

NUFFIELD ECONOMICS & BUSINESS

A SHORT HISTORY

Nuffield Economics & Business courses sought to introduce both subjects by examining familiar situations, allowing students to develop an understanding of the ideas that can be used to make sense of what is happening around them. Concepts were always introduced in context.

In these courses, Business and Economics were fully integrated so the insights of both were equally accessible to students. Both could be brought to bear on issues students were investigating. Arguments that students constructed in their problem-solving activities could draw on concepts from both subject areas.

Students explored aspects of the real world by observing for themselves and using case study material. Once students had learnt how relevant theory can be applied in one specific context, they went on to learn how the same theory might be applied in a range of different contexts.

There was considerable emphasis on the development of independent thinking skills. This involved understanding of the conceptual toolkit embodied in the courses, and selecting ideas relevant to the questions and issues in hand.

Background

The Nuffield Economics & Business project was set up and funded in 1991. For four years before this, Jenny Wales and Nancy Wall had been thinking together about how the teaching process could be developed, in order to instill in students a much deeper understanding of economics. In 1990 a publisher familiar with their work suggested a way to get funding for curriculum development. Very quickly they were in discussion with Anthony Tomei at the Nuffield Foundation. He contributed his extensive experience of best practice in curriculum development work. The plan evolved to include business studies and the joint subject approach. Stephen Barnes and David Lines joined to supply business expertise.

At that time the National Curriculum dominated all thinking about 11-16 education, and so attention focused on A-level. The development process started with regular meetings with a panel of teachers, starting with a completely blank sheet. The serious initial problem was to find a way to integrate the discipline of economics with the multi-disciplinary approach of business studies. Traditional topics went out and subject content was integrated to produce a coherent course.

Setting up new courses was seen as a crucial element in the curriculum development process. It was considered unlikely that teachers would change to more active teaching strategies if they were following existing courses which had changed little in several decades. So the project had a three-pronged approach: new courses, new resources, and training sessions for interested teachers.

Aims and ethos

The aim of Nuffield Economics & Business was to make economics and business accessible and relevant, and to ensure that learning was rooted in real-world experience. The teaching approach encouraged students to build their conceptual understanding by investigating problems and case studies. Decision-taking activities were given particular prominence in both the classroom and the assessment process. Teachers were encouraged to use active, student-centred learning strategies throughout the course. The primary objective was to deepen student understanding by ensuring that they were actively engaged in the learning process.

A crucial element was the teaching of concepts in context. The aim was to proceed from the concrete to the abstract. Whenever possible, students would be thinking through the concepts in the context of a real world problem. The teaching of Nuffield Economics & Business always started with a case study, rather than the real world being presented as an example of how the theory worked.

The Nuffield Economics & Business course was strongly investigative in character, requiring students to explore and analyse data from many different sources. The investigative character of the courses required students to explore and analyse data from many different sources. Using a range of case studies and activities, students learnt to identify many differing perspectives.

This meant that the learning experience was always an active one. Activities were regarded as vitally important in placing students in situations where they must work out and justify a suitable course of action. Equally, activities could be used to help identify differing perspectives.

The teaching and learning approaches are captured in the phrase, 'investigation, progression and integration'. Progression meant building up the level of difficulty by degrees, and this helped to make the course accessible (and enjoyable for students). Integration of the two subjects meant that students could always draw on the insights of both subjects to illuminate the problem in hand. Investigation allowed students to take possession of their own learning process.

Exploiting ICT

The Nuffield Economics & Business team was, from the start, very aware of the role which ICT could play in bringing case studies and data to life. The project developed a series of CDs incorporating interactive material that made imaginative use of tables, graphs, diagrams and photos. Students were encouraged to use a very sophisticated data-handling program to interpret information and incorporate it into their coursework. This work was led by Steve Hurd and his team at the University of Staffordshire.

NUFFIELD ADVANCED ECONOMICS & BUSINESS

Resources for the A-level course, 1994-2000

Nuffield Economics & Business courses sought to introduce both subjects by examining familiar situations, allowing students to develop an understanding of the ideas that can be used to make sense of what is happening around them. So every section of the textbooks opened with a case study. Students explored this in a way that led them into a sense of the theory which can help to explain the situation. Once theory or concepts have become familiar, students went on to apply them in more unfamiliar contexts.

Activities were seen as important in placing students in situations where they work out and justify a suitable course of action. There was considerable emphasis on the development of independent thinking skills. These objectives were embodied in the teachers' resource packs.

Longman were the publishers for the A-level project. The 1994 publications included a textbook, photocopiable activities, a teacher guide, an answer book and a data book, plus six option books. This proved to be a very unwieldy collection. The 2000 offering was a textbook and a teachers' resource pack.

Edexcel specifications and exams, 1991-2008

Edexcel (then London Examinations) were involved from the start of the project in 1991. David Lines (the first chief examiner) and Jenny Wales were heavily involved in creating a workable syllabus and getting approval. Many of the examiners were enthusiasts who had helped to test the resources and adopted the course from the start. The teaching of Nuffield Economics & Business started in 1994. All students of this original course did four core modules, with the last two modules selected from six options. This choice determined whether students got an A-level in Economics, Business Studies, or Economics & Business. Assessment included data response, essays and portfolio work. The portfolio was intended to embody a variety of investigative coursework experiences and to be an integral part of the learning process.

For the Curriculum 2000 Nuffield Economics & Business course, the option modules were reduced to three and all students emerged with a joint subject A-level. This greatly simplified the resourcing and examining of the course.

Edexcel took over full responsibility for developing the new specification for their September 2008 course, and Nuffield involvement largely ended. The first AS and A2 units are common to Edexcel's Business Studies and Economics & Business courses. The joint subject approach continues in the Edexcel units 2b and 4b. These are based on Nuffield Economics & Business and include much previously developed content, with their approach and emphasis brought up to date.

Structure and content of the 2000 Nuffield course

Nuffield AS level Economics & Business started by introducing students to the issues they meet in their own lives. It broadened out to encompass issues of national and then global significance, and these dominated the A2 course.

Module content introduced concepts and theories as they are needed, so that students had repeated opportunities to practise the application of key ideas. Each module was built around questions highlighting the direction of investigation.

All concepts were taught in context, giving a concrete framework within which theory can be developed. Usually students started out with a case study which encouraged them to mobilise relevant prior knowledge and explore possible ways of generalising.

The three AS modules were as follows:

Module 1 Objectives: What do people want?; What does business do?

Module 2 Efficiency: What makes firms effective?; Do markets work?

Module 3 Change: What are the challenges? Which way forward?

The A2 module and options were as follows:

Module 4 Competitiveness: What shapes the contest? How competitive?

Module 4 is common to all, then two of the three options were taken.

Option 1 What is the global future?

Option 2 Can there be certainty?

Option 3 Competition, conflict, or consensus?

Assessment of the 2000 course

Edexcel assessment was by a combination of written papers and coursework. The written papers included evidence-based questions and extended writing. The coursework took the form of items from the Portfolio, consisting of investigative activities completed during the course

AS Unit 1, testing Module 1 ‘Objectives’ weight 15%; time 1 hr 15 mins

Students selected one from a choice of two evidence-based questions. The evidence might consist of text, graphs and data tables, often being some combination of these. Questions were structured, with more marks awarded for those requiring evaluation and conclusions with supporting argument.

Students then selected one from a choice of two essay questions. These were always structured in two parts.

AS Unit 2, testing Modules 2 ‘Efficiency’ and 3 ‘Change’

weight 20%; time 1 hr 45 mins

Section A consisted of a single compulsory evidence-based question. The evidence might be in the form of text, graphs or tables, or some combination of these. The questions were structured, the later ones embodying expectations that students employ higher-order skills.

In **Section B**, students selected one from a choice of two essay questions, each structured in two parts. The essay titles were likely to be related to the subject matter of Section A.

Section C required a choice of one of two evidence-based questions. These were broadly similar in style to Section A but tested different areas of the specification content.

Students were known to ignore the rubric of this paper and to answer more than the required number of questions. This affected their performance rather badly because they were almost certain to have insufficient time. They needed to be warned!

A2 Unit 3 Two portfolio pieces, one on Module 1 and one on Modules 2 or 3, Weight 15% Not more than 1,250 words per piece.

A2 Unit 4, testing Module 4 ‘Competitiveness’

Written paper using pre-issued evidence and some new evidence.

Weight 15%; time 1 hour 45 minutes

This was the pre-issued case study paper, intended to provide students with an opportunity to demonstrate their investigative skills. About 5-8 pages of pre-release evidence was sent out in September each year. This could be used during the teaching of Module 4, so that students become familiar with it.

In the actual exam, some additional evidence was provided. Questions were compulsory and structured. Half the marks were for the final question which required wide-ranging thought, analysis and evaluation. Students needed to structure their answer, building a coherent series of arguments to address the question. For example, the 2002 subject was Interbrew and the takeover of Bass.

A2 Unit 5: the synoptic examination covering the three options

Weight 20%; time 2 hours. Synoptic paper based on two options chosen from Option 1 What is the global future?; Option 2 Can there be certainty?; Option 3 Competition, conflict or consensus?

Section A consisted of evidence and three structured questions.

Section B required a choice of one from two structured essay questions.

The structure applied to all three options. Students needed to be carefully briefed to select only the options they had studied. They also needed to be ready to marshal all relevant ideas from the course as a whole. Awareness of the synoptic element in the unit was essential for competent performance.

Unit 6 Two portfolio pieces, one on each of chosen options.

Weight 15%. Not more than 1,500 words per piece.

NUFFIELD BUSINESS & ECONOMICS PRE-16

In 1994 it became clear that it would be possible to extend the work to provide courses for 14 to 16 year olds, with the support of the oil company BP. The aims of the GCSE course were fundamentally the same as the A-level course. BP, Collins the publisher and Edexcel the awarding body were all keen to see the programme providing worthwhile experiences for all young people in this age range.

Work on the GCSE course began in late 1994, with teaching starting in 1996. The development process was swift and the outcome very straightforward, with a single course, a textbook and resource pack. Embodying the team's experience, the course turned out to be user-friendly and remarkably free from teething troubles. Collins produced exceptionally well-designed resources. When GCSE courses were revised in 2001, the GCSE continued in a very similar form to the original.

In 1999 the team adapted their approaches to produce a set of GNVQ Part 1 resources, with textbooks for Foundation and Intermediate and a resource pack. These were very well-received by teachers, but enjoyed a short life because the system evolved to become Applied Business. This had a fundamentally different structure from GNVQ and the resources were inappropriate for the new courses.

Structure of the GCSE course

The GCSE course was built up around a series of questions, emphasising its investigative nature. At the outset, in Unit 1 'Make or Break' students were introduced to real-world businesses and markets in familiar, localised contexts.

Students thought about the nature of enterprise and the reasons why some businesses succeed while others fail.

They learned the importance of markets and competition. As the course progressed, students encountered national and, increasingly, international contexts.

Students consider the role of governments and the EU, and address environmental issues.

Edexcel 2001 GCSE Assessment scheme

Candidates took two written papers, each 1 hour 15 minutes duration, and submitted two pieces of coursework.

Both written papers were based on evidence which is common for both Foundation and Higher papers. Students were expected to demonstrate their understanding of both subjects within the context of the evidence.

Coursework consisted of two short investigations drawn from a portfolio of work completed.

Papers 1 and 3: Foundation and Higher, Problem solving

Candidates read the evidence which is drawn from a range of sources. Structured questions required them to show how problems can be solved.

Papers 2 and 4: Foundation and Higher, Perspectives.

Evidence was provided, detailing differing perspectives on issues and events. Candidates had to be able to identify points of view and the reasons for them, evaluate the evidence and draw conclusions.

Coursework consisted of two pieces of portfolio work, teacher-assessed and externally moderated. These were short (no more than 1000 words each), and were often related to a local issue. Students selected their own question for investigation, subject to guidelines.

NUFFIELD ECONOMICS & BUSINESS: OUTCOMES

The influence of the courses within the subject area was quite considerable. Key players watched carefully and gave much encouragement to the team. Many teachers were aware of the ethos of the course and adopted similar teaching strategies for other courses.

Initial recruitment in 1994 went well, and both the A-level and the GCSE attracted around 4000 candidates at the outset. However, this figure never grew very much and in time, it began to diminish slightly. The team believed that this was due in part to the impact of league tables. Around 1994-5 teachers were being asked by their senior managers not to change to courses where there was a risk of lower grades. Fear of losing league table positions led to risk-aversion and playing safe. This anxiety was passed on to the team over a long period.

When courses were revised in 2000 (A-level) and 2001 (GCSE), candidate numbers fell slightly for A-level and grew slightly for GCSE. Despite these relatively low numbers, Edexcel approached the 2008 changes with a strong commitment to continuing joint subject courses.

2008 onwards

In the run-up to the 2008 changes at A-level, Edexcel took over the planning and writing of the new A-level Economics & Business Studies. Similarly, the GCSE course was also being superseded by the new Edexcel GCSE in Business; this is based on the Edexcel pilot course, and has a Year 11 option entitled 'Introduction to economic understanding'. These new courses have made extensive use of the Nuffield course content and have kept close to the ethos of the original project.

The free resources which have been developed are being made available on the EBEA website during 2009.

We are very proud that the courses we set up have acquired an independent life of their own. Feedback from the teachers who came on board in the mid 1990s, stayed with Nuffield Economics & Business, and then moved on to the new courses is very positive. We were invited to contribute to the new resources being produced and still have many opportunities to encourage teachers both to follow and to develop the principles first set out in 1994.

Nancy Wall, December 2008