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Bringing Pluralism into Foundation Year Economics

MICHAEL ELLIOTT
King's College London

Calls for more pluralistic and critical forms of economics education have gathered momentum in recent years, often as part of broader initiatives towards 'rethinking' economics. In this article, I reflect on these calls from a foundation year perspective. Inquiring into the meaning and implications of a pluralisation agenda at this level of study, I seek to clarify the critiques its proponents advance against mainstream economics education, the direction of change they propose, and the terms on which this is justified. I also consider the pedagogical and practical challenges associated with pursuing pluralism in a foundation year context. Arguing that pragmatism and creativity are needed if these challenges are to be successfully negotiated, I present an example of what this might mean in practice. This is drawn from three years of work to embed pluralism in an international foundation programme (IFP) economics module at a UK university. While far from perfect, this serves to indicate the possibilities that exist for enhancing pluralism at this level, and what the rewards for doing so might be.

1. Introduction

Calls for more pluralistic forms of economics education have gathered momentum in recent years. Against a backdrop of rising discontent with the discipline in general, not least as a result of its seeming disconnect from — or even implication in — the most pressing social issues of the age, coalitions of students, educators, policymakers, and others have called for a fundamental 'rethinking' of economics education (see Earle *et al*., 2016; Muijnck and Tieleman, 2021; Reardon *et al*., 2018). The common refrain is that curricula have become dominated by an excessively narrow and technical approach that elides the presence and value of contestation over economic ideas and contributes to intellectual stagnation at a time of unprecedented need for innovation. Accordingly, while exact visions for an alternative form of economics education differ, most agree that an enhanced pluralism must be central to it.

In this article, I reflect on such calls from a foundation year perspective. Although considerable effort has gone into elaborating the case for pluralism at undergraduate and postgraduate levels of study, much less attention has been paid to possibilities and challenges of pluralisation at pre-undergraduate levels. This is unfortunate given that it is here that many

students begin their formal journey into economics — and, for some, where that journey ends. By focusing on foundation level study, I hope to contribute towards a better understanding of what a pluralisation agenda means in pre-undergraduate contexts, and what the challenges and advantages of pursuing it here might be.

My specific aims are as follows. First, I seek to clarify pluralistic critiques of mainstream economics education and the direction of change called for (section 2). Next, I outline the main justifications for pluralism and their relevance to foundation year education (section 3). Third, I consider the main challenges that pluralism presents at foundation level and why a pragmatic and creative approach to its implementation is needed (section 4). Finally, in section 5, I offer an example of how this might look in practice. Drawing on 3 years of work to embed pluralism in an IFP economics module, I sketch an approach that, while in many ways imperfect, demonstrates the potential for successful integration at foundation level. My hope is that, together, these contributions provide a useful reference point for others engaging calls for increased pluralism and interested in working out locally viable approaches to answering them.

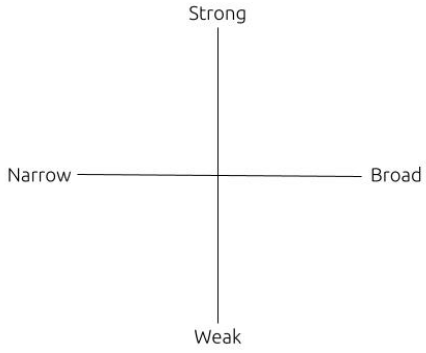
2. What is Economic Pluralism?

One of the things that becomes apparent when surveying calls for increased pluralism in economics education is variation in what this demand seems to mean. The potential for confusion here is not helped by counterclaims coming from the mainstream arguing that it is already pluralistic and such critiques therefore address a strawman (see Gräbner and Strunk, 2020). For the sake of basic orientation to these debates, it is therefore helpful to impose some form of analytical organisation. I propose to do this via a simple two-dimensional model of economic pluralism. Although offering only a low-resolution image, this suffices to capture the most relevant aspects for the present discussion.

The first dimension pertains to the scope or breadth of perspectives engaged through any educational programme. By definition, economic pluralism signals the presence of multiple perspectives, at a minimum, more than one (monism) or two (dualism) (Dow, 2007). It should be stressed that the exact nature of variance may be constructed in different ways. It might, for instance, be rendered on 'theoretical', 'methodological', 'ontological', 'epistemological', 'cultural', or some other grounds. But in an elemental sense, pluralism implies the presence of multiple distinct perspectives. Accordingly, we might label as *narrow pluralisms* those which, while moving beyond monism or dualism, nevertheless remain relatively constrained in scope, and *broad pluralisms* those which span a significantly wider positional terrain.

Standing in conjunction with breadth/scope is a further dimension relating to normative judgements about plurality. As Dow (2007) contends, engagements with plurality are rarely a matter of pure description but involve evaluations — whether open or implicit — about the status of the diversity engaged. Another relevant factor, then, concerns the 'strength' of pluralism espoused or engendered (Dow, 2007). Where diversity in perspectives is engaged but treated with indifference or even hostility, the form of pluralism can be regarded as relatively *weak*. The more positive the commitment towards not only recognising plurality but celebrating and enlivening it, the *stronger* is the pluralism.

Imagining these two dimensions as two axes in a cross formation (visualised below) helps to develop a clearer account of the charges brought against mainstream economics education and recommendations for its transformation.



Typically, critiques of the mainstream operate along both dimensions. Without necessarily denying pluralistic credentials in all respects, they identify serious deficiencies in both regards. In terms of scope, the mainstream is accused of being dominated by a single tradition — namely, neoclassical economics and its derivatives — and accommodating only a very narrow range of 'other' perspectives, and typically only those which promise to update or improve a neoclassical-centred view rather than fundamentally oppose it (Muijnck and Tieleman, 2021). Normatively, the mainstream is accused of engendering a general hostility to pluralism in at least two respects. First, through a tendency to elide the contested nature of the discipline by defining it exclusively on 'methodological' terms, typically in accordance with Lionel Robbins' (2013 [1932], p. 22) famous depiction of economics as "the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses". Second, through a more generalised pattern in which the notion of a single 'right way' of doing economics (or thinking like an economist) is continually reinforced and an image reproduced of economics as internally directed towards the perfection of a single, unified body of knowledge (Chang, 2014; Muijnck and Tieleman, 2021; Stilwell, 2006). The combined effect is not only to construct implicit hierarchies around economic knowledge but to essentially disqualify alternative perspectives and approaches from the bounds of true economics. Calls for greater pluralism thus typically drive both towards the expansion of educational programmes to include a wider range of voices and perspectives, and a reorientation towards more positive valuations of diversity and contestation within the discipline.

In a moment I will move to outline the key justifications offered for this direction of change. First, however, I want to pause briefly over two positions indicated by this two-dimensional view that appear, at first glance, confusing but which lead us towards an important pedagogical matter: *weak-broad* and *strong-narrow* forms of pluralism.

To clarify, on the terms set out here, a weak-broad approach would be one in which a relatively expansive survey of economic perspectives is combined with a failure to value plurality in positive terms. Thus, while possessing pluralistic credentials in one sense (scope), it lacks them in another (normative). If initially seeming unlikely, one can easily imagine a scenario in which plurality is engaged purely as an empirical reality to which a rigorous educational programme must attend, or perhaps even as a pathology it must help to eliminate. Education would here be structured in light of plurality but would remain indifferent or hostile to its presence. Consequently, it would not be consistent with the kind of pluralism that is widely called for today.

The inversion of this arrangement in a strong-narrow form of pluralism, however, might be. Here, a strong positive valuation of plurality is combined with a relatively constrained scope of engagement. Two considerations help to show why this is not only a logically consistent scenario but one that resonates particularly with foundation contexts.

The first is to reiterate a point already made: that pluralism can be constructed in different ways. Since the lines (or spaces) between perspectives are rarely either self-evident or absolute, pluralism necessarily involves acts of theoretical and other kinds of boundary drawing. It is thus possible for diverse perspectives to be categorised or 'packaged' in different ways, such that what on one view appears a comparatively narrow form of pluralism might from another angle reveal much greater breadth. Second, if selection and exclusion are necessary features of all educational settings if learners (and educators) are not to become overburdened, narrowing the field of view in some way might be considered not only consistent with a strong normative pluralism but essential to it. I will return to this issue shortly.

3. The Argument for Pluralism

On what basis is an enhanced pluralism justified? Arguably, the most prominent strand of justification in the literature concerns perceived educational benefits, both in terms of economic learning specifically and more general skills development. In part, this reflects a realist take on the actually contested nature of economic ideas in contemporary societies. In a world where different perspectives vie for and find influence, it is argued, a pluralistic approach is crucial to the development of genuine economic literacy (Mearman, 2017; Wolff and Resnick, 2012). Moreover, through engagement with debates and criticisms between perspectives, deeper learning is promoted (Mearman, 2017). Students are better placed to ascertain the strengths and limitations of the approaches they study and empowered to form their own conclusions (Wolff and Resnick, 2012). This helps not only to expand the 'economic toolbox' on which students may draw but fosters greater aptitude and wisdom in using it (Mearman, 2017; Muijnck and Tieleman, 2021).

In terms of more general skills development, engagement with a diverse and contested terrain of economic knowledge is claimed to improve students' critical and analytical capacities (Mearman, 2017; Muijnck and Tieleman, 2021; Stilwell, 2006); encourage open-mindedness, tolerance, and intellectual humility (Mearman, 2017; Muijnck and Tieleman, 2021); and generally prepare students for navigating social, intellectual, and employment contexts where pluralism is the norm (Dow, 2007).

Interwoven with claims about learner benefits are justifications stressing matters of pedagogical rigour. Given the fact of plurality, it is argued that a duty falls on educators to teach that there is more than one way, history, or tradition of making knowledge about the economic world (Earle *et al*., 2016; Schneider, 2022; Wolff and Resnick, 2012). For some, this reflects the inescapably political and sociological nature of the discipline, which among other things renders it dangerous to presume that currently dominant perspectives are so by virtue of their intellectual merits alone (Mearman, 2017; Stilwell, 2006). The most significant pedagogical justification in most cases, however, relates to the inherent complexity of the world and the insufficiency of a single or narrow perspective for understanding it (Chang, 2014; Mearman, 2017). As a minimum, this means a need to engage with heterodox as well as orthodox economic perspectives, and to support students to develop more historically, politically, and sociologically informed kinds of economic understanding. It might also mean looking beyond 'conventional' sites of economic reflection to explore other mediums or locations in which relevant knowledge and insight emerge (Muijnck and Tieleman, 2021).

Pluralism is also understood to carry benefits that extend to the discipline and society at large. Advocates contend that it is the contestation of ideas that makes the discipline thrive, and that knowledge stagnates when this is suppressed (Mearman, 2017; Stilwell, 2006). Pluralist education is crucial in this regard because it serves as a guard against the demonisation and

exclusion of perspectives that otherwise fall from popularity in the professional economics community, helping to enliven critical debate at all times but especially in moments of incipient crisis or rising social stress (Earle *et al*., 2016; Wolff and Resnick, 2012). Society also benefits in a more practical way from pluralistically trained economists by virtue of their capacity to draw on a broad range of tools in analysing problems and imagining solutions. A lack of pluralism in education therefore constrains what economics as a discipline can achieve and what it contributes to society. It may also render it an obstacle to progress on crucial social and intellectual matters.

Finally, there is the potential for pluralistic education to assist in addressing the chronic underrepresentation of women and people from minority ethnic backgrounds in higher professional levels within economics, and support decolonising initiatives within the discipline. Insofar as educational programmes are more inclusive of diverse voices and perspectives, economics may become a more attractive and hospitable professional environment for a wider range of people. And while pluralisation does not automatically equate to (or even, in all cases, necessarily align with) decolonisation, it can be considered a necessary part of work to expose and unsettle the eurocentrism of the discipline and confront its complicity in Western colonialism and imperialism (see Kvangraven and Kesar, 2022).

While not exhaustive, this offers a reasonable account of the arguments behind calls to pluralise economics education. Although advanced principally with undergraduate and postgraduate education in mind, these arguments translate well to a foundation context too. In fact, in some ways, the case for pluralism gains additional force here. In a higher education environment where interdisciplinarity, internationalisation, and employability are highly valued, developing students' awareness of and confidence engaging with diverse perspectives might be considered an imperative for foundation level education, not merely an option. Moreover, foundation level economics students typically progress to a range of degree programmes, often outside of economics narrow construed. While it would be unrealistic to imagine that a foundation module should cater comprehensively to all possible pathways, there is a strong case for ensuring its basic relevance and value to them. More pluralistic and critical curricula can be argued to have clear advantages in this regard. Given the cosmopolitan background and outlook of many foundation students, approaches which embrace diversity might also hold benefits in terms of engagement, satisfaction, and attainment.

Finally, if justifications for pluralising economics education are accepted in principle, its pursuit at more elementary stages might be considered crucial. An absence of pluralism at the start of students' formal journey into economics has the potential to lay foundations that impede its promotion at later educational stages. Equally, promoting pluralism at an earlier stage might support its continued development over the duration of educational journeys. Pressing towards more pluralistic models at foundation level may, then, be regarded as significant to the success of a wider pluralisation agenda rather than merely an extension of it.

4. Key Challenges

If the case for enhanced pluralism is well developed in the literature, the same cannot be said for opposition to it. Gräbner and Strunk (2020) group the objections that can be found into three streams: (1) claims that economics is already pluralistic; (2) claims that if there was need for greater pluralism this would emerge on its own, making a 'pluralism movement' redundant; and (3) claims that pluralism descends into relativism and an 'anything goes' approach, thus jeopardising scientific rigour.

None of these criticisms hold much water. First, as indicated through the two-dimensional model above, the claim advanced against the mainstream is typically one of deficiency rather than simple absence. The mainstream may have a claim to pluralism in some sense, then, but this does not insulate it from pluralistic critiques. Second, the suggestion that there is no justification for actively pursuing pluralism works only if we accept a view of academic institutions as a perfectly level playing field for economic ideas, akin to the neoclassical image of the perfectly competitive market (Gräbner and Strunk, 2020). Once the deeply unrealistic nature of this view is acknowledged, the case for a pluralisation initiative strengthens. Third, the claim that pluralism equates to relativism and a deterioration of scientific rigour is resolutely dismissed by advocates of pluralism as a clear misrepresentation of their position. With pluralism, they contend, comes an *enrichment* of critical scholarly standards rather than an impoverishment (see Dow, 2019; Muijnck and Tieleman, 2021).

While missing its mark, this last criticism does at least direct us towards an area of more legitimate concern. This relates to the demands that a push for greater economic pluralism might place on students and educators. For educators, the worry is that pluralism might require them to venture beyond areas of existing expertise, comfort, and perhaps competence for the sake of developing more diverse and critical curricula. Such intellectual demands are likely to be exacerbated by a range of practical and institutional constraints, not least in terms of time and other resources. For students, the threat is that increased pluralism might mean an increase in the material they need to cover and the cognitive load they bear as a result. It could also mean sacrificing important content to make way for heterodox perspectives and critical contemplation. In short, the worry is that — irrespective of any potential benefits — pluralism carries such heavy demands that it is not only a difficult path to follow but potentially an unworkable one, and which risks coming into conflict with educational objectives rather than unambiguously serving them.

That such concerns reflect real possibilities of a pluralisation agenda is signalled by their expression as much by supporters as opponents. And there is reason to think they apply particularly to foundation contexts. Students at this level are often coming to economics for the first time, typically as a first step beyond secondary or high school education and sometimes following a significant break in formal education. The shift this entails can be challenging under any circumstances, but if enhanced pluralism means expanding the content of courses and including more complex and 'meta' levels of debate, the demands risk becoming excessive. This is especially so given the pressures of a broader transition to university life, which are likely to be multiplied where students are learning in a second or foreign language and facing a more intense process of acculturation.

The structure of foundation programmes also means that economic learning inevitably sits alongside other subjects and skills acquisition, which not only place competing demands on students' time but may, in some cases, come to represent a greater priority. This is especially likely when progression to a preferred undergraduate degree is linked to attainment in 'core' areas (i.e. English and maths) and overall programme grade, rather than in economics specifically. These represent important considerations in terms of how far it might be possible (or sensible) to pursue a pluralisation agenda at foundation level, and what the repercussions of doing so might be.

From a more educator-centred perspective, demands in terms of learning new material, revising delivery methods and lesson plans, and identifying and developing new learning resources may be particularly acutely felt in foundation contexts. Space for scholarship and development activities is often relatively constrained here, with less opportunity for research-led forms of module development. Further obstacles exist where tutors are employed on fractional, fixed term, or professional services contracts. And whereas pluralisation may be pursued

in an integrated programme-wide manner at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, in foundation contexts it is likely to be centred on a single module (and single module team).

Thus, if a pluralisation agenda brings significant challenges in all contexts, it arguably does so in particularly acute ways at foundation level. It is significant, then, that most calling for pluralism propose a pragmatic approach to its implementation. While a multi-perspectival approach is essential, it is "neither feasible nor productive for students to engage with every possible angle for every topic" (Muijnck and Tieleman, 2021, p. 303). Rather, strategies of selection are needed. This returns us to the significance of a 'strong-narrow' pluralism in educational settings. If a key objective is to demonstrate the value and importance of pluralism, both in general and in relation to understanding of specific topics, wide or expansive approaches may not always prove the most advantageous. Rather, the goals of even a strong pluralism may be best realised through a pattern of comparatively narrow engagements. In practice, this might mean focusing on specific combinations of perspectives for one topic and different combinations for another. Or it could mean foregrounding one perspective more consistently through a programme of study and drawing on others to develop criticality around it. Different approaches are possible, and all generate important questions about *how* choices are made and at what cost. But the point is that a pragmatic, creative, and reflective approach offers a means to mitigate the most serious pedagogical complexities associated with enhanced pluralism.

The same applies in respect of institutional and other practical constraints. Moves towards pluralism do not have to be immediately radical in every respect. Incremental, circumscribed, and otherwise negotiated approaches may be possible and, depending on local circumstances, necessary. Foundation programmes might even afford certain advantages in this regard, given the degree of autonomy to determine curricula and learning outcomes they often provide. None of this diminishes the challenges described. But it does signal that they are not in all respects insurmountable. If the basic justifications for pluralising economics education are accepted, whether in full or significant part, facing these challenges appears necessary. Pragmatism and creativity can help in devising pathways that are locally viable and sustainable.

5. An Example from Practice

In support of this claim, I want to finish with an example of what such an approach might look like in practice. This is drawn from three years of work to embed pluralism in an IFP economics module at a UK university. The process of curriculum transformation it reflects is imperfect, sometimes improvised, and in many respects still evolving, and is thus offered here not as a model for others to follow but as indication of how the challenges of pluralisation have been met in one context. For reasons of space, I will focus only on those aspects that most clearly distinguish the approach taken, acknowledging that this means leaving many stones unturned.

The overall approach to pluralism adopted resembles what Mearman (2017) labels an "orthodox-plus" model. This is characterised by adherence to a relatively standard looking curriculum format and the utilisation of heterodox perspectives to develop a more pluralistic and critical approach than is typical of mainstream courses. This path was followed both in view of pedagogical considerations associated with foundation level study and its alignment with the guiding aim of the module, which is to provide a foundation in economic knowledge that not only supports students' future studies but encourages what Chang (2010) calls "active economic citizenship": that is, the capacity to make informed judgments on economic issues and hold public decision-makers to account accordingly. Situating mainstream, neoclassical economics as the central focus and drawing strategically on heterodox perspectives to layer in criticality and pluralism offers a means to build familiarity with the ideas that dominate contemporary policy

and debate whilst also developing the tools needed to scrutinise those ideas and their application.

While 'orthodox-plus' reasonably describes the general approach taken, it is important to note its framing by an extended introductory/orientation phase of the module. In fact, this might better be termed a *dis*orientation phase given that its main aim is to unsettle common preconceptions about economics and its study. Students are introduced from the first week to the contested nature of the discipline by looking at divergent answers to the question 'What is economics?' From there, they meet the claims behind calls for economic pluralism and the structuring of education in view of it. The aim is to demonstrate that while economics often involves departing from everyday or commonsense thought, this does not mean it converges on a single way of thinking. It is also to encourage students to reflect on the educational process itself, and how its structure can limit or support deeper learning. Students then move to consider the role of values in economic analysis, not merely in terms of the standard positive-normative distinction but also the (in)stability of this distinction and the need to inquire into the presence and influence of values in all aspects of economic knowledge. One of the examples used in this is Kate Raworth's (2012) call to "vandalise" the circular flow model by drawing in the environmental and inequality factors it conventionally omits. Methods like this enable us to cover key aspects of knowledge while also promoting pluralistic and critical thinking. The overall purpose of this orientation/disorientation phase is to set the tone for the rest of the module by alerting students to the fact and potential value of economic pluralism. It is also to prepare them for a form of learning in which critical and reflective thought are emphasised above memorisation and narrow technical aptitude.

Beyond this initial phase, the module follows a recognisable route through microeconomic and macroeconomic topics. The exact format has changed year-on-year in response to lessons learned, the identification of new resources, and alterations to the programme structure. However, the basic approach has remained consistent. The mainstream, neoclassical-dominated perspective is centred in the curriculum, but in a denaturalised and critical way. 'Denaturalised' in the sense that the neoclassical perspective is explicitly named as such and identified as one approach to economic understanding among others. 'Critical' because it is studied in a manner that attends to the assumptions underpinning the theory and the social implications of the analyses it offers. Heterodox perspectives are utilised in this throughout to underline the theoretical, methodological, and cultural particularity of neoclassical economics, provide clarity and substance to criticisms, and where possible open alternative avenues of thought and questioning. In years where there is room within the programme structure, we have also incorporated weeks in which alternative perspectives are centred — e.g. ecological economics, modern monetary theory, decolonial and 'non-Western' perspectives — offering students a glimpse of more cohesive critiques of mainstream economics. Typically coming at the end of the module, these heterodox-centred weeks also serve a revision function in helping students to improve their understanding of key material by seeing it again in a critical light. The aim is to develop a deeper understanding of the economic ideas that prevail in academia and policy-making today.

Students are encouraged to develop this through formative and summative assessments that emphasise independent thought and reflection over memorisation and narrow technical ability. Perhaps most notable in this regard is a group project assignment in which students are asked to identify, analyse, and respond to an economic problem of their choosing. There is no requirement for this to be a 'pluralistic' analysis, although criticality is expected. However, evidence from three years of running this assignment attests to students' readiness to apply multi-perspectival approaches to complex real-world issues when given the freedom to do so, and to enjoy considerable success and satisfaction in doing so.

This clearly represents only a very partial snapshot of an answer to calls for pluralisation. It also reflects, as I have said, an imperfect process in many respects, and 'pragmatic' is an apt — if also perhaps generous — way to describe it. The module remains a work-in-progress, evolving with each year in response to lessons learned, changing circumstances, and other factors. It has also required considerable personal investment as well as institutional support. While less than ideal in many respects, then, the result is nevertheless a module which not only functions to provide a good, critical, and pluralistic introduction to economics, but which proves extremely popular with students and successful in terms of attainment and progression. It is thus indicative of possibilities for pursuing a pluralisation agenda in foundation year contexts, and the rewards this can offer.

6. Conclusion

Calls to pursue more pluralistic forms of economics education are justified on multiple grounds. I have suggested here that if the case for pluralism is accepted in principle, there is not only no obvious reason to reject its applicability also at foundation (and other pre-undergraduate) levels but perhaps cause to pursue it here all the more resolutely. Significant challenges will be faced in doing so, and there will undoubtedly be different ideas about how the call for pluralism should be answered. Such diversity is to be valued. My hope is that the discussion offered here assists these processes in some small way and encourages educators (and students) to pursue more pluralistic forms of economics education at foundation level.

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About the Author

Michael Elliott is Lecturer in Economics (Foundation) Education at King's College London. As well as addressing economics, political economy, and related pedagogy, his research engages with contemporary political thought connected to democracy, justice, imperialism, and decolonisation.

Email: michael.c.elliott@kcl.ac.uk