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Challenges of Teaching Economics for Undergraduate Level Students

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Abstract: ***This paper attempt at examining the challenges facing lecturers who are teaching micro and macroeconomics for undergraduate level students. The purpose of the study is provide major insights into economics learning strategies which can in return help policy makers to identify the suitable level where in economics could be taught. A survey was carried out using a questionnaire which was distributed to 30 lecturers in Sultanate of Oman in order to elicit their perceptions on these challenges. Results revealed that the parameters identified as challenges are relatively diversified in nature. It was also found that many students' academic backgrounds are not the same this makes it difficult to manage such class set-up. This study recommends that for those students who will not take economics as their specialization subject it should be taught at-least at the diploma second year level, furthers lecturers are also encouraged to use real cases with localized examples, finally ethics and academic integrity should be adhered to in order to bring in-depth knowledge and understanding which would result a critically thinking future graduates..***

Keywords: economics, class room, environment, learning

1. Introduction

The general notion about economics is that it is a very difficult, rigid subject to understand particularly when students are taking economics as a subsidiary subject they feel somehow it is rather a burden on them to study it. In addition to that recently a growing demand for higher education has forced higher education institutions to drastically change the ratio of lecturer to students this by itself worsen the situation as students' basic skills are varying . In most of the cases economics as a subject aiming to build analytical skills on learners further it also develops critical thinking and improves communication and systematic skills. This paper will investigate the effectiveness of methods of teaching principles of economics for the diploma first and second year.

2. Problem Statement

Recently students' performance in economics papers (diploma level) is showing an average grades, allocation of lecturers' to teach economics is not been done in proper manners that help academic staff members to impart their knowledge and expertise with their students. These two aspects were the main comments while piloting the research-ability of topic. This research will try to investigate on how the existing set up of procedures would enable students to enhance their performance and understand the basic subject matter of economics. It is relevant to mention that the term economics here is used when students are taking it as subsidiary subject not a major one.

3. Research Objectives

In reference to the aforementioned problem statements this research paper would be discussing the following objectives:

1) To measure the current levels of creativity in teaching methods.
2) To examine the ethical and integrity in the processes of delivering economics courses
3) To evaluate the challenges hindering teaching economics courses.
4) To assess the processes of managing large classroom settings.
5) To propose recommendations based on triangulated results.

4. Literature Review

Creating powerful learning experiences is particularly crucial in the natural resources field, where effective teaching can promote changes in behavior among students, promoting a sense of stewardship and an ethic of sustainability. Professors in this field strive to provide creative, active, and stimulating learning environments and experiences for university students. Professors often spend many hours keeping up-to-date with the latest research and trends in their field, drawing up lesson plans, and updating lecture and reading materials. They keep office hours, help students who are struggling, and incorporate student feedback. But little is known concerning what matters the most to students and their learning when it comes to their professor's intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics (e.g., Freeman et al., 2014; Light, 2001; McKeachie, Pintrich, Lin, Y.G. and Smith, 1987). **(1)**
The challenge of teaching and learning in larger courses is not a new one. As early as the 1970, lecturers were seeking to address some of the challenges in managing large lecture halls (Gaynor & Millham, 1976; Gleason, 1986) **(2)** . This is perhaps not chronologically coincidental, as many of the same financial and political pressures that characterized the landscape of higher education in the 1970s have begun to reappear in new guises in the current decade. The growing pressure to increase class size has triggered large-scale course redesign projects, often at the program, department, or university level. These projects are based on mapping course redesign to institutional priorities, including retention, efficiency, and assessment (Twigg, 2000: Twigg, 2005) **(3)** . In addition, large course redesign projects have often focused

on the integration of technological solutions, notably including clickers and flipped (and other hybrid) models, which touch on the hot-button issues of equity and quality that are associated with on-line solutions (Rosenthal & Weitz, 2012; Russell, 1999) **(4)** . The impetus to change has largely been administratively or externally driven and tied to strategic goals or imperatives that supersede the student or instructor.

Managing large classroom settings continues to be a challen**ge** for many teachers. Administrators' and senior faculty, however, often overlook the teaching development process for faculty of large classroom settings. The need for effective large classroom instructors in higher education is overwhelming (Stanley & Porter, 2002)(5). Although there is a wide variety of research and guidebooks that focus on tools, strategies, and techniques for large class faculty (e.g. Carbone, 1998; Heppner, 2007; Stanley & Porter, 2002) (6), there is a lack of research on which strategies and principles the current faculty of large classes use and which tools they would like further education about. CIDER's large classroom initiative focuses on a holistic approach that includes faculty input via surveys and interviews, current empirical research, and large classroom observations, as well as hosting the first conference on teaching large classes.

Ethics and academic integrity in higher education are continuing areas of research and discourse (e.g., Barber & Bagsby, 2011; Bertram Gallant & Drinan, 2006; Blum, 2009; Engler, Landau, & Epstein, 2008; McCabe, 2005; McCarron & Stewart, 2011; Prohaska, 2013) (7). Collectively, themes of the foregoing cited research can be categorized under institutional climate, classroom management, or students' motives for cheating. **In classroom environments it is the goal to enhance student motivation and learning outcomes.** Research shows that active engagement can bring in-depth understanding, knowledge retention, increased levels of processing, and critical thinking skills (e.g. Mareno, Bremner, & Emerson, 2010) (8). As a result, mastering the art of engaging students inside of learning environments is critical. Supporters of clickers argue that this technology can improve the engagement process of students and ultimately improve the performance levels in large classroom environments. It is the goal of clickers to monitor students' understanding and to foster cognitive interaction between students and their instructors (Caldwell, 2007; Kay & Le Sage, 2009) (9). According to Al – Lamki (2010) **(10)** "During the renaissance of the last 30 years, the Sultanate of Oman has established a relatively large and diverse system of general (pre-tertiary) education. The rapid and dynamic expansion of general education has produced an ever-increasing demand for higher education unmatched by supply." Economics as a subject usually taught in the diploma first year i.e first year of the post foundation level , it is a college compulsory subject for most of the undergraduate students business and information technology etc.

5. Methodology

Researchers are often faced with a situation, in which outside parties have conflicting views on a topic under study. The Delphi Technique is widely recognized as a 'consensus-building tool', which has been applied as a means of cognition and inquiry in a variety of fields including land-use planning, policy making, organizational restructuring and tourism. The Delphi Technique is said to be particularly appropriate in facilitating decision-making by a number of individuals in environments characterized by antagonistic or strongly opposed political or emotional factions, or when personality differences or intellectual style would be distracting in face-to-face settings (Cline, 2000; Rosenthal, 1976: 121) **(10).** The technique is recommended in evaluation studies where conflicts between stakeholders are a disruptive influence, which can become interpersonal and derail the focus of the study (Patton, 1997: 151) **(11).**

A group of 15 experienced lecturers who have already taught economics in diploma level in Oman were involved in this study , as per the Delphi technique two iteration took place the first one involved an open ended question with main objective on how teaching economics course could in an effective manner, further structured questionnaire was distributed to the respondents using Likert's scale i.e. 1-5 to gauge the various aspects of delivering economics courses in Sultanate of Oman. Researcher have utilized SPSS to conduct ANOVA for quantitative set of data of the second iteration, NVIOV was used to find out thematic analysis to evaluate the consensus level among the experts' opinions pertaining to teaching economics at diploma level in Sultanate of Oman.

6. Data Analysis

This part of the research would highlight on the main responses given by respondents, structure set of interview questions were utilized to find out how lecturers can deliver micro and macro-economic papers for the undergraduate students, around 75 % were in the view that economics papers should be interactive in nature, with a proper blending of theory and practice. Further to that students should be exposed the real world of economy through case studies and mini assignments along with quizzes. Although the respondents could mention any of the characteristics of the current course materials which by in-large not updated and the examination patterns are more or less just a repetition and using foreign symbols like US Dollar or Pound Sterling despite the fact no harm in using these symbols but the idea is localize the examples which in return help the students to understand the subject matter effectively and efficiently.

For other lecturer they feel that the students are facing a great difficulty to translate the basic numerical skills required for understanding economics in English language as in majority of the students have completed their basic certificate level in Arabic language, in some cases students will struggle to uplift their knowledge level where they could be able to apply GDP deflator for instance or the consumption function. Some lecturers are of the view that the subject is challenging for the student and there is stereotyped concepts which are stating that even if the student passes economics he/she will pass on a lower grade such as C or C - .i.e. below 69 marks only cause subject is a very difficult to the extent some of them are asking to move the subject to a higher level at-least after spending three to four semesters in post foundation they numerical and communication skills would have improved hence they can get higher grades.

Lecturers roles in any set up should be evolving on their personalities and how could impart the good values , competencies with their students who would be benefited of that through a diversity of teaching methods and techniques. Finally respondents are also harping on the fact that general graduate attributes should be observed while delivering the course, implicitly students should realize the fact that though economics is not their major specialization subject but it is an integral part of the holistic view of business environment, so it is equally important regardless the narrow field of specialization they will opt in their final years of undergraduate level.

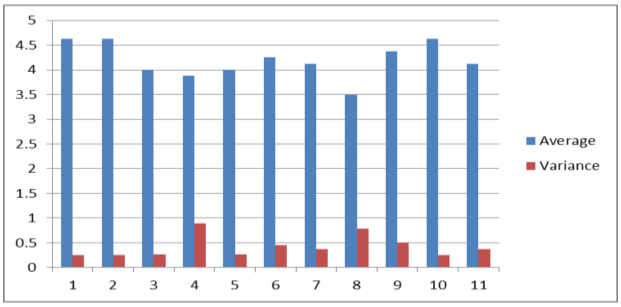

Figure 1: Bar-chart Variance and averages for 11 questions

Table 1: ANOVA

SS	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*P-value*	*F crit*
30.27273	10	3.027273	7.166316	6.1E-10	1.868247
106.875	253	0.422431			
137.1477	263				

As mentioned earlier an structured questionnaire was disseminated to 30 respondents out of which 24 valid responses were 80 %, responses of the sampled group was categorized. Table 1 show that The test statistic is the F value of 7.16. Using **α of .05**, results show that that **F.05; 1, 10 = 3.89**. Since the test statistic is much larger than the critical value, we reject the null hypothesis of equal population means and conclude that there is a (statistically) significant difference among the population means. The p-value for **7.16is .00325,** so the test statistic is significant at that level.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

As stated by Methuku & Hussein (2013; 2016) **(12-13)** for an effective delivery of programs management should take into account very strict approaches while recruiting academic staff members, diversity is another challenge that is facing the delivery of economics courses , students would opt to take the course with a bilingual lecturer so informally they can communicate with them.

The existing teaching approaches could have learning implications. First economics requires both numerical and communication skills, ironically in some cases it was evident that student have not clear their foundation level totally still they have progressed to post-foundation level where economics is to be done without a proper pre-requisites. Another hurdle is that the gaps or ranges between failure students and those who have passed in excellent grade is very huge the study suggests that this gap would have been smaller should the higher education institution literally followed student centered approaches generally and particularly in teaching economics.

It is evident that delivering economics papers in undergraduate level in privately own higher education institutions is a little better off as compared to publically own higher education institutions, from business perspective four main areas of differences such as students progression , competition with other private HEIs; governance and power structures; and coupling of subsystems. Further academic staff is claiming that students lack basic prerequisites of the economics i.e. numerical skill and business English communication. A commendation could be given some HEIs where students will not be allowed to take post –foundation courses without clearing or passing all of the required courses in lower levels. In other words the graduates attributes of each level is the basis for the higher level of student progression.

Finally according Governance and policy makers should have clear mission, vision, and values that attend to the national priorities of higher education. Furthermore, they should have also a clear set of duties and directed by internal regulations, lines of accountability, and a clear reporting mechanism**. (14)**

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