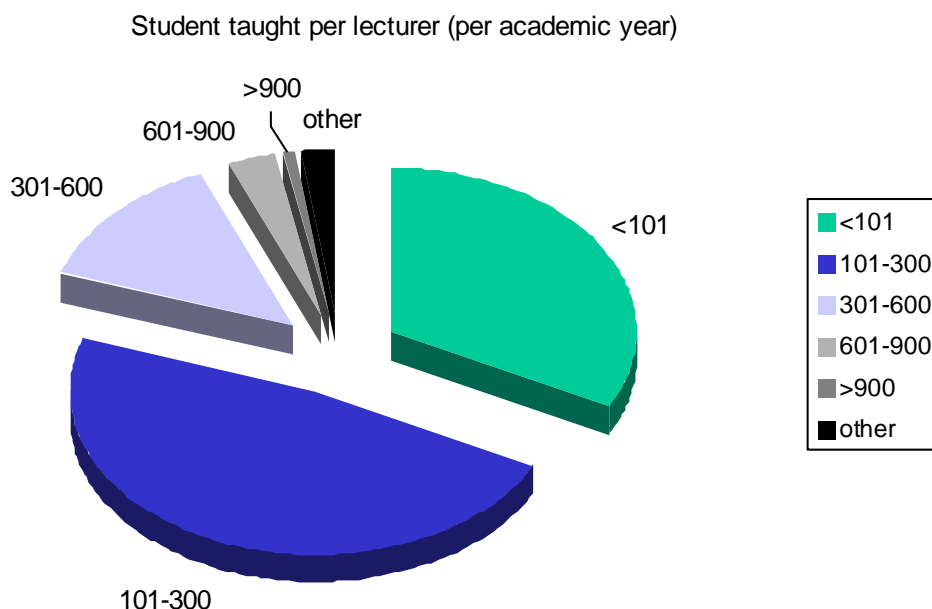
When asked to provide details lecturers describe reasons for change and their actions (some comments are general, others are in more detail):

- *More and better teaching is required to compensate for deterioration in student attendance and learning skills*
- *Teaching workshops and dissatisfaction with my teaching: exam results were so bad!*
- *Students skills and abilities: had to remove more “technical” aspects of course due to students lack of problem solving skills and the resultant higher fail rate*
- *Merger with Business means some modules are now vast and this raises a whole range of issues with regard to teaching (still lots to do on this though). Currently exploring use of personal response system*
- *Feedback from students: provided summary lecture notes on the web*
- *The introduction of PBL and research into my teaching is the result of a number of factors, which in combination have changed my perception about a) what education is about and b) how students learn*
- *Suggestions from teaching workshops: I have started to use Power Point more and provide the slides on Blackboard. I also started to provide formative assessment exercises*
- *Students' skills and abilities, Feedback from students: Mainly dumbed it down, took out a lot of mathematical content as much as possible. Proving theorems in the modules provides the brightest and the most motivated students to shine out, but leaves the majority learning nothing*

## Student numbers

Rise in the students' numbers are mentioned as one of the reasons for change and among 'most important issues in teaching'. Nearly half of the respondents teach between 101 and 300 students in total this academic year, while a third teach fewer than a 100. One in 25

lecturers teaches more than 600 students. In their comments, lecturers point to the problems of large class sizes, both in lectures and seminars. Problems highlighted include disruptive behaviour and inattention in large lectures, meeting individual students' needs in seminars and marking loads.



## Use of Economics Network resources or services

In the next question of the survey we asked lecturers about their use of Economics Network resources and services. We also asked about the value of these resources and/or services to them, if they use them and if they haven't used them we ask them to clarify why not.

Even though more than a half of the respondents (103) reply that they haven't use Network resources or services, from the details they provided with their answers one can understand that some of them have misinterpreted the question and in reality have used our services, for example small grants, workshops, etc. Among those who have used our resources or services the overwhelming majority (81) use the website resources, half (47) use publications and a quarter (23) attend the workshops. When asked in what ways our resources have been of value to them, only one respondent mention 'very small value', pointing to the fact that some of the resources could be found elsewhere, while others provided examples of how useful they find various aspects of our resources and services. Among the replies:

- *Exam and coursework questions from your Data bank*
- *Excellent access to data and 'real-life' issues in economics*
- *Gives me examples of what other people doing. Sometimes inspires me to pursue new things or affirms I'm already doing something innovative myself*
- *I have found the workshops interesting and useful and often use the online resources available when preparing my teaching materials (question bank, online notes, textbook catalogue etc)*
- *Workshops are a great way to open up an internal debate. Surveys have been thought provoking*
- *They are very valuable – I SHOULD make more use of them!*

- *They have helped a lot of students*
- *Publicising study in economics – use of short films for example interesting journal*
- *Internet Economist was used in a tutorial; Math support info used in teaching; also make students aware of your site*
- *The Instant Remedial Maths test was good for me to give to students starting year 2 but still with gaps in their maths knowledge! Guide to online date saved me doing it myself.*

Among those who haven't use our resources and services the majority stated lack of awareness about the Network as the main reason for not using it:

- *Did not have information*
- *I am not aware of the resources available from the Network*
- *I don't know what is offered*
- *I hadn't really heard of them...will look now!*

Some point to the fact that they are newly appointed lecturers and have just been introduced to the website, while others who are aware of the resources blame their forgetfulness or lack of time for not using them:

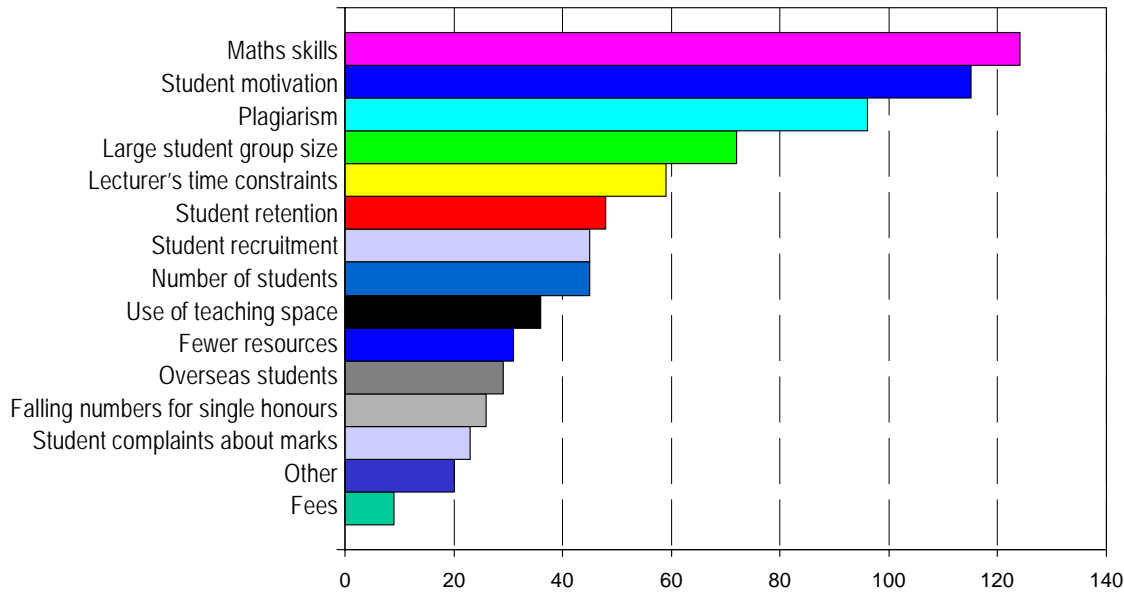
- *I keep meaning to use them – I find them valuable- but lack of time prevents...*
- *I forget it exists. I really must take another look*
- *I have used them but not nearly to their potential due to lack of time*

These results show that still a lot is to be done to raise the awareness about the Network's activities and resources among the economics lecturers' community. The Economics Network will use this information in developing its strategy and promoting various events and resources.

## **Most important issues in Teaching**

In the next question of the survey respondents were provided with a list of issues, considered important by a focus group of Associates, and asked to name the ones that they and their colleagues regard as most important in their current teaching.

## Most important issues in current teaching in economics



The graph shows that 'Students' maths skills' (124), 'Students' motivation' (115) and 'Plagiarism' (96) were identified by the respondents to be most important.

When asked to provide details to their answers, respondents pointed to various aspects of their teaching:

- Students' overall skills and abilities - *In our sector many students are entering HE with inadequate learning or basic communication skills. Also their attendance is compromised by the need to work part-time. Escalating fees seem to encourage the view amongst some students that they are purchasing a qualification rather than earning it*
- Increase in the number of overseas students - *My most serious issue is providing material in language that is understandable by ESL students. I am searching for ideas all the time - your site helps me in this regard*
- Discipline in class - *In the past I have occasionally had overseas students talking in class - but this was usually one of them translating for the others. But the current problem is amongst British students - it is plain bad manners and disruptive for those students who are trying to hear me*
- Students' motivation and attitude - *Motivation is an issue, especially in year 1. At the same time we need to retain a larger proportion of these students given a decline in recruitment numbers in the last couple of academic years; Students' expectations, particularly in 1st year, of the time and effort they need to devote to study/learning are significantly lower than we would like them to be or consider appropriate*
- Students' attendance - *The issue for us is low attendance (at lectures or other classes) and the links with student performances; The problem of attendance is that the university is not enforcing any policy of punishment for students who do not attend the seminars/tutorials, even if in principle they are compulsory. Obviously if we are not backed up by the university we, as lecturers, are left with no means apart from words to increase students' responsibility*
- Change in the character of modules - *Formerly small and selective third-year modules are now becoming much larger. The variance in motivation, math skills and (in some*

cases) language ability is changing the character of the modules - making them more like lowest-common-denominator lectures and less interactive and flexible. Group work helps (if the groups are sufficiently mixed) but they self-associate in ways that may make the problem worse. Also, work habits have suffered - problems arise from plagiarism, procrastination, 'minimum effort' approaches and (at the other end) an obsession with classification.

- Additional administrative burden - *Certain tasks (e.g. photocopying lecture material, articles reference etc) are left to us - I think that this should not be so*
- Larger groups - *Larger numbers are making computing classes more difficult to provide as they have to be repeated; Larger modules make for large seminar classes and inability to give detailed individual attention; I teach part of one of the Introductory courses, with 800 students. I feel that the large lecture hall makes real time assessment of student's reactions impossible*

## Support from Economics Network

In the last question of the survey we ask respondents how can the Economics Network support them in addressing those important issues.

In answering this question many respondents praise the good work of the Economics Network team and express hope that it will continue:

- *Carry on doing what you do;*
- *Continue the good work!*
- *Continue the Network's work to stimulate student engagement and to summarise reliable evidence of what seems to work, in what context;*
- *Existing website is excellent portal of resources;*
- *Keep doing what you are doing. Keep sending mail and more frequently.*

Besides praising the good work some respondents include suggestions for the future developments of Network –

- *The Network does a good job. My only suggestion was perhaps a bit more linkage with what publishers are offering us and how best we might use this with our students. And secondly how are we all dealing with SENDA, and disability issues generally?*
- *Keep on doing what you're doing, but a focus on big groups and attendance would really be helpful for me (I'd like to put in a bid to do a student survey on attendance/motivation/attitudes to study etc if there is another round of Mini-projects, and have a preliminary agreement to collaborate with a colleague in another university in doing this)*
- *Why Study Economics? Is useful as recruiting tool. May be you already have other resources useful for recruitment?*

Some lecturers point to the need to deal with policy issues at the higher level and provision of incentives to good teaching:

- *Career incentives for academic economists are such that input into teaching is virtually unrewarded, with research playing much bigger role in promotion. In order to keep teaching quality high, universities may want to consider introducing parallel career paths, creating permanent positions for people who do relatively more teaching (though continuing to do some research) and whose career progression is more strongly tied to teaching. There have been experiments of this sort in the US (for example, U of San Diego, among many others);*

- *Motivation and student expectations about time and effort to devote to study/learning are, I think, generic problems across (at least) Arts and Social Science disciplines. As such they need to be addressed generically, rather than by subject networks;*
- *Changing the political/ideological culture at Westminster! In other words, not much;*
- *Use any means in your power to reverse the worrying deterioration in students' mathematical skills before they enter university; work with relevant bodies to devise an effective strategy of English language support for overseas students, particularly those who register for one-year MSc courses; and encourage in any way you can universities to improve their administrative support to lecturers.*

Many lecturers agree that there couldn't be 'quick fixes' in dealing with these issues:

- *Not sure one can offer any blanket solutions;*
- *Not really sure. I feel the issue is at an earlier stage in the educational process;*
- *Not sure you can. We are teaching students' maths that they should have had at school or did have at school but they didn't learn it.*

## Conclusions

The Economics Network's Lecturers' Survey is an important part of the information gathering about teaching practice in HE. Data analysed in this report do not represent the opinions of all Economics lecturers and reflect the views of those who replied to the survey.

The survey identifies a trend amongst increasing numbers of lecturers to change their teaching methods over the past two years due to changes in students' skills and abilities, larger classes and feedback that they receive from students. Changes in teaching practice were influenced by suggestions from teaching workshops and from colleagues and by the developments in technology. This puts pressure on Economics Network to provide more services and resources and support dissemination of good practice throughout the community.

Unfortunately due to various reasons only half of the respondents have used existing services and resources of the Economics Network and the Network will need to look into new ways of raising awareness and support amongst the community.

When questioned about most important issues in their current teaching, more than half of the respondents point to the 'Students' maths skills', 'Students' motivation' and 'Plagiarism'. The Economics Network will look into developing special 'theme' pages on these issues on its website.

As for possible support that the Economics Network could provide to lecturers dealing with these issues, respondents overwhelmingly praise the good work that Network is already doing, pointing to various resources on the website that they find especially useful: case studies of good practice, mini-projects, surveys, the Why Study Economics? Web site, maths leaflets, the Internet Economist etc. They also express the hope that this good work will continue and put forward suggestions about future developments in Economics and in Higher Education in general, with the need to raise the profile of teaching and learning issues and develop a stronger commitment to such issues within the sector.

The survey results will allow the Economics Network to have a better understanding of the needs of the community and will help to shape its future events, resources, briefings and publications in support of Economics lecturers.