Doing curriculum research: some pointers

Dear reader,

Recently, the movement for pluralism in economics has published a number of reviews of the curricula used to teach us economics. The members of the PEPS-Economie Students’ Association did research into French undergraduate economics curricula by looking at course titles (Association, 2014), ISIPE used this framework to do a comparison between countries (Jatteau, 2016), in the Germany they have also applied this framework (Fauser & Kaskel, 2016) and in Britain they have investigated in detail how economics students are tested (Earle, Moral, & Ward-Perkins, 2016). We are Rethinking Economics NL, and we recently published the report *Thinking like an economist? A quantitative analysis of economics bachelor curricula in the Netherlands.* That report analyzes and compares the content of the curricula of all nine Dutch bachelor tracks in Economics.

If you want to know what we did, the Dutch report is publicly available, [here](http://www.economieonderwijs.nl/). But if you want to *do* something similar, it is worthwhile to realize there were many choices, mistakes, discussions and explorations along the way which didn’t make it into the public version – the backstory. By the way, if you want to use our material, text, theoretical work, empirical strategy, or any other element of this report, please do! Feel free to steal 😊. The work is Creative Commons, which means that it’s anyone’s to use, as long as you don’t go commercial with it.

The purpose of the document before you is to set out the lessons learned in the Netherlands, during the process of setting up that research, gathering data, analysing the results and writing it all out – in a manner calculated to achieve our goal of stirring up discussion surrounding these programs. To set these out as clearly as possible, we have decided to *focus on the choices* we made, and the considerations behind them.

We provide relatively much information on the considerations that lead us to make our choices. But this is not meant to be an advertorial for ‘doing it the Dutch way’; we simply know more about our own considerations and doubts. As the authors of other studies add to this document, it will be further enriched with a variety of angles. And in general, we do set out why we did what we did, but we do not believe that there is one ‘optimal way’ to do such research. It depends very much on the situation in your country/university. Important factors are:

* How much time/(wo)manpower do you have?
* How many programs do you want to analyze?
* Who is your intended audience?
* What is the strategic objective of the research?
* What is your own interest in this project?

# Method: quantitative or qualitative?

An important choice in setting up such research is between qualitative and quantitative research. Most likely you have been speaking out already, on the basis of your own experiences in economics education. That would be a crude form of qualitative research. Most of the examples in this document are quantitative research. Perhaps this is a consequence of the fact that our economic training has taught us all that quantitative data is ‘real’ data. But we feel that there is another argument for quantitative research: it is more easily comparable between universities. And it’s not just economists who feel that numbers are the real thing: increasingly, the public and policy-makers feel the same way. That doesn’t mean we should just go along with it and start thinking the same way. It simply means that if we can only reach certain audiences with quantitative data, we should perhaps consider…making quantitative data for them. People find it much harder to ignore numbers than to ignore stories.

However, it is not necessarily *easy* to create quantitative data. It hurts to squeeze the complex reality of an experience, a course, a theory or an idea into a single figure or statistic, and it always misses more information than it captures. But don’t let that put you off. The purpose of quantitative data is not to fully describe your object of investigation, it is to prove *one specific thing* about it. Real category boundaries are fuzzy, and statistical boundaries are way to absolute. But as long as you are confident that your statistical boundaries are roughly in the right place, your research will have contributed something meaningful to the discussion.

On the other hand, qualitative data can also speak in ways that numbers cannot. If this is where your personal strength lies, or you feel that this is what the debate in your country/university needs, then by all means, go for it! We are just putting out some considerations here which might be useful to further your own thinking about this stuff, but we certainly don’t want to tell you what to do or how to do it.

# Data sources

There are many possible data sources for a research project like this. Some of these are:

* Course titles (ISIPE / Germany / France studies)
* Course descriptions (NL Thinking like an Economist?)
* Exams (Econocracy, Rethinking UK methodology)
* Survey among students
* Interviews among students
* Interviews/survey among employers
* Personal experience of courses ([Christopher Proctor piece](https://issuu.com/isrf/docs/isrf_bulletin_issue_ix/22))

The quickest ways to do such research, especially for a large ‘outsider’ audience, is to use course titles (crude quantitative method) or personal experience of courses (crude qualitative method). In the Netherlands, relatively detailed course descriptions for all bachelor courses are available online, so we were able to do the whole research with a team of two, from the comfort of our living rooms. This allowed us to build up a broad and detailed picture of the contents of the various curricula (see report for details). Another way to get a clear and honest view of what students are supposed to learn is the *Econocracy* way: they checked what’s in the exams. This is the Realpolitik of education, that is: what are students *forced* to learn, what we are tested on? That’s what really matters.

These are all largely quantitative research strategies, and for good reason. If your primary audience consists of academic economists, you can be sure that ‘data’, that is, *quantitative* data, will catch their eye. But quantitative research can only get you so far, in terms of really capturing what people learn. To get a truly accurate and detailed picture, you should probably combine quantitative and qualitative research. Some options here are surveys among students, interviews among students, details from course evaluations, or your own experiences – after all, you are very close to your own research object.

Considerations for this choice: If you have a smaller sample of universities (or just one), this is possible. For us, it wasn’t. If we had replaced our quantitative research with it, that would have been the end of our comparability – this is simply easier with quantitative research. And if we had added it to our quantitative research it would have been a lot more work. Finally, we would have risked ‘tainting’ our quantitative, ‘positive’ results, with qualitative, and thus ‘normative’ results. These views are not ours, but they are held by the majority of academic economists: “numbers are facts, text is just an opinion”. Keep this in mind when you make your choice: who are you trying to convince, and what kind of data convinces them? If your primary audience is the general public, or policymakers, then you might well want to choose something more ‘human’ than statistics. But if your primary audience consists of economists, numbers work well.

Another possible data source consists of the (future) employers of students. If these feel that the graduates they are getting have only been brainwashed into a monistic theory, and need to be retrained to be of any use, then by all means, get them to fill out a simple survey to this effect. It will be a powerful campaigning tool.

# Normative or positive?

Of course, there is no such thing as positive science. There is no ‘neutral’ picture of the world, everything you say or analyse is done from a certain vantage point, looking through a specific type of glasses. But are you going to clearly take a stance in your findings, or fuel the debate with data, and leave it to others to draw conclusions?

In the Netherlands, we experience this as a continuous balancing act. The way we decided to think about it is by using the commonly known [good cop/bad cop](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fR5xHGCJYk) metaphor. On one end of the strategic spectrum is the *good cop* strategy. No rough shouting, no public attention grabbing, no op-ed pieces in media or demonstrative actions in class. Instead, politely trying to get the faculty to listen to your concerns, offering to help with thinking out ways to improve the curriculum. Most faculties will try to encourage this attitude, and in certain instances, it can be very effective. On the other end of the strategic spectrum is the *bad cop* strategy. Writing angry letters and posters, making blanket statements about the economics programs (such as calling it “autistic”, like students in Paris did), or even doing a walk-out (like happened to Mankiw at his Harvard class). Going public and going angry, in short.

We believe that your position as a student group on this strategic spectrum is something to continuously evaluate and adjust. In the early phases of the movement, it is most important to raise a clear flag about the problem you see. That generally means going *bad cop.* If other students, faculty and outsiders don’t realize there’s a problem in economics education, you won’t get any support off the ground and you won’t be heard, so playing *good cop* generally doesn’t work in this stadium. In the Netherlands, we exclusively played *bad cop* in the first year or so of our movement. This allows for hard (public) debates, which are a very good way to stake out your position and to make people aware of both the problem and your existence as a student group which is working to do something about it.

In recent years, we have decided to shift on the strategic spectrum. We are now somewhere in the middle. We haven’t written an op-ed in over a year, and when we explain what’s wrong with the curriculum, we don’t use blanket statements so much anymore (we also got better at phrasing our blanket statements to avoid stepping on toes unnecessarily). This is possible because there are other, better-known public voices who support our cause in a very vocal way, who in effect do the street fighting for us: several professors and some economic journalists and commentators.

So what we tried to do with this report, *Thinking like an economist?*, is two things. We tried to create the kind of material that sympathetic faculty leaders, such as deans, need internally, for academic economists to realize and show that there is a problem in economics education, and to show that problem *in a nuanced and detailed way*. And we try to provide ammunition for those public voices that speak out for our cause. So in our report, we don’t draw very explicit conclusions. We don’t really tie neoclassical economics to neoliberal policies. We don’t say: this theoretical approach has those consequences. But we do provide all the statistical data to *support and enable* such conclusions. And we make sure that we talk to the opinion makers who are on our side, to provide them with this material and to facilitate them in speaking out on our behalf.

In this way, we try to balance the good cop / bad cop tightrope. And if this report does not have the desired effect of kickstarting change in the curricula, we will move out towards the *bad cop* side of the spectrum again, trying to raise some alarm. Decide for yourself where the debate is at in your situation, and what kind of message/content would be most effective.

# Theoretical framework

This is one of the most important choices you will make. It is also one of the most difficult choices, and that is because a good theoretical framework becomes invisible once it’s been put into place. A good theoretical framework looks so logical to the reader, that (s)he does not question it and simply takes your schematic representation of the world for granted. At the same time, it is a very powerful device; a theoretical framework literally puts a frame on the world. And most likely there has not been prior research of this type in your environment, so your theoretical framework is the first and only one people see. You get to frame the discussion. Take your time to do so.

There is a surprising degree of variety between the different research projects in this regard. We present the options as we see them one by one.

## Option 1: sum up the existing curriculum

The French, the German and the ISIPE research tallied courses by names to quickly create an overview of the contents of a large amount of universities. In a sense, this means there is no need to create an independent theoretical framework. You simply take the course names as given, and assume that they stand for clear categories of knowledge.

This is a great approach if you want to cover a lot of bases quickly, or do an international comparison. It is relatively easy and won’t be attacked, because there is almost no possible controversy in interpreting your results. After all, you simply followed the course names as they were given and did a simply addition exercise. Yet it can still show very powerful results. If you choose this approach, make sure that the same course name means roughly the same course content throughout your research area (“micro-economics 1” in Kassel = “micro-economics 1” in Paris?).

## Option 2: compare to implicit ideal type

Our own research *Thinking like an economist?* starts with the question: what should economists learn? We sketch two options: learning a specific theoretical lens on the world (i.e. choices under conditions of scarcity), or learning (to think) about ‘the economy’. We then choose “learning about the economy”, since this is what society requires of economists: that they are good at understanding and managing the economy. Then we ask the follow-up question: what do you need to be able to properly study this aspect of our society, ‘the economy’?

The answer to this question then falls apart in four different sub-questions. First, since the economy is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, you need a broad basis in terms of methodological approaches. Sub-question 1: what research methods are taught, in what proportions? You also need a variety of ‘lenses’ or theoretical perspectives. Sub-question 2: what theoretical perspectives are taught, in what proportions? Furthermore, theory and method are not enough; you need thorough knowledge of the ‘real economy’. Sub-question 3: how many courses spend serious time on specific economic sectors, specific problems (poverty, climate change, banking crisis, …)? Finally, you need to have skills in terms of critical thinking and discussing. Sub-question 4: what didactic methods are used to stimulate critical thinking?

In short, we put an implicit frame on the discussion. The answer to our first sub-question is a number of pie charts, which show very clearly that the thinking in economics courses is very monistic, with neoclassical economics taking 86% of all theory course time. The answer to our third sub-question is that 75% of all courses spend no attention on the real economy whatsoever. This is a result that only comes out if you decide that you find this important, so you end up measuring how much attention is spent on the real economy. In short: it’s more work to make your own theoretical framework. But if you do, you get to decide what’s important, what gets highlighted. And of course, again, feel free to use (pieces of) ours.

## Option 3: zoom in on a specific aspect of the program

The authors of the *Econocracy* study also created their own theoretical framework in order to investigate how economics students are being tested and evaluated. They have categorized all the exam questions in the following four categories: (1) Operate a model; (2) Describe questions; (3) Evaluate questions; and (4) Multiple choice. In doing so they showed whether students are being asked to have technical modelling skills, reproduce knowledge, use their independent judgement or just fill in the right option.

This is again a lot more work than option 1, for two reasons. First, because the authors had to work out their own theoretical framework. They could have gone for other categories, such as (1) Build a model, (2) Argue qualitatively, (3) Argue quantitative, (4) Multiple Choice, (5) Essay question. Or literally any number of other options. The point is that creating your own theoretical framework is hard work: you have to find a way to squeeze the world into categories of your own making, categories which say something meaningful about the thing you care about (in this case: the ways people learn to think). Second, this was hard work because the authors then had to impose their own home-made theoretical categories on empirical material (the exams) which did not necessarily fit neatly into the categories thought up by the *Econocracy* authors. For example, some questions may have involved both operating a model (1) and describing an argument (2). Where do you categorize those?

But, it can deliver powerful results, exactly because the authors (like us in the Netherlands) were able to put *their own frame* on the world. Their results speak directly to the point they care about. A result like “90% of the introductory courses are on micro-economics” does not speak directly to non-economists. It requires quite some additional explanation of what micro-economics is, and what the function of an introductory course is. But a result like “in 90% of exam questions, students are forced to simply operate models, unquestioningly”, *does* speak directly to people, because its frame has been carefully constructed.

## Options, options, options. So how to make this choice?

We would advise you to first ask yourself carefully what exactly you want to show with your research, and to whom you want to show it. This question is harder than it may sound. Once you’ve figured that out, decide whether this requires a theoretical framework that is radically different from those described above. If not, you are lucky, because you can simply borrow from the pre-existing research, although every theoretical framework might need some tweaking to fit to your own situation.

If you decide that it’s really necessary to create a new theoretical framework from scratch, which may well happen, then we strongly advise you to get in touch with some of the people who have done similar research in the past (see contact details at the bottom of this document). Not because we own the Universal Truth about this kind of project, or because we can tell you exactly what to do. But because we have all explored widely different options to structure this kind of research, including going into a lot of dead end options. So we may be able to help you to think through your project and through the hard process of creating your own theoretical framework. It’s a pity to go at it alone if you don’t have to; this kind of work is hard enough already.

# How broad should your report range: data only, or the full story?

Should you confine yourself to gathering and reporting data in your report? Or should you tell the whole story of Rethinking Economics and what we are trying to achieve – and why this is so important? This one is very much related to the good cop / bad cop strategy spectrum we discussed above, and it again depends on the strategic purpose of the project. Is this research cushioned in a broader palette of activities? Will it form the basis for discussions with your faculty? Or is it rather aimed at the outside world / policy makers / broader public?

The two ends of this spectrum are well represented by the ISIPE research as being data-centered and the *Econocracy* as a book which is more focused on painting a larger societal picture. We do not have a lot of specific advice on this for you. Except of course that it is far, far more work to write a larger societal story like the Econocracy. Creating data is quite powerful in itself already, especially since you can simply bundle it with a copy of Econocracy or similar writing. The Rethinking argument has been expressed powerfully by a number of people by now, and there is no need to reinvent the wheel. But it’s also an interesting and educative experience to tell the full story yourself, so if you want to, go for it! Just don’t let the ‘perfect’ become the enemy of the ‘good’, and end up never publishing anything at all.

What might be useful is points to consider around various possible chapters of your report:

* **Executive summary.** This is always a good idea. It may be very obvious to you and me why this stuff is so important, and what it means that there is no History of Economic Thought course, but most outsiders have no clue how to interpret such data and what to look for. So summarize it for them. And spend serious time on this: 90% of the readers of your report will only read this, so make it count!
* **Methodology**. You need to add *some* methodology, but it’s generally fairly boring work, and will only be read by (a) those who want to do similar work (b) those who are looking for something to attack you on. So the extensiveness of this section mainly depends on how many attacks on your data you expect.
* **(Policy) recommendations**. A section with practical recommendations can take away from the ‘neutrality’ of your report. After all, if you already know what needs to happen and why, then isn’t your report a very partisan document? In the Netherlands, we decided to add such a section anyway, because we wanted this report to be able to stand on its own and tell the full ‘Rethinking story’. But if you have the possibility to give recommendations in person and in separate documents, that may well be a better option for your situation.
* **Philosophy of science**. It’s one thing to (briefly) describe your theoretical framework, it’s quite another enterprise to go deeply into the philosophy of science of economics. In the Dutch report, we did end up spending 10 pages on explaining the different ways ‘economics’ has been conceived of over the centuries. We found this to be necessary, to support our theoretical framework, which says: you shouldn’t be learning to ‘think like an economist’ primarily; economics should be about the economy. Today, this is not common sense in economics faculties. Most academic economists think of the discipline as a bundle of methods, a way of thinking. So we wrote a section showing how this has changed since Adam Smith, and how for most of this period, thinking *about the economy* was what economists did.
* **Appendices**. Remember, you can always put the really boring stuff in appendices.

# Ranking, comparison or descriptives?

## Ranking

Creating a ranking is a powerful strategy for getting attention. This is a bad-cop strategy: naming and shaming. And it is important to be clear on this: it includes shaming, even if you choose to focus on the top part of the ranking. That’s because such research is a critical appraisal, so if journalists pick up on the story they will (also) write about who is at the bottom of your list (unless you choose to publish only top-3’s or so). And those finding themselves at the bottom of your ranking will be very offended, and feel attacked. So ranking is a good strategy if you have little to lose. If you’re not getting a seat at the table, then this is advisable. In that case, rank fairly but clearly, shout loudly, and force the conversation open.

## Comparison

A comparison allows for more nuance and can be more detailed. To be clear, even if you choose to do a ranking, then that won’t be all you do. Most likely you will also be providing detailed and nuanced data. It’s just that once you rank something, that’s generally the only thing people focus on. And it makes the discussion emotional, which can both help and harm your purpose. A comparison allows you to highlight differences without handing out a value judgement. Again, this can be exactly what you want.

This might also be more suitable if you do this as a thesis project, since a comparison is a very accessible academic format.

## Descriptives only

The least offensive way to write a report like this is by simply gathering and presenting descriptives. If you are serving a scientifically-minded audience that is best served by getting lots of data, and that would be very much offended by you interpreting that data, then this might be your best choice. But to be frank, we feel that most people are simply unable to interpret such raw data, and it would not help much for your message to stick in people’s minds.

## Our choice

So far, we’ve been unable to decide on this one. We definitely produced a lot of descriptives, which we mapped per university on a specially-designed infographic (so proud!). We also provide a comparison between the universities, but we don’t do so explicitly in our report. Instead, we do this in an academic article which we’re writing on the basis of this research, in which we scale universities on the axis ranging from “economics as a method, a way of thinking” to “economics as a topic, a real-world phenomenon to be investigated”.

And as for a ranking, we are currently not doing that, despite the fact that it is almost a surefire way to get into the newspapers again. Because at the moment, we are getting a seat at the table. The Dutch College of Deans of Economics Faculties have invited us to present our research, and we are getting plenty of attention for our work. So we don’t want to step on people’s toes too violently, which a ranking would do. But this is a tricky situation, it might simply be a way to get us to quiet down – in that case it’s working. Should we, at any point, start feeling that we are simply being appeased, we will publish a ranking after all, and get all critical and shouting-outsiderish again.

# Conclusion

This is not a conclusion. We just want to say: happy to see that you made it to the end of this document, even happier that you have decided to be part of the Rethinking movement, and *even* happier that you apparently share our passion for doing this kind of research! We know how hard it can be, so we wish you all the best with the project. We’d be very happy to hear from you, whether your research is progressing fast, slow, easy, or not at all as planned – neither did ours.

If you want, we can also Skype/e-mail about this stuff. It’s impossible to put everything in such a document that would be relevant for *your* particular situation, and in fact, conversations often bring out topics in new ways. Feel free to contact us, even if you don’t have specific questions but would just like to discuss doing this kind of work in general.

  

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