

# Rethinking Undergraduate Economics Education

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Worldwide, a concerted and systematic criticism of the way economics is taught began after the onslaught of the 2007 global financial crisis. In India, postgraduate economics education has received more attention than its undergraduate counterpart. After identifying some structural constraints of undergraduate education in India, a set of curricular and pedagogic recommendations to improve undergraduate economics education is explored.

Since the 2007 global financial crisis, much has happened to the economics curriculum worldwide due to mobilisations by economics teachers and students. This is largely because of the dissatisfaction amongst teachers and students with the orthodox and instrumental nature of economics education. Over roughly the same period, the landscape of higher education in India has expanded with an increase in the number of public and private universities. This has led to a sharp increase in the number of economics programmes available to students.

Moreover, the economy has been drastically transforming in the last two decades, and it has brought along with it a growing demand for trained economists from diverse fields such as banking and finance, social sector, policy, and teaching. However, this has not led to any significant rethinking of our economics education (curriculum, pedagogy, resources, linkages) in the Indian educational system, be it schools, colleges, or universities. In fact, there has been a real dearth of economists dealing with the question of curriculum.

To the best of our knowledge, the last significant article on economics teaching in Indian universities was written by Sukhamoy Chakravarty (1986) in this journal, where he laments the state of economics teaching.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the only book that dealt with this subject—*Issues in Teaching of Economics in Indian Universities* (edited by M A Oommen, and published in 1987)—was based on a workshop. The contributors to his volume included Sukhamoy Chakravarty, C T Kurien, George Mathai, M A Oommen, V R Pillai, and K N Raj.

Aiming to revive the kind of thinking and spirit encompassed in Oommen's edited work, we organised a forum for "Rethinking Undergraduate Economics Education" at Azim Premji University (APU) in October 2017. A modest beginning

was made by bringing together college and university teachers from public and private universities, schoolteachers, and undergraduate students.<sup>2</sup> There is an urgent need to identify and document the challenges and strengths of our undergraduate economics curriculum and to assess their suitability to meet the current demands of the student, whether it is further education or getting a job, as well as a collective need to create an equitable, humane, just, and sustainable society. The present article documents some of the key issues that were presented and discussed during the October forum.

This article first identifies some structural shortcomings of undergraduate economics education in India. Subsequently, it provides a set of curricular and pedagogical recommendations to improve undergraduate economics education.

## Structural Constraints

Most colleges in India do not have the freedom to make their own curriculum, and consequently, they do not have a choice in the kind of core and elective courses, the contents of the courses, and the reading lists. Moreover, with the recent University Grants Commission's (UGC) Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) requirements, the colleges and universities, which earlier had the autonomy to make their own courses, are now being constrained.

More often than not, this leads to teachers and students engaging in a curriculum that does not fit their needs and interests. Furthermore, the content and structure of the courses tend to be overwhelmingly determined by available textbooks and "external" exams. This generates a situation where the teachers are compelled to spend their time teaching "textbooks," which often do not reflect the Indian socio-economic context.

Additionally, colleges accumulate the exam question papers of the previous years in order to prepare the students to do well in the exams. Such a learning environment encourages rote-based learning and is inimical to not only student learning but also teacher development.

Currently, as indicated above, the curricula are prepared by "external experts" in the field. There is significant value addition in consulting with other

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stakeholders while framing curricula. Both college teachers and schoolteachers should be included in the discussion. This allows the curriculum developers to take account of the ground-level realities of teaching. Moreover, feedback opportunities should be provided for students when the curriculum is being reviewed (say, every once in three years). Student feedback can give useful information regarding how much the students can meaningfully learn in a semester, what level of linguistic and quantitative aptitude can be reasonably assumed, and the degree of student interest in the various electives that are offered.

Another major structural constraint is that college/university teachers are often not well prepared or trained for teaching. The successful completion of PhD/national eligibility test (NET) is sufficient to become a teacher. However, the knowledge of economic content alone does not a teacher make. Teaching is a skill that needs to be actively learnt. There is a strong rationale for including an experiential elective on teaching in our MA/MPhil/PhD curriculum. Furthermore, there is a need to

expand and revitalise the existing teacher development programmes conducted by the Academic Staff Colleges (with UGC support) by involving other colleges and universities that have the autonomy and interest to develop better curriculum and effective pedagogic methods, and have a diverse student body.

### Curricular Interventions

Undergraduate economics degrees have been oriented towards giving students skills to enter the job market and preparing them to undertake a postgraduate degree in the discipline. Therefore, the foundational economics courses in an undergraduate degree deal with microeconomics, macroeconomics, and quantitative economics. Most of the content in these courses falls within the neoclassical (or more accurately, marginalist) tradition in economics.

We believe that economics curriculum should become pluralist by including the teaching of schools of thought which fall outside the neoclassical cannon (Thomas 2016). Such a curriculum will enable students to engage more deeply

with the fundamental questions and debates posed in the discipline and will demonstrate to the student that no single theory can *fully* explain a socio-economic phenomenon.

In most economics curricula, important concepts such as capitalism, development, and economic growth are taught without sufficiently incorporating the historical forces such as colonialism, wars, authoritarian rule, and crises that influence them. The contents of the foundational microeconomics and macroeconomics courses often ignore the historical processes and structural tendencies which shape the economy. Thus, there is an urgent need to *reintroduce* economic history in the economics curriculum in order to explain how colonialism, technological change, capitalism, and shifting sociopolitical dynamics created the modern economy.

Importantly, economics is mostly taught as a body of knowledge that has progressed linearly and without internal conflicts. There is an urgent need to include a course on the history of economic thought that will enable students to understand the major debates and

## Dr. V. V. Bhatt Memorial Internship Programme

Applications are invited from students for the V. V. Bhatt Memorial Internship Programme. The Internship has been named after the late Dr. V. V. Bhatt, a well-known Development Economist, who had served in the Reserve Bank of India and the Industrial Development Bank of India, and also in multilateral institutions such as the Asian Institute for Development and Planning, the World Bank and the Economic Development Institute.

Under this Programme, one student pursuing M.A./M.Phil/Ph.D will be awarded summer Internship for a period up to three months starting from April 2018.

The student will work under the supervision of a senior staff at EPW Research Foundation (EPWRF), Mumbai. Though undertaking assigned work, he/she will be encouraged to do research on a theme broadly in Development Economics.

The awardee will be provided with an internship amount of Rs. 15,000 per month. While the intern has to make own arrangements for his/her stay in Mumbai, travel expenses will be reimbursed to and fro (by train, 3rd AC). Interested candidates should send their applications to the Director, EPW Research Foundation, C - 212 Akurli Industrial Estate, Akurli Road, Kandivli (East), Mumbai – 400101 or e-mail to [director@epwrf.in](mailto:director@epwrf.in), along with a reference letter from the head of the institution/department where he/she is studying. Applications should reach by **March 15, 2018**.

developments that the discipline has gone through and the different trajectories that came out of it. This has the pedagogic value of inculcating a deep understanding about the discipline, the political contexts in which it evolved, and a nuanced appreciation of the inherent gaps and biases in the discipline.

The ability to understand and analyse data is a basic requirement for an economist. The process involves collecting, programming, visualising and analysing data. Currently, many undergraduate programmes treat data analysis as a separate course much like mathematical economics. To enable students to attain data proficiency, data analysis needs to be incorporated within their economic courses. For example, a course on the Indian economy can have a component on analysing trends in sectoral growth and consumption data over time, or a development course can be used to collect data from a local community.

Foundational courses in economics are often taught through textbooks written by foreign authors (the notable ones being Mankiw, Varian, and Dornbusch and Fischer). Our students find the examples, case studies, and data used difficult to relate with and therefore it negatively affects their learning. There is an urgent need for “Indian” textbooks with examples and data from India. Moreover, relevant concepts such as informal labour and dual economy should be taught because they help us make sense of our surroundings. A structured engagement with the real economy through fieldwork assignments in their courses will prove beneficial. For example, when studying market competition, a teacher can send students to observe the dynamics of local vegetable markets and the teacher can discuss pricing strategies between Ola and Uber when teaching them oligopolistic competition.

Writing plays an important role in the work of a professional economist—in both academia and the industry. Therefore, it is important to inculcate good writing habits in students through curricular means. Writing should be instituted as one of the learning objectives in all the economics courses. Students should be trained to write well—have a good structure and

be able to make a convincing argument. It may be a useful exercise to get the students to read different kinds of economics writing and to identify their respective strengths and weaknesses. This will help students improve their writing skills.

Writing should also be made an integral part of the assessment structure. Assessments should be structured such that students have to explain graphs, diagrams, derivations, and calculations. Economics assessment should not be restricted to objective questions, because articulation, argumentation, and explanation are important skills required by an economist; these can be tested only by asking them to write essay-length answers.

Economics students need to be prepared to handle the quantitative component of the discipline. However, students in India come from diverse schooling systems and preparedness in mathematics. Some institutions tend to prescribe a minimum required marks in Class 12 mathematics for entering economics programmes; the logic for this is that good mathematical abilities imply good economics ability. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Keynes famously wrote about how Max Planck, the famous physicist, found it difficult to study economics. However, reducing the ability to do economics to mathematical ability can result in the exclusion of students with other academic strengths from economics programmes. The student’s interest in economic affairs and the ability to analyse the contemporary economy is perhaps a better indicator of their interest and ability. More importantly, economic programmes have institutional mechanisms to support students with a weak quantitative ability; this can be achieved through tutorial or remedial classes and/or by offering courses in basic mathematics and statistics.

### **Pedagogic Interventions**

As teachers, we have not paid sufficient attention to methods of teaching, modes of learning, and learning environment in the classroom. The biggest blind spot in this regard is that often research and content knowledge is perceived as an indicator of teaching ability. Teaching is a skill that is developed through experience—by

introspection, attentiveness to student diversity, extensive discussions with colleagues on what works and what might not, and so on. It is especially important for young teachers to get opportunities to learn about teaching; this can be achieved through both workshops and mentoring by experienced teachers. There needs to be a sharing of strategies and resources such as quizzes, activities, and practice exercises amongst economics teachers in the country (see De [2016] for one such activity). There is an urgent need to establish a web forum through which teachers can share and learn from each other.

Economics knowledge is tested mostly through highly stressful in-class end-semester exams that privilege recall and application-based knowledge. Classroom teaching is focused on “cracking” the question paper or building skills that are needed in the exams. The effect of this is that all forms of learning that do not directly contribute to doing better in the exams are ignored. Emphasis is given to rote learning, solving problem sets, and summarising readings. Important meta-cognitive skills such as evaluation, creation, and synthesis of multiple ideas and data analysis skills are hardly given importance in the curriculum.

While there are difficulties in changing the current exam culture, there is widespread acknowledgement of the importance of multiple assessments as opposed to single high-weightage and high-stress exams. The former is better at assessing the learning of the student and provides continuous feedback over the semester. A more holistic way of assessing student learning is through providing different kinds of assessments to measure the different kinds of learning that takes place. Aside from in-class tests, take-home assignments, presentations, group work, and oral exams provide other ways of measuring learning.

With more students having access to computers, it is important for colleges to use available technology to their advantage. Moodle is a free online learning management system that would be a helpful tool for any teacher. Moodle is a useful platform through which teachers can manage all their out-of-classroom interactions and also record attendance,

share resources, receive student submission, conduct a poll, and so on.

Content from non-standard sources is a useful aid for teaching. For instance, in *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*, Thomas Piketty has used selections from fictional texts to complement his discussion on the socio-economic context in Britain and France in the early capitalist era. Similarly, books of fiction, movies, poems, and songs can be used to introduce students to important socio-economic situations and periods. For example, cinema, literature, and newspaper reports can provide students a deeper understanding of the nature of Indian society and the economy under Nehru's prime ministership in the 1950s and 1960s.

Research should be introduced in undergraduate programmes especially because it provides a different kind of learning experience. Research provides a good foundation for independent thinking and helps develop self-motivated learners. The UGC, in its CBCS document, has recommended a six credit research project as part of the undergraduate curriculum. However, undergraduate research should not be seen as a small-scale PhD research. They are both quite different in their aims and feasibility.

Undergraduate research is primarily geared towards teaching students research skills (such as writing, conceptualising, data collection, fieldwork, and writing a paper); if, in the process, a small value addition is made to the literature, it is a positive externality. Moreover, supervisors cannot provide the same kind of time to undergraduate students pursuing research vis-à-vis PhD students given the number of students we have in undergraduate programmes. Undergraduate research may also be conceptualised as a guided self-study of topics not introduced at the undergraduate level or based around fieldwork. The emphasis should be on students learning research skills rather than producing new knowledge.

### The Way Forward

In summary, there is a strong mandate to rethink undergraduate economics education in India. Priority should be given to: understanding the learning transition students undergo from school to college,

the provision of institutional support for students from diverse learning backgrounds, the organisation of workshops and forums to improve teachers capacity, and the creation of textbooks and resources (in both English and regional languages) to meet the contemporary needs of Indian students.

Colleges must have a say in curricular decisions. These decisions can neither be arbitrary nor casual; they must be founded on a transparent set of educational aims. We hope that the issues we presented in this article motivate similar conversations in the coming months and years. Such issues are critical and urgent because of the increasing inability of economics to understand and explain contemporary Indian realities.

### NOTES

- 1 The article by Varma (2012) looked at the teaching of macroeconomics at the postgraduate level in Indian universities. It must also be noted that *Economic & Political Weekly* has previously published letters that deal with economics curriculum in India (Arora et al 2012; Shah 2016).
- 2 Here is a list of speakers in this forum along with their institutional affiliation arranged region-wise. National Capital Region: Chirashree Das Gupta

(Jawaharlal Nehru University), Yugank Goyal (Jindal Global University), Nitish Kashyap (Miranda House, Delhi University), Arun Kumar (Jindal Global University), Hemanshu Kumar (Ashoka University), and Krishna Kumar (Sri Venkateswara College, Delhi University). Eastern Region: Soumyadip Chattopadhyay (Visva Bharati University). Hyderabad Region: G Omkarnath (University of Hyderabad). Bengaluru Region: Amit Basole (APU), Rahul De (APU), Kade Finoff (APU), Arjun Jayadev (APU), Adaina K C (Christ University), Nilesh Kumar (St Joseph's College), Subhashini Muthukrishnan (St Joseph's College), Venu Narayan (APU), Divya Pradeep (Christ University), Anand Shrivastava (APU), Ajit Sinha (APU), and Alex M Thomas (APU). Southern Region: Muhammed Kasim (Farook College). Two schoolteachers, Anupama Chandrasekharan and Anima Chowdhury, also spoke at the forum.

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## Journal Rank of EPW

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Scopus has indexed research papers that have been published in *EPW* from 2008 onwards.

The Scopus database journal ranks country-wise and journal-wise. It provides three broad sets of rankings: (i) Number of Citations, (ii) H-Index, and (iii) Scimago Journal and Country Rank.

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- Highest among 37 Indian social science journals and second highest among 187 social science journals ranked in Asia.
- Highest among 38 journals in the category, "Economics, Econometrics, and Finance" in the Asia region, and 37th among 881 journals globally.
- Highest among 23 journals in the category, "Sociology and Political Science" in the Asia region, and 17th among 951 journals globally.
- Between 2009 and 2015, *EPW's* citations in three categories ("Economics, Econometrics, and Finance," "Political Science and International Relations," and "Sociology and Political Science") were always in the second quartile of all citations recorded globally in the Scopus database.

For a summary of statistics on *EPW* on Scopus, including of the other journal rank indicators please see ([bit.ly/2dDDZmG](http://bit.ly/2dDDZmG)).

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