NOTES AND COMMENTARIES

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ABSTRACT

The problem of declining numbers of students electing to study Economics in Australian and Queensland schools is addressed and this is considered in the context of student participation rates in a range of traditional subject areas. A syllabus and a pedagogical response are offered with a particular emphasis on the Queensland situation and a recommendation is made that liaisons be developed with other subject areas and stake-holders such as tertiary institutions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Economics in Queensland schools has an emphasis on inquiry-based learning, offered within a flexible curriculum structure by which students develop economic literacy and learn about choice. This approach, in part, addresses a concern expressed by Becker (2004) that there is a global lack of student interest in pursuing the study of Economics. The situation is no different in Australia and in Queensland.

2. DECLINING NUMBERS OF STUDENTS

Fullarton et al (2003) in their contribution to the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) note that from 1990 to 2001 there was a “substantial shift in participation of Australian Year 12 students away from subjects in traditional fields such as Economics and Accounting towards more vocationally oriented subjects such as Business Studies”. They suggest that this is due, in part, to the influence of a changing labour market and the economy (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 12 Participation Rates in Subject Areas</th>
<th>1993</th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Society and the Environment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>10.8 (10.6)</td>
<td>7.0 (9.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>7.3 (14.8)</td>
<td>6.4 (11.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Studies</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>17.1 (4.7)</td>
<td>22.7 (20.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>13.8 (15.7)</td>
<td>12.0 (13.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>17.4 (21.9)</td>
<td>18.2 (22.8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages in brackets represent data for Queensland.
In Queensland, since 2000, numbers of students studying Economics at schools continues to decline but the number of schools offering the subject has recently increased (Table 2).

### TABLE 2

**YEAR 11-12 STUDENTS STUDYING ECONOMICS AT QUEENSLAND SCHOOLS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of students</td>
<td>7855</td>
<td>7244</td>
<td>7231</td>
<td>7681</td>
<td>6588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of schools</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Queensland Studies Authority.

If there are insufficient numbers of students in a school wishing to study Economics, the subject can face extinction as an offering within that school. Should a school have removed Economics from its normal curriculum offerings, students can now elect to study Economics through the School of Distance Education or as part of the Education Queensland Virtual Schooling programme. While Economics can be retained as a curriculum offering in schools, the decline in numbers of students electing to study the subject still needs to be addressed.

### 3. SYLLABUS RESPONSE

Fullarton et al (2003) acknowledge that ‘students will actively engage in the subjects in which they have an interest and success’ and that while there does not seem to be any single factor to explain their participation in certain subjects, foundations that shape student uptake of subjects in later years are established in earlier stages at school. This presents a problem for Economics as it is offered only as an elective at senior school level. While it is certainly important for teachers to pay attention to pedagogy and relevance in learning tasks, there may be a strong argument for a syllabus response.

In 1998, there was a major change in the Queensland Economics syllabus which enabled teachers to tailor the subject better to the needs and interests of their students. The syllabus offers a wide range of choice. Within the framework of the circular flow of income model, there are four mandatory core units of study and schools may choose five to seven electives from a list of seventeen. There is even the opportunity for schools to devise their own school based elective. For example, a school on the Queensland Gold Coast may elect to investigate the ‘Economics of Tourism’ and a school in western Queensland may elect ‘Economics of the
Beef Cattle Industry’. Schools' choices are registered in a work programme that is accredited by the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA).

Becker (2004) advocates that lecturers (and school teachers) change their strategies to reflect the dynamic nature of Economics and to recognise the current social and political issues that abound. An inquiry-based curriculum can enable exactly that to happen. In the Queensland syllabus, students are challenged to identify current issues or problems, to research them, analyse and interpret their findings, to evaluate possible solutions and to make recommendations. These then would be presented in a written or non-written (for example, an oral or a web-based presentation) response to audiences of teacher and their peers. In assessment, the key terms and concepts of Economics are treated equally with process criteria, and students are required to demonstrate their interpretative, decision-making, research and communication skills in a range of authentic situations. Flexibility in assessment is enabled by the absence of external assessment tasks in senior school subjects, and panels of teachers registered with the QSA annually conduct monitoring and verification of school levels of achievement. Each year, a common, external, core skills test (Queensland Core Skills Test) is used to obtain group results to scale school results in each subject area.

Further to the LSAY findings that the foundations of student subject choice are established in the earlier stages at school, the syllabus provides continuity with the Studies of Society and Environment syllabus for Years 1 to 10 - ‘Systems, Resources and Power’ strand. For teachers and students, this can be a point of reference as to the nature of Economics when choices are being made for senior school studies.

For schools with small numbers of students in a particular year level electing to study Economics, the syllabus provides for the establishment of composite classes so that students in Years 11 and 12 can work together on a common course of study. The syllabus also provides for students who elect to enter a course later than the rest of the cohort by offering a catch-up opportunity of a bridging study.

4. PEDAGOGICAL RESPONSE

While Economics textbooks may provide a useful resource for students and teachers, inquiry learning offers challenges and opportunities to test hypotheses, collect data and evidence, analyse people’s perspectives and to conduct investigations in the field or by using the media. Students learn to critically select and sort information and to make decisions supported by evidence using criteria. Investigations may vary from a local assessment of market forces with used cars to making considered judgements regarding the strengths and weaknesses of international trade agreements.
As students cannot initially be expected to possess sophisticated skills such as internet research, analysis of data, decision-making, application of quantitative procedures, report writing and formal debating, they need to be an integral part of a teaching and learning programme. Beyer (1987) advocates the explicit teaching of skills so that students can be effective critical thinkers and problem solvers.

The world abounds with Economics related problems for student investigation.

5. CONCLUSION

It seems unlikely that numbers of students electing to study Economics at school in Queensland will increase to the levels of the 1980s due to a range of socio-economic and curriculum factors. Flexibility in syllabus requirements, creative timetabling and thoughtful implementation of the syllabus in schools should provide sufficient fertile ground for Economics to co-exist with the broad range of subject offerings in schools. The establishment of liaisons with related subject areas (for example, in the Social Sciences and Mathematics), and with schools of Economics in tertiary institutions would complement a recovery.

The flexible Queensland syllabus and foundational work established in secondary schools should challenge and encourage students to continue their studies of Economics at a tertiary level. As one pre-service teacher recently reflected, “challenges for the future include developing the theoretical knowledge of Economics in a way that is relevant and engaging to ensure that the numbers continue to be maintained and improved”.

References


Whatever else is said about the teaching of economics (and other disciplines at tertiary level), assessment remains of major importance both to students and to the agencies providing certification of tertiary success. All universities are aware of the ‘academic crime’ of plagiarism, and accordingly tend to highlight their policies against it. University homepages broadcast the institution's stance against plagiarism, progressive assessment essay cover sheets issued by some departments require signed declarations by students submitting work, and disciplinary committees are well aware of the implications of proved plagiarism.

Four contemporary points - not specific to economics alone - are worthy of notice and reflection:

1. **On 3 September 2003 the NY Times (Sara Rimer) reported - and protested - that a study on 23 college campuses revealed that internet plagiarism was a growing problem.** Thirty-eight per cent of the undergraduate students surveyed said that in the last year they had engaged in one or more instances of ‘cut-and-paste’ plagiarism involving the Internet, by paraphrasing or copying anything from a few sentences to a full paragraph from the Web without citing the source. Rimer reported that almost half the students said they considered such behaviour trivial or not cheating at all. Forty per cent of students acknowledged plagiarizing written sources in the last year. Some students say they do it ‘only to get into college’; undergraduates say they need to cheat because of the intense competition to get into graduate school, and land the top jobs; and some say it is OK because it only mimics what goes on in business and in politics. Clearly there is a need both for academics and students to be aware of current practices and current attitudes towards the notion that whatever is on the internet is public property, requiring no attribution.

2. **In the wake of this report based on USA circumstances a serious case has arisen in Australia at the University of Newcastle. The 2004 University of Newcastle plagiarism case has gone before ICAC (the NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption) and is still under investigation, as of October 2004. ICAC advises that the case is incomplete and that the hearing will resume on 27 and 28 October 2004, and 8 to 12 November 2004, inclusive. The ICAC is investigating the conduct of certain present and former members of**
the staff of the University of Newcastle in relation to an allegation made in January 2003 that certain students of Institut Wira, Malaysia had engaged in plagiarism. Essays of 15 students were sent for re-mark by another academic after first being deemed to include plagiarised material. The ICAC commissioner objected that what was required of the university was that a process be put in place so as to determine whether the original marker was right or wrong. Simply getting another lecturer to do a re-mark does not determine whether plagiarism has occurred as alleged, and cannot itself be an adequate administrative response. The case continues.

3. Given the prospect of internet plagiarism, and recent controversies related to it, the place of progressive assessment in subject evaluation is in line for review. The relative importance of progressive assessment varies from institution to institution, and no doubt from School to School, but may range up to 100 per cent of total assessment. Given the inability to guarantee authorship of progressive assessment essays, and given that academic results affect even applications for permanent citizenship in the case of overseas students, there is an obvious possibility that some students may feel a temptation to plagiarise either by downloading from the internet or by simply paying others to write their papers for them. If institutions have failed to explicitly provide for this possibility by including provisions in their rules to allow for a viva or a written exam at the discretion of the relevant Head of School, it may be exceedingly difficult to effectively deal with such cases even when there is clear reason for suspicion. In the absence of such explicitly stated rules, can a student under suspicion be required to attend an interview to defend his/her paper on a date specified by the institution? It may be that some overseas students, for example, may perceive a chance to enter Australia, attain permanent residence status, work full time, attend no classes, and merely pay others to write for them such progressive assessment papers as are required. In the circumstances that may be a very cheap way to get a (post-graduate) degree, and also a cheap way to get citizenship. For domestic students the same opportunity exists, at least to buy a cheap degree.

4. Enrolment scam: On the 15th October 2004, ICAC also reported an investigation of a university enrolment scam involving the fraudulent enrolment of 24 overseas full-fee paying students in 2003 at the University of Sydney. The scam involved the creation of forged documents indicating the students had graduated from the Foundation Studies course at the University of New South Wales
(UNSW), a bridging course to assist overseas students to meet the academic and English requirements for enrolment in Australian universities. The forged documents falsely stated that students had attended the Foundation Studies course when they had not, or falsely stated a higher mark than the one actually achieved. These forgeries were created by persons associated with agents contracted by universities to recruit overseas students. Commissioner Irene Moss noted that these agents are largely unregulated and are paid a fee for each student they recruit to a university. They also have the authority to certify copies of students’ original documents for enrolment, which is a blatant conflict of interest and which makes the entire Australian university sector vulnerable to fraud. Police records showed that persons associated with one particular agent were well-known for suspected involvement in criminal activity.” Students who had their marks increased to get into the University of Sydney paid agents between $11,000 and $15,000. Most were from China and told the ICAC that they assumed the extra fee was to facilitate their enrolment, which they said was a standard practice in their home country. The ICAC was unable to identify the core offenders. Its investigation was hindered by a delay by University staff in promptly reporting the fraud. It has recommended the University ensure all staff are familiar with procedures to promptly report suspected corrupt conduct.