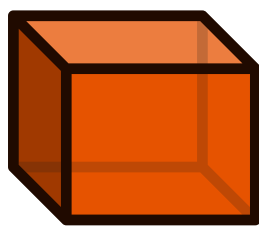


# Economy Studies for Business Schools

**New Ideas & Materials for Educators & Students**



**Economy  
Studies**

Sam de Muijnck & Joris Tieleman

Rethinking  
Economics

  
OUR NEW ECONOMY



Amsterdam  
University  
Press

## The book Economy Studies

This booklet is part of a series based on Economy Studies, a project for re-envisioning and redesigning economics courses and programs. The project emerged from the worldwide movement to modernise economics education, spurred on by the global financial crisis of 2008, the climate crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic. It envisions a wide variety of economics graduates and specialists, equipped with a broad toolkit, enabling them to collectively understand and help tackle the issues the world faces today.

This is a practical guide for (re-)designing economics courses and programs. Based on a clear conceptual framework and ten flexible building blocks, this handbook offers refreshing ideas and practical suggestions to stimulate student engagement and critical thinking across a wide range of courses.

### Key features

- 1 Adapting Existing Courses: Plug-and-play suggestions to improve existing economics courses with attention to institutions, history, values and practical skills.
- 2 Teaching materials: A guide through the rapidly growing range of innovative textbooks and other teaching materials.
- 3 Example Courses and Curricula: How to design pluralist, real-world economics education within the practical limits of time and resources.

## What others say about Economy Studies

*“A tremendous resource for both teachers and students of economics.”*

Prof. **Wendy Carlin** (UCL), director of the CORE Economics Education Project

*“This is precisely the book that economics has been crying out for. It should fundamentally alter the way in which we teach, learn and practise economics and help us all appreciate what economics education has been missing for so long.”*

Prof. **Colin Mayer** (Oxford), Peter Moores Professor of Management Studies

*“This book is a tour de force. The mastery of the subject that the authors and their team display is astonishing. It was a source of inspiration for the development of the new program at the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam.”*

Prof. **Arjo Klamer** (EUR & VU)

## Why this booklet

In this booklet, we provide suggestions, content and teaching material for economics courses taught at business schools. Most business or management programs teach students a few economics courses, often focused on micro and macro 101. There are, however, many useful economic concepts and realities that students are rarely taught. With this booklet, we aim to help educators and students modernise the economics courses in business programs by paying more attention to different ways of organising, values, and diverse perspectives.

Other booklets in this series available via [www.economystudies.com](http://www.economystudies.com):

- 1 Economy Studies for Students
- 2 Economy Studies for Program Directors and Deans
- 3 Economy Studies for Secondary Education
- 4 Economy Studies for Business Schools
- 5 Economy Studies for Public Administration & Law Programs
- 6 Economy Studies for Economics 101
- 7 Economy Studies for Microeconomics
- 8 Economy Studies for Macroeconomics
- 9 Economy Studies for Econometrics
- 10 Economy Studies for Labour Economics
- 11 Economy Studies for Public Economics
- 12 Economy Studies for Environmental Economics
- 13 Economy Studies for Development Economics
- 14 Economy Studies for Industrial Organisation
- 15 Economy Studies for Finance
- 16 Economy Studies for Monetary Economics
- 17 Economy Studies for International Economics
- 18 Economy Studies for Game Theory
- 19 Economy Studies for Behavioural Economics

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## Reading Guide

To get an overview of the Economy Studies project as a whole, start with the *Summary*.

For concrete suggestions on topics and material to enrich your own course, go directly to *Economics Courses for Business Students*.

For a brief explanation of the key economic theories on firms and markets and how they can be taught, see the *Pragmatic Pluralism* chapters.

For ideas and materials on teaching students about tackling problems and making proposals, take a look at the *Building Block* chapters.

To see what you can do to help modernize economics education at your own university, see the *Conclusion*

# Summary

*“I don’t care who writes a nation’s laws, if I can write its economics textbooks.”*

**Paul Samuelson**

## 1 Rethinking Economics Education

Humanity is wealthier, more connected and more technologically advanced than ever. Access to healthcare is rapidly expanding and poverty levels keep dropping in most parts of the world. At the same time, societies around the globe are facing a multitude of challenges. To name a few: climate change, biodiversity loss and resource depletion, growing inequalities and power concentrations, economic instability and soaring levels of private and public debt, ageing and migration, social polarisation and rising authoritarian nationalist populism. And, back on the table since 2020: pandemics.

Tackling such challenges requires a deep comprehension of the economy, which the current system of economics education does not sufficiently provide. Economists need a real-world understanding of how various industries work, how they are intertwined with each other, how economic power works, what roles states play and how these are embedded in our society at large. It also requires open minds which can look at issues from a variety of perspectives. A single theoretical framework cannot provide the answers to every question. A range of approaches which prioritise different methodologies, assumptions, units of analysis and outcomes, is necessary for gaining a good understanding of the economy and its issues. Economists need to be able to think critically, select the tools which are most relevant for the context and problem at hand, and understand the limitations and uncertainties of the conclusions that they draw from them. Finally, it requires an awareness and an explicit discussion of the moral dilemmas and normative trade-offs involved in economic decisions. In short, economists have a lot on their plate.

Economists also have a lot of influence, for good and for bad. Firstly, as key policy experts and advisors, economists largely run many of the most powerful public-sector organisations in the world: central banks, ministries of finance, social and economic affairs, the IMF and the World Bank. In the private sector, economists co-direct the behaviour of banks and other large companies. Secondly, the economic ideas that float around most prominently in our society exert an influence far beyond the formal advisory reports of professional economists, guiding decision-making of citizens everywhere. Economic thinking influences even those who do not become economists, as economists have a central role in the public debate and many citizens are taught basic economics in secondary or tertiary education.

The growing societal importance of economists and economic ideas has sparked a lively debate around the content and structure of economics education. A worldwide movement of students and academics calls for more pluralist, real-world focused and socially relevant programmes that would enable economics graduates to better understand and tackle the economic issues that the world faces today. This movement has accelerated over the last decade, spurred on by the global financial crisis of 2008, the climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Under names such as Rethinking Economics, Netzwerk für Plurale Ökonomik, Institute for New Economic Thinking (INET), International Student Initiative for Pluralist Economics (ISIPE), International Confederation of Associations for Pluralism in Economics (ICAPE), Diversifying and Decolonising Economics, Economists for Future, Reteaching Economics, and Oikos International, these groups come together for dissent, discussion, self-education, action, campaigning, disseminating ideas and engaging with wider audiences.

Research by these groups indicates that many current programmes are not sufficient to prepare students for their future roles in society. They are often organised around the notion of ‘thinking like an economist’: training students to think exclusively from the neoclassical perspective and having skills in econometrics, while neglecting other valuable theoretical approaches and research methods. Furthermore, these analytical tools are taught in an overly abstract way and are presented as being value-free.

These groups and others have also produced a growing amount of innovative teaching material, beyond how economics programmes are traditionally structured. From online educational resources such as the open access CORE project and the bottom-up e-learning platform Exploring Economics, to multiple new pluralist and real-world focused textbooks. Many departments have introduced a wealth of new courses, or even started entirely new programmes.

## 2 This Book: Purpose and Overview

What has been missing so far in this field is an integral approach for constructing economics curricula and courses. This book aims to fill that gap. We bundle the ideas and materials of renewal and reform into a coherent multi-level vision for economics education: its overarching structure, its goals and its principles. We also provide the concrete building blocks for this in terms of academic content, including detailed overviews of teaching materials and practical suggestions. Finally, we translate these to the level of actual programmes and courses, providing a wide range of practical tools for implementation.

This entire book carries a CC-BY Creative Commons licence, which means that any part of the book may be freely copied, redistributed, remixed, transformed or built upon, without restrictions. As such, our proposal for a new integral approach to economics education can also be adopted and used partially, rather than being accepted as a whole. Each idea and suggestion can be judged and incorporated independently. You can totally disagree with principle 1 yet support principle 3. Or you might find little value in building block 5 and yet fall in love with building block 9. That’s the idea: it’s modular. Thus, the book as a whole can be used as a source of inspiration and overview of options for improving and renewing economics education.

### Part I: Foundations

The first part of the book, Foundations, sets out our philosophy and the three guiding principles that should underpin any economist’s education. In contrast to the currently common approach of teaching students to ‘think like an economist’, the Economy Studies approach is this: We envision an education where economics is not centred on a specific method of analysis or thought, but rather centred on a study matter, the economy. Economies can broadly be described as open systems of resource extraction, production, distribution, consumption and waste disposal through which societies provision themselves to sustain life and enhance its quality.

Based on this philosophy, we formulate three principles: Pluralism, Real-World and Values.

First, a discipline centred around a single subject matter requires a plurality of theoretical frameworks: one

single set of basic assumptions is not enough to understand such a multifaceted subject matter. Here it is important that students learn which ideas are compatible with each other and which are in conflict with each other. Some of these theories fall within the current economic mainstream, others exist on its fringes, and yet others are currently at home in other disciplines. It also implies a plurality of research methods, from basic statistics and regression analysis to interviews, network analysis and survey analysis. Such pluralism means that there is no single dominant framework, which might be more difficult for those receiving economic advice, but is ultimately beneficial for the quality of analysis and the resulting decisions.

Second, the notion of a programme centred on the subject matter of the economy implies a continuous and conscious orientation towards the economy as it exists in the real world. Students benefit from studying practical questions and gaining concrete knowledge, not just abstract analytical tools. For instance: How is the German car industry structured? What hurdles does the global energy transition face? What happens at a central bank? The Real-World principle ranges from studies of economic sectors and key institutions in the local or (inter-)national economy, to the histories of economies and case studies of specific economic challenges.

Third, we draw attention to the wide variety of normative principles and visions that can guide economic decisions and action, and which are often subtly embedded in economic theories. There is little sense in trying to 'solve economics problems' without considering what things exactly are worthwhile or problematic, and what values are at stake. Profits, sustainability, power, equal chances, equal outcomes, job creation, labour conditions, ownership, accountability, GDP growth, wellbeing – what should we focus on?

Economics has historically been, and is still, dominated by upper- and middle-class white men based in the Global North. This has consequences for each of the three principles. In terms of Real-World, it is important to pay attention to the lived economic realities of working-class citizens, women, minorities, and those living in the Global South. For Pluralism, we need to incorporate often ignored but valuable ideas and contributions of lower class, female, and non-western scholars. For Values, it is key to realise that people from different backgrounds have different priorities and values, and work to ensure that these are reflected in the questions we focus on and the theories and methods we use. In sum, we need to diversify and decolonise economics education.

The Foundations part ends with a chapter on didactics. Improving economics education is not simply a matter of changing what is taught, but also how it is taught. Various surveys among employers of economists show that more attention for communication and collaboration skills is needed. There are also worrying indications that economics classes often fail to facilitate open, critical, but also respectful, discussions. Finally, to make economics education more lively, interesting for students and connected to the real world, a greater variety of teaching and examination methods could be used. On all these fronts we provide practical suggestions.

The second part of the book is devoted to the Building Blocks. Where the Foundations part discusses the purpose and principles of economics education in general, the building blocks are more applied: ten thematic areas of knowledge and skills, which form the meat and bones of the Economy Studies course design method. Each of the ten building blocks covers an area of knowledge and set of skills that we see as essential for the education of future economists.

## Part II: Building Blocks

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We start out with two building blocks that focus on acquiring basic economic knowledge, one conceptual and one focused on the real world. Introducing the Economy is about getting a feeling for economic matters, discussing what the economy is in the first place, why it is relevant, how it is related to other aspects of the social and natural world, and what societal roles economists have. Know Your Own Economy, on the other hand, has a more concrete focus as it is about knowledge of the actual (national and local) economy and its structures, institutions, and sectors.

The third and fourth building blocks deal with history: History of the Economy and History of Economic Thought & Methods. The fifth and sixth building blocks are more conceptually oriented, dealing with how economies can and have been organised, at micro and meso levels – Economic Organisations & Mechanisms – and at the macro level – Political-Economic Systems.

The seventh and eighth building blocks provide a broad and diverse analytic toolkit: Research Methods & Philosophy of Science and Economic Theories. These two, especially the latter, are relatively large. In most programmes, they will require more space than the other building blocks. Finally, building blocks nine and ten deal with practically contributing as an economist: Problems & Proposals is about analysing concrete economic challenges and formulating or evaluating proposed policies and actions, and Economics for a Better World asks how normative principles and visions can guide action to address the major challenges of our times, and helps students to be reflective of their own role as an economist

These building blocks can be used as templates to create stand-alone courses or modules, or they can be combined in courses. They can be re-ordered, combined or integrated in many ways to suit the specific needs of each programme. For instance, Building Block 3: Economic History could be taught as a stand-alone subject, or integrated with the fourth building block into a course History of Economic Thought and Reality, or integrated as a minor component in an existing Labour Economics course. In our ideal world, these building blocks would be combined to form a wide range of economics programmes. Different contexts and challenges require differently trained economists.

### **Part III: Tools**

The third part of the book, titled Tools, provides material that is directly actionable. It starts with Pragmatic Pluralism, a suggested format (including references) for teaching theory in a pluralist manner without drowning students in the enormous diversity of ideas out there. We list thirteen core economic topics and set out for each topic the two main opposing perspectives, a key complementary perspective and additional insights coming from other approaches.

Often there is no space in programmes for completely new courses but there is room for adjustment in some existing courses. In *Adapting Existing Courses*, we offer ready-to-use sets of suggestions and material to do so, for courses like Micro, Macro, Public Economics and Finance. The Curriculum Review Tool offers a clear starting point for applying our building blocks to an existing programme. This tool helps identify possible blind spots of a programme and suggests ways to strengthen it. The Example Courses that follow illustrate how the building blocks can be used to create completely new courses. The next chapter maps out several complete Example Curricula, demonstrating how the building blocks might be combined to form a complete bachelor or master programme in Economics.



While this book is primarily oriented towards full economics programmes in academic education, in the chapter Courses for Non-Economists we suggest limited packages of core economic ideas that may be useful for business schools, secondary school economics programmes, in an academic minor or for self-study. Finally, Learning Objectives offers tools for designing the learning objectives behind economics courses, starting not from the question ‘what does the teacher know best?’ but from ‘what do the students need to know, to be prepared for their future societal roles?’.

## Part IV: Online Materials

Economy Studies is more than a book. On the website, we offer an extended version of the Pragmatic Pluralism chapter, a broader range of Adapting Existing Courses topics, additional Example Courses and Example Curricula. We also provide background material on each of the Economic Approaches described in this book, as well as neighbouring sub-disciplines such as economic sociology and economic geography. In addition, we provide a more complete overview and discussion of research methods, coordination and allocation mechanisms, and the history of economic thought and methods. Finally, we offer much more extensive lists of teaching materials for each of the building blocks.

Online, we also work together with the INET Education Program, at the Institute for New Economic Thinking. This platform will host free educational resources online, accessible to students, teachers and the general public. This includes video lecture series, syllabi, teaching modules, lecture notes, readings, sample quizzes and exams. The platform will also serve as a center to build up an online community of teachers and learners, working together to improve the way economics is taught and learned. Each of the chapters in this book has a discussion page on that platform.

What kind of graduates would a programme based on these ideas and materials produce? It is important to acknowledge that they would not have all the skills that current-day graduates have. Less mathematical sophistication, less expertise in econometric analysis, less knowledge of neoclassical theory. In exchange for these losses, students gain: a deeper understanding and more concrete knowledge of the economy in which they live and will work. An awareness and understanding of the various ways in which economic processes are organised at the micro, meso and macro levels. Practical skills for investigating and tackling questions of economic policy: understanding the context and choosing the right tools, from a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches. And the ability to argue morally as well as analytically, and to clearly distinguish the two.

With this *creative commons* work, we hope to inspire economists and all students of the economy to rethink how we learn economics. The economic challenges we face as societies are enormous, so we desperately need well-prepared economic experts and a citizenry able to participate in economic discussions. Economics education has the vital task of preparing these people as best as possible.

This booklet provides a preview of the *Economy Studies* project. The full book also includes the complete set of building blocks, additional teaching materials, a curriculum review tool, example courses and curricula and suggestions for learning objectives. If you are interested to learn more, visit our website and buy or download the whole book, open access, or contact us.

[economy.st](http://economy.st)

# Economics Courses for Business Students

While most business students will never call themselves economists, they do take in economic ideas and will apply these in their later work and personal life. Thus, economics education to business students has a large impact on the world.

This chapter starts with the application of the Foundations part of this book to the education of business students. We discuss the implications of teaching economics from the perspective of the individual who engages with economic systems in various ways, we go into the application of the principles real-world, pluralism and values, and we argue for the democratisation of economics through the notion of the citizen economist. Then, we go through the ten building blocks, separated in three categories: those we consider core, those which are optional, and those we would not recommend focusing on for business students. For each of these categories, we suggest teaching materials which seem most suitable for teaching economics to business students.

## 1 Foundations

### The Philosophy of Economy Studies

As citizens and members of our local, national and international communities, we engage in many economic processes and decisions. The economics education of business students should therefore focus on a broad understanding of economic systems and issues. In public debates about government budgets, for example, there are often misunderstandings, such as the idea that public finances work in the same way as personal household finances or corporate finances.

Without any economics education such misunderstandings are very likely as people do have personal experience with personal or business finances, but have never learned anything about public finances. The goal of economics education for business students should thus be to help people better understand the larger economic systems they are part of and also understand counter-intuitive insights. And since most will not continue to specialise in economics, it is important that economics education for business students “focuses primarily on preparing students for citizenship rather than for intermediate theory courses” (Nelson, 2009, p. 62).

### Principles: Real-World, Pluralism & Values

Each of the three principles set out in this book is also relevant for economics education for business students. The only difference is the way in which these principles can be applied and put into practice, with as main difference the more limited amount of teaching time with which to convey them to students.

Firstly, pluralism. It is crucial that business students are exposed to different economic ideas and that they realise that these ideas of economists are theories about the world, rather than direct descriptions of how the world works. This may sound rather obvious for any economists, or any academically trained person. But many non-academics tend to think of experts as simply knowing ‘the truth’, rather than that they have different ideas about how the world may work and perform empirical analyses to see what the evidence suggests. To use Alfred Korzybski’s words, it is important that students learn that “the map is not the territory” (1931).

We think that this fundamental realisation best sinks in when students are exposed to a couple of contrasting economic debates. It does not require teaching full theoretical frameworks and mathematical models. This can be done by simply juxtaposing ideas about a certain economic issue, such as whether to tackle the problem of unemployment and a shrinking economy through government stimulus or austerity. Useful materials, ordered from light to heavy: the Keynes vs Hayek rap battles *Fear the Boom and Bust & Fight of the Century*, London School of Economics debate Keynes v Hayek with Selgin, Skidelsky, Weldon and Whyte, the book *Austerity vs Stimulus: The Political Future of Economic Recovery* by Skidelsky and Fraccaroli, or the book *Austerity: When It Works and When It Doesn't* by Alesina, Favero and Giavazzi.

Secondly, real-world. Especially when teaching business students, it is crucial to link the concepts that are discussed to the real world and the experiences of the students. If matters are only discussed in the abstract, it is likely that many students will not be able to see how it is relevant for the world around them, which will likely diminish their interest in the topic. Therefore, we advise bringing the real world in as much as possible.

As discussed in the chapter *Foundation 3: Real-World*, this can be done by using case studies, the news and economic history, visiting or having guest lectures by employees of economic institutions and companies, and exposing students to current public debates about economic issues. In doing so, we would encourage teachers to feel free to also do so in a playful manner. One could, for example, let students read an economics cartoon book, such as *Economix: How and Why Our Economy Works (and Doesn't Work) in Words and Pictures* by Goodwin and Bach. This may sound silly and of little educational value, but we would argue the opposite is true. As long as the materials are carefully selected to ensure their content is of good quality, the more playful manner in which these contents are communicated to students simply facilitates, rather than prevents, learning and is likely to leave behind longer lasting impressions on students. While the cartoon book is funny, it is surprisingly informative, helping readers better understand what the economy is about, economic history, the history of economic thought, different ways of organising economies, economic theories, normative aspects of economies and economic policies debates.

Thirdly, values. It is essential that business students learn to see and think about values and normative issues in the economy. This is also precisely where the views and ideas of business students are most relevant. They have just as much to say about value judgements related to economic issues as economists do (see more about this below in *Democratising Economics*). So students need to learn to identify value judgements in order to be able to properly interpret, value and make use of advice by experts without needing to blindly follow them. Interesting books and video's might be the book and INET video series by Michael Sandel both called *What Money Can't Buy*, Mariana Mazzucato's book *The Value of Everything* and her related TED talk *What is economic value, and who creates it?*, Robert Skidelsky's INET video *Ethics & Economics* and the chapter carrying the same title in his book *What's Wrong with Economics? A Primer for the Perplexed*.

## **Democratising Economics**

Economics education for business students currently too often discourages, rather than encourages, them to participate in economic debates. The strong focus on technicalities and mathematics causes economics classes to often feel more like tests or competitions of mathematical talent and economic jargon, than places of learning and questioning. In a democratic society, all citizens should, however, engage in debates about important issues that influence their lives and futures. Therefore, we strongly advise to facilitate, rather than to hinder, this through economics education for business students. So instead of focusing on teaching technicalities, we advise to focus on teaching substantive knowledge about the economy in an accessible way. It is also important that students learn how to ask questions and participate in economic debates. Such an open, critical and active learning process can help create citizen economists according to Earle et al. (2016, p.

154):

“We propose the idea of the ‘Citizen Economist’, an individual who has the basic knowledge, confidence and interest to engage critically with economic discourse in politics, the news and their local communities. Citizen Economists are able to see the links between their individual circumstances and the operation of the economy on a systemic level. They are able to engage with economic statements and narratives made by politicians, economists and media commentators about the performance of the economy and evaluate the values and assumptions behind their arguments. A society of Citizen Economists is one in which individuals have more understanding and thus control over their circumstances. It is a society where there are always alternatives and all of society plays an active role in proposing, debating and scrutinising them, ultimately deciding collectively and individually which paths to take.”

In a world in which expertise is often despised, this might read as an argument to make people mistrust economists, but it’s actually the opposite. We believe blind public trust in economic experts is a recipe for disaster. Not only would this lead to undemocratic debates and decision making related to economic issues, it will lead to mistrust of economists and has arguably already done so. If something goes wrong or is seen as unfair, and citizens have no say in the matter, then the fault must be with the experts who claim the exclusive right to discuss economic issues, or at least this accusation is easily made and difficult to refute when the message is that citizens should not have a say in economic affairs.

What we need is more mutual understanding between economists, the business community and ordinary citizens. In recent years, economists have often been criticised for being ‘out of touch with normal people’ and they, for example, often misjudged how citizens would receive their economic expert advice related to the Brexit referendum. And the other side of the coin is the topic of this chapter: economics education for business students. This will not make everyone an economic expert, but it will help them better participate in public debates about economic issues. And it will also enable them to better understand economists as well as being better able to critically scrutinize and question their arguments.

## 2 Building Blocks

While all ten of our building blocks could be applied and used in economics education for business students, some are more relevant than others. Here we discuss the building blocks from high to low priority for economics education for business students.

### Core building blocks

We advise putting the following building blocks at the core of economics education for business students:

- Building Block 1: Introducing the Economy
- Building Block 2: Know Your Own Economy
- Building Block 5: Economic Organisations & Mechanisms
- Building Block 6: Political-Economic Systems
- Building Block 8: Economic Theories
- Building Block 9: Problems & Proposals
- Building Block 10: Economics for a Better World

Before we go into the various building blocks, it is important to note that each of the building blocks will have to be treated more lightly than in full economics programmes. So here we suggest using elements of these building blocks, not trying to cover the full scope and depth of each in a course for business students. Courses

can differ in how much they go into detail into economic theories, real world knowledge, or ways of organising the economy. We advise trying to cover these various topics, even if briefly, but if this is not possible one can choose to leave one or more out.

### **Building Block 1: Introducing the Economy**

The first step in any economics course is to explain to students what the economy is and why it is important to learn about. This can be done in many different ways, from giving students a good academic or cartoon book, watching a documentary or letting them do their own online research, to giving them exercises to go outside of the classroom and observe parts of the economy for themselves and interview people about. Key topics for such exercises can be recent changes in the local economy, the main societal challenges of the day, and what people are concerned about and find most important.

#### **Materials**

- Economics: The User's Guide by Ha-Joon Chang, from 2014, chapters 1 & 2. Perhaps the most accessible and yet insightful introduction book into economics, with particular attention to why it is relevant to learn economics and what economics is in the first place.
- Introducing a New Economics by Jack Reardon, Molly S. Cato, Maria A. C. Madi, from 2018, chapters 1, 3, 4, & 5. An accessible textbook which introduces students to what economics is, how it is embedded in society and the environment, and major societal challenges, such as climate change, poverty, financial instability, and inequality.
- Principles of economics in context by Neva Goodwin, Jonathan M. Harris, Julie A. Nelson, Brian Roach, Mariano Torras, most recent edition from 2019, chapters 0, 1, 20, and 21. This economics textbook covers many of the traditional economic topics, but pays more attention to why studying the economy is relevant and concerns, such as human wellbeing, ecological sustainability, distributional equity, and the quality of employment.
- To help students get an idea of the main societal challenges of today, it can be useful to have them take a look at reports, such as the Sustainable Development Goals Reports, World Development Reports, and World Happiness Reports. It can also be useful to use more engaging types of materials, such as documentaries and coverage of political protests and debates. Furthermore, it can be interesting and useful for students to also be exposed to material on the key issues in the domestic, rather than global, economy.

### **Building Block 2: Know Your Own Economy and Building Block 9: Problems & Proposals**

Building on the suggestions above, it can be very useful for students to acquire basic factual knowledge about the economic world they live in. As described in more detail in Building Block 2: Know Your Own Economy, this can be done by looking at and discussing key indicators, institutions and sectors. One can also take the core current problems and let students create factual overviews of them. With this, students do not only acquire factual knowledge but also practical skills to tackle economic problems. Perhaps the most often applied policy tool, which often also plays a central role in the public debate, is cost-benefit analysis. For this reason, it can be worthwhile to make students familiar with the basics of the method and its limitations, enabling them to ask critical questions and properly interpret the results. Furthermore, it is useful to also discuss different approaches to comparing policy options, such as participatory evaluation and risk-opportunity analysis, as this widens students' understanding of how policy options can be assessed.

#### **Materials**

- Material on the national economy as described in Building Block 2: Know Your Own Economy.
- To introduce the policy tools, reading materials can be of use, but they will probably have the most lasting impact when combined with practical exercises in which students have to apply the tools themselves.

- For cost-benefit analysis, a useful book is: *Cost-Benefit Analysis: Concepts and Practice* by Anthony E. Boardman, David H. Greenberg, Aidan R. Vining, David L. Weimer, most recent edition from 2018. For participatory evaluation, the following book can be of help: *Participatory Evaluation Up Close: An Integration of Research Based Knowledge* by J. Bradley Cousins and Jill A. Chouinard, from 2012.
- Risk-opportunity analysis is newer and has yet to be explained in a textbook, but a useful working paper explaining the tool and providing examples of applications is: *Risk-opportunity analysis for transformative policy design and appraisal* by Jean-Francois Mercure, Simon Sharpe, Jorge Vinuales, Matthew Ives, Michael Grubb, Hector Pollitt, Florian Knobloch and Femke Nijse, from 2020.

### Building Block 8: Economic Theories

Theory is normally the meat and bones of economics courses, and for a good reason. It is critical that students learn about different analytical ideas about the economy. So while we advise to pay more attention to other matters than theory, it is still of great importance. Our main suggestion is to focus on making students familiar with different ways of looking at the economy, rather than on teaching them only rudimentary theoretical models. In Building Block 8: Economic Theories, we explain in more detail how this could be done by first explaining the basic elements of different economic approaches and then focusing on the main approaches per economic topic. To prepare students for their economic citizenship, different economic ideas about the form and function of government can be particularly useful as these are often central to the public debate. For suggestions, see the section Government in chapter Tool 1: Pragmatic Pluralism.

### Materials

- *Economics: The User's Guide* by Ha-Joon Chang, from 2014. This book provides a brief and accessible pluralist introduction to a broad range of theoretical insights the discipline has to offer. While theoretical, this book is never dry. It is clearly written and has a very succinct style.
- *Rethinking Economics: An Introduction to Pluralist Economics* by Liliann Fischer, Joe Hasell, J. Christopher Proctor, David Uwakwe, Zach Ward Perkins, Catriona Watson, from 2017. This collection of essays provides an accessible introduction into post-Keynesian, Marxian, Austrian, institutional, feminist, behavioural, complexity and ecological economics.
- The website *Exploring Economics: [www.exploring-economics.org/en/](http://www.exploring-economics.org/en/)*. This website provides sharp and helpful introductions into the different economic perspectives and furthermore gives many useful overviews of related teaching materials, video's and existing (online) courses.
- *Principles of Economics in Context* by Jonathan Harris, Julie A. Nelson and Neva Goodwin, most recent edition from 2020. A useful textbook that treats much of the traditional content, but also consistently discusses the social and environmental challenges inherent in economic questions.
- *Economics After The Crisis* by Irene van Staveren, from 2015. This well-written textbook describes twelve central topics in economics at an introductory level from four different perspectives: the neoclassical, institutional, social and post-Keynesian perspectives.
- *The Economy* by The CORE Team, from 2017. This highly successful textbook, freely available online with additional resources, provides a treasure trove of empirical data, context and recent research. The CORE Team has also been working on developing teaching material for high school economics education, see their website for the latest materials: [www.core-econ.org](http://www.core-econ.org)
- *Introducing a New Economics* by Jack Reardon, Maria A. Madi, and Molly S. Cato, from 2017. This ground-breaking textbook introduces many of the core issues in economics today and weaves together pluralist theory and real-world knowledge in an eminently readable way.
- *Political Economy: The Contest of Economic Ideas* by Frank Stilwell, most recent edition from 2011. This well-written textbook provides a good introduction to economic ideas from multiple perspectives, with particular attention to classical, Marxist, neoclassical, institutional, Keynesian and more recent insights



related to capitalism.

### **Building Block 5: Economic Organisations & Mechanisms and Building Block 6: Political-Economic Systems**

Economic Organisations & Mechanisms and Political-Economic Systems are about showing to students that there are multiple ways of organising and thinking about economies. In both cases, the point is not that students need to remember and reproduce specifics. The focus should, however, be on making them realise the economic world can be organised and thought about in multiple ways and giving them a rough idea of the various options and perspectives that exist. This can be done by discussing various economic organisations, mechanisms and theories in an accessible, engaging and non-technical way. This knowledge can help students understand the different options that are discussed (or ignored) in the public debate or in an organisation they are involved in.

#### **Materials**

- *Introducing a New Economics* by Jack Reardon, Molly S. Cato, Maria A. C. Madi, from 2018, chapters 10, 11 & 12. Three accessible and brief chapters, with accompanying classroom activities and questions, introducing students to what public goods, commons and firms are and how they can be governed, for example as a corporation owned by shareholders or as a cooperative owned by its workers or consumers.
- *Economics: The User's Guide* by Ha-Joon Chang, from 2014, chapter 5. A short well-written chapter on different economic actors and organisational forms, from multinational corporations, cooperatives, and labour unions, to governments and a variety of international organisations.
- *Organisations: A Very Short Introduction* by Mary Jo Hatch, from 2011. A brief, accessible and yet highly informative book full with scientific theories and ideas on what organisations are, how they can be structured, how they change, and their internal dynamics and interaction with markets and society.
- *Capitalism* by Geoffrey Ingham, from 2008. A highly insightful introduction into capitalism with chapters on key ideas from Smith, Marx, Weber, Schumpeter and Keynes, and core institutions, such as market exchange, the enterprise, money, capital, financial markets and the state.
- *Capitalism: A Very Short Introduction* by James Fulcher, most recent edition from 2015. A brief and yet useful book on capitalism's definition, historical evolution, varieties, global networks, and recurring crises.
- *Socialism: A Very Short Introduction* by Michael Newman, most recent edition from 2020. A similar brief and yet useful book, but then on capitalism's main rival socialism, with chapters on its varieties around the world, historical traditions and more recent developments.

### **Building Block 10: Economics for a Better World**

The public debate about the economic matters is often normatively loaded and focused. Therefore, it is of great importance that students become familiar with the normative foundations and ideas on which economic debates are built. As discussed in more detail in Building Block 10: Economics for a Better World, this can be done by discussing normative principles for decisions and visions for the economy. The point here is not that students should learn political philosophies by heart or make sophisticated normative arguments. It is rather about giving them a basic understanding and feeling for the different ways in which normative issues can be looked at.

#### **Materials**

- *A Guide to Ethics and Public Policy: Finding Our Way* by D. Don Welch, from 2014. A brief but insightful book providing a broad framework for evaluating policy proposals and outcomes, organised around five moral principles: benefit, effectiveness, fairness, fidelity, and legitimacy.
- *Political Ideologies: An Introduction* by Andrew Heywood, most recent edition from 2021. A useful

and accessible introduction into a wide variety of political ideologies, from liberalism, socialism, and conservatism to feminism, nationalism, and green ideology, that shape much of our normative thinking on the economy.

- *Moral Views on Market Society* by Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy, from 2007. An insightful overview paper on the key different normative perspectives on capitalism, enabling readers to better understand and place ideas and arguments prevalent in many debates about the economy.
- *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* by Michael J. Sandel, most recent edition from 2012. A highly influential and well-written book reflecting on the moral place of markets in society and asking the key question whether everything should be up for sale. The Institute for New Economic Thinking has also launched a video series on the book and topic: <https://www.ineteconomics.org/perspectives/videos/what-money-cant-buy>

### Additional building blocks

If the teacher has a personal affinity with these topics, we recommend including them, but otherwise they do not have priority:

- Economic History (BB3)
- History of Economic Thought and Methods (BB4)

While we would argue that the two building blocks devoted to history are not of the highest priority, we think they can be of great value added if it is done well. As such, we would thus advise to include it if history is of particular interest to the teacher and he or she knows how to use it well to engage students more with economic ideas and realities. So rather than putting it at the core of economics education for business students, we see it as a didactical option to possibly teach the other contents in a more interesting way. It should be noted that this is not the case for full economics programs, for which a basic understanding of the histories of economic ideas and realities is essential.

### Materials

- *Capitalism: A Short History* by Jürgen Kocka, from 2016. A concise and yet broad-ranging account of how capitalism developed from early merchants, colonialism and slavery to the recent wave of globalisation and financialisation, accompanied by discussions of capitalism's key thinkers, such as Smith, Marx, Weber, and Schumpeter.
- *Economics: The User's Guide* by Ha-Joon Chang, from 2014, chapters 2 & 3. Two short and well written chapters on how the economy has changed over the last centuries and how capitalism evolved.
- *Global Economic History: A Very Short Introduction* by Robert C. Allen, from 2011. A brief but insightful introduction into the economic history of the world with chapters on industrialisation, the rise of the West, great empires, the Americas and Africa.
- *The Worldly Philosophers: The Lives, Times and Ideas of the Great Economic Thinkers* by Robert Heilbroner, most recent edition from 1999. While first published in 1953, it remains perhaps the best introduction into the history of economic thought to this day. In a remarkably well-written and accessible manner it discusses the ideas of key economists and puts them into historical context.
- *Grand Pursuit: The Story of Economic Genius* by Sylvia Naser, from 2012. Another very accessible but more recent book introducing the history of economic thought through captivating narratives.

### Less relevant building blocks

Finally, we would recommend avoiding the following building block when teaching business students:

- Research Methods (BB7)



Research methods are, of course, of great importance, but given the aim of economics education for business students we would argue that teaching time can be better spent on the other building blocks. Business students are not prepared to do detailed analyses of economic issues, as economics students are. Rather, business students need to acquire a rough understanding of economic issues and learn about how to deal with them. Learning the specifics of various research methods will only very indirectly help with this and have therefore least priority. Another important downside of focusing on econometrics and mathematics-heavy material, is that it makes economic ideas and topics inaccessible for those without an affinity for mathematics. The current focus on technique harms students from understanding the economy: “If a student is not capable of understanding graphs, then subsequent success in one’s economics class is less likely. ... It could be that if the intention is to prepare students to use economics to understand policy and everyday life, graphs generate more harm than good.” (Hoyt & McGoldrick, 2012, p. 338). Economics education for business students should therefore be understandable for everyone and not require a high level of mathematical expertise.

This also relates to another point: Do not focus on techniques. What matters is that students gain more knowledge about the substance of economic ideas and topics. Whether students are able to work with a model and have technical skills related to statistics, should not matter. Especially when considering that the technical skills they could acquire will be too minimal to be of any significant use in the real world. If an organisation needs someone to construct or work with a mathematical model about an economic topic, this person would need considerably more training to do so properly. In fact, many organisations consider even a full university economics programme not enough and hire trained mathematicians and statisticians to work on the technical aspects. Furthermore, leaving the technical aspects out frees up teaching time to focus on the various things discussed above. In the current dominant way of teaching, the technical and substantive aspects are often supposed to be conveyed to students by teaching them a few simplified models. This demands a lot from teachers to be able to convey both at the same time to all students, especially considering the different levels of talent for the technical and substantive aspects that the students have. Putting the focus (exclusively) on the substantive aspects will make it more doable for teachers to convey economic ideas and real-world knowledge to students.

### 3 An Economics Course in a Business Programme

Whether it is for economics majors or for a smaller side programme such as described in this chapter, the Economy Studies framework can be flexibly applied to create a wide variety of courses. To illustrate this in practice, we provide in this section an example economics course for business students, built on the basis of the Economy Studies framework. Online, we provide three more examples: an economics course for high school students, an economics course in a public administration and law programme, and an academic minor in economics.

**Title:**

Introducing business students to the world of economic thinking

**Required background knowledge:**

None

**Nominal workload:**

Equivalent of 6 ECTS (180 hrs)

**Course goals:**

This course enables business students to understand how businesses are embedded in the economy at large. It provides them with an overview of the economic system and the various types of organisations in it such as commercial, cooperative and non-profit entities, as well as various forms of government which interact with the private sector. It also provides students with a basic, intuitive understanding of the main theories about firms and markets.

#### **Course outline:**

The course is divided into the following three parts:

- 4** The role of business in society
- 5** The composition of the business world
- 6** Economic theories about markets and firms

#### **Part 1: The role of business in society**

The first part of the course concerns the role of business in society. It starts with a discussion of the concept 'the economy', including the question where its boundaries lie and how this system is embedded in a broader ecological and social context. Students also learn about the concept of capitalism as a political-economic system. Using several readings, they discuss with each other the advantages of this system and its inherent problems.

The discussion then zooms in on the societal role of business. Various perspectives are discussed, from the shareholder value theory to democratic and stakeholder theories. Possible materials:

- The series of articles on the shareholder-stakeholder debate 'Milton Friedman 50 Years Later' edited by Zingales, Kasperkevic, & Schechter, from 2020.
- The book *Change Everything: Creating an Economy for the Common Good* by Christian Felber, from 2015.
- The fierce yet constructive video debate between Zingales and Felber 'The Future of Capitalism #10: Can a Different Market Economy Work in Practice?', from 2020.

A case study is presented on the interplay between government and commercial actors in Germany's famous and relatively early turn to green energy production (Grüne Wende). This case study is mainly used to demonstrate how the commercial sectors are interwoven with each other, how big firms and small- to medium-sized enterprises together make up an industrial ecosystem. It also demonstrates to students how change can occur in an economy, in this case a deliberately orchestrated transition from polluting forms of energy production to cleaner techniques.

For more details, teaching materials and practical advice on teaching these topics, see the following building blocks:

- Building Block 1: Introducing the Economy
- Building Block 6: Political-Economic Systems
- Building Block 10: Economics for a Better World

#### **Part 2: The composition of the business world**

The second part of this course focuses on a real-world overview of the main economic sectors in the country, and their relation with public and civil sectors. For instance, say this course were to be taught in Germany, students might learn about the structure of the automobile industry, the mechanical engineering sector, the chemical industry and the electrical industry.

This second part of the course also introduces to students the wide variety of economic organisations: from

commercial firms to cooperatives to non-profits. The concept of cooperatives is illustrated with the German cooperative banking sector, including a brief historical overview, from their local formation by citizen collectives to the subsequent series of mergers between them to form larger organisations.

For more details, teaching materials and practical advice on teaching these topics, see the following building blocks:

- Building Block 2: Know Your Own Economy
- Building Block 5: Economic Organisations & Mechanisms

### **Part 3: Economic theories about markets and firms**

In the third part of the course, the focus becomes more systemic. Students learn of the main government policies regarding the country's commercial sectors, both those designed to stimulate and protect them and those designed to regulate their impacts on the environment and their potential monopoly powers. Students also gain a brief overview of the sectors' relations with civil society, such as labour unions and NGOs, and the main points of contention between these parties.

This part also introduces students to the main economic theories about markets and firms. On firms, there is a short presentation of field theory, which sets out how firms stabilise and shape power relations in an economic system, and of institutional economics, which sees firms as a way to limit the transaction costs, which would be impossibly large if an economy only consisted of individual free agents. On markets, students are presented with the contrasting views of neoclassical economics, which sees competition as a harmonious process with an optimal outcome, and classical economics, which sees competition as a ruthless process more akin to war.

For more details, teaching materials and practical advice on teaching these topics, see the following building blocks:

- Building Block 6: Political-Economic Systems
- Building Block 8: Economic Theories

For three more examples, visit our website.

- 7 A High School Economics Course
- 8 An Economics Course in a Public Administration and Law Programme (30 ECTS)
- 9 An Academic Minor in Economics (30 ECTS)

[economy.st/nonecon](http://economy.st/nonecon)

# Pragmatic Pluralism: Overview

Key insights and ideas for thirteen core topics in economics, organised by selecting the most relevant theoretical approaches per topic and contrasting them with each other.

This chapter provides a map through the complex jungle of economic theories. There are many different theoretical approaches, and each aspect of the economy has been analysed by a number of different ones. However, it is neither feasible nor productive for students to engage with every possible angle for every topic. Hence, this chapter, together with *Building Block 8: Economic Theories*, sets out an alternative approach: pragmatic pluralism. That is, make a selection of the most relevant theoretical approaches for the topic that is taught.

The building block chapter sets out the general approach of *pragmatic pluralism* (see [economy.st/bb8](http://economy.st/bb8)). This chapter instead focuses on the content, applying the pragmatic pluralism approach to several of the core topics in economics. The full chapter (see [economy.st/pragmatic](http://economy.st/pragmatic)) covers the following thirteen topics:

- 1 Governments
- 2 Business Cycles
- 3 Consumption
- 4 Economic Development
- 5 Finance
- 6 Firms
- 7 Households
- 8 Inequality
- 9 International Trade
- 10 Labour
- 11 Markets
- 12 Money
- 13 Nature

To reiterate, the core logic of this approach to teaching economic theory is that whilst pluralism is an essential aspect of academia, we also need to be pragmatic to successfully apply it in practice. Rather than pursuing the extreme of either only focusing on one approach, or including every possible strand of thought for every topic, we propose a pragmatic middle ground: teaching a select number of approaches for each topic. In this way, it is possible to introduce students to the variety and diversity of economic thinking, whilst still having enough time and space to properly discuss each of the insights in detail with them.

*“Reasonable people may have different theories of the way the economy works – different pictures in their heads of what connects one thing with another in the economic system.”*

**Solow** (1983, p. 67)

Theory is the beating heart of all social sciences, including economics. It allows one to understand the components, processes and causal mechanisms characterising various social phenomena in a more structured and systematic manner. However, every topic can be understood from various theoretical perspectives, which can both complement and contradict each other.

Most contemporary economics programmes focus almost exclusively on neoclassical theory. In opposition, some other programs choose to focus entirely on another perspective. We believe, in contrast to both, that there is no single ‘correct’ or ‘best’ way to understand the economy as a whole. It is too large and complex to be captured by a single point of view.

Hence, we propose a fundamentally pluralist approach to teaching theory. It is essential to teach students a variety of approaches to give them a rich and broad understanding of the topic, the debate around it and learn to think critically and not to take things as absolute truths. Approaches should be judged on their merits, topic by topic: thinking critically and reflectively to decide which theoretical points of departure help us best to understand this particular corner of the economic system.

Including this pluralist discussion is crucial for the development of students’ vital critical thinking skills, through the investigation of links and contradictions between the insights learnt. For a pluralist economics education to be truly valuable, students must graduate not just with strong knowledge of a range of perspectives and methods, but also with a critical understanding of the limitations and blindspots of those tools. Without this, they will struggle to select the most relevant approaches to the task at hand, and to judge how much confidence to have in the conclusions that they reach. Active discussion also has the additional benefit of making sure that students are genuinely understanding the content taught to them, rather than just temporarily memorising it for an exam.

## In Practice

So how does this approach work when applied to a topic?

Each topic is subject to debate between alternative views, and to make students familiar with these competing theories, for every topic the two main opposing perspectives are selected. But not all differing ideas and theories are necessarily in conflict with each other. There are also approaches which can supplement one, or both, of the main opposing perspectives, contributing to a richer understanding of the topic. Therefore, each topic also contains one main complementary perspective. On top of these three main theoretical approaches, there are many other useful ideas that students could benefit from by learning about. For this reason, we provide a short summary of other useful insights and ideas that could be included for each topic.

For each topic, we suggest a few particularly useful teaching materials. In the resource chapter *Teaching Materials*, we provide longer lists of suggestions.

The topics presented below could be, and often already are, taught in individual courses. They can also be combined, especially when there is significant overlap such as with Finance and Money for example, although this does of course shorten the teaching time that can be devoted to each topic and its insights. As to determining the relative teaching time to the various perspectives, the following rule of thumb could be useful: the first half of the course is devoted to the two main opposing approaches, the third quarter to the complementary perspective and the last quarter to the other useful insights. As with every rule of thumb, the specific case and context should be taken into account and we advise teachers to determine the relative teaching time devoted to each insight taking the local situation into account.

## Cautionary Notes

Before we go into the specific ideas and insights, we want to provide a short recap of the cautionary notes, which are described in full in *Building Block 8: Economic Theories* (see [economy.st/bb8](http://economy.st/bb8)).

Firstly, the following overview should be viewed as only one possible example of a pragmatic pluralist approach to teaching economic theory. An overview such as this one should never be set in stone, as the discipline itself is also constantly evolving. While some approaches, such as complexity economics, currently have relatively few insights listed in the overview, this might change over the coming years as more scholars will further develop this approach and apply it to different topics.

Secondly, the overview could easily be expanded to allow for more detail and nuance or a wider range of perspectives or topics. The examples have been written to suit the time constraints of an individual module. The framework could be adapted for a relatively brief programme, such as an economics major in a liberal arts programme, by selecting fewer perspectives for each topic and including fewer topics and possibly combining them into individual modules. Equally, if the available teaching time is greater, for example with a theory-oriented four year undergraduate economics programme, more topics, insights and a greater range of perspectives could be included.

Thirdly, our economics education and own reading has shaped the topics and perspectives that are presented below. This is greatly influenced by living and studying in the Netherlands, and Europe more broadly, and the strong bias in the discipline as a whole towards economic thinking from the Global North. We strongly believe that economics curricula need to be decolonised and with this book we try to contribute to this. To help us do so, we have asked students and professors from all over the world, as well as organizations active on this issue, such as *Diversifying and Decolonising Economics*, for advice. Nevertheless, it is important to say that this is not an area that we personally have particularly strong knowledge in and feel that more could, and should, be done in this regard. We therefore welcome all suggestions on how the content in this chapter, and the rest of the book, could be enriched and improved by including other topics, perspectives and insights.

Finally, this technique of putting approaches as well as topics in separate boxes is only a heuristic for identifying the most important ideas and insights to teach. Many of these approaches and topics are strongly interlinked and can be difficult, or even impossible, to truly separate from each other. As a result, individual thinkers and their ideas can be difficult to put into a single box. For instance, Joseph Schumpeter built on classical, historical, Marxian, Austrian and neoclassical ideas, and is often seen as a key inspiration for evolutionary economics, which is therefore also sometimes called Schumpeterian economics. It is important

that students learn about these links and become familiar with how both the ideas and the topics are connected.

With these cautionary notes in mind, we hope this overview can be of some help in putting the pragmatic pluralist approach in practice and adapting economic theory courses.

## Core Theoretical Insights Organised by Topic

Below we have put the thirteen economic topics (along the top) and sixteen theoretical perspectives (down the side) in a table to give an overview of how our pragmatic pluralist approach works.

It would be possible to fill in every box (representing a combination between a topic and an approach) to create what could be described as ‘indiscriminate’ pluralism. We think that for research purposes, such an approach could be very useful as it could generate new insights by utilising approaches previously not applied to a topic. However, for education we would not advise such an approach, as it would be impossible to teach every possible perspective on a given topic in a meaningful way, given the limited teaching time available. Instead, we advise teachers to focus on the main insights into their chosen topic. In other words, when teaching an economics course, they should focus on the combinations of the topic and perspectives that are most important. For every topic, we have noted to the two main opposing perspectives with ■, the main complementary perspective with □, and the perspectives that can provide smaller but still valuable additional insights with +. In this way, many boxes stay empty. This does not mean that the perspective has nothing to say on the topic, as it often does. But economics education requires us to make choices as to what to teach and what not. In this overview, below we have presented an attempt at making such choices, asking which insights help us understand the world the most. Sometimes there are cases in which perspectives share a certain insight. This is discussed in the explanations of the insights, but for brevity each insight is attributed to a single perspective in the table.

	Governments	Business Cycles	Consumption	Economic Development	Finance	Firms	Households	Inequality	International Trade	Labour	Markets	Money	Nature
Austrian School	+	■						+			+	■	
Behavioural Economics	+			+	+			+			+		
Classical Political Economy	+			■		+					■		□
Complexity Economics	+				□			+					
Cultural Approach					+		□			□	□	□	
Ecological Economics			□	+									■
Evolutionary Economics	□			+		□							
Feminist Economics							■	□		+			
Field Theory						■					+		
Historical School	+			■								+	
Institutional Economics			■	□		■							+
Marxian Political Economy	+	+		+			+	■		■			
Neoclassical Economics	■	□	■	+	■	+	■	■	■	■	■		■
Post-Keynesian Economics	■	■			■			+	■			■	
Social Network Analysis						+				+			
Structuralist Economics				+					□				
Other	+		+			+		+	+				+

- Main opposing perspective
- Main complementary perspective
- +



# Pragmatic Pluralism 6: Firms

In our economies most production is organized through firms, from enormous multinational corporations to small family shops and independent contractors. Given their importance, many scholars have thought about and analysed firms. Core questions in the field: why do firms exist in the first place, and how do they work? Are firms social structures that help stabilize and control power relations, or are firms better understood as technical solutions to organize the economy efficiently? Another key question is what makes one firm successful while another one fails?

## Main opposing perspectives

- Field theory: Firms stabilize and shape power relations
- Institutional economics: Firms are a way to minimize transaction costs

## Main complementary perspective

- Evolutionary economics: Entrepreneurship and innovation drive success

## Additional perspectives and insights

- + Classical political economy: Firms are drivers of the division of labour
- + Neoclassical economics: Firms maximize profit
- + Social network analysis: Firms largely consist of informal networks
- + Other: Business and organizational studies

## Main opposing perspectives: Field theory and institutional economics

A key difference of perspectives on firms, as well as other organizational forms, is whether they should be mainly seen as instrumental solutions to coordination problems or as social constructions that embody power relations.

New institutional economists view the firm as an efficient way of organizing given the fact that market transactions cost money, time and resources. In other words, they argue it is often simply more efficient to have hierarchical organization, than to do everything through market transactions between individual people, and that firms exist for this reason. In this approach, different forms and levels of organization should be explained as efficient solutions that minimize the transaction costs related to the specific economic activities and their characteristics such as asset specificity. If a social institution or organizational form is not efficient, it will cease to exist and will be replaced by more efficient ones.

Proponents of this view, such as Ronald Coase and Oliver Williamson, are often called ‘new’ institutional economists, as opposed to ‘original’ institutional economists, such as Thorstein Veblen and John Kenneth Galbraith, who view power relations as being crucial, like field theorists do. Furthermore, new institutional economics is strongly linked to neoclassical economics in its approach and theoretical assumptions, causing many to consider new institutional economics to be a part, or extension, of neoclassical economics.

In new institutional economics, as in neoclassical economics, individuals are (boundedly) ‘rational’ and maximize their utility. But new institutional economics, sometimes also called transaction cost theory, emphasizes that engaging in transactions through spot exchange and necessarily incomplete contracts has search and information, bargaining and decision, and monitoring and enforcement costs. Besides minimizing production costs in order to maximize profits, which is a core aspect of traditional neoclassical economics,

firms thus also minimize transaction costs. And as such, the hierarchical organizational forms of firms can be understood as efficient instrumental solutions to coordination problems.

Field theorists, such as Neil Fligstein and Pierre Bourdieu, on the other hand, see firms as social institutions that are constructed through power struggles, both in society at large and in the specific local social space that the firm operates in. The existence and functioning of firms depend on the broader political-legal and socio-economic context, with its property rights, rules of exchange, governance structures, and regulation as well as labour relations and public investment, innovation, education, and infrastructure. These institutions, in which firms are embedded, are the outcome of power struggles between actors within the government, owners and managers of firms, and workers. The specific historical trajectory and balance of power in a country thus shapes how its economy and firms look.

In capitalist societies according to field theorists, firms are in constant struggle for survival with pressure and uncertainty coming from competitors, suppliers, customers and workers. The main driving concern of firms is therefore organizational survival and creating stability, rather optimal resource allocation and maximizing efficiency. This goal is achieved by creating and maintaining social relationships and local cultural understandings. Within this context, incumbents and challengers creatively struggle to gain and maintain power, making use of the existing social structures and cultural rules in the field.

A slightly different way of framing the debate is to oppose the new institutional view with the resource-based view of the firm, as advanced by Edith Penrose, Alfred Chandler, and William Lazonick. Rather than seeing a firm as a nexus of contracts, they see firms in terms of their organizational capabilities and productive resources. The 'blackbox' of production processes is opened and research has focused on how and why certain firms were able to develop them through strategic decisions, organizational learning, innovation, and interaction with their environments. This resource-based view of the firm also has considerable overlap with the evolutionary approach to analyzing firms.

### **Main complementary perspective: Evolutionary economics**

Evolutionary economists emphasize the importance of entrepreneurship and innovation in explaining firm successes, or the lack thereof. Industries consist of diverse ranges of firms that engage in market competition, which is understood as an evolutionary struggle for survival. The behavior of firms depends on their routines, relating to production processes, pricing and management decisions, recruiting and selecting personnel, and advertising and selling products. But besides effectively and efficiently carrying out these routines flexibly to adapt to the environment, it is also crucial for the success and survival of the firm to innovate through experimental trial and evaluation and in doing so develop new products, and production and coordination processes. The ability of firms to innovate depends on their dynamic capabilities, which are a core object of study within the business studies literature. Innovation, however, always takes place inside a larger ecosystem, which is referred to as an innovation system and consists of government organizations, research and educational institutions, and financial institutions, as well as firms.

### **Additional perspectives and insights**

Classical political economy: Classical, as well as Marxian, political economists argue that the profit motive of the capitalist is dominant in how firms operate and are organized, because the small group of capitalists own the means of production. Workers, who do not have the means of production, sell their labor in order to get by. As such, they saw firms as places where capital accumulation and division of labor, but subsequently also alienation, took place. Through specialization, productivity increases and economies grow, giving rise to economic prosperity. Specialization and the division of labour, in turn, is understood to be dependent upon

the extent of the market, thereby giving rise to the promotion of free trade as a way to increase economic prosperity.

Neoclassical economics to a certain extent follows the same logic as it also sees profit as central to firms. But in contrast to classical and Marxian political economists, neoclassical economists emphasize profit maximization in a rational choice framework. In this framework, the internal functioning of firms is generally treated as a black box with a production function which gives the optimal combination of capital and labor given the available technology.

During the 1970s, various neoclassical economists began, however, to develop theories about the internal workings of the firm. Inspired by Milton Friedman his essay *The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits*, Jensen and Meckling, among others, began to develop agency theory. The key idea was that American firms struggled because their principal-agent relationships were not optimally designed. Rather than trying to tackle the problem of excessive power of top management by regulation and greater transparency and accountability as original institutional economists as Berle and Means had argued, agency theorists thought the solution was to make managers themselves shareholders of the company as well. By making the rewards for top managers dependent on the shareholder value, their conflict of interest with the owners of the firm would be solved.

The underlying assumption that the maximization of shareholder value should be the central aim of firms, also became influential in real business practices. From the 1970s onward, the shareholder value model with the “downsize and distribute” approach replaced the stakeholder value model with its “retain and reinvest” approach (Lazonick and O’Sullivan). This has caused a shift away from long term investments in physical and human capital, to a focus on short-term profit, stock buybacks, and higher pay of top management.

Social network analysis: Social network analysis argues that it is the informal networks that really matter, and, in doing so, sets itself off from new institutional economics which focuses on formal structures and contracts of new institutional economics. An official high position might look nice, but personal relations determine whether people have a real impact on what happens. In fact, they argue that building relationships within and outside the firm is what drives success and that resorting to formal agreements can be detrimental: “you don’t read legalistic contract clauses at each other if you ever want to do business again” (Macaulay, 1963, p. 61).

Other: Economists and economic sociologists, are far from the only ones studying firms, as in particular organizational and business studies have been focused on how firms function. In these fields, multiple theoretical approaches have been applied and developed, putting the focus on organizational culture, psychology, or learning processes for example. An important difference with the economics of the firm, is that organizational and business studies are more practically oriented and aim to prepare students to become good managers of public and private organizations. Economics, on the other hand, focuses more on explaining how firms behave and shape economies at large, in order to inform policy decisions.

## Teaching Materials

- Chapters & Papers:
  - *Economics: The User’s Guide* by Ha-Joon Chang, from 2014, chapter 7. This brief and accessible pluralist book contains a useful introductory chapter on the world of production.
  - *Economics After The Crisis* by Irene van Staveren, from 2015, chapter 4. This well-written textbook sets out the neoclassical, post-Keynesian, social economic and institutional perspectives on the firm and management.

- The Economy by The CORE Team, from 2017, chapter 6. This successful textbook introduces students to the economics of the firm with attention to the division of labour as well as the labour discipline model and agency theory.
- The Microeconomics of Complex Economies: Evolutionary, Institutional, Neoclassical and Complexity Perspectives by Wolfram Elsner, Torsten Heinrich, and Henning Schwardt, from 2014, chapter 16. This innovative textbook makes readers familiar with new insights coming from frontier mainstream economic research, with one chapter devoted to firms, networks and innovation.
- The Handbook of Economic Sociology by Neil J. Smelser and Richard Swedberg, from 2005, chapters 19-21. This extensive and yet accessible book for non-sociologists, provides an impressive and useful overview of the field of economic sociology, including three chapters on the role of firms, business groups, and entrepreneurship in the economy.
- Introducing a New Economics by Jack Reardon, Maria A. Madi, and Molly S. Cato, from 2017, chapter 10. This ground-breaking textbook introduces firms and industries and weaves together pluralist theory and real-world knowledge.
- Capitalism: Competition, Conflict, Crises by Anwar Shaikh, from 2016, 4 & 6. This impressive and extensive book compares multiple perspectives on many traditional economic topics including production, costs, prices, capital and profit.
- The Routledge Handbook of Heterodox Economics: Theorizing, Analyzing, and Transforming Capitalism by Tae-Hee Jo, Lynne Chester, and Carlo D'Ippoliti, from 2017, chapter 14. This broad and diverse book sets out a variety of theories on the business enterprise.
- What is a firm? A historical perspective by Alfred Chandler, from 1992. A useful short article which introduces students to the influential research and ideas of Chandler on how firms and management work and shape the modern economy.
- How do UK companies set prices? by Hall, Simon, Mark Walsh, and Anthony Yates, from 1997. An informative study that empirically investigates, rather than assumes, how firms set prices by analyzing the behaviour of 654 UK firms.
- Towards a political theory of the firm by Luigi Zingales, from 2017. A useful paper enabling students to better understand how political and economic processes overlap and interact, in particular how the political power and profits of firms can reinforce each other.
- Books:
  - Handbook on the Economics and Theory of the Firm by Michael Dietrich and Jackie Krafft, from 2012. This impressive collection of essays introduces students to the wide variety of ideas on the firm, from Marshall and new institutional economics to Schumpeter and the resource-based view.
  - The Theory of the Firm: An Overview of the Economic Mainstream by Paul Walker, from 2016. This book introduces students to the classical, neoclassical, and new institutional perspectives on the firm.
  - Theory of the Firm: Governance, Residual Claims, and Organizational Forms by Michael C. Jensen, from 2000. This book introduces students to the agency and shareholder theory of the firm, arguing that firms should exclusively focus on maximizing shareholder value in order to prevent inefficiencies.
  - The Transformation of Corporate Control by Neil Fligstein, from 1993. An influential book examining changes in how US firms were run throughout the 20th century as a result of its interaction with the wider society and how control shifted from manufacturing to sales and marketing to finance.
  - Predatory Value Extraction by William Lazonick and Jang-Sup Shin, from 2019. This informative book builds on the resource view and helps students understand how firms can engage in value creation and innovation, but also value extraction and rent-seeking.

- The Problem of Production: A New Theory of the Firm by Per L. Bylund, from 2015. This book introduces students to the Austrian theory of the firm, which is viewed as a part of the market, not standing outside of it, and putting the emphasis on entrepreneurship and information.

# Pragmatic Pluralism 11: Markets

Markets make up much of contemporary economies, organising more and more aspects of our lives. But how do markets function? Is competition between firms more like a gentle process of balancing, or a ruthless war of attrition? Do markets facilitate rational allocation, or are they more often defined by manipulation, norms, and power struggles? And how do markets relate to broader society?

## Main opposing perspective

- Classical political economy: Competition as a ruthless process
- Neoclassical economics: Competition as an optimal outcome

## Main complementary perspective

- Cultural approach: Markets are embedded in social structures

## Additional perspectives and insights

- + Behavioural economics: People can be manipulated
- + Austrian school: Markets excel at spreading information
- + Field theory: Market stabilisation through social and formal rules

## Main opposing perspectives: Classical political economy and neoclassical economics

There are two dominant perspectives on market competition. One view sees it as a harmonious outcome and the other sees it as a ruthless process. The static perspective (competition as an outcome) is mainly used by neoclassical and post-Keynesian economists, while the dynamic perspective (competition as a process) is mostly used by classical, Marxian, Austrian, evolutionary and complexity economists, as well as by business scholars. The neoclassical story starts from the Pareto-optimal perfect market, characterised by rationally self-interested behaviour of many buyers and sellers, complete secondary markets, perfect information and factor mobility, no market power, no transaction costs, and no externalities. If any firm is, however, able to acquire more profit than “normal”, then the neoclassical competition-as-end-state view assumes there is some imperfection in the market, otherwise economic “forces” would return the market to a competitive optimal equilibrium. Much of neoclassical economics is, therefore, devoted to solving these market failures, with dedicated fields such as industrial organization, environmental economics, game theory, information economics, organizational economics, and public economics. In the dynamic competition-as-war view, differing rates of profit are not understood as an imperfection, but as an inherent part of the rivalry and fighting between firms, which always creates winners and losers. Equilibrium and arbitrage in this dynamic approach are not realized at one point in time, but over time through periods of under- and overshooting.

Both approaches recognise how market competition can create economic prosperity, but do so in a different way. The static perspective emphasises allocative efficiency, which refers to the maximization of consumer utility. For this products have to be produced at the lowest costs possible and consumed by those who value them most. Neoclassical economists generally argue utility cannot be compared between individuals and therefore assume that the highest bidders are the one’s valuing the product most. The dynamic perspective, instead, emphasises dynamic efficiency, which refers to the reduction of production costs over time. The static perspective thus mainly focuses on consumer demand and elasticities, while the dynamic perspective draws more attention to innovation and the productive processes inside and between firms.

Within these two broad analytical strands, as well as within the various schools of thought, there are many

specific theories about how prices, costs and profits are formed. It is beyond the scope of this chapter, and most courses, to review and summarize each of these (for this see, for example, Dobb, 1975, and chapter 8 in Shaikh, 2016), so we will limit ourselves to a key example for both strands. A recent reformulation of the dynamic approach to understanding markets is provided by Shaikh (2016). He builds a broad range of ideas and research from Smith, Ricardo and Marx to Kalecki, Harrod, and Andrews, among others, and in doing so develops a labour, or cost-of-production, theory of value. Interestingly, he also builds on the insight of Becker (1962) that the key empirical consumption patterns, such as downward sloping demand curves, Engel's Law, and Keynesian type consumption functions, can be derived without assuming rational utility maximization and only requires two assumptions: that there is a budget constraint and a minimum level of consumption for necessary goods. Most microeconomics textbooks build on the neoclassical utility theory of value to explain prices, costs and profits (examples of microeconomics books). A key difference between the two approaches is whether prices are set so that marginal costs are equal to marginal revenue, profit is maximized and fluctuations in demand cause price fluctuations, as neoclassical economics assumes. Or whether competition forces firms to engage in price-cutting behavior, which is ultimately limited by production costs, as Shaikh argues.

### **Main complementary perspective: The cultural approach**

While the above perspectives focus on the internal workings of markets, economic sociologists investigate how markets are embedded in society. Rather than existing in an a-social vacuum, markets are constructed and maintained by socially situated human beings. In this way, markets and the state are not understood as each other's opposites or enemies, but as building on each other. Markets are social institutions that require government action to be created and expanded. Within economic sociology, social network analysts focus mainly on how social relationships influence market processes, while the cultural approach emphasises how economic practices are shaped by cultural norms and popular ideas.

A key insight of the cultural approach is that the boundaries and rules of markets are culturally determined. Cultural conceptions and moral values shape what we see as being appropriate to be bought and sold. A famous example of this is that life insurance only became culturally acceptable at the end of the 19th century after a prolonged marketing campaign by companies. Another important insight is that economics itself influences how we think markets should work. For example, auction theory is perhaps just as much about how auctions should work as how they do work. In the real world, auctions have become more like the neoclassical representations of them. This influence on the design of auctions comes either directly through the hiring of economists, or indirectly through the impact these ideas have on the thinking of business students. Economics as a discipline has therefore become crucial in various cognitive processes that in turn shape economic processes, creating difficult questions for the philosophy of science.

### **Additional perspectives and insights**

Beyond these three main perspectives, various schools of thought both inside and outside of economics add to our understanding of markets by providing specific insights.

Behavioural economists, mainly inspired by psychology, focus on studying how people behave in experiments. Here they found that, in contrast to neoclassical theory, people have cognitive limitations and are therefore bounded rational. This implies that we often make decisions which do not optimise our own utility and that we are susceptible to outside influences on our decision-making, whether that is by firms through marketing or by governments through nudging. In this way, behavioural economics is often seen as a 'positive' theory of how consumer behavior deviates from the neoclassical "rational maximizing model [which] describes how consumers should choose", which is taken as (normative) benchmark (Thaler, 1980, p. 39).



The Austrian school argues, on the other hand, that through the price mechanism, markets give us important information for economic coordination. Instead of seeing market decisions as easily misguided and manipulated, the Austrian view of markets is that they allow for collective wisdom. In fact, in this view the price mechanism is the only way in which so much local and subjective information can feasibly be collected and communicated.

Field theory's approach to markets, sometimes referred to as markets-as-politics and closely related to the cultural approach, focuses on how markets are built and structured through social power struggles. Markets are understood as meso-level social fields, arenas in which the game of jockeying for position constantly plays out. When organising markets it is necessary to create a stable order in which competition does not take destructive forms. This stabilisation generally comes about through an interplay between entrepreneurs and the state, which not only provides a general social and legal order but also is an active participant and regulator.

## Teaching materials

- Chapters & Papers:
  - Economics After The Crisis by Irene van Staveren, from 2015, chapter 5. This well-written textbook which in one chapter sets out the neoclassical, post-Keynesian, social economic and institutional perspectives on markets.
  - The Economy by The CORE Team, from 2017, chapters 8, 11 & 12. This successful textbook introduces students to the economics of market competition, rent-seeking, and market failures.
  - Principles of Economics in Context by Jonathan Harris, Julie A. Nelson and Neva Goodwin, most recent edition from 2020, chapters 17 & 18. This useful textbook, which pays particular attention to social and environmental challenges, contains two chapters on markets with and without power.
  - Capitalism: Competition, Conflict, Crises by Anwar Shaikh, from 2016, chapters 7, 8 & 9. This impressive and extensive book compares theories and empirics on many traditional economic topics including competition and prices.
  - The Routledge Handbook of Heterodox Economics: Theorizing, Analyzing, and Transforming Capitalism by Tae-Hee Jo, Lynne Chester, and Carlo D'Ippoliti, from 2017, chapters 25 & 35. This broad and diverse book sets out a variety of theories on labour processes and full employment.
  - Alternative Ideas from 10 (Almost) Forgotten Economists by Irene van Staveren, from 2021, chapter 9. This book emphasizes often ignored and neglected ideas and contains chapters on the ideas of Adam Smith on the abuse of markets.
  - The Handbook of Economic Sociology by Neil J. Smelser and Richard Swedberg, from 2005, chapter 11. This extensive and yet accessible book for non-sociologists, provides an impressive and useful overview of the field of economic sociology, including a chapter on markets.
  - The Microeconomics of Complex Economies: Evolutionary, Institutional, Neoclassical and Complexity Perspectives by Wolfram Elsner, Torsten Heinrich, and Henning Schwardt, from 2014, chapters 5-7. This innovative textbook makes readers familiar with new insights coming from frontier mainstream economic research, with three chapters devoted to the neoclassical theory of markets as well as critiques and how the real world deviates from it.
  - Classical vs. Neoclassical Conceptions of Competition by Lefteris Tsoulfidis, from 2011. A useful article introducing students to the two main opposing perspectives on markets: the dynamic process view and static equilibrium view.
  - Varieties of Field Theory by Daniel Kluttz and Neil Fligstein, from 2016. This chapter introduces students to field theory and its understanding of markets by providing an overview of its different



strands.

- Markets as Politics: A Political-Cultural Approach to Market Institutions by Neil Fligstein, from 1996. This influential article sets out core ideas of the field theoretic approach to markets.
- Irrational behavior and economic theory by Gary Becker, from 1962. In this classic article, Becker, a key prominent of neoclassical economics, shows how many key empirical microeconomic patterns derived without assuming rational utility maximization.
- Toward a positive theory of consumer choice by Richard Thaler, from 1980. In this influential article, Thaler, a leading behavioural economist, argues we should understand neoclassical theory as being normative, describing how people should behave, and behavioural economics as providing a descriptive theory of how people actually do behave.
- Books:
  - The architecture of markets: An economic sociology of twenty-first-century capitalist societies by Neil Fligstein, from 2001. This book introduces students to the field theoretic approach to markets, paying particular attention to institutions, employment systems, corporate governance and globalization.
  - The Social Structures of the Economy by Pierre Bourdieu, from 2000. This book presents an extensive and detailed analysis of the French housing market followed by a short introduction into the field theoretic approach to studying markets.
  - The Great Transformation by Karl Polanyi, from 1944. This classic describes the history of markets and its social embeddedness.
  - Do Economists Make Markets? On the Performativity of Economics by Donald MacKenzie, Fabian Muniesa and Lucia Siu, from 2008. This influential collection of essays gives an introduction and overview of the literature on performativity and analyzing markets through a cultural lens.
  - Economic Lives: How Culture Shapes the Economy by Viviana Zelizar, from 2010. This book brings together the literature using a cultural approach to understand the economy and markets, discussing issues related to pricing, money, intimacy, care and commerce.

# Building Blocks: Overview

The meat and bones of the Economy Studies course design method are the ten building blocks. Each of these building blocks covers an area of knowledge or a skill that we see as essential for the education of future economists. They can be used as templates to create courses, of generally six to ten weeks each. One can also pick and choose elements of the different building blocks to combine them into a broader course, or split up a building block into several courses.

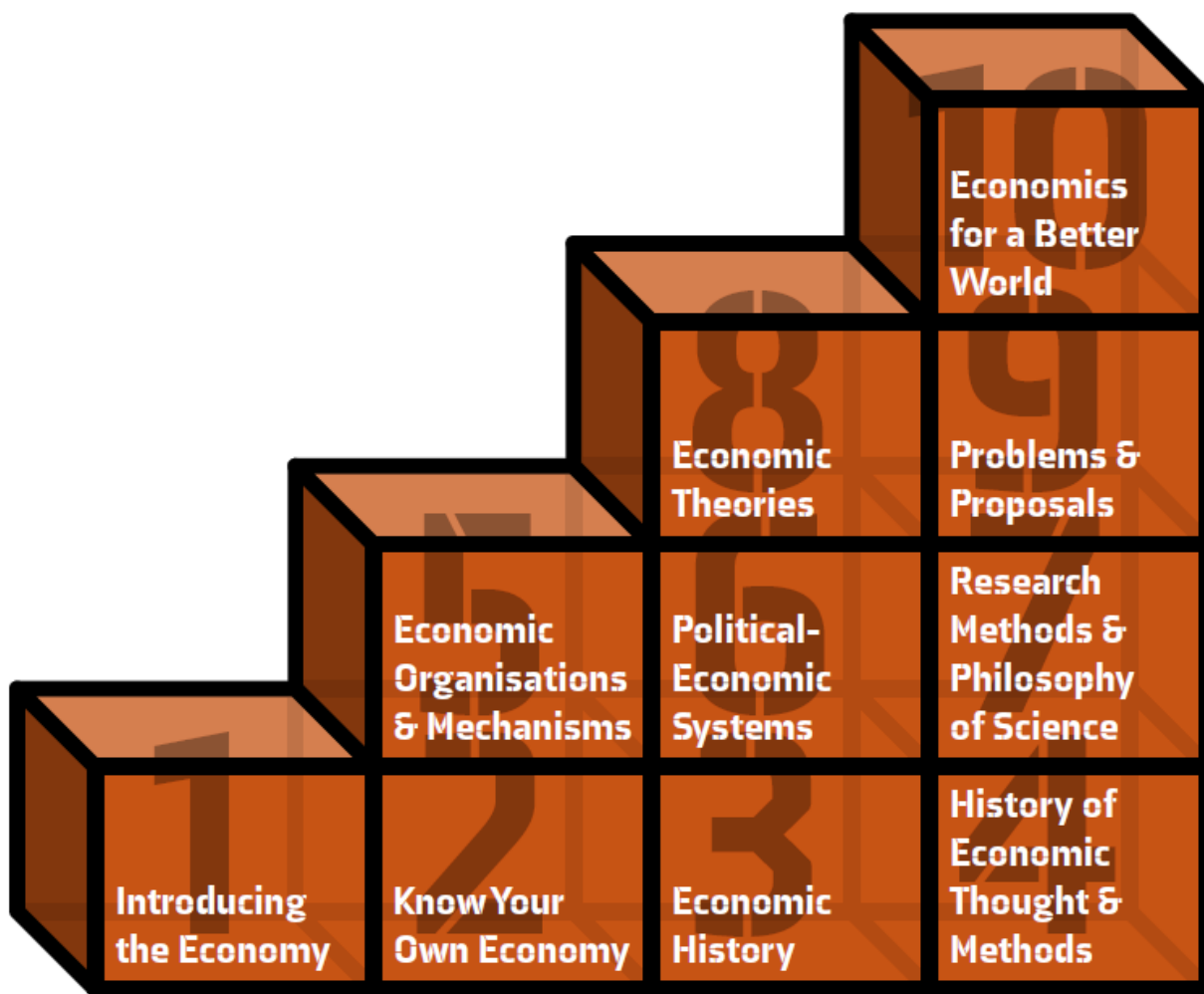


Figure 1: The ten building blocks that form the core of this book. The order of the numbers is not necessarily the order in which they should be taught. Their relative size varies, with building blocks 7 and 8 generally taking up much more space than the others.

The first two building blocks focus on helping students to develop a feeling for economic matters and teaching them basic conceptual and real-world economic knowledge. *Building Block 1: Introducing the Economy* discusses the definition and relevance of ‘the economy’ and how it is related to other aspects of the social and physical world. *Building Block 2: Know Your Own Economy*, explores actual national and local economies and their structures, institutions and sectors.

With this basic knowledge in hand, we explore the history of economic thought and of the real-world economy. *Building Block 3: Economic History* explores the fascinating and diverse history of economic events and developments. *Building Block 4: History of Economic Thought & Methods*, in contrast, is about the remarkable

and complex history of ideas about the economy. Together, these chapters provide a crucial foundation for students' further education.

Besides knowing basic economic concepts, facts and history, it is key that economics students learn how economies can and have been organised, at micro-, meso- and macro-levels. *Building Block 5: Economic Organisations & Mechanisms* investigates the different forms of economic interaction and organisation that operate at each level and together make up an economy. *Building Block 6: Political-Economic Systems* reviews the complex structures, institutions and power relations that form the overarching structure of an economy.

Another core element of a good economics education is a broad and diverse analytic toolkit, filled with relevant methods and theories. *Building Block 7: Research Methods & Philosophy of Science* is about both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods. In *Building Block 8: Economic Theories* we propose a 'pragmatic pluralist' approach to teaching theories by focusing on only the most important insights for every topic. These two building blocks will likely take more space in most programmes than the others, as the centre of gravity of an academic education lies in methods and theories.

The last two building blocks are largely concerned with the productive application of economic ideas in the real world. Economics education should be preparing the economic experts of tomorrow for their future roles in society. *Building Block 9: Problems & Proposals* deals with the practical skills necessary for the work of almost all economists: analysing real-world problems and working on proposals to address them, whether in a company, government agency, think tank or academic department. *Building Block 10: Economics for a Better World* deals with the values involved in decision making, asking what normative principles and visions can guide actions to address the major challenges of our times.

# Building Block 5: Economic Organisations & Mechanisms

**The different economic organisations and mechanisms – how market, hierarchical, communal, associational, familial and cooperative forms together make up the economy.**

*What:* This building block discusses the different ways in which economic processes can be organised. These are the different ways in which people determine how to allocate the limited time and resources available, how to work together to create economic value and subsequently how to distribute it. The focus of this building block is on making students familiar with the variety of organisational forms and ways of interacting with each other that shape how our economies work.

*Why:* Without an understanding of the variety in the organisations and mechanisms that exist it is very difficult to grasp how an economy works and misunderstandings arise easily. A better grasp of the different ways in which economies are organised will also enable students to think openly, accurately and critically about any proposal to reshape economies.

*Contrast with current programmes:* Many academic programmes currently focus on markets. Additionally, even when the topic of study is not a market, it is often understood as if it were a market. This causes students to find it hard to think in ways that do not follow market principles. Upon studying a problem, the natural inclination of many economists is to introduce a market or correct a market failure. However, this causes (policy) recommendations to have a one-size fits all tendency, and causes many parts of the economy to be unstudied or misunderstood. We therefore encourage introducing and defining a wider range of economic organisations from the start, as well as the different coordination and allocation mechanisms that exist between and within them, examining where they occur, how they differ from each other and how they interrelate.

## **Sections:**

- 1** Forms of Economic Organisation
- 2** Coordination & Allocation Mechanisms
- 3** Practical Suggestions

*“The economy is much bigger than the market.”*

Ha-Joon Chang (2014, p. 456)

Economies consist of many different types of organisations, ranging from multinational corporations to groups of volunteers caring for the elderly, and from small cooperatives to state-run infrastructure companies. Within and between these organisational structures, we find different coordination and allocation mechanisms, such as market transactions, hierarchies, commons, networks and reciprocity. These are all different ways in which people organise themselves to create value – whether monetised or not. Differences in both aspects, the organisational forms as well as the different coordination and allocation mechanisms, yield micro and meso level variations in how an economy is structured and functions.

Among all these economic forms, most contemporary economics programmes focus almost exclusively on market mechanisms. We suggest widening the scope, to include the large real-world variety of economic organisations and mechanisms. Without knowledge of how economic activities are organised, it is virtually impossible to understand how economies work or to give good advice for economic decisions. To be sure, we are not suggesting taxonomy or classification for its own sake. We argue for a better understanding of economic processes by conceptualising the wide diversity in forms.

This building block is closely linked to the next, Building Block 6: Political-Economic Systems, as they both focus on the different ways in which economies are organised. However, the current building block focuses more on micro and meso patterns, looking at the various ways in which specific processes can be organised, coordinated and allocated. The next building block has a more macro focus on economies as full systems with complex networks of organisations and mechanisms.x

## 1 Forms of Economic Organisation

Economic systems, like natural ecosystems, are made up of many different forms. Looking around us, we see a large variety of private businesses, cooperatives, governmental organisations, households and forms of non-profit organisations, most of which also exist in informal varieties. These social constructs vary amongst others on the following aspects, which in turn will vary by country:

- Legal form (as defined by the state);
- Main motive or purpose (profit or non-profit);
- Type and number of owners and transferability of ownership (tradable shares, private owners or state);
- Funding (sales, taxation, donations);
- Power structure (centralised or decentralised);
- Size (individual, small, medium, large);
- Geographic scope (local, national, international).

The universal system of taxonomy that biologists use to identify the different species of the natural world does not have an equally well-structured counterpart in economics. Fortunately, becoming familiar with this diversity does not always require much analysis, but it does require looking with an open perspective. To grasp the different forms of economic organisation that exist, students can simply look at the world around them, perhaps using something like the above list of variables. This list is not an existing theoretical framework; we put it together

for this building block, and the relevant variables would differ depending on the purpose of the investigation. We will now briefly review the main categories of economic organisations that can be distinguished.

Private businesses are perhaps the most visible type of economic organisations and come in all shapes and forms depending on amongst others ownership (who is the owner and how easily is ownership transferable such as on the stock exchange), their size and whether they act locally, nationally or internationally. Corporate businesses for example are large complex legal entities, owned by shareholders (often anonymous underneath a certain threshold and whose shares are freely tradeable) and run by managers. Their employees may be organised through trade unions in order to increase their bargaining power and have a voice in how the company is run. In many countries, large corporations are also required by law to have worker representation on corporate boards. Next to corporate businesses, there are various other forms of private businesses. Many companies are privately owned by a family, a partnership or a sole proprietor. It should be noted that family firms are not always small: the ALDI supermarkets, Tata Steel, Koch Industries and Dell are all majority-held by their founding families.

Cooperatives are run in a more direct democratic manner: not by shareholders but by their workers, customers, consumers and/or other stakeholders. These too come in many forms and sizes, ranging from small grocery stores to the Basque giant Mondragon. In worker cooperatives, such as Mondragon, the people who work at the company determine how it is run. Consumer cooperatives, on the other hand, are owned and managed by customers. These have been especially important in retail and finance such as The UK Co-operative Group and the Swiss Migros. Producer cooperatives have been particularly prevalent in agriculture, as they allow relatively small farmers to achieve economies of scale together. Recently, the idea of multi-stakeholder cooperatives has become more popular, with the aim to give all relevant groups a voice and seat at the table: from consumers and workers, to producers, investors and members of the local community.

Next to such formal forms of economic organisation exists a large variety of informal organisations, which together are generally referred to as the 'informal economy'. This includes all economic activity that is not fully grounded in the legal structures of the state. In the western world, this is relatively limited to particular sectors such as unregistered housekeepers and illegal drug trade networks. In many developing countries, on the other hand, the informal economy covers vast parts of economies. There are various myths surrounding the term, as it is often associated with 'black' markets and 'underground' activities. One should, however, realise that the majority of workers in the world, 61% in 2018, earn their living in the informal economy (ILO). It is not some backwater shadow world, but rather says something about how far the formal systems of state reach.

Most textbooks discuss government mainly as a rule maker, an arbiter and a mechanism of redistribution. While the formal regulations of the state cover only a relatively limited part of the economy in much of the developing world, states are in virtually every country highly important economic producers themselves. The public sector often contributes around half of GDP and government agencies conduct massive amounts of economic activity themselves: running hospitals and clinics, schools and universities, the military and police, infrastructure, energy and water systems, and state-owned enterprises in many other sectors.

Another core form of economic organisation is the household. While individually, households are fairly small, in sum they are an enormous part of economies. Think of all the unpaid labour, such as care work and housekeeping, that is coordinated and performed inside households. Estimates suggest that household activity may even amount to about half of all economic activities (OECD, 2018). Students should note that the structures and functions of households are different from place to place and from time to time, from the

stereotypical nuclear family to single-parent but also extended families. A look at the current situation in terms of household structures in the country can be useful and interesting for students.

Finally, there are also various civic non-profit organisations, such as charities, foundations, community groups, and voluntary associations, which receive donations to work on some cause and/or function on the basis of voluntary unpaid work. Recently, the line between non-profit and for-profit has become more complicated with the rise of social enterprises, which in varying complex ways combine social and commercial goals. There are also many civil society organisations, or non-governmental organisations (NGOs), trying to influence governmental policies. Commercial corporations are again key here, as private business through employers' and trade associations are the most powerful interest groups in many countries.

All the above descriptions refer to very large categories and there are many differences within them. Letting students choose more than one case of each category to look at or analyse can therefore be very useful, as it will show them how companies can be legally very similar yet function very differently in practice. Useful materials to teach about economic organisations in an accessible way are: *Introducing a New Economics*, *Economics: The User's Guide* and *Organisations: A Very Short Introduction*.

The study of these different organisational forms is not merely an intellectual pastime. The same product or service can be produced by very different types of economic organisations, and this often has far-reaching consequences for all stakeholders, from workers and investors to suppliers and consumers, as well as broader society and the natural environment. A concrete example from the Netherlands: when private equity started buying up child care organisations and transforming their internal organisation, from their services, labour arrangements and scheduling practices to their real estate ownership and lease structuring, this had serious consequences for the way they functioned, sparking societal and academic debate (Dutch Government, 2020; Dutch Parliament, 2019; Roosenboom, 2020; Van Bussel, 2020; Van de Weijenberg, 2018).

## 2 Coordination & Allocation Mechanisms

The previous section discussed fairly straightforward typologies of economic organisations: forms into which people organise themselves. This section focuses on the more complex underlying coordination and allocation mechanisms between and inside these organisation forms, which decide how people and organisations allocate their time and resources. The two most known of these are market transactions and hierarchical redistribution. There are, however, multiple other mechanisms that, despite their importance in real-world economies, have received less academic and popular attention. These include commons, networks and reciprocity. Students should become familiar with these different ways in which people interact economically with each other in order to understand how economies work.

### Markets and Hierarchies

Markets are currently at the core of economics education, and for a good reason, as markets are highly important for how economies operate today. However, due to an abstract theoretical and mathematical approach, relatively little attention is paid to the exact forms that markets take in the real world. Not every market is the same, as markets are made out of social rules and practices that vary from place to place and from time to time. The economic sociology of markets and game theoretical field of mechanism design, in particular, have focused on the concrete ways in which markets are and can be structured. Markets allocate time and resources based on price, money, competition and individual gain. We suggest letting students study examples of different real-world markets in different contexts, identifying the actors, how they are organised and how they interact, so that they can better understand how markets function.



Hierarchical distribution allocates time and resources based on fixed roles and formalised lines of command. It is typically associated with public sector and state entities, but it is also the way in which many organisations within the private sector are organised internally. Although the number of self-employed people has increased over the last decades, most economic activity in the private sector still takes place within hierarchical organisations: private bureaucracies. This form is not restricted to large organisations. Small organisations can also function on the basis of hierarchical distribution. The key differentiating factor from the market is that decisions within such an organisation are made between people based on hierarchical interactions and not based on the price mechanism.

Similarly, entrepreneurship exists both within the private and public sector and small and big organisations. Change and innovation do not only come from small private start-ups. Big organisations, public and private, often play key roles in creatively developing new products and processes, and changing economic structures.

The interactions between markets and hierarchies are many and complex, as we already noted that many market actors, such as private businesses, are internally organised as hierarchies. Indeed there are various combinations and variations between hierarchical bureaucracies and markets which make the study of organisations so fascinating and important. Simplistic dichotomic notions of public versus private and big versus small are not likely to improve our understanding of how these dynamics play out in reality. Therefore, we suggest exposing students to this wide variety of hierarchies and how they can function.

### **Other Mechanisms: Commons and More**

Besides the mechanisms of the market and hierarchy, there are various others that often get less attention than they deserve, given their importance in real-world economies. There are multiple theoretical conceptualisations of these other coordination and allocation mechanisms amongst which commons, reciprocity, gift economies, associations, networks and householding. The coordination and allocation may be done based on social relationships, trust, group identity, norms or shared practices. Compared to markets and hierarchy, these mechanisms are often somewhat more symmetrical and norm- or culture-driven. Contemporary Capitalism: The Embeddedness of Institutions gives a useful overview and introduction into a wide variety of economic mechanisms, from markets and public and private hierarchies, to communities, associations and networks.

How do these coordination and allocation mechanisms function? Here we take one example: the commons. In the online resources we provide a brief literature overview of other mechanisms, such as reciprocity, gift economies, associations, networks and householding, accompanied with suggestions and teaching materials for more in-depth courses on economic mechanisms.

Over the last decade the commons have received increasing attention. The term describes situations where resources are held in common by a community which governs them through informal norms and social practices. Traditionally, the concept has been associated with natural resources such as grasslands, fisheries, forests and irrigation systems. Recently, the concepts of the digital, urban, cultural and knowledge commons have gained prominence.

There are two main academic approaches to the commons. First, commons are analysed to determine why and how they can fail, centred on the idea of The Tragedy of the Commons popularised by Garrett Hardin in a paper in 1968. A second strand focuses on how they can succeed, centred on Elinor Ostrom's empirical body of work. Ostrom (1990) found that institutional arrangements largely determine the success of shared resource

management resources, requiring the following:

- 1 Clear boundaries regarding users and non-users and which resources are concerned.
- 2 Appropriation and provision rules are adapted to local conditions
- 3 Most people affected by the arrangements are able to participate in creating and changing its rules
- 4 The appropriation and provisioning, as well as the conditions of the resources, are monitored
- 5 Sanctions for rule violations start very low but become stronger if a user repeatedly violates a rule.
- 6 Mechanisms allow conflicts among users or with officials to be quickly and locally resolved at low costs.
- 7 Higher-level authorities recognize the rights of local users to make their own rules.
- 8 When connected to a larger economic system, governance is organised in multiple nested layers

Going beyond the notion that resources necessarily need to be managed by either the state or the market, Ostrom points out multiple other possible solutions that rely on voluntary self-governing. The point here is not that markets and states are not important, it simply means they are both part of larger governance structures, which she calls polycentric, in which commons also play important roles.

Rather than debating which mechanism in general is superior, she argues we should be more open-minded and consider the diversity in ways in which decisions about time and resources are made. We should look at specific cases with their own characteristics and contexts and analyse which (combinations of) mechanisms, and especially which design rules, lead to successes. In other words, rather than trying to simplify the world, we should recognise its complexity and learn about the many ways in which economies can be (more and less successfully) organised.

Coordination & Allocation Mechanisms elaborates upon this overview of the commons as well as the other mechanisms of coordination and allocation by examining them from three perspectives: economic anthropology, social systems of production and new institutional economics. We show how these three are connected, how their focus differs and offer suggestions on how to use them in teaching this material.

[economy.st/backgroundbb5](http://economy.st/backgroundbb5)

### 3 Practical Suggestions

Below we describe four suggestions to consider when teaching economic organisations and mechanisms. First, treat forms both as analytical concepts and in their real-world expressions: always use examples. Second, start with basic explanations of individual static forms and move towards discussions of dynamic and interacting forms. Third, in specialised courses, showcase the different ways of organising surrounding that topic, such as different labour, financial or tax systems. Fourth, distinguish analytical description from normative evaluation of forms.

First, treat economic organisations and mechanisms both as concepts and as real-world phenomena. Forms of economic organisation (companies, non-profits, etc.) are easily spotted in the real world, and this can make for interesting student assignments. As for the different coordination and allocation mechanisms (hierarchy, the commons, market mechanisms, etc.), they can be quite difficult to grasp. So it might be useful to first discuss the concepts with the help of some clear examples of different mechanisms with students. Nevertheless, it is also important for students to learn how to see these forms in the complex real world around them.

An exercise for this could be to let students record the different mechanisms they themselves engage in on a day. A student might wake up and first make breakfast for him- or herself, an example of householding. Subsequently, they might go on public transport to university which is organised through hierarchical organisations of the state, partially funded by taxation. On their way, they might look up the topic of today's class on Wikipedia, a commons. In class, they might help out a friend by lending him or her a pen – reciprocity. For lunch, they buy a meal at a local cafeteria, a market transaction with a formal private business. In the end of the afternoon, they might go to the student sports club, a voluntary association. As a side job, in the evenings they tutor their neighbour's son in mathematics, an informal private business.

A more extreme exercise to make students understand the roles of these mechanisms in economies, would be to give them the assignment to avoid using one mechanism for a day. This could be done once, or multiple times to let students experience it with different mechanisms. How would a day look without being able to buy or sell anything? Not following any instructions from a superior or giving them yourself (please, only on the weekend). Or without being able to reciprocally receive and return favours (not for too long, or everyone will hate you)? And perhaps most impossible of all, without doing any householding and self-care activities? The goal here is not that students strictly adhere to the exercise, but that they realise the prevalence of each of these different economic mechanisms.

For a less extreme exercise, let students describe what life would look like if they were to avoid one particular type of economic coordination mechanism. Different groups could be assigned different mechanisms, and afterwards, groups could debate what mechanisms are most vital to our economic organisation. Our second suggestion: start simple and move to more complexity. To help students get an idea of the different organisations and mechanisms, it might be useful to start with isolated and static descriptions: “This is the concept of a multinational, and here is an example. This is the concept of a commons, and here is an example.”

Reality is, however, of course more complex. In the real world, organisations and mechanisms do not exist in isolation from each other but do interact in various complex ways. They might strengthen each other but they might as well undermine each other. Furthermore, things change over time. For example, elderly care might first be organised through households and religious organisations, but later through various state organisations and, after that, privatised to for-profit companies.

Understanding how some economic activities and resources move from one form to another is at the core of understanding economic change. Our advice is to start with isolated static mechanisms and, when possible, move to more complex discussions about how they interact with each other and change over time.

Our third suggestion: when teaching a specific topic, such as finance, labour or fiscal policy, use the same logic. Showcase different ways of structuring economic life. Say you are teaching a course on financial economics. This could include an overview of the highly different kinds of financial organisations: such as commercial and investment banks, public investment banks, credit unions, hedge funds and green banks. It could also include an overview of various mechanisms. For instance, the different financial systems such as a gold standard, fiat money, the international Bretton Woods system and, recently getting more attention, crypto-currencies, full reserve banking and central bank digital currency. The same could be done for various labour arrangements in labour economics courses, or for tax and government systems in public economics, etc.

Fourth and finally, it is important to distinguish normative evaluation as much as possible from the analytical

description of organisations and mechanisms. Both are relevant for students to learn about, but mixing them can be very dangerous, so we suggest being explicit to students about whether the focus is on description or normative evaluation. Furthermore, we think it is helpful to start by giving students an analytical and real-world understanding of the different ways of organising, before going into the normative judgements about them (which is at the core of the final building block of this book, Building Block 10: Economics for a Better World).

This approach is somewhat opposite from the currently prevalent approach, which starts from a normative assumption and subsequently goes into analytical descriptions. How so? Many current programmes start by explaining to students that markets, if they are ‘perfect’, lead to optimal outcomes. Much of the subsequent programme then consists of learning analytically how these optimal outcomes, sometimes also referred to as ‘competitive equilibria’, do or do not come about, with the help of neoclassical models. Later, the state often comes in as a possible solution for market imperfections, although students are also taught to look out for government failures in such cases.

While this approach teaches students many valuable lessons, it can give students the impression that markets (sometimes accompanied by an interventionist state) are a priori desirable and superior compared to other mechanisms. We firmly believe that learning to think independently and critically is at the core of academic education. Therefore, we think it is important that programmes expose students to a wide variety of positions and analytical ideas, as opposed to teaching a single main perspective or starting point, with the danger of (unintentionally) instilling normative beliefs into students.

The point is not that the neoclassical answers to questions about economic mechanisms are false. It is rather that they are only one set of possible answers to complex normative and analytical questions. We therefore advise to expose students to these different sets of answers and help them to critically scrutinize the philosophical arguments and empirical evidence that underline them.

Furthermore, we think it is important to pay attention to the complex and often nuanced nature of arguments and positions. We would not suggest assigning students to write an essay or debate about which mechanism they think is superior. Rather, students might be given specific cases to analyse and argue about how they can best be tackled. This could require students to suggest combinations of mechanisms and organisational forms to address the real-world problem. The degree of nuance and complexity of such an assignment would depend on the level of the student or class.

## Teaching Materials

- Introducing a New Economics by Jack Reardon, Molly S. Cato, Maria A..C. Madi, from 2018, chapters 10, 11 & 12. Three accessible and brief chapters, with accompanying classroom activities and questions, introducing students to what public goods, commons and firms are and how they can be governed, for example as a corporation owned by shareholders or as a cooperative owned by its workers or consumers.
- Economics: The User’s Guide by Ha-Joon Chang, from 2014, chapter 5. A short well-written chapter on different economic actors and organisational forms, from multinational corporations, cooperatives, and labour unions, to governments and a variety of international organisations.
- Organisations: A Very Short Introduction by Mary Jo Hatch, from 2011. A brief, accessible and yet highly informative book full with scientific theories and ideas on what organisations are, how they can be structured, how they change, and their internal dynamics and interaction with markets and society.
- Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action by Elinor Ostrom, most recent

edition from 2015, chapters 1, 2 & 3. A sharp and rigorous discussion of commons, how they are different from markets and hierarchies, how we should theorize them and real-world examples that help us better understand how they can be successful.

- Contemporary Capitalism: The Embeddedness of Institutions by J. Rogers Hollingsworth and Robert Boyer, most recent edition from 2012, chapter 1. An instructive analytical introduction and overview of different coordination and allocation mechanisms, such as markets, public and private hierarchies, networks, communities and associations.

The website provides a wider range of teaching materials for this building block.  
[economy.st/bb5](http://economy.st/bb5)

# Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, we briefly review what this book has offered and then look ahead, offering practical suggestions and ideas for economics teachers and professors, programme directors and students.

## 1 A New Vision for Economics Education

Our rapidly changing world is faced with many economic challenges, such as increasing debt levels, staggering inequalities and serious forms of ecological breakdown. These challenges are complex and cross multiple dimensions of our social and natural systems. To face these troubles, therefore, it is not nearly enough for economists to hold knowledge in formal, theoretical abstractions. Whilst these may be sophisticated, they only reflect a fraction of what is actually going on in the real world. We need broadly-trained economists with an understanding of the real-world economy. We need economists who know for example how the main industries work, who can grasp the interfaces between state and corporate systems and who see how economies are embedded in the society and ecology at large.

This requires open minds which can look at issues from a variety of perspectives. Given the multifaceted nature of economic systems, no single theoretical framework or methodology can answer all questions, or capture all of its dimensions and mechanisms. Instead, economists need the ability to think critically and evaluate the appropriateness of a range of fundamentally different approaches. In doing so, they also need to be able to clearly distinguish and explicitly discuss the moral dilemmas and normative trade-offs involved in economic decisions.

This book sets out a concrete path towards building such a pluralist and real-world based economics curriculum. While we envision a large diversity of possible economics programs, we suggest that all programs would be improved by following these three organising principles: a pluralist toolkit of theories and methods, sufficient real-world economic knowledge and practical skills, and active training in the consideration of moral and social questions. To flesh out these principles, we propose ten concrete Building Blocks: practical material for the creation of courses. These Building Blocks include introductory material, history of economic thought and reality, forms of economic organisation, research methods, theoretical approaches, normative ideas, practical skills and knowledge of the real economy.

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What kind of graduates would a program based on these ideas and materials produce? It is important to acknowledge that they would not have all the skills that current-day graduates have. They would have less mathematical sophistication, less expertise in econometric analysis, and less knowledge of neoclassical theory. In exchange for this, students would gain a deeper understanding and more concrete knowledge of the economy they will live and work in. This includes:

- An understanding of the linkages between the economy, the environment and society.
- The ability to analyse different types of economic topics and problems, by using a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches.
- An integral understanding of how various smaller mechanisms make up larger economic systems.

- Practical skills for investigating and resolving questions of economic policy: both understanding the context and choosing the right tool.
- The ability to argue morally as well as analytically, and to clearly distinguish the two.

In short, such programmes would produce academically-trained professional economists: broad thinkers and practical scholars, rather than students who are trained to write academic research papers.

## 2 Change Is Necessary and Possible

It will not be easy to build such programmes. We fully realise that these changes cannot be introduced overnight. Surprisingly rare is the academic economist who can teach even a basic introductory course on their national economic sectors and institutions. The structure of the discipline - highly internationalised, methods-centred and organised around a single pyramid structure of journals - does not facilitate the creation of such knowledge. The same applies to pluralism in economic theory: the decades-long marginalization of valuable schools of thought has left us with a dearth of suitably trained academics.

In addition, academic programmes tend to have a strong path-dependency. Most are only updated infrequently and changed piecemeal. Long-running courses have to be adjusted, the order of courses stacking on top of each other has to be reconsidered, new courses have to be developed and new expertise has to come into the economics departments. In many countries, national or international frameworks regulate academic programme content. In short, this is a long road, but one that we believe is both necessary and possible.

The changes we propose are necessary. The devastating impact of our economy on the life-sustaining ecological systems of this planet is increasingly visible, making the realistic study of that economy all the more urgent. The unprecedented centrality of the economy in our society and the big role of economic ideas in political decision-making make it all the more vital for economists to be firmly rooted in the real world, to have a pluralist perspective and to be trained in distinguishing the moral tangles inherent to economic questions. We need to prepare a new generation of economists, and we should start this work now.

And the changes we propose are possible. Indeed, they are happening, thanks to the energy of a growing worldwide network of students and academics. More and more pluralist and real-world textbooks, course formats, readers, best practices and other materials are becoming available (see the online *Teaching Materials* resource chapter for many examples). Increasingly, faculties are teaching economics primarily as a subject-based pluralist discipline, rather than a method-centred monist approach. Economic faculties are hiring academics from other theoretical schools and other disciplines, thus reversing the narrowing of the past decades and enriching both students and colleagues with fresh insights. Various universities are starting to experiment with teaching-based career tracks, enabling staff to focus on developing better teaching materials rather than spending every free minute on trying to get published in mainstream academic journals. Pluralist programs are springing up inside and outside of traditional economics departments, throughout the academic world. Perhaps most importantly, more and more faculties are opening up to the idea of widening their student's view beyond the traditional theories and methods.



### 3 Calls to Action

But while there are hopeful signs of change, this is only the start. We need more students, teachers, programme directors and deans to make a difference and help ensure that the economists of the future are prepared for their roles in society. So what can each of us do to bring economics education to a higher plane?

**Students**, be critical of what you are learning. Do not just ask: “*Is this part of the exam?*”. Instead, ask: “*Does this reflect the real world?*”, “*In what other way could one also look at this issue?*”, and “*What are the moral dilemmas surrounding this case?*”. Look up the course you are following in chapter *Tool 2: Adapting Existing Courses* and discuss the suggested additions and changes with your teacher. Design your own ideal course with the tool of chapter *Tool 4: Example Courses* and campaign to make your dream into a reality. Talk to your lecturers and find out who is interested in your ideas. Build public support by publishing an open letter or petition that advocates for the creation of this new course.

Get in contact with the programme committee and apply the *Tool 3: Curriculum Review* to your programme to see what could be improved. Build, or join, a local team of critical students. Organise a reading group or an event. If you want, you can get affiliated with the international Rethinking Economics network and benefit from the experience, contacts and resources of a large worldwide network of student groups. Doing it together will not only help you last longer and achieve more impact, it will also be more fun.

**Teachers**, think about what you are preparing your students for. Less than 3% of them will become academic economists, the rest will work inside government agencies, policy institutes and think-tanks, (central) banks and other financial corporations, private sector and not-for-profit companies, NGOs and campaign groups, and journalistic entities. As such, they will work on tackling practical and real-world problems, rather than publishing academic articles. So, confront your students with the messy and complex real world, let them practice tackling actual cases, start lectures with today’s newspaper, ask guest speakers from the relevant field, and let students go out of the classroom and see it with their own eyes.

Stimulate open discussions and active participation from students, bring in literature from other disciplines, actively expose the weaknesses of the theories you are teaching. Make normative assumptions explicit and let students struggle with the resulting moral dilemmas. Make sure that you are not just pushing through a textbook; be proud of your role as a teacher and use it. Make use of the suggestions provided throughout this book, and in particular in *Tool 2: Adapting Existing Courses*. Kick-start discussions, play devil’s advocate. Trigger students to start thinking, critically and independently.

Most academics reach many more people through their teaching than through their academic papers. Yet today, teaching is underappreciated and under-rewarded. Often, the time allocated for teaching is not nearly enough. Please speak out about this. Challenge that status quo, with the students as your allies.

**Deans and programme directors**, support and facilitate good teaching. Make sure that your faculty have enough resources and time available for teaching. Enable them to constantly improve their teaching and update the taught material. Give students a voice and role in designing and adapting the courses. And ask yourself: how is our program built? Was it created through a departmental power struggle about which professors’ specialisation is more important and deserves most space in the programme? Or is it carefully designed based on a clear idea of the societal roles students are being prepared for?

Do not be afraid to deviate from the standard programme at other universities. Variety in programs makes economics education stronger, not weaker. Take a look at the chapter *Tool 5: Example Curricula* and draw

inspiration from other innovative programmes. And try your hand at the Curriculum Review Tool, to see where in your programme there might be gaps in terms of relevant knowledge or skills. You could also ask teachers or students to run this analysis, and set up a series of meetings to discuss the outcomes. Or you could ask members of the international Rethinking Economics movement to organise a workshop or conference to further explore how the programme could be improved. Attention and open discussion about how to better economics education can only be positive, contributing to better prepared future economists.

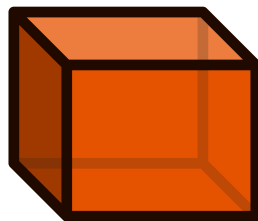
**Governments**, create the right conditions for good economics education. Look at how resources for teaching and research are distributed. Does this encourage relevant, open-minded and interdisciplinary research and teaching, or does it encourage scoring on the intellectual square millimetre through a competitive ‘publish or perish’ system? Are universities stimulated to offer their faculty career options focused on education and reward good teaching? Governments could also follow the French example (2014) and initiate an independent and in-depth investigation of the state of the economics education in the country.

Climate change, inequality, economic instability, ageing, power concentration, pandemics, biodiversity loss, social polarisation, resource depletion, migration, poverty; these are core challenges for the world of today and tomorrow. Economists have a central role in society and need to tackle these challenges head-on. Reforming and modernising economics education is therefore of great importance not only to the students and teachers directly involved in it, but also to society as a whole. Let’s build better courses and programmes, together.

# Ready to get started?

This book is free and open access. We hope it serves you. Here are three things you can do to help this movement for renewing economics education:

- 1. Send this or another booklet to three colleagues/students: [economy.st/short](http://economy.st/short)**
- 2. Contact us to organize a workshop at your faculty: [economy.st/workshops](http://economy.st/workshops)**
- 3. Subscribe to the newsletter: [economy.st/news](http://economy.st/news)**



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