

Teaching economics as if the last three decades had happened

Event at HM Treasury, 11 November 2013

On Monday 11 November, HM Treasury hosted an event entitled *Teaching economics as if the last three decades had happened*. This workshop was not only the next instalment in Diane Coyle's project launched last year at the Bank of England to discuss the relevance of the economics curriculum, but also an introduction to the INET CORE project. The curriculum open-access resources in economics (CORE) venture is funded by the Institute for New Economics Thinking (INET) and is an international effort to change the core curriculum in economics and to take advantage of new technology to improve the way it is taught.

CORE's aim to improve what economics students learn and how they learn. It is partly a response to current pressures on economics education from students (paying higher tuition fees), faculty, employers and policy makers to produce more 'work-ready' graduates (which is also the focus of a research study by Economics Network; see www.economicnetwork.ac.uk/projects/research2013). Specifically, the CORE project will design a core economics curriculum that asks big questions about the economy, shows how economics can address them while taking into account evidence and theoretical developments from the last thirty years. More detailed information on the CORE project is available at: <http://core-econ.org/>.

The event on 11 November was an apt occasion to launch the project, as the panellists reinforced a widely held view in economics education that curriculum change is needed. Above all, there were two points that became clear throughout the discussion: firstly, the need to recognise that not all economics students will go on to become PhD candidates – in fact the majority will go into careers where an advanced technical knowledge is less important than a firm grasp of the workings of specific modern economies and a range of critical skills. Indeed, Bob Allen from the University of Oxford pointed out that in medicine, research at the frontier of science remains vital but simple cures are often the most effective for everyday ailments. Secondly, many of the other issues related to

broadening economic students' understanding about the limitation of models, (for example, what happens out of equilibrium) and thinking more widely about the historical, institutional and political context of economic behaviour. Economics Network patron, Tim Harford emphasised the lack of understanding of complex interactions that lead to surprises in the economy. It was suggested that an increased focus on economic history in the curriculum might help students become aware of such complexity and the limitations of some of the models they study. Recognition of such alternatives will develop their critical thinking, which John Cassidy, journalist for the *New Yorker*, suggested was the most important faculty for students to acquire.

One concern here is how to fit all of this into an already packed curriculum; a concern highlighted by John Sloman, EN Visiting Fellow, in his chapter in Diane Coyle's book entitled *What's the use of economics?* The solution may be to integrate economic history into modules rather than adding new modules in this area. Wendy Carlin suggested that courses should not be structured so that independent topics taught in early years are then simply revised in later years at an increased level of technical sophistication. Rather, a redesign of the curriculum is required such that students are introduced to big and relevant questions and then provided with the tools to analyse and answer these questions. Bob Allen stressed the need to develop the capacity among students to *ask* questions as well as answer them, to translate these questions into models and to appeal to relevant data in support of their arguments. Students should be able to respond to the messy and unexpected aspects of economies and the curriculum should be structured to enable them to do this. The CORE project seeks to address this challenge.

The Economics Network has collected the tweets from the event and made them available at: http://storify.com/economics_net/treasury-workshop-on-reform-of-the-economics-curri.