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Editorial: Pluralism in Economics Education

Abstract

The Editorial introduces the special issue of IREE on pluralism in economics education. It draws out the pedagogical consequences of the contradiction between the plurality of the discipline and the singularity of student induction into it. Economics education should instead be based on controversy, benefiting students, staff, employers, and the polity, via the development of students' intellectual independence. Pluralism does not entail lowering standards, but itself constitutes a demanding standard. On pluralist criteria, the current subject benchmark statement for economics is seriously deficient, but an appropriately edited version would constitute a step towards the pluralistic reorganisation of economics education.

Introduction

This issue of the International Review of Economics Education (IREE) is a special issue on the topic of pluralism in economics undergraduate education. I am extremely grateful to the editors of IREE, Peter Davies and Ross Guest, and their team, for the opportunity, and the experience of working together on the special issue. The origins of the project are as follows. In 2006 the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education launched a review of the existing Subject Benchmark Statement for Economics (SBSE), originally published in 2000, leading to the revised SBSE (QAA, 2007). As part of that review, the Association for Heterodox Economics (AHE) submitted a paper critical of the original SBSE (Freeman, 2007). The AHE then approached IREE with proposals for collaboration on the issue of pluralism in economics education which led to a very successful workshop at City University London in October 2008¹, supported by the Royal Economic Society (RES), and this special issue.

The journal consists of two sections. The first was to contain commissioned papers from the AHE and from the Conference of Heads of University Departments of Economics (CHUDE) addressing the controversy over the SBSE. CHUDE was responsible for overseeing the development of the 2000 SBSE (together with the RES) and for overseeing the revision of 2006 (QAA, 2007: Preface). CHUDE declined to contribute a paper to this section – as indeed they had declined to participate in the workshop at City University, on the grounds that “CHUDE is a representative of all its members who will no doubt have quite disparate views of the benchmarking statement” (personal communication). This section therefore consists of one paper, a consideration of the relationship between the benchmark statement and pluralism from the perspective of the AHE, by Alan Freeman, the Convenor of the National Committee of the AHE. This paper is the product of a wide consultation, both within and outside the membership of the AHE, and may be taken as representative of a significant strand of opinion. The remainder of the special issue consists of four contributed papers on the general topic of pluralism in economics education which have been through the normal refereeing process. Of these, one, the paper by Wilson and Dixon, was presented at the City University workshop. We believe these papers, the survivors of a much larger number of submissions, constitute a showcase for the scholarship taking place in the area.

The remainder of the introduction to the special issue attempts to situate the contributions by drawing out some of the themes and concepts upon which those further papers are based.

A plural discipline taught monistically

We start with two salient facts about the world. The first fact is that there are, not one, but many sciences of economics. To illustrate: as well as the neoclassical family of schools of thought – including neoclassical Keynesians, monetarists, new Keynesians, new classical and real business cycle theorists, new institutionalists, new economic geographers and analytical Marxists – there is a constellation of heterodox schools, including Post Keynesians, Marxians, Austrians, institutionalists, Georgists, Associative economists, feminists, and critical realists, as well as Muslim, Christian and Buddhist economists, in so far as they regard their religion as informing their economics. My suggested system of classification may (in fact certainly does) lack consensus, but the basic fact of interest here is indisputable. There are many economics: many sciences, many practices, many visions and paradigms of economics – that is simply a fact that we have to recognise and deal with.

The second salient fact is that the teaching of undergraduate economics, both in the UK and elsewhere, is – given this heterogeneity within the discipline – surprisingly homogeneous. Typically, undergraduates are taught a core of mainstream textbook microeconomics and macroeconomics in their first two years, alongside courses in mathematics and statistics, and then a range of optional applications of that core to specific topics in such specialisms as financial economics, industrial economics, labour economics, health economics, and monetary economics, in their final year. Economics is typically seen within the discipline as analogous to engineering – there is little valid or interesting controversy on fundamentals, and what controversy there is can only be addressed on the basis of a common technical basis: the acquisition of this technical basis is therefore the principal or sole preoccupation of undergraduate, and indeed postgraduate, tuition. The degree to which we are systematically failing to expose our undergraduates to alternative paradigms should not be underestimated. In my third-year, second-term, optional module in history of economic thought, I discovered a year or so ago, in the first lecture of that year's series, that none of the dozen students present had ever even heard of Hayek – and that's the group of students who, presumably, were least averse to learning about the past of their discipline.

The contrast between the heterogeneity of the discipline and the homogeneity of our undergraduate pedagogy is striking, and worth dwelling on.

Every science is rhetorical, but social science is rhetorical in a double sense. Every science consists of a body of knowledge and an image of knowledge: the first is the substance of the science, the knowledge of the world which the science claims to offer, the second concerns what the discipline thinks it is and should be, how it presents and justifies itself to itself and to the world (Giocoli, 2003). The body of knowledge comprises the accumulated theoretical and empirical knowledge of the science, the methods it has adopted, and the open questions and features of the world the science should address. The image of knowledge comprises the identity of the science: how it thinks of itself and presents itself – both to itself and to the world, the identification of the open questions deserving most urgent attention, the grounds and criteria upon which these open questions are to be resolved, what constitutes an authoritative statement of the science, and how novices are inducted and socialised.

Economics is no exception and this is the first sense in which we can identify a rhetoric of economics: it has a self-image.

The social sciences, however, present a special case in that their content addresses interests: their almost every pronouncement leads or tends towards one policy prescription or another, including the prescription to do nothing. We are all fallible beings, but, mostly, we are not stupid. We can often see where a line of thought is going to take us, and the temptation to choose the line of thought in the light of its expected terminus may frequently be overwhelming. Given the variety of interests in the world, which may be served or frustrated by the pronouncements of economists, it is not then surprising that there is also a variety of economic lines of thought. And of course, the notion of interest need not be interpreted in any crude or mechanical way: it is well known that we perceive it to be in our interest to adopt new ideas when they are consistent with what we already think we know. Science is blighted by confirmation bias. Empirically we see every day that people do indeed believe what they want to believe, and that is frequently what they perceive it to be in their interest to believe. It would be odd if economists were immune. The image of knowledge thus feeds back into the body of knowledge and a variety of images can be expected to give rise to a variety of bodies, a range of sciences of economics. This is the second sense in which the social sciences and in particular economics is rhetorical. Its outputs, its insights, its theories, its prescriptions, serve and frustrate interests. So much the more pressing then, that these outputs be presented, to the economists themselves as much as to the end-users of their outputs, as the product of pure, dispassionate science. To the extent that a social science must, in serving knowledge, serve also interests, its image of knowledge has a double rhetorical function: each economics must find a way not only to justify itself, to present itself as scientific, but also to justify its content, its particular body of knowledge.

While this is true of social science in general, it is particularly true of economics because of its proximity to the policy-making, and in particular the economic policy-making, process. (Freeman, this issue). Interests within society, the potential winners and losers from the implementation of this or that policy, often stand to win or lose more as a consequence of economic policy decisions than any other, and indeed almost every policy issue has an economic dimension. Such interests do not hesitate to attempt to influence the kind of economics which is performed in the hope of influencing its outputs in their favour. The hope that cold fusion does or does not work does not give those hoping for one or the other outcome much incentive to support this or that kind of physics. Few believe that the outcome can be influenced in this way: at best discoveries can be hastened or delayed. But with, say, minimum wages, the case is quite different: every organised interest with a stake in the matter is free to commission their own research, in-house, or bought in from private and public sector research organisations, in the same way as they might employ legal staff to defend their interests at law. The purpose here is not the discovery of truth, but the generation of effective rhetoric. Those hoping for cold fusion would generally accept that there is a truth, and they're probably better off knowing it sooner rather than later. Those whose interests will be promoted or damaged by this or that policy on minimum wages, or some change to the tax system, are principally interested in ensuring that their interest is represented as the interest of society, and hence acquiring social acceptance for their desired outcome. As long as interests within society are various, therefore, we can expect economics itself to be various.

So the discipline is inevitably and intrinsically plural, and our transmission of it to the next generation is overwhelmingly singular. Perhaps needless to say, this monism extends well beyond the particular issue of undergraduate pedagogy that we are considering here –

research and postgraduate education are similarly dominated by a single standpoint. Undergraduate education is merely a particularly salient and egregious instance. Progress towards pluralism in undergraduate education, should we decide that that is what we want, is most unlikely to be achieved in that domain in isolation, but presupposes parallel shifts from monism towards pluralism in postgraduate education and in research. Later I want to say more about the desirability or otherwise of this contrast between a plural science and singular representation of it. Here I want to address an important ‘knee-jerk’ response to the idea of pluralism in economics education.

Given that economics is inevitably plural, there can be no neutral ground on which to stand, outside of the many competing paradigms, from which we can pronounce upon the legitimacy of these schools of thought, or the quality of what representatives of those schools say. The alternative, then, is either **pluralism** – a tolerant, critical conversation (McCloskey, 1998), or **monism** – what we have today: the hegemony of a particular approach. Other social sciences, by contrast, take a multiplicity of positions and methodological discussion for granted.

The suggestion of relaxing the monism of the discipline immediately raises a concern: does open-mindedness mean empty-headedness? This is addressed in almost every defence of pluralism today: pluralism, it is said, does not mean that ‘anything goes’ (Dow, this issue; Freeman, this issue). A Google search for the key words pluralism, economics, and “anything goes” yields nearly 12,000 hits. Pluralism, that is, raises the spectre of legitimising cranks and cults, unproductive and damaging hangers-on that are parasitic on the discipline. Parallels in medicine and in other sciences immediately spring to mind. But the difference is this: In general, we know what is wrong with previous, exploded theories such as those of phlogiston, the luminiferous ether and the inheritance of acquired characteristics, on the one hand, and current heterodox notions such as intelligent design, homeopathy and astrology, on the other, because they have been theoretically and empirically comprehensively refuted. Moreover, the knowledge of these past and heterodox notions remains – to a greater or lesser degree – at the disposal of the current generations of these disciplinary practitioners and theoreticians, available to them to draw on, should new phenomena challenge the accepted view. In medicine and the natural sciences we continually see the heterodox becoming the orthodox (and vice versa). The Wilson and Sarich finding in 1967 that humans and apes diverged 4 to 5 million years ago, an order of magnitude below the contemporary consensus, was discounted for decades before being accepted. Likewise with Julian Huxley’s notion of clades. Elaine Morgan’s aquatic ape hypothesis has never been accepted by the majority of palaeontologists, but the idea is well known and new facts and interpretations of the facts are often compared with its predictions.

The situation is quite otherwise in economics, however. The past, and the periphery, are not overcome in theory but simply forgotten. There is, in my opinion, no cogent neoclassical critique of – for example – Marx’s labour theory of value, Keynes’s theory of aggregate demand, or Hayek’s theory of social evolution. These contributions have not been refuted, they are simply ignored. And that ignoring, that ignorance, is not a passive failing, but an active process: the long drawn-out process of squeezing the history and methodology of the subject out of the curriculum is part of an organic process of quarantining and sequestering heterodox thought in the discipline. Heterodox economic thought today embraces a great variety of standpoints within it – and they cannot all be right. But whatever its flaws, it cannot be compared to the eccentric attachment to astrological and homeopathic notions rightly dismissed by astronomy and medicine. Until the process of intellectual settling of

accounts has taken place, we cannot know who are the cranks, which are the cults. No doubt we all have our suspicions.

What is pluralism?

I believe that we can identify a lower and a higher grade of pluralism in economics undergraduate education, which I will refer to as permissive and assertive pluralism.

The lower grade of pluralism simply involves permission: allowing or advocating permission for many schools of thought and modes of teaching to exist. In this view, intellectual diversity is advocated or at least tolerated. It can be regarded as teacher-centred, since it permits teaching which fits with the inclinations of the teacher. What is taught is not necessarily particularly pluralist, the pluralism lies rather at the aggregate level, simply in the fact that many approaches are taught, or may be taught. This minimal pluralism is required to satisfy the criterion of academic freedom.

The higher grade of pluralism presupposes permissive pluralism but goes further. It requires the mutual engagement of different schools of thought. In this approach, it is recognised as a necessary part of undergraduate education in economics that students be exposed to competing paradigms. It can be regarded as student-centred, as aiming to give students an adequate induction into the discipline, one which educates them about the plurality of their discipline and inculcates the skills required to deal with that plurality. This grade of pluralism is pluralistic in practice as what each student gets is tuition in the range of economic approaches, past and present, and assistance in acquiring the knowledge, understanding and skills required to discriminate between them. This is the kind of pluralism for which the AHE is committed to striving (Freeman, this issue). It's the difference between tolerating diversity and embracing diversity.

Nevertheless, it is very important to underline that pluralism in economics education cannot be identified with heterodoxy, and monism with orthodoxy. Pluralism is not about replacing one approach or family of approaches (the current orthodoxy) with another (one or other current heterodoxy) – which thereby becomes the new orthodoxy. Pluralism is not about combating the mainstream – there are many pluralist individual economists, institutional units and processes within the mainstream. Indeed, pluralism requires a debate with heterodox as much as orthodox currents since it is perfectly possible for heterodox economists to be quite convinced in the correctness of their particular heterodoxy and to wish to see it become the new orthodoxy. Salerno (2009), for example, wishes to see the Austrian school become “THE new neoclassical mainstream”. Rather, assertive pluralism breaks with the notion that progress means replacing one orthodoxy with another, or even that it means the renewal from within of an existing orthodoxy. It rejects the idea that where we are – now or at any other time – can be reduced to a single doctrine or canon. Pluralism is a challenge to the heterodox and orthodox alike. Indeed, those paradigmatically attached to the current mainstream have a strong incentive to support pluralist pedagogy since – as will be argued in this issue – it promotes deeper learning of orthodox theories, by contrasting them at every point with their rivals.

For assertive pluralism, the starting point in constructing the undergraduate curriculum has to be that economics is plural, that is, that there is more than one approach, theory, and proposed solution to every problem. Pluralism, Freeman argues, is the tradition of controversy. All

major economic doctrines are born and sustained in controversy. This is the nature of the discipline, which, if we are honest, we have to communicate to our new students from the outset of their studies. It is significant that the “post-autistic” movement of French students explicitly demanded the teaching of economics via controversy. Controversy, according to this understanding or pluralism, is not something for the footnotes or closing chapters in the textbooks, nor something to be focused on in optional modules towards the end of the students’ undergraduate studies. Rather controversy is the method, the tool, the means of instruction from the very beginning of that instruction.

Pluralist undergraduate education in economics is a process of teaching and learning focused on the coexistence of multiple approaches – all of which are presumed to be valid, until theoretically and empirically refuted. It uses controversy between these schools of thought as the means towards developing pluralist students, that is, students with the capacity not simply to reproduce and apply one particular theory, but who are knowledgeable about, and have insight into, the main intellectual trends within the discipline, and the ability to discriminate between their pronouncements on the basis of logical cogency and empirical relevance. The aim of pluralist teaching is equip students to exercise their own professional judgement as economists. To this end, pluralism cannot be reduced to synthesis or inclusion, but has to be based on systematic deployment of controversy as means of understanding and educating. It means introducing students to controversy and debate from day one of their programme.

Why pluralism?

The first answer one can give to the question, “Why pluralism?”, is a very simple one – it’s the truth: the discipline is plural, we have to tell the students that. Failure to inform the students of the plurality of their discipline is just dishonest.

The bigger answer is that by failing to expose our students to plurality, by failing to use controversy as a pedagogical instrument, we make it much more difficult for ourselves to do our job as teachers. The pedagogical advantages of pluralism- the papers in this special issue conclude – are overwhelming. The process of contention and discussion between differing standpoints is an essential component of progress towards an adequate understanding of the world.

Economics undergraduate education has four broad purposes – to underpin citizenship, to equip students to be productive employees, to lay the basis for further professional education and training in economics, and to have fun. For those few unconvinced by the fourth goal suggested here, an instrumental approach can be adopted: if teachers are enjoying themselves, they’re probably going to do a better job; and students who enjoy their courses are more likely to be learning effectively. All of these goals are supported by pluralist pedagogy, though the consequences for the enjoyability of economics education will be left implicit on this occasion. The claim made in the papers published here is that it supports vocational goals both by teaching the standard content of economics degrees more effectively, and by setting that in a far-reaching social context. Student understanding is deeper, and they are better able to learn and integrate new material. All four goals are supported by enabling students to become life-long learners. The central claim is that basing pedagogy on controversy leads to the development of critical independence, which itself leads to better citizenship and employability, and better mastery of the discipline.

The subject matter of economics is marked by diversity, openness, fragmentation and complexity. In these circumstances it is possible that the application of a range of approaches will lead more reliably to valuable insights, than reliance on any one method, however, good. This is related to the well-known idea, in domains from meteorology to finance, that averaging a range of forecasts, impounding different forecasting approaches, will lead to greater accuracy. The various paradigms within economics may thus be complementary. No paradigm is complete, none has the last word: all have lacunae and blind-spots; it is possible for diverse approaches to contribute to our understanding of the world, even though they may appear to be mutually inconsistent. In other words there can be a cross-fertilisation between paradigms. This leads to the idea of a pragmatic, heuristic pluralism, a horses-for-courses approach potentially valid both in research and teaching. It might be judged desirable to teach our students to practice heuristic pluralism and to seek insights from a range of standpoints. Teaching via controversy is more likely to lead to good economics.

It is well known that people display greatly varying abilities to do the same task, depending on how the task is presented. An example is the Wason test. A number of cards is displayed and subjects are asked to turn over the minimum set required to prove or disprove some hypothesis about the obverse and reverse of the cards. People are in general surprisingly bad at it, but research has shown that they do much better when it is presented – for example – as detecting violations of an implicit social contract (Ridley, 1994). Similarly, a blue-collar worker with limited mathematical schooling can often quickly execute complex arithmetical calculations in the bookmaker's shop. By presenting the matter in terms of controversy about important issues with which students can engage, it may be that they can learn faster by recruiting brain modules not normally employed for the task.

Teaching economics by using the controversy between a range of economic paradigms allows students to see themselves and the issues they care about as part of the discussion, encourages student engagement with the interests of the agents involved, and underlines that economic choices have moral, social, cultural and civic dimensions. Students are enabled to identify with agents, to take sides, to care about outcomes, and to identify the human significance and moral status of economic interpretation and policy prescription (Peterson and McGoldrick, 2009). We all respond better to a story, and students are no exception (Dave Wilson, personal communication).

Pluralism leads to deep learning, partly because it speaks to matters which students care about, and hence recruits brain modules not otherwise engaged, and partly because the use of controversy itself requires students to take sides and hence to find reasons for the views they adopt. By viewing the phenomena in question from multiple perspectives, pluralism raises the issues of uncertainty, complexity and context. This requires students to develop strategies for coping with all three. Different paradigms dispute the evidence and its interpretation, dispute the logical and theoretical framework within which the evidence is to be understood, and dispute the normative, policy-orientated consequences to be drawn from theoretical consideration of the evidence. At each level the student is challenged to understand, to diagnose, and to judge. The competing points of view interpret differently the borders between economics and contiguous subjects, leading students to a deeper understanding of context, the definition of economics and how it relates to its cognates.

Whatever stance a student takes with respect to a specific issue, exposure to controversy will help the student to cope with uncertainty about the truth, and challenges to the correctness, of his own arguments. We are likely to do less damage when we are aware of our ignorance, and

of the existence of alternatives, than when we think we have the answers. What is needed is reflective judgement, the ability to make judgements in the context of uncertainty, and a commitment to questioning one's own purposes, evidence, implications, assumptions, and standpoint, as much as those one opposes.

Pluralist teaching leads to better citizenship. It teaches the student to be participatory, critical, and informed, and emphasises powers of judgement. The Enlightenment goal of student intellectual independence lies at the heart of the pluralist pedagogical project. Presenting the alternative theories for every phenomenon requires students to make up their own minds, and requires the instructor to help the student to do so. Students learn to think for themselves and to negotiate their way through difficult issues on which there are many perspectives. What is prized above all in this perspective is the student's ability to think critically, independently, and objectively.

Pluralism helps students learn to become life-long learners. They are encouraged to engage with the learning process itself: understanding why the content is being taught via controversy leads to conscious reflection on learning and the promotion of active learning. Ever-deeper understanding of the roots of controversy between economic paradigms underpins the capacity to change one's mind, both to correct erroneous premises and to respond to changed circumstances. It encourages students to become conscious about their own learning and to learn about the learning process. Pluralist learners become active, self-directed learners.

Pluralist education is vocationally useful. Employers want oral and written communication and presentation skills, social and team-working skills, and debating skills. They also want problem-solving skills with the ability to cope with complexity and interconnectedness. They want employees who are able to weigh up the sides of an argument. Some of this we've already mentioned above. Pluralism develops students' rhetorical powers in two ways. Firstly they must understand the rhetoric of the schools of thought whose pronouncements they are studying – how do these writers and thinkers attempt to gain support for their standpoint. But it also encourages students to become articulate communicators by getting them to engage with this issue and that, to put forward a case, orally or in writing, for this theory or that, that policy prescription or an alternative. All this makes students better, more attractive employees. Learning in a pluralist environment, students become more creative, better judges, better problem-solvers, more effective organisers.

Pluralism is associated with a more open and varied approach to pedagogy, ie a greater variety of modes of instruction, with greater stress on student-centredness. This is to be contrasted both with 'Monecon' – the standard, single-paradigm, single-delivery approach, and with artificial attempts to graft a more open and varied pedagogy onto the mainstream approach, that is, in abstraction from any attempt to remedy the deficiencies of a monist pedagogy. It is through a hypostatisation of content and curriculum – a wilful narrowing of content and standardisation of the canon, not through failure to adopt the best teaching practices, that Monecon has become boring, divorced from reality, and difficult to teach. As Wilson and Dixon (this issue) elaborate, the attempt to isolate the technique of teaching as at fault, and to introduce innovative methods of teaching and learning without addressing the problems of a monist curriculum, generates counter-productive and perverse effects. Such methods can be 'hands on without being minds on'. Pedagogically innovative techniques, combined with the interest of learning about and through controversy, by contrast, can lead to learning activities which are engaging, comprehensible, interesting and satisfying. They can

capture student interest, question the underlying assumptions of the approaches considered, and illuminate different approaches. This is a world away from both the monolithic, inefficient rote learning and memorisation, or, rather, learning and forgetting, still associated with so much of the mainstream, and – Wilson and Dixon claim – the attempt to paste “teaching and learning”, in particular via new technology, onto the monist mainstream curriculum without addressing the content.

How to move towards pluralism?

The question, whether a pluralist broadening of the curriculum is desirable, leads immediately into the question of how its proponents would envisage its implementation. Broadly there are two paths, which are not mutually exclusive, but rather support each other, and which relate to the two grades of pluralism considered above. In the case of the lower grade of pluralism, permissive pluralism, the appropriate mode of procedure is for individual lecturers and departments to add heterodox material to the mainstream material, to infiltrate pluralism within existing modules and programmes. For the higher grade of pluralism, assertive pluralism, one approach worth considering is benchmarking for pluralism. I will address this in the next section.

It is not generally possible to start a pluralist or heterodox module or programme from scratch. There are exceptions, such as the recently launched master’s and doctoral programme in Austrian economics at King Juan Carlos University, Madrid, and such opportunities are of course to be seized with both hands². Nevertheless, at present they are the exception, not the rule. So the question is, how we are to infiltrate pluralism into predominantly mainstream modules and programmes. There will of course be random opportunities where specific members of staff have both the interest and expertise, and the confidence of their colleagues, to introduce alternative material. In many ways, the mainstream has become more internally pluralist than it has been in the past (Dow, this issue; Coyle, 2007): opportunities to exploit this internal pluralism do exist. On these occasions, instead of standard mainstream textbooks, the instructor may choose to deploy an alternative textbook, to read two textbooks in parallel, to compile a set of selected readings, or to use their own specially created notes and teaching materials. A project to run over 2009-10, partly funded by hefce, via the Economics Network, and partly by City University London, will attempt to collect heterodox teaching materials and make them publicly available on the Economics Network website (Economics Network, nd). If successful, this will help teachers to introduce heterodox material alongside the standard, mainstream material, injecting an element of local pluralism into the students’ education.

A more systematic approach to the problem of introducing heterodox material into existing modules and programmes is indicated in the contribution to this issue by Sheila Dow, namely via history, in particular via the history and methodology of economics, and via economic history and the history of economic policy. A strong case can be made that students need the historical background to the doctrines we are now teaching them, and which are now accepted by many practising economists, in order for them to fully understand what they are being taught. Equally, a strong argument can be made for introducing students to the history of the economic system, of which ostensibly they are embarking on a study, and the history of government policy and *laissez-faire*. But the history of economic thought cannot be taught without introducing students to controversy. The history of the emergence and development of even just the current mainstream ideas implies setting out the controversies giving rise to

and sustaining those ideas. Likewise, the methodology of the subject cannot be taught without introducing students to a range of possible methodologies, and investigating the reasoning and motives behind the adoption of this or that methodology in the social and natural sciences. Finally, the history of the economy and of economic policy cannot be undertaken without examining the motivation and reasoning of the policy makers and the evidence on the efficacy of their interventions in the history of the economy. All of these approaches, to the extent that they are taught effectively, teach students via the deployment of controversy and therefore not only tend towards the goals outlined above, but form a transition to a more assertive and systematic grade of pluralist pedagogy.

Benchmarking for pluralism

Undergraduate tuition in economics in the UK is benchmarked in the subject benchmark statement for economics (SBSE), established by the QAA (QAA, 2007). Subject benchmark statements “describe what gives a discipline its coherence and identity, and define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the abilities and skills needed to develop understanding or competence in the subject” (QAA, nd). The SBSE cannot be ignored. A recent Royal Economic Society-Economics Network study reported that “the Benchmark Statement has been found to be robust and relevant to current employers” (O’Doherty et al, 2007: 15). A number of reactions to the SBSE are possible. On the one hand, a casual inspection might lead to the impression that the BES is so anodyne that it is compatible with almost any interpretation and unlikely to obstruct the advancement of pluralism within economics education. The opposite extreme sees it as inevitable that a benchmark statement will dictate adherence to the orthodoxy, whatever the orthodoxy happens to be. The only possible response in this view is that the benchmarking system should be rejected, or, if we must suffer the imposition of benchmarking, then we should engineer the benchmark statement for economics to be as vacuous as possible.

The line take by the AHE is different from both of these. It takes seriously the current statement and regards it as damaging to the profession, but at the same time argues that reforms to the SBSE can convert it into an important instrument for the pluralist reform of undergraduate education in economics in the UK.

The SBSE consists of seven sections – a very brief introduction, a definition of the nature and context of economics, the aims of degree programmes in economics, a summary of subject knowledge and understanding, a list of subject-specific and other skills, a section on teaching, learning and assessment, and, finally, a set of threshold and modal benchmark standards. Garnett (this issue) notes that the SBSE already has some pluralist elements, and argues that rather than completely re-writing the SBSE from scratch, we need to ‘beef-up’ these sections. For example, the very last modal benchmark standard says that the typical graduate should “display familiarity with [‘awareness of’ in the threshold benchmark standard] the possibility that many economic problems may admit of more than one approach and may have more than one solution” (QAA, 2007: 8). However, this is the last of seven modal and threshold attainments and appears to have the status of a footnote. Moreover, it is highly ambiguous what “more than one approach” actually means: it is quite possible to teach a range of neoclassical approaches to a single problem, without ever drawing on a heterodox idea. And pluralists would claim that the threshold benchmark – indeed, the very first threshold benchmark – should require the graduate to display a profound familiarity with the necessity, not merely the possibility, that economic problems admit of many approaches and solutions.

Again, one of the possible attainments of an economics student is listed as “Appreciation of the history and development of economic ideas and the differing methods of analysis that have been and are used by economists”. It is indeed laudable that the history and methodology are thus mentioned. But this comes in a list of possible ‘indicative’ attainments immediately after a disclaimer stating that which elements on the list are actually selected is a matter of individual institutional choice (QAA, 2007: 3).

Finally, under “Subject knowledge and understanding”, we read that “students ... should appreciate the existence of different methodological approaches” (QAA, 2007: 2), which, while welcome, is, to say the least, ambiguous – after all, even two standard econometric techniques, not to mention indifference curve analysis and ISLM models, could easily be interpreted as ‘different methodological approaches’. This is exactly the same point as has already been made above about the references to possible plurality of approach mentioned in the seventh and final threshold and modal benchmark standards.

These elements, as Garnett (2009) implies, are features that a pluralist SBSE would incorporate, develop and build on. The AHE would certainly agree that all students should be familiar with the history of their subject, and of the different ways economists have conceived of their discipline, and that they should assume that every economic problem will admit of a plurality of approaches and solutions. But that is not enough.

It’s worth stating what it is which is objectionable about the current SBSE. The three lengthy paragraphs constituting the definition of the subject do not give the merest hint that there may be a number of schools of thought with very different views of the subject. The SBSE describes the mainstream view and calls it ‘economics’. The extensive list under ‘The transferable concept’ in Section 5 (QAA, 2007: 4-5) comprises eight concepts including incentives, the margin, equilibrium, gains from trade, and expectations. Indeed, a very strong argument can be made for every one of these concepts. But that is not the point. The fact is that nearly every one of them is disputed – either rejected completely, or interpreted in a quite different way – by one school of thought or another. But they are presented here as wholly uncontroversial. The assumption is that when we speak of ‘economics’, it is just the mainstream version of economics that we’re talking about. Apart from the two ambiguous references, noted above, to a possible plurality of approach, and the reference to the history and methodology of economics as an optional target attainment, there is simply no mention or acknowledgement of controversy. That, for the AHE, is the core.

The starting point for the construction of a satisfactory SBSE must be that economics is plural: there is more than one approach, more than one theory, more than one proposed solution to every economic problem. The discipline is plural in the sense that a large number of competing schools of thought strive to make sense of the economic world we inhabit. Our education in economics simply has to reflect that fact. As argued above, in the section on assertive pluralism, this means that pedagogy has to be based on controversy. The SBSE has to prioritise controversy, criticism, and the nurturing of dissent. The goal has to be the inculcation of critical independence, the ability to challenge received wisdom of whatever kind, and the production of students who are in a position to be able to make up their own minds. This is far from being a novel way of conceiving the role and structure of a benchmark statement: as the AHE submission to the review of the SBSE (Freeman, 2007) documents, other benchmark statements in the social sciences and beyond, from theology to accountancy, find ways to reflect the pluralism of their disciplines in ways that the SBSE signally fails to do.

It should not be thought that the pluralism being advocated here effectively displaces standards of quality. Pluralism itself constitutes a demanding standard of quality.

Benchmarking for pluralism sets up pluralism itself as the expected standard throughout the discipline. A pluralist SBSE would set out benchmark standards for pluralism, establishing threshold and modal criteria for students' capacity for critical and pluralistic reasoning, knowledge of the variety of theories and standpoints, past and present, in the discipline as a whole and the specific field in which they're working, understanding of the presuppositions of these theories, and ability to discriminate between their pronouncements on the basis both of the empirical evidence for their assumptions and predictions, and of their logical cogency, and the rhetorical skills both to understand the use of rhetoric which they will encounter, and the ability to present a powerful and cogent argument of their own.

In this approach, pluralism is regarded as both an output and an input. It is not just that the students' education is pluralist, but that the students produced by a programme meeting the standard of pluralism, will themselves be pluralist – in the sense that they will accept, entertain and encourage difference, dissent, and controversy. The goal is to teach pluralist courses which will produce pluralist students.

The pluralist SBSE, without dictating anything, would describe the discipline's expectations of what undergraduate degree courses in economics would consist of and what sort of graduates it would lead to. Each department and institution would be able to choose its own way forward. We should expect a very diverse range of courses and ideas, introducing students to the diversity of approach within the discipline and providing them with the intellectual tools to make sense of this diversity. It seems likely, however, that the historical approach mentioned above, and spelled out in detail in the paper by Sheila Dow, would play a large role. The history of economic thought is a prerequisite for understanding the controversy between the schools of thought extant within the discipline today. A study of economic methodology of the subject is essential in order to gain a deep understanding of the differences between the approaches and the rhetorics deployed by those schools of thought. And, finally, a study of the history of the economy and of economic policy-making is essential in order to be able to appraise the various policy prescriptions of these schools of thought.

Conclusion

In this introduction to the special issue I have tried to set the scene for the papers which follow by drawing out the consequences for undergraduate education of the manifest contradiction between the plurality of the discipline and the singularity of the induction into it that our undergraduate students receive. I have argued that this contradiction cries out for resolution by giving our students a pluralistic education in economics, an education based on controversy. Further, education based in controversy is capable of delivering benefits for staff, students, employers, and the polity of which they are citizens, via the development, in a manner closed to the current monist curriculum, of the students' intellectual independence and critical judgemental skills. A wide-spread concern is that allowing pluralism will be tantamount to diluting standards. I have argued that this concern is misplaced and that pluralism itself constitutes a demanding standard. Finally, I have outlined the view of the Association for Heterodox Economics that, while the current subject benchmark statement for economics is seriously deficient when viewed through the lens of pluralism, it would be possible to draft a benchmark statement which would establish pluralism as the standard by which undergraduate education in economics should be measured.

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¹ For more information about the workshop, please see <http://www.staff.city.ac.uk/andy.denis/pluralism.htm>

² As pointed out above, there is nothing particularly pluralist itself in generating a heterodox programme such as this, the pluralism lies rather at the aggregate level, in the fact that the teaching of a plurality of approaches has been permitted.