Rethinking Economics

How to...

Handle Common Objections to our Campaign
This guide will show you how to...

➔ Respond effectively to arguments against our campaign from members of your department and students
➔ Convert those opponents into supporters

Unfortunately, not everyone agrees with us— if they did RE wouldn’t have to exist!

But any objector is a potential convert who can become an agent for change just like you. The task of reforming the undergraduate curriculum is a long-term process, with many powerful agents and institutions involved. This means you need to get as many people on board as possible, as institutions are more likely to respond to a crowd than to a single voice. The more people you convert into members, the stronger your campaign will be and the more likely you’ll be to succeed! So, onto those objections...

**Objections from Academics**

❖ **What you’re asking to learn isn’t real economics, it’s politics or sociology**

As a discipline, economics is predominantly taught as a methodology – a way of doing something – rather than as an object of study (the economy itself). But we believe it should be more like the latter.

Many students chose to study economics because they wanted to learn about the real world, and in the real world you can’t separate economic decisions from the power dynamics and surrounding socio-political and cultural contexts that they happen in. Economic decisions aren’t made in a vacuum, politics and political institutions have a huge impact on them eg. Government setting tax rates & negotiating trade agreements. As any significant influence in the economy, we need to learn about it.

❖ **You’re just anti-maths**

We’re not anti-maths. We don’t want all maths removed from the curriculum. We just want it to be fairly represented as one potential tool we can use to examine the economy – but not the only tool. We also want space to learn qualitative research methods that are equally as viable in learning about and analysing the economy.

We also want to understand the reasoning, construction and assumptions behind the models and mathematical tools we use so we can be better critical thinkers.

Furthermore, some heterodox economists actually use more maths, and more complicated and advanced forms of maths, than we’re taught. See Steve Keen and other Post-Keynesian’s work on Kaleckian pricing models for examples.
❖ You don’t know enough about economics yet to criticise it yet, just wait until your Masters, PhD...

The overwhelming majority of economics students don’t continue with post-graduate study or go into academia. Therefore, the only formal economics education they receive is their undergrad degree so they should get a say in its design.

These BA & BSc students will also go on to work in powerful institutions (in Government, Finance, Business, Consultancy etc.) and make decisions which will affect the public so they need to be properly prepared, at the moment, they aren’t. See our book The Econocracy and our UK Employers Report for further evidence and arguments on these points.

❖ What if we taught the CORE curriculum instead?

[ NB: CORE refers to the Curriculum Open-Access Resources in Economics Project. It’s a series of resources which it distributes as free MOOCs (Massive Online Open Course) the most well-known one of which is it’s textbook ‘The Economy’ aimed at first year undergraduates. Led by Professors Wendy Carlin and Samuel Bowles and developed by a number of international academics, the project was launched in 2013 and is now taught at more than 20 universities around the world.]

Overall, we applaud the creation of CORE. It’s a big step in the right direction to improve our economics education. It uses real world data, mentions big historical thinkers; like Smith, Marx, Minsky, examines problems like climate change, and has a fun interactive interface but... it doesn’t go far enough!

CORE is not pluralist. It still represents one paradigm – one that is predominantly neoclassical and teaches that like it’s the one and only way to study economics. Moreover, CORE still mainly focuses on the global north and western actors, the role of colonialism and ongoing economic power relations are still overlooked.

❖ We’d love to meet all your demands but the REF has our hands tied

[ NB: REF refers to the Research Excellence Framework. It is an impact evaluation designed to measure British higher education institutions and distribute public funding. This Objection and response is only relevant to UK students]

Whilst the REF may be a key source of income for universities and economics departments; students are as well. The fees which students pay mean they are significant financial stakeholders in – as well as the beneficiaries of – their education and therefore their views should be taken just as seriously. Such a role was outlined by the Government in the white paper they published on fee introduction. This described students as being “co-creators in their curriculum”.

Whilst the REF is meant to assess what you research – not what you teach, it affects teaching because academics are hired based on their academic record, and kept in employment based on their academic output. Their teaching ability comes second. But teaching is how the majority of students benefit from the staff and so this should be a primary concern for them. Alternative solutions to putting on new modules if new economics professors can’t be hired is to collaborate with other departments to
produce and teach modules together. Or save money and resources on creating new modules by finding alternative economics teaching materials which are already out there and asking the academics who made these for support on teaching them. Check out www.exploring-economics.org and the Reteaching Economics network.

Objections from Students

❖ But surely I need to study the current curriculum to get a good job when I graduate?

Of course employability is a key concern for most students when they’re studying, so it may surprise them to learn that employers aren’t satisfied with the current curriculum either! We released a report in July 2018 with interviews from 18 UK employers across the private and public sector and the data showed they want to hire graduates with more real world knowledge, critical thinking skills and knowledge of economic alternatives.

A pluralist education will make you a better economist and thereby more employable. Being part of a RE society will also give you loads of vital and transferable skills; event planning, social media promotion, writing blogs, and networking with high ranking academics. RE alumni also go on to work for top employers including the Bank of England and the Financial Times.

❖ You just point our problems and don’t provide solutions

It’s true that we don’t point to one course and say ‘Look that one’s perfect, be like that!’ - although that would make our lives easier! We argue for pluralism because we see intrinsic value in having variety in our education and allowing each student to decide for themselves which tools and methods are best in approaching each problem.

There are lots of different solutions out there, eg. Module on History of Economic Thought at Cambridge University, module on Feminist Economics at University of West England, and our own textbook Rethinking Economics: An Introduction to Pluralism. Ultimately, we’re fighting because we don’t hate economics, we love it and just want to make it better!

❖ Why should I campaign to change the curriculum if I’ve left uni by the time it actually changes?

I understand your point but we’re not just in this out of self-interest. Improving our economics degrees will ultimately improve society for everyone. Economics graduates (more so than graduates from other subjects) will go on to work in important institutions that impact public life – for example the biggest recruiter of economics graduates in the UK is the civil service. We need better economists to tackle the problems the 21st century faces eg: increasing inequality, climate change etc. These problems have escalated and are affecting us now because past
generations were ill-equipped. This needs to change and we have a responsibility to future generations as well.

Institutional change can take a very long time. This is the nature of the problem we’re dealing with, particularly as a campaign involving students because they have a high turnover but this means your contribution, no matter how small, is extremely valuable!

❖ I agree with everything you’ve said but I don’t have time to campaign with you and study for a degree at the same time

Obviously, getting your degree is the most important thing every student should do. But...

No one studies 100% of the time. It’s good to give your brain a break and getting involved with any student society has loads of benefits. You get to try out new skills, learn new skills such as event organising, running social media, how to campaign, and how to balance all these responsibilities effectively. All these will not only look great on your CV but you could make some new friends in the process too!

Getting involved an RE society in particular will also make you a better economist. You’ll learn about new schools of thought and be exposed to ideas you would never have come across in a classroom making you a more critical thinker, and possibly putting you in better stead for future employment. You’ll also get the opportunity to meet and learn from famous economists like Ha-Joon Chang, Lord Robert Skidelsky and Kate Raworth.

Lastly, a commitment to our campaign doesn’t have to be a big thing. There’re loads of little tasks which you could do that don’t take much time. Suggest small things like picking up the food/drinks on the way to an event or sharing the group’s facebook page with just 5 other people. Or hanging up just 10 posters around campus. Breaking up activities into bite-sized chunks can make them more appealing to people and build people’s confidence if they’ve never been involved with a society before.

**Strategising and Picking your Battles**

Converting objectors takes time, and since time is a valuable and a limited resource for all campaigners, but especially student ones, you’ll need to learn how to pick your battles, and use your time wisely. To help you decide which individuals to target or decide between say the Head of undergraduate programming OR a young new lecturer.

2 really useful campaign tools to use here are **power-mapping** and creating a **spectrum of allies**.
You can draw out these diagrams and fill them with individuals or institutions from your own context. The first step in doing this, is to research and find out where people or for instance, members of your department, sit in the first place. You can do this by setting up meetings directly, looking online to see what internal committees’ academics might sit on, or by talking to others. Then you’ll start to get a sense of how much it’d take to convince them and whether it’s worth it or not.

For example, one member of the department might sit in the bottom left-hand corner of a power map, so they strongly disagree with you but have little power or influence. Whereas a second person might sit in the middle, meaning they don’t disagree as strongly, and they have more power. It would therefore be more strategic to target this second person instead of the first because it’d take less work to convince them, and if you were successful they’d have more power to help make the changes you want to see happen.

Try using these to decide whether you should talk to...

- an Economics student OR a History student?
- the Head of undergraduate programming OR lecturer with no administrative position?

Some individuals that are always worth targeting as well are

- PhD students – because they’re around for years, if you recruit one as a core organiser you’ll have a reliable volunteer for ages
- Your own lecturers – because they’re easier to strike up a conversation with and easier to follow up with as well, they can’t dodge your emails if you’ll be seeing each other face-to-face every week!
Further Resources

Our first book; The Econocracy (Penguin 2017) was written by 3 members of our Manchester Post-Crash Economics Society. It provides the background and big ideas behind our campaign, alongside a curriculum review of economics degrees at 8 UK Russel Group Universities. On top of the benefits to student, the book also makes the important link to the beneficial effect reformed economics degrees would have on the general public and wider society.

 Whilst our other book; Rethinking Economics: An Introduction to Pluralist Economics (Routledge 2018) is an academic resource. Each chapter introduces a different school of economic thought written by a leading academic in the field, whilst the editorial team, who oversaw the whole project and penned the introduction, were student members of RE from around the world. It illustrates the kind of alternative content we want to see in our degrees.

You should be able to request copies of both books through your university or local libraries for free, so you can lend them to anyone you’re trying to convince! You can also campaign to have it added to your reading list, just like Goldsmiths College, University of London have done!

As for all the other reports and pieces of evidenced we mentioned in this guide; our UK Employers Report, you can find these on our website www.rethinkeconomics.org. For more information on convincing others to join your campaign and recruitment tactics also check out more resources from our friends NEON (http://neweconomyorganisers.org/resources/) or get in touch with us directly via info@rethinkeconomics.org!