Economics Education for Sustainable Development: Institutional Barriers to Pluralism at the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin (France)

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Abstract: While commitments made at the Rio+20 conference paved the road for the building of a green and fair economy, the ability of economics to provide a satisfactory intellectual framework to support this process has been increasingly questioned, particularly since the 2008 global financial crisis. In order to make economics more responsive to present and future challenges, this study argues that education in economics must be centred on the pursuit of sustainable development with what has been termed Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). To qualify as ESD, this paper contends that economics education must embrace pluralism on four levels (theoretical, methodological, disciplinary and pedagogical). This fourfold pluralism will improve economists’ capacity to deal with societal challenges and allow for the long-term building of resilient green-er and fair-er economies. The University of Versailles Saint-Quentin (France) Bachelor of Economics and Management is chosen as a case study to identify the current institutional factors hindering the opening of economics education to pluralism. The thesis draws on relevant literature in the field, and also utilises interviews undertaken with five economic professors teaching in the Bachelor. Following analysis of the case study, five main barriers to a plural economics education were found; these barriers are professionalisation, recruitment, evaluation, laziness and performance.

Keywords: sustainable development, green economy, fair economy, economics, education, pluralism, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

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Summary: During the last United Nations Conference for Sustainable Development (June 2012), member states renewed their commitment to “ensuring the promotion of an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable future for our planet and for present and future generations” (UN, 2012, p. 1) through the building of a green and fair economy. At the core of this strategy, participants stressed the need for a new type of education. This Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) was defined as an education that will “allow every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future” (UNESCO, 2012). This study aims to (1) define how education in economics could evolve in order to become an ESD and (2) identify the institutional barriers that could hinder such a change taking the Bachelor of Economics and Management at the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin (France) as a case study.

Keywords: sustainable development, green economy, fair economy, economics, education, pluralism, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

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Preface: The author as a political economic person

In the words of the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal “valuations are always with us [...]. Disinterested research there has never been and can never be. Prior to answers there must be questions. There can be no view except from a viewpoint. In the questions raised and the viewpoint chosen, valuations are implied.” (Myrdal, 1978, pp. 778-79). The reflections expressed within the framework of this study are deeply rooted in the past and present experiences that constitute the foundation of my ideology. To better understand the ideological lenses through which I am conducting the research, I will in this section briefly describe several dimensions of my personal life that influence me as a political economic person (Söderbaum, 2008).

I studied a bachelor of economics at the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin for three years with a specialisation in international finance and economics. During the third year, I went to the University of Uppsala in Sweden where I took two courses¹ on sustainability-related issues at the Center for Environment and Development Studies (CEMUS), a unique example of student-run education for sustainable development². After this first exposure to sustainability studies and alternative educational models, I decided to join a Masters of Sciences of the Environment, Territory and the Economy at the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin. At the end of the first year, I moved back to Uppsala to undertake the Masters in Sustainable Development that shall conclude with the completion of this thesis.

One year ago, I started to teach a course titled ‘The Global Economy: Environment, Development and Globalisation’ at CEMUS. As any teacher on his or her first day, the following questions sprung to my mind: what should be the content and form of the course? In the light of current global crises, what kind of actors do we want to educate? And how does this ideological orientation translate in the theories and methodologies we present to students or in the way we interact with them? This pressure to provide future actors the tools needed to deal with the complexity of sustainability-issues initiated thoughts about our responsibility as educators in teaching new generations of economists.

The ideas exhibited in this paper are the product of those constant reflections as well as my experiments as a teacher in bringing the concept of Economics Education for Sustainable Development (EESD) into reality through The Global Economy course.

Timothée Parrique
Uppsala, May 2013

¹ Global Challenges and Sustainable Futures and Critical Perspectives in Sustainable Development in Sweden.
² See http://www.csduppsala.uu.se/cemus/
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Finally, I would like to thank my students and colleagues at The Global Economy: Environment, Development and Globalisation (CEMUS) that made me reconsider the importance of education for sustainable development. If it was not for them, I would have probably never studied – and seen the importance of – education in economics. I am deeply indebted to those at CEMUS who helped me see the big picture.
Acronyms and abbreviations

AAA  Actor-Agenda-Arena
CNU  University National Council (*Conseil National des Universités*)
EE   Economics Education
ESD  Education for Sustainable Development
EESD Economics Education for Sustainable Development
FAPE French Association of Political Economy (*AFEP*)
GFC  Global Financial Crisis
L1, L2, L3 First, second and third year of Bachelor
M1, M2 First and second year of Masters
Macro Macroeconomics
MDC  Associate professor (*Maître de Conférence*)
Micro Microeconomics
NCE  Neoclassical Economics
PAE  Post-Autistic Economics
PEP  Political Economic Person
PEO  Political Economic Organisation
PEPS For a Pluralist Economics Higher Education (*Pour un Enseignement Pluraliste dans le Supérieur en Économie*)
pt. Personal translation
SD   Sustainable Development
UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UVSQ University of Versailles Saint-Quentin (*Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin*)
WEA  World Economics Association
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Context

The industrial revolution marked a rupture in the nature of the relationship between man and the environment. The energy regime change made possible by the discovery of fossil fuels and a revolution in communication technologies initiated the exponential growth of the world population. The increasing scale of humanity and the changing nature of its activities came to exert new pressures on its natural habitat. For the first time in the history of mankind, humans started to have a significant global impact on the Earth’s ecosystems, marking the beginning of a new geological epoch: the Anthropocene. This new era acknowledges a particular interaction dynamic between nature and society where mankind’s activities both depend on and impact the global availability of natural resources. Such an increased power over the natural world came with a new intra- and inter-generational responsibility of stewardship. It is in this context of global stewardship responsibility that the state of the world in 2013 can be characterised.

1.1.1 The state of the world in 2013

The world in 2013 is characterised by the convergence of several interactive global crises that are threatening civilisation.

- **Climate change**: In its last report (2007), the IPCC announced a rise in global temperature of 0.74°C between 1906 and 2005 and detailed related changes in physical and biological systems (e.g. sea level rise, extreme weather, reduced water availability and ecosystems disruption) that represent potential threats for civilisation.
- **Reduction of biodiversity**: Monitoring changes in the state of the planet’s biodiversity, WWF reported a 28% decline of the global living planet index since 1970 (WWF, 2012).
- **Ecological overshoot**: The same report estimated humanity’s demand for natural resources to have doubled since 1966 to reach a consumption that is today equivalent to 1.5 planets – and estimating annual needs to be the equivalent of 2 planets by 2030 under business-as-usual projections.
- **Population growth**: On 31st October 2011, the world population reached 7 billion inhabitants with an expected growth factor of 1.4 before 2050 (PRB, 2012).
- **Environmental refugees**: By 2020, the United Nations has projected a number of 50 million environmental refugees while there were 11.4 million in 2008 and 9.9 in 2007.
- **World inequality**: In a 2006 report, the United Nations University’s World Institute for Development Economics Research found that the richest 1% of the world’s population owned 39.9% of the world household wealth – a total greater than the wealth of the world’s poorest 95%.
- **Financial crisis**: According to the Roosevelt Institute (2010) the financial crisis that broke out in 2007 destroyed $34.4 trillion of wealth by March 2009, the equivalent of almost half of the world GDP in 2011.

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3 Using data from the year 2000.
4 Based on the evolution of the total market value of publicly traded companies around the world.

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Trying to evaluate the extra-human state of the world, Rockström, et al. (2009) established nine biophysical limits to human development – three of those planetary boundaries already being transgressed (climate change, biodiversity loss and nitrogen cycle) and four others being on the verge of transgression (land system change, global freshwater use, ocean acidification and phosphorous cycle). The paper concluded that “anthropogenic pressures on the Earth System have reached a scale where abrupt global environmental change can no longer be excluded” (Rockström, et al., 2009, p. 1). This ecological overshoot remains particularly problematic in a world where a significant part of humanity has not yet reached a satisfactory level of development⁶.

Integrating this need for further development, Raworth (2012) used the planetary boundaries’ framework to define a “safe and just space for humanity” taking human rights as a foundation. She described sustainable development as being a development contained between Rockström, et al.’s (2009) critical natural thresholds (the “environmental ceiling”) and eleven social boundaries⁷ to be fulfilled to avoid critical human deprivations (the “social foundations”). After analysis of those criteria, she concluded that humanity is “far from living within those boundaries” (Raworth, 2012, p. 5).

The state of the world in 2013 is therefore characterised by an environmental and social conundrum; there is still a great need for development in parts of the world⁸ but the natural resource base required for this process is being impoverished by development itself. The word ‘crisis’ comes from the Greek ‘krisis’ meaning ‘decision’. Accordingly, the world in 2013 is indeed in a state of crisis; a state where decisions on what it means to develop and how to make it happen fairly within the boundaries of humanity’s natural environment need to be taken.

1.1.2 Commitments towards sustainable development (SD)⁹

In June 2012, countries of the world gathered at Rio de Janeiro for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development to elaborate a global institutional framework for action towards sustainable development. The conference was part of a twenty-years tradition of international cooperation on sustainability issues¹⁰. In the outcome document entitled “The Future We Want”, the participants renewed their commitment to “ensuring the promotion of an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable future for our planet and for present and future generations” (UN, 2012, p. 1). While the document put a strong emphasis on the economy and education independently, very few links were made between the two in the form of policy impacting education in economics.

By choosing the ‘green economy’¹¹, as a theme, the conference placed emphasis on the economic approach to sustainable development. As stated in the Rio+20 outcome document, the economic system is regarded “as one of the important tools available for achieving sustainable development” (UN, 2012, p. 9). Referring to environmental sustainability it is stated, “we recognise

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⁵ Estimated by the World Bank (2011) to be around $69.98 trillion.
⁶ In 2005, 47% of the world population lived on less than $2.00 a day with a projection of 34.6% in 2015 (World Bank, 2008). While this indicator can be criticised of monetary reductionism and raises further reflections on questions of absolute and relative poverty, the need for further development in some parts of the worlds is incontestable.
⁷ The eleven social criteria (energy, jobs, social equity, gender equality, health, food, water, income, education, resilience and voice) have been defined by an analysis of governments’ stated social priorities in the preparation for the Rio+20 conference.
⁸ The ‘parts of the world’ in need for development do not only refer to the global South (duality developed/developing countries) but also to parts of the world within highly unequal developed countries that also remain in need for development.
⁹ The term sustainable development has been defined in many different ways beyond the famous Brundtland definition (1987). However, the choice of a particular definition remains out of the scope of this paper. The term ‘sustainable development’ – and its associated ‘green economy’ – will be understood as defined by the United Nations conferences.
¹¹ The two themes of the conference were the following: (a) a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication and (b) the institutional framework for sustainable development.
that urgent action on unsustainable patterns of production and consumption where they occur remains fundamental in addressing environmental sustainability” (UN, 2012, p. 11). On the same page but referring this time to social sustainability, the document states that green economy policies must “continue efforts to strive for inclusive, equitable development approaches to overcome poverty and inequality.”

The French strategy defined by the “National Strategy of Sustainable Development: Towards a green and fair economy” (2010, pt.) is consistent with this economy-based approach. In the document’s introduction, it is stated, “the [current] structural economic crisis is calling for the imagination and the experimentation of a new model of development” and that “the [French] strategy is aimed at building an energy efficient, robust and fair economy” (SNDD, 2010, p. 1, pt.12).

On the other hand, education is also defined as a field of importance at both the international and the national level. When addressing the education issue, the member states agree “to promote education for sustainable development and to integrate sustainable development more actively into education” as well as “to improve the capacity of our education systems to prepare people to pursue sustainable development, including through enhanced teacher training and the development of sustainability curricula” (UN, 2012, p. 43). In the same way, amongst the seven challenges highlighted in the French National Strategy (2010), one entitled “Knowledge Society” touched on education and research. Stemming from an eponymous section in the new European Sustainable Development Strategy (2006), it acknowledges the French government’s commitment to integrate education for sustainable development in every discipline and at every level. A pledge is also made to develop more study programmes dealing with six key fields for sustainable development – economics being one of them – as well as to reinforce research on sustainability issues.

At all levels (international, European and French), the building of a green and fair economy appears to be a shared focus in commitments towards sustainability. In the same way, education is consensually defined as being a driving force behind sustainable development.

1.1.3 The state of economics in 2013

On 17th September 2011, people began protesting in the streets of New York City’s financial district against the high level of inequalities characterising the current socio-economic system. The Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement grew exponential and inspired similar protests in most of the western developed countries 13. The planetary scale of the OWS uprising revealed an almost universal discontentment concerning the functioning of modern economies. In the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis, the investors’ fear of potential sovereign debt crisis in several European countries such as Greece, Ireland and Portugal raised concerns about the sustainability of public finance. With the downgrading of government debt came pressures for governments to refinance their national debt, often through austerity measures. One year after the Occupy Wall Street revolt, people took to the streets again to protest against their governments’ response to what is now referred to as the Eurozone crisis. Anti-austerity strikes and protests occurred widely across Europe14. The increase in scale and frequency of social movements protesting against the malfunctioning of the current socio-economic system can be seen as a symptom of a more structural state of crisis.

While visiting the London School of Economics in November 2008, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II asked the assembled scientific community why nobody noticed that the Global Financial

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12 Any translation conducted by myself shall be annotated as personal translation (pt.).
14 Including countries such as Spain, Italy, Portugal, Belgium, Greece and France (Anon., 2012).
Crisis was on its way. In July 2009, two fellows of the British Academy replied to the Queen’s question. “So in summary, Your Majesty, the failure to foresee the timing, extent and severity of the crisis and to head it off, while it had many causes, was principally a failure of the collective imagination of many bright people, both in this country and internationally, to understand the risks to the system as a whole” (Besley and Hennessy, 2009, p. 3). This failure of collective imagination attracted a great deal of attention on the discipline of economics and triggered a process of investigation on its internal functioning; “What went wrong with economics?” (The Economist, July 2009), “How did economists get it so wrong?” (The New York Times, September 2009), “Needed: a new economic paradigm” (The Financial Times, August 2010), “Why economics is bankrupt” (Business Week, September 2009)15. For civil society, the economic crisis soon became a crisis of economics16.

On 2nd November 2011, first year Harvard economics students walk out of Gregory Mankiw’s eminent course ‘Economics 10’ to express their discontent with the bias inherent in this introductory course. Although similar student uprisings had occurred before17, the prestige of both the institution and the professor combined with the widespread media coverage18 opened the economics education case again. In the light of this crisis of economics education, concerns were raised about the education of economists and its relation with the functioning of the real economy. In the summer of 2012, the magazine Adbusters devoted a special issue to this crisis of economics by publishing a post-Occupy Wall Street revolutionary manifesto19 gathering eminent economists20 opinions about the current state of the discipline – one part of the manifesto addressing what was referred to as the crisis of economics education.

While a decade ago society did not pay particular attention to economists’ quarrels, concepts such as homo economicus, neoclassical economics, and efficient market hypothesis are now directly related to people’s everyday life through the functioning – or malfunctioning – of the global economy. This is the first time since the 1970s that collective faith in mainstream economics21 has been seriously tested. As decisions need to be taken concerning the state of the world, the same applies today for the state of economics and its education. In fact, the state of economics and its education in 2013 is somehow similar to the state of the economy and to the state of the world; it is in crisis. Those different crises are not independent from each other and any decisions taken to solve one crisis would indubitably impact the development of other crises. Yet, one could ask how those crises interact together and particularly how the crisis of one single scientific discipline relates to those more global crises.

1.2 Rationale: Why is economics and its teaching related to sustainability issues?

15 A more complete selection of press articles is provided in the empirical part (p. 30).
16 It should be noted that this dissent against neoclassical economics goes back long before 2008; however, the Global Financial Crisis brought the scale of the debate to a new level with criticism coming not only from economic experts but also from other actors.
18 Following the revolt, articles have been published in The New York Times, The Slatest, The Crimson, Daily Mail, Adbusters and Business Insider (non exhaustive list).
19 Meme Wars: The creative destruction of neoclassical economics (2012).
20 Including G. Akerlof, M. Atwood, H. Daly, M. Hudson, S. Keen, M. Max-Neef, J. Stiglitz and others.
21 Traditional or mainstream economics can be understood here as “the economics one finds in university textbooks, discussed in the news media, and referred to in the halls of business and government – it is the mainstream view of academic economics” (Beinhocker, 2007, p. 24).
The international commitment to transform the economic system into a green-er and fair-er\textsuperscript{22} one exposes its structural incapacity to deal with certain social and environmental issues. Such a statement entails a primary assumption, namely the claim that the current global economic system\textsuperscript{23} is to some extent detrimental to achieving certain sustainability goals such as social and environmental justice.

The second assumption concerns the influence of economic theories on policy. It will be assumed in this paper that the intellectual advancement and social recognition of economics as a science has an impact on the economy. Indeed, if the economic system is mainly framed by economic policies emanating from public and private institutions, and if the analytical framework provided by economics as a discipline influences the decisions made by those institutions (because policy makers can only take as a foundation for action the scientific knowledge that is available and socially considered as valuable), then economics defines what can be done in the economy.

Connecting the two aforementioned assumptions, it can be claimed that economics is part of the problem. The current social and environmental crises would therefore be seen as consequences of an inappropriate management of resources influenced by inappropriate economic theories. Although, if theoretical economics impacts the social and environmental realm through economic policy, it means that economics can also be part of the solution. That is, economics as a discipline could evolve to provide an analytical framework more likely to support the building of a green-er and fair-er economy. The question then is, can the discipline of economics – as it is today – provide the scientific foundation needed for the building of a green-er and fair-er economy?

But what if the discipline of economics was not able to provide such an analytical framework because of an internal malfunctioning? In other words, what if the discipline of economics was itself in crisis? This paper will advocate that this crisis is a fact, and that the crisis is twofold. To quote Freeman (2010), “the economist is not an actor that knows the correct answer but only an actor that knows the possible solutions.” The first crisis of economics can be understood here as a situation where economics has been investing most of its human capital into one answer – or paradigm\textsuperscript{24} – that has recently been proven inadequate by the aforementioned socio-environmental cataclysms\textsuperscript{25}. The second crisis of economics relates to the position of economics itself in our modern societies, namely the faith in economics to be the only disciplinary analytical framework able to provide correct answers. It is therefore a crisis of economic faith; the faith of economists in business-as-usual economics (first crisis) and the faith of society in economics (second crisis). In the light of such a dual crisis of economics, the question then becomes, how can economics be able to provide the scientific foundations needed for the building of green-er and fair-er economies?

While such a crisis of economics is leaving global managers under-equipped to take urgently needed decisions, what is needed in priority is not only a plan B, but a discipline of economics that can systematically propose plans B (and C, D, E etc.). While the current global crisis of management is calling for an increase of the diversity of possible solutions available to decision-makers, the current crisis in economics is calling for an opening towards the capacity to generate such a diversity of possible solutions. In order to maximise the diversity – or plurality – of possible solutions in economics, one must avoid the creation of an ideological monopoly and guarantee a fair competition

\textsuperscript{22} The term ‘green-er and fair-er economics’ is preferred to the usual ‘green and fair economy’ to put an emphasis on a fundamental characteristic of sustainable development, namely the fact that there is no predetermined way to achieve sustainable development. It means that SD strategies are highly contextual (economies) and can only be considered in comparison with a past or present state of affair (green-er and fair-er).

\textsuperscript{23} Since developed countries dominate the global economy and since a majority of developing countries only thrive to reproduce the developmental model of the North, the malfunctioning of the global economy directly addresses the malfunctioning of so called ‘developed economies’.

\textsuperscript{24} Referring to the intellectual monopoly of American-driven neoclassical economics since the 1970s (Kim, et al., 2006).

\textsuperscript{25} Subprime crisis, European sovereign debt crisis, Occupy Wall Street movement, Chilean student protests, Deepwater Horizon oil spill to name a few.
on the market of economic ideas. Consequently, this paper does not argue for the dominance of any specific school of thought but rather for an opening of economics to a plurality of approaches.26

However, an opening to a plurality of economic schools of thought will only solve the first dimension of the crisis of economics. To solve the second dimension, this scientific revolution in economics must be accompanied by an ideological revolution aiming to change the relationship of modern societies with economics itself. In other words, a strategy of SD requires a new social contract for economics that will change the role that economists play in society. This role is directly influenced by how economists perceive themselves. While the economist currently stands as an apolitical expert isolated from other disciplines, an ideological shift in economics would imply re-integrating economists as political actors within society. It is this need for a new social contract that calls for a pluralism going beyond the theoretical level. To solve its double crisis, economics must open to pluralism on different levels (ontological, epistemological, disciplinary, methodological and theoretical). The question is now changing to the following, how can we bring a scientific and ideological revolution in economics?

In the words of Max Planck (1968 cited in Max-Neef and Smith, 2011, p. 171) “a new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and them making see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.” This new generation is the most powerful leverage point27 for societal change, and makes investment in economics education28 a requirement for the long-term success of the green economy – and sustainable development in general. Far from being only understood in monetary terms, this investment would rather take the form of an ideological commitment to change, or to use Kuhn’s (1962) concept, a systemic acceptance of possible “scientific revolutions.” Because of the fundamentally uncertain nature of the future, the capacity to manage modern economies sustainably does not only require one revolution in economics, but rather the possibility for revolutions within the economics institutional framework. Economics must therefore be responsive to the needs of global society; a responsiveness that must be embedded in the education of this new generation of economists. The question then becomes, what type of economics education will be more likely to make economists more responsive to global society’s needs? Or in short: (1) How can economics education be improved in light of sustainability issues?

When this question aims to define a direction (where do we want to go?), it does not investigate what needs to be done to bring economics education to such a state (how do we get there?). In order to answer the latter, the first step consists in identifying the barriers standing against such a process of change. The identification of those barriers will be the object of the second research question: (2) What are the barriers to pluralism in the current institutional framework?

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26 Accordingly, the aim of the paper is not to define which schools of economic thought would be more likely to favour the building of green-er and fair-er economies.
27 A leverage point can be defined as “a place in the system where a small change could lead to a large shift in behaviour” (Meadows, 2008, p. 145).
28 Naturally, the green economy, and other strategies for SD require investments in all disciplines – not only economics. However, the dominance of economic priorities in Western societies’ organisation gives a particular responsibility to the discipline of economics.
1.3 Aim, scope and relevance

Aim
The aim of this paper is to analyse ways to improve economics education in the light of sustainability issues and to identify factors that could hinder such a change within the specific institutional context of the Bachelor of Economics and Management at the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin in France.

Scope
The analysis will solely focus on the discipline of economics when studied at university at the undergraduate level. The institutional analysis will focus on the one case of the above-mentioned programme at the one above-mentioned university contextualised in the French national system of higher education.

Relevance
The study of economics education is important for two main reasons. Firstly, the way students are taught economics at university will influence the conduct of their work as economists after graduation. Given the strong influence of economists on current policy-making and the current context described in the previous part, thinking about the design of curricula is the first step into solving contemporary crises. Secondly, economics education will also influence a large population of non-economists through the teaching of introductory economics – or basic principles. As reported by Thornton (2012, p. 15) “many students choose, or are required to undertake at least one introductory economics subject while at university. What these students learn in these introductory classes affects how they make sense of both economy and society; introductory economics thus exerts a strong influence over what a society deems as being acceptable economic analysis and policy advice. It can therefore heavily influence a society’s view about what is and is not possible.”

1.4 Structure

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. The objective of this chapter, Chapter 1 (Introduction), is to connect the topic of the thesis to broader implications in terms of sustainable development. In Chapter 2 (Vision and concepts), the reader is provided with the conceptual framework used to answer the research questions. Based on a literature review, Chapter 3 (Perspectives on economics education) gives an overview of current debates on education in economics. The forth chapter (Methods) presents and justifies the methods used to conduct the research. After being provided contextual information about the case study in Chapter 5 (Case study background), the teachers’ perspectives in regard to the research questions is presented in Chapter 6 (Meeting the economics professors). Chapter 7 (Analysis and discussion) provides a space for interpretation, analysis and discussion of the findings.
In the words of Ernst Friedrich Schumacher, “nothing can be perceived without an appropriate organ of perception and [...] nothing can be understood without an appropriate organ of understanding” (Schumacher, 1977, p. 50). This chapter aims at presenting both the organ of perception and the organ of understanding that have been used in the thesis. While the former explains how the actor-observer perceives the world (2.1 Pre-analytic vision), the latter (2.2 Conceptual framework) describes a chosen way to look at the world.

2.1 Pre-analytic vision

The first step of any scientific inquiry consists in defining the basic ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions that the observer made while conducting the research. Indeed, when actors investigate reality, they are not only limited by their intelligence, but also by their beliefs. Those beliefs include or exclude the existence of different “levels of reality” to form a worldview (Schumacher, 1977, p. 44). The nature of this vision is described by Schumpeter in the History of Economic Analysis (1954, p. 41): “In order to be able to posit to ourselves any problems at all, we should first have to visualize a distinct set of coherent phenomena as a worthwhile object of our analytic effort. In other words, analytic effort is of necessity preceded by a pre-analytic cognitive act that supplies the raw material for the analytic effort.” Based on this, the way of perceiving reality (ontology), knowledge (epistemology) and our ability to interact with those two dimensions (methodology) is fundamental, not only to understand the answering of the research question but also to understand the formulation of the research question itself. The pre-analytic vision presented below has been structured around the epistemological, ontological and methodological foundations of ecological economics described by Spash (2012).

In terms of epistemological vision, the logical positivist approach usually embraced in economics to understand reality will be rejected in favour of a more holistic understanding of science. As follows, methods of understanding reality will be seen as being dependent of culture (value laden) and reality as being dependent of methods of understanding. It will also be assumed that the nature of social and natural things is not static, and that therefore reality cannot be understood through one set of universal laws. Instead of seeing science as a process of discovering the ultimate truth, a more pragmatic approach will be taken, assuming that “we do not have access to any ultimate, universal truths, but only to useful, abstract representations (models) of small parts of the world […] the ultimate goal being therefore not truth, but quality and utility” (Costanza, 2001, p. 459). According to this perception of knowledge, the domination of one perspective is detrimental to the understanding of a situation. The worldview is therefore perspectivist in the sense that it acknowledges the fact that the co-existence of several perspectives improves the understanding of a phenomenon.

Costanza (2001, p. 460) goes further in saying that “the criteria by which one judges the utility and quality of models are themselves social constructs that evolve over time”.

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29 Costanza (2001, p. 460) goes further in saying that “the criteria by which one judges the utility and quality of models are themselves social constructs that evolve over time”.

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The ontological vision underlying the present research can be described by what Capra (1982) called an organic worldview. The organic worldview can be characterised by a nonlinear interconnectedness of living entities (Capra, 1982 cited in Ingebrigtsen and Jakobsen, 2012, p. 85). According to this worldview, nature and society are understood as collective phenomena instead of a mere sum of atoms or individuals; “community and nature both make one another and require one another as the same time” (Ingebrigtsen and Jakobsen, 2012, p. 85). In this framework, the social realm is perceived as an ever-evolving construction. According to what is defined as a social constructivist approach, phenomena will be understood not as isolated events owning inherent quality but rather as products of their social context. Since humans create social reality, facts about social reality are not value neutral. This social reality differs from a biophysical reality that is distinct but interconnected with the social one. The biophysical reality – or nature – is objective and exists independently of mankind. A holistic approach\(^{30}\) will be taken to defend that neither society nor nature can be reduced to an aggregation of individuals and vice versa. Perceptions of those realities can be presented in terms of interacting complex systems that change over time in an unpredictable way.

While Spash (2012) holds interdisciplinarity as a fundament of ecological economics, the methodological vision underlying the present research can rather be understood in terms of transdisciplinarity. Jahn, et al. (2012) described transdisciplinarity as a research approach that starts off with complex societal problems (problem-oriented research). Solving the issue will then involve cooperation between various disciplines and fields as well as cooperation between science and society (interdisciplinarity and the participation of extra-scientific actors) in a process of mutual learning (Jahn, et al., 2012). Transdisciplinarity thus involves “the establishment of a novel, hitherto non-existent connection between distinct entities of a given context” and “challenges how science itself deals with the tension between its constitutive pursuit of truth and the ever increasing societal demand for the usefulness of its results” (Jahn, et al., 2012, p. 3 and 10).

The pre-analytic vision (or how does one perceive the world) is only the first step of the research process. It leads directly to the choice of a conceptual framework that will influence the way one looks – or investigates – the environment.

2.2 Conceptual framework

Looking at complex social systems, the choice of a conceptual framework will significantly influence the nature of the results. A conceptual framework can be understood as an intellectual map where the researcher chooses an interpretation out of a selection of “contested concepts” (Connolly, 1993 cited in Söderbaum, 2012). While a map illuminates only certain aspects of reality (geological with oceans, rivers and mountains; political with national boundaries or types of governments; or economical with GDP per capita or GINI index), this particular conceptual framework will only illuminate certain dimensions of the situation under study. Indeed, to quote the philosopher Alfred Korzybski, “the map is not the territory” (Korzybski, 1931 cited in Coyle, 2012, p. 56). Accordingly, one should remain aware that regardless of the actual situation (the territory), what one will end up seeing in the analysis depends on the conceptual lenses (the map) one chooses to wear.

2.2.1 Actor and organisation

As defined by Lawson (2009, p. 765), “social reality is an open, structured, relational totality in motion.” Based on this, the social realm can be understood as made of the interactions of many parties with different interests, values, goals and strategies. Those parties – or actors – are all directly

\(^{30}\) The whole is more than the sum of its parts.
or indirectly connected with each other to form a dynamic, complex and socially constructed whole. This social meta-system – or society – is characterised by flows of energy, material and information between actors of various forms (e.g. individuals, businesses, non governmental or governmental institutions) and through a variety of sub-systems (e.g. market, education or family).

The concept of actor will be understood according to the Political Economic Person assumption defined by Söderbaum (2008); or as, “an individual with many roles (professional, consumer, citizen, parent, etc.) and relationships who is referring to a specific ‘cognitive map’ or worldview and guided by a political or ‘ideological orientation’. The individual has an identity and is positioned in, and interacts with a context that is political, socio-cultural, institutional, physical (man-made) and ecological” (Söderbaum, 2008, p. 56). The PEP assumption moves away from the neoclassical theory of behaviour (homo economicus) in several dimensions. First, it accepts the actor as being “a product of her history and relationships to specific contexts” (Söderbaum, 2008, p. 61) whereas the neoclassical economic man only relates to a an-historical relationship to markets. Second, it refuses to see the actor as a perfectly informed utility-maximiser that constantly optimises its actions through rational decision-making. Instead, the PEP is seen as a rules- and habits-following actor that tries to match her or his ideological orientation with the different alternatives considered. The PEP assumption shares some features with the old behavioural theoretical approach designed by Herbert Simon. In Administrative Behavior (1947), Simon criticised the rationality assumption commonly used in neoclassical economics in stating that individuals’ rationality was limited – or “bounded” – by their cognitive abilities to process all the information necessary to take an optimal decision. As a consequence, economic agents went from optimisers to “satisfiers” (i.e. the economic agent seeks not the best, but a satisfactory level of utility) (Simon, 1947).

According to the PEP assumption, the actor’s decision-making process is always an interactive learning process that directly or indirectly involves other individuals (Söderbaum, 2008, pp. 58-9). The PEP assumption sees each individual as a policy-maker that both moves according to her or his context and influences others’ context by “contributing to institutional change processes at a collective level” (Söderbaum, 2008, p. 75). The actor’s behaviour is driven by its ideological orientation in a given context and consequently it is the combined impact of external (a law or a social norm) and internal (a moral norm) incentives that drives behaviour (Söderbaum, 2008, p. 60).

An organisation can be defined as a situation where individuals arrange themselves into a structured whole. Perceptions of an organisation governing dynamics are usually classified under the term ‘organisational theory’ or ‘theory of the firm’. However, when discussing sustainability issues, the definition of the firm needs to go beyond the usual profit-maximising firm encountered in neoclassical microeconomic theory of organisation to include a wider range of social institutions such as universities, non-governmental organisations or other public or private institutions (Söderbaum, 2008). For this purpose, organisations will be analysed in reference to the concept of Political Economic Organisation (Söderbaum, 2008). Building on Freeman’s (1984) stakeholder theory of organisational management, the PEO sees the organisation as the network of all parties influenced or influencing the organisation’s activities. Each individual connected with the organisation is interpreted as a PEP with a specific ideological orientation and therefore, the organisation is seen as polycentric. The PEO evolves through complex political conflicts and tensions between stakeholders’ interests where issues of power, ethics and ideology are central (Söderbaum, 2008, p. 63). As for the PEP, the PEO is a product of its history and acts in a multidimensional context (political, socio-cultural,

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31 Old behavioural economics is opposed to a new behavioural economics that accepts full rationality assumptions and constrained optimisation.

32 Although similar in some regards, the social dynamics of organisations such as universities or NGO’s differs from the one of a usual profit-driven corporation. The broadening of the firm category acknowledges the fact that the economy is composed of a diversity of institutions exhibiting a diversity of behaviour.
institutional, physical and ecological) without an assumption of perfect information. Its justification for existence goes beyond the usual shareholders’ profit to include broader social responsibilities.

### 2.2.2 Institutional change and inertia

The process of institutional change will be approached using the Actors, Agendas, Arenas (AAA) framework (Söderbaum, 2008). As an actor-oriented approach, the AAA theory argues that institutional change is driven by *Actors* (PEP and PEO) that interact together in *Arenas* to further their specific *Agendas* about desired institutional change – or inertia (Söderbaum, 2008, p. 88). At the core of this framework lies the concept of institution. As defined by Söderbaum (2008, p. 92), an institution can be understood as “a phenomenon that has a common understanding among a number of actors who relate to it positively or negatively in cognitive and emotional terms through their ideological orientation.” In this sense, institutions are what Durkheim (1912) called “collective representations” or symbols having a shared-meaning between actors. Söderbaum’s (2008) definition also relates to Veblen’s definition of an institution as a “collective habit of thought” (Veblen, 1914 cited in Thornton, 2012, p. 35). According to this definition, a PEO such as a university, an ideology such as neoliberalism or a scientific paradigm such as neoclassical economics can be classified as institutions. The strength of an institution (i.e. the number of supporters) can change over time through processes of institutionalisation (an institution becomes more strongly established between actors by gaining support) and des-institutionalisation (Söderbaum, 2008, p. 89). Different institutions are directly or indirectly interacting and affect the possible emergence of new ones (Söderbaum, 2008, p. 80).

In *An Evolutionary Theory of Economic Change* (1985), Nelson and Winter proposed a theoretical framework to understand change within a firm. They explain change within an organisation as an evolutionary selection of routines (i.e. collective habits). In order to survive in a changing environment, the firm will tend to change its routines. The pattern of evolution follows a Darwinian logic as the most successful routines will provide incentives for the firm to keep them un-changed (a survival of the fittest routine). As a consequence, successful routines in a given environment can initiate a path-dependent trajectory within an individual or a group of firms. The consecutive selection of a routine over time can generate significant levels of inertia that make revolutionary change within the firm difficult. This inertia is built on two processes (Nelson and Winter, 1985 cited in Thornton, 2012, p. 48). Firstly, inertia occurs through the “path-dependence of cognition” (Nelson and Winter, 1985), namely the fact that since “routines are dependent on a prior framework of understanding [...] moving to an entirely new set of routines will likely involve unlearning the old framework and learning a new one” (Thornton, 2012, p. 49). Secondly, inertia occurs to preserve what Nelson and Winter (1985) called the “organisational truce” (i.e. the power structure within an organisation). If routines codify a particular balance of power within a firm, “the fear of breaking the truce is [...] a powerful force tending to hold organisations on the path of relatively inflexible routine” (Nelson and Winter, 1985, p. 112 cited in Thornton, 2012, p. 49). Those two processes explain why new organisations are more likely to be innovative than old ones.

### 2.2.3 Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

As defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2012), the aim of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is to “allow every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future.” In 2004, the Swedish Committee on Education for Sustainable Development described ESD in several fundamental ideas (CESD, 2004, p. 19 cited in Lindberg, 2013, pp. 2-3):

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33 Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Education for Sustainability (EfS) are understood as synonyms.
• “Many multifaceted illustrations of economic, social and environmental conditions and processes should be dealt with in an integrated manner by using interdisciplinary working methods.
• Conflicting objectives and synergies between different needs and interests should be clarified.
• Content should have a long-term perspective extending from the past to the future, from the global to the local.
• Democratic working methods should be used so that students can influence the design and content of educational programmes.
• Learning should be reality-based with close and frequent contact with nature and society.
• Learning should focus on problem solving and stimulate critical thinking and readiness to act.
• Both the process and the product of education are important.”

ESD differs from studies in sustainable development as it is not a new field of study, but rather a “perspective that is added to all schools and university subjects” (Lindberg, 2013, p. 3). As follows, ESD rather identifies a teaching for sustainability instead of a teaching of sustainability. ESD builds on the fact that there is no predetermined way to deal with sustainability issues. Consequently, instead of teaching actors a way of doing things according to present needs, education for sustainability aims at educating actors to be able to find new ways of doing things according to present and future needs. To build such ability, Tilbury and Wortman (2004) suggest a set of essential skills:

• **Envisioning**: the ability to think about the future
• **Critical thinking**: the ability to question our beliefs
• **Systemic thinking**: the ability to see the world as complex interactions of elements
• **Cooperating**: the ability to learn and work together
• **Participating in decision-making**: the ability to take part in decision-making processes.

This chapter provided the conceptual foundations needed to appreciate the analysis conducted in the present paper. While social systems were described in terms of Political Economic Persons interacting through an inert or evolving structure of institutions, ESD was defined as a new perspective that will make individual disciplines more responsive to sustainability challenges. Based on a literature review, the next chapter will give an overview of the ideological landscape surrounding the economics education debate.
Chapter 3: Perspectives on economics education

In February 2012, the Government Economic Service (GES) and the Bank of England hosted a conference to discuss the state of economics and its teaching. As reported by Coyle (2012, p. x), three themes were approached during this conference: the narrow range of knowledge and skills demonstrated by economics graduates, the methodological approach in economics education and the barriers to curriculum and teaching reforms in universities. In this chapter, those three issues will be used to structure an overview of the ideological landscape surrounding the current state of economics education. The first part will cover both issues of content and form (What should we teach economics’ students? And how?), while the second part will approach the “question of incentives that academics face to either introduce change in their courses and teaching practice, or resist it” (Coyle, 2012, p. xvi).

3.1 Classification and terminology

The debate about education in economics is characterised by contested concepts such as ‘orthodox’, ‘heterodox’, ‘neoclassical’, ‘mainstream’ or ‘modern’ economics. While the choice of an interpretation for those concepts is fundamental in understanding the arguments made in this paper, debating on their nature remains out of the scope of this study.

The neoclassical paradigm is often understood as being the orthodoxy when alternative schools of thought such as ecological, feminist, Marxist, institutional or post-Keynesian economics are qualified as the heterodoxy. The terminology of this power game has been widely debated in recent years (Colander, 2000; Backhouse, 2004; Dequech, 2007; Mearman, 2010, 2011; Wrenn, 2007; Lee, 2012); however this paper will simply accept the dichotomy orthodoxy/heterodoxy as neoclassical economics opposed to aforementioned alternative34 schools of thought. As defended by Colander, Holt and Rosser (2004 cited in Earl, 2010), modern – or mainstream – economics is no longer a neoclassical monolith. As a matter of fact, Colander (2000) goes even further in declaring the death of neoclassical economics. Surely, it becomes difficult to classify emerging research approaches such as neuroeconomics, agent-based computational economics, and experimental, evolutionary or behavioural economics as neoclassical. Yet there exists a discrepancy between trends at the research level and trends at the teaching level. Numerous studies have shown that even if the neoclassical paradigm is dead in terms of research, it remains dominant in terms of teaching – at least at the undergraduate level (Lee, 2006; Keen, 2004; Davis, 2006: Dequech, 2007; Becker, 2007; Thornton, 2011). Since the present paper only looks at undergraduate education and because undergraduate curricula remain significantly sealed off from the latest findings at the research frontier, ‘neoclassical’, ‘mainstream’ and ‘modern’ economics will be understood as synonyms.

34 As noted by Lee (2012), heterodox economics is not a homogenous category gathered around the rejection of neoclassical economics. While the use of the term ‘alternative’ reinforces the existing balance of power, it should be noted that heterodox schools of thought exist independently of mainstream economics.
Neoclassical economics (NCE) will refer to what is currently taught in most undergraduate programmes. In order to select one interpretation of this contested concept, Dobusch and Kapeller’s (2012) paradigm definition framework will be used. Dobusch and Kapeller (2012) assigned three social aspects to any paradigm; an institutional dimension (i.e. a common set of respected institutions such as universities, associations, journals or prizes), a methodological dimension (i.e. a common set of methods) and an evaluative dimension (i.e. a common conception of academic standard). If one attempts to characterise mainstream economics according to its institutions, it emerges as “what is taught in the most prestigious universities and colleges, gets published in the most prestigious journals, receives funds from the most important research foundations, and wins the most prestigious awards” (Dequech, 2007, p. 281). Concerning the methodological dimension, Arnsperger and Varoufakis (2008) highlighted three identifying features of neoclassical economics: individualism, instrumentalism and equilibration. Methodological individualism refers to the micro foundation of neoclassical economics, or the fact that all phenomena are explained at the level of the individual – or representative – agent. Methodological instrumentalism describes the utility-maximising assumption given to economic agents. According to this assumption, actors’ behaviour is always preference-driven. Methodological equilibration relates to the axiomatic imposition of equilibrium that characterises all neoclassical theories. Finally, the evaluative dimension of neoclassical economics would refer to a strong emphasis on mathematical formalisation as a standard for rigor (Dequech, 2007).

3.2 On the content and form of education in economics

3.2.1 The dominance of neoclassical economics and its dangers

In 1992, the American Economic Review published “A Plea for a Pluralistic and Rigorous Economics”, a petition signed by 44 leading economists including four Sveriges Riksbank Prize laureates calling for “a new spirit of pluralism in economics, involving critical conversation and tolerant communication between different approaches” and demanding that this pluralist spirit be “reflected in the character of scientific debate, in the range of contributions in its journals, and in the training and hiring of economists” (Hodgson, et al., 1992, p. xxv cited in Garnett and Reardon, 2011, p. 1). This new spirit of pluralism was advocated in contrast to the current domination of mainstream economics in the academia. Indeed, several studies demonstrated the dominance of neoclassical economics across the institutions that constitute the discipline of economics, and especially regarding education. Lee (2006) showed that NCE was dominating British economic departments in terms of research and teaching. Thornton (2011) found that the Australian economics curricula have been becoming narrower since 1980. Barone (1991, p. 16) claimed for the case of the U.S. that NCE was acting “as an hegemonic force within the discipline, limiting discourse and restricting the study of economics to a single perspective.” Lee and Keen (2004) and Knoedler and Underwood (2003) asserted that a majority of economics textbooks were written from a neoclassical viewpoint. Dequech

35 For example, The Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel.
36 Fullbrook (2010) described the structure of the economics profession in six institutions: university departments, associations, journals, classification systems, textbooks and economics basic narrative.
37 After investigation of all the universities in United Kingdom, he concluded that 72% of the 27,369 economics students “inhabited an educational environment in which the presence of heterodox ideas was weak if non-existent and where the presence of heterodox economists ranged from very small to zero” (Lee, 2006, p. 318).
38 Thornton (2011) reported the evolution of Australian economics curricula and found that they had narrowed sharply since 1980 with sub-disciplines such as economic history, history of economic thought, comparative economics or development economics experiencing significant decline. On the other hand, heterodox economics grew slightly, but notably this growth occurred outside traditional centres of economics teaching in faculties of arts and social sciences (Thornton, 2011).
(2007) argued that NCE was internationally dominating education in economics at both undergraduate and graduate level. Starting from 1980, Davis (2006) recorded levels of neoclassical dominance in economics education in contrast to the prosperity of alternative economic theories at the research level. He argued that the content of economics curricula was not significantly affected by the evolution of the research frontier and concluded that NCE was still strongly embedded in curricula.

The dominance of neoclassical economics in curricula can be perceived as a technical and ideological threat. It can be seen as a technical threat in the sense that the teaching of NCE might not be enough to allow students to understand the real functioning of the economy; this line of criticism particularly addresses the high degree of mathematical formalisation in mainstream economics. On this point, Streeteen (2002, p. 19) described NCE as “the triumph of technique over substance, of form over content, of elegance over realism” arguing that its teaching would lock economics students within a formalised imaginary world eventually being detrimental to their understanding of the real economy. Likewise, Radford (2010) differentiates students who study economics and students who study economies to stress the fact that the goal of any education in economics must be the understanding of economies’ functioning in reality – in contrast to their theoretical functioning in formalised models.

Beker (2011) expresses concerns about the supremacy of neoclassical economics because of its inability to analyse situations of crisis. While he defends that mainstream economics remains suitable for the study of “economic health” (i.e. “stable, normal time when what happened yesterday is the best guide to what will happen tomorrow”), he affirms that heterodox approaches are more suitable to deal with “economic illness”, or periods of instability and crisis (Beker, 2011, p. 16). Frank (2007) makes the analogy between learning a language and learning economics. When most of second-languages courses focus on learning complex grammatical mechanisms and very detailed vocabulary, this knowledge does not allow students to simply talk while being in a foreign country. Following the same logic, Frank (2007) argues that what students learn in economics classrooms is disconnected from what they would need to know as an economic practitioner in the real world. By providing only one perspective, the dominance of neoclassicism is perceived as a threat to current students’ – and future economists’ – understanding of economic phenomena.

On the other hand, the domination of neoclassical economics can also be considered as an ideological threat considering that a paradigm is never neutral in terms of ideology. This assumption brings Max-Neef and Smith (2011, p. 163) to claim that current economics departments provide a “toxic teaching” of economics. They consider the domination of neoclassicism in curricula as a form of ideological propaganda in favour of neoliberalism. While neoliberalism is not a problem in itself, the supremacy of one particular ideology in education can be seen as an issue in a democratic society. Along these lines, Söderbaum (2003, p. 94) argues that the dominance of NCE in universities is not compatible with ideas about democracy. Since economics is not value-free, it also exposes students to ideological orientations. Consequently, and as a safeguard against political propaganda, economics departments should open to a plurality of theoretical – and therefore ideological – perspectives.

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39 This debate started in the 1980s after the publication of an experiment evaluating students’ tendency to free ride by Marwell and Ames (1981). Those two authors were one of the first to argue that students in economics were more likely to behave selfishly than students in other disciplines. This article started a wave of similar research that opened an investigation of economics education. From then on, economics students were found to be more self-interested (Carter and Irons, 1991; Raeko, 2011; Gandal, et al., 2005; Lanteri, 2008; Frank, et al., 1993), less cooperative (Cox, 1998; Blais and Young, 1999; Frey and Meier, 2003), more corrupt (Frank and Schulze, 1999), having more faith in the market (Haucep and Just, 2004), more profit-maximiser (Rubinstein, 2006), or less honest (Lida and Oda, 2011). Two main explanations were advanced: self-selection (individuals with the aforementioned attributes choose to study economics) and indoctrination (studying economics push students toward those attributes). Conversely, various authors conducted experiments to falsify these hypotheses (Yezer, et al., 1996; Stanley and Tran, 1998; Laband and Beil, 1999; Hu and Liu, 2003; Zsolnai, 2003).

40 The association of NCE with the political practices of neoliberalism has also been claimed by Stilwell (2006).
3.2.2 Pluralist approaches

In order to improve students’ understanding of the economy and avoid undemocratic ideological propaganda, some authors advocate the opening of economics curricula to a plurality of approaches. The range of this opening can extend to several dimensions (theoretical, methodological, disciplinary, pedagogical) whose importance varies between authors. Pluralism as a recent contested concept has been defined in different ways (Garnett, 2008; Siler, 2008; Raveaud, 2009; Lee, 2011; Garnett and Reardon, 2011). Since there is no consensual pluralist approach in teaching economics, this part will only present different perspectives on pluralism.

As one possible pluralist approach, the PEPS-économie\(^41\) movement (2011) advocates the opening of economics education on three levels (plurality of methods, theories and disciplines). Firstly, a methodological pluralism with a combination of epistemology, history of thought and history of economic facts that will allow students to reflect critically on theories. Similarly, Norgaard (1989) talks about a conscious methodological pluralism meaning that participants would be conscious of their own methodologies, be conscious of the advantages and disadvantages of competing methodologies and be tolerant of the use of different methodologies. Secondly, a theoretical pluralism that would require the presentation of a diversity of schools of thought. On this point, Freeman (2010, p. 1594) makes the case for an “assertive pluralism” where the students would be educated to be able to “handle disagreement: to identify, select, adapt, and critically interrogate the range of theories relevant to each concrete problem.” He argues that pluralism also redefines the social contract between economists and society, therefore turning the task of economics from providing a single answer to any policy question to inform decision-maker of the range of possible policies (Freeman, 2010, p. 1595).

Thirdly, a disciplinary pluralism with an analysis of economics issues taking a multidisciplinary perspective (e.g. economic history, human geography, socio-economics, or philosophy of economics).

Several authors also advocate pluralism as a plurality of pedagogics. A pluralist pedagogy has been described as “a teaching practice that explores a plurality of different ways of understanding how the economy works” (Stilwell, 2006, p. 43). When a monist pedagogical approach would only consider a one-way transmission of knowledge from teachers and textbooks to students, a pluralist pedagogical approach acknowledges the “multiplicity of voices in the educational process” (Garnett and Reardon, 2011, p. 3) and considers student learning “as a by-product of decentralized interactions among many minds” (Schackelford, 1992 cited in Garnett and Reardon, 2011, p. 3).

As an example of such an alternative pedagogical strategy, Barone (1991) proposes a “contending perspective” approach to teaching economics. By learning through debates between orthodoxy and heterodoxy and exposing students to arguments outside the mainstream, this approach would “enrich the discipline and benefit both students and teachers” (Barone, 1991, p. 18). Similarly, Raveaud (2009) talks about teaching through controversies as a way to make economics education more valuable and more interesting for both students and teachers. He defends that the most feasible way to introduce a pluralist approach is to structure it around a series of critiques of neoclassical economics\(^42\).

As another alternative to current teaching approach, Nelson (2011) discusses a “Broader Questions and Bigger Toolbox” (BQBT) approach where students would start with questions about real-world issues before drawing tools from different perspectives. The questions will be broader in the sense that economics would be understood as the study of the “economic provisioning” or “how societies organize themselves to sustain life and enhance its quality” (Nelson, 2011, p. 12). The toolbox would be bigger by going beyond the standard models to include more investigative and empirical skills.

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\(^{41}\) For a Pluralist Economics Higher Education (pt.).

\(^{42}\) Structural, Keynesian, distributional, ecological and foundational critiques.
One other alternative way to conduct economics education at the university level can be inspired from the high school teaching of Social and Economic Science (SES)\textsuperscript{43}. Created in 1967, this approach aims at teaching students the basic functioning of contemporary economies and societies. The approach encourages the unity of the social sciences by acknowledging the transdisciplinary character of real world issues. Taking as a starting point for reflection social objects such as family, money or unemployment, the analysis is built on a plurality of disciplines, theories and methods. Concerning pedagogics, the SES approach is based on the idea of participative learning, according to which students are considered as active learners (learning through empirical studies and field work) instead of passive learners (top-down memorisation) (Dollo, 2009).

Biesta (2009) argues that education must perform three different functions: qualification (providing knowledge, skills and understanding), socialisation (transmitting a particular social, cultural and political order) and subjectification (providing the critical skills required to develop an intellectual independence). Seeing this subjectification function as the missing ingredient in the current education system, several authors advocate a more student-centered approach to teaching economics. Stilwell (2012, p. 154) talks about a “student-centered educational philosophy” to describe an approach “relating students’ learning to their personal experiences, observations and engagement in the real world.” Feiner (2003, p. 99 cited in Fullbrook, 2003) discusses what she labels as a feminist approach to economics pedagogy. In this approach, self-reflection (i.e. recognising that social position affects knowledge), personal history (of sex, gender, race and ethnicity) is fundamental to maintain rigor and relative objectivity in scientific inquiry. The feminist pedagogy is framed within a minimally hierarchical environment where students and faculty stands as equal in the face of uncertainty; the goal being to bring students out of their “comfort zones” while still being emotionally supported by a group (Feiner, 2003, p. 99). At the end, reflections on feelings will make students realise that “the economics is as personal as the personal is political” (Feiner, 2003, p. 99).

Elzinga (2012, p. 129) presents an approach that aims at teaching economics socratically through lines of questions where “each question is based upon the response given to the prior question.” The Socratic Method makes students learn “not by professorial exposition but by professorial inquisition” (Elzinga, 2012, p. 129). This approach is similar to Colander and McGoldrick (2009) wish to realign the goals of economics teaching with the goals of liberal education. The liberal perspective considers education as been intrinsically valuable per se, implying for the case of EE that students would not be taught to think like an economist but rather to “think like a liberally educated person who knows economics” (Colander and McGoldrick, 2009, p. 613). As described by Mearman, et al. (2009), knowledge is only secondary in this approach when a greater emphasis is put on fostering students’ critical, analytical and comparative thinking in a spirit of intellectual open-mindedness.

Smith and Waller (1997) refer to those approaches as a paradigm shift in pedagogics. This new paradigm will see knowledge as been jointly constructed by students and faculty and students as “active constructor, discoverer, transformer of knowledge” that learn through relation in a cooperative context instead of memorisation in a competitive one (Smith and Waller, 1997 cited in Colander, 2003, p. 3). As follows, the purpose of education goes from the usual completion of requirements within a discipline to a “continual lifelong learning within a broader system” that aims at developing “students’ competencies and talents” (Smith and Waller, 1997 cited in Colander, 2003, p. 3).

\textsuperscript{43} In its original form (in contrast to the form it took after the 2012 reforms).
3.2.3 The benefits and pitfalls of pluralist teaching

The opening of economics education to a plurality of theories, methods, disciplines and pedagogics is perceived both in terms of benefits and pitfalls. Conducting focus group amongst British students, Mearman, et al. (2009) concluded that pluralism in economics education made better educated, happier students. Their paper argued that pluralist curricula were more popular amongst students and that students were more likely to develop analytical, critical and comparative skills than with a monist curriculum. Likewise, O’Donnell (2007, p. 14) argues that a pluralist teaching could contribute in producing better graduates by “broadening and deepening their intellectual reach, by fostering creativity and innovation, and by developing richer skill sets beneficial for students, economics and societies.” Finally, Knoedler and Underwood (2003) suggest that pluralism would make students more interested in economics and would therefore solve the issue of decreasing enrolments.

According to Freeman (2010), pluralism in economics education makes more competent economists. He argues that a pluralist approach in economics holds three benefits for students: It enables them to respond to unanticipated phenomena, to reflect critically on theories by regularly confronting them to empirical evidence, and to react creatively to unsolved problem without falling into “formulaic catechism” (Freeman, 2010, p. 1604).

Similarly, Dobusch and Kapeller (2012) advance three arguments in favour of a pluralist approach to teaching economics. From an epistemological point of view, there is no absolute truth and every explanation remains fallible. From an ontological point of view, only a variety of perspectives can accurately describe the multi-faceted character of reality (there is not one right view of reality). From a methodological point of view, “every research question is unique and demands its own way of being answered or estimated, since the question should determine the method and not vice versa” (Dobusch and Kapeller, 2012, p. 11).

Stilwell (2006) brings forward four reasons for pluralism in the teaching of economics. First, it would open economics to other disciplines in a multidisciplinary process of exploration. Second, because pluralism acknowledges the political character of the discipline and therefore stands as a safeguard against dogmatism in education. Third, a plurality of teaching practices would lead to the future building of more comprehensive knowledge about the real functioning of the economy by giving students the “required fluidity and flexibility of thought for progress in analysis and research” (Stilwell, 2006, p. 49). Finally, a pluralist pedagogy would foster students’ capacities for critical and comparative thinking and would be more exciting to teach for professors.

Warnecke (2009) gave an account of both the students and teachers’ benefits of implementing a pluralist pedagogy in an international economics course. She reported that “the value of teaching from a pluralist perspective is not simply fostering critical thinking for students, but for professors as well. It is a mutual learning experience, which is the essence of university education” (Warnecke, 2009, p. 98 cited in Garnett and Reardon, 2011, p. 9).

On the other hand, several pitfalls dealing with the implementation of a pluralist approach in teaching economics have been identified for both teachers and students. For teachers, Stilwell (2006) argues that pluralism could represent a significant challenge since teachers would have to educate themselves in different alternative schools of economic thought before teaching it; “inertia and/or laziness stand in the way of any such enterprise” (Stilwell, 2006, p. 51). A pluralist approach would force teachers to step away from the “two T’s”, easy to teach and easy to test (Freedman and Blair, 2009 cited in Thornton, 2012, p. 206). Garnett and Reardon (2011) share those concerns about the adoption of pluralist pedagogies. They advocate that a pluralist pedagogy is likely to generate more

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44 Argument also made by Söderbaum (2007).
45 Thornton (2012, p. 207) argues that the orthodox curriculum is in some important respects easier to teach, thus creating an incentive to persist with it.
work and greater fears of failure on the teacher side, while on the student side, it could lead to higher levels of anxiety and frustration (Garnett and Reardon, 2011). Stilwell (2006) also suggests that a pluralist approach raises some issues concerning the practicalities of curriculum design (e.g. which schools of thought to include, in which order, how much time for each or what balance between technics and politics). This issue refers to the breadth versus depth debate (i.e. breadth of understanding across a diversity of schools of thought or depth of knowledge in one particular school).

Concerning disciplinary pluralism, several risks have been identified. As argued by Hervier (2003), a majority of undergraduate students are not ready to give extra effort to reach the theoretical requirements for a real multidisciplinarity. According to him, by adding additional courses to an already difficult formation, multidisciplinarity would over-burden students (Hervier, 2003, p. 66). Likewise, Mills (2003, p. 66, pt.) points to the risk for multidisciplinarity “to drown economics in the ocean of social sciences”, that is to say loosing any depth in economics in favour of a disconnected superficial knowledge in different disciplines.

As can be expected, students might not welcome a pluralist curriculum that would require more work on their part without understanding the underlying objectives. In this regard, Earl (2003) provided an empirical account of the students’ resistance he encountered while trying to introduce a microeconomics pluralist approach in New Zealand. Earl (2003, p. 91) explained, “an approach to economics in which students were expected to battle to grip with unresolved debates in the discipline, was a shock to the majority of the class”, students were dissatisfied with the uncertainty of the knowledge given (i.e. the fact that there were no right way to answer a question). The pluralist experiment led to massive student discontentment and ended up with a student petition against Earl’s teaching. As this case illustrates, a pluralist approach can be seen as a potential risk for teaching evaluations score and departmental enrolments when students’ expectations have been “locked” at the undergraduate level (Earl, 2003, p. 92). Nieddu (2003, p. 66) shares this concern when he states that pressures towards professionalisation can disengage students from reflections on economic controversies, history of thought and epistemology. Pluralism is then perceived negatively because it would give students a disadvantage on a job market giving greater value to professional monist competencies. On this point, Thornton (2012) showed that students could oppose the opening of economics curricula for two main reasons. First, in a context of increased specialisation of diplomas, students may see pluralism as a disadvantage since it will not meet employers’ preferences (“vocationalism”). Second, in a context of economic uncertainty, students may give little intrinsic value to the intellectual dimension of education and rather choose degrees that are “easy to pass and raise their chances of securing a well paid job” (“anti-intellectualism”) (Thornton, 2012, p. 152).

The debate over the content and form of curricula often relates to the possibilities that the current institutional situation offer for change. On this point, several authors have tried to identify institutional factors that could explain the inertia of teaching practices within university departments.

### 3.2 On institutional change: Barriers for pluralism

The different institutions of economics (publications, associations, prizes, universities, textbooks and basic narrative) are often criticised by the heterodoxy as being resistant to change (Hopkins, 2010; Thornton, 2011, 2012). Those institutions being all part of a connected system, inertia – or change – within one institution can influence the behaviour of the other institutions. This is why to understand how economics education evolves one also needs to look at the evolution of economics at the research level.

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46 i.e. the importance of other disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, geography or history in curricula.
In 1898, Thorstein Veblen⁴⁷ was one of the first to question the eligibility of economics as an evolutionary science. Defending the negative, he described the discipline as being “helplessly behind the times, and unable to handle its subject-matter in a way to entitle it to standing as a modern science” (Veblen, 1898, p. 373). He qualified the classical economic theory as being static and therefore unable to analyse processes of economic change and criticised the use of economic theory as being used as “a projection of an ideal of conduct” (Veblen, 1898, p. 382 cited in Dobusch and Kapeller, 2009, p. 867). More than a century later, Dobusch and Kapeller (2009) proposed a theory of path dependence to explain how economics could remain in such a situation of paradigmatic lock-in. They isolate three mechanisms that could possibly lead to such a situation: coordination, complementarity and learning. In addition to those mechanisms, they define several amplifiers that accentuate those mechanisms.

Coordination works as a direct network effect⁴⁸ where the utility of individuals supporting a paradigm increases with the total number of supporters. For instance, economists working within the dominant paradigm are in theory more likely to find a job, a research position or intellectual recognition. Lee (2012, p. 346) characterises this situation in stating, “students of mainstream and heterodox programmes have a local employment-seeking advantage and a cross-paradigm employment-seeking disadvantage.” This inertia within applied work in economics permeates into teaching through teachers’ responsibility to guarantee career prospects for their students; “I think the main motivation for not changing isn’t academics’ preference to have a monopoly, but rather the fact that one isn’t serving students well by teaching them material that nobody else who might give them a job or graduate place regards as the proper knowledge base” (Earl, 2010, p. 14). On this point, Arnsperger and Varoufakis (2008) showed that neoclassical economics discouraged innovation through a process of intellectual authoritarianism. The lack of alternatives is understood in evolutionary terms by the fact that currently, believing in the business-as-usual paradigm is a requirement for succeeding as an economist. Freeman (2010) refers to this phenomenon as a “selection for conformity” or when “economists are dominated by a compulsion to agree” (Freeman, 2010, p. 1598). Interviewing leading economists, Colander and Holt (2004) also affirmed that career incentives in the field of economics tend to discourage innovation.

As an amplifier, Dobusch and Kapeller (2009) talk about The Bank of Sweden Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel⁴⁹. Indeed, as argued by Söderbaum (2004), the prize constitutes a barrier for new thinking because it reinforces the hegemony of an already dominant economic paradigm.

Complementarity relates to an indirect network effect where the ideological orientation of the most socially established institutions will make this specific ideological orientation more attractive. For economics, this mechanism describes a trend in research publication. Following what Merton (1968) called the Matthew Effect⁵⁰, a journal with a high reputation will be more likely to earn more social recognition in the future. This self-reinforcing reputation is amplified by the capacity of economics to delimitate the borders of the discipline by excluding innovative research from the economic community – labelled as “sociology”, “not representative” or “esoteric” (Dobusch and Kapeller, 2009, p. 885).

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⁴⁷ Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) is often considered as the father of institutional economics.

⁴⁸ A network effect refers to demand-side economies of scale or a situation where the value of a product would increase proportionally to its number of users. A network effect is direct when the value increases proportionally to one variable (e.g. the more internet users, the more valuable internet will be); it is indirect when the value increases proportionally to several variables (e.g. the more DVD users, the more value given to DVD players which in return increase the value of using DVDs).

⁴⁹ Dobusch and Kapeller (2009, p. 880) argue that this prize is a “quasi-neoclassical” prize because of its specific criteria defined by the Bank of Sweden and its close affiliation with a neoclassical think-tank (the Mont Pelerin Society).

⁵⁰ The Matthew effect describes a situation of accumulated advantage (Gladwell, 2008); it is often summarised as follow: the rich get richer the poor get poorer.
Finally, learning is seen as an irreversible investment that creates a disincentive to learn alternative ways to do things. The scientist will defend her or his knowledge as an asset; “the past intellectual investment in neoclassical economics is not to be wasted or narrowed by abandoning or criticizing it” (Dobusch and Kapeller, 2009, p. 886). As claimed by the authors, one way to reinforce this mechanism is to assimilate the innovative starting point of the heterodoxy (e.g. environmental vs. ecological Economics, new vs. old behavioural economics or neo-institutionalism vs. institutionalism).

Both Schiffman (2004) and Earl (2010) investigated the barriers to innovation in economics for both practitioners and teachers. While the latter showed that research audits where performance was measured by the staff publication (ranking) had a negative impact on innovation, the former argued that career incentives tended to discourage innovation. In like manner, Lee and Harley (1998) discovered “an inverse correlation between rating and the hiring of heterodox economists” and concluded that the review system “eliminated the capacity to generate alternatives” (Lee and Harley, 1998, p. 41 cited in Fullbrook, 2010, p. 1599). This can be explained by the fact that a lower quality was systematically assigned to heterodox research.

This chapter clarified the breadth and depth of the debate environing the current state of economics education. While the first section focused on understanding perceptions of the concept of pluralism in terms of forms, threats and opportunities, the second section introduced different theories that could explain the institutional evolution of economics education. After laying the methodological and theoretical foundations of the thesis in Chapters 2 and 3, I will in the next chapter present the procedures undertaken to answer the research questions.
Chapter 4: Methods

In this chapter, I will detail and justify the use of a qualitative actor-oriented analysis when investigating the institutional dynamics of economics education at the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin (UVSQ). The functioning of a complex social system is better understood by looking at how actors perceive a particular context in relation with their worldview (in contrast to looking at the context in objective terms). Since the aim of the paper is to expose the governing dynamics of such a social system, the methodological problem can be described as the following: how to gather and analyse the actors’ situational perception\(^{51}\) and ideological orientation around the economics education issue?

4.1 Methodological rationale

The literature review’s objective was to extract a list of concepts causing tension between different ideological orientations (e.g. pluralism, sustainable development or democracy). Those “contested concepts” (Connolly, 1993 cited in Söderbaum, 2012) are concepts that can be interpreted differently by different actors. When meeting the actors, emphasis was placed on encouraging them to firstly tell their story in order to expose their situational perception in a genuine way. The second phase consisted of using the contested concepts extracted from the literature as triggers for reactions, and by doing so encourage actors to expose their ideological orientation. The objective of the interviews was to analyse the behaviour of several elements of the social system in order to reflect on the governing dynamics of the whole system.

4.2 Case selection

The case of the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin (UVSQ) in France has been selected for three reasons. Firstly, the economics education debate has been particularly active in France since the first student revolt in 2000\(^{52}\). Secondly, I personally attended the Bachelor programme investigated in this paper. While this allowed my own personal narrative to be included in the study, it also facilitated the process of obtaining access to data (scheduling interviews and being granted an authorisation to investigate). The third reason relates to the university’s stance within the national ideological

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\(^{51}\) Actors express their representation of reality through narratives. Those narratives – or stories – represent individual or collective perceptions of a given situation. This situation awareness – or situational perception – will influence actors’ behaviour since it will trigger positive or negative impulses when matched with their ideological orientation. Indeed, according to Söderbaum (2008, p. 58), actors’ habitual behaviour (established habits) and decision-making (the establishment of new habits) are understood “as a matter of matching ideological orientation and expected impacts”; those expected impacts are projected consequences of a given alternative on the initial situational perception. The expected impacts and the ideological orientation are both seen as “visions or images of desired and undesired states of affairs” (Söderbaum, 2008, p. 58). The positive or negative feeling resulting from the matching of an ideological orientation with a situational perception will determine the actor’s behaviour in this specific situation.

\(^{52}\) Referring to the Post-Autistic Economics uprising; more information will be given in the first section of Chapter 5 (pp. 27-32).
landscape. The UVSQ is considered by its peers to be significantly heterodox in terms of research; an ideological orientation that stands out amongst other French economics departments. Since the thesis is meant to discuss the possibilities for change in economics education, it was relevant to select a case where change is desired in the first place and where there have been experiments in innovations over the years.

I decided to focus the analysis on the bachelor level for several reasons. First, the teaching provided to first-year students can be seen as a bifurcation point that initiates a path dependence for the rest of their studies; in other words, it sets the tone by defining what should be considered as a ‘good’ economics education. Whatever is taught in undergraduate economics – and the way it is taught – is likely to become normality, or a standard of comparison for students’ future studies. According to this assumption, undergraduate education appears as a more effective leverage point than graduate education.

Second, only a minority of undergraduate students in economics continue their study in the field of economics. As a consequence, the economics teaching received at the bachelor level will constitute for those students, the totality of what they know about economics. While masters or Ph.D.’s might have a greater influence on future economists, undergraduate studies have a wider influence in terms of economic culture.

Finally, the current decrease of enrolment rates in undergraduate economics studies raises questions about the quality of the education. In contrast, masters programmes in economics have been receiving more and more students (coming from undergraduate disciplines outside economics). This trend suggests that the diminishing enrolment rates cannot simply be explained by a loss of interest in the discipline of economics, but rather by a more structural malfunctioning of undergraduate economics education.

4.3 Research design

The contested nature of many of the concepts approached in this thesis (e.g. sustainable development, pluralism or orthodoxy and heterodoxy) makes quantitative research unlikely to reveal actors’ ideological orientation and situational perception with any depth or variety. For this reason, a qualitative approach has been preferred through the use of in-depth interviews and questionnaires.

4.3.1 In-depth interviews

Face-to-face interviews present an interesting opportunity to capture stakeholders’ impressions on the EE debate. The interviews lengths ranged from 52 minutes to 76 minutes. A majority of the respondents consented in having their name stated in the thesis but in order to preserve the anonymity of the others, fictional names have been given to all the interviewees (the fictional names have been chosen respecting the original gender of the respondents). When arranging the interviews, I introduced myself as a masters’ student writing a thesis on the teaching of economics in France and its relation to sustainable development.

   a. Target population and sampling method

The population targeted was professors in economics teaching undergraduate courses at the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin, holding specific responsibilities (e.g. head of the Department of

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53 None of the professors interviewed has been financially compensated for their time.
Economics, pedagogical coordinator, programme director) and conducting research gravitating around sustainability issues.

Firstly, I gave priority to actors holding specific responsibilities within the programme because of their power in changing the content and form of the economics education at the whole bachelor level. Still, professors not holding overarching responsibilities within the bachelor have also been considered for interviews because of their local power (i.e. the power to decide the content and form of their own course). No discrimination has been made on the level of the course; that is, teachers of courses in first, second and third year were equally considered. Nonetheless, professors teaching courses not directly connected to economics such as mathematics, statistics, marketing, accounting, research methods or English and other languages have been excluded from the sample. Similarly, categories of actors that did not hold any decision-making power (e.g. teaching assistant or Ph.D. students teaching already designed workshops) have also been excluded from the study.

Secondly, emphasis was placed on the connection between actors’ research and sustainability themes. Since the goal of the thesis is to consider ways to improve economics education in the light of sustainable development, it was necessary to select actors that had already been working from a sustainable development perspective.

Finally, it should be said that no sample has been made out of the population. Similar requests were sent to every actor fitting the characteristics described above, and all the actors responding positively to the request were considered for interview.

b. Data collection instruments and source
The totality of each interview was recorded electronically using the Garage Band software. Their full transcription into textual form has been performed using the software Dragon Dictate 3. The translation of textual data from French to English has been performed by Google online translation service (Google Translate). A translation software – in contrast to my own translation – has been solicited for two reasons. Firstly, it made the translation faster and easier. Secondly, the use of Google Translate guaranteed an ideologically neutral translation while personal translations could have been potentially influenced by my ideological orientation.

c. Types of questions
The objective of the interviews was to gather actors’ personal perceptions of the situation of economics education. The literature review provided different themes to approach during the interviews. Although guided by those different themes, no rigid set of questions was used as a guideline. Actors were encouraged to share their reflections in a spontaneous way, the goal being for me to simply listen to their narrative.

4.3.2 Questionnaires
The population targeted were students following the Bachelor of Economics and Management at the UVSQ. A semi-quantitative paper form questionnaire was distributed during two compulsory courses in micro- and macroeconomics (micro for the first-year students and macro for the second-year) at a time where it was most likely to maximise the number of students surveyed. As before, no additional sampling process has been made; only students attending the course on that day – and willing to fill in the questionnaire – have been included in the study. The selection of students has been made

54 Those teachers have been excluded because they were most of the time external actors (belonging to an other department) coming solely to teach those classes, and therefore had no involvement in the design of the content of the curricula.
55 After using Google Translate, only imperfections impeding readability were corrected.
indiscriminately of grades, gender or any other distinctive features. The sample size was 51 students for the first year and 58 students for the second year. The questionnaire consisted of 26 questions divided in 5 sections (ambitions, content, opinion, pedagogy and general). Five types of questions were asked: yes or no, multiple choice, open, scale from 1 to 5 and scale from ‘very important’ to ‘not important’. Such a plurality of types of questions was chosen both to safeguard against passive box ticking and to give respondents diverse ways to express themselves. The questionnaires were distributed and explained at the beginning of a three hours class and collected at the end of the same class. The objective was solely to grasp students’ collective perception of the economics education provided in the Bachelor. The fact that no personal information was asked (e.g. background, age, gender or grades) makes the questionnaire results unsuitable for regression analysis; for this reason, the questionnaire has only been used to illuminate a collective narrative.

4.4 Discourse analysis methods

A mix between categorisation and unitising methods has been used to analyse the data. The textual transcription of the interviews was firstly categorised according to terms or expressions used by respondents (e.g. pluralism, sustainable development, orthodoxy or heterodoxy) and secondly according to themes emerging from the data analysis (e.g. content, form and possibilities for change). Yet, the textual data remains organised in large units in order to avoid cutting actors’ narratives. Even if only a sentence seemed relevant to the topic, an emphasis was put on highlighting the thoughts that triggered this reflection (pre-thoughts) and the thoughts that emerged from this reflection (post-thoughts).

4.5 Methodological limitations

4.5.1 Case selection and research design

Criticism may be made on both the choice of the university and the level of study. Firstly, the UVSQ has been chosen as a case study because of its strong heterodox ideological orientation. Nevertheless, it remains only one case framed within a unique social context. Consequently, it is difficult to generalise the economics education situation at the UVSQ to the regional, national or international level. Secondly, the fact that I personally attended the Bachelor as a student constitutes a limitation because the analysis is significantly influenced by my memories of how the teaching was in the past – a perception that could conflict with actors’ perceptions of how the teaching is today. Also, the paper only focuses on undergraduate studies and therefore excludes issues dealing with economics education in high school or at masters and Ph.D. level. Finally, more importance is given to the professors’ side in analysing the situation. Indeed, the paper looks at the situation from only one perspective whereas more importance could be given to the students (organising focus groups with students would have been a valuable addition to the present thesis and could have led to the addition of a new chapter: Meeting the economics students).

4.5.2 Data collection

a. Literature review
Most of the literature has been drawn from journals considered as heterodox where mostly heterodox economists publish. This particular population of economists has been chosen because of their critical stance towards the status quo, even though it represents a limitation because the orthodox point of view has not been equally represented in the study.

b. Interviews

Data collected using interviews is limited as it is only a “fragmentary representation of selected individuals’ verbally expressible views and experience gathered during a short period of time” (Hansson, 2003, p. 61). The ideological breadth of actors’ discourses is also circumscribed by the fact that all four of the respondents belonged to the same socio-demographic category (Caucasian male between forty and sixty). Indubitably, more factors could have been identified in an extended investigation including perspectives from different actors within the UVSQ or even within other universities. In the light of those limitations, the present study only provides an incomplete incentive map to understand actors’ behaviour.

c. Questionnaire

The semi-quantitative questionnaire is mainly limited by three factors. Firstly, due to time constraint very little instructions were given to students before filling out the questionnaire. The fact that the surveying happened during a course might have forced students to minimise the amount of time allocated to answering the questions and therefore explains the incoherence of some of the answers. Secondly, both the formulation of the questions and their order have unquestionably impacted their judgment. Thirdly, the non-discrimination of respondents according to their grades creates a significant issue in term of credibility. That is, conscientious critics emanating from well-informed students cannot be distinguished from criticisms coming from students that have not invested time and effort in understanding the issue.

4.5.3 Data analysis

The data analysis is limited in the sense that several individual narratives have been merged into “one particular story of one particular place or one intellectual stance” (Hanson, 2003, p. 61). Also, due to space constraint, actors’ stories have been divided in core segments and thus forced me to exclude some arguments from the study.

This chapter explicated the methods undertaken to conduct the present investigation. While mainly based on the interviews of four UVSQ economics professors, the study also includes a student perspective in the form of a semi-quantitative questionnaire. The next chapter will present the Bachelor of Economics and Management in a broader historical context.


Chapter 5: Case study background

This chapter presents the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin (UVSQ) approach to teaching economics at the bachelor level. After framing historically the construction of the Economics Education (EE) debate in France (Section 5.1), the Bachelor of Economics and Management will be described in terms of objectives, structure and students’ perceptions (Section 5.2).

5.1 Historical context

The context framing a particular societal debate is always historically constructed. The debate on economics education (EE) has been built over the years by the meeting of various ideological orientations in different arenas and it is only with reference to those past events that one can understand the complexity of the current French situation.

5.1.1 The Dreyfus affair of economics

The contextual timeline will start on 17th June 200058 with the sensational publishing of an “open letter from students in economics” in the influential Paris daily Le Monde. Gathered under the name of Post-Autistic Economics (PAE) movement, a group of students from l’École Normale Supérieure (ENS) de Paris expressed their discontentment regarding economics education in three main lines of critique. Firstly, they denounced the lack of an empirical side in teaching economics which gave the impression that the discipline was solely dealing with “imaginary worlds” disconnected from the real functioning of the economy (“We wish to escape from imaginary worlds!” pt.). Secondly, they criticised mathematical formalisation as being an end in itself in economics and claimed that “maths should be used to the extent that it is necessary, no more, no less” (Raveaud, 2009, p. 44) (“We oppose the uncontrolled use of mathematics!” pt.). And finally, they stood up against the one-sidedness of the curriculum to plead for a plurality of approaches in the teaching of economics (“We are for a plurality of approaches in economics!” pt.). The letter ended with a vigorous call to teachers (“wake up before it is too late!” pt.) and with the now famous sentence, “we no longer want to have this autistic science imposed on us” (pt.). Shortly after, the PAE movement created an online review entitled the Post-Autistic Economics Newsletter59 and posted a more detailed manifesto defining their alternative vision of economics education (PAE, 2000b).

This rather small student initiative (only 15 students) turned a minor academic controversy into the Dreyfus affair60 of economics. French media fuelled the debate by giving the students access to a

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58 Many historical events could be chosen as a start for such a timeline, and undoubtedly many prior to the PAE uprising had a significant impact on the breadth and depth of current debates. However, because of its broad international coverage, the June 2000 student revolt appears as the appropriate starting point considering the scope and scale of the present paper.


60 The Dreyfus affair is a political scandal beginning in 1884 and continuing through 1906. “The controversy centred on the question of the guilt or innocence of army captain Alfred Dreyfus, who had been convicted of treason for allegedly selling military secrets to the Germans in December 1884” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013).
broader audience; Le Monde, Les Echos, Le Nouvel Economiste, La Tribune, Alternatives Economiques, Politis, L’Economie Politique, and BFM radio spread the complaints of the PAE movement raising the students’ petition to more than 500 signatures in the first month (Benicourt, 2003 cited in Fullbrook, 2003). On 31st October 2000 a counter-letter titled “Counter appeal to preserve the scientism of economics” (pt.) was published by teachers to defend formalisation in economics as a requirement for scientific rigor. Few weeks later, a group of 200 teachers reacted by publicly expressing their support to the PAE movement by publishing “Questioning economics education... Finally!” (pt.), a petition calling for a debate on the teaching of economics. In the former, they agreed with the PAE students on the exclusion of non-neoclassical theories, the mismatch with economic reality, the overuse of mathematics and the lack of plurality; they also denounced teaching methods that excluded or prohibited critical thinking (Fullbrook, 2003, p. 15). Back and forth in economics newspapers’ columns, several distinguished economists entered the arena and EE quickly became a new buzzword amongst the academia; the famous French Economics Association (AFSE) even devoted a round table on this topic (IDIES, 2011). In the meantime, debates were organised in universities across France to discuss those issues. The debate did not stay confined to the French scene. In fact, the Autisme revolution triggered similar uprisings in the United States (the Kansas City petition in September 2001, the Harvard petition in 2003), United Kingdom (the Cambridge-27 “opening up economics” petition in June 2001 or the Oxford petition in 2001), Spain (The Asociacion de Estudiantes de Economicas), Canada and Australia. In The Crisis in Economics: The Post-Autistic Movement: The First 600 days, Fullbrook (2003) used the French movement as an opportunity to gather international economists opinions on the EE debate.

On the national scene, the controversy grew to such an extent that the former French Minister of Education (Jack Lang) appointed a prominent French economist (Jean-Paul Fitoussi, president of l’Observatoire Français des Conjonctures Economiques, OFCE) to head an investigation of higher education in economics. Yet, the interest of the French government in the EE debate was not new; in 1998 – after an unexplained drop in economics’ students enrolment rates – a similar report was committed to another economist (Michel Vernières).

Published in September 1999, the Vernières report (1999) expressed recommendations on both the content and form of EE. Concerning the content, the report described the need for EE to be built on three pillars equal in importance: economic analysis contextualised and debated within the history of economic thought, knowledge about present institutions, and the learning of technical tools for analysis such as mathematics, statistics and modelling. Emphasis was placed on valuing the historical dimension of the economy and embracing a plurality of approaches. On the organisation of the teaching, the report warned officials against an over-specialisation of curricula and recommended a broadening of course goals with more time allocated to methodological reflections. Finally, the Vernières report (1999) called for a new conception of the academic career by changing the balance between research and teaching for the teachers-researchers (Vernières, 2013).

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61 In The Crisis in Economics (2003, p. 6), Fullbrook reported that by 2003, over 100 articles have appeared in the French press about the crisis in economics. A more complete description of the media coverage can be found in the first issue of the Post-Autistic Economics Newsletter (PAE, 2000c).


63 Association Française de Sciences Economiques (AFSE).

64 Montpellier on 16th March 2011 (400 students), Paris Nanterre on 10th April 2001 (300 students) and Lille, Reims, Bordeaux and Strasbourg.

65 A more complete description of student uprisings following the Autisme movement can be found in The Post-Autistic Economics Movement: The first 600 Days (Fullbrook, 2003).

66 J.K. Galbraith (Canada), D. McCloskey (U.S.), F. Ackerman (U.S.), J. Sapir (France), B. Guerrien (France), A. Orléan (France), S. Keen (Australia), P. Söderbaum (Sweden), G. Harcourt (U.K.), M. Lavoie (Canada) and K. Martinás (Hungary); this list being not exhaustive but merely illustrative of the international dimension of the debate.
Two years after the Vernières investigation, the Fitoussi commission released its report. In its recommendations, the report stressed the need for both pedagogical and institutional reforms. On the pedagogical side, emphasis was placed in conserving the two dimensions of EE: the formation to economics (as a specialised discipline) and the formation through economics (as a way to acquire broad competencies) (Fitoussi, 2001, p. 145, pt.). The report acknowledged the criticisms made by the PAE movement by defending that theoretical, methodological and disciplinary pluralism was essential to educate economists. The main pedagogical reform proposed was the creation of “integrated courses” focusing on broad societal questions – in opposition to courses only aiming to “master formalised tools” (Fitoussi, 2001, p. 152, pt.). Taking a political economy approach anchored in history, those courses must aim at “giving the students an understanding of the world they live in and [not only] an illusion of knowledge” (Fitoussi, 2001, p. 16, pt.). On the institutional side, the report proposed a division of the studies into a 3/5/8 structure with a multidisciplinary first year after which students could choose a major and a minor discipline – the specialisation only starting after the forth year. The report also raised concerns about the evaluation of the teaching, the ideological pluralism of the recruitment process and the low remuneration of professors – the need for a global growth in investment in education being strongly emphasised throughout the report (Fitoussi, 2001, pp. 160-79, pt.).

Three months after its publication, the PAE movement publicly approved the Fitoussi report’s conclusions. Nevertheless, the students stressed the need for recommendations to be – this time followed by actual reforms (PAE, 2001). Between 2001 and 2004, the students published a newsletter series gathering information about events and publications in relation with PAE’s ideological orientation. But after 2002, the movement started to run out of steam. In his master’s thesis about the history of the Autisme movement, Letissier (2013) gives two explanations to the slow death of the movement. Firstly, as the heterodoxy lacked institutionalisation in the French academia, it did not allow for any institutional support, which may have discouraged the students. Indeed, the higher education system being mainly administered by neoclassical actors, the heterodoxy would have needed to be more organised to exert any significant pressure for change. Secondly, the movement may have lost momentum when most of its members graduated and went away to work in different geographical areas.

In any case, with the loss of impetus of the Post-Autistic Economics movement, the debate on economic education slowly suffocated. In a context of rather favourable economic conditions, the civil society lost interest in the education of future economists.

5.1.2 Economic crisis or crisis of economics?

The 2008 financial crisis brought the EE debate back into life in a scale never seen before. By exposing the influence of economic theories on actual policy, the subprime crisis revived a fundamental question: are we experiencing an economic crisis or a crisis of economics? But this time, the debate went beyond academia to spill over all civil society. Indeed, one only needs to look at some newspaper headlines to grasp the scope of the debate:

“What went wrong with economics?” (The Economist, 2009),
“How did economists get it so wrong?” (The New York Times, 2007),
“How economics lost sight of the real world.” (The Financial Times, 2009),

67 Questioning education in economics (L’enseignement supérieur des sciences économiques en question, 2001, pt.).
68 Bachelor (3 years), Masters (3+2), Ph.D. (3+2+3).
69 They refer to the Vernières report as an example of a report “not followed by any action” (PAE, 2001).
70 Entitled “Micro, macro, my fangs!” (Micro, macro, mes crocs! pt.).
“Why economics is bankrupt.” (Business Week, 2009),
“Why economics failed.” (The Atlantic, 2009),
“Rescuing economics from its own crisis.” (The Guardian, 2010),
“Ivory tower unswayed by crashing economy.” (The New York Times, 2009),
“Praying for revolution in economics.” (The Guardian, 2009),
“The nobel prize for economics may need its own bailout.” (The Guardian, 2009),
“It’s possible to subtract mathematics from economics.” (The Guardian, 2009),
“Seduced by a model.” (The New York Times, 2009),
“Needed: a new economic paradigm.” (The Financial Times, 2010),
“Sweep economists off their throne.” (The Financial Times, 2010),
“What good are economists anyway?” (Business Week, 2009),
“Have economists gone mad.” (The Atlantic, 2009),
“Will economists escape a whipping?” (The Atlantic, 2009),


The critics emphasised the responsibility of the economist as a societal actor by connecting the theoretical production of knowledge to its practical impact on the economy. These criticisms created an opportunity for alternative schools of thought to institutionalise\(^71\) at both national and international level\(^72\).

On 17\(^{th}\) December 2009, the French Association of Political Economy (FAPE) was created as a scientific organisation to “pressure the academic rules of the game” (Postel, 2011, p. 27, pt.). During its first convention in December 2010, 300 participants democratically agreed on what should be the pillars of the organisation’s engagements: reforming the evaluation of teaching and research activities, the suppression of the agrégation d’économie\(^73\) and the creation of a new “Economy and Society” section at both the National University Council (CNU) and the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS). The FAPE reached 500 economists\(^74\) members in March 2012.

On 22\(^{nd}\) February 2011, the association Les économistes attérés (the appalled economists) was created “to stimulate collective reflection and public expression for the economists who are not resigned to the dominance of neo-liberal orthodoxy” (Les économistes attérés, 2013, pt.). The publication in October 2011 of a manifesto entitled “Crisis and debt in Europe: 10 pseudo obvious facts, 22 measures to drive the debate out of the dead end” attracted some attention; they are now followed by more than 4,500 people on Twitter (Les économistes attérés, 2013).

On 16\(^{th}\) May 2011, the World Economic Association (WEA) was created aspiring to become “the first professional organisation in the international community of economists being truly international and pluralist” (WEA, 2013). The association exceeded 10,000 members in 2012.

The new institutionalisation of economics heterodoxy coupled to the economics-as-usual paradigm loss of credibility caused by the Global Financial Crisis created fertile conditions for a revolution in economics education.

\(^71\) i.e. become more strongly established between actors by gaining support in terms of number of supporters.
\(^72\) Those institutions coming to join the already existing International Confederation of Associations for Pluralism in Economics (ICAPE, 1993), the Heterodox Newsletter (2004), Post-Autistic Economic Review (PEACON, 2000).
\(^73\) A competitive examination to recruit professors in the French public higher education system.
\(^74\) Including 10% of other social scientists according to the FAPE website.
5.1.3 New hope for a French revolution in economics education?

On 14th November 2010, the publication of “A students call for the reform of education in economics” caused a new uproar within the academia. Taking the legacy of the PAE organisation, the movement For a Pluralist Economics Higher Education (PEPS-économie) denounced the dominance of an orthodoxy, the failure of the science’ “quantitative obsession” to fully grasp social reality and a counter productive lack of pluralism in economics education (PEPS, 2010). As a way forward, they advocated the instauration of a triple pluralism (theoretical, methodological and disciplinary) in EE (PEPS, 2010). Their movement gained momentum when a second call for action was published in the economic magazine Alternatives Economiques in February 2011. At the same time, the PEPS-économie was trying to mobilise students all over France by visiting economics departments and sharing their opinion on the topic. After gathering different criticisms and analysing all the different undergraduate programmes in economics available in France, they worked on the design of an alternative undergraduate curriculum that would embrace the aforementioned triple pluralism. They also organised a fortnightly seminar at Normale Paris (starting in Fall 2012) where they could invite different actors to openly discuss topics in relation with the economy.

In June 2011, the Collectif Zadig (a group of teachers-researchers75) wrote a letter to the French Minister of Higher Education and Research to plead for a modification of evaluation criteria for teachers-researchers in economics. Denouncing the lack of pluralism in the process of recruitment and promotion, they acted to defend the quality of EE, the quality of research and the quality of French economic information in general (Collectif Zadig, 2011). Their initiative was soon followed by the approval of the FAPE (FAPE, 2011).

This double uprising called for a more detailed look on the reforms that have been conducted in the Post-Fitoussi decade. In March 2011, the IDIES76 published a paper titled “Where is education in economics today?” (pt.) with the interview of three economics professors – one of them being a core member of the former PAE movement. According to Dominique Thiébaut and Nicolas Postel, “After all, Vernières and Fitoussi, two good reports... for nothing... education in economics only impoverished for the last 20 years, without any flexibility if not towards a dangerous road that leads to nonsense and that discourages young minds to engage in the studying of our economy” (IDIES, 2011, p. 5, pt.). The paper’s last section – entitled “The eternal return of critics?” – concluded that the Fitoussi report has not been followed by any significant reform (IDIES, 2011, p. 6, pt.). Similarly, Michel Vernières (2013) affirmed in his participation at one of the PEPS-économie seminar77 that the government quickly “buried” (pt.) the two reports.

On 28th November 2012, both teachers and students protested in a national strike against the new Social and Economic Science (SES)78 curriculum designed by the government. The Association of SES teachers (APSES) described the former as “being encyclopaedic” and “asphyxiating students reflection by force-feeding them like geese” or even as being “counter productive for the understanding of the economy’s functioning” (APSES, 2012, pt.).

The 2010-12 period witnessed a convergence of different criticisms against economics and its teaching. The memories of the Global Financial Crisis and the social impacts of the current European sovereign debt crisis kept the public interested in the EE debate. On top of that, both students and teachers have been protesting against the French economics-as-usual education paradigm. Those

75 Enseignants-chercheurs (pt.)
76 Institut pour le développement de l’information économique et sociale (Institute for the development of economic and social information, pt.).
78 SES is an exploratory course for all students in their first year of high school that becomes more specific in second and third year for students choosing the Economic and Social (ES) field of specialisation.
different criticisms have pushed the heterodoxy to institutionalise into the French ideological landscape therefore increasing the pressure for an opening of EE to pluralism.

5.2 Case study: La licence Economie-Gestion à l’UVSQ

5.2.1 Description and objectives

When evaluated by the Evaluation Agency for Research and Higher education (AERES) in 2009, the Bachelor of Economics and Management\(^\text{79}\) was given a A on a scale from A+ to C. As one of the only weaknesses, the report put a particular focus on the number of students dropping out in first year.

On the university website (UVSQ, 2013), the formation’s objectives are described as follow:

“The bachelor in Economics and Management aims to deliver a solid training in economic analysis and its tools and applications in various fields of Finance and International Economics. The training focuses on the knowledge and understanding of concepts, theories and their application (fields, debates and contemporary issues). In particular, it aims to provide a sound knowledge about:

- The major issues of the international economy: institutional trade, globalisation, international trade dynamics, international strategies of firms, financial globalisation, regional exchanges polarisations.
- International finance: international payment systems, currency risks, risks associated with the transport of goods, non-payment risks, country risks assessment, raw materials, environmental risks.

In addition to learning international finance and economics, the formation offers cross-disciplinary courses focusing on technical skills in relation with our masters (statistics, econometrics, economic conditions and observation) and to fields that can be related to the formation (financial accounting marketing, management control, project management, information systems).

At the end of the programme, students will value their competencies in either pursuing their studies in the context of a professional or research-oriented masters at the UVSQ or other universities in the fields of economics, management and logistics, or by directly integrating the labour market.”

In the section meant to describe the specific features of the programme, one can read:

“The Bachelor is built on courses that allow, firstly, to understand the characteristics and functioning of modern economies and, secondly, to provide students with the skills necessary to integrate different industries (banks, consulting, expertise, logistics, education, research, construction, distribution, etc.). The programme (with an opening on the economy and international finance, sustainable development and logistics) relates to a changing economic, social and environmental context.

Through the core skills developed, the programme allows the graduate student to observe, measure, assess and incorporate into its activities and organisation, economic, social and environmental impacts of activities as well as new forms of organisation and integrated management. Students thus have good assets concerning jobs that open every day in an international context.

\(^{79}\) Licence de sciences économiques et de gestion mention sciences économiques (pt.)
This programme offers a diverse selection of specialisations (International Finance and Economics, Management Science and Engineering Science and Technology Logistics) to acquire specific skills at the end of the three years. From the second year of bachelor, the different specialisations available are based on fundamental courses on economic analysis, finance, mathematics and statistics, but they also introduce to environmental economics, development economics, management and logistics. This knowledge will then be deepened in specialised masters."

### 5.2.2 Course structure

This part will provide a detailed description of the compulsory and electives courses available during the six semesters of the programme. Starting semester 4, only courses for the specialisation in Finance and International Economics have been kept.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester</th>
<th>Compulsory courses</th>
<th>Electives</th>
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<td>Semester 1</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Contemporary economic analysis (36h)</td>
<td>Introduction to law (42h)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>History of economic thought (24h)</td>
<td>European geography (42h)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Introduction to management (33h)</td>
<td>Introduction to sociology (42h)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mathematics 1 (42h)</td>
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<td>Statistics 1 (33h)</td>
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<td>Semester 2</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Microeconomics 1 (51h)</td>
<td>Economic history since the industrial revolution (24h)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Macroeconomics 1 (42h)</td>
<td>Economic sociology (42h)</td>
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<td>National accounting (12h)</td>
<td>Social psychology (24h)</td>
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<td>Financial accounting 1 (51h)</td>
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<td>Mathematics and statistics 2 (48h)</td>
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<td>Semester 3</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Macroeconomics 2 (48h)</td>
<td>Firms and sustainable development (24h)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Microeconomics 2 (48h)</td>
<td>Industrial and innovation economics (24h)</td>
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<td>Financial accounting 2 (24h)</td>
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<td>Currencies and monetary policy (36h)</td>
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<td>Mathematics 3 (42h)</td>
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<td>Semester 4</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Macroeconomics 3 (39h)</td>
<td>Labour economics (18h)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Microeconomics 3 (39h)</td>
<td>International energy market and energy policy (18h)</td>
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<td>Mathematics 4 (36h)</td>
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<td>International monetary and financial relations (24h)</td>
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<td>Theory of the firm (24h)</td>
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<td>Banking and financial markets (24h)</td>
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<td>International firm strategies (24h)</td>
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<td>Semester 5</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Economic dynamics (51h)</td>
<td>Money and international finance (24h)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>International economics (51h)</td>
<td>European economy (24h)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Game theory (36h)</td>
<td>Topics in international finance and economics (18h)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mathematics 5 (36h)</td>
<td>Geopolitical and economic issues in Northern America (24h)</td>
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<td>Economics observation (24h)</td>
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<td>Semester 6</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Economic dynamics 2 (51h)</td>
<td>Ecological economics and environmental risks (24h)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Risk economic analysis (24h)</td>
<td>Financial markets and risk management (24h)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Econometrics (36h)</td>
<td>Developing countries and country risk evaluation (24h)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mathematics 6 (42h)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Economic issues (18h)</td>
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</table>
The course structure found in the Bachelor of Economics and Management (UVSQ) can be compared to the average course composition characterising undergraduate economics studies in French universities. In a study conducted in April 2013, the PEPS-économie movement found that in average 19.5% of courses within economics bachelors were dedicated to the teaching of a technical apparatus (e.g. mathematics, statistics and econometrics). In the case of the UVSQ, those courses currently represent 26.9% of the curriculum. Otherwise, the composition of the Bachelor at the UVSQ reveals that 13.8% of the courses are dedicated to the teaching of microeconomics (the national average being 10.7%), 18.3% of the courses cover the teaching of macroeconomics (the national average being 12.8%), 1.9% of the courses approach the history of economic thought (the national average being 1.7%), 4.2% of the courses deal with contemporary economic issues (the national average being 1.7%) and 7.1% of the courses belong to other social sciences (the national average being 1.8%).

5.2.3 Students’ perspectives

In this part, I will use the data extracted from the semi-quantitative questionnaire to give an overview of the students’ perspectives about the education provided in the programme. A majority of students decided to study the programme because they considered it as a “safe investment for future prospects” (37.5% of the L1 and 55% of the L2). The choice of further studies favoured by both first and second year students remained business schools (22% of the L1 and 33% of the L2). Only 4% of the students declared being interested in becoming a researcher; the number remained very low when asked about teaching vocation (2% of the L1 and 7% of the L2).

Around one third (29% of the L1 and 36% of the L2) of the students answered positively when asked if they would like to have more courses in philosophy integrated in their programme. When asked about the programme’s ideological orientation, most of the students (61% for both L1 and L2) affirmed not knowing what was referred as orthodox and heterodox economics. Students reported that sustainability and sustainable development were themes rarely approached in the programme. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being ‘catastrophic’ and 5 being ‘excellent’), students gave a 3 in average to the quality of courses given within the bachelor.

More than half of the students that filled the questionnaire reported never having been given a course evaluation to assess the teaching provided for either one single course or the whole programme. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being ‘very dissatisfied’ and 5 being ‘very satisfied’), the students gave a 3 in average to measure their degree of satisfaction concerning the education provided in the Bachelor; only 13% of the students affirmed they regretted choosing to study economics at the UVSQ.

This chapter presented the historical background of the French economics education debate. While society’s interest in issues of economics has followed a cyclical path since the first student uprising in 2000, the instability of the current economic situation has created a social context fertile for a reconsideration of the ends and means of economics teaching. In the midst of such a debate, the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin (UVSQ) stands as a well-functioning university that couples a rather orthodox teaching with heterodox orientations in terms of research. By reviewing the opinions of four economics professors teaching undergraduate courses at the UVSQ, the next chapter will explore the concept of pluralism and identify institutional factors that could explain the ideological discrepancy between teaching and research orientations.

83 The comparison is made with the numbers found by the PEPS-économie movement in their recent attempt to map the current state of undergraduate education economics for the case of France (PEPS, 2013).
Chapter 6: Meeting the economics professors

This chapter aims to present an overview of the interviewees’ answers. After presenting the actors’ reaction to the concept of crisis of economics (Section 6.1), I will follow the formulation of the research questions and divide actors’ stories in two categories: on how to improve economics education in terms of form and content (Section 6.2) and on barriers to pluralism within the UVSQ institutional framework (Section 6.3).

6.1 On the crisis of economics

When asked about the crisis of economics, actors’ narratives referred to two interactive dimensions that both influence education in economics. While one is internal to the discipline (scientific crisis), the other one deals with the use of economics as a discipline in modern society (political crisis). The first dimension will be referred to as the scientific crisis of economics since it relates to the capacity of current economics tools and methods to predict and solve economic crises:

“I think we have been in a period in economics for at least twenty or thirty years where economics became increasingly sophisticated (in modelling). In this area, there is a significant progress. But at the same time – and this is perhaps a paradox – because of this sophistication, there is a discipline that ultimately is less able to inform us about the origins of economic difficulties and which is especially less able to provide us with ways to get out of the current crises [...]. And at the same time it is true that models are more beautiful, more sophisticated. It’s a great scientific work it’s undeniable. However, it remains a little disconnected – this is the least we can say – with reality.” (Paul)

Emphasis is placed on the connectedness of the economics apparatus with reality. According to Paul, the lack of connectedness is embedded in the teaching of the discipline:

“So I think that economics students, seeing things that are never explained, playing with concepts without really knowing their meaning (for example, interest rate; when you really understand what actually is an interest rate, you are already professor).” (Paul)

The second dimension will be referred to as the political crisis of economics since it deals with the importance given to economics in decision-making processes organising modern societies.

“How do we put into perspective what is taught; put into perspective with the real world that the universe of disciplines is a reductionist universe [...]. There is such a dominance of economism – in the negative sense [...] so, for me the real crisis isn’t the crisis of the economy or the crisis of economics teaching, it’s that the dominant paradigm in economics helps the dominant elements of society to maintain their domination. So they use economics as a form of discourse to legitimise their position [...] discourse that I think most of us (as professors) put into perspective for students; meanwhile however, the world does not put it into perspective [...]. So it’s the layer number one, crisis of economics, it’s a complicated issue, crisis of economics education, I’m not sure, but crisis of the importance given to economics in decision-making, yes there is a real problem. We put it [economics] at the centre because it suits some people. And then, to explain this to students, it’s not easy I would say. Whatever we do to put things in perspective, the world
The term “economism” is here used negatively to describe the dominance of the discipline in political decision-making processes, or when the science of economics is used as a way to legitimise a particular political agenda. From Pierre’s point of view, this political crisis is directly connected with the scientific crisis because political orientations shape the discipline according to its needs. The lack of pluralism in economics is therefore understood as a result of a power game within and between the political and scientific communities:

“This issue of disappearance of plurality, I perceive it as the establishment of solid boundaries that reinforce the discipline as a political object within the business world. So maybe yes, we lack pluralism and we need pluralism. The question isn’t that much to know whether we are living in this imaginary world, but essentially to be warned about it.” (Pierre)

This lack of pluralism in economics will impact society since it will decrease the analytical power of economics (i.e. the ability to predict and solve crises). Indeed, Paul claims that the disappearance of courses dealing with sociological, historical and philosophical dimensions in curricula is partly responsible for the incompetence of current economic practitioners:

“In practice, I only see them [the students] during the first year... Here, you can hardly find any sociology in the rest of the bachelor [...] this [my course] is the only opportunity they have to do some sociology in their whole curriculum. This is the same case for the history of economic thought. These courses forming the unity of social sciences (history of economic thought, economic sociology, history of facts etc.), students don’t have them anymore. Economics students aren’t doing any social history or economic history anymore. All these subjects aren’t exposed to students neither at undergraduate level or after [...] I feel that all of these courses have or are disappearing from curricula. [...] Today, we are in a situation where it is necessary to reconstruct the object of economics. While the sophistication of models seems very effective in theory, it’s not effective enough in practice. Reconstruct the economic object means integrating the social, historical and even philosophical dimension in the curriculum.” (Paul)

Respondents’ stories highlighted an interaction between the two crises of economics. That is, actors suggested that the use of the discipline of economics as a political object within society was shaping the discipline of economics as a scientific object within universities. When economics at the scientific level was described as incompetent in dealing with contemporary economic crises, this incompetence appeared to be sustained by a lack of pluralism in the content and form of economics education at university.

### 6.2 On how to improve education in economics

After discussing the different crises of economics and their relation to education (*what’s wrong with current economics education?*), questions about the objectives of EE were raised. All the questions asked to the respondents were gravitating around the following theme: *how to improve education in economics* or specifically *what should be changed – in terms of content and form – in the current way of teaching economics?*

One point that made consensus between the five professors is the fact that undergraduate studies must cover the teaching of ‘basic principles’ regardless of the ideological orientation (orthodox or heterodox) of the professor.
“The basic training of a student requires micro, macro... the fundamental teachings. These are basics that can be criticised, but I think they are necessary to understand economic reality. It is part of the disciplinary education to understand concepts that all students must master. Students are forced to go through traditional schools of thought to learn the essence of the discipline; I don’t see how a teacher-researcher could translate heterodox research in traditional teaching for undergraduate students. For students to understand the results of any piece of research, they already need to acquire the fundamentals of the discipline.” (Paul)

“So at the bachelor level, our expectations are similar to other programmes with an emphasis on microeconomics, macroeconomics and mathematics; those are the pillars, the fundamentals that we develop over the three years.” (Jacques)

“There should be a course of micro and macro in first second and third year, this is really useful regardless of everything else.” (Pierre)

“Nevertheless, I think the bachelor should focus on teaching the basics of economics (micro-macro level 1,2 and 3) [...] I think any student must be very good in those basics.” (François)

When actors remained unclear on the nature of those basics (only describing them as microeconomics, macroeconomics and mathematics), they affirmed that there existed a national and international consensus amongst economists on it and that the content and form of those basics were not evolving over time.

“When it comes to defining the knowledge base of economics students at the undergraduate level, all the economists generally agree [on what should be taught as the basics] at the national level at least, and then also at the international level concerning economics education in English-speaking countries.” (Jacques)

“There is a consensus amongst economists about things, methods and concepts that are common to several approaches and that should constitute the basic teaching of the discipline. There are arguments, disagreements, theoretical divisions amongst economists, but it’s still a discipline founded scientifically – which we can criticise, some assumptions are questionable – but there are still common methods, common concepts; concepts on which economists agree in saying that they constitute the basics of the discipline.” (Paul)

“Economics education at the undergraduate level remains conventional in the sense that it’s similar to what can be found in all other French universities teaching economics. There isn’t any fundamental change on the basics that structure undergraduate studies, that is to say the foundation of basic knowledge in economics.” (Jacques)

Only one actor defended the evolution of those basics, arguing that they were constantly adapting to the economic context:

“Basics don’t change as fast as every five or six years, but they change over the long term... We stop to present models not because they are no longer correct, but because they are no longer relevant to a period. I won’t teach French students models meant to understand periods of hyperinflation, it’s been 30 years we didn’t have any inflation in France (it’s gravitating around 2 %). Imagine that in five years the inflation returns, the model that I will need to teach students will be the one that explains inflation; there are trends in terms of which models to teach. Models can be overcome theoretically or empirically, so there are changes that happen over the long term.” (François)

Discussion on the basics often led to the concept of pluralism, and to the question of what kind of pluralism should economics be open to. On this point, actors’ priorities diverge towards four types of pluralism: theoretical, methodological, disciplinary and pedagogical.
“The idea of pluralism... I think that we lack theoretical pluralism in economics education. [...] There are points of agreement amongst economists, there are also fundamental disagreements and therefore when you need to educate students or when you want to inform the public about various economic phenomena, the least you can do – especially in a democracy – is to embrace pluralism in terms of presenting current debates [...]. Usually the answer to that is to say that there is a dominant paradigm... But in reality there is no consensus. If we only teach what makes consensus – and we can do it – I think it impoverishes EE. What’s interesting are the disagreements, debates, and disputes. It’s more disagreement than consensus that pushes science forward.” (Paul)

“From my point of view, it’s obvious that the basic training of every student in economics must present every school of thought, hence pluralism. That is to say that for me it would be impossible to only teach either classics or heterodox. And at the undergraduate level, the fact that I’m orthodox or heterodox doesn’t matter. Students should be exposed to all the schools of thought; you must have all the authors and their methodological implications. So of course, education must be pluralistic.” (François)

Theoretical pluralism appears both as a responsibility and an opportunity. In a democratic society, they affirm that there is a responsibility towards students and the broader audience to provide a plurality of perspectives. Besides, teaching through controversies could be a way to add value to the education. As defended by Jacques, the responsibility expands to another dimension:

“There is therefore an ideology that can hide behind what appears as first sight as a highly technical equipment. So the challenge for us professors is to inform students, showing them the non-neutrality of this technical equipment. That is to say, using tools within a certain framework is like using a particular worldview; it directs you towards specific dimensions that are not positive but normative. So this is a reality that we must keep in mind.” (Jacques)

According to Jacques, this theoretical pluralism has been sustained at the UVSQ through a first year course in history of economic thought and other courses approaching economics from a different disciplinary framework (history, sociology or geography). This disciplinary pluralism is understood as a means to go beyond the formation of economic technician and provide students with a strong economic culture:

“Here [at the UVSQ], we have always defended the desire to maintain a course in history of economic thought. Today, there is still a course in history of economic thought, at least during the first year and then several other courses that refer to the history of economic thought. But the current trend at the national level is to set aside the teaching of the economy as a history of thought and instead strengthen the technical, technician not to say technicist dimension of the economist. Here [at the UVSQ], we have always tried to illuminate this economic culture in the teaching.” (Jacques)

Concerning methodological pluralism, it is seen as potentially enriching for students to be exposed to a plurality of methodologies. Nevertheless, and as defended by Jacques, the dominant methodology (neoclassical methodology) must remain the central pillar of the education:

“I would say personally that it would be rewarding enough to enlighten students on other approaches, other methodologies than the one they see in the context of their conventional training. I would not necessarily fully substitute... we have to acknowledge what is already there. But I am all for contextualising, presenting the dominant methodology in comparison with other worldviews.” (Jacques)

In terms of pedagogical pluralism, the Bachelor’s director (Jacques) talked about placing more emphasis on students’ practical competencies regarding applied economics. The competency dimension is to be favoured in opposition to the knowledge dimension in the curriculum.
“There is also a dimension of pluralism that relates to the economist competencies, opening to a more applied EE. […] Considering not only knowledge, but also practical competencies […] and [at the UVSQ] we’re interested in this applied economics dimension. So pluralism perhaps relates to the different schools of thought presented; approaches of the economy with an orthodoxy that remains very dominant in undergraduate studies compared to the heterodoxy that remains in periphery and that we start to approach when students specialise at the masters level. There is pluralism in the way that one perceives the economist as a variation of practical skills and methods. And on this type of pluralism, I think there is still a lot of work to do, work that universities are starting to do but very slowly. We want to not only value students’ knowledge but also their competencies.” (Jacques)

Regardless of the orthodox or heterodox orientation of the content, the programme director expresses concerns about the current pedagogy in the bachelor:

“Our way to teach economics is surely open to revision; shining more light on current issues, focusing more on applied economics, surely. But this does not imply excluding the orthodoxy; we can also be illustrative within an orthodox framework. Surely there is also an alternative way to teach the orthodoxy. We must keep in mind the way of teaching, perhaps being more inductive and illustrative; having less concepts at first sight, make it more appealing for students (we could teach micro taking concrete issues as a starting point, in the way that Americans such as Mankiw are doing it).” (Jacques)

However, several pitfalls concerning the opening of undergraduate studies to pluralism are also raised. The first pitfall deals with the opening to multidisciplinarity that is considered as a risk in terms of disciplinary depth.

“I’m against an approach […] very multidisciplinary. I think we should keep the disciplinary division at the undergraduate level. Of course, disciplinary teaching should still provide bridges between disciplines. But I’m against indeterminate bachelors […], I know it starts with a good intention, to give a taste of the various disciplines to students to enable them to choose. But I think we lose too much time, students must choose a discipline when arriving at university.” (Paul)

The second one relates to the maturity level required for students to approach methodological reflections. The pluralism issue therefore extend to a new dimension: when should one introduce students to pluralism?

“We must consider the fact that some degree of maturity is required for students to be able to consider these methodological differences. This is not necessarily an easy question, how do we know whether students are ready for epistemological discussions […] you need a certain level of maturity to be able to step out from your own discipline to reflect on the process of learning itself […] merging different methodologies in the first year can be a risk. To borrow some economist terminology, there is an investment phase in education. This is a phase where students must manage a quantity of methods, concepts, facts before being able to take some distance and examine these [methodological and epistemological] issues. […] When confronted with the first epistemological discussion in first year, most of the students don’t see the point; they’re asking, ‘Why is he bothering us with that?’ The plurality must be introduced gradually taking into account students’ maturity.” (Jacques)

Finally, the third pitfall concerns the change of pedagogy and a possible decrease in quality of the intellectual education in favour of a more technical training:

“I’m convinced that we are completely out of our mind when we focus curricula on technical competencies rather than intellectual skills.” (Pierre)

According to the programme’s director, the major question remains: how to introduce heterodoxy in the curriculum? That is to say, what balance to make between orthodoxy and heterodoxy:
“How to introduce heterodoxy in the curriculum? I’m not in favour of a complete substitution; let’s not imitate our orthodox fellows. We still need to teach the basics of the orthodoxy. You cannot substitute heterodoxy to orthodoxy […] somehow students must understand the orthodoxy if they want to criticise it, in order to develop a critical stance … You must know the orthodoxy in order to enter the critical … it is a component of the plurality.” (Jacques)

On the question of what kind of education should be provided to tomorrow’s economists, four types of pluralism have been identified in the actors’ discourses (theoretical, methodological, disciplinary and pedagogical). The opening of those different dimensions raised several concerns in relation with students’ maturity, the design of the curriculum, the workload for students, the intellectual depth and the disciplinary breadth. Now that the content and form of the curriculum have been discussed, the last section of this chapter will approach the second research question.

6.3 On barriers to pluralism in economics education

While every actor recognised the need for an opening of EE to pluralism, they also acknowledged the inertia of the current institutional framework in terms of innovation. This inertia can be explained when looking at the institutional framework as a structure of incentives that influence professors’ behaviour in terms of pluralist innovation. When asked about those barriers for pluralism, actors referred to five main factors limiting either the demand for or the supply of alternative EE.

6.3.1 On the demand side: Professional and academic prospects

As described by François, the professionalisation of university programmes is a recent trend:

“The professionalisation issue came in the late 80s early 90s, let’s say from Jospin’s policies84, after doubling the number of students at the BAC85, we were faced with a wave of students who were not looking for an ‘intellectual’ diploma; this forced universities to operationalise those programmes, to professionalise them.” (François)

Professionalisation then refers to the shaping of universities’ curricula according to the specific needs of the current job market. According to Paul, the increase of the number of students in universities coupled with higher unemployment rates created a new responsibility for universities:

“The context also changed, there are more and more students, unemployment rates are important… there is also a strong ideological discourse about this economy of knowledge… implying the need for universities to provide the skills necessary to businesses, and ultimately necessary for the economy as a whole. It’s a discourse that reinforces the importance that students give to the professionalisation of their studies.” (Paul)

This context totally changed students’ expectations regarding higher education, and the prospect to find a job after university became students’ main concern:

“I keep in mind that one of the students’ major concerns when they enter university is to find a job.” (Paul)

“When students come to me, they ask me: ‘Am I going to find a job? How much am I going to earn? What’s the use?’ They ask me.” (Pierre)

84 Lionel Jospin was the French Minister of Education from 1988 to 1991.
85 The Bac is an abbreviation for baccauleureate (baccaulerat); it refers to France’s national high-school diploma.
“Today, your generation doesn’t really want to read these texts. And since the university wants to cling to those humanities and this intellectual education (in its non-professional dimension), it’s hard.” (François)

This trend increased the value of programmes most likely to lead to a job (i.e. the professionalising programmes) when it decreased the value of other more traditional diplomas (e.g. research focused masters) creating a situation where engaging in more intellectual studies is seen as a risky investment:

“There are fewer and fewer students in economics that want to engage in research. They would give higher value to more vocational training, more professionalising. They’re less interested by reflections on the discipline itself; it becomes difficult to find students who want to study the epistemology of social sciences or the history of economic thought.” (Philippe)

“But on the student’s side, engaging in research is taking a risk. Signing up for a research masters as a preparation for a future Ph.D., it’s still very risky. We cannot necessarily guarantee them a job at the university and in the current labour market; it’s extremely difficult to find research positions. So faced with such a risk, the safe investment remains the professionalising masters.” (Jacques)

Although this professionalisation trend mostly translates in the operationalisation of masters (e.g. Masters of Environmental Management, Masters of Eco-Tourism), it also affects undergraduate studies. Indeed, the intensified competition to integrate those professional masters is creating a responsibility for undergraduate teachers to give students the skills needed to be considered as an eligible post-graduate candidate. In order to survive (because students will only join undergraduate studies that secure such a set of skills) or because of a responsibility towards students, undergraduate curricula have to adapt to the new nature of students’ demand.

“If students don’t sign up for a programme, the programme dies. [...] If as it is today, students aren’t there, you have to adjust, we must adapt to the demand.” (Jacques)

The programme director explains how the economic environment is shaping the content and form of the education:

“The challenge for us is to offer students an education that will enable them to value their skills and knowledge in the pursuit of their studies – whether it’s in business schools, in our or other masters or on the job market. To a certain extent, what we teach them here needs to make sense according to what they can do after; the goal being to give them the possibility to have a choice after graduating. [...] We cannot develop our own specific curriculum, we must also take into account what our colleagues are doing, what’s happening around us, if only as a responsibility towards our students. [...] So, we have heterodox orientations, but we also have the responsibility to give students the choice after their bachelor. This choice is conditioned by what we teach them during those three years, so let’s say we have a conditional liberty; somehow we need to restraint our freedom [in designing alternative curricula] to give students the freedom to choose.” (Jacques)

86 Private business schools have been excelling in operationalising their programmes, therefore securing job prospects for their students. This trend has given higher value to private business schools studies compared to traditional public universities. Being free, undergraduate studies at universities are often considered as a cost-efficient stepping stone towards business school; as a result, many students start university studies in economics and management only to join a business school after two or three years. This phenomenon even led to the creation of specific competitive exams (called ‘footbridge competitive exam’ or concours passerelle) organised by business schools to recruit the best students from university during or after their bachelor.
In a context of legal autonomy\(^87\) where the university is in theory able to fully decide the content and form of its curricula, this dynamic explains how an institution as heterodox as the UVSQ is still pressured to design a business-as-usual undergraduate curriculum:

“A priori, we have no direct instructions from the Ministry [of Higher Education and Research] or other institutions that would impose us choices in terms of education. However, we must see if we are able to defend a position that is completely heterodox if it disadvantages our undergraduate students by reducing their possibilities of further studies. Rather, we position ourselves in relation with our peers and to all the other curricula proposed at the national level […]. We defend that students must be familiar with the language that others practice around us. It is this aspect that explains why our curriculum – at least at the undergraduate level – remains significantly orthodox. We want to equip our students with the same background that is given to economics students in other institutions. When competing to integrate a business school\(^88\), we want our students to be able to answer questions; and these questions always revolve around an orthodox apparatus of knowledge.” (Jacques)

According to Jacques’s story, possibilities of innovation are bounded by the university’s environment (job market, business school or masters and Ph.D.’s):

“There are systemic dynamics, systemic logics… We’re not imposed by a formal institution but we’re forced to fit within a system; even if we are considered as autonomous, we cannot do whatever we want. We aren’t completely free because we interact with a given environment and we need to adapt to it.” (Jacques)

Very critical towards this professionalisation trend, Pierre explains how this phenomenon restrained the content he could possibly teach in his course:

“We’re being asked to design programmes that give students a job; not programmes that make them think and reflect. On this trend, I don’t see any strong change in the short term […] They [the students] come because they can have easy credits but the content they don’t care. Those who choose to study economics do it only because they think it’s a discipline that can enhance social mobility. They do it because they want to work in banks, finance, and move vertically in a firm. A firm would not hire someone who is very knowledgeable on de-growth theories\(^89\), they would hire someone who is very good with financial assessment; so here, we don’t teach de-growth theories, but we teach financial assessment techniques. For me, the university is a place where students learn how to think and reflect, not a place where they learn how to perform a job.” (Pierre)

In the professors’ stories, professionalisation is perceived as a powerful barrier to an opening of curricula to pluralism. The negative correlation with pluralism is here linked to the two interactive crises of economics described in the first section of this chapter. While such a professionalisation trend could foster the opening of EE to pluralism in an environment where pluralist skills were highly valued, it currently goes against pluralism because of the low value that employers and elite education institutions (such as business schools) see in pluralist economic skills.

“When I come up with alternative things, people tell me: ‘What’s the use of this to find a job? People that study economics, they want to go work at the bank, they want to work in finance. They don’t need this.’ The answer is always: ‘What’s the use?’ So I always explain that the goal is to enlighten students, what I think is the purpose of the university; to be enlightened in the sense of having access to ideas that make their life better and easier, and also make them more efficient in

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\(^87\) The UVSQ is legally considered as an autonomous university. Adopted in 2007, the university autonomy law or ‘law concerning universities’ liberties about responsibilities’ (LRU, pt.) gives universities more freedom at several levels. An autonomous university manages its allocation of budget, human resources and property assets; it is also free to take decision in terms of development strategy, student selection policy, pedagogical organisation and self-evaluation (Anon., 2008).

\(^88\) Business schools refer here to Ecole Supérieur de Commerce (French business school at the higher education level) and Grandes Ecoles (elite schools).

\(^89\) De-growth theories were taken as an example of theories totally excluded from undergraduate curricula.
performative terms. And this enlightenment happens through philosophy, de-growth theories and all kind of things. But I always face the ‘what’s the use?’ answer. My colleagues tease me in saying, ‘Do you think that Bouygues and Veolia want to hire students who know the philosophy of science?’ What can I answer to that; there's just no way to answer that.” (Pierre)

He goes further in arguing that the professionalisation of curricula may not be such a safe investment in the long term. In Pierre’s narrative, students should not only be given a set toolbox of skills but rather the ability to think and adapt their skills to an ever-evolving environment.

“Everybody is happy; but nobody ask us to consider what will happen to graduates later in their careers. We’re only evaluated on their performance after three, six or twelve months. The fact that they will be frustrated in 10 years, no one cares. The fact that they aren’t intellectually equipped to move forward, no one cares.” (Pierre)

While acknowledging the importance of career prospects for students, he argues that professionalisation can be done in different ways:

“We’re now in the process or re-designing the Bachelor and the majority of questions concern employment prospects. I agree with the fact that it’s important that our students find a job when they leave university; however I am convinced that this can also happen without operationalising every single course. I’m convinced that this will happen even if each course is not directly linked to a job. We note the existence of a dominant discourse: one funds universities for a particular purpose, in order to make students ready for employment. I would like to teach people to be successful in the ability to think, not just tools. I would like to create a new course that is a little bit alternative but I give up. Because the answer will be hell.” (Pierre)

The recent students’ preference change towards more professional programmes has acted as a barrier to introduce pluralism in the curriculum. The value given to orthodox skills both on the job market and while selecting applicants for masters or business schools has created the responsibility for undergraduate professors to teach students economics-as-usual. Regardless of actors’ ideological orientation, respondents described the possibilities for innovation to be limited by the professional and academic environment external to the university.

6.3.2 On the supply side: Professors’ recruitment and promotion

While the previous part suggested that the lack of demand for alternative curricula could explain inertia in economics departments, this section will now discuss how the same phenomenon can be explained because of a lack of supply in alternative curricula. That is to say, emphasis will be placed on processes that could discriminate against heterodox teachers early on and therefore jeopardise the availability of professors competent in creating alternative content and form. In addition, disincentives facing pro-pluralist professors already in place within the system will be identified. On the professor side, two main factors have been identified as barriers to pluralism. While the first mechanism relates to the way French universities initially recruit professors, the second deals with the way they are evaluated during their career. Those two processes are directly linked with a third factor that concerns the ranking of economics journals.

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90 Bouygues and Veolia are two French-based multinational company working in close cooperation with the UVSQ. After the university autonomy law (2007), partnerships between companies and universities became common and led to the creation of new work-based programme at the masters level (master en alternance). A formation en alternance is a course where students study at university part-time and work in a company the rest of the time (e.g. two weeks, two weeks).

91 Since all the actors interviewed were ‘enseignant-chercheur’ (literally teacher-researcher), I will use the terms ‘teacher’, ‘professor’ and ‘enseignant-chercheur’ as synonyms. The term ‘enseignant-chercheur’ refers to a particular status of professorship in the French national system of higher education. The E-C status characterises actors that are both teaching and conducting research. As stated in the last decree defining their status (April, 24, 2009), teachers-researchers are obligated to allocate roughly 20% of their time to teaching (Ministère de l’Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche, 2009).
As described by Pierre, the agrégation\(^2\) is the first factor that will constrain the content and form of undergraduate curricula. This early process of selection already discriminates against heterodox economists, and therefore reduces possibilities of pluralism in EE:

“To teach at university, we go through a recruitment process where people decide whether or not we are qualified to teach. So actually the first level of the decision-making process is those people who decide if we can teach or not. So yes, if your work is considered to be inconsistent scientifically, if your work is seen as something wacky, you will not be considered eligible and therefore you will not have the opportunity to teach economics; they will assume that you are not qualified to teach economics, which is obviously absurd.” (Pierre)

Both François and Paul describes the agrégation as a direct barrier to pluralism:

“In my opinion, the agrégation in economics strengthens the specific character of economics at the expense of other social sciences. Jury panel for the agrégation are not pluralist.” (Paul)

“One would need agrégation jury panels to be more pluralist. We are living in a period where the agrégation promotes primarily one type of research, one type of professor. By holding the dominant paradigm as a required ideology for success, the agrégation forces people to conform.” (François)

Similarly, both Jacques and Philippe affirmed that for students wishing to teach economics at university, defending a heterodox ideological orientation already constituted a competitive disadvantage:

“If you want to have a career in economics, if you want to have a good job, it would be wise to choose an orthodox thesis topic; and the same apply for the choice of your supervisor and your jury panel. All those early decisions will impact your prospects within the field of economics. So it must be said that at the moment, remaining within the orthodoxy makes things easier.” (Jacques)

“There are also issues concerning careers at university. For a student writing a thesis to become university professor, choosing a transversal approach will be a strong disadvantage; it would be frowned upon by the jury. When you want to make a career at university, it’s risky to play the pluralism game. It is risky to play the theoretical pluralism game within the discipline but it is also risky to venture into disciplinary pluralism. The penalty falls quite rapidly. [...] One needs to be realistic, within a disciplinary field that is actually very conformist, it is disadvantageous to be pluralistic in terms of career (without taking into account the amount of time necessary to learn different schools of thought).” (Paul)

This discrimination against heterodoxy goes beyond the recruitment stage and persists during the professors’ career in the way they are evaluated. There are two factors that make this process of evaluation a barrier to pluralism in EE. Firstly, the evaluation process only focuses on the research duties of the teacher-researcher when the teaching duties are left un-evaluated. This creates a strong disincentive for teachers to invest time and effort into improving their teaching skills\(^3\).

\(^2\) The agrégation de l’enseignement supérieur is a national competitive examination organised for the recruitment and promotion of university professors. The examination is open at two levels: the so-called first and second-examination (premier and second concours). When the former is open to applicants holding either a doctorate or an habilitation, the latter is only open to associate professors (called maître de conferences in the French education system) older than forty years old and having worked at least ten years within a higher education institution. The jury panel for the examination is composed of six professors directly selected by the Minister of Higher Education and Research – four of them from the discipline of origin and two from other disciplines.

\(^3\) As suggested in Chapter 3, a pluralist teaching requires extra-efforts for professors. This can be explained by the fact that theoretical, disciplinary, pedagogical and methodological pluralism requires learning about other schools of thought, other disciplines, other types of pedagogics and different methodologies.
“In French universities, teachers-researchers are essentially evaluated on their research. No investment in education will be favourable in terms of career. And this is also one of the problems at university.” (Paul)

“In France we have a systemic logic that gives more value to the research dimension of the teacher-researcher [...] Traditionally, the priority goes to conducting research when teaching remains in the background. And so this is influencing behaviour, university professors tend to prioritise research activities and to not put that much effort into teaching. We cannot really blame them for it because so far, the criteria used to evaluate their overall performance only looks at their research activity. So I’m not absolutely sure what’s the situation elsewhere, but I feel it’s similar internationally. [...] When it comes to considering career opportunities, evaluations only consider the research dimension.” (Jacques)

As understood by Pierre, the research-focused evaluation criteria created a culture that looked down on teaching:

“Many people only want to do research; there are very few people who have a vocation for teaching.” (Pierre)

Secondly, the research-based evaluation process is performed using a certain qualitative classification of review – or ranking94 – that gives less value to heterodox publications:

“The real problem is the following: the most prestigious journals are often the mainstream-dominant journals (formalised economics). Of course if all the best journals95 only represent one school of thought, all the people that do research outside of this framework will receive less value for their research. And this has an effect even after the recruitment process; because gradually, since all the [teaching] positions at the university will only be given to applicants that publish in the best journals (and therefore belong to the dominant school of thought), the number of heterodox professors will decrease. Any student that wants to become an academics will need to belong to the dominant school of thought, otherwise they won’t be selected to become professors. Otherwise, they need to pretend to be like that [orthodox], and when they are at the top of the pyramid, they can exclaim: ‘I fooled you, I don’t believe in it! And I want to do something else.’ It is not very healthy; it is true that I tend to say laughingly that it happens like that, people need to wait to be at a certain level to think freely. It is not the only case where people needs to wait reaching a certain hierarchical level to be able to say what they truly think.”(François)

“The second mechanism of exclusion lies in the way that we have to classify heterodox journals. And in France there are very few opportunities for intellectual recognition, it is still quite limited by the way we rank heterodox journals; the rankings are what they are... If we are only evaluated on our publications, a heterodox researcher will receive less intellectual recognition. [...] The possibilities are very limited in France and I think they are even more limited in the Anglo-Saxon world. When you look at the CNRS ranking of journals, you can immediately see that French journals ranked either 3 or 4. So as to heterodox journals, they are mainly ranked 4 (knowing that there are only four ranks). They are still ranked journals, but ranked last. If we consider the relative position of these journals compared to others in this ranking, heterodox journals are the worse ones. [...] I think this is a very strong dynamics of exclusion.” (Jacques)

According to François, this discrimination in the ranking can be explained by a lack of selection for excellence in heterodox journals. The lack of readability in terms of quality among heterodox publications gives a competitive disadvantage to heterodoxy as a whole compared to a well-hierarchised orthodox ranking. When competing for a university position, an orthodox applicant may have more leverage in terms of valuing his publications than a heterodox applicant:

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94 In France the ranking of economics journals is performed by the CNRS. As defended in their last categorisation (CNRS, 2011), the ranking is not performed using bibliometric technics.

95 The journals with the higher rank (rank 1).
“The question now is no longer if teaching should be pluralist, it is the issue of recruitment of university teachers and researchers. To recruit, we need criteria of excellence. At the end of the day, only excellent economists should be recruited at university. If you want to promote pluralism, you need to recruit excellent economists from all schools of thought. [...] The question of pluralism in the recruitment requires a way to distinguish excellence. So now the problem ... heterodox journals should have a hierarchy to distinguish excellence where only the best Marxist, ecological, post-Keynesian economists and so on would publish in the best journal (the one where it is the hardest to publish)... This way we would be able to recruit both excellent orthodox and excellent heterodox economists in judging by the ranking of their publications. To value itself, the heterodoxy needs a stronger hierarchy in its publications, otherwise they will keep being considered as second rank applicants. I’m all for a ranking dictatorship as soon as it truly reflects the quality of people who come to publish. Pluralism still requires a selection in terms of excellence.” (François)

In addition to the evaluation factor, Paul and Pierre explained the lack of pluralism in teaching as a result of laziness:

“It’s less tiring because teaching in a pluralist way requires a lot of learning. [...] So I’m not saying it’s laziness ... But let’s say it’s much more comfortable ... to specialise in a small area than to open to pluralism. This applies to both theoretical and disciplinary pluralism. So the tendency at university is to avoid pluralism.” (Paul)

“I do feel it’s rather a total laziness, not a laziness particularly dealing with teaching.” (Pierre)

As an additional barrier to pluralism in economics curricula, Pierre pointed to a lack of financial resources coupled to the way performance is currently measured in universities:

“The Bachelor is structured around standards that are not very creative. This is a real question that students ask themselves: why are we here? And what do we learn? This relates to the history of the Plan Réussite Licence (PRL). We are evaluated on the performance of our students, so it’s a factor that we want to maximise. Some students have difficulties that would require a real support for them to succeed (support that we cannot give within our limited budget). So offering them a richer – but more difficult – content would be a threat to our evaluation results. It’s why we have the disincentive to create very creative content; we’re pushed to create very simple content that looks like a kind of formatting. If we want to make the average student succeed, it is much easier to simply format him or her, to have simple rules and not complicated stuff.” (Pierre)

This chapter answered the research questions based on information provided by the actors’ narratives. While the first research question aimed to define what kind of change could improve the current economics education, the second identified barriers that could hinder such a change. A summary of the findings is presented in the table below.

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96 As a social construct, ‘excellence’ in economics is another contested concept.
97 The Plan Réussite Licence (literally Undergraduate Success Strategy) is a strategy implemented by the former Minister for Higher Education and Research Valérie Pécresse (2007-2011). The objective of the PLR was to divide by two the rate of failure during first year studies at university. The strategy was built around three pillars: re-designing the content, give better support to students and providing a better orientation for students graduating from high school (Pécresse, 2007).
**Research question 1: How to improve economics education?**

**Theoretical pluralism:** breaking the dominance of neoclassical economics and opening EE to a plurality of schools of thoughts (both orthodox and heterodox).

**Methodological pluralism:** opening curricula to different methodological frameworks when approaching economic phenomena.

**Disciplinary pluralism:** opening curricula to other disciplines.

**Pedagogical pluralism:** embracing a plurality of pedagogical approaches to provide students with a balanced and diversified set of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values.

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**Research question 2: What are the current barriers to pluralism in EE?**

- **Barrier 1:** *Professionalisation* (it is currently a barrier because future studies and professional opportunities require a business-as-usual economics training).

- **Barrier 2:** *Recruitment* (it is currently a barrier because the recruitment process of university teachers discriminates against alternative ideologies).

- **Barrier 3:** *Evaluation* (it is currently a barrier because professors are solely evaluated on their research while no importance is given to the quality of their teaching).

- **Barrier 4:** *Laziness* (it is currently a barrier because pluralism in teaching requires more effort in terms of preparation and implies a greater risk of failure).

- **Barrier 5:** *Performance* (it is currently a barrier because universities are evaluated on students’ success and therefore tend to design simple curricula).

- **Potentially aggravating factor 1:** *Ranking* (it is currently a potentially aggravating factor because heterodox journals get usually a lower rank than orthodox ones).

- **Potentially aggravating factor 2:** *Lack of student evaluation* (it is currently a potentially aggravating factor because students have no possibilities to provide feedback on the way they are being taught).
Chapter 7: Analysis and discussion

7.1 Analysis

This paper attempted to answer the following question: how can economics education be improved in light of sustainability issues? The first step determined how students’ knowledge, skills, attitudes and values could be improved through a change of curriculum content and form. On this point, the findings suggest that an opening to pluralism on four levels (theoretical, methodological, disciplinary and pedagogical) would improve students’ capacity to deal with contemporary and future societal issues. The second step identified the institutional barriers that are currently hindering such a process of change. The present paper’s findings point to five different factors that restrain the opening of economics education to pluralism at the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin (professionalisation, recruitment, evaluation, laziness and performance) with the addition of two potentially aggravating factors (the ranking of economic journals and the lack of students’ evaluation).

Pluralism as a requirement to build an EESD

In order to satisfy the definition of an Education for Sustainable Development – or an education that will “allow every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future” (UNESCO, 2012) – EE must strive towards greater pluralism. The ideological resilience of one particular worldview in the face of criticism contradicts the foundations of democracy and restrains the possibilities of building more sustainable economies as it reduces the diversity of possible solutions available for arising challenges. In order to give students the ability to think about the future, to question their beliefs, to see the world as a complex interaction of elements, to learn and work together and to take part in decision-making processes, economics education must broaden its theoretical, methodological, disciplinary and pedagogical landscape (Tilbury and Wortman, 2004).

While the actors’ stories often considered the pedagogical dimension as being peripheral, I claim here that it is the most important aspect of the quadruple pluralism. Only a shift of the form (pedagogics) will allow an opening of the content (theories, methodologies and disciplines). That is, the introduction of a richer and more complex content needs to be accompanied with a redefinition of what it means to teach. In order to build an EESD, pedagogics must go beyond the usual chalkboard teaching to encompass the diverse array of techniques (games, experiments, debate, group work, role play or field trip) required to educate better and happier economists.

Incentives to conform as barriers to pluralism

The aforementioned five factors are currently barriers to pluralism because they generate an incentive for professors to conform to the status quo (i.e. a non-pluralist EE-as-usual). How do economics professors end up facing such a powerful incentive to conform? Actors affirmed that the exclusion of heterodoxy at the agrégation impacted negatively the opening of education to pluralism. This early discrimination creates a first incentive for economists to conform; in order to become professors, applicants must lean towards the orthodoxy. When dealing with actors already holding a teaching

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98 A solution is possible when it is both technically feasible (skills) and socially acceptable (ideology).
position, what is described as ‘general conformism’ can be understood in terms of collective routine path dependence. Over the years, successful routines (the way to teach that will maximise the performance criteria of the economics department) have settled within the department creating a path-dependence of cognition (i.e. professors only know how to teach this way). An opening to pluralism would require significant effort since it would require teachers to unlearn the old framework (monist teaching) and to learn a new framework (fourfold pluralism). This extra-investment explains why the term ‘laziness’ was repeatedly used to justify an economics-as-usual teaching. Decreasing financial resources allocated to universities aggravate this behaviour; indeed, budget constraints often lead to non-innovative textbook teaching based on what has been done before.

The way professors are evaluated accentuates this incentive to conform. As evaluation does not take into account the quality of teaching, it discourages investment towards a business-as-unusual teaching. All the time invested in improving teaching is a time not invested in improving research; and since evaluation only takes research into account, education remains secondary in professors’ priorities. In the current situation, there is no external incentive to innovate in terms of teaching; that is to say only professors driven by an internal incentive (i.e. holding the ideological belief that EE needs to open to pluralism) will change the way they teach. However, since the recruitment phase discriminates individuals most likely to hold such an ideology\(^99\), the situation moves towards a paradigmatic lock-in over the long term.

This incentive to conform can also be explained in terms of preserving what Nelson and Winter (1985) defined as an organisational truce; in this case the balance of power between teachers and students. Opening teaching to a more student-centered philosophy would perturb this power structure, and therefore professors may have the incentive to keep their routines unchanged in order to preserve their position of power. This hypothesis could explain why teachers at the UVSQ were reluctant to be evaluated by students. The lack of evaluation preserves the position of students as mere consumers of knowledge without any influence on the content and form of the course\(^100\). Blocking this communication channel appears as a significant barrier to change because it reinforces educators’ path-dependence of cognition, namely the fact that if nobody complains, it must be the right way to teach. The lack of feedback (from students, from external agencies, from the university management) contributes to building inertia within a course, and leaves any possibility for change in the hands of only one actor (the professor). Likewise, the discrimination against heterodoxy during the recruitment process can also be seen as preserving an organisational truce. The systematic exclusion of the dominated (heterodoxy) can be understood as a routine to preserve the position of the dominant (mainstream economics) in terms of power and prestige in the academia.

As explained in Chapter 2, an actor’s behaviour is the combined impact of external and internal incentives (Söderbaum, 2008, p. 60). From the case study, we saw that actors were still significantly constrained by external incentives irrespective of ideological orientations that regard an opening to pluralism as a positive change. The situation at the UVSQ department of economics is typical of a lock-in situation where the possibilities for change are institutionally constrained. The incentives facing actors within the economics department – if not the university – are blocking change from within. Achieving pluralism in undergraduate studies at the UVSQ relies on the building of incentives that will foster such a change.

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99 Indeed, heterodox economists have been found to be more open to pluralism than orthodox economists (King and Kriesler, 2008; Lee, 2009; Vlachou, 2008 cited in Lee, 2012).

100 Some could argue that students are free to switch programmes if disappointed with the quality of the teaching. However, higher education is a good example of a vendor lock-in, or a situation where customers are dependent of one vendor and are unable to use another one without significant switching costs. After starting a bachelor at university, changing to another programme is often costly because it forces students to wait one year or to join a private institution with substantially higher fees. This situation is also created by a lack of information about the quality of the teaching within different programmes. Since the teaching is not evaluated, it is difficult for students to obtain such information prior to their choice of university.
Several measures could be implemented to allow an opening of curricula to theoretical, methodological, disciplinary and pedagogical pluralism. Firstly, teaching criteria could be included in the process of evaluating teachers-researchers. The quality of the teacher-researcher teaching would be measured and taken into account for both recruitment and promotion. To support such a shift, additional resources would be required for professors to improve their teaching skills along their career. Another possible measure could be the creation of full-time teaching positions. Currently, inexperienced teachers (teaching assistant or professors with little experience) are usually allocated to inexperienced students while the best professors – in terms of pedagogics – are allocated to more experienced students (third year, masters or Ph.D.). Those full-time teaching positions could be efficiently allocated for first- and second-year courses where the need for effective pedagogics is the highest.

Secondly, the university’s SD ideology could be integrated in the design of economics education in terms of content and form. Holding pluralism in economics as a core pillar of the university’s SD strategy could allow space for change at lower levels. This strategy is defined by Meadows (2008, p. 115) as the “harmonization of goals” or the “re-definition of larger and more important goals [...] as a way of aligning the various goals of the subsystems [...] that allows all actors to break out of their bounded rationality.” An example of such a policy can be found in the Swedish system of higher education where legislation has been used to emphasise the importance of SD. Since February 2006, the Higher Education Act obliges higher education institutions to promote in their activities “SD that ensures present and future generations a healthy and good environment, economic and social welfare and justice” (official act cited in Lindberg, 2013, p. 4). While such an overarching objective can be ineffective if only considered at the highest level (university direction), it can translate into concrete action if all departments are required to report on the way they integrate SD in the design and provision of education.

Thirdly, to make curricula more responsive to societal needs, different types of stakeholder should be included in the design of curricula. Students, employers and actors representing diverse dimensions of civil society must cooperate with professors in a democratic way to improve the match between the demand and supply of economic skills. As the main stakeholder of the educative process, students should be given more influential power in the design of their education. The inclusion of students in the design of curricula could start with an effective and formalised feedback process with students systematically giving their opinions on the quality of all the courses taken within their undergraduate studies. Furthermore, their influence could be strengthened by their active participation in the design of curricula. One or two students could be elected as representatives of the students’ interest and participate along with professors and other actors in the planning phase of the courses.

Fourthly, the creation of a compulsory first semester that would embrace the aforementioned fourfold pluralism could lead to a demand-driven organic evolution of the whole programme. Instead of starting by acquiring a chosen set of theories and methods disconnected with reality, students would start by being directly exposed to real world issues in an interdisciplinary, trans-paradigmatic, multi methodological and multi pedagogical manner. The process of scientific inquiry will then be tailored in accordance to the characteristics of the particular issues, therefore allowing more flexibility in the choice of theories and methods (higher education institutions such as the London School of Economics\(^\text{101}\) or the Norwegian University of Trondheim\(^\text{102}\) are examples of initiatives going in this direction). This first exposure to the complexity of real-world research is likely to shift students’ expectations in terms of education from a simplified, monistic, top-down presentation of theories and methods to a pluralist teaching.

\(^{101}\) See the LSE100 course (LSE, 2013).
\(^{102}\) See the Experts in Teamwork (EiT) (NTNU, 2013).
When analysing the situation in terms of system dynamics, the system of undergraduate economics education at the UVSQ can be described as being in a state of suboptimisation. Such a state occurs “when a subsystem’s goals dominate at the expense of the total system’s goals” (Meadows, 2008, p. 85). The current lack of theoretical, methodological, disciplinary and pedagogical pluralism in the Bachelor can be understood as an optimum situation within the boundaries of the university economics department. Indeed, as professors explained in Chapter 6, more pluralism in the teaching could be detrimental to the students (in their quest for a job, a masters or a business school programme), the teachers (for their career) or to the university (for their performance evaluation). Consequently, this sub-system would tend to minimise innovation in terms of teaching in order to conserve this optimal business-as-usual economics. However, when we widen the boundaries of this subsystem we realise that the conservation of an optimum state in the EE sub-system can be detrimental to objectives of social and environmental justice at the global level. In other words, actors within the sub-system (economics departments) face incentives that contradict the overall objective of the system (the university or even the government) in terms of sustainable development.

7.2 Discussion

The findings confirmed several international trends highlighted in previous research. Firstly, the study highlighted the dominance of neoclassical economics in undergraduate teaching. When Jacques and François both confirmed the technical threat of a paradigmatic dominance, Pierre and Paul placed the emphasis on the ideological threat it could represent. Secondly, some similarities have been found between the actors’ discourses and the potential pitfalls identified in the literature. Factors such as the fear of extra effort, superficial depth, burdening of students and students’ lack of maturity emerged in the respondents’ stories. Concerning factors that hinder the opening to pluralism, the stories confirmed Dobusch and Kapeller (2009) theory of path dependence. The discriminatory nature of the French recruitment process (the agrégation) and the teachers’ responsibility to guarantee future prospects for their students (for further studies or in the job market) acted as factors of coordination. Professors gave an example of the complementarity process in describing the journal ranking as a dynamic of exclusion that would keep heterodoxy out of the curricula. Finally, what has been described as cognition path dependence, or the fact that teachers were reluctant to learn a new way of teaching economics, can be seen as an example of a learning factor. In terms of overall trend, the findings acknowledged a similar lock-in situation at the UVSQ to the one found in Australian universities by Thornton (2012).

The analysis provided in this thesis is limited in several ways. Firstly, the Bachelor’s degree of pluralism is difficult to estimate since the structure, literature and other features of individual courses have not been reviewed prior to this study. While the Bachelor’s structure and teachers’ and students’ stories have exposed certain aspects of the education, a more in-depth review of the content and form of the teaching is needed to overcome this limitation. Secondly, while an opening to quadruple pluralism was described as the most appropriate direction to fulfil commitments towards sustainable development, the question of how plural the curricula should be remained untouched. Finally, the malfunctioning of communication channels within the Bachelor management team is likely to create misunderstandings when reflecting on the actual level of pluralism within the programme. For this

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103 Innovation is understood here as innovation towards pluralism, or positive innovation. As suggested in Chapter 6, the professionalisation trend can create another type of innovation (a narrowing of the curricula in terms of theories, methodologies and disciplines in favour of a more applied approach to economics). Taking the fundamental uncertainty of sustainability issues, I claim that such an innovation would be detrimental to achieving SD as it will reduce economists’ ability to think outside of the current system. Innovation towards more operationalised curricula is therefore considered as a negative innovation because it neglects other dimensions of the fourfold pluralism.
reason, actors’ stories remain significantly bounded by their understanding of the actual situation and should be only considered as subjective perspectives.

In the light of the present paper’s findings, several avenues for future research can be suggested. First of all, this paper calls for similar studies in different contexts in order to identify global trends of education in economics. While this paper focused on undergraduate education, the need to assess education provided at both lower and higher level is equally important. Additionally, in-depth analysis of the influence of professionalisation on the intellectual quality of programmes is needed as at the moment such an influence remains at the level of assumption. Further research aiming to study the influence of external actors (such as corporations engaging in partnerships with universities) on university curricula is therefore called for by this paper. As the scope of the paper only considers university EE, research on the impact of EE outside the range of universities is needed (e.g. in the press). Finally, this paper raised questions about the usefulness of students’ evaluation. Research aimed at finding effective and unbiased ways for students to evaluate the way they are taught is also required.
Conclusion

While it has been argued that an opening towards a quadruple pluralism (theoretical, methodological, disciplinary and pedagogical) could improve economics’ ability to deal with sustainability issues, this paper presented evidence of five factors (professionalisation, recruitment, evaluation, laziness and performance) hindering the broadening of economics education. The institutional inertia characterising the case of the UVSQ is problematic when considering commitments towards sustainable development – and especially when focusing on the building of green-er and fair-er economies.

While Söderbaum (2013) claimed that mainstream economics was socially constructed as a closed perspective, this study argues that education is a key factor in the reproduction of economists’ close-mindedness. Current education in economics – as the replication of a social and ideological order – appears to be a strong mechanism phasing out possibilities for economics to evolve and adapt to new societal needs. The case of the UVSQ demonstrated that this replication was not orchestrated at the macro level (government or university) but was rather driven by incentives to conform at the micro level (professors, students, textbook writers and publishers and academic journals). The strong culture of compliance in current economics departments confirms Keynes’ observation that “the difficulty lies, not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones, which ramify, for those brought up as most of us have been, into every corner of our minds” (Keynes, 1936, p. xii cited in Dobusch and Kapeller, 2009, p. 874). In this perspective, identifying barriers to innovation in the current institutional framework is the first step to change the way economists are educated. As this paper suggested, there is sometimes a gap between objectives formulated at the highest level104 and the behaviour of actors on the field. Therefore, changing the overall objective at the macro level is not enough to introduce effective change within a system if contradicting incentives105 still influence actors’ behaviour at the micro level. The deconstruction of contradicting incentives needs to be taken into account while considering new objectives given to universities in the light of sustainable development.

In the context of sustainable development, universities have a particular social responsibility. Aside from the fact that they remain publicly funded in the case of France (and therefore should contribute to collective welfare), actors at universities also bear a responsibility as intellectuals. While the biologist Paul Ehrlich (1989) claimed that everyone at university should dedicate at least ten per cent of their time to solving issues of global survival, I claim that today, economists – and economics students – bear an even greater responsibility. The omnipresence of economics in the organisation of our developed societies calls for a democratisation of all the institutions106 that constitute the discipline of economics. As the core institution of the discipline, the university has the duty to match the supply of economics (the analytical capacities of economists) with its demand (society’s – democratically defined – needs for economic knowledge) in a democratic manner. As a hallmark of democracy, higher education institutions should always welcome a plurality of perspectives and by

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104 In our case, the overarching commitment of both the French government and UVSQ to promote ESD.
105 The professors’ incentives to conform to a status quo contradict the university’s commitments to innovate beyond business as usual.
106 University departments, associations, journals, classification systems, textbooks and economics basic narrative (Fullbrook, 2010).
doing so, preserve the availability of a diversity of solutions when confronted with a particular challenge. The capacity to build green-er and fair-er economies directly relies on universities’ capacity to act as a democratic forum between researchers and society.

The economy, the discipline of economics and higher education in economics are three systems that interact together in a circular fashion. Our understanding of the economy defines what can be thought in economics, which in turn determines what can be done in the economy. Similarly, our understanding of economics defines what can be taught in economics education, which ultimately circumscribes what can be researched in economics. As demonstrated by this thesis, institutional factors can hinder the co-evolution of those systems and lead to a situation of suboptimisation where the created discrepancy between demand and supply of economics can be detrimental to the societal achievement of sustainability objectives.

Since education is fundamental in bridging today and tomorrow’s needs, it must be the backbone of any sustainable development strategy. The building of a green and fair economy can only be made possible by the teaching of a green and fair economy (or more precisely the teaching of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that will allow the creation, and acceptance, of green-er and fair-er economies). In order to bridge the gap between possibility (the future we want) and probability (the future we can get), more attention should be given to the way we educate the economists of tomorrow.
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