

Attitudes towards Economic Education in Saudi Arabia

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There is a growing body of academic and policy interest on what drives students to specialise in Economics following declined enrolment and lack of diversity in the field. The financial crisis in 2008 also refuelled the interest and the critique of how Economics is taught, with rising initiatives to induce practical teaching and tackle misconceptions about the subject. Understanding how students perceive Economics and teaching practices represents a crucial foundation for a more inclusive field, an area that remains underexplored in Saudi Arabia. We contribute to a similar line of thought and extend the literature on whether Economics should be taught in English to aid the use of recent and more expansive resources. This adds to increased competition from Business and Finance majors that teach in English to respond to labour market demand and improve teaching content. This diversity in teaching practices within and across universities may influence the choice of major, where teaching in Arabic or English may generate a bias for prospective students in Saudi Arabia.

This study examines attitudes towards Economics as a choice of major based on a representative sample across Business schools in four universities in Saudi Arabia: King Saud University (KSU), King Abdulaziz University (KAU), King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals (KFUPM), and Princess Nourah Bint Abdulrahman University (PNU). The sample used represents public universities across main urbanised regions: KSU and PNU in the capital, KFUPM in the Eastern region and KAU in the Western region. The choice of dataset contributes to the literature by comparing different institutions in two ways. Firstly, it allows us to examine the role of gender in a comparative context: KSU offers degrees for female and male students, KFUPM for male students¹, while PNU is for female students only. Secondly, the dataset allows us to explore how teaching Economics in English influences attitudes towards the subject. KSU and KAU represent mainstream departments that teach in Arabic since 1957 and 1970; KFUPM teaches Economics in English to Business students since 1975, while PNU's emerging department of Economics was established in 2007 and started teaching in English only recently.

We investigate what impedes students from majoring in Economics, the role of the teaching language, perceptions towards the subject and aspirations. A pilot study was conducted in January 2021, and a formal data collection period occurred from March to May 2021. The study includes more than 500 participants, ranging between Economic undergraduates and non-major students who study Economic as part of their curriculums, as well as postgraduates and alumni. Around

¹ KFUPM has opened admissions to female postgraduate students as well in 2019 and for undergraduates in 2021.

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concepts as difficult to understand or lack practicality for solving problems, stating that as a reason not to major in Economics. The preliminary analysis adds to the call for inducing practical illustrations in teaching and improving the teaching content to catch up with developments in the field. Forward work entails applying discrete choice models to examine underlying relationships between variables to understand better the determinants of attitudes towards Economics as a choice of major.