



Undergraduate Economics Education in Europe

Report on a Survey by the EEA Education Committee

Introduction

This note summarises the results of a Survey on Undergraduate Economics Education in Europe conducted by the Education Committee of the European Economic Association in Summer 2022. More detailed results from the Survey are available on the [Education Committee webpage](#). The Survey was sent to over 300 Economics Departments in Europe. The results are based on 68 completed responses and 23 partial responses. About 40% of the responses came from UK-based institutions; very few private institutions replied. These are important elements to keep in mind when interpreting the results, as we cannot claim that the results are fully representative of the European landscape.

The Survey covered three main areas:

1. Undergraduate Economics Degree Programmes as a whole,
2. The first Economics course students are exposed to, and
3. Governance and teaching policies

The initial Survey findings were discussed during a workshop held on 26 October 2022. Results from the Survey will be used to inform the future activities of the EEA Education Committee.

Undergraduate Economics Degree Programmes

The first section of the Survey investigated how Economics Programmes are structured. Respondents were invited to report on the most distinctive “Economics” programme offered by their university.

The average length of an Economics degree is 3 years, but in few countries like Spain and Ireland the length is 4 years. In about half of the degrees outside the UK, instruction is offered in both English and the national language. Only one third of programmes are exclusively taught in the national language.

Cohort sizes of incoming first year students are fairly large: in a quarter of cases, they range between 251 and 500 students, and they exceed 500 for 11% of universities that participated in the survey. The most common way to select incoming students is high-school grades. Performance in an entry exam is commonly used in Eastern European Universities. About three quarters of universities in the sample provide financial support to economics students.

The organisation of economics degrees varies significantly across Europe. In Northern Europe, about 80% of modules are compulsory, while it is only 60% in the UK. Students in the UK have the lowest proportion of non-economic modules in their degree, something much more common in Southern European Universities. This is consistent with the findings that Economics for Business is taught more often in Southern Europe. Similarly, Southern European Universities are more likely to offer degrees labelled as Economics and Business or Economics and Management. In UK Universities, on the other hand, the main Economics degree is almost always labelled simply as “Economics”.

Most universities have some form of work experience built into their degrees; Western European Universities are an exception to this, as only a quarter of them offering such an experience. UK students are more likely to receive career support than students in Continental Europe.



Students' first exposure to an Economics Course

The second Section of the Survey attempted to understand in more detail the characteristics of the first economics course students are exposed to. In almost half of cases, this is a general “Principles of economics” course, covering topics in both micro and macroeconomics. Such a course is often attended by students who do not major in economics. This is especially true in Southern Europe, and less the case in the UK, where universities are much more likely to offer “pure” economics degrees.

The introductory courses are very popular, offered to cohorts of more than 250 students in more than half of universities. Students spend on average 4 hours per week in the classroom for this course. More than a third of universities report that lectures in this course are traditional “chalk and talk” lectures, especially in Northern and Southern Europe, and less so in the UK.

Teaching materials are also mostly textbooks: this is the only resource used in Southern Europe, and across Europe is used in 90% of universities. Between 50% and 60% of universities also rely on other materials such as websites, news articles and research papers. To prepare for exams, students mostly rely on traditional methods like problem sets or textbook exercises. Only 16% of universities report that students are asked to work with data in these introductory courses.

End-of-course exams are most often traditional closed-book exams, marked by course leads in 82% of the cases. Half of the universities also rely on teaching assistants for marking, with a much greater use of teaching assistants in UK universities.

Governance and teaching policies in European Universities

The last section of the survey focused on policies to promote and incentivise teaching, and on factors driving or hampering changes in teaching.

Most staff across Europe have research and teaching roles. The share of staff fully devoted to teaching is highest in Northern and Southern Europe, at about one quarter.

Training requirements for teaching do not vary much with the contractual status of the staff. The most common types of required training for teaching are induction sessions and education development training, offered in about half of the universities in the sample. Three quarters of universities offer incentives for teaching excellence. The most common form is teaching awards (38%). 29% of universities offer both awards and monetary incentives, while 25% rely only on monetary incentives.

Finally, the survey asked about opportunities and challenges for improving teaching. In almost 90% of cases, universities reported that lecturers decide about curriculum content and teaching methods on the basis of their own experience. Half of the universities report that, on both curriculum content and teaching practices, the tendency is to continue with what was done in the past; the other half reportedly relies on review of pedagogical best practices. Roughly one third of universities solicit ideas from students or follow university requirements. National regulatory requirements play a smaller role.

The largest constraint to implement curriculum changes is staff time availability (in 54% of universities), followed university-level restrictions on the timing (42%) and nature (36%) of changes. External policies and institutions place some but limited constraints on curriculum design, with about one third of respondents reporting government, higher-education regulator or the body responsible for curriculum design and delivery as a major challenge to implement changes in the curriculum.