

Correspondence

The State of UK Academic Economics

Sir,

I read with interest the recent article on the status of various European countries regarding academic citations ('The State of UK Academic Economics', *Newsletter* no. 112, January 2001). In the article, the term 'UK academic economist' was used to denote an economist working in the UK, but not necessarily of British citizenship. I am one of those, although I think that the term 'UK-based economist' is more appropriate. Nevertheless, it brings home an interesting aspect of the community here: that while the academic community is of high calibre, the number of British students entering PhD programmes (and thus likely to teach in university departments) is rather low. Gradually this will mean that a considerable proportion of staff at UK economics departments will be from overseas. Concern about this problem has been voiced repeatedly in the pages of the *Newsletter* (see no. 107, October 1999). What often appears to be lacking in these discussions is whether this should really be a concern? Why does it matter that economists working here are citizens of other countries? I came to England because the academic community (staff and students) is of high quality and was not concerned whether my teachers/colleagues would be British or not. In fact, it is probably a lot more interesting and educational if there is a good mix of British and others in UK academic departments. It is particularly important to development economics that the lecturers are not all from the UK but that many are from developing regions.

An interesting follow-up study to the one summarised in the article, would be to determine what proportion of citations to 'UK academic economists' are to work of British economists.

Paul Vandenberg, University of Bristol.

Sir,

Reiner Eichenberger and Bruno Frey have written a useful article in your January issue on UK academic economics. They use citations data, and create a ranking of economists and countries. Another (less defensible) league table, based on recent total publications, has been produced recently; available on a Belgian website, it has been emailed all around the world.

However, we are reaching the point where the obsession with rankings may be reducing the quality of research. A subject benefits from a diversity of approaches and an emphasis on real problems. We do not want young researchers thinking about appearances, or how to abide by some set of rules that will get them into a league table, or to believe that what matters is merely getting a 20 page article in journal X per se, or to think all the time about what their peers are doing. The more talk there is of citation and publications rankings, the more distortionary behaviour we encourage. And it is not the job of economists to spend much time studying themselves.

What young research economists need to decide is whether they are likely to be content, when they sit in their garden at the

age of 80 thinking about their careers, that they worked on things that mattered so did not waste their lives. That's all, surely.

The concern with rankings may now be doing more harm than good. Editors of economics journals ought to be discouraged from publishing them.

Andrew Oswald, University of Warwick.

Economics in France

Sir,

Alan Kirman ('Letter from France', *Newsletter*, no. 112, January 2001) may like to draw Transport Economics to the attention of his French colleagues as a field of study with the potential to bridge the various intellectual gaps his article describes. It brings together theory, mathematical modelling and empirical work, and at the same time has the potential to make a positive contribution to the resolution of pressing policy problems. It can thus appeal to both the heads and the hearts of concerned students. No work in the field can go far without confronting the daily realities of transport today - social interaction cannot be neglected! Moreover, it can bridge ideological divides with, for example, free marketeers and environmentalists being led to similar conclusions on pricing policy. Despite the early contributions of French economists such as Dupuit, the subject hardly features at first degree level in France now; and at postgraduate level seems largely confined to the University of Lyon.

The time is ripe for a revival as new transport policies gather momentum all over Europe, exacerbating the current and prospective shortage of transport planners (not just in France), opening up job opportunities for transport economists and solving another problem to which the article draws attention.

Hugh Wenban-Smith, Clapham, London.

The dramatic history of economics

Sir,

I agree and sympathise with Samuel Brittan's remarks at the British Association Annual Conference (as reported in *Newsletter* no. 112, January 2001) to the effect that no one has seen fit to dramatise the history of major economic discoveries in a manner to rival some recent literary successes. Colleagues considering the challenge are free to draw on the following suggestions for titles.

A Little of What you Fancy... (marginal utility)

On a Clear Day you can see Forever (rational expectations)

Half a Loaf... (comparative advantage)

The More the Merrier? (Malthus on Population)

Tomorrow's Just Another Day (time inconsistency)

Keith Bain, University of East London.