

Common themes and shared responsibilities

(From the Economics Network students and lecturers surveys)

The Economics Network conducts regular surveys to research the current state of teaching and learning in Economics Higher Education in the UK. These surveys are part of a comprehensive research programme, which aims to understand better the needs of our different stakeholders including students, lecturers, alumni and employers. They inform our support role and give a voice to the Economics community.

We conduct students and lecturers surveys biennially and alumni and employers every four years. The results of past surveys can be seen on the Economics Network site at: <http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/projects/surveys.htm>

Finding out about previous learning experience of the respondents allow us to provide better support to prospective and current students through our websites <http://whystudyeconomics.ac.uk/> and <http://www.studyingeconomics.ac.uk/> and to develop new resources for lecturers <http://economicsnetwork.ac.uk/journals>

This paper looks at the common themes from the student and lecturer surveys.

Lecturer surveys

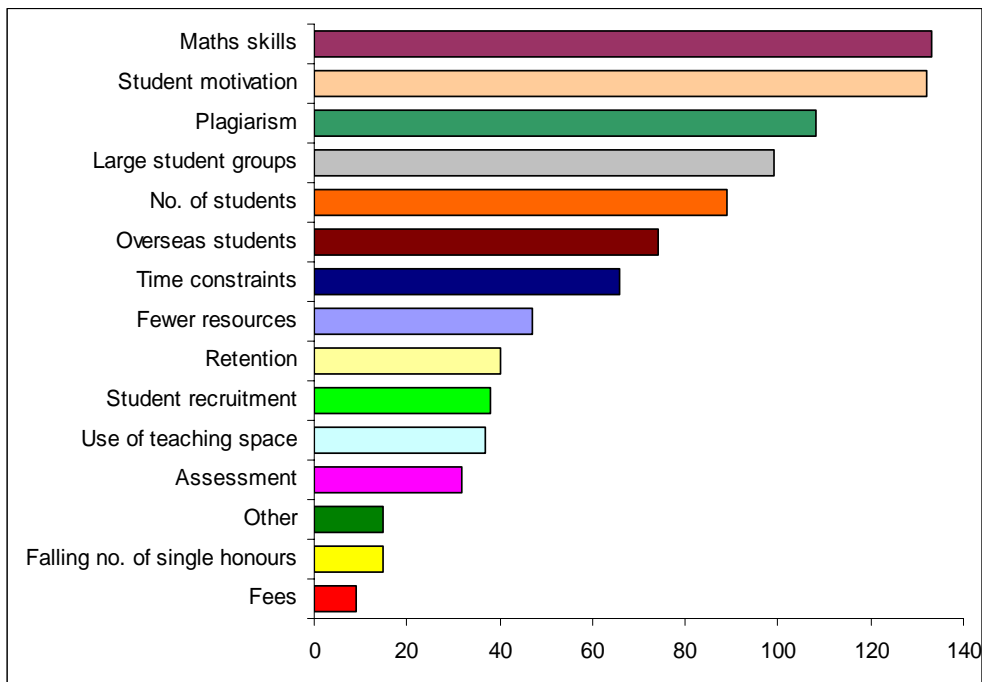
Among the most important issues mentioned by lecturers in the 2007 and 2009 surveys were: students' maths skills, students' motivation, plagiarism, number of students and large-sized groups, supporting overseas students along with time constraints, fewer resources, use of teaching space, assessment, students' recruitment and retention.

Lecturers described the most important issues in more detail.

Maths skills of students – *“Maths skills are becoming increasingly problematic as is the cut-and-paste structure encouraged by 'A'-levels”; “As I teach in third year or postgraduate, students have taken core economics and maths modules, yet many seem unable or unwilling to remember and retain a fear of equations;” “Maths is a key issue in our department as students are often very weak at maths and disengage from the subject early on. We are trying a new system this year of delivering the material in smaller groups as opposed to through lectures and we are separating A-Level and non A-level”.*

Student motivation – *“Motivation is a particular issue in year 1 alongside growing difficulties of student transition to university and university learning”; “Motivation of students is often to pass the exam rather than to learn;” “Problems with some second year students who don't attend lectures and/or tutorials”; “Too many students who are not well prepared and don't want to work to learn”; “The majority of our students see no need to do any work and have no real interest in the topic they have chosen to study.”*

Most important issues in current teaching in economics in 2009



Number of students and large-sized groups – *“There seems to be continual pressure to teach greater numbers of students more cost effectively”; “We’re caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. The university has a policy on contact hours and class sizes. Given the challenging outlook in terms of public finances, it is likely that student/staff ratios will rise further over the next 5 years. With pressure to conduct research that maintains our position in the top 5, something has to give;” “The course has nearly 800 registered students. The content is very difficult, and we often do not have time to cover it in the detail we would like during classes;” “Biggest problem is some teaching rooms not being big enough especially lecture theatres”.*

Student surveys

Students’ comments from the 2006 and 2008 surveys touch many similar themes: maths, motivation, large groups, overseas students, assessment.

More than half of the respondents found teaching of Maths and Stats on their course to be good. Among the suggestions for the improvement of these courses were checking on prior knowledge, tutors being more sensitive to students’ learning needs, a larger number of workshop-style classes and more problem-based learning. Students complained that often they could not understand the lecturers or tutors because of their accent or poor use of English. Provisional results for 2010 survey look very similar.

The methods of teaching come under particular criticism, and many students comment on the need to improve the quality of teaching by having better qualified teachers or lecturers leading the seminars. They criticised PhD students / teaching assistant for poor grasp of English and low quality of teaching. Typical comments about the quality of teaching related to the teachers being dull and uninteresting, making it

difficult for them to motivate themselves: *“The teaching style can be more lively”*; *“It depends on the lecturer, if he is not interested then the students tend to not understand as well. Same for seminars”*; *“Employing tutors who enjoy teaching rather than economics students who really couldn't care less whether or not you learn”*.

Some suggest that this could be improved by training the teachers: *“Seminar teachers should be given more teachers training so that they can lead classes. They should also be given more support by the lecturers/prepare more for classes so that they know the topics they covering properly.”*

One of the main concerns of the students is the prior assumption of knowledge by lecturers/tutors in their teaching. Typical comments include: *“Stop assuming we know everything!!”*; *“Teach Maths as if you were trying to teach aliens who have no prior knowledge of the subject, not like students are maths professors!!!”* Many suggest the need to stream ability groups, or differentiate between those who have done A-level Maths and those that have not.

The question of teaching is directly linked to students' motivation. Some students were critical of the lecturers' attitudes, claiming that they are not student centred but more concerned with their own research. By 'neglecting their teaching duties' they can make the lectures boring and lacking in interaction: *“Find many of the lecturers unstimulating and unwilling to help – more concerned with being at the uni to undertake research projects. Lack of real interaction with lecturers”*. Students suggest that the seminars need more interaction between the students and tutors, and more interaction amongst students themselves by *“making everyone contribute”*, even if some are reluctant to participate.

For many, the techniques of teaching could be made more imaginative and innovative with the use of role-plays and games: *“Games, experiments and role-play sounds like fun!”* This, they suggest, can be useful for relating the knowledge and theory to the real world: *“More use of role-play, to put into perspective the real economic world.”* Another suggestion – relating the Maths to more real-life examples as a way of making it more interesting and helping those that are struggling: *“Make it more interesting using real-world examples of where it can be used”*.

Students suggest that the interest in the course would improve greatly if there was *“more real-world relevance.”* There were some specific suggestions about the course content: *“Too Americanised, i.e. the textbook and examples are all based on US examples. This also means a huge bias towards free market economics”*, etc.

Students suggest that their degree could be improved by more feedback and continuous assessment. Many students did not like an assessment system too heavily weighted on a final exam and which was only testing memory: *“Dependence of some modules on parrot fashion exams”*. In terms of improving their learning students commented on how they thought that they would benefit from more frequent tests and practice exams, getting feedback from work handed in and doing more essays.

Among other suggestions on how to improve teaching students mention smaller groups and more seminars and tutorials. Typical responses are: *“Having more tutorial, it is easy for us to understand the course material in reduced groups”*; *“More tutorials would be better, allowing for more discussion”*; *“Smaller tutorial*

sizes for better interaction with the tutor". Many comment on the need to increase contact and teaching time, saying that sometimes there is not enough time to deal with all the aspects of the course.

We are aware of the different attitudes of lecturers to the growing number of international students in the classes: some see it as a benefit to students' learning, while others point to the additional problems that situation creates. Students themselves in the survey mention growing internationalisation as one of the best aspects of the course. At the same time, international students pointed to the same language issues raised by UK students: "*The seminar tutor should speak better English, as a strong Chinese accent makes it sometimes very hard to follow, even for my English native speaking friends*", and highlighted other problems that they had: "*Please, think about all students, not just only British students. Foreigners are suffering for studying compared with British.*"

One of the issues often mentioned by students, both in 2006 and in 2008, was misunderstanding by non-English lecturers of the UK education system and the level of knowledge one can expect from the students. Approximately 25% of Economics higher education teaching staff are not from the UK and 80% of these are from Europe. Even though our survey was conducted with Economics students, we presume that it is an important issue for other disciplines as well and needs to be addressed at the university level. We have included advice for international class teachers in our Handbook for Economics Lecturers.

Conclusions

Even though many themes mentioned by both lecturers and students are similar, the understanding of shared responsibility for the learning is definitely missing. From the students' point of view lecturers are seen as having the majority of power to educate, and they have secondary or no power at all. The concepts of power and responsibility are closely connected, as less power or even powerlessness means less ability to act and less responsibility. Many students see education as something being done to them, not something that they do. This passive attitude to learning showcases itself in students taking less responsibility for their own education and in the rise of "the blaming" culture.

As some students don't see themselves as active partners in learning they don't regard their group mates as partners in this process as well and could dismiss as irrelevant their perspectives and the value of group work. Engaging students in active learning, highlighting the value that their perceptions could bring to education, can be very empowering and could lead to a better understanding of a shared responsibility.

Analysing common themes that emerge from students and lecturers surveys will allow us better to target our support to both lecturers and students. In some cases, students' suggestions for improvements in the way courses are run, such as smaller class sizes or more contact time, would require extra resources. In other cases, however, their suggestions could be achieved through relatively small changes in practice, such as ways of using VLEs, classroom activities or teaching styles.

We hope that those surveys will not only provide the Economics community with useful information, but will play an important role in the improvement of teaching and

learning in Economics. The Economics Network will be happy to provide workshops and advice to interested departments on the issues raised by those and NSS surveys.