MORE EFFECTIVELY ENGAGING STUDENTS IN UNIVERSITY ECONOMICS COURSES*

Anthony Stokes & Sarah Wright
Faculty of Arts and Sciences,
Australian Catholic University

ABSTRACT

In recent decades the numbers of students majoring in economics at universities in Australia have been in decline. There has been a growing trend for students to turn away from economics to business related studies and a wider range of vocationally orientated courses. This paper outlines the strategy of enhanced student engagement employed by one university to reverse this trend and provides evidence from a range of sources to indicate the success of this strategy over the ten year period from 2001 to 2010.

Keywords: teaching economics, student engagement, learning styles.

JEL classifications: A20, A22

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades there has been a general decline in the numbers of students majoring in economics at universities not only in Australia (Lewis and Norris 1997; Millmow 2006) but throughout the world (Becker 2004; Siegfried 2000, 2006). Figure 1 illustrates this continuing trend in Australia with commencing student numbers in economics (including econometrics) in decline while the overall sector

* Correspondence: Anthony Stokes, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Australian Catholic University, Locked Bag No. 2002, Strathfield, NSW, 2135, Australia. Email: Tony.Stokes@acu.edu.au. A version of this paper was presented to the 40th Australian Conference of Economists, Australian National University, Canberra, 11-14 July, 2011. Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggestions.
experienced considerable growth. In the period 2004-2010 there was growth in commencing student numbers across all courses of 29 percent. Business and management numbers rose 27 percent, marketing and sales 34 percent and law 30 percent. The number of commencing economics students declined, however, by two percent. It is interesting to note that Morgan (2009) reports that the onset of the Global Financial Crisis appears to have increased interest in economics courses in the United Kingdom. Commencing student numbers in economics there rose in 2009 by 15.2 percent compared to an increase of 7.0 percent in overall student numbers. Sadly in Australia the numbers have actually fallen steadily since 2007. Perhaps this is a sign that Australia did not experience a sufficiently robust crisis to warrant greater interest in the study of economics.

![Figure 1: Commencing Student Enrolments in Selected Australian University Courses, 2004-2010](image)

Economics has, therefore, changed from being an important discipline and course in its own right to being primarily one of service teaching in a business or commerce degree. In some universities the traditional first year semesters of Microeconomics I and Macroeconomics I have been replaced by a single unit, often labelled “Business Economics”, which is typically a hybrid of these traditional courses. Its purpose tends to be the provision of a minimal amount of economics training before students move on to studies in vocational business programs rather than to lay the foundations for more
advanced study in economics. One wonders, however, what business graduates can achieve without a comprehensive understanding of the markets in which they will be operating.

This paper examines the response of one university to this declining trend. It begins by looking at the trend in greater detail as well as at some of its possible underlying causes. It then outlines the teaching and learning strategy at the Australian Catholic University (ACU) developed to reverse this trend. This raises some questions about alternative learning styles that are also considered. An evaluation of the ACU model is then provided before some conclusions are drawn in the final section.

2. REASONS FOR DECLINING NUMBERS IN ECONOMICS

Lewis and Norris (1997) report the results of a survey that asked heads of Australian economics departments about trends in student numbers and perceived causes underlying these trends. These results confirm that economics student numbers have been on the decline not only in universities but also in schools throughout Australia. The results also identify a number of factors that heads of department believed were responsible for the decline in university economics student numbers. Key among these factors was the corresponding growth and image of business courses. These were often seen as more vocationally orientated and with a greater likelihood of providing employment (Lewis and Norris 1997; Worthington and Higgs 2004; Millmow 2006). As can be seen in Table 1, department heads were of the view that economics also suffers from the perception of being overly rigorous and/or boring. More general business studies, in contrast, were seen as an easier option and more relevant to the real world.

In high schools, there was a major increase in vocationally orientated courses from 1990 and many states introduced business and legal studies into their curricula for the first time. This attracted students who may otherwise have been inclined to study economics. In some high schools, business studies completely displaced economics which was no longer offered, so that over time, economics came to be viewed as an unknown, fairly difficult and highly mathematical discipline. In schools that kept economics, usually the more capable students studied it, and students of more average ability took business studies.

Alauddin and Valadkhani (2003) suggest that there are three basic reasons for the decline in economics majors in Australia. These are:
Table 1: Heads of Economics Department - Perceptions of the Causes of the Decline in Economics Degree Enrolments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank (1 = Highest)</th>
<th>Perceived Cause</th>
<th>Mean Score (Scale 1-5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Business studies are seen as more career focused than economics</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Business studies degrees are seen as leading to higher paid jobs</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Economics is seen as too rigorous and/or abstract</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>School students are taking ‘easier’ courses in areas such as business studies and legal studies rather than economics</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Students are increasingly less well prepared in mathematics</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Economics is perceived as ‘boring’</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Students are seeking a more rounded and pragmatic approach than that perceived to be offered by economics</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Lewis and Norris (1997, pp.9-10), with modifications.

Inappropriate economics offerings for an increasingly diverse clientele; the introduction of more attractive business, commerce and industry-oriented programs such as finance, accounting and commerce, and business majors geared to the needs of the real world; and the use of less experienced teaching staff in lower level undergraduate courses.

Argyrous (2007, p.58) considers that ‘undergraduate teaching of economics in Australia is dominated by an uncritical presentation of neoclassical economics’. Students begin (and often end) their university education in economics with ‘foundation courses’ in neoclassical microeconomics and macroeconomics which provides them with a very theoretical and somewhat narrow view of economics. These views are supported by Stilwell (2006) who suggests that there needs to be a widening of both the economic thought and the pedagogy that underpins the teaching of economics. He believes that students should be ‘exposed to the competing
currents of economic thought, eg. classical, neoclassical, Keynesian, Marxian and institutionalist’ approaches to economics (Stilwell 2006, p.43). Students should also develop different ways of looking at economic processes, problems and policies, according to Stilwell.

Guest and Duhs (2002) find evidence of student dissatisfaction with the teaching of economics which accords with the contribution of Ongeri (2009) for the U.S. This could partly be the result of a perception amongst academics that research performance is more important for promotion purposes than is the quality of teaching. Indeed many first year classes are primarily taught by junior academic staff (associate lecturers, lecturers and senior lecturers), while more senior staff (associate professors and professors) teach smaller numbers of students in third year or postgraduate courses.

These issues have been facing economics departments for almost two decades and in general there is little evidence of a turnaround in student numbers or improved students perceptions. The following section describes one strategy that was designed to reverse this trend: an approach at the ACU to make economics more engaging from the student perspective.

3. THE ACU TEACHING AND LEARNING MODEL

The economics major at ACU is designed to cater for a wide range of students with different abilities and with different career aims. Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) scores for economics students at the ACU have ranged from less than 40 to 99. Students studying economics do so in a variety of degrees including: Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Arts (Psychology), Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Business or Commerce, Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Teaching, Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Social Work. This context is important for thinking about how students at an institution such as ACU might be best taught economics.

In 2001, one of the authors (Stokes) joined the ACU, at its Strathfield campus in Sydney, as the only lecturer in economics. He decided to rewrite the economics curriculum in light of the problems raised above and drew upon his experience at the University of Wollongong and as an economics teacher in New South Wales high schools. Stokes was later joined by another full time lecturer (Wright) and two sessional colleagues.
An important aspect of the ACU curriculum redevelopment was a consideration of students’ prior learning and interests. At the University of Wollongong, Stokes was involved in a program that taught three separate streams of introductory macroeconomics to students, based on their prior learning backgrounds (see Stokes & Wilson 2009). The three streams comprised domestic students who had previously studied high school economics, overseas students who had studied some economics in their home country, and a stream for students with no prior learning in economics at all. Stokes & Wilson (2009) report the success of this model and suggest its applicability to other large and diverse student cohorts. Due to the relatively small numbers (under 100) in the introductory economics units at ACU, however, all economics students were required to have a common program. Nonetheless, accounting for students’ prior learning was an important principle that informed ACU’s curriculum redesign.

This redesign was also intended to move the ACU program from one driven by the standard exposition of neoclassical theory to one that took economic issues and policy problems as its starting point and looked for a range of possible solutions to these problems. The view was adopted that all economic theory has some value and some part to play in explaining economic phenomena. The program introduced students to elements of classical, neoclassical, Keynesian, Marxian, neo-Marxian and institutionalist theories as they related to particular issues and policies. Initially eight economic units were redeveloped including two new units, *The Global Economy* and *Labour Economics*. These units were written on the basis of what the main issues in the relevant fields might be. For example the *Introductory Macroeconomics 1* unit was concerned with looking at the following types of question:

- What is Economics about?
- What are the main challenges and choices Australia faces in the macro economy?
- What makes the economy grow?
- What is inflation?
- What is unemployment?

Under the rubric of each question, students would consider the central issues, problems and consequences of the particular phenomenon being examined. For example, treatment of the question
‘What is inflation?’ would be based around a set of subsidiary questions such as: ‘Why is inflation a problem?’; ‘How is inflation measured?’; ‘What are the types of inflation that can occur?’; ‘What causes each type of inflation?’; and ‘What are the consequences of inflation on individuals, businesses and the economy?’. Students would examine the issues in terms of both the contemporary situation and times of extremes in other countries or periods, such as the episode of German hyperinflation between World Wars I and II.

Accounting for context was also an important dimension of the ACU pedagogy. For example, students considered the issue of unemployment by first looking at actual unemployment rates in their local regions and then discussing possible reasons for and implications of the trends they uncovered. Only at that stage were economic theories and frameworks such as the aggregate demand-aggregate supply model introduced as part of the process for trying to explain the trend rather than as the main topic focus. Later on, when students were introduced to economic policy, policy was considered as a means of solving particular problems rather than as an issue in itself. Attention was, therefore, also given to developing students’ problem solving skills. In this respect, focus questions were designed to pose situations that simulated real world problems, and students were asked to analyse these situations and propose solutions to the associated problems.

Another feature of the ACU approach was that concepts such as unemployment and inflation were dealt with entirely in a single topic. Due to time constraints, many lecturers rely on textbooks to determine what, how and when concepts and theories are taught. Many texts spread these concepts through a number of topic areas and chapters, and students sometimes have problems chopping and changing between topics. For example, in the economics text by McTaggart et al (2010), different aspects of inflation are discussed in Chapters 19, 22 and 24-28. A similar situation occurs in the Stonecash et al (2011) macroeconomics text. Inflation is considered in Chapters 13 and 16-19. Spreading out an issue in this way may lead students to develop an attitude of ‘I have done this topic. Why am I doing it again?’

Table 2 shows how a conventional first year economics course outline would compare to that developed at the ACU in Macroeconomics 1. The ACU course is structured in terms of various issues first and then introducing policies to deal with those issues. The
### Table 2  Comparison of Traditional Macroeconomics Course and the ACU Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventional Textbook Syllabus for Introductory Macroeconomics&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>ACU Model of Introductory Macroeconomics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Macroeconomic challenges and choices</td>
<td>Introduction - What is Economics about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring macroeconomic performance</td>
<td>What are the main challenges and choices Australia faces in the macroeconomy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measuring employment and unemployment</td>
<td>What makes the economy grow?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggregate demand and aggregate supply</td>
<td>What is inflation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expenditure multipliers</td>
<td>What is unemployment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiscal Policy</td>
<td>What is the Balance of Payments and exchange rate?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money, banking and interest rates</td>
<td>What causes the CAD and Foreign Debt?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monetary policy</td>
<td>Why are the economic problems difficult to solve?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The exchange rate</td>
<td>What is the role of Fiscal Policy and the budget?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiscal and monetary interactions</td>
<td>What is the role of Monetary Policy and interest rates?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflation</td>
<td>What alternative economic approaches are there?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The economy at full employment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic growth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The business cycle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macroeconomic policy challenges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The balance of payments and external debt</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> This model is adapted from McTaggart, Findlay & Parkin (2010), which is widely used in Australian universities.

Conventional course follows more of a theoretical direction with issues spread through the various topics and sometimes repeated.
A similar approach has been applied to other economics units at ACU. Lecturers found that students in intermediate microeconomics and macroeconomics courses were more prepared to engage with difficult concepts and theories, and were more interested in exploring the relationship between theories and their application to real world problems compared to earlier periods when more traditional curriculum approaches were used. As a result, students at ACU appear to have developed a positive attitude to studying economics and could see the value of continuing to study economics in subsequent courses.

4. A VARIETY OF TEACHING APPROACHES TO CATER FOR DIFFERING LEARNING STYLES

Apart from developing a curriculum that students found relevant and that challenged them to think critically, careful consideration was also given to the different ways in which students learn. Flemming’s (1995) VARK approach was used to account for the variety of students’ preferred modes of accessing, processing and applying course content (cf. St Hill 1997). This approach identifies four main learning styles:

- **Visual (V):** Preference for observing and reflecting upon images as a way of learning new concepts and ideas, for example symbolic representations, graphs and videos;
- **Auditory (A):** Preference for listening to verbal explanation and discussion of new ideas;
- **Read/Write (R):** Preference for engaging with texts at one’s own pace and processing the new ideas learned by writing notes or reflections that express the new learning;
- **Kinesthetic (K):** Preference for learning experiences that involve movement. These types of students become bored if they are not physically active in the learning process.

A study by Cheah, Stokes and Wilson (1999) at the University of Wollongong showed that all four learning styles were apparent in a survey of 101 economics students at the University. Students were asked to respond to a series of 13 questions by nominating one or more of the above modes as appropriate for them. The average number of responses for each mode was 3.7 for V, 3.5 for A, 5.0 for R
Box 1: Deserted Island Group Exercise

You are to break into groups of 4-5. You are to assume that you are stranded on a deserted tropical island, 500 kms off the coast of Queensland. You have the task of setting up an economic system on that island. You need to decide the basic economic questions of:

• what and how much to produce?
• how to produce it?
• who will get it?
• what will be done to increase efficiency and economic growth?

It is important to develop a system that will sustain economic development. The role of each person in the group should be clearly explained. The group will have 20 minutes to plan their economic system and each group will give a 3-5 minute report.

Box 2 Using the Internet and the Australian Bureau of Statistics

Use the Australian Bureau of Statistics website on the internet to answer the following questions:

1. What are the current levels of the following economic indicators in the Australian economy? (Remember these should be expressed in annual terms).
   - Inflation
   - Unemployment rate
   - Economic growth rate
   - The size of the current account deficit
   - The level of the net foreign debt
2. How many major categories are there in the CPI? List them.
3. Which categories have contributed most to inflation in the last 12 months? What caused this?
4. Has there been deflation in any areas in the last year? Why did this occur?
and 4.0 for $K$, out of a maximum of 13. Whilst the read/write preference was ranked the highest, the other modes were also significant, implying that visual, auditory and kinesthetic approaches are all important methods that economics students use to learn.

Various teaching approaches were developed at ACU to cater for these different learning styles. One such approach which was introduced in the first economics tutorial was a group work activity entitled ‘Stranded on a deserted island’. This activity, outlined in Box 1, placed a group of students in a hypothetical scenario, posed them a series of questions relating to this scenario, and required them to report as a group to the rest of the class. The tutor/facilitator then followed up on these group reports by asking group members if they had any problems coming to agreement and why this might have been. The tutor then related this to problems faced in the economy in deciding priorities or courses of action in particular circumstances. Apart from engaging students in active learning, the activity performed an ice-breaking function, introducing students to each other in their first week at university.

A second example that integrated the development of research skills, the ability to interpret statistics and to engage in analytical thinking was used in a Macroeconomics 1 tutorial. This activity is described in Box 2 and asked students to access some basic macroeconomic statistics on the Australian Bureau of Statistics website and to answer some simple questions about these statistics. Statistical interpretation and graphical skills were also developed by providing contemporary data and asking students to analyse relationships between this data and particular economic theories. This activity is described in Box 3.

Another method that was used to cater for different learning styles involved the use of cartoons and videos in both lectures and tutorials to introduce contemporary issues and to engage students in discussion about these issues.

Approaches such as these have been embedded in all the economics units offered in the economics major at ACU, including: Microeconomics 1 and 2; Macroeconomics 1 and 2; The Global Economy; Economic Policy Analysis; Development Economics; Labour Economics; and Applied Econometrics.

One other factor that characterised the approach to implementing this new curriculum at ACU is worth mentioning. The ACU
Refer to the table of statistics on the Australian Economy and answer the following questions.

1. What do you think have been Australia's economic strengths and weaknesses in the last 10 years?

2. What has happened to Australia’s economic performance since 2008?

3. When was inflation at its highest? What was the inflation rate? What was the cause of inflation at this time?

4. On the following graph plot Australia’s economic growth rate and mark in the stages of the business cycle that you observe.

5. What relationship do you observe from the table between unemployment and economic growth?

6. Can you suggest some possible reasons for this relationship?
More Effectively Engaging Students

Economics staff worked very much as a team. They devised programs, shared teaching resources and developed assessment strategies together. This not only reduced total preparation time but facilitated the use of better ideas and teaching methods and shared responsibility for program development among a larger number of staff. Part of this team approach was the mentoring of less experienced academics. This approach was so successful that ACU economics lecturers were subsequently involved in mentoring new staff in other discipline areas of the University.

5. Evaluation of the ACU Model

The teaching and learning model described above was evaluated using data on demand for the ACU economics program, student feedback about the ACU program obtained from the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), employment outcomes for ACU economics graduates, teaching awards won by ACU academic staff and the impact of the ACU program on the teaching of economics in NSW schools. Each of these is considered in turn.

(i) Students completing majors and retention rates at ACU

Figure 2 shows the number of commencing students in the ACU economics program for the period from 2001, when the changes described above were first introduced, to 2010. Over this period, the number of students in the first year of the program rose from 34 to 92, and the number of students majoring in economics increased from 6 to 51. The conversion rate for students moving from the first year economics subject to the economics major also rose from 18 percent in 2001 to 55 percent in 2010.

(ii) Students’ perceptions of completing the ACU economics major

Figure 3 compares the perceptions of ACU economics graduates about the quality of teaching they experienced during their degree with the perceptions of Australian economics graduates more generally. This shows that the proportion of ACU graduates who rated the teaching they experienced as “good” or better on the CEQ has been in excess of 50 percent in each of the four years from 2007 to 2010 compared to less than 20 percent for the nation as a whole.
Figure 4 makes a similar comparison to that in Figure 3 for the overall satisfaction of graduates with their degree experience rather than simply for their perception of teaching quality. Here too ACU is well above the national average for all four years. ACU regularly scored 60 or above for graduate satisfaction compared to a score of under 40 at the national level. In 2009, when the national course satisfaction rating of economics graduates fell, ACU’s score rose and did so again in 2010.

Figure 5 shows economics graduate satisfaction with the development of generic skills during their degree studies. This figure indicates that ACU graduates, once again, had a higher level of satisfaction with the development of these skills during their time at ACU than did graduates on average across the nation.

The CEQ data thus indicate a superior level of satisfaction amongst ACU economics graduates with their university experience than among economics graduates more generally across the nation. While this may be the result of a number of factors, it is consistent with the proposition that the revised ACU curriculum described above has had a positive impact on student learning. This is also consistent with the fact that ACU has been well above average in all categories used by the Good Universities Guide to describe the educational experience of graduates. ACU is the only university in Australia to be given the top rankings for ‘teaching quality’ and ‘overall satisfaction’ in economics in each of the 2009, 2010 and 2011 Good Universities Guides. In addition, ACU received the top ranking for ‘generic skills’ in economics in two out of these three years.
Figure 3: Good Teaching CEQ data for Economics - ACU and National Average.\(^a\)

Figure 4: Overall Graduate Satisfaction for Economics - ACU and National Average.\(^a\)

Figure 5: Generic Skills for Economics - ACU and National Average.\(^a\)

(iii) The employability of economics graduates from ACU

Earlier studies suggest that economics has not been seen as a good career option compared to broader business subjects (see Lewis and Norris 1997; Worthington and Higgs 2004; Millmow 2006). Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) data and a comparison of national average employment rates for economics and business graduates, however, show that ACU economics graduates have experienced above average employment rates in recent years. GDS employment data shows the percentage of graduates still looking for fulltime work in April the year after they completed their course. In the period 2006-2010 the average percentage of ACU economics graduates still seeking full time employment was 14.3 percent (ACU 2011). This compared to a national average for economics graduates of 18.3 percent (Good Universities Guide, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011). Students who completed a Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Business combined degree with an economics major in the arts component at ACU recorded a zero unemployment rate in the period 2006-2010. Students who studied business studies at ACU, without economics however, had a considerably higher percentage of graduates still seeking full time employment, averaging 23.4 percent in the period (ACU 2011).

(iv) Awards won by staff teaching the ACU economics major

It was noted in the literature review above that Alauddin and Valadkhani (2003) raised a concern about the use of less experienced teaching staff in lower undergraduate courses. The evidence from ACU suggests that the impact of staffing on learning outcomes is not simply a matter of experience but also of staff teaching ability and their priorities for teaching compared to research. ACU has two fulltime teaching staff and two sessional staff teaching in the economics major. All staff are qualified school teachers having completed teacher training. They have thus been trained in applying a variety of pedagogical approaches to manage differing student needs and backgrounds.

Evidence of the effectiveness of the approach implemented by these teachers includes a number of awards for outstanding teaching received by these members of staff. In 2006, Tony Stokes was awarded a Carrick citation for his work on the ACU economics program as well as the ACU Excellence in Teaching Award. Sarah Wright, the second fulltime staff member to join the economics program at ACU, was also the recipient of a Faculty Teaching Award.
and was voted by students as the 2010 UniJobs Lecturer of the Year at ACU in only her third year of full time teaching.

(v) Impact of the ACU model on schools in NSW

As discussed above, declining numbers of students studying economics in high school has been seen as a factor influencing the number of students taking economics at university level. The ACU teaching and learning model was also applied by Stokes to the development of the HSC Economics Syllabus in New South Wales in 2000. Stokes was one of two curriculum writers in 2000 and, along with Kramer, produced a syllabus based on problems and issues that introduced students to economic concepts and theories. Stokes and Wright have also been involved in developing student-centred teaching resources for HSC students (see Stokes 2010a, Stokes 2010b, Stokes 2010c, Stokes & Wright 2011) and providing lectures to teachers and students on aspects of the HSC syllabus.

The impact of the 2000 syllabus and the use of better teaching resources have contributed to a reversal in the trend of falling numbers of economics school students in NSW. Between 2005 and 2010 the numbers of students enrolled in economics in year 12 rose from 5601 to 6201, an increase of 10.7 percent. At the same time the numbers studying business studies declined by 1.5 percent in NSW. This shows that students can find economics an interesting subject that is worthwhile studying. This turnaround in numbers and interest should provide economics departments at universities with an increased opportunity to build their student numbers. Figure 1, however, shows that this is still to eventuate in most universities and even if the commencing numbers in economics do improve, the secret will lie in how successfully universities can be at retaining these students.

Overall the evidence presented in this section is consistent with the idea that the approach taken at ACU to more effectively engage students in economics has been highly effective.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper began by looking at the challenges facing economics in Australian universities and arguably universities right around the world. The main challenges identified were:

- declining student numbers in economics;
- the perception of economics as being too rigorous and/or abstract;
students seeking a more rounded and pragmatic approach than that perceived to be offered in economics;

- the perception that business was more career focussed than economics;
- the perception that economics is boring.

The paper has also argued that the type of program developed and implemented at the Australian Catholic University in Sydney is capable of effectively addressing these issues.

The ACU redesigned its units to move from a course founded primarily on the standard exposition of neoclassical theory to one that begins with economic problems and issues and then uses a range of theoretical perspectives to cast some light on these issues. In this approach, all economic theory has value and a part to play in explaining economic phenomena. The ACU teaching and learning model thus accepted Stilwell’s view that students should be ‘exposed to the competing currents of economic thought’ (Stilwell 2006, p.43). The program introduced students to elements of classical, neoclassical, Keynesian, Marxian, neo-Marxian and institutionalist theories as they related to particular issues and policies.

The paper also describes how the ACU model applied VARK (Flemming 1995) in the development of its teaching methods and approaches in order to cater for a variety of individual learning styles and preferences among economics students.

The use of such a variety of teaching methods and the implementation of an economics program that is very contemporary, relating to students’ interests and life experiences has proven to be very successful. ACU experienced an increase in commencing student numbers and increased numbers of economics graduates at a time when other universities were experiencing falling numbers. CEQ data and the Good Universities Guides (2009-2011) show that ACU was one of the leading universities in Australia for good teaching, the development of generic skills and overall student satisfaction in the discipline of economics. The data shows that economics at ACU was not viewed as boring or abstract by students but as relevant and engaging with graduates very satisfied with their experience of economics at ACU.

The results at ACU demonstrate that quality teaching is not solely about experience but about having lecturers trained and/or mentored in teaching and enthusiastic about teaching, seeing it as an important
part of their role and the curriculum is designed to more effectively engage students in learning that prepares them for the real world.

REFERENCES


