

## **Is UK economics teaching changing? Evaluating the new subject benchmark statement**

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This paper evaluates the recent reform to the curricular governance framework for UK Economics teaching: the revised Subject Benchmark Statement document for Economics (SBSE). The crisis of confidence in economics which was amplified by the global financial crisis presented an opportunity for fundamental change in economics teaching. The paper asks whether the new SBSE represents change. We ask whether the new SBSE is pluralist with regard to economic theory and method; how it treats the economy and its wider socio-political dimension; what are its educational goals and approach; and overall, how much change has it brought? The paper concludes that the new SBSE does not constitute change: it still exhibits limited pluralism, ignores ethics, power and politics, and ignores key educational goals.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In proclaiming that he wished not to write his nation's laws but its economics textbooks, Paul Samuelson recognised the importance of the governance of economics curricula. Such concerns are well established in this journal: O'Leary (1942) laid out some principles which all economics curricula might follow. DeShon (1970) argued for a radically reformed economics curriculum given the logical flaws displayed by standard economic methodology. Zuidhoff (2014) showed how neo-liberal principles are embedded and reinforced by economics textbooks. Knoop (1972) argued for greater prominence of values in economics teaching. Such calls have been reinforced, particularly since the global financial crisis highlighted the role of questionable professional ethics in precipitating it. DeMartino (2013) argued for teaching of professional ethics; however Yalcintas and Selcuk (2015) showed that there is little evidence of teaching of research ethics in economics courses. Their data suggests little recent change in economics teaching practice, despite calls to do so from various quarters.

One important recent driver for change in this arena has been the student movement. Earle et al (2016) capture the spirit of this movement in a wide-ranging critique of current economics teaching: they make four connected demands with regard to economics teaching: 1) greater pluralism of approach to economics; 2) the inclusion in economics teaching of societal and political aspects of the economy; and 3) a 'liberal' education. Thus 4) they demanded fundamental change. Teaching changes can be observed at a local level, as individual instructors or even departments change their practices. However, change can occur at a wider level. For example, the British Academy published *Reflections on Economics*, a report on the state of the art of the discipline and ways to improve it (Besley, et al, 2015). A key initiative in this regard has been the CORE Project.

While Mearman et al (forthcoming) acknowledge that CORE represents an improvement to predecessor curricula<sup>1</sup>, they evaluate it as not meeting the students' demands. Another key mechanism through which teaching can change is via official curriculum governance frameworks. In the UK this framework is outlined in the Subject Benchmark Statement for Economics (hereafter SBSE).

This paper will explore the new revision of the SBSE. The new revision was an opportunity to (try to) change economics. However, we argue that the SBSE does not meet the students' demands. The SBSE does not deliver greater pluralism. Nor does it seek to integrate ethics, power, politics and society into economics teaching. Further, it promotes instrumental rather than 'liberal' education, and pays little explicit heed to educational philosophy. This is a serious flaw given that it is unlikely that a new architecture will be successful if its aims are unarticulated.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section outlines our evaluative criteria. The criteria are then applied to the SBSE (section 3). The paper then concludes. The paper's findings, though rooted in the UK, have international implications, as they may be replicated elsewhere. Wherever there is an existing national curriculum for economics, the SBSE could be a model. For those considering how to control economics teaching more effectively, the UK approach could provide ideas. Thus the evaluation of the SBSE has serious potential consequences. One such outcome could be to significantly squeeze space for the principles valued by social economy even further.

## II. EVALUATIVE CRITERIA

We evaluate the SBSE according to four criteria, all of which reflect recent literature on economics education, and which encompass Earle et al (2016)'s

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<sup>1</sup> An anonymous referee commented that CORE has presented "grand fundamental changes" to a first year economics curriculum. This is representative of many similar claims for the Project. However, *inter alia* Mearman et al (forthcoming), Earle et al (2016), Morgan (2015) have argued that CORE offers less actual change than it sometimes claims to do.

recommendations. Hence we provide an integrated critique of the SBSE. The first criterion examines the approach to economics embodied within the SBSE. It considers pluralism in economics – specifically, how curricular governance frameworks reflect degrees of openness to non-mainstream economics and uncertainty of knowledge (Freeman, 2009; Dow, 2009; Morgan, 2015). A second criterion borrows from a heritage of critical political economy (Lee et al., 2013; Andreoni, et al, 2016): it scrutinises treatments of society and power within economics curricula. The third criterion utilises Clarke and Mearman’s (2001, 2003) argument that economics curricula have implicit educational goals and philosophy. It interrogates the underlying educational approach(es) of the SBSE. The final criterion asks whether the SBSE actually represents a change from the current state of affairs in economics curriculum. It builds on existing evaluations (Morgan, 2014, 2015).

### *II.1. Monist or pluralist approach to economics*

Our first criterion concerns the approach to economics embodied by the SBSE. Here we utilise two distinctions: monism versus pluralism in economics; and mainstream versus heterodox economics. *Monism* here means the insistence that there is one way (perhaps broadly defined) to gain insight into the economy. That might be in terms of theory, or perhaps method. We also must define ‘mainstream economics’. We acknowledge the arguments that mainstream economics is changing or fragmented (Cedrini and Fontana, 2017). Nonetheless, here mainstream economics is associated with ‘neoclassical’ principles, foremost that individuals are rational utility maximisers and that economic entities tend to equilibrium. It also tends to prioritise, or for Lawson (1997, *et passim*) insists on, mathematical modelling. ‘Heterodox economics’ is a more elusive concept, but typically opposes the principles of mainstream economics and stresses the importance of focusing on power and uncertainty in economics (see Dequech, 2007; Mearman, 2012). It also tends to presuppose an ‘open systems ontology’ and therefore a wider range of methods. Combining these two distinctions, one

might be a mainstream monist (insisting on, for instance, individualist analysis), or a 'heterodox' monist (insisting on, say, class analysis).

In turn, *pluralism* is the advocacy of more than one theoretical or methodological perspective. One important argument for pluralism is that it is helpful in understanding and addressing events within the complex, open economy (for this view see Dobusch and Kapeller, 2012). It might be that economics might become more scientific by being *openly* pluralist. Fullbrook (2016, chapter 1) argues that in natural science, there is greater comfort than in economics in shifting between what may seem incompatible positions (e.g. quantum mechanics and Einsteinian general relativity). Another argument for pluralism might be *fallibilism*, i.e. the possibility of being mistaken about reality. This possibility has been highlighted more, because some claim that the crisis was partly caused by the hubris amongst economists. Fourcade et al. (2015) speak ironically of the 'superiority of economists'. Caballero (2010) has posited the 'pretence of knowledge syndrome' and urged that economists show greater epistemological caution. Pluralism is also supported for its educational benefits (Stilwell, 2012). Some argue that it may engage students better; and possibly equip them better to solve complex problems (Nelson, 2009). Pluralism may make graduates more employable by improving skill formation (O'Donnell, 2013). Some authors maintain that pluralism allows liberal and critical educational goals to be achieved (see section 2.3). Davis and Dolfsma (2008) claim that social economics is inherently pluralist.

## *II.2. Treatment of ethics, power and society within economics*

The second criterion concerns the approach taken by economics curricula to the nature of economics and the economy. Earle et al. (2016) criticise economics for treating the economy as a separate entity, thereby generating theories which somehow separate economic aspects from wider society. Consequently, considerations of the nature of society are excluded from economics curricula. Girardi and Sandonà (2017) show that many students demand that genuine

sociality be incorporated in economics teaching. For Davis and Dolfsma (2008) economic relationships are at bottom social. So, we ask whether the SBSE admits this element into its vision of economics. Further, we explore how the SBSE considers power in economics which, *arguably* has until now been largely excluded from mainstream economics (for this view see Ozanne 2016). Where it is included, power is not conceived as intrinsic to social constitution and interaction but only in the limited sense of distortion of an equilibrium process or of the potential of an adverse market structure (compared to some ideal unreal point unattainable situation).

We also consider whether or not political or ethical aspects of economics are acknowledged. The discipline's retention of the fact/value distinction makes this controversial. According to this positive economic position, a staple of introductory economics courses, economists *qua* (social) scientists and educators ought to exclude their political views in their practice. This is hard to defend. Veblen (1919) and Myrdal (1930) show that economics abounds with implicit, perhaps even intentionally hidden ethical principles and culturally determined concepts. These concerns are significant to social economists, as they relate to values, and to professional ethics (DeMartino, 2013). More fundamentally, social economics "emphasises the connection between economics and ethics, where ethics concerns how values are inescapably intertwined with social relationships" (Davis and Dolfsma, 2008, p. 2).

### *II.3. Educational goals and approaches*

Our third criterion concerns educational philosophy and practice. Peters (1970, p. 28) argues that an examination of educational aims must *precede* any discussion of curriculum content or teaching process, as 'a way of getting people to get clear about and focus their attention on what is worthwhile achieving'. Clarke and Mearman (2001), though, argue that economists have neglected educational

goals. Instead, the focus of economics education literature is on either content or process.

We deploy three broad strands of educational goals in the literature: instrumental, liberal, and critical. From Bridges (1992), *instrumental education* aims that students are trained in concrete, identifiable skills, such as the ability to solve certain types of problems, know formulae or techniques, remember and, perhaps, apply theory, or possess 'knowledge' of a topic. All education will involve instrumental outcomes, even if they are not intended: students learn facts, for example. However, an education *geared* towards such instrumental goals is 'instrumentalist'. Therefore, an education in which a learner is uncritically exposed to only one theoretical perspective and its behavioural ideal is instrumentalist. Any educational process may be instrumentalist if its content is delivered uncritically.

By contrast, the central feature of *liberal* education is 'to equip people to make their own free, autonomous choices about the life they will lead' (Bridges, 1992). Hence the goal is that students develop the intellectual capacities of critical, evaluative and comparative thinking, and intellectual open-mindedness. Hence curriculum content should be assessed according to its ability to achieve these outcomes. The learning of facts is de-emphasised. Arguably these desired capacities are achieved better in a pluralist curriculum than in a monist one, as pluralism should incorporate contrast and criticism of one view by another (Mearman et al., 2011). Liberal education may have several benefits for learners; however, liberal educational philosophy is vulnerable to the critiques that it is individualist. Further, Mirowski (2013) warns that under neoliberalism, the debate favoured by liberal teachers has an *agnotological* function that is to create doubt by means of science, thereby blunting transformative social action.

*Critical pedagogy* has been developed by, for example Freire (1970). It has been promoted by radical political economists (Bridges and Hartmann, 1975; Rose, 2005). It is rooted particularly in critical theory. Critical pedagogy generally rejects



modernist (Enlightenment) education, therefore including liberal education. It aims to liberate those oppressed and excluded by the system. In practice, this involves the process of *conscientisation*, in which everyday concepts are evaluated and re-evaluated critically. Critical pedagogy is thus student-centred. *A fortiori*, the content of the curriculum should stress the contributions of oppressed groups. This partly resonates with liberal goals; however, critical pedagogy provides the necessary space for students to, for example, struggle with ongoing relations of power (Visano, 2016).

Some caveats must be noted. First, whilst the framework presented covers much of the territory of educational philosophy, it is not exhaustive. Second, here we have presented the three educational philosophies as analytically distinct for convenience; but in reality, they overlap. For example, liberal education is clearly somewhat instrumentalist as it implies a vision of society. Similarly, critical pedagogy can encompass an objective of changing society. As already noted, liberal and critical education share the goal of empowering learners. Third, a good educational programme may contain elements of each of the three perspectives (albeit in context-specific combinations). However, bearing in mind these caveats we will use the framework as presented, to evaluate the SBSE.

#### *II.4. Extent and nature of change*

The criteria laid out in sections II.1-II.3 capture how we intend to evaluate the extent and nature of change represented by the SBSE. Moreover, the three criteria are connected. A more pluralist approach (criterion 1) would facilitate a broad treatment of societal aspects of economics, including power (criterion 2). That follows because the heterodox traditions tend to embrace those broader aspects. Further, greater pluralism might imply a more critical approach to education (criterion 3). Additionally, we must state our premise that the *status quo ante* of economics teaching is monist (neoclassical), in which the socio-political dimensions of economics are largely excluded, and educational goals are opaque

and instrumental. Thus for the SBSE, our evaluation of change (criterion 4) will concern whether it has become more pluralist, addresses socio-political dimensions of economics, and make explicit educational goals inclusive of a non-instrumental approach.

We now apply these criteria to the Economics benchmark statement (SBSE).

### **III. THE SUBJECT BENCHMARK STATEMENT IN ECONOMICS**

Subject Benchmark Statements (SBS) are important elements of the regulatory environment in UK higher education. They provide a context and a set of guidelines for the delivery of degree programmes. They define ‘what can be expected of a graduate in the subject, in terms of what they might know, do and understand at the end of their studies’ (SBSE, p. 1). Further, SBSs are ‘used as reference points in the design, delivery and review of academic programmes. They provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with the programme but are not intended to represent a national curriculum in a subject or to prescribe set approaches to teaching, learning or assessment’ (p. 2). There is a set of SBSs, which share similarities but also sometimes exhibit significant variation. Our present task is to assess the most recent draft of the SBS for Economics in terms of our four key questions.

#### *III.1. Is the SBSE pluralist?*

The SBSE is written by a panel. Significantly, the composition of the 2015 panel was broader than in previous incarnations. Alongside mainstream academic economists were various other constituencies, including specific educational expertise (Alvin Birdi, Economics Network director) and heterodox experts in finance, Daniela Gabor (UWE, Bristol) and Neil Lancaster (De Montfort). The impact of the latter two is evident through greater emphasis on finance and money; and critical thinking. Lancaster also linked formally to several students from the

*Rethinking Economics* group who were present. Bringing the perspective of the UK's largest employer of economists was the former deputy director of the Government Economic Service, Andy Ross. His impact is evident via a new paragraph on employers' needs. Overall, this new panel augured a radically different, more pluralist and epistemologically cautious document.

However, there was no *requirement* for the SBSE to be pluralist, or to become pluralist. SBSs merely 'allow for flexibility and innovation in programme design within a framework *agreed by the subject community*' (SBSE, p. 2, emphasis added). As the italicised phrase suggests, the SBSE expresses a view from the discipline of itself. There is clearly scope to show that economics can become a pluralist subject – as other disciplines do – *or* that it had responded to demands for pluralism by shifting its perspective either by explicitly adopting greater variety of approach and/or by displaying greater epistemological caution. Indeed, as Lancaster (2015) reports, at the outset of the discussion, the Committee Chair declared that 'we are all pluralists now', suggesting sufficient will to change the document.

What evidence is there that the SBSE has become more pluralist? Overall, we argue that the document suggests more openness, including a more descriptive tone and greater evidence of epistemological caution. Unfortunately, the document gives as it takes away: the openness is superficial, the caution is undermined by hubris, and the descriptive tone may actually have a dogmatic aspect.

First, SBSE section 2.2 contains a rather pluralist injunction: 'Various interpretations of commonly observed economic phenomena exist, and hence explanations may be contested. It is therefore important that...theories are evidence-based, using quantitative and qualitative data analysis' (p. 5). The statement appears significantly open. It hints at both greater tolerance of alternatives and a recognition that established ideas may be fallible. These

implications would be important given criticisms of economics as monist and hubristic.

However, *acknowledging* pluralism minimally, in some circumstances, is not the same as *enabling* pluralism. Merely referring to alternatives is weak. A course could satisfy the injunction to examine alternative approaches by offering merely two very similar interpretations of a phenomenon from the same school of thought. While economics as a discipline is changing and exhibits a great diversity, in its teaching established schools of thought considered ‘heterodox’, such as Post Keynesianism, Marxism and Institutionalism are not mentioned. There is certainly no injunction to engage meaningfully with them. Far from proclaiming that ‘we are all pluralists now’, the SBSE provides scant grounds for pluralism.

Second, an alternative perspective on the earlier SBSEs was that their main problem was not monism, but overconfidence. Given the weight attributed to the hubris of economists (and their employers in finance) in many explanations of the crisis, greater humility was warranted and perhaps expected. One of the effects of the *threat* to credibility suffered by economists might be that this confidence was eroded. Let us investigate whether the SBSE supports this thesis.

There is evidence of an epistemological shift in the SBSE. The document now contains many references to the importance of historical context. For example, SBSE section 2.2 states: it is ‘important that economic phenomena are studied in their relevant historical, political, institutional, international, social and environmental contexts’ (p. 5). This is significant because it suggests results are less likely to be universal. Similarly, the document’s new references to criticality – including in its summary of changes – might be interpreted as representative of greater epistemological caution. Specifically, section 3.1 refers to being critical about the specific assumptions being made in economic modelling. Section 4.1ii now acknowledges that different methods have strengths and weaknesses.

Section 5.4iii includes an additional clause emphasising the need for caution about data sources.

Further, ‘...economists learn not to be misled by numbers or the selective use of data. They question whether the numbers represent what they claim, they understand statistical significance and they are aware of at least some of the difficulties in sampling a population. In addition, with some understanding of econometrics, they recognise that conclusions drawn from data might be ambiguous’ (section 5.5, p. 6). This again suggests an epistemological shift.

However, the statement is guilty of omission and of smuggling in priorities. For instance, it retains a stress on *statistical* significance and makes no explicit acknowledgement of substantive *economic* significance. This is problematic because it reinforces the notion that technical expertise trumps an engagement with reality. Second, while recognition that ‘conclusions drawn from data might be ambiguous’ is commendable, data analysis is implicitly equated with econometrics. There is no reference in the document to other types of data analysis, despite their being increasingly employed and recognised as useful by economists. Proposed re-wording to encompass qualitative and mixed-methods research was rejected by the SBSE committee (Lancaster, 2015). Hence, without justification, a relative prominence is still given to mathematics and computing techniques (section 4.1iii). As Morgan (2015, p. 532) argues, this position renders economics less able to generate adequate scientific accounts of phenomena, which require economists to ‘seek out and use *all relevant methods*’ (emphasis added).

Other statements undermine further the sense of an epistemological shift and hence claims to pluralism. Whilst there is greater awareness that economics is under external scrutiny – for instance its opening statements refer to its audience – the document’s humility could be stronger. An exemplar of this is SBSE’s attempt to outline the nature of economics. The document claims that economics has a ‘distinctive nature’ (1.1, p. 5). Further, it states (2.1, p. 5):

‘Economics is the study of the factors that influence income, wealth and well-being. From this it seeks to inform the design and implementation of economic policy. Its aim is to analyse and understand the allocation, distribution and utilisation of resources and the consequences for economic and social well-being.’

Now, this statement could be regarded as relatively benign. Most economists might agree that economics concerns those factors and topics, notwithstanding disagreement about the importance of allocation (to some economists) and distribution (to others). However, in comparison with other disciplines, economics appears more dogmatic. Freeman (2009) juxtaposes the SBSE with its counterpart for Theology and Religious Studies (TRS), which one might expect to be more prone to dogma. In fact, TRS appears much less certain about its purpose and identity, stressing that it ‘...*may be characterised as a family of methods...*’ (QAAHE, 2007b, p. 05, emphasis added).

Further contrasts are illustrative. Physics, for example, is a discipline that has been aped by mainstream ‘neoclassical’ economists who, however, do not follow the behaviour of physicists of actually abandoning wrong theories (Mirowski, 2002). The SBS for Physics, Astronomy and Astrophysics (QAAHE, 2016) notes that ‘Physics is a continually evolving discipline that has theoretical, computational and experimental aspects; [and that] many physicists span these categories’. It also recognises its interdisciplinary nature. Biology has also inspired economics, though not the current mainstream ‘neoclassical’ economics. Its SBS (QAAHE, 2007c) states: ‘Study of the biosciences involves a multidisciplinary approach to the understanding of life processes. Complexity and the relationship between form and function are intrinsic to the biosciences’. This may seem to restrict debate and exclude reductionism; however the passage continues: ‘Although some biologists strive to reduce complex systems to their simplest components, all acknowledge that they are ultimately working with organisms whose complexity is fundamental

to their life, difficult to understand and greatly influenced by their environment'. Finally, in its SBS, mathematics (QAAHE, 2007d) is portrayed as a vast subject with numerous applications. And, though it is based around principles of abstraction, generalisation and deduction, the SBS does not prescribe beyond that and explicitly recognises the history of the subject and the relevance of earlier mathematics (7). These role-model sciences appear, compared to economics, somewhat more open *and cautious*.

Third, significantly, there has been a linguistic shift in the SBSE to a more descriptive (and ostensibly more contingent) tone: from stating what students will *normally* learn to what they would *usually* learn (SBSE, section 4.1). Furthermore, in SBSE section 3.1, an aim of undergraduate programmes is to 'foster an understanding of alternative approaches to the analysis of economic phenomena'. Also, less stress is now placed on the core neoclassical concept of scarcity that many heterodox economists reject (see Lee, 2000). Of further significance was the removal of the term 'a coherent core of economic principles' (2007a) (p. 7) in favour of 'Economic concepts, principles and tools' (section 4.1i). These examples may reflect an implicit objective to describe rather than prescribe economics. That seems promising.

However, the apparent shift towards a more descriptive tone instead of having a prescriptive purpose may disguise dogmatism. The SBSE presents a core, or 'mainstream', which fits the majority of the discipline, granting only limited room and prestige to dissenting perspectives. By defining what is 'usual', one can exclude. They facilitate insults against heterodox economists that their work is not core economics, or worse, *not economics at all*. These serve to confer opprobrium on them and status on others. Whereas prescription works via fiat, description works via norms, conventions, and other subtle forms of power.

Another rationale for descriptivism is if the power of the regulatory document is weak. In the case of the SBSE, its power is limited by a number of factors. Its

preamble stresses that it has advisory and informative purposes and is not intended as a framework akin to a national curriculum (which is explicitly proscribed). Specifically, SBSs are '*reference points* in the design, delivery and review of academic programmes...[which] provide *general guidance* for articulating the learning outcomes associated with the programme...[and] *allow* for flexibility and innovation in programme design within a framework *agreed by the subject community*' (p. 2, emphasis added). This begins to suggest that though it is permissive, the power of the SBSE is small.

What actually gets taught in departments reflects greatly the desires of the staff within them (see Clarke and Mearman, 2003). However, the composition of staffing is driven mainly not by teaching but by research. Lee et al. (2013, p. 714) show that research assessment has biased hires in UK departments towards mainstream mathematical modelling, thereby narrowing theoretical pluralism therein by reinforcing the mainstream preference for mathematical economists. Consequently, it is unlikely that intellectual history, methodology or a pluralist approach will take root in teaching. So there are institutional constraints (and enablements) on the governmental, legislative, disciplinary and local levels acting on academics who construct curricula or courses. Not least, promotion routes and criteria reinforce existing biases. Against this backdrop, the SBSE document remains rather impotent and likely to be overridden.

In conclusion, despite apparent shifts in tone and content, the SBSE does not deliver greater pluralism. In the next section we argue that this is manifest in the SBSE's treatment of socio-political factors and ethics (section III.2). This has significant implications for the prospects of social economics and other heterodox approaches. The lack of pluralism is reinforced by a lack of engagement with educational philosophy and practice, as discussed in section III.3.

### *III.2. How does the SBSE treat ethics, power, politics and society within economics?*



We now consider how the SBSE appears to treat ‘the economy’, and then how it deals with social, political and ethical dimensions of economics. The first point to note is that the SBSE does not offer an *explicit* ontological vision. However, atomistic ontological presuppositions are implied in its treatment of the macro level as an aggregation (SBSE, section 2.2). Nonetheless, the SBSE clearly recognises that the economy sits in a context: ‘It is therefore important that economic phenomena are studied in their relevant historical, political, institutional, international social and environmental contexts...’ (SBSE section 2.2). Unfortunately, reflecting prevailing approaches within the discipline, the SBSE treats the economy as a strictly separate entity. *A fortiori*, economics is treated as a rather separate social science. Thus, the SBSE maintains a very clear sense of what economics is (section 2.1), and that it has a “distinctive nature” – its boundaries are still clear enough to make this claim – or at least, economists’ abilities remain sufficient to identify correctly the boundaries. This allows one to continue to delineate strictly what is economic (and what is not). In this way it is fundamentally different from how a social economist would look at it.

For example, in the key skill of ‘framing’ (SBSE section 5.4iv) the student should understand a problem’s parameters and how these might change. Further, this ‘encourages a student to place the economic problem in its broader social and political context’. Moreover, in assessment, instructors are guided to consider ‘[h]ow successfully ... students [have] used evidence and knowledge of historical, political, institutional, international, social and environmental contexts...’ This seems reasonable; however, in considering another key skill, ‘abstraction’, the student’s objective is to ‘provide a useable framework for evaluation and assessment of the effects of policy *or other exogenous events*’ (section 5.4i, emphasis added). The approach also maintains the assumption that the ‘economic’ aspects can be separated easily from the complex whole. Further, ‘non-economic’ events are still considered ‘exogenous’, rather than, say, political and cultural factors being mutually constitutive with the economic. To treat policy as an

exogenous event, for instance, ignores the extensive deployment of economists from all aspects of modern government.

Furthermore, there is little evidence to suggest that social, environmental, political, power, and ethical dimensions are considered inherent to economics: rather these are treated as external shocks, whose internal effects are to be explored. The SBSE seems to exclude the wider and more complex nature of economic interactions and of economics itself. Indeed, politics is largely absent. The word 'power' is not used in the SBSE. Key issues such as inequality are implied (as 'income distribution') but not explicitly discussed or emphasised. Here, then, the demands of many for more explicit consideration of the socio-political dimensions of economics have been ignored, demonstrating a failure to address significant responses to student and academic calls for more pluralism and real-world application of economic theories.

Further, we see little evidence that the SBSE reflects another recent shift in economics towards interdisciplinarity. The nature of the interaction between economics and other disciplines remains rather superficial, selective and, in some ways, still imperialistic. Consider how the SBSE defines economics. This has implications for the relation of the subject to other disciplines. The document now says that, 'Economics ... draws on and influences other social sciences. It also links with other subject areas such as ethics, finance, geography, history, international relations, law, philosophy and psychology. It uses and interacts with mathematical and statistical methods and sciences such as environmental science, biology and medicine' (SBSE, section 2.3). The list of disciplines is salient. Explicit reference to politics and sociology has been removed; whereas ethics has been added in. However, though the document does mention conflict of interest, this is at a conceptual level. Significantly, despite a recent public focus on it, the SBSE does not refer to professional ethics.

The document's treatment of ethics is significant. Economics *links to* ethics (2.3). Any notion that economics is *inherently* ethical is absent. More broadly, the SBSE makes no explicit reference to normative judgement or positions – and certainly avoids any suggestion that economics is inherently value-laden. The sole use of the word 'value' refers to what employers may want in graduates (3.1, 5.2). The absence of this term is further evidence of the SBSE's weak pluralism: value is, after all, a foundational concept in economics. Further, the SBSE contains no reference to morality. References to welfare are exceptions, but again there is no explicit discussion of welfare as being utilitarian or that there are alternative conceptions of well-being. Indeed the latter is treated as synonymous with income and wealth (2.1).

Approached in this way, economics is not a moral, ethical, political or social discipline *per se*. This is clearly antithetical to social economics, for which “ethics concerns how values are inescapably intertwined with social relationships” (Davis and Dolfsma, 2008, p. 2). One way to have dealt with this matter more effectively would have been, drawing on section 3.1, to become more pluralist by incorporating heterodox economics perspectives. Much of heterodox economics acknowledges that the economy is about who we are as human beings and how we should live our lives and this involves normative judgments. These have to be made explicit and reasoned out vis-à-vis the alternatives (see for example, Lee and Cronin, 2016; and Jo et al, 2017).

### *III.3. What are the SBSE's educational goals and approach?*

We have argued in section III.1 that the new SBSE is not noticeably more pluralist. Further, its entrenched monism manifests in an inadequate treatment of power and politics in economics (section III.2). These outcomes reflect the structures of the economics discipline; however, they need not mean that economics teaching has to be so narrow. A way to counteract that would be for economics educators to adopt a more pluralist approach. One way to inspire that pluralism would be to

adopt a liberal or critical educational philosophy. Unfortunately economics educators have shown little explicit recognition of, or concern for, educational philosophy. Accordingly, we argue that the SBSE is weak on its explicit discussion of educational goals while implicitly adopting a mostly instrumentalist stance focused on the development of knowledge and skills.

Further, although there seems to be a commitment to the development of students' skills, there is misunderstanding about these skills. Specifically, there appears to be confusion between subject-specific and transferable skills. The SBSE identifies four key subject-specific skills: abstraction, framing, reasoning, and quantification. It is clear that none of these is either specific to economics, or derived from it. The impression of confusion is reinforced by the SBSE's use of the notion of 'transferable skills'. At this point (section 5.5i), the document identifies *inter alia* opportunity cost, incentives, expectations, equilibrium, and marginal analysis as transferable. On the contrary, these are clearly subject-specific – and indeed draw on one economic paradigm – which the document fudges by using the phrase 'transferable application of economic concepts'. The document claims that '[s]tudents in economics are exposed to these issues and this enhances their potential effectiveness as decision-makers' (p. 9). The muddle is further evidenced by the fact that, although quantification is regarded as a subject-specific skill, section 5.6 (correctly) identifies 'numeracy' as a transferable facet. These examples suggest that the SBSE's engagement with educational theory and philosophy could be stronger.

Beyond this, it seems that the *implicit* educational philosophy of the document is instrumental. This can be inferred from statements within the document, and omissions from it. Let us examine the stated aims of the SBSE. These are mainly instrumental. Section 3.1 begins with a statement that economics degrees are about 'education and training in economic concepts, theories, ideas and tools, and their application' (p. 6). However, this is the only use of the word 'education' in the document, whereas training appears four times. Indeed, the word education was

absent in 2000, 2007, and the first draft of the 2015 document, only being inserted after critical discussion within the group. This reinforces the impression that the SBSE – and hence economics curricula – aims merely at training students. While the SBSE contains references to evaluation, these are in all but one case explicitly about policy. While the document proclaims that a commitment to critical thinking has been strengthened, these changes come late in the document.

The SBSE remains relatively dogmatic about the nature and content of economics. It appears relatively prone to defining problems and ways of considering them in narrow ways. A stress remains on assessing particular types of evidence using particular tools, which are geared towards proficiency in data handling rather than genuine deep, critical engagement with evidence. All of this is underpinned by a lack of acknowledgment of fundamental uncertainty in economics and fundamental disputes regarding economic knowledge claims. The SBSE makes gestures towards a different vision, but does so in tokenistic and superficial ways. Hence, the possibilities for pluralist critical thinking are lost. All of this runs contrary to liberal and critical education and buttresses the impression of instrumentalism.

The instrumentalism of the document is reinforced in its increased focus on employability. Employability was always present; however, the addition of section 5.2 to the 2015 document is significant. The section stresses many prosaic skills such as report writing and communication; but also ‘knowledge of economic history and its context...pluralistic perspectives and interdisciplinary synthesis, to inform an application of critical judgement’ (p. 9). This section, again, contains the potential for a pluralist, liberal or critical approach to economics education – but one which also has instrumental benefits to employers and society at large. As Clarke and Mearman (2004) argue, liberal goals can be consistent with employability if the latter does not focus too heavily on rote learning or repetitive training. Further, as noted in section II.3, it is likely that an educational programme will combine ‘liberal’, ‘critical’ and ‘instrumental’ objectives; however, there is no

indication in the SBSE that this combination is being pursued consciously or achieved knowingly.

One possible defence of the SBSE's approach to educational philosophy might be that the document itself does not allow for such explicit statements. In both the SBSE and the SBS for Business and Management (QAAHE, 2015), section 2 covers the nature and extent (or scope) of the subject. However, within that section, there is scope for subject-specific variation. So, the Business and Management SBS addresses specifically "improved self-awareness and personal development" (section 2.2), and "the encouragement of positive and critical attitudes towards change and enterprise" (section 2.3). Further, that defence presupposes that had the opportunity arisen, the SBSE would have taken it. This, however, seems unlikely. As Mearman et al (forthcoming) show, in another recent curricular development, the CORE Project, there is little meaningful explicit engagement with educational philosophy; and the educational approach implicit seems to be geared towards training rather than open-ended enquiry.

#### *III.4 Does the SBSE represent change?*

While the SBSE offered an opportunity for significant change, it was not required to deliver that. Some change in the document was inevitable, as stipulated by the QAAHE. However, the structure of the document conformed to a standard for all subject benchmarks. In some ways, then, the SBSE committee was limited in its scope to change the document. Nonetheless, we might have predicted that the 2015 SBSE would be significantly different from its predecessors, given the make-up of the panel and, particularly, in the context of the economic crisis which had occurred since the 2007 edition and the unprecedented criticism of economics which it triggered. Indeed, a February press release was headed 'QAA debate signals fundamental change in the study of economics' (Morgan, 2015: p. 520).

Largely, though, this promise was confounded. The most striking thing about the *original* draft of the document was how similar it was to its predecessor. Subsequent debate within the group led to the inclusion of newer material, for instance on employability. Nonetheless, arguably, the SBSE fails even to capture many developments in mainstream research. Despite its role as one of the contributing factors to the economic crisis, finance remained largely ignored. Further, the ecological crisis was still essentially omitted. Despite considerable noise about history, there was relatively little about it. As Lancaster (2015) notes 'Students are asked to 'appreciate history (of economic thought)' but not to understand it'. For those expecting fundamental change, the SBSE was disappointing. However, for those inside the process, perhaps only gradual change was politically feasible.

We have also examined the claim (made privately) of proponents of the SBSE that it contains an epistemological shift, in which declarations which in previous versions of the SBSE were bold, are presented more cautiously. There is some evidence for this. However, the changes of language in the SBSE may be so subtle as to be lost; and indeed other bolder statements contradict them, undermining any epistemological shift they might convey. There seems to be little reduced confidence in economists to make claims about how the economy works, or how one would know this.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This paper has explored the revision of the UK SBSE, an opportunity for economics to demonstrate the major curricular change that was demanded by students (Earle, et al 2016), government and the wider public. However, we have argued that the new SBSE falls short of these expectations. Indeed, seemingly it goes even less far than does the CORE Project, in terms of updating the curriculum, or Besley et al (2015)'s recommendations that much greater explicit attention be paid to interdisciplinarity, particularly politics and history.

In the language of our evaluative criteria, the SBSE continues to exhibit limited pluralism, either in terms of openness to fundamentally different alternatives, or to the possibility that the dominant view might be wrong. In teaching this is a significant deficiency as it limits the achievement of key educational goals such as the development of core cognitive faculties. Furthermore, the SBSE is limited in creating the environment for a meaningful engagement with the wider social-political, and ethical, nature of economics. Nonetheless, this deficiency could be addressed if the SBSE paid explicit attention to educational philosophy. Unfortunately, our analysis suggests that the SBSE pays scant *explicit* attention to the educational purpose of economics teaching. This is a fundamental problem: 'Instructors simply function in a fog of their own making unless they know what they want their students to accomplish as a result of their instruction' (Mager quoted by Curzon, 1990, p. 131). As such, the SBSE does exhibit some change; however, it is remarkably similar to its previous incarnation. This inertia reflects disciplinary structures *and* reinforces the theoretical and methodological monism within the discipline. In these senses, the SBSE presents change in order to stay the same. These are crucial findings in understanding how governance structures change; or how and why they do not change. The issues raised therefore resonate beyond the UK context.

Our concerns about the SBSE resonate particularly strongly with social economists. As, for instance, Davis and Dolfsma (2008) suggest, social economics has been inherently pluralist. They note that "social economists have a variety of additional orientations, including institutionalism, Marxism, feminism..." (p. 4). As we have seen the document creates little space for these perspectives or for social economics itself. Second, social economists are interdisciplinary, yet the SBSE is selective in its engagement with other disciplines. This problem is manifest in the SBSE's treatments of society and ethics. Social economists "treat the economy as fundamentally social" (p. 2), whereas in the SBSE there is little sense of the economic being embedded in the social. Further, social economics "...



emphasises the connection between economics and ethics, where ethics concerns how values are inescapably intertwined with social relationships” (p. 2). As we have argued, the SBSE does not do this. As such, the SBSE seems unlikely to facilitate the development of social economists, who seek to understand “the deep underlying social-value principles that encompass and guide the entire social economy” (p. 5).

A starting point for the needed fundamental change would be to focus on its educational (and therefore broader societal) objectives. Liberal education demands that students develop critical thinking, autonomy, and wisdom. Incidentally, these also serve the purposes of fostering insightful citizens and able workers. However, those objectives may not be well-served if the objectives of economics educators are mainly to produce the next generation of neoclassical researchers. Instead, one might imagine economists to be specialists seeking to solve practical problems. Pluralism may play an important role here, as a vehicle for developing flexible, critical thinking and developing multiple bases of knowledge when solving complex problems. That might in turn reduce the perceived disconnection between economists and their various constituents both inside and outside of academia, ranging from the public to students and other academic fields.

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