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Modular dissertation pathways in undergraduate economics: A case study of curriculum innovation

Panagiotis Giannarakis^{ID}

Department of Economics, School of Policy and Global Affairs, City St George's, University of London, St John Street, London, EC1V 0HB, UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study of curriculum innovation in undergraduate economics education at a UK Russell Group university. A modular dissertation structure was introduced to address uneven econometric preparation, rising supervision pressures, and increasingly diverse student interests. The redesigned framework separated dissertation activity into three interconnected modules: a shared research design module, a traditional empirical dissertation route, and a policy-oriented dissertation pathway with structured support. The initiative integrated thematic topic allocation, Stata training, digital scaffolding, drop-in support sessions, and oversight by a dedicated Director of Dissertations. Drawing on institutional data, student feedback, and reflective curriculum evaluation, the paper examines how the redesign was perceived to support student engagement, reduce supervision pressures, and strengthen the alignment between dissertation provision, inclusivity and employability. The study contributes to economics education literature by demonstrating how modular curriculum design and collaborative leadership can support sustainable dissertation delivery while preserving research-led learning in large undergraduate cohorts.

1. Introduction

Undergraduate dissertations are a defining component of economics education, offering students a unique opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge to independent research. However, coordinating and supervising large cohorts of dissertation students presents enduring challenges for academic departments. These include uneven student preparedness, particularly in empirical methods, rising staff workload, and the complexity of aligning research projects with both student interests and supervisor expertise.

There is growing pressure on higher education institutions to innovate in curriculum design, especially in ways that promote independent learning, student agency, and practical skill development (Gonta and Tripon, 2020; Kärkkäinen, 2012). Within economics, this challenge is especially pronounced given the technical nature of empirical research and the increasing demand for policy-relevant analysis (Clark and Hordosy, 2019).

This paper explores how a modular redesign of the undergraduate dissertation programme in the Department of Economics at a UK Russell Group university responded to these issues. Initially operating under a traditional two-semester structure, beginning with a literature review and followed by empirical work, the programme was restructured so that, after completing the common foundation module ECON3036, students selected one of two Semester 2 continuation routes: an empirical, data-driven dissertation route (ECON3037), which retained the core features of the previous model, or a newly introduced policy-oriented route (ECON3038). This

E-mail address: Panagiotis.Giannarakis@city.ac.uk.

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common foundation module supported research design, critical engagement with literature, and the development of research proposals that aimed to contribute meaningfully to existing debates.

This modular approach emerged from sustained feedback from students and staff. Students voiced anxiety around empirical expectations, especially those with limited econometrics training. Staff also expressed concern about increasingly specialised supervision burdens, exacerbated by retirements, sabbaticals, and expanding class sizes. By streamlining dissertation themes and introducing guided, instructor-led policy projects, the department addressed these tensions through a flexible and collaborative framework. Leading such curriculum reform required not only pedagogical redesign but also coordinated institutional change across a large supervisory team, reflecting established principles of educational change leadership (Fullan, 2019).

This paper contributes to economics education scholarship in three ways. First, it offers a practice-based case study of dissertation redesign in a large undergraduate economics programme. Second, it shows how a modular dissertation structure can support student engagement, supervisory coherence, and methodological inclusivity without abandoning research-led learning. Third, it provides a transferable framework for departments seeking to redesign dissertation provision in ways that are pedagogically robust and operationally sustainable.

1.1. *Approach and evidence*

This paper draws on programme development and module leadership experience from 2016 onward, during which a series of changes were introduced to the dissertation structure, support model, and supervision processes. The most significant reform was implemented in 2020–2021, when the dissertation was restructured into two distinct pathways alongside a common preparatory module. Across this period, the model served annual cohorts of around 200 students and involved approximately 40 academic staff contributing to dissertation teaching and supervision.

The analysis draws on programme-level evidence gathered through routine module leadership and review, including internal data on student route choices and supervision allocation, module documentation, student evaluation feedback, and staff reflections. Broader student-experience indicators, including perceived improvements in National Student Survey (NSS) outcomes discussed within the department, are reported only as anecdotal contextual reflections and are not used to establish the impact of the dissertation redesign. The aim is not to offer a causal evaluation, but to document the rationale for the redesign, explain how the model operated in practice, and reflect on its perceived benefits and constraints.

The paper uses both formal and informal feedback. Formal evidence includes module evaluation, survey data, and student outcomes; informal evidence includes recurring issues and responses identified through meetings, drop-in sessions, and routine coordination with students and staff. As the paper reports curriculum development and evaluation at programme level using aggregated and anonymised internal evidence, formal ethics review was not sought. The case is necessarily limited to one department and one institutional setting, so the value of the paper lies in offering a transferable teaching framework rather than a claim of generalisable impact.

2. Literature review

2.1. *Undergraduate dissertations and curriculum innovation*

Undergraduate dissertations are widely recognised as a cornerstone of research-led teaching, fostering independence, critical thinking, and methodological rigour (Healey et al., 2014; Jenkins et al., 2007). Yet their implementation presents challenges, especially in economics, where student backgrounds in empirical analysis vary widely (Jenkins et al., 2007; Clark and Hordosy, 2019). These challenges have intensified calls for flexible, inclusive, and supportive dissertation structures.

Curriculum modularisation offers one response, enabling institutions to accommodate varied research preferences and learning styles while managing growing class sizes (Kärkkäinen, 2012). In economics, such modular designs help balance technical skill development with policy relevance (Gonta and Tripon, 2020). Strategic curriculum reform must also consider how pedagogical innovation can remain sustainable for both students and staff (Kandiko Howson and Blackmore, 2012).

2.2. *Supporting independent learning*

Scaffolding research skill development is essential, particularly when students are managing their first substantial independent project (Levy and Petrulis, 2012). Structured deliverables, exemplars, and workshops can enhance confidence and reduce attrition (Kandiko Howson and Mawer, 2013; Healey and Jenkins, 2009). These practices align with Vygotskian models and constructive alignment principles (Biggs et al., 2022). In economics education specifically, writing-based activities have also been shown to deepen understanding and strengthen student learning, particularly when they are integrated into course design as part of a structured developmental process (Greenlaw, 2003). Economics education research also suggests that structured writing activities can strengthen student learning and support independent research development when embedded within staged curriculum design (Dynam and Cate, 2009). In economics, similar principles underpin student-led undergraduate research, where clear guidance on topic development, faculty matching, writing, and presentation can make independent projects more manageable and more rewarding for students and supervisors alike (Gitter, 2021).

2.3. Supervision models and peer learning

Effective supervision is widely recognised as critical to the undergraduate dissertation experience but is increasingly constrained by workload pressures and institutional expansion (Todd et al., 2006). Shared, group or collective supervision models offer one alternative to fully individualised supervision by fostering peer interaction, improving consistency and alleviating staff workload (Rowley and Slack, 2004; Dautel, 2020). Peer learning and peer-support structures can also reduce isolation, support informal feedback and help students navigate the dissertation process alongside others facing similar research challenges (Colvin and Ashman, 2010; Collings et al., 2014).

2.4. Behavioural nudges and engagement

Insights from behavioural economics suggest that “nudges” such as reminders, deadlines, and streamlined processes improve student engagement (Damgaard and Nielsen, 2018). These are especially impactful in time-intensive projects like dissertations, where procrastination and cognitive overload are common. Such approaches also support widening participation by helping students unfamiliar with academic research norms (Thomas et al., 2017).

2.5. Employability and policy relevance

There is growing recognition that traditional empirical dissertations may not suit all students. Conceptual and policy-oriented research offers a viable and meaningful alternative, especially when aligned with secondary data and real-world contexts (Todd et al., 2006; Mantai et al., 2024). This is consistent with recent work in economics education showing that policy-focused capstone structures can provide a coherent framework for upper-level research and applied analysis (Morreale and Shostya, 2021). These formats enhance employability by fostering critical thinking and applied policy analysis (Rowley and Slack, 2004).

Taken together, this literature suggests that dissertation redesign in economics should be understood not only as a question of supervision logistics, but also as a matter of curriculum design, inclusion, and the structuring of student research pathways.

3. Case study: modular dissertation pathways in practice

3.1. Institutional and programme context

In the UK undergraduate system, economics degrees are normally completed over three years, and the dissertation modules discussed in this case study are taken in the third and final year of study. For students on single-honours Economics programmes, the dissertation is a core final-year requirement, meaning that it must be passed with the standard undergraduate pass mark of 40 out of 100. For students on joint-honours programmes, students are also required to complete a dissertation or equivalent final-year research project, but this may be undertaken either in Economics or in the other discipline of their joint degree, depending on the programme structure.

The dissertation cohort was therefore not methodologically uniform. It included students from programmes with very different levels of required quantitative, statistical and econometric training before the final year. Some students entered the dissertation after a strongly quantitative sequence of economics, finance, actuarial science, statistics and econometrics modules. Others came from joint, interdisciplinary or professionally oriented programmes in which the curriculum placed comparatively greater emphasis on politics, management, accounting, philosophy or broader social science content. Table 1 summarises this variation by programme and classifies each route according to its relative quantitative intensity. A more detailed mapping of required and pathway-dependent quantitative modules by programme is provided in Table 2 in the Appendix.

As Table 1 shows, most students came from high or very high quantitative-intensity programmes. However, around 22.5% of the cohort came from moderate, moderate/low or lower quantitative-intensity programmes. This minority was still substantial in a large dissertation cohort of around 200 students per year. Variation in prior quantitative preparation therefore created additional pedagogical and supervisory challenges, particularly when students were expected to develop empirical research questions, identify appropriate data, select feasible methods and interpret quantitative evidence.

This variation did not reflect differences in academic ability, but differences in prior curriculum exposure and confidence with applied econometric work. It is important for understanding why a single empirical dissertation model became increasingly difficult to sustain. The redesign discussed below therefore responded not only to student preference, but also to a structural feature of the dissertation cohort: the need to preserve the academic value of independent research while supporting students with different methodological backgrounds.

All students taking the Economics dissertation sequence began with ECON3036 in Semester 1 before progressing to one of two Semester 2 continuation routes: ECON3037 or ECON3038. The structure and assessment of these modules are discussed below.

3.2. Background

Against this programme context, the Undergraduate Dissertation Coordinator's role involved overseeing the academic and administrative framework for dissertation modules and coordinating more than 40 academic staff across the department. Over time, consistent feedback from students and staff highlighted a set of challenges that made redesign increasingly necessary.

Many students reported feeling overwhelmed by the empirical expectations, particularly those with limited prior training in econometrics or data analysis. This anxiety often resulted in procrastination, lower engagement, and suboptimal research outcomes. At the same time, staff members expressed concerns regarding the growing supervision burden, intensified by large cohort sizes, specialised research topics, and pressures from retirements and sabbaticals. These tensions created a need for a more flexible, scalable, and inclusive approach to dissertation delivery that could maintain academic rigour while supporting diverse student needs and managing staff workload.

In response, the redesign was led collaboratively by senior colleagues, and a modular dissertation structure was introduced in the 2020–2021 academic year. The redesign divided the dissertation process into three distinct but connected modules:

- **ECON3036 (Semester 1): Literature Review and Research Question Development**

This foundational module guides students through the process of critically engaging with existing literature and formulating a clear, focused research question. It establishes core skills in research design and academic writing, with structured workshops, formative assessments, and feedback to build confidence early in the process.

- **ECON3037 (Semester 2): Empirical Dissertation Continuation**

This module continues the traditional dissertation path for students opting to conduct original quantitative research, applying econometric methods to primary or secondary data. Supervision remains largely individualised, with faculty experts providing tailored support to students with the requisite technical skills.

- **ECON3038 (Semester 2): Policy-Oriented Dissertation with Guided Support**

Created to accommodate students seeking a less econometrically intensive, policy-focused approach, this module provides structured lectures, guided resources and topic-led support. Students explore economic issues through conceptual analysis and secondary data, emphasising policy relevance and real-world application.

After completing ECON3036, students were required to select either ECON3037 or ECON3038, depending on the nature of their proposed project, their methodological preparation and the academic guidance received during the common foundation module. ECON3037 retained the core features of the previous empirical dissertation model, including individual supervision and quantitative analysis using primary or secondary data. The main new continuation route was ECON3038, which introduced a policy-oriented dissertation model for students whose research interests, methodological preparation or career goals were better aligned with conceptual, applied and evidence-based policy analysis. However, both routes operated within a redesigned system because students now entered them after a common proposal-development module, structured early feedback and a clearer pathway-choice process.

The two continuation routes also differed in their support model. ECON3037 retained individual supervision, which was appropriate for students undertaking empirical dissertations requiring tailored guidance on data, methods and interpretation. ECON3038 did not use individual dissertation supervisors in the same way. Instead, it used a topic-led support model based on lectures, tutorials, shared resources and opportunities for clarification through drop-in sessions. This distinction was important for sustainability: the policy-oriented route reduced the intensity of individual supervision while still providing structured academic guidance. However, the model also required clear communication so that students understood that independent work within ECON3038 was supported through a different, topic-led structure rather than through one-to-one supervision. The available evaluation evidence did not directly measure students' perceptions of individual versus topic-led support, and this remains an area for future evaluation.

In assessment terms, ECON3036 functioned as the common foundation for both continuation pathways. Students were assessed on both the literature review and the research proposal, including the clarity, feasibility and academic grounding of their proposed project. The feedback, mark and academic guidance provided through ECON3036 helped students make an informed choice between the two Semester 2 routes. Students choosing ECON3037 completed a traditional empirical dissertation, assessed on the application of quantitative methods, data analysis, interpretation of results and contribution to an economics research question. Students choosing ECON3038 completed a policy-oriented dissertation, assessed on their ability to analyse an economic issue using relevant literature, secondary evidence, policy context and critical economic reasoning. In this way, the redesigned structure preserved the dissertation as

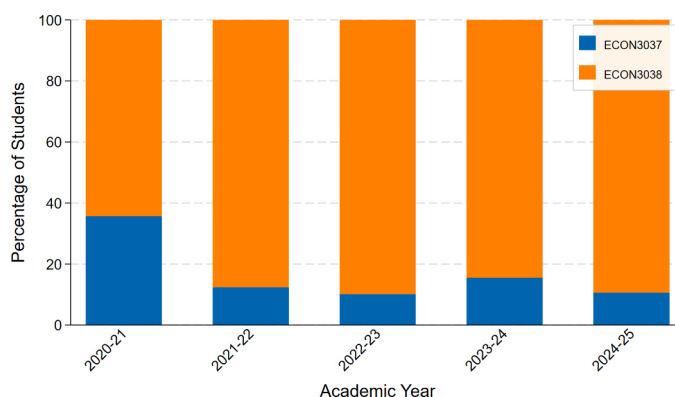


Fig. 1. Percentage of students enrolled in ECON3037 and ECON3038 by academic year, 2020-21 to 2024-25.

an independent final-year research project while allowing students to pursue a route better aligned with their preparation, interests and methodological confidence.

Each module was mapped against core programme learning outcomes, including critical analysis, data literacy, communication and self-management, to preserve alignment between assessment and graduate attributes. The redesign was also informed by consultation with staff and students, including discussions with Year 2 students and feedback gathered through surveys.

A fuller summary of the teaching structure, support model, student outputs and assessment for each of the three modules is provided in Appendix B, which condenses the relevant pedagogical content from the original module handbooks.

3.3. *Pathway uptake and student choice*

One immediate outcome of the redesign was a marked shift in student pathway choice. From 2020–2024, across annual cohorts of around 200 students, approximately 85% selected the policy-oriented route (ECON3038). This suggests strong demand for a dissertation option that reduced technical barriers without removing the opportunity for substantial research.

Student uptake across the two continuation pathways provides further evidence of how the redesigned structure operated in practice. As shown in Fig. 1, the policy-oriented pathway attracted the majority of students in every year after the redesign, with uptake increasing strongly after the first year of implementation.

This pattern indicates sustained demand for an alternative to the traditional empirical dissertation and supports the argument that the modular structure widened participation in dissertation work.

The increasingly uneven balance between the two pathways raises an important issue for future development. While the intention was to broaden student choice, the scale of uptake on ECON3038, consistently around 85% of the cohort, suggests that ECON3037 may, over time, have become more marginal than intended. This pattern warrants careful interpretation.

One possibility is that the distribution reflects genuine student preference: a large proportion of students in a methodologically diverse cohort simply found the policy-oriented route better aligned with their skills, interests, and career goals. On this reading, high uptake of ECON3038 is not a problem to be corrected but an accurate signal of the diversity within large undergraduate economics cohorts, precisely the diversity that motivated the redesign in the first place.

However, a second interpretation cannot be dismissed. If the policy-oriented pathway came to be perceived, whether through informal peer communication, module descriptions, or the way academic advisers framed the choice, as the lower-effort or lower-risk option, then the observed distribution may partly reflect risk-aversion rather than informed preference. This would be a concern not because students chose wrongly, but because the choice architecture may have inadvertently undermined the intended parity between pathways. Research on student decision-making in higher education suggests that when options are framed asymmetrically, students systematically gravitate towards the path that appears to offer less uncertainty, even when their preparation would support the more demanding route (Damgaard and Nielsen, 2018).

Departments adopting a similar model should therefore pay careful attention to how alternative pathways are described and promoted. Both routes should be presented as equally rigorous and equally valued, with clear communication that ECON3037 is the appropriate choice for students with strong quantitative preparation, not a prestige option reserved for the most confident, but a natural fit for a specific kind of research interest. This may require active framing in induction sessions, written guidance, and personal tutoring conversations, rather than leaving students to infer relative difficulty from module descriptions alone.

A further consideration concerns the long-term viability of the empirical pathway. If ECON3037 continues to attract only a small minority of students each year, departments will need to assess whether it remains sustainable and whether the supervision expertise it depends on is being maintained across the academic community. This does not necessarily mean that the two pathways should attract equal numbers of students. Rather, it suggests that route balance should be reviewed over time and that the empirical pathway should be clearly framed as the appropriate choice for students whose research questions require quantitative analysis and whose preparation supports that approach.

The redistribution across pathways also appears to have reduced supervision demands in Semester 2. Whereas almost all academic staff remained involved in dissertation supervision in Semester 1, only around 15% of the 40 staff members were required to supervise dissertations in Semester 2 under the revised structure.

3.4. *Structured support and research guidance*

The redesign was accompanied by a substantial expansion of structured academic support. A suite of digital resources was developed on the university's Virtual Learning Environment to complement face-to-face teaching and supervision. These included weekly task lists, automated reminders, exemplar dissertations, annotated articles, FAQs, recorded support sessions, and a streamlined ethics process. Together, these materials were designed to reduce uncertainty, support time management, and provide students with clearer guidance throughout the dissertation process. These shared VLE resources, reminders, exemplars, recorded support materials, ethics guidance and drop-in opportunities were available to students across both Semester 2 continuation pathways, rather than being restricted to the policy-oriented route.

This approach is consistent with economics education research showing that explicit support for disciplinary writing and communication can improve students' ability to express economic reasoning effectively (Schmeiser, 2017). Related work has also shown that writing for non-academic audiences can strengthen communication skills and broaden students' understanding of the relevance of economics beyond the classroom (Picault, 2021). Similar emphasis on public-facing communication is evident in recent economics capstone teaching, where activities designed for general audiences help students translate technical material into more

accessible forms (Marks et al., 2024).

The VLE was also used to support peer interaction. Earlier iterations of the dissertation support model included a more structured peer-support design, in which students were placed into online groups and encouraged to exchange questions, experiences and informal feedback on literature review development and research design. The original model also envisaged periodic monitoring by teaching assistants and optional group Q&A or drop-in sessions. In practice, staffing constraints limited the extent to which this could be sustained as a fully facilitated peer-support scheme. The peer-support element therefore evolved into a lighter VLE-enabled model, where students were grouped by supervisor or topic area and encouraged to identify peers working on related projects, share experiences, exchange informal feedback and support one another during the research and writing process.

Support was also strengthened through regular drop-in sessions run jointly by academics and teaching assistants. These sessions gave students accessible opportunities to discuss research design, progress, and writing, and helped sustain momentum across the cohort.

Targeted Stata training was introduced for students in both ECON3037 and ECON3038, ensuring broader access to core quantitative and data-handling skills. Delivered by specialist tutors and postgraduate teaching assistants, these sessions covered data management, descriptive statistics, and basic regression analysis. By embedding this training early in the semester, students were better able to interpret and present data regardless of their prior econometric background. This initiative supported the department's broader emphasis on research literacy and employability skills and aligns with evidence that structured skill development can strengthen engagement and research quality (Roberts and Seaman, 2018). It also reflects more recent work in economics teaching that treats data literacy as central to the undergraduate curriculum (Kassens, 2025) and supports active engagement with econometric reasoning through invention-based activities (McKee and Orlov, 2021).

To improve supervisory consistency, a mentoring programme for new supervisors was introduced alongside workshops on constructive feedback. These measures helped create greater uniformity in guidance and contributed to a more coherent research culture across the department.

3.5. Leadership, external engagement, and institutional recognition

The modular structure also depended on sustained academic coordination. Oversight by a Director of Dissertations helped maintain alignment across modules, support activities, and assessment practices. This role was important in preserving consistency, avoiding duplication of effort, and ensuring that student feedback informed ongoing refinement of the dissertation process. As Garrison and Vaughan (2012) argue, effective leadership in blended and modular learning environments depends on shared vision, pedagogical coherence, and sustainable innovation; these considerations were central to the operation of the redesigned dissertation model.

To connect dissertation work more directly with applied economics, guest lectures were made available to students across both continuation pathways, including sessions from economists at the Office for National Statistics, the International Labour Organization, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the World Bank and the European Commission. These sessions gave students insight into the policy relevance of economic research and exposed them to professional applications beyond the classroom. This emphasis on applied engagement is consistent with economics teaching practices that use interactive policy-focused activities to deepen student interest and participation (Logan, 2022). Related work also shows that public-facing economic writing and structured policy presentations can strengthen students' ability to communicate analysis in applied settings (Hall and Podemska-Mikluch, 2015; Gundersen and Kaminaga, 2022).

The impact of these interventions was reflected in stronger module evaluation results, positive student feedback, and institutional recognition. Module evaluation scores increased by around 20% across all categories compared with the years before the modular change, and in 2022 ECON3036 was nominated by students and shortlisted in the Best Learner Support Course category of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and Blackboard Awards. Student feedback highlighted the clarity, structure, and range of support resources. One student noted that “the wide range of resources available and the thought that has gone into this makes this module better

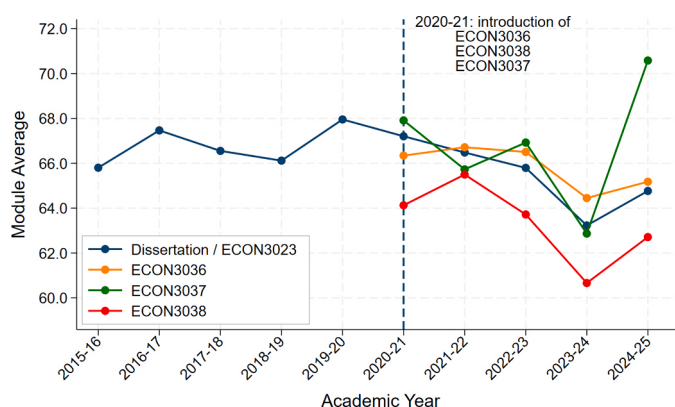


Fig. 2. Module averages by academic year before and after the introduction of the modular dissertation structure in 2020–21.

than others” and that the VLE site was clearly designed “to guide students to success.” Another emphasised the value of “a structured and detailed VLE site, with clearly labelled content,” including additional support for Excel and statistical software that contributed both to dissertation work and transferable skills. Judges’ comments likewise described the level of support as “excellent” and noted that the design helped ensure students were not left feeling “alone or unsupported.” Internal departmental feedback was also positive, with senior colleagues perceiving the redesign as contributing to improved NSS outcomes and a stronger overall student experience. This link is reported as anecdotal departmental reflection rather than as formal evidence of a direct causal relationship between the dissertation redesign and NSS performance.

3.6. Academic performance and pathway alignment

A second descriptive indicator concerns module performance before and after the redesign. Fig. 2 plots module averages across academic years under the earlier single-module dissertation structure and the subsequent modular pathway model.

Under the earlier single-module structure, average dissertation marks remained relatively stable in the mid-to-high 60s. Following the introduction of ECON3036, ECON3037 and ECON3038 in 2020–21, average performance across the new modular structure also remained broadly stable, although with some variation across modules and cohorts. ECON3036, the common foundation module, showed relatively consistent averages across the post-reform period. ECON3038 remained lower on average than ECON3036 and ECON3037, but its pattern was relatively consistent over time. ECON3037 displayed greater year-to-year variation, including a marked increase in 2024–25. This spike should be interpreted cautiously because ECON3037 had a smaller and more self-selecting cohort than the other modules; in 2024–25, the ECON3037 average was based on only 19 non-zero marks. The increase therefore appears more likely to reflect the composition of a particularly strong empirical-route cohort than a structural change in the pathway itself.

Taken descriptively, Fig. 2 suggests that the differentiated structure did not weaken academic standards. However, averages alone do not show whether the redesign affected different parts of the mark distribution in the same way. This caution is important because changes in assessment design can affect both grade distributions and how students experience assessment, meaning that mark patterns should not be interpreted as direct evidence of learning gains without further analysis (Stankov, 2024). To address this, Table 5 compares dissertation mark means and dispersion before and after the modular pathway redesign, both overall and by quartile.

More specifically, Table 5 reports two before-and-after comparisons: a focused two-year comparison around the redesign and a broader five-year comparison used to check whether the same distributional pattern is visible over a longer period. In the immediate two-year comparison, the overall mean remained virtually unchanged, moving from 67.0 before the reform to 66.9 after the reform. However, the overall standard deviation fell from 8.8 to 6.0, and this reduction in dispersion was statistically significant. This suggests that the redesign was not associated with weaker average performance in the immediate post-reform period, but it was associated with more consistent outcomes.

The quartile analysis provides further insight into the tails of the distribution. In the immediate post-reform period, the lower tail improved: the Q1 mean increased from 56.6 to 59.5, and this difference was statistically significant. At the same time, the Q1 standard deviation fell sharply from 11.1 to 5.1, with a statistically significant reduction in dispersion. This suggests that students in the lower part of the distribution performed better and with less variability after the redesign. The middle and upper quartiles show a different pattern. Q2, Q3 and Q4 means fell modestly, with statistically significant differences in means, while changes in dispersion were smaller and mostly not statistically significant. The five-year comparison supports a more cautious version of this interpretation. Although the overall mean was lower across the full post-reform period, the Q1 mean was maintained and Q1 dispersion reduced substantially. Over the same period, Q2, Q3 and Q4 means were lower, while dispersion increased slightly. Overall, the evidence suggests that the redesign was associated with improved lower-tail performance in the immediate post-reform period and greater consistency in lower-tail outcomes over the longer period, alongside some downward compression in the middle and upper parts of the distribution.

Table 6 explores what may have contributed to the reduction in dispersion by comparing marks across the post-reform modules. The most relevant comparison is between ECON3036, the common foundation module, and the two continuation pathways, ECON3037 and ECON3038. ECON3036 had the highest standard deviation in both the immediate two-year post-reform period and the full five-year post-reform period. Both continuation pathways had lower standard deviations than ECON3036. This pattern is consistent with the logic of the redesign: ECON3036 brought the full cohort together at the proposal-development stage, when students were still refining their research questions, methodological choices and project direction. Once students moved into differentiated continuation pathways, dispersion would be expected to narrow because students were following routes more closely aligned with their preparation, interests and intended dissertation format.

The reduction in dispersion is clearest in the comparison between ECON3036 and ECON3038. In the two-year comparison, the standard deviation was lower for ECON3038 than for ECON3036, at 7.0 compared with 11.0, and this difference was statistically significant. In the five-year comparison, the standard deviation fell from 9.6 to 7.7, and this difference was also statistically significant. ECON3037 also had lower dispersion than ECON3036 in both time periods, although these differences were not statistically significant, which may partly reflect the smaller number of students taking the empirical pathway.

Overall, the performance evidence suggests that the modular redesign was associated with greater consistency in dissertation outcomes. In the immediate post-reform period, average performance was maintained, overall dispersion fell, and the lower tail improved, with Q1 students achieving higher marks and less variation. Over the longer comparison, average marks were somewhat lower, but dispersion remained lower and Q1 performance was maintained. This suggests that the redesign reduced variability, particularly in the lower tail, while the middle and upper parts of the distribution show some downward compression.

However, the performance data should not be interpreted as evidence that one support model produced stronger outcomes than the other. The observed patterns may reflect pathway self-selection, differences in assessment format and cohort composition, as well as differences between individual supervision and topic-led support. The more cautious interpretation is that the redesigned structure maintained academic standards while improving pathway alignment and reducing the variability associated with a single common dissertation route.

The modular pathway structure was not introduced in isolation. It built on earlier changes to dissertation organisation and supervision that had already begun to address problems of allocation, coherence and student support.

3.7. Topic consolidation and thematic streamlining

An important earlier stage in the wider reform of dissertation provision involved the consolidation of dissertation topics and the strengthening of a topic-first supervision model. Before the later introduction of the modular pathway structure, the ECON3023 dissertation model offered students more than 40 highly specialised dissertation topics, often tied closely to individual staff research interests. Although this created wide choice, it also made supervision allocation increasingly difficult, especially as some niche topics attracted very few students while others became oversubscribed. As cohort sizes grew, the administrative burden of managing this highly individualised structure became increasingly difficult to sustain.

In response, dissertation topics were consolidated into around 20 broader themes aligned with staff expertise, including labour economics, international development, behavioural economics and public policy. These themes were identified through a department-wide poll, ensuring that staff interests remained represented while the overall structure became more manageable and accessible. In this sense, topic consolidation formed part of the broader reform of dissertation provision that later supported the modular pathway model. The subsequent ECON3036/ECON3037 topic list retained the principle of topic-first allocation and continued to organise dissertation choice around a more manageable set of broader themes. An illustrative ECON3036/ECON3037 topic list is provided in Table 4 in Appendix A, showing the breadth of research areas available within the empirical dissertation route. ECON3038 was introduced separately as a policy-oriented pathway, with its own guided research topics and support model. These ECON3038 topics varied by year and were organised around topic-led lectures, tutorials and structured resources rather than the broader empirical dissertation topic list.

This thematic model (see also Fig. 3) allows students to choose a topic area first and then be matched with a suitable supervisor. It therefore differs from the supervisor-first model used in some other departments, where students are expected to identify a supervisor and formulate a project around that person's interests. While such a model may suit highly confident or research-experienced students, it often works less well for others. Research in higher education supervision suggests that unstructured matching can disadvantage less experienced students and contribute to anxiety, inequity, and inconsistent supervision quality (Roberts and Seaman, 2018; Dautel, 2020).

Experience from dissertation committee work also highlighted these problems in practice. In some cases, students from other departments selected supervisors before they had identified a viable topic, which led to poorly defined proposals and mismatched expectations. In others, students identified a topic of interest but found that the relevant supervisor was unavailable or unable to supervise in that area, generating confusion and formal complaints. These experiences reinforced the value of a topic-first, theme-based allocation system that prioritised clarity, alignment, and equitable access to expertise.

The topic-first model provides a more transparent starting point for dissertation development. It makes it easier for students, regardless of confidence or prior experience, to identify a research area they can work within and to receive supervision from an

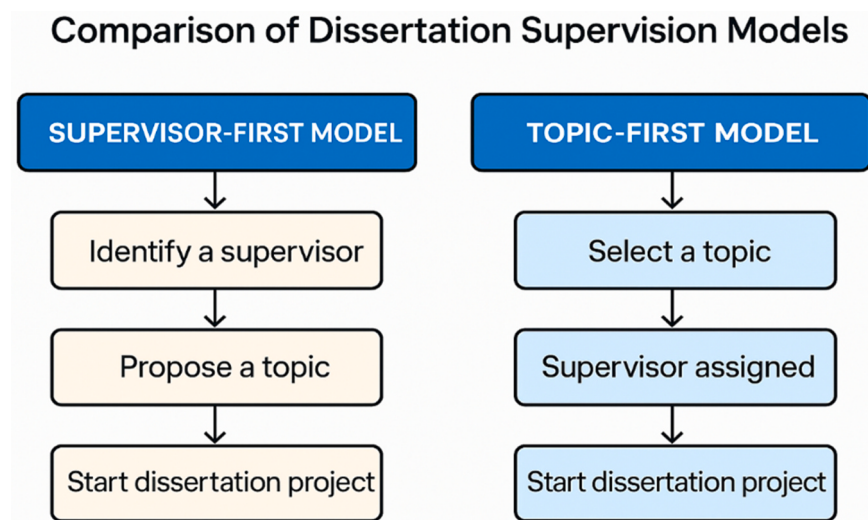


Fig. 3. Comparison of supervisor-first and topic-first dissertation allocation models.

appropriately matched academic. It also created opportunities for informal peer learning and shared support within thematic clusters, particularly through VLE groups organised by supervisor or topic area, although this remained a light-touch support mechanism rather than a formal peer-mentoring scheme. For staff, grouping students by theme creates economies of scale, allowing similar examples, resources, and feedback to be used across related dissertations. In this sense, topic consolidation was not simply an administrative adjustment. It was a pedagogically motivated change intended to reduce barriers, support inclusion, and create a more coherent dissertation experience.

4. Discussion

4.1. Interpretation of the modular model

This case study suggests that modular dissertation design can help economics departments address the persistent tension between student independence and the need for structured support. Undergraduate dissertations are often presented as a single model of independent research, but the evidence from this case indicates that a more differentiated structure may better reflect the diversity of student preparation, methodological confidence, and career orientation within large economics cohorts. In this sense, the value of modularity was not merely administrative. It created a way of preserving research-led learning while widening access to meaningful dissertation work.

A central implication of the case is that flexibility is most effective when combined with coherence. The redesigned structure did not simply expand student choice; it paired differentiated pathways with a common preparatory stage, shared expectations, and coordinated oversight. This combination appears to have been important in maintaining academic standards while reducing uncertainty for students and supervisors. The case therefore points to the importance of design coherence, not just route diversification, in curriculum reform. Rather than treating flexibility and consistency as competing goals, the model suggests that they can be mutually reinforcing when supported by clear programme architecture.

The case also highlights the pedagogical importance of recognising different forms of disciplinary inquiry within economics. In many departments, the dissertation is implicitly framed around an empirical model that assumes a particular level of quantitative confidence. The introduction of a policy-oriented route challenged that assumption by treating conceptual and policy analysis as a legitimate and rigorous form of upper-level economics work, rather than as a weaker alternative. This matters not only for inclusion, but also for the intellectual identity of the discipline. A broader conception of what counts as valuable economics research may allow more students to engage seriously with economic reasoning, evidence, and communication. This interpretation is consistent with economics education scholarship that supports both policy-focused capstone work and structured undergraduate research experiences (Gitter, 2021; Morreale and Shostya, 2021).

A second important implication concerns the role of scaffolding in sustaining student engagement. The case suggests that dissertation quality may depend less on complete individualisation and more on the availability of staged guidance, timely feedback, and opportunities for clarification. For students, especially those encountering extended independent research for the first time, the dissertation can be experienced less as an opportunity for intellectual autonomy than as a source of uncertainty and cognitive overload. The redesign addressed this by embedding support within the process rather than treating support as remedial or optional. In this respect, the model reinforces a broader lesson from the literature: independent learning is often strengthened, not weakened, by well-designed structure, including in economics teaching contexts where structured writing and staged research support improve student learning (Dynan and Cate, 2009; Greenlaw, 2003).

The topic-first allocation system also has broader significance beyond the practical matter of assigning supervisors. In this case, thematic clustering appears to have reduced ambiguity at the point where many students struggle most: moving from a broad interest to a workable research question. By organising supervision around themes rather than highly individualised projects from the outset, the department created a more transparent and accessible starting point for dissertation development. This appears particularly important in large-cohort settings, where overly personalised matching systems can generate inequities, uneven access to expertise, and unnecessary confusion. The case therefore suggests that allocation systems should be understood as part of dissertation pedagogy, not simply as administrative mechanisms.

From a staff perspective, the case points to a similar conclusion: the sustainability of dissertation teaching may depend not only on reducing workload, but on redesigning supervision in ways that create greater coherence across the programme. Topic consolidation, shared resources, and common points of coordination appear to have made supervision more manageable without removing academic autonomy. This is important because the undergraduate dissertation is often imagined as a highly individual activity for both student and supervisor. The case instead suggests that some degree of collective structure can support a better balance between disciplinary expertise, workload sustainability, and consistency of student experience.

The discussion also underlines the significance of academic leadership. In this case, the effectiveness of the modular model appears to have depended on sustained coordination across modules, supervisors, and support activities. This suggests that leadership in dissertation provision should not be viewed only as an administrative necessity. It is also a pedagogical condition for maintaining consistency, ensuring that student feedback informs practice, and preserving alignment across a complex capstone experience. For departments considering similar reforms, the presence of a clear coordinating role may be as important as the formal structure of the dissertation itself.

At the same time, the case should be interpreted with appropriate caution. The evidence presented here is drawn from one departmental context and from internal evaluative material rather than from a comparative or causal research design. The claims that can be made are therefore necessarily modest. The paper does not demonstrate that modularity will produce identical outcomes in all

settings, nor does it isolate the effects of any single element of the redesign. What it does provide is a grounded account of how modular dissertation pathways were implemented in one economics department and why they appear to have been experienced as beneficial by staff and students.

Taken together, these points suggest that dissertation reform in economics is most productive when framed not as a choice between rigour and accessibility, or between independence and support, but as a question of design. The case indicates that carefully structured modular pathways can preserve the academic value of the dissertation while making it more inclusive, more sustainable, and more adaptable to the realities of contemporary undergraduate education. In that sense, the main contribution of the model lies less in any single intervention than in the way structure, support, supervision, and leadership were brought into closer alignment.

4.2. Teaching implications for economics departments

This case study demonstrates that modular dissertation design can be implemented effectively through coordinated, evidence-based actions. Departments aiming to enhance student research, inclusivity, and supervision efficiency can adapt the approach through the following key steps:

1. Appoint an Experienced Director of Dissertations:

Designate a dedicated academic lead to oversee all dissertation modules. This helps sustain alignment across teaching teams, maintain quality assurance, and support a coherent student experience.

2. Run a Staff Themes Poll:

Consolidate dissertation topics into broader, inclusive themes aligned with department expertise. This fosters collaboration, balances workload, and improves the availability and clarity of topic options for students.

3. Adopt a Topic-First Allocation Model:

Allow students to select a theme first and then match them with a suitable supervisor. This approach promotes equity, improves student-supervisor fit, and reduces confusion during topic selection.

4. Introduce a Scaffolded Policy Dissertation Route:

Develop a guided, lecture-supported pathway for students pursuing policy-oriented projects. This structure supports those with limited econometric training while enhancing engagement through real-world relevance.

5. Simplify Processes and Maintain Engagement:

Implement regular nudges and reminders, streamlined ethics procedures, software training for all students, and open drop-in sessions to maintain steady progress and reduce administrative barriers.

Together, these steps provide a replicable framework for enhancing inclusivity, engagement, and research quality in undergraduate economics dissertations.

5. Conclusion

This paper has presented a practice-based case study of modular dissertation redesign in undergraduate economics. Its central argument is that dissertation innovation need not involve lowering expectations. Rather, it can involve creating structures that better align research-led learning with differences in student preparation, staff capacity, and programme goals. In this case, modular pathways, topic-first allocation, structured support, and coordinated academic leadership provided a way of combining inclusivity with disciplinary rigour.

The case also suggests that the undergraduate dissertation is best understood not simply as an individual research exercise, but as a curriculum design challenge. For large and diverse cohorts, the quality of the dissertation experience depends not only on student motivation or supervisor expertise, but also on the coherence of the wider framework in which research is developed, supported, and assessed. The model discussed here indicates that flexibility and structure need not be in tension. When carefully designed, they can reinforce one another and make dissertation teaching more accessible and sustainable.

The paper is limited to one departmental context and draws on internal evaluative evidence rather than comparative or causal analysis. Its claims should therefore be read as illustrative rather than universally predictive. Even so, the case offers a transferable framework for economics departments seeking to make dissertation supervision more coherent, inclusive, and manageable for staff and students alike. Future research could build on this by tracking student outcomes more systematically, comparing dissertation models across institutions, and examining more closely the relationship between dissertation design, student confidence, and employability.

Appendix A

Table 1

Programme composition and relative quantitative preparation of dissertation students, 2020–2026

Programme	Relative quantitative intensity	Pooled share 2020–2026	Average students per year
BSc Economics and Actuarial Science	Very high	4.9%	10.2
BSc Economics/ MEcon	High	42.8%	89.3
BSc Economics and Finance	High	29.8%	62.3
BSc Economics and Accounting	Moderate	6.7%	14.0
BSc Economics and Management Sciences	Moderate/Low	7.3%	15.3
BSc Politics and Economics	Lower	3.1%	6.5
BA Economics and Philosophy	Lower	2.1%	4.3
BA Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE)	Lower	3.3%	6.8
	Total	100%	208.8

Table 2

Programme composition and relative quantitative preparation of dissertation students: detailed at module level

Programme	Relative quantitative intensity	Required core or compulsory quantitative modules	Additional or pathway-dependent quantitative modules
BSc Economics and Actuarial Science	Very high	Mathematics for Economics; Quantitative Modelling in Economics; Statistics for Economics; Financial Mathematics; Statistical Theory 2; Econometrics with Big Data; Applied Microeconomics 2	Students select from a named actuarial set that includes Linear Algebra I; Stochastic Processes; Actuarial Mathematics I; Actuarial Mathematics II; Mathematical Finance; Statistical Methods in Insurance; Survival Models; Applied Econometrics; Labour Economics and Empirical Finance were also available as options.
BSc Economics/ MEcon	High	Mathematics for Economics; Statistics for Economics; plus one of Introduction to Econometrics / Statistical Theory 2 and one of Econometrics with Big Data / Methods of Econometrics	Quantitative Modelling in Economics; Applied Econometrics; Empirical Finance and Labour Economics were optional to all pathways.
BSc Economics and Finance	High	Mathematics for Economics; Statistics for Economics; Portfolio Theory and Financial Markets; Principles of Finance; Empirical Finance; plus one of Introduction to Econometrics / Statistical Theory 2 and one of Econometrics with Big Data / Methods of Econometrics	Further quantitative finance options included Empirical Finance and Futures and Options.
BSc Economics and Accounting	Moderate	Introduction to Mathematics for Economics or Mathematics for Economics; Statistics for Economics; Applied Econometrics or Applied Microeconomics 3	Introduction to Econometrics and Empirical Finance were available but not popular options.
BSc Economics and Management Sciences	Moderate/ Low	Introduction to Mathematics for Economics or Mathematics for Economics; Statistics for Economics; Principles and Practice of Management Science; Applied Microeconomics 2 and Applied Microeconomics 3	A small number of optional modules included quantitative topics.
BSc Politics and Economics	Lower	Introduction to Mathematics for Economics or Mathematics for Economics; Statistics for Economics; Applied Microeconomics 2 and Applied Microeconomics 3	Research Methods in the Social Sciences was available as an option.
BA Economics and Philosophy	Lower	Introduction to Mathematics for Economics or Mathematics for Economics; Statistics for Economics; Applied Microeconomics 3	Introduction to Econometrics; Methods of Econometrics; Applied Econometrics; Labour Economics and Empirical Finance were available but not popular options.
BA Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE)	Lower	Introduction to Mathematics for Economics or Mathematics for Economics; Statistics for Economics; Applied Microeconomics 3	Introduction to Econometrics; Methods of Econometrics; Applied Econometrics; Labour Economics and Empirical Finance were available but not popular options.

Table 3

Modular Dissertation Structure

(continued on next page)

Table 3 (continued)

Module Code	Semester	Focus Area	Key Features
Module Code	Semester	Focus Area	Key Features
ECON3036	Semester 1	Literature review and research question	Workshops, formative feedback, structured writing tasks
ECON3037	Semester 2	Empirical dissertation continuation	Individual supervision, econometric methods, primary/secondary data analysis
ECON3038	Semester 2	Policy-oriented dissertations with guided support	Topic-led lectures and tutorials, structured resources, policy relevance, secondary data

Table 4

Illustrative ECON3036/ECON3037 dissertation topics

Topic	Research area	Research topic
1	Macro-Labour Economics	Determinants and Consequences of Unemployment
2	Monetary Policy	Central Bank, Monetary Policy and the Banking Sector
3	Open Macro	Globalisation and Macroeconomic Interdependence
4	Macroeconomic Modelling	Policy Announcements and Structural Change
5	Housing	Modelling Housing Prices
6	Growth and Development	Debt, Growth and Fiscal Policy
7	Growth and Development	The Resource Curse
8	Economics of Well-being	Determinants of Subjective Well-being
9	Economic Theory / Applied Economics	Determinants and Consequences of Changing Risk Attitudes
10	Behavioural Economics	Household Finance
11	Industrial Organisation	Mergers and Acquisitions
12	Experimental Economics	Testing Economic Theory using Experiments
13	Health Economics	Health, Health Behaviours and Economic Outcomes
14	Migration	Rural-Urban Migration in China
15	Migration	Migration: Host or Source Country Perspective
16	Labour Economics	The Effects of Minimum Wages
17	Labour Economics	Gender Pay Gap and Discrimination in the Labour Market
18	Applied Economics and Education	Higher Education in the UK
19	Economics of Crime	Lessons from the Economics of Crime
20	Finance	Stock Market Valuations and Profitability
21	Finance / Macro	Optimal Portfolios
22	Applied Econometrics	Quantile Methods in Econometrics
23	Spatial Econometrics	Modelling Social and Spatial Networks

Table 5

Comparison of dissertation mark means and dispersion before and after the modular pathway redesign

Two-year comparison: 2018–19 and 2019–20 versus 2020–21 and 2021–22								
Variable	Pre N	Pre mean	Pre SD	Post N	Post mean	Post SD	Mean difference	SD difference
Overall	388	67	8.8	427	66.9	6	-0.2	-2.8***
Q1	98	56.6	11.1	108	59.5	5.1	2.9**	-6.0***
Q2	97	66.8	1.4	106	65.7	1.1	-1.1***	-0.3
Q3	96	70.1	1.3	106	68.6	1	-1.5***	-0.3
Q4	97	74.8	2.3	107	73.7	3.1	-1.1***	0.7
Five-year comparison: 2015–16 to 2019–20 versus 2020–21 to 2024–25								
Overall	942	66.8	8	962	65.5	6.3	-1.2***	-1.7**
Q1	237	57.2	9.2	243	57.9	5.2	0.7	-4.0***
Q2	235	66.1	1.5	239	64.3	2	-1.9***	0.5***
Q3	234	69.5	1.2	239	67.5	1.8	-2.1***	0.5***
Q4	236	74.3	2.4	241	72.6	3.2	-1.8***	0.7*

Notes: Difference = post-reform mean or SD minus pre-reform mean or SD. Differences are calculated from unrounded values. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Mean differences are tested using Welch t -tests. SD differences are tested using Brown-Forsythe tests. Results are descriptive rather than causal. Marks below or equal to 5 are excluded as final report non-submissions. Quartiles are calculated within academic year.

Table 6

Comparison of mark means and dispersion across ECON3036, ECON3037 and ECON3038

Comparison	Module 1 N	Module 1 mean	Module 1 SD	Module 2 N	Module 2 mean	Module 2 SD	Mean difference	SD difference
2020–21 to 2021–22								
ECON3036 vs ECON3037	443	66.5	11	100	67.4	7.5	0.9	-3.5
ECON3036 vs ECON3038	443	66.5	11	331	64.9	7	-1.6**	-4.0***
ECON3037 vs ECON3038	100	67.4	7.5	331	64.9	7	-2.5***	-0.5
2020–21 to 2024–25								
ECON3036 vs ECON3037	982	65.8	9.6	162	66.9	8.5	1.1	-1.1
ECON3036 vs ECON3038	982	65.8	9.6	815	63.3	7.7	-2.5***	-1.9***
ECON3037 vs ECON3038	162	66.9	8.5	815	63.3	7.7	-3.6***	-0.8*

Notes: Difference = Module 2 minus Module 1. Differences are calculated from unrounded values. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Mean differences are tested using Welch *t*-tests. SD differences are tested using Brown-Forsythe tests. These module-level comparisons are descriptive, as ECON3036 is the common foundation module and students then progress into one of the two continuation pathways. Marks below or equal to 5 are excluded (final report non-submissions).

Appendix B. Condensed Module Handbooks

B.1. ECON3036 Dissertation: Literature Review

B.1.1. Module overview

ECON3036 forms the first part of the Economics dissertation sequence. It is taken in Semester 1 and provides the common foundation for students who later progress to either ECON3037, the empirical research project route, or ECON3038, the guided research-topics route. The module introduces students to independent research in economics through literature searching, topic development, research-question formulation and critical evaluation of academic literature.

Students undertake a substantial piece of independent work by preparing a literature review on their chosen research topic. The module is intended to support students in moving from a broad area of interest to a focused, feasible and academically grounded research question.

B.1.2. Educational aims and learning outcomes

The main aim of ECON3036 is to convey the importance of research activity in economics and to provide guidance, supervision and support for students independently searching and reviewing the academic literature. By the end of the module, students are expected to demonstrate the ability to summarise, synthesise and, where appropriate, critically evaluate relevant academic literature in a coherent and focused way. They are also expected to identify and frame an economic research question and suggest an appropriate methodology for investigating it.

The module develops students' ability to retrieve, organise and present economic research, communicate logical arguments and quantitative reasoning in written form, select and access appropriate sources, and manage independent work over the semester.

B.1.3. Teaching, support and supervision

The module includes a structured programme of introductory, skills-based and developmental support. This includes an introduction to the dissertation, an introduction to ECON3036, library-skills teaching, data sessions, a session on how to write a literature review, tutorials on how to read an economics paper, and VLE-based support. Students are also expected to arrange an early meeting with their allocated supervisor to discuss their topic, research question and next steps.

Students are expected to use the Semester 1 timeline to develop a manageable topic, agree a research question and next steps with their supervisor, build a portfolio of papers for the literature review, complete the Library Skills Test, discuss the findings of their literature search where needed, and then finalise, write, review and submit the literature review.

B.1.4. Indicative timeline and milestones

Period	Main activities and milestones
Weeks 1–2	Introduction to the dissertation and ECON3036; Library Skills Session; initial topic orientation.
Weeks 3–4	Literature review session; tutorial on reading economics papers; data sessions; first supervisor meeting to discuss topic, research question and next steps.
Weeks 4–6	Build a portfolio of papers for the literature review; complete the Library Skills Test; begin developing the structure of the literature review.
Weeks 6–8	Discuss literature-search findings where needed; contact supervisor with an outline; second supervisor meeting if required.
Weeks 8–11	Finalise literature searching and begin writing the literature review.
Final submission point	Review, proofread and submit the ECON3036 Literature Review.

B.1.5. Topic choice and supervisor allocation

Each year, the department releases a list of dissertation topics in Semester 2 of Year 2. These topics cover a wide range of areas in economics, including applied microeconomics, microeconomic theory, macroeconomics, development, finance and industrial economics. Students select a topic through the online topic submission system. A supervisor is then allocated according to the chosen topic area.

This topic-first allocation process is intended to align student interests with staff expertise and to provide a clearer starting point for dissertation development. Supervisor allocations are normally final, although small deviations from the allocated topic may be possible with the agreement of the supervisor.

B.1.6. Student task and expected output

Students produce a literature review of up to 4000 words. The review should motivate the research topic, survey and critically review relevant academic literature, identify gaps in existing knowledge, and propose a research question and appropriate methodology for future research.

The recommended structure includes an introduction, the main literature review, a conclusion, bibliography and, where appropriate, appendices. The conclusion should move beyond summary by identifying a more specific research question and explaining how it could be investigated in the next stage of the dissertation sequence.

B.1.7. Assessment

The final mark for ECON3036 is made up of two components:

- Library Skills Test: 5%
- Literature Survey and Critical Evaluation: 95%, up to 4000 words

In the case of referral or repeat, students produce one piece of work: a Literature Review worth 100%, up to 4000 words.

B.2. ECON3037 Dissertation: Research Project

B.2.1. Module overview

ECON3037 forms the second part of the Economics dissertation sequence for students who choose the empirical research project route after ECON3036. It continues the work developed in ECON3036 and requires students to produce an independent piece of economic research on their chosen topic.

The module is designed for students who wish to work in depth on a single research topic using empirical, data-led economic analysis, normally involving data collection or data selection, econometric methods, regression analysis and interpretation of results.

B.2.2. Educational aims and learning outcomes

The main aim of ECON3037 is to convey the importance of research activity in extending knowledge in economics and to provide guidance, supervision and support for students undertaking an independent research-focused project. Students are expected to motivate an economic problem, select relevant arguments and techniques, apply them to the chosen problem, and draw supported and balanced conclusions from the analysis.

The module develops students' ability to apply economic theory and economic reasoning to applied questions, retrieve and analyse economic data, use quantitative reasoning and statistical inference, communicate logical arguments in research-report form, and work independently to a deadline.

B.2.3. Teaching, support and supervision

ECON3037 is an individually supervised project. Students are allocated a supervisor with relevant expertise in their topic area. There is academic continuity between ECON3036 and ECON3037, although this does not necessarily require continuity of supervisor. The supervisor may be the same person as in ECON3036 or another colleague familiar with the topic area, depending on availability.

Once the supervisor allocation is confirmed, students arrange a meeting to discuss their ECON3036 feedback and the next steps of the dissertation. This meeting provides an opportunity to refine the research question, consider the econometric model or analytical approach, identify suitable data and, where needed, prepare for ethics approval.

In addition to individual supervision, students receive general guidance on how to conduct an empirical research project through lectures and supportive sessions. The module also includes an ECON3037 introduction, Stata lab sessions, software help sessions, ethics guidance and VLE-based support.

Students are expected to use the Semester 2 timeline to review their ECON3036 feedback, agree the research question and next steps with their supervisor, refine the methodology and data strategy, complete the ethics process where required, undertake data collection or data analysis, discuss emerging findings and interpretation with their supervisor where needed, and then finalise, write, review and submit the Research Project.

B.2.4. Indicative timeline and milestones in ECON3037

Period	Main activities and milestones
Week 1	ECON3037 introduction; students review feedback from ECON3036.
Weeks 2–3	Stata lab sessions; students begin refining data, methods and empirical strategy.
Weeks 3–4	First supervisor meeting to review ECON3036 feedback, research question, econometric model and data.
Weeks 4–7	Data collection, cleaning and analysis; software help sessions; ERGO approval where required.
Weeks 7–9	Write up results and interpretation; second supervisor meeting to discuss findings where appropriate.
Weeks 9–12	Write up discussion, conclusions and policy/practice implications; complete abstract and introduction; review, proofread and submit the Research Project.

B.2.5. Research question, data and ethics

ECON3036 and ECON3037 are independent modules. Students may therefore update the research question, methodology or data strategy proposed in ECON3036, although they are advised to discuss any substantial changes with their allocated supervisor.

Students working with data must complete the relevant ethics process before beginning the empirical part of the dissertation. Ethics approval is required where students use individual or household level secondary data, primary data, surveys, interviews, focus groups, experiments or other data requiring ethical review.

B.2.6. Student task and expected output

Students produce one independent Research Project of up to 4000 words. The project is the empirical part of the dissertation and should develop an economic analysis supported by appropriate evidence.

The recommended structure includes an abstract, introduction, literature review, theoretical or economic model where appropriate, data section, empirical methods, results, discussion or conclusion, bibliography and appendices. The literature review in ECON3037 should normally be shorter and more focused than the ECON3036 literature review, because the main emphasis of ECON3037 is the student's own analysis.

B.2.7. Assessment

The final mark for ECON3037 is based on one component:

- Research Project: 100%, up to 4000 words

In the case of referral, students produce one Research Project worth 100%, up to 4000 words.

B.3. ECON3038 Dissertation: Research Topics

B.3.1. Module overview

ECON3038 forms the second part of the Economics dissertation sequence for students who choose the guided research-topics route after ECON3036. It provides an alternative to the individually supervised empirical research project in ECON3037.

Students cannot take both ECON3037 and ECON3038. ECON3038 is designed for students who prefer to work on a range of set topics and produce concise reports addressing specific economic or policy questions. Students complete two pieces of economic research, each up to 2000 words.

B.3.2. Educational aims and learning outcomes

The main aim of ECON3038 is to convey the importance of research activity in extending knowledge in economics and to provide guidance and support for students undertaking independent research-focused work. Students are expected to motivate an economic problem, select relevant arguments and techniques, apply them to the chosen problem, and draw supported and balanced conclusions from the available evidence.

The module develops students' ability to apply economic theory and sophisticated economic reasoning to applied topics or questions, retrieve and analyse economic data, use quantitative reasoning and statistical or logical inference, work independently to deadlines, and communicate logical economic arguments in research-report form.

B.3.3. Teaching and support model

ECON3038 projects are not individually supervised. Students do not have an individual dissertation supervisor. Instead, their work is guided through lectures, tutorials and supportive sessions for each topic. These sessions introduce the research area, relevant literature, methodology, economic or econometric model where applicable, research question, data and tools needed for the report.

The module includes an ECON3038 introduction, lectures for Topic 1 and Topic 2, tutorials for each topic, Stata lab sessions, ethics guidance and VLE-based support. Some sessions are delivered face-to-face and others are made available online or asynchronously.

Students are expected to use the Semester 2 timeline to engage with the Topic 1 and Topic 2 lectures, tutorials and supporting materials, select one topic from each topic-choice set, complete the ethics process where required, use the relevant data, literature and topic-specific guidance, develop two concise research reports, and then finalise, review and submit Research Topic 1 and Research Topic 2.

B.3.4. Indicative timeline and milestones

Period	Main activities and milestones
Week 1	ECON3038 introduction; introduction to Topic 1 lectures, research expectations and report requirements.
Weeks 2–3	Further Topic 1 lectures, tutorials and Stata lab support; students select Research Topic 1 and begin working with the relevant literature, data and topic-specific materials.
Weeks 4–6	Complete ERGO approval where required; analyse the relevant data or evidence; develop, finalise and submit Research Topic 1.
Weeks 7–8	Introduction to Topic 2; Topic 2 lectures and tutorials; students select Research Topic 2 and begin developing the second report.
Weeks 9–12	Continue Topic 2 research, analysis and writing; finalise, review and submit Research Topic 2.

B.3.5. Topic choice

Students choose one topic from Topic Choice 1 and one topic from Topic Choice 2. The available topics may vary by year. Examples of Topic Choice 1 include Determinants of Growth, Economics of Crime, Returns to Education and Modelling House Prices. Examples of Topic Choice 2 include Experimental Impact Evaluations of Economic Policies, The Economics of Digital Platforms, Migration, and Unemployment Theories: Evidence and Policy.

For each topic, students are provided with topic-specific materials and guidance. Students may be given a research question for the report, although they may also choose their own research question where appropriate, after consulting the Topic Lead.

B.3.6. Student task and expected output

Students produce two concise research reports rather than one longer dissertation. Both reports are policy-oriented and require students to apply economic reasoning to real-world economic questions. Research Topic 1 is more empirically focused and normally requires students to work with data, apply quantitative reasoning and present evidence-based analysis. Research Topic 2 is more conceptual, theoretical or case-study based, requiring students to evaluate an economic issue, compare arguments and draw balanced conclusions from available evidence.

For Research Topic 1, students analyse data and compose a short report; the data differ by topic and are provided to students, with tutorial support on how to analyse them. For Research Topic 2, students focus more on economic reasoning and policy analysis, often evaluating an economic issue from different perspectives.

Students are expected to use feedback on Research Topic 1 to inform their approach to Research Topic 2, particularly by addressing common issues in structure, argument, evidence use, referencing, presentation of analysis and clarity of conclusions.

The recommended report structure includes an optional executive summary, introduction, literature review, economic analysis, results, discussion or conclusion, bibliography and appendices. Reports should be analytical rather than descriptive. Students are expected to avoid unsupported speculation and to support arguments with evidence and references.

Ethics

Students working with data must complete the relevant ethics process before beginning any empirical analysis. Where a topic uses individual-level, household-level or otherwise sensitive data, students are required to complete the appropriate ERGO form and submit evidence of approval as instructed through the VLE. Topic Leads provide guidance on whether ethics approval is required for each report.

Assessment

The final mark for ECON3038 is made up of two components:

- Research Topic 1: 50%, up to 2000 words
- Research Topic 2: 50%, up to 2000 words

In the case of referral, students produce two pieces of work: Research Topic 1 worth 50%, up to 2000 words, and Research Topic 2 worth 50%, up to 2000 words. Students cannot update their topic choices for the referral assessment.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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