

Collaborative project on “Teaching and assessing employability skills in economics”

Abstract

At the Developments in Economics Education Conference (DEE) in September 2017 we had a number of interesting discussions about what skills students need to develop in their economics degree and how best to teach and assess these skills. The purpose of this study is to take these discussions forward by undertaking a survey across economics departments in the UK to establish what they are doing on employability skills in their curricula. We would use the Economics Network Employers Survey to establish a set of employability skills to consider and conduct focus groups in the first instance to inform the design of the survey. The aim is to produce a report for DEE 2019 that would allow for sharing of practice and also identify potential areas where further idea development and research may be warranted. This is an important area of discussion for the discipline in general but particularly in the context of subject-level TEF and its focus on graduate outcomes. The issues that would be considered are also in line with wider discipline discussions on #whateconomistsdo and #communicatingeconomics.

Proposed approach

This is a qualitative research project. There will be two dimensions to the research.

- Establish an understanding of what employability skills means in the context of an economics degree and whether there is a common view across economics programmes on this.
- For each skill area, identify how economics departments are teaching and assessing the relevant skills. This should provide ideas on what is feasible and what challenges arise.

The suggested research methodology is as follows.

1. Review Economics Network Employer Survey evidence over time to establish a set of skills that employers would like an economics graduate to have entering the workforce. Also review DLHE data to establish the range of career destinations of economics graduates (to highlight variety). It would be nice, time permitting, to sense check this information in focus groups with employers and alumni.
2. Conduct a survey of economics programmes across UK Universities to identify what skills they think are important and to find out how they teach and assess those skills within their economics degree.

3. Host a series of focus groups to discuss survey findings and identify common themes around what is going well and where there is room for improvement. Ideally include mix of universities, employers and alumni in focus group discussions where feasible.
4. Present research findings at DEE 2019. The aim would be for this to provide a springboard for discussions on how to fill gaps in the teaching and assessing of employability skills. We want to move conversations forward by recognising, and celebrating, what is already done and identifying where more work is needed.

A note on the survey

The survey would have two parts.

The first part would include questions asking economics departments what they think the key skills are that they need to teach and assess in their degrees. This can be compared to what employers think is important.

The second part would be about getting information about how economics department teach and assess these skills. This could include identifying at what stage of the degree the skills are focused-on and whether they are taught in compulsory or optional modules. There would also be questions around whether the Department expects certain skills to be developed outside the core curriculum, for example through Placement Year opportunities, not-for-credit activities, or work experience that is separate from the degree. We would also ask the respondents to identify if they have examples of good practice in particular modules, or across modules, that they think could be shared as case studies. In parallel, we would ask questions on what are the constraints/limitations on being able to teach and assess the skills.

The survey would be run online and would be aimed at those responsible for the whole undergraduate programme (“Programme Directors”).

We would ask ‘lead’ universities, most likely form amongst the Economics Network Associates, if they could volunteer to provide feedback on a draft of the survey in early Autumn 2018.

The Economics Network would invite universities to indicate if they wished to participate in the survey with the aim of getting as broad a mix of universities/degree programmes represented as possible. The survey would be shared with those who signed up to participate towards the end of autumn 2018 with responses due in early 2019.

Using the survey results

The information obtained from the surveys would be collated to establish commonality on the employability skills in economics and to highlight any variation. This would include establishing any variation across types of institution (e.g., Russell Group relative to post-1992) or types of degree (e.g., single honours relative to joint degrees).

The information obtained from the Programme Director surveys would also be collated to identify different approaches used to teach and assess different skills. This could look like a menu or

portfolio of teaching and assessment options for each skill area. Any commonality in approaches would be highlighted, for example, if the skill is developed mainly through a narrow set of modules such as dissertation modules. The analysis of the survey would also reveal whether there are skills that get limited attention across economics degrees.

Resources

Dr Cloda Jenkins, UCL BSc Economics Director and co-founder CTaLE, would lead the project. There is no cost for her time.

It is hoped that support would be provided by the Economics Network on the design of the survey, on getting universities to sign-up to participate and on organising focus group discussions.

University programme leads commit time to completing the survey.

Project Plan

Summer 2018 (July/August)

Cloda to review Employer Network Surveys and DLHE data and to write a short report of what 'employability skills' means in economics for discussion with Economics Network.

Cloda to prepare draft survey

Economics Network to identify Associates who are willing to provide feedback on survey design and to discuss the project more generally in early autumn 2018.

Autumn 2018 (September-November)

Economics Network to contact economics departments to explain what doing and ask them to sign up to participate in autumn 2018 survey (sign-up by end October). Also departments to signal if they are also willing to participate in focus group discussions in Spring 2019.

Cloda to finalise survey, after feedback from Associates.

Run survey from end November 2018.

Plan dates for Spring 2019 focus group discussions and identify people to invite

Winter 2019 (January-March)

Close survey end January 2019.

Cloda and Economics Network research support to review responses to survey and collate key findings into draft report.

Spring 2019 (April-June)

Economics Network and Cloda to host three focus groups across the country with mix of universities, employers and alumni to discuss draft findings.

Follow-up on suggested case studies in surveys with view to getting short summaries for summer report.

Summer 2019 (July/August)

Revise findings and produce draft final report. Discuss findings in session at DEE and get feedback to inform final report with recommendations on next steps.