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# Economic pluralism in South African universities

*By Stephanie Craig*

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*In the mid-20th century a mathematical approach to economics took root in economics departments of universities in the West which has become the dominant mode of teaching the discipline. There is now a deep re-think taking place about whether this technical method should continue. The questioning grew after the financial crisis in 2008 and the disillusionment with neoliberalism in many parts of the world. Those who call*

*for a more pluralistic approach to economics hold that this kind of economics doesn't teach us anything about the conditions we see around us. Through her groundbreaking, original research, Stephanie Craig presents us with the rationale behind the demand for pluralism and makes a compelling argument for the need to change the way economics is taught.*

**I**n the last decade there have been mounting levels of frustration among students of economics at higher education institutions across the globe as they grapple with the lack of relevance of their degrees to real-world socio-economic challenges. Although not a new phenomenon, the disconnect between what economic students are taught in the classroom versus what they see happening in the world around them reached peak levels in the 2008 global financial crisis. This served as a catalyst for student groups to mobilise and put

significant pressure on universities across all continents to adapt their economic curriculums, in particular by including more pluralistic content.

South Africa is no exception to this global trend. In September 2018, the first ever Rethinking Economics for Africa (REFA) festival was held at the University of the Witwatersrand, bringing together hundreds of students, social activists, academics and researchers to discuss possibilities for adapting economics to better suit the African context. This is a very important first step to take, as it has become evident that one of the biggest challenges to changing the way economics is taught in South Africa is the uncertainty and apprehension regarding what 'economic pluralism' actually means. Fears of 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater,' and simply replacing orthodox economics with heterodox theories are widespread. This is an unfortunate consequence of the failure of those pushing for pluralism to make their case in a clear and precise manner, tainting the movement as being ideologically driven without a sound, objective basis.

This article addresses the issue of economic pluralism with a view to understanding its salient features. It

does so in three ways: firstly, it provides a framework with which to analyse the issue of economic pluralism in higher education institutions so as to foster more precise discussions around its inclusion. Secondly, it outlines the author's vision of what a pluralistic curriculum would achieve and, most importantly, it clarifies what economic pluralism is *not* meant to be.

Finally, the article details the results of a survey conducted among staff in economic departments at various South African universities. The survey found that general support for teaching a wider range of economic schools of thought is plagued by several practical and ideological challenges. If the recommended changes in this paper's conclusion are to occur, proponents of economic pluralism will have to assist universities to find innovative and effective ways of implementing them.

### WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ECONOMIC PLURALISM?

The call for more economic pluralism at higher education institutions is often a very complex and contentious topic. What one would think should be an objective decision around the merits of including or excluding certain content in higher education economic curriculums frequently turns out to be a politicised debate about which people have strong, varying emotions.

More often than not, this is because the ambiguous and nuanced nature of the term makes it difficult for people to effectively communicate their arguments, often unknowingly talking at cross purposes. Thus, it is very important to develop an analytical framework with which to untangle the various components of the pluralism debate to clarify the type of pluralism and specific challenges being discussed.

Sean Muller, a senior lecturer at the University of Johannesburg, offers a version of such a framework in his insightful paper entitled, 'What does a

South African economics degree look like' (Muller, 2017)? He clarifies the various aspects that need consideration in the creation of a localised South African economics degree by asking the following questions:

- Content of curriculums – what topics are being included?
- Framing of content – how is the content being interpreted and presented to students?
- Contextualisation of the content – does the content reflect local circumstances and history?
- Relevance of the content – is the content relevant to the socio-economic challenges currently facing students and their country?
- Accessibility of the content – is the content being taught and assessed in a manner that students can relate to and understand? Are students able to relate to their teachers?



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The utility of these questions lies in the way that they enable a thorough assessment of economic curriculums in South Africa, separating out the nuanced issues. An application of this framework to the main complaints being made by students across the world provides a clearer picture of the problems:

- Content of curriculums – Many students working their way

through a typical university economics curriculum are not taught that their course content, often neoclassical, is one specific school of thought, distinct from the myriad of economic theories that have emerged from a rich and complex global economic history. Similarly, they are not exposed to complementary subjects such as politics or history, which play an integral role in shaping economic events.

- Framing of content – Which content is portrayed in a good light versus which is considered bad? How are the different schools of economic thought or different types of economic systems being portrayed against one another? Why is economics framed as a discipline separate from politics when political factors influence so many economic decisions?
- Contextualisation of the content – Economic models, mathematics and theory are taught in the abstract, without any contextualisation to real-world applications. Abstract models, mathematical equations and graphs, albeit meant to simplify complex phenomena, are undermined by their strict assumptions which fail to represent everything that is going on in the real world.
- Relevance of the content – Many young economic graduates feel under-equipped to use their education and have difficulty explaining the things they see going on around them. They are not given the skills and holistic understanding needed to be able to begin addressing the challenges >>

their economies and countries face. Likewise, the textbooks from which they are taught do not reflect many of the major socio-economic issues facing society and they feel no more equipped upon graduation to begin addressing these than they did upon entering tertiary education (Pilling, 2016).

- Accessibility of the content – Economics is not always taught in a way that all students from different backgrounds can understand. Here, issues such as language barriers, the quality of teaching, the way in which the content is assessed, are important.

Evidently, each of the points raised are related yet distinct issues, meriting separate debates. Likewise, one solution is unlikely to address all these issues and reforming the way that economics is taught may require multiple interventions to get it right.

### WHAT DO WE NOT MEAN BY ECONOMIC PLURALISM?

Just as important as creating a framework within which to have the pluralism debate is the need to clarify what the call for economic pluralism in higher education institutions is *not*. It is particularly crucial to address the misconceptions and false assumptions being made as they are a hindrance to collaborative and inclusive progress.

For example, the call for pluralism has, for some reason, become associated with a ‘dumbing down’ of economics by opponents immediately assuming that the intention is to remove the technical difficulties that students struggle with and make the subject, as a whole, easier. Others have associated pluralism with “the politics of the left,” as “the dominant economic orthodoxy currently has such a strong association with the political practices of neoliberalism” (Stilwell, 2006) and oppose it on an ideological basis.

Many of the negative reactions also stem from the assumption that pluralism will entail the baby being thrown out with the bathwater – simply getting rid of orthodox, neoclassical economics and replacing it with alternative schools of thought. Moreover, significant opposition to the call comes from academics who see other schools of economic thought as being incorrect and therefore, not something that should be taught. For those who view economics as an objective science with clear right and wrong, distinct from other more subjective areas of humanities studies, there is not much room to debate different views and understandings of how the world works.



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To address these concerns and correct misperceptions then, let the following statements be made regarding what economic pluralism should *not* be:

- It is not about taking away from curriculums but rather it is about adding more content.
- It is not about the ‘dumbing down’ of economics but rather the development of more critical reasoning skills.

- It is not about removing mathematics or technical, quantitative skills from the curriculum but rather it is about the development of the ability to apply such skills to varied, real-world issues.
- It is not about an outright rejection of neoclassical economics but it is about broadening the scope to include more heterodox economics.
- It is not an ideologically driven movement and it need not be aligned to any one political view at all.

### WHAT WOULD A PLURALIST ECONOMIC CURRICULUM ACHIEVE?

What then would an adequately pluralist economics curriculum contain? In my view, it would have to offer the following:

- Exposure to all relevant schools of thought, the history of their development and associated subjects such as politics or history.
- A critique of different schools of thought and a justification of preferences;
- The application of economic theory to complex and country-specific situations.
- The application of mathematics to solve real-world issues as opposed to application of formulas without understanding them.
- Strong critical thinking, reasoning, research and data analysis skills.
- A range of theories and different subjects for students to draw on to create unique, multi-faceted solutions.

The aim of such a curriculum would not be simply to get rid of orthodox economics, but instead to present it as one possible way of interpreting



economics events in the real world. Students should be made aware of the myriad of other schools of thought and be able to substantiate why they might prefer one over the other. It's about producing students who are able to understand why they are being made to focus on getting the mechanism of mathematical tools correct, and how they can use these in a variety of real-world applications.

It is also about ensuring that young graduates develop a well-rounded understanding of how development and policies work. It is problematic that many economists graduate without any exposure to political economy, while many political scientists enter the work force with very little understanding of how the theories they espouse interact with the economy.

### **THE STATE OF ECONOMIC PLURALISM IN SOUTH AFRICA**

An examination of university economic curriculums in South Africa reveals that many students graduate with a bachelor of commerce in economics without being made aware that there are a multitude of different schools of thought, let alone being prompted to study

them. Nor are they encouraged to study complementary subjects such as philosophy and politics.

Although the incorporation of more diverse content in economic curriculums is by no means a panacea for all the issues identified in Muller's framework, it is an important first step in the right direction and a good place for universities to start making changes. Furthermore, there appears to be a demand for such content among South African students who are disillusioned with the status quo in economics departments, as was evident at the REFA festival.

However, not all relevant parties are in agreement. While some universities, such as the University of Cape Town, are in the process of adapting their undergraduate economics curriculum, change has been very limited or non-existent at other higher education institutions in South Africa. The major question at this point thus seems to be not whether things have changed but rather what are the major impediments to change?

What is significant here are the objections and concerns of those in positions of power – namely, South African academics. If there are valid

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and significant counter arguments, proponents of economic pluralism must understand and adequately address these to see change take place. A survey of academic staff in economic departments at various South African universities shows that support for change hinges on concerns regarding the manner in which it will occur.

### **WHAT DO SOUTH AFRICAN ACADEMICS HAVE TO SAY ABOUT ALL THIS?**

A survey was sent out to over 300 academics working in economics departments at eight South African >>

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universities, canvassing their thoughts and objections to the idea of a wider range of economic schools of thought and economic history being introduced into economic curriculums. In total, there were 34 responses to the survey, of which 82% were senior academic staff members and 12% were junior academic staff members. These responses came from all eight of the sampled universities and respondents were not clustered according to institutions.

It should be noted that, as the overarching purpose of this paper is to promote the exposure of economics students to a wider range of theories and complementary subjects, such as politics and history, the survey was limited to an assessment of the diversity of content in economic curriculums. The narrow definition of economic pluralism adopted by the survey thus does not consider issues regarding the framing, contextualisation or accessibility of the content.

### **ARE SOUTH AFRICAN ECONOMICS DEPARTMENTS TEACHING PLURALIST ECONOMIC CONTENT?**

The first section of the survey attempted to form a picture of current teaching trends within economics departments at South African universities. Respondents were initially

asked whether they had preferences in terms of schools of economic thought. The majority, 10 respondents, indicated that they did not have any preferences, while nine respondents indicated a preference for institutional economics, eight for behavioural economics and five for Marxist economics. An analysis of the possible correlations between preferences and institution of respondents revealed no apparent clustering of ideological preferences across the sampled universities. At most of the institutions, four to six different types of preferred schools of thought were highlighted.

It is unfortunate that very few economists with neoclassical preferences responded to the survey because, as proponents of the dominant theory being taught, it would have been interesting to find out whether they had any particular objections to changes in the status quo. This might be a sign of possible sample selection bias, with those academics who prefer subjects other than what is currently being taught, or who prefer a greater variety of subjects to be taught, more likely to respond to the survey than those who are happy with what is currently being taught.

It would appear that the diverse preferences of academics are not necessarily what they are being required to teach students. When asked whether they thought their university identifies with a particular type of economics, responses were roughly equally split between 'yes,' 'partially' and 'no,' with a higher total proportion of respondents indicating some level of ideological identity prevailing at their institution.

All the respondents who indicated that their university does subscribe to a particular school of thought, whether fully or partially, identified that school as being neoclassical in nature. Consequently, it is not surprising that most respondents gave their university a two or three out of five, when asked

to rank the institution according to the plurality of the content being taught.

Moreover, there appears to be clear trends in terms of the subjects that academics think should be a compulsory part of economic programmes and those that should be offered by other departments at their universities. In particular, academics think that subjects such as introductory psychology, politics and philosophy are valuable for students to take but need not be offered by the economics departments.

This is not surprising as these are not economic subjects. However, considering that they are quite important for economics students to take as complementary subjects, it is concerning that most respondents gave their institution a two out of five for the strength of their economics department's relations with other social science departments. There seems to be little collaboration occurring across departments.

### **IS THERE SUPPORT FOR ECONOMIC PLURALISM AMONG SOUTH AFRICAN ACADEMICS?**

In light of all this, the question remains – do South African academics support the call for more economic pluralism in higher education institutions? Responses to the survey indicate that a large majority (82%) of the respondents do. What was surprising about this response is that support for the call came from all the universities in the sample. It is also interesting that this support did not appear to be significantly affected by the respondent's preferred school of thought.

### **REASONING BEHIND THE POSITION OF ACADEMICS**

Some very interesting findings emerged when respondents were asked to justify their position towards more pluralistic content in economics,



particularly from those who oppose it or are neutral about it. Those in favour of introducing more economic pluralism cite reasons that have long been argued by its proponents: that the orthodox school inhibits critical thinking. That one school of thought can never adequately represent the complex, multi-layered world in which we live and that debate is essential to good economics seems to be roundly endorsed. In addition, they point out that while the neoclassical tenets are presented as facts, there is no scientific basis for having to accept them as we do the law of gravity and thus open thinking and debate is needed to produce other ideas and theories to counter their assumptions. We should also be developing innovative methods of resource allocation.

Opponents of change to the current design of the curriculum argue that students enter South African universities with a very low quality of secondary education which restricts their ability to grasp even the most basic of economic concepts. They express concern that such students will have difficulty coping with a more complex and nuanced curriculum. Some academics recommend getting these students up to a basic standard first rather than adapting and complicating the content they are being taught.

Similar concerns were echoed by those who are neutral about the suggested changes, particularly around the low level of mathematical ability of students coming from public schools. The sense is that criticism about the use of mathematics and statistics in economics comes from students' aversion to the subjects and their ill-preparedness for the mathematical rigour of economics, as opposed to there being an actual problem with teaching numerical concepts and content. A strong sentiment emerging from respondents is that mathematics, statistics and economic modelling

should not be discarded or removed from the curriculum.

In addition, academics who hold a neutral position expressed concern that the pluralism movement is ideologically driven, as opposed to being based on strong empirical evidence and objective reasoning – that the desire is simply to replace orthodox economics with heterodox economics. They are concerned that not enough evidence will be used to assess which ideas work and which are not broadly applicable.

There is also a very practical question about how much time should be dedicated to each economic school of thought. In the view of these academics, not all ideas are created equal and neoclassical economics has been widely accepted. So while students should be taught a critique of mainstream ideas, they feel that it is unreasonable to expect all schools of thought to be presented equally and taught in the same level of detail.

### **CHALLENGES TO ADOPTING MORE PLURALISTIC ECONOMIC CONTENT AND PEDAGOGY**

On questions about the impediments to the introduction of more pluralistic content in economics degrees, respondents indicated that the following factors were most relevant to their institutions:

- Limited time and space in academic programmes for additional subjects.
- A lack of academics with appropriate or adequate pluralistic qualifications.
- Complexity involved in designing a comprehensive pluralistic curriculum.
- Conflicting opinions of academics in economic departments.
- Not seeing the narrow focus on neoclassical economics as a problem.

### **Practical Challenges**

The limited time and space in academic programmes for additional subjects is an issue that emerges as one of the practical implications of curriculum change. There is a fear that the incorporation of additional economics subjects could result in the removal of others, or the extension of the length of programmes, which will have cost and time implications for students.

This situation is made more difficult by the “lack of academics with appropriate or adequate pluralistic qualifications”. A problem often cannot be solved within the same context in which it was created, thus it follows that academics may not be equipped to change the system in which they were trained. Respondents noted that the “complexity involved in designing a comprehensive pluralist curriculum” was a major challenge facing universities.

Lecturers will also naturally be more comfortable teaching content they studied and neoclassical economics lends itself particularly well to teaching large classes. For example, problem sets with defined right or wrong answers are much easier to assess than those which require narrative or thoughtful responses. That there are only a few pluralistic teaching materials available, with undergraduate economic textbooks covering mainly



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neoclassical economics, ensures that universities remain fixed on an orthodox path.

### **Ideological Challenges**

Perhaps more problematic than the practical considerations are the ideological challenges. Respondents indicated that two major hurdles that need to be overcome are (1) “conflicting opinions of academics in economics departments’ and (2) “the narrow focus on neoclassical economics not being seen as a problem”. Change will be difficult if firstly, people do not see any reason for it, and secondly, if they cannot agree on what should actually be done.

Although there are not any significant variations across respondents with different positions, those who are neutral ranked “limited incentives to prioritise pluralist economics teaching and research” as a more relevant challenge than those who support the movement. This is important to note as there are few incentives within universities and in the field of economics as a whole to promote pluralistic economics. This influences the type of research being undertaken by academics which, in turn, filters into what they teach their students.

Additionally, one cannot hold a discussion on adopting pluralist economics without recognising the existing power asymmetries at play. Challenging the status quo at economics departments is essentially a threat to existing intellectual capital. Offering different schools of thought is tantamount to questioning the relevance and importance of neoclassical professors and seasoned academics in those departments.

Labour market dynamics are also an influential factor because South African universities, to a large extent, orient their programmes to match the needs of employers with limited value placed on a liberal arts education. If



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the labour market does not demand skills taught in a pluralistic economics curriculum, universities are less likely to drive such changes as an imperative. Evaluation and ranking systems which look at performance metrics, such as throughput and graduate placement rates, also feed into the marketplace of ideas with critical views being relegated to the dark matter of intellectual space.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

While there is support among some academics for curriculum change, the challenges outlined above would first have to be overcome for the pluralist approach to be set in motion. On the ideological level, proponents of more pluralist content in economic curriculums must make their case in a balanced, evidence-based manner, emphasising that it is a move towards a more progressive and holistic application of critical reasoning skills. They should strive to correct the misconceptions that economic pluralism simply entails a complete removal of neoclassical economics and quantitative methods.

At the practical level, academic institutions will need assistance with introducing new content into economic curriculums. Forums need to be created through which students and pluralist economists help to create

implementation plans and find ways to make expanded economic curriculums the new standard for teaching economics. All parties should expect that this process may take some time with much trial and error.

All participants in this process acknowledge that the move towards economic pluralism is complex and fraught with challenges but the difficulties it poses should not be used as a reason to abandon the change. With this in mind, the following three action items are recommended as good places for economic departments to introduce the proposed changes:

- Make the History of Economic Thought a compulsory subject for all economics students so that the foundation for a pluralist approach to economics is set. The historical development of the field is essential in this regard.
- Foster more discussion in current subjects around applications of different schools of thought.
- Encourage greater levels of inter-faculty cooperation, making it easier for students to take electives from other departments.

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