

## ***Recent Developments in the Economics Network (UK)***

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We have had another very successful year at the Economics Network. The Economics Network of the Higher Education Academy is one of 24 subject networks that promote high quality learning and teaching through the development and transfer of good practices. We are a publicly funded organisation, which aims to enhance the quality of learning and teaching throughout the higher education economics community. Our website <http://www.economicnetwork.ac.uk> is one of the world's leading economics education sites, with nearly 5000 documents downloaded by human users each day.

During the last year we have conducted lecturers and employers surveys, census of Economics provision in UK higher education, managed 13 small scale projects and provided support for the dissemination of large scale projects, like METAL (that I talk about last year), published 2 issues of IREE (The International Review of Economics Education) with Michael Watts from Purdue University as our new editor, and Christmas CHEER, added 2 new chapters to our Handbook of Economics Lecturers, expanded our resources on website and redesigned the 'Why study Economics?' website, conducted a series of departmental and national workshops and organised an impressive 2007 Developments in Economics education conference in Cambridge, which some of you have attended.

This is in short and now in more detail about our work.

### **1. Teaching in Economics is changing: 2007 Lecturer Survey Results**

The main objective of the survey, conducted in February- March of 2007 was to clarify current practices and issues of concern to Economics lecturers and their students, as well as to provide the Economics Network and those who fund us with information about how Economics lecturers use our services and what impact it has on their teaching.

This survey, along with the Student, Alumni and Employer surveys, is part of the centre's research programme into teaching and learning in Economics. Survey results help the Economics Network gain a better understanding of the needs of the community and shape its future events, resources, briefings and publications in support of Economics lecturers.

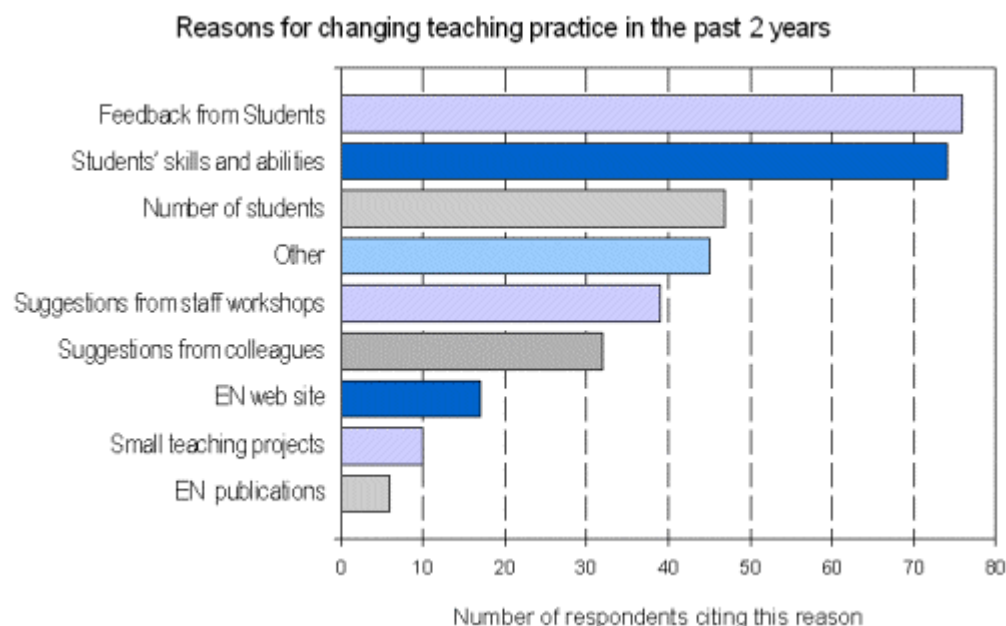
The survey was conducted online. 193 respondents completed the survey this time, compared to 185 in 2005 and 125 in 2003. It was intended as an observational study and not a controlled experiment. The survey consisted of 5 questions and benefited from free-text commentary by the respondents to the questions.

#### **a. Number of students**

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.

### **b. Change in Teaching Practice**



The survey confirms the tendency for increasing numbers of lecturers having to change their teaching methods in the past two years as a result of changes in students' skills and abilities, larger classes and feedback that they receive from students. Changes in teaching practices were influenced by ideas gained from teaching/learning workshops (whether hosted by the Economics Network or other external agency, or by their own department or university), by colleagues, by developments in technology or by changes in the type of class they were required to take. This puts a pressure on the Economics Network to provide more services and resources and support dissemination of good practice throughout the community.

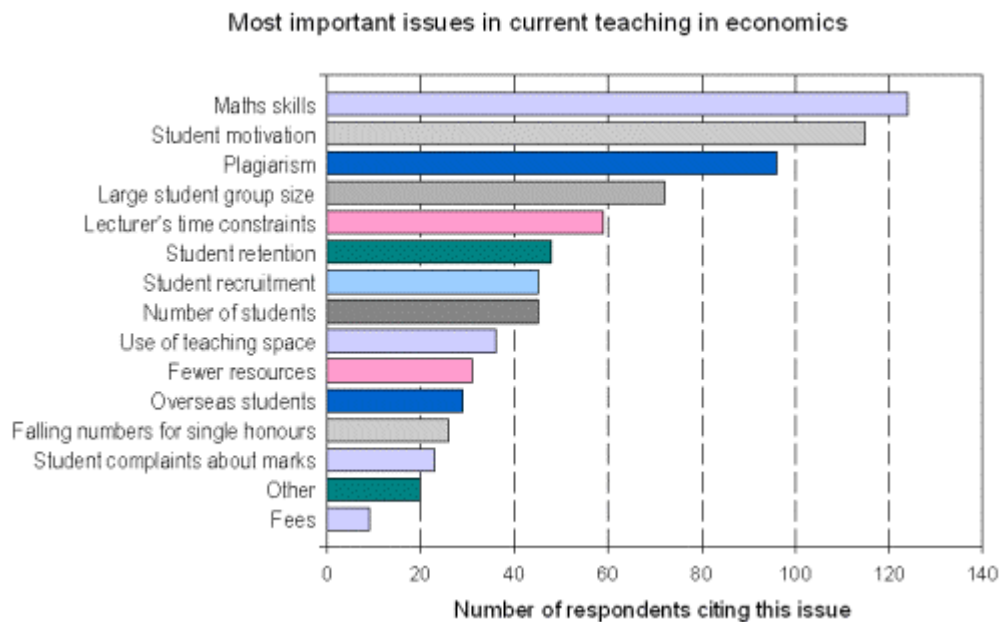
This year 72.5% of respondents said that they had changed their teaching practices in the past 2 years. An additional 6.7% said that, even though they had not changed their practices, they would like to do so. Only one in five said that there was no need to do so. Comments provide an insight into lecturers' reasons for change and their actions.

### **c. Use of Economics Network resources or services**

For various reasons, only half of the respondents have used existing services and resources of the Economics Network and the centre will need to look into new ways of raising awareness and support among the community. Those who use the Network's resources provided examples of the value they gain from particular resources and services.

### **d. Most important issues in teaching**

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



### e. Support from Economics Network

As for the possible support that the Economics Network could provide to lecturers dealing with those issues, respondents overwhelmingly appreciate the work that centre is already doing, pointing to various resources on the site that they find especially useful: [case studies of good practice](#), [mini-projects](#), surveys, the [Why Study Economics?](#) website, [maths leaflets](#), [Internet Economist](#), etc. They express the hope that all this will continue and make suggestions about future developments in Economics, and in Higher Education in general, including the need to raise the profile of teaching and learning issues and to develop a stronger commitment to such issues within the sector. The full report is available [Read the Full Report \(PDF\)](#)

## 2. What do employers want from economics graduates?

Earlier this year the Economics Network, in partnership with the Royal Economic Society, commissioned a survey of key employers of economics graduates. This survey has identified employers' requirements in terms of graduate skills and mapped these against the 2006 revised Quality Assurance Agency Economics Benchmark Statement. Employers feedback the need for improvement in knowledge and skills in the following areas:

- Recent developments in economics policy
- Application of economics knowledge/problem solving
- Written and verbal communication skills
- Job application and interview skills

The full report is available from:

<http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/surveys.htm>

## 3. Census of economics programmes

The Economics Network is in the process of conducting a census of Economics provision in UK higher education. The aim is to provide a comparative picture of the structure of Economics degrees and the teaching and assessment methods across UK

Economics departments and schools. The census will not identify individual departments but is designed to provide useful information for the planning and restructuring of degree programmes in Economics. Initial draft reports are available at <http://www.economicnetwork.ac.uk/projects/census.htm>

#### **4. Mini Projects**

The thirteen 2006/07 Mini Projects have been very successful, producing case studies and teaching resources which we are spending some time to integrate more fully into our website (partly through themed sections). Three projects which were about developing ideas are continuing this year using monies from two projects which didn't finish (one from last year, one from the year before). The next call for bids will be issued in Spring 2008 on our site and on our email list. Up to £5000 will be available for each project: <http://www.economicnetwork.ac.uk/projects/mini.htm>

#### **5. FDTL5 projects**

The four FDTL5 projects are all completing their work and their resources and services are available free of charge to UK HE.

- Bringing Economic Experiments into the Classroom (Exeter)
- Mathematics for Economics: Enhancing Teaching and Learning (METAL) (Nottingham Trent, Brunel and Portsmouth)
- Developing First Year Undergraduates' Acquisition of Threshold Concepts in Economics (Staffordshire, Durham, Coventry and UWE)
- Embedding computer-based learning & effective uses of WinEcon & VLEs (Birmingham and several partner universities)

Links to all four projects and resources:

<http://www.economicnetwork.ac.uk/projects/fdtl5/>

#### **6. Health Economics Education**

Following a learning and teaching session run by Nancy Devlin at the Health Economics Study Group conference in September a Health Economics Education group has been formed. The session uncovered a lot of interest and activity in this area, which is now being coordinated by Nancy. HEN's aims are:

- To encourage and support teaching and learning in health economics in UK universities
- To create a community of health economics teachers willing to share ideas, resources and expertise in health economics teaching
- To promote health economics to potential students

The HEE website is at: <http://healtheconomicnetwork.pbwiki.com/>

#### **7. JISC DELII elearning Projects**

A meeting of our 4 JISC funded elearning projects took place in January. The 4 projects are 2 year projects running until March 2008 and are:

- Mathematics for Economics and Business: Online Real-World Case Studies
- Developing Metalearning Capacity in Economics (using an online learning inventory and support materials)
- Academic Performance Profiler for Economics
- The Anorak Test: Simple eLearning Tips for Economics Lecturers

<http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/elearning.htm>

## 8. Developments in Economics Education 2007

The conference attracted 121 delegates, including 20 from overseas. Feedback from the conference was generally very positive particularly for keynotes. Generally it was felt the quality of papers has much improved over the 4 conferences (this was the fourth biennial conference run by the Network). Our three conference keynotes are viewable as online video

- Andrew Ross, Government Economics Service, “Educating Economists for Government”
- Prof. David Hendry, Oxford University, “Teaching Undergraduate Econometrics”
- Tim Harford, author of *The Undercover Economist*, "How can economists grab the attention of students, and keep it?"

<http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/dee2007/>

Presentation materials from the other sessions at the DEE conference are also available.

<http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/dee2007/abstracts>

## 9. What’s new on the Economics Network website?

- Themed pages (by subject specialism and by teaching/learning area, such as assessment, the use of Excel, teaching assistants and new lecturers, plagiarism, maths support and employability) – the latest one – Finding audio and video materials
- Lecturer and student diaries
- Economics in Action: blog and podcast
- YouTube versions of student videos and keynotes from the DEE conference
- Many more students worksheets and other learning materials
- Many new ‘sharing experience’ case studies
- Redesigned Why Study Economics website ([www.whystudyeconomics.ac.uk](http://www.whystudyeconomics.ac.uk)), including iPod versions of student videos

### Themes

Theme documents are succinct guides to the important resources in an area related to teaching economics. New themes on the site include:

- Student Motivation and Active Learning
- Employability and Entrepreneurship
- Linking Research and Teaching
- Experiments and Games in the Classroom
- Finding audio and video materials

<http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/themes>

## 10. Handbook for Economics Lecturers

Two new chapters have been added to the Handbook:

“Teaching Heterodox Economics Concepts” by **Andrew Mearman**, addresses the why and how of including heterodox approaches in an Economics course. It considers three different strategies, each with examples: 1) adding heterodox concepts to an

orthodox module; 2) creating a dedicated module and 3) combining parallel perspectives in the same course. The chapter also offers tips and resources.

“Undergraduate Research in Economics” by **KimMarie McGoldrick**, Department of Economics, University of Richmond deals thoroughly with the topic of undergraduate research projects, from general principles through to specifics. The chapter includes two self-contained case studies and also has examples of grading rubrics and other documents.

<http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/handbook>

## 11. Lecturer and GTA diaries

In a new section of our Reflections on Teaching archive, lecturers and teaching assistants in UK economics departments reflect frankly on their trials and tribulations.

<http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/showcase/diaries>

## 12. Join us on YouTube

We have joined the YouTube video sharing community, and are using it to post our own videos, including some from the student film project, and in the near future some on careers in economics. We are also using it to highlight interesting economics-related clips from other sources. If you’re using video clips in your lectures, we’d be interested in your recommendations.

<http://www.youtube.com/economicsnetwork>

## 13. New learning materials on our site

Increasingly, lecturers are using our site to share learning materials with the community, whether as outputs of a mini-project or simply as a favour to colleagues struggling with the same issues. We give full attribution, and providing materials in Word or other easily customisable formats. Contact [econ-network@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:econ-network@bristol.ac.uk) if you are interested.

### Mathematical Concepts for Economists case studies

These documents cover topics such as the housing market or economics of sport, spelling out the mathematical concepts used with algebra and graphs. They have been produced by staff at Nottingham Trent University to illustrate the importance of mathematics in economic analysis.

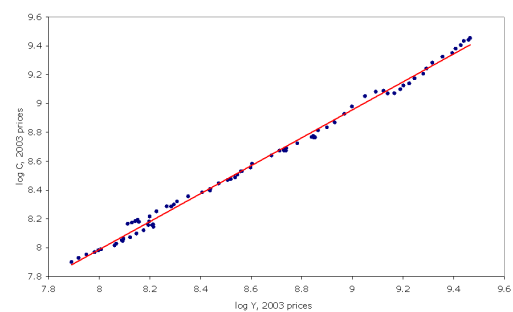
[http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/archive/math\\_s\\_worksheets](http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/archive/math_s_worksheets)

### Case Studies in Competition and Collusion

Vindelyn Smith-Hillman at the University of Northampton teaches microeconomics using a case-study method, aiming to “foster analytical development and also cater to mainstream business students who are taking an economics minor”. Student handouts and detailed teaching notes are being put online as the result of a mini-project.

[http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/mini/smithhillman\\_casestudies](http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/mini/smithhillman_casestudies)

**Chart 3: Log-linear consumption function**



### **Student Handouts on Excel**

Created by David Allen at the University of the West of England, these handouts use screen shots to guide students through creating and formatting a data plot in Excel, and exporting it to Word.

[http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/archive/allen\\_app/handout](http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/archive/allen_app/handout)

### **Worksheets for Problem-Based Learning tasks in Economics**

A number of lecturers using Problem-Based Learning are sharing the materials they have developed. The latest worksheets deal are from courses in Economic Growth and Principles of Macroeconomics.

<http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/themes/activelearning>

### **Excel PPF game**

Created by James Mackley at Swansea University, this Excel application helps illustrate the Production Possibility Frontier by giving a live plot of students' "production" in a classroom game.

[http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/showcase/mackley\\_ppfgame](http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/showcase/mackley_ppfgame)



## **2008 – future work**

### **Internationalisation**

The Network is currently involved in some work around the theme of internationalisation, specifically about supporting international students.

During the past year we have run a series of focus groups with students with some very interesting outcomes. For example, many of our international post graduate students have asked for resources to produce in MP3 format. As part of the main Academy Internationalisation project we are arranging and co-facilitating two further focus groups (one at the LSE, one at London Metropolitan University). These focus groups will feed into our student survey in the Spring.

We are also planning a new Handbook chapter about supporting international students.

### **Student survey**

Next term we will be conducting our 4<sup>th</sup> biennial national Economics students survey. This is quite different from the national student survey and previous surveys have provided rich information to departments on student perceptions. As in previous years a national report will be prepared and individual confidential departmental reports.

<http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/surveys.htm>