

# **ECONOMIC CURRICULA IN SOUTH PACIFIC HIGH SCHOOLS: WHAT SHOULD THEY INCLUDE?**

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to highlight a number of issues related to the development of Economic Curricula in middle and senior Secondary School. It may possibly have implications for the tertiary level as well. It is also hoped that the points raised may generate discussion which could be useful in evaluating what may be presently offered and guiding the development of any future offerings in the Region's Secondary Schools.

The South Pacific is an area that is experiencing educational growth and change in its commercial curricula. Indigenous prescriptions are being developed in Accounting, Commerce and Economics. However, most Economics courses at secondary level continue to be based on Cambridge Curricula (U.K.) for some island nations such as Kiribati and Vanuatu and on New Zealand School Certificate and University Entrance Courses for the remaining U.S.P. countries. Fiji, however, has introduced Economics at the Form 7 level and is presently planning a Form 5 Economics course. Perhaps in the future other regional countries may wish to offer Economics courses also.

Developing indigenous Economics courses presents a number of difficulties. Professor Todaro has warned that:

introductory economics courses in developing nations too often become no more than disguised versions in scope and content of courses used in developed countries. Thus they naturally tend to give undue emphasis to economic models and contemporary problems important to the developed countries to the neglect of those which may be more appropriate for the developing world.<sup>1</sup>

Already Economic Curriculum developers from Papua New Guinea (writing about tertiary courses) have suggested that the aims, objectives and content prescriptions of economics education for preparing students in a developing country in the Pacific require careful thought and analysis.<sup>2</sup> It is the contention of this paper that Economic curricula should be based on the educational needs and economic characteristics of South Pacific societies if relevance, usefulness and learning are to be maximised by students studying Economics.

## **Some Aims for South Pacific Economics Curricula**

Economics Curricula may offer the societies of the South Pacific some important contributions to their educational and training programmes.

1. Economics is a basic component of **business or managerial expertise**. Professional competence for people at senior levels in industry, government, co-operatives and retailing in many cases requires a knowledge of certain economic principles and ideas. Economics is an element of the higher secondary or tertiary training for accountants, small businessmen and managers, who must be conversant with some economics in fulfilling their employment functions. It must be remembered in this context that most South Pacific nations face an acute shortage of trained managerial and technical personnel and that their training is an urgent priority for manpower planning programmes.
2. Economics provides a foundation for the development of **economic literacy**. Fuller participation in the cash economy and decision making in social and political life are demanding increased knowledge of economics and commerce. Wider socio-economic changes in society may require more formal training in financial management and practical commerce. Hence arguments and plans advanced and accepted for economic literacy in first world countries such as New Zealand and Australia acquire increased importance when considered for the South Pacific. There is a growing recognition that the diverse peoples of the Pacific need to become more "businesslike", if they are to respond adequately to the new opportunities and challenges facing the development of their nations. This business acumen can be enhanced by economic study.
3. As a subject itself Economics attempts to **analyse economic, political and social events in a logical and rational way**. However the deeper understanding derived in this way needs to be developed in the context of the problems and possibilities of the South Pacific nations themselves if it is to be of practical benefit to students and the wider society.

The major disadvantage of studying 'metropolitan courses' based on the economies of developed societies is to neglect the important economic issues vital for Pacific peoples. Such courses could logically be described as 'Economics as a foreign language'.<sup>3</sup> The important issue to which indigenous curricula should contribute are those based on wider cultural impact and nature of continuing western economic development in the South Pacific. For example, one of the difficult questions Pacific people face is whether their emerging economic systems, based increasingly on an essentially capitalist mixed economy, require for their successful operation complementary social, cultural and political forms to exist. Economics courses in the South Pacific may deepen understanding of such issues.

## **Developing Economics Prescriptions**

Developing an Economics prescription in the South Pacific would require careful consideration of a number of interrelated questions:

- (1) What are the 'central concepts' or 'core topics' which are necessary or vital for effective and meaningful economic understanding?
- (2) What features and characteristics of South Pacific economics warrant inclusion in prescriptions?
- (3) What abilities, skills, motivation, understanding and experiences do students possess prior to their study in the courses?
- (4) After a realistic appraisal of what possible options living in the South Pacific may entail, what contribution can the topics make to the students 'preparation for life'?

It is not possible to discuss (3) and (4) at this point because these questions would relate to a specific curriculum. What might be of assistance to economic curriculum developers is to discuss the idea of 'central concepts' of economic study which may be specifically applicable to the South Pacific.

The concept of a 'core' of economic concepts has received widespread attention.<sup>4</sup> Generally, writers in this field claim that core topics include economic methodology and certain content.

### **An Approach to Economic Study**

The notion of methodology essentially refers to our 'approach' to economic issues and problems. This may include some concepts but basically the First World has focused on such fundamental problems in economic study as 'objectivity', value judgements and analysis. This type of approach should be of particular concern to economic curriculum planners in the South Pacific. It would be appropriate to extend the concept of approach to stress the relationship between economics as a subset of a wider social system. Therefore, in the case of Pacific economics forced to respond to rapid socio-economic change and development a priority should be to examine the relationships between economic and associated cultural and social developments. In this context, it is interesting to note the approach that Professor Todaro claims has guided the preparation of his text:

- (a) Economics should be taught in the context of the major problems of development and underdevelopment...from an institutional as well as an economic perspective.

- b. Economics should concentrate on the real world of contemporary economic development problems in contrast to presenting economic principles as a set of abstract concepts applicable to any and all societies.

The full nature of the approach discussed can be made clear by relating it to basic economic topics.

### **Basic Economic Concepts Applicable to the South Pacific**

The study of basic economic principles is essential in developing economic understanding. The problem for curriculum planners is to select content from an ever-growing body of economic knowledge. Some research in this area has advanced four core areas of economic study as a minimum for economic study as a minimum for economic understanding.\* Each of these four areas will be discussed in relation to South Pacific economies. Also the structure of these economies requires consideration of another two areas.

#### **1. Scarcity and Choice**

This area requires the study of the economic problem: wants, resources, economic systems, exchange and so on. The notion of scarcity has generally been taught as a basis of the concept of choice and through that price theory. Perhaps one of the failings of economics generally has been to neglect the line of argument which suggested that if resources are scarce then how can economic systems conserve them. The unavailability of many resources in the Pacific makes their depletion a serious concern. Elementary (external) economics courses currently studied in the South Pacific tend to assume that prices conserve resources. However, in the Pacific prices in many cases are only a minor factor in allocating, developing and conserving resources. Pacific economies are almost completely dominated by agriculture and much of it is of a subsistence or semi-subsistence nature. Consequently an indigenous curriculum should stress changes in subsistence agriculture, land tenure, rural development plans, etc. as the main themes in its treatment of scarcity, choice and resources.

In the context of economic systems it should be stressed that values determine wants and preferences and hence economic organization and resource allocation (and ultimately welfare). Therefore, the importance of values should be stressed, especially in considering problems involving cultural change.

#### **2. Economic Efficiency**

For a given value system students should understand the basis of maximizing

production by proper utilization of resources. However, technological change, specialization, efficiency and the like must be studied in the context of Pacific economies. It is important to note that these economies possess small (but in some cases growing) industrial sectors, that they are experiencing gradual changes in agriculture and are characterized by small markets dominated by large external firms. Consequently, overconcentration on detailed theories of market structure and the treatment of 'marginal analysis' in depth would seem inappropriate.

### **3. Income Distribution**

The source and distribution of incomes must be studied against the background of economic dualism, growing urbanization, unemployment problems, increased availability of Western education and changes in economic aspirations. Courses which do not focus on these issues may neglect the most important concerns South Pacific economies face.

### **4. Aggregate Output and Income**

Pacific nations generally have development plans designed for growth — some in contrast to declared aims for the retention of rich cultural and social heritages. Indeed economic study should illuminate the need to understand why these are contradictory aims. The efficient use of resources to maximize growth and the ability of the government to influence the economy and plan for economic change should be studied in relation to these Pacific concerns. Heavy emphasis on manipulating Keynesian national income models and alternative monetarist theories may be unwarranted.

5. In addition to the above, meaningful understanding of Pacific economies demands consideration of the relationship between **International Trade and the Domestic Economy**. Past colonial history, the degree of openness, dependence on aid, and reliance on exports for economic growth play vital roles in domestic economic policy. The importance of this would warrant considerable stress in any South Pacific prescription.

6. As I have suggested in this paper one of the essential priorities of economics courses in this region is to examine the **relationship between economic and other aspects of the social and culture system**. This examination should not be separated and distinguished from the study of the other core areas mentioned but should complement the topics and underly the approach to the preparation of each core area.

### **Types of Economics Prescriptions**

These five concepts represent an economic core of concepts and topics which may establish a minimum of understanding in economics in the Pacific.

However, there is no single accepted way of structuring this content both within a curriculum or for teaching purposes. For example the above content could be organized around:

- a. a 'welfare' prescription based on the economic aspirations of society and the forces which shape economic decisions and economic welfare; or
- b. a 'sector' prescription based on the various important sectors of the economy; or
- c. an 'economics systems' prescription based on how the economic system functions in comparison to other economic systems; or
- d. a 'problems and ideas' prescription based on the important economic problems facing a society and the appropriateness of policies to deal with such problems; or
- e. a 'principles and concepts' prescription emphasizing fundamental concepts and principles of economic analysis and their application to specific contemporary case studies; or
- f. an 'economics for living prescription' designed to equip students with skills, knowledge and attitudes to guide them in responding to their economic environment.

The organization of a prescription's content and selection of the type of prescription would ultimately depend on the aims of economics curriculum developers. However, in all of these prescription types, curriculum planners will have to carefully balance the relative weights given to economic analysis based on theory and models and economic description based on Pacific economies.

This weighting has been a much discussed controversy. The great danger usually attributed to overstressing theory is that students become so absorbed with models and theories that they fail to know, understand and appreciate their own economies. This danger could be accentuated in the Pacific where many of the theories and models are based on the experiences of developed nations rather than Third World countries.<sup>7</sup> Thus the teaching of theories for their own sake should be avoided. Most secondary economics courses in New Zealand and Australia now emphasize studying, analysing and thinking critically about the real world rather than drilling students in analytic techniques and theory. In view of the importance of economic issues generally in Pacific societies it would seem most appropriate to stress them in indigenous prescriptions as well.

## **CONCLUSION**

W. John Smyth, writing on Economics Education in Papua New Guinea, has summed up the concerns of this paper:

If ever there was a need for enthusiastic and enlightened economic cur-

riculum designers, developing countries must surely present a formidable challenge ... Instead of a set of meaningful, relevant and attainable objectives, backed up by a coherent body of core concepts in economics, we find instead, rigidly imposed courses that have been directly transplanted from some developed country ... What is desperately needed is some kind of moratorium amongst teachers and educators directed towards the isolation of a core of indispensable economic concepts specifically suited to the requirements of students in a developing country.

These concerns will need consideration by future economics curriculum developers.

*(The author wishes to thank Mr. Bernie O'Donnell of USP for his valuable suggestions in the preparation of this paper.)*

#### NOTES:

1. M. Todaro, p. xix.
2. W.J. Smyth
3. I am indebted to Dr Herbert Mason of USP for this phrase.
4. K.G. Lumsden and R.E. Attiyeh. Also D. Whitehead.
5. M. Todaro, p. xx.
6. K.G. Lumsden and R.E. Attiyeh. Also L. Senesh.
7. M. Todaro, pp. 28-30.

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