

Chairs of Applied Economics and Economic Theory¹

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I wrote this little note in December last year, originally as an introduction to a paper in honour of David Newbery, Professor of Applied Economics at the University of Cambridge.³ Applied Economics is of particular interest to me because that was the title I chose for my own Chair at Aston University. I have not sought to determine what Applied Economics means.⁴ But it is not a common title.

I began the paper with a reference to a concern expressed by Coase, that mainstream economics is stronger on theory than on facts. Writing the paper prompted me to investigate how many other Professors of Applied Economics there are or have been in the UK, how this compares with Professors of Economic Theory, and whether appointments to chairs seem consistent with Coase's concern.

So far, I have come up with the lists of chairs set out in Tables 1 and 2.⁵ Several aspects of these lists are interesting. First, they are rather short lists. There have been only 19 Professors of Applied Economics in the UK (20 appointments), and 15 Professors of Economic Theory (16 appointments), compared to presumably hundreds of Professors of Economics or of other branches of economics.⁶

Second, Professors of Applied Economics and of Economic Theory are relatively modern concepts in the UK. The earliest known appointments were in 1948 and 1949.⁷ Chronologically, David Newbery appointed in 1988 is almost the median professor of Applied Economics, and the median appointment in Economic Theory falls between 1982 and 1990. Half the appointments have thus been in the last two decades. Half the appointees in Applied Economics and nearly half of those in Economic Theory are still in post.

¹ Presented at a Conference in Honour of the 65th Birthday of Professor David M G Newbery, Cambridge, 13 September 2008.

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³ "Some applied economics of utility regulation", *Energy Journal Special Issue*, 29 (?), September, 2008.

⁴ Those interested in that question are referred to the splendid paper by Roger E Backhouse and Jeff Biddle, "The Concept of Applied Economics: A History of Ambiguity and Multiple Meanings", *History of Political Economy*, Supplement, 32, 2000. (Also published as *The History of Applied Economics*, edited by Roger E. Backhouse and Jeff Biddle, Durham NC: Duke University Press.)

⁵ The dates refer to periods of employment. Some of the professors in the tables (e.g. Thirlwall, Godley, Kennedy and Black) subsequently became Emeritus or Honorary Professors of Applied Economics or Economic Theory. The table does not include Emeritus or Honorary Professors who were not employed under the title (e.g. Subrata Ghatak, Emeritus Professor of Applied Economics at Kingston University, London, since 2005, having previously been Professor of Economics there).

⁶ I have not attempted to count the number of Professors of Economics or related titles, but I note that in two of the larger Economics departments (Oxford and LSE) the number of Professors of Economics (34) is presently about twice the combined numbers of all other titles involving the term Economic(s) (18).

⁷ Joseph Johnston had been appointed earlier (1939 – 1972) at Trinity College, Dublin. I am grateful to Keith Tribe for this information, and for suggesting several other early names including for Economics generally.

Table 1 Professors of Applied Economics in the UK

Date	Name	University
1948-1959	Ely Devons	Manchester
1951-1961	Alexander K Cairncross	Glasgow
1952-1959	Charles F Carter	Queen's, Belfast
1966-1975	Arthur Beacham	Liverpool
1972-1975	Stephen C Littlechild	Aston
1976-2004	Anthony P Thirlwall	Kent
1976-1997	A Patrick Minford	Liverpool
1980-1994	Wynne A H Godley	Cambridge
1985 to date	Ron Smith	Birkbeck, London
1987 to date	Vani K Borooah	Ulster
1988 to date	David M G Newbery	Cambridge
1989-1996	Kenneth Button	Loughborough
1990 to date	Christopher Heady	Bath
1991-1994	Stephen P Jenkins	Swansea
1992 to date	Peter Gripaos	Plymouth
1997 to date	A Patrick Minford	Cardiff
2001 to date	Peter R Midmore	Aberystwyth
2002 to date	Geoff Meen	Reading
2004 to date	Richard I Harris	Glasgow
2006 to date	Kathryn Graddy	Oxford

This contrasts with more established titles. There had already been nine Drummond Professors of Political Economy at Oxford by 1945, and at least seven Professors of Political Economy elsewhere by 1938.⁸ The earliest such Professor (Malthus at East India College, Haileybury) was appointed in 1805. Professors of Economics were on the scene by 1891 (Cunningham at Kings College, London), with at least eight appointed by 1939.⁹

Despite these similarities in numbers and timing, there are two quite striking differences between the two lists. Chairs of Applied Economics are spread throughout the geographical regions of the UK whereas Chairs of Economic Theory are not. Seven of the 20 appointments in Applied Economics – over one third of the total - are in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. This compares to one sixth (16.2 percent) of the UK's total population in those countries in 2006. So the chance of finding a Professor of Applied Economics in those regions is more than twice what it is in England. In contrast, not one of the 16 appointments in Economic Theory is located outside of England.

⁸ Drummond Professors: Senior, Whately, Lloyd, Merivale, Rogers, Price, Edgeworth, Macgregor and Henderson. Professors of Political Economy elsewhere include Malthus, McCulloch, Fawcett, Marshall, Pigou, Clay, Hicks. The latter are taken from Mark Blaug (ed.) *Who's Who in Economics*, 3rd edition, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 1999, but no doubt there are other such Professors.

⁹ Cunningham, Clapham, Jevons, Robbins, Robertson, Paish, Robinson (EAG), Meredith.

Table 2 Professors of Economic Theory in the UK

Date	Name	University
1949-1950	Alexander Henderson	Manchester
1956-1959	Harry G Johnson	Manchester
1962-1982	Ivor Pearce	Southampton
1966-1970	Charles Kennedy	Kent
1967-1984	John Black	Exeter
1972-1974	Syed Ahmad	Kent
1974-1988	Alessandro Cigno	Hull
1982-1987	Kevin W S Roberts	Warwick
1990 to date	John H H Moore	LSE
1993-2003	Daniel J Seidman	Newcastle
1997-2000	Walter Bossert	Nottingham
1999 to date	Paul Madden	Manchester
2000 to date	Richard Cornes	Nottingham
2003 to date	Daniel J Seidman	Nottingham
2005 to date	Roger Hartley	Manchester
2006 to date	John K-H Quah	Oxford

There is also notable variation within England. Table 3 shows that Chairs of Applied Economics and of Economic Theory are both to be found in London University colleges and in the early (civic) 'Red Brick' universities, which together account for about one third (31%) of the appointments in both cases. Chairs of Economic Theory are much more prevalent in the later 'Red Brick' universities (44% compared to 8%). Chairs of Applied Economics are more frequently located in the 'Plate Glass' and even 'Newer' universities (31% and 8% compared to 19% and zero) but also, perhaps surprisingly, at Oxbridge (23% compared to 6%).¹⁰

Table 3 Comparisons

Type of English University	Professors of Applied Economics		Professors of Economic Theory	
	Number	%	Number	%
Oxbridge	3	23	1	6
London	1	8	1	6
Civic Red Brick	3	23	4	25
Later Red Brick	1	8	7	44
Plate Glass	4	31	3	19
Newer	1	8	0	0
Total	13	100	16	100
Russell Group				
Total period	10/20	50%	12	75%
Today	4/10	40%	6/6	100%

¹⁰ Civic Red Brick universities include Manchester and Liverpool; Later Red Brick include Exeter, Hull, Newcastle, Nottingham, Reading and Southampton; Plate Glass include Aston, Bath, Kent, Loughborough; Newer include Plymouth.

Since universities may vary considerably within these categories, consider finally the relationship to the Russell Group, “an association of 20 major research-oriented universities of the UK” formed in 1994.¹¹ This Group accounts for the major share of UK high quality research.¹² Half (10/20) of the Chairs of Applied Economics are at universities belonging to the Russell Group, compared to three quarters (12/16) of the Chairs of Economic Theory.

Interestingly, this comparison has changed over time. For those appointees no longer in place, in both cases 6 out of 10 were from universities now in the Russell Group. But if the test is applied to those in post today, the comparison is stark: 40 per cent (4/10) of the Chairs of Applied Economics compared to 100 per cent (6/6) of the Chairs of Economic Theory.

Applied economics and economic theory are thus both relatively recent innovations as titles of Chairs. It would seem that the established economics profession in England has been more attracted to economic theory, while the provinces and outlying countries and newer universities of the UK, plus Oxbridge, have provided more fertile and welcoming ground for applied economics. At one time, high quality research resources seem to have been directed to both areas about equally; now, they tend to favour economic theory relative to applied economics.

These data are of course very limited and merely suggestive. Nonetheless, they tend to support Coase’s concern that mainstream economics is stronger on theory than on facts. And lead us to encourage the appointment of more Professors of Applied Economics in leading universities tomorrow.

¹¹ Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Imperial (London), King’s (London), Leeds, Liverpool, LSE, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Queen’s (Belfast), Oxford, Sheffield, Southampton, University (London), Warwick. <http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk>

¹² “In 2004/5, Russell Group Universities accounted for 65% (over £1.8billion) of UK Universities’ research grant and contract income, 56% of all doctorates awarded in the United Kingdom.... In the 2001 national Research Assessment Exercise, 78% of the staff in Grade 5* departments and 57% of the staff in Grade 5 departments were located in Russell Group Universities.” Ibid.