

Pluralism in the economics curriculum in Germany (EconPLUS)

An empirical study of offerings in introductory courses and of attitudes among teaching personnel

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Summary

Starting situation, approach and aim of the study

In recent years there has been growing criticism in the public as well as within the scholarly community regarding the one-sidedness of economics as it is currently taught. According to “Normal Science” generally, also in economics there are actors and institutions – e.g., opinion leaders, faculties at important universities, central conferences, prestigious or frequently cited journals – which set the pace and establish the dominant tone for the mainstream of scholarly activities. With reference to these figures and structures, critical researchers speak of a prevailing canon of ideas, concepts, models and methods (the "orthodoxy" or dominant “paradigm”) of the field. Today, this orthodoxy is located almost exclusively within the intellectual edifice of neo-classical economics. In this context, criticism is made not only that this approach neglects other schools of thought and issues outside the neo-classical tradition, but that it also neglects courses dealing with the history of economic thought or philosophy of science. From a pluralistic perspective, there cannot only be a single dominant school of thought in economics, which is after all a social science. To the contrary, questions regarding the diversity of economic concepts and methods, interdisciplinary approaches as well as (historical) self-reflection should be a significant focal point.

Against this background, the network "Pluralistic Economics" (Plurale Ökonomik) has initiated a cooperation project with the University of Kassel to investigate this line of criticism. The project has received financial support from the Hans-Böckler Foundation.

The study, which has been conducted by Prof. Dr. Frank Beckenbach, Dr. Maria Daskalakis und Dr. David Hofmann at the Department of Environmental and Behavioral Economics at the University of Kassel, should provide scientifically documented information regarding the pluralism of economics in basic undergraduate courses (introduction to economics, microeconomics and macroeconomics) in Germany. It should also investigate possibilities for expanding the pluralism of these offerings. For this purpose, a survey was conducted among teaching economists involved in 54 economics and business studies programs in Germany. The first aim was to investigate which concepts the surveyed economists judged to be central for the mainstream of economics and which relevant concepts are not included in this mainstream. In addition, respondents were asked which ideas and attitudes are dominant in the economics curriculum and how these ideas and attitudes are reflected in actual teaching practice, as well as what obstacles exist to a more pluralistic teaching approach. Second, the module descriptions of basic courses "introduction to economics", "microeconomics", "macroeconomics" as well as the teaching materials used were examined. The aim here was to determine to what extent orthodox teaching content was already stipulated in the module descriptions and to what extent pluralistic content was emphasized. A subsequent analysis of teaching materials then showed to what extent the module descriptions and the actual teaching content correspond with each other. The study took into consideration the influence of research as well as the effect of internal university organizational structures on the teaching of economics as found in post-Bologna university processes.

Results of the survey of teaching personnel

The general considerations about the direction of economic research as well as about the post-Bologna university process could be determined through the survey of teaching personnel and the analysis of the teaching content used for basic courses. The survey results document that teaching personnel assume the existence of a hierarchical structuring of the concepts used in economic analysis. The notions generally held to be relevant in this context reveal a particular conceptual perspective (identification of a "mainstream"). According to the respondents, this mainstream is characterized by concepts and methods that pertain to the intellectual framework of the neoclassical school of economic thought. The respondents identify the most relevant feature of the mainstream approach as the actor concept of *homo economicus* as well as the categories rationality, equilibrium, maximization and efficiency.

Surprisingly, publicly articulated criticism of many students is generally judged to be justified by the majority of the respondents and a more open perspective is held to be more appropriate.

The results show, however, that this willingness in principle to have more pluralistic teaching in economics is not realized on a corresponding basis in actual teaching practice (attitude-practice gap). References to the extent of compulsory material in the curriculum and personnel shortages as impediments to a more open (pluralistic) organisation of university courses confirm the supposition that the performance-oriented organizational routines of the modern university play an important role here. In addition, with teaching personnel predominantly oriented to research-related questions, the imparting of knowledge and abilities for the solving of concrete social problems or for dealing with real issues in professional activities at a later time take on a secondary role.

Results of the analysis of teaching content

For the analysis of teaching content, use was made of the classifications that came from the responding teaching personnel of material as "mainstream" or "sidestream". In addition, these classifications were made on the basis of statements in the literature regarding the dominant paradigm. In this process, the text mining method was used for the first time in such a context. The analysis of curriculum content came to the result that in the area of basic economics courses there is a strong focus on a similar set of terms coming from the mainstream and orthodoxy respectively. The links that appear in this analysis reveal a basic neoclassical conceptual framework. Terms frequently used in course catalog descriptions of the content of microeconomic courses include, for example, equilibrium, game theory, monopoly, welfare, maximization, optimization. In macroeconomic courses, equilibrium-oriented perspectives also dominate, although the microeconomic content has a stronger orthodox orientation. The relatively frequent mention of behavioral economics at the interface between the mainstream and the sidestream gives an initial indication that the mainstream is perhaps becoming more open and providing an entry to other actor-based approaches. However, this occurs infrequently in the sense of actually overcoming the neoclassical paradigm. On the contrary, the analysis of course content shows that behavioral economics can be seen as the critical "protective belt" of orthodox economics, as a variation within a given paradigmatic core teaching. Seen in this way, it is in effect a scholarly product differentiation (without an alteration in the basic product characteristics).

The few terms which cannot be classified to the mainstream or orthodoxy appear much less frequently and do not reveal any particular conceptual correlation. This basic situation is also reflected in the content of the most frequently used textbooks. The standardization of course content and of the content of economics textbooks stand in a reciprocal relationship. This

commitment to a prefabricated perspective deriving from current research corresponds with the relatively minor importance of subjects that include some form of historical reflection. The analysis of course modules at the university level shows the serious consequences of an educational approach that is decidedly one-sided. In microeconomics, for example, in over 80% of the examined courses of study, approaches outside the neoclassical approach are not considered. Likewise, only very few universities offer courses with an "enhanced" view on a systematic basis dealing with the intellectual history of economics, with economic ethics or with the history of economics or philosophy of science as shown in the course modules. This situation underlines the supposition of a one-sided educational orientation and raises the question whether an educational situation of this sort is, in fact, compatible with freedom of research and of teaching. The latter question is particularly relevant as the content of the courses described in the course modules is mandatory and allows very little scope for more pluralistic approaches.

The most important results of the EconPLUS Study

Central results of the survey of teaching personnel

1. The vast majority of the surveyed economists are of the opinion that a mainstream does exist. A majority of the economists also believe that there are relevant economic concepts and theoretical approaches (sidestream) that are not covered by this mainstream.
2. Respondents' classification of terminology as mainstream shows that this mainstream is mainly located in the conceptual and methodological edifice of neoclassical economics. The statements regarding the sidestream are highly fragmented.
3. The majority of the respondents have a broad knowledge of the publicly articulated critique of the students. Half of the respondents see this critique as basically justified.
4. There is a clear discrepancy between the willingness to provide pluralistic teaching and the actual implementation of such teaching (attitude-practice gap).
5. The amount of compulsory teaching material is cited as the main impediment to a greater diversity in the curriculum, followed by a lack of personnel resources, high work loads as well as the basic orientation of the course of study.
6. Women are significantly more open than men for the critique of the students as well as for a resultant redesign of the curriculum.

Central results of the analysis of curriculum content

1. The course module descriptions of the examined basic courses suggest that in a majority of economics-oriented courses of study at universities, there is an unjustified preselection of subjects, concepts, learning objectives and methods.
2. This preselection of perspectives and curriculum content amounts to a self-restriction in teaching practice and stands in contradiction to the idea of an open university and the constitutionally guaranteed right of freedom in research and teaching.
3. This finding is generally reflected in the focus of the examined teaching materials (course materials and textbooks). It can be assumed that the course module descriptions and the actual teaching practice are significantly related with each other.
4. It can be seen that the course descriptions for the basic undergraduate courses are dominated by terms and concepts that fall within the purview of modern neoclassical economics.
5. Courses with a wider perspective, for example the history of economic thinking, history of economics, philosophy of science and ethics, are not a genuine part of the prevailing curriculum. Instead, they are offered only at isolated universities, if at all.
6. The responsibility of an academic education to facilitate self-reflective interaction with societal problems is not met by such an approach. Current teaching practice particularly neglects the educational interests of students who do not intend to remain in a university environment.

Practical conclusions of the EconPLUS Study

1. Universities thrive on openness and diversity. This study provides a basis for identifying promising approaches for promoting pluralism in the teaching of economics. This involves *first* the promotion of pluralistic attitudes in teaching personnel and *second* the development of pluralistic teaching materials. *Third*, an increase in the degree of choice in the delivered curriculum is a matter of central importance – for example, through an increase in the elective portion of the curriculum (or a decrease in the compulsory portion), additional offerings of subjects with a wider perspective, and above all through the retraction of standardized curriculum content as specified in course module in favor of more extensive possibilities of choice for the students.
2. The study can be used as a guide for further empirical examinations of parts of the courses of study in economics that were not dealt with here (Bachelor phase following the basic courses, Master's degree programs as well as postgraduate studies).

Furthermore, the examination can be extended to other countries, in particular Austria and Switzerland.

The central results of the study are available online:

<http://pluralowatch.de/econplus/>

The complete study will be published in November 2016 by the Metropolis-Verlag:

<http://www.metropolis-verlag.de/Zur-Pluralitaet-der-volkswirtschaftlichen-Lehre-in-Deutschland/1250/book.do>