

Designing and Implementing Literacy-Targeted Principles Courses: Lessons from Simon Fraser University*

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1 Introduction

Calls for economic literacy as the central goal of introductory economics have grown steadily over the past two decades (Salemi, 2005; Hansen, Salemi and Siegfried, 2002; Cohen, 2024). This work emphasizes that most students who take principles courses are non-majors, and that the traditional coverage-heavy principles course—structured around a long list of theory chapters—often does not equip them to apply economic reasoning in civic, professional, or personal contexts. Cohen (2024) articulates a “literacy-targeted” (LT) approach, which re-frames introductory economics around the competencies students should be able to demonstrate, rather than around preparing future majors for intermediate theory. Empirical evidence suggests that LT principles courses can increase student engagement, broaden participation, and improve perceived relevance (Bayer et al., 2020). In a quantitative study, Benjamin, Cohen and Hamilton (2020) further show that students from LT pathways perform comparably in subsequent economics courses and that LT structures can diversify who continues in the discipline, including increased female participation. While longer-term institutional effects remain under-explored, we believe that the evidence base for LT pedagogy has strengthened substantially. Against this backdrop, the SFU experience provides an extended institutional case study of how literacy-targeted principles courses can be envisioned, approved, implemented, and integrated into a department’s curriculum.

The chapter proceeds as follows. We first describe the history of the LT-initiative at SFU in Section 2, considering both early unsuccessful attempts and the institutional and political conditions that ultimately

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enabled adoption. Next, Section 3 presents design and structure of our LT courses, including learning objectives, core content, and assessment strategies. The last Section 4 presents data on enrolments, student composition, and performance, drawing on three years of experience with both LT and traditional principles pathways to examine who the LT courses serve and how students fare within and beyond them.

2 History and Implementation of Literacy-Targeted Principles Courses at SFU (2016–2025)

Rationale and Early History (2016–2020)

Before the introduction of our LT courses, the two Economics principles courses regularly offered at SFU,¹ Econ 103 “Principles of Microeconomics” and Econ 105 “Principles of Macroeconomics”, served dual roles. On the one hand, the Econ 103/105 sequence provides a foundation for students who intend to pursue a major in Economics. Both courses are required, with a minimum grade of C-, for students to be able to enrol in our gatekeeper course Econ 201 “Intermediate Microeconomic Theory I”, which has to be completed in order to declare the Economic Major. On the other hand, the Principles courses were intended to deliver basic economic insights and knowledge to students in other disciplines: with a ‘breadth’ designation, the courses have traditionally been popular among non-majors from all faculties who seek to fulfill general SFU credit requirements. These goals not necessarily well aligned. In particular, since instructors wanted to ensure that intended majors receive adequate preparation for the comparatively analytical intermediate theory courses, they typically covered a long list of concepts (including such complex ones as income/substitution effects, elasticity, dead-weight loss, average vs marginal short-term/long term cost curves etc.), deferring the discussion of applications until later. As additional hurdle, students frequently had to use a variety of mathematical skills to be able to follow the course.

Students who enrolled in Econ 103 and Econ 105 traditionally came from three primary sources: first, high school graduates who were admitted into the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, about half of which were intended Economics majors for whom the courses were compulsory. Second, high school graduates who were admitted to the Beedie School of Business and for whom both courses were required for the Bachelor in Business Administration (BBA) degree. Third, high school graduates who were admitted through the faculty of applied sciences. About half of these students would be engineering degree, which had Econ 103 as a requirement. Together, those groups made up over 80 percent of the student body with BBA intended majors representing the bulk of enrolment with around 40 percent of the total (see Table 1). Put differently, about 60% of students enrolled in the introductory economics courses because they were required for their degree. It is plausible that the lack of greater appeal was in part caused by

¹SFU uses a trimester system with three main academic terms: Fall (Sept-Dec), Spring (Jan-Apr), and Summer (May-Aug), allowing students to study year-round. Both courses were historically offered in all three terms, with at least 2 sections of each during the busier Fall and Spring term. Since 2020/2021, however, SFU experienced declining international enrolments and by 2024/2025, demand for Econ 103/05 had deteriorated to the point where only one section per term has been offered on a regular basis.

the the chapter-based delivery structure and the perceived heavy quantitative emphasis.

The recognition of the lack of appeal and barriers to entry of the current Principles courses motivated the department’s first exploration of a literacy-targeted approach in 2016. At the same time, faculty discussions on the matter raised the issue of what topics should – and should not – be covered in more literacy-oriented Principles courses, keeping in mind that these courses would ordinarily not be a steppingstone into the Major, but rather the only economics course students would ever take. The central question here was one echoed later in Cohen (2023): What do we want students to be able to do with economics after a principles course? Kessler, who at the time was the Chair of the Undergraduate Economics Program, made a first attempt to address these issues with a proposal for two new, literacy-oriented Principles courses targeted at students for whom economics principles courses were not a requisite for their Major. Those courses, with proposed course numbers Econ 123 and Econ 124, would be offered in addition to Econ 103 and Econ 105 and would be organized around a “small core” of durable economic concepts, emphasizing application, writing, and real-world reasoning rather than technical model manipulation. The internal rationale described goals consistent with the broader LT literature: improving economic literacy, broadening participation, diversifying who studies economics. Importantly, however, structure and design of those courses would also align well with SFU’s overall educational goals and emerging national discussions about competencies. Last but not least, the proposal that was brought forward included the possibility of Econ 123/125 opening up a meaningful non-quantitative alternative to the designated 103/105 pathway into the Major via a minimum grade (A-) requirement. The University of Toronto’s experience with a similar literacy-focused sequence provided external validation [reference] for this additional consideration.

Somewhat unexpectedly at the time, the proposal encountered strong and ultimately insurmountable internal resistance from a small but critical stakeholder group, namely those instructors currently teaching Econ 103 and Econ 105. The primary concern raised were that Econ 123/125 duplicated existing course content and, as a result, would not constitute a clear alternative to the current principles courses. Faculty members were also worried that in the “watered down” versions of the Principles courses, economic thinking could not be developed to the same extent and that the envisioned alternative pathway into the Economics Major would lower standards, posing a threat to the rigour and quality of our undergraduate degree.

When the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee met in October 2016 to approve the proposed new courses, the motioned failed. While a many other members of the economics faculty supported the proposal, the majority of members of the undergraduate curriculum committee majority sided with the view that the risks to rigor and departmental identity outweighed the benefits. The lesson to be learned here is that the early attempt stalled because the department lacked consensus about the purpose of introductory economics and because the institutional environment did not yet create the incentives needed to make reform urgent or desirable. Between 2016 and 2020, the initiative remained dormant. The core concerns—limited accessibility, narrow enrolment demographics, and misalignment between learning outcomes and student needs—persisted. But without external catalysts or internal alignment,

no structural changes were made. The stage was set, however, for renewed momentum when institutional pressures, a decline in student enrollment, and curricular needs converged several years later.

Momentum and Implementation (2020–2022)

The revival of literacy-targeted principles courses at SFU emerged during a period of significant institutional change. In 2020–21, the Beedie School of Business began revising its undergraduate curriculum. One critical goal of the reform was to introduce new compulsory courses that modernized the School’s programs and concentrations. The need to make room for new courses meant that required credits would have to be reduced elsewhere, and our principles courses – mandatory for BBA students – presented obvious candidates. Early drafts of the reform proposed dropping ECON 105 entirely as a requirement for Business students, which would have posed a direct threat to the Economics Department’s funding, which is connected to its annual full-time equivalent (AFTE) enrolment: internal projections estimated the loss of up to 550 student seats annually. This external pressure shifted the strategic landscape for introducing literacy-based Principles courses. What had been framed as a mostly pedagogical innovation in 2016 could now be re-framed as a necessary institutional solution— one that aligned Economics with Beedie’s credit structure while safeguarding departmental enrolment and maintaining an accessible path for Business students to engage with economics.

In Fall 2021, the department introduced a proposal for ECON 113 (Introduction to Microeconomics) and ECON 115 (Introduction of Macroeconomics). Although the internal course outlines retained the conceptual DNA of the 2016 literacy-targeted vision—fewer concepts, real-world engagement, emphasis on usable understanding—the rationale presented to the department now explicitly depicted the new courses as a collaborative solution to Beedie’s restructuring and emphasized how the new courses would respond to the pressure reduce required credits while at the same time preserving both Microeconomics and Macroeconomics requirements for Business students. As such, significant enrollment loss would likely be avoided, despite reducing the number of credits from 4 in Econ 103 or Econ 105 to now 3 credits per course. While the original motivating factors – improving economic literacy, broadening participation, diversifying who studies economics – were still relevant, in internal discussions they took a backseat to the threat of losing significant enrollment as result of Beedie’s curriculum reform during a time where overall enrollment was already on the decline [see table]. As before, the proposal also envisioned the courses as alternative pathways into the Economics major; this was seen as important because historically, a small number of high-performing Business students would switch over to Economics over the course of their studies and the department did not want to block that pathway.

This strategic re-framing proved critical. When ECON 113 and 115 were presented to the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee on November 29, 2021, the discussion was procedural and supportive, a stark contrast to the contentious 2016 meeting. The motion passed and by early 2022, Senate approval was secured. Outside of the department, the rationale in support of the new courses highlighted the benefits of literacy-targeted, non-quantitative economics courses to students who are not intending to major in Economics through learning core concepts while at same time focusing more intuitive reasoning critical

for day-to-day economic decisions. The course description in the university calendar explicitly states [emphasis added] “Focused on basic competencies in [...] economics, this course is suitable for business and other students not intending to specialize in economics.”

The Beedie School of Business simultaneously implemented their much broader curriculum reform, which now contained the provision that Business students could take either Econ 103 (respectively, Econ 105) or Econ 113 (respectively, Econ 115) to fulfill the requirement for the BBA degree. Further, for program requirements outside of the BBA, notably Economics, students who took Econ 113 or Econ 115 and received a grade A- or higher on their first attempt could have the respective course counted as equivalent to the corresponding regular principles course Econ 103 or Econ 105. The non-Major courses were first offered in the Fall of 2022. Not surprisingly, given that non-Econ Major students now had a lower cost, 3-credit, alternative to 4-credit original version of the Principles courses to fulfill their degree requirements, enrolments were strong from the outset: 82 students in ECON 113 and 83 in ECON 115, numbers comparable to established introductory courses despite limited prior publicity. In Section 2 below, we document the time trends in student enrolment and composition of student body in both courses in more detail and compare the corresponding trends in Econ 103 and Econ 105 over the same time period.

Embedding LT Courses Into the Curriculum (2022–2025)

As Econ 113 and 115 were launched, the department began the work of negotiating how these courses would relate to the broader curriculum. Key questions included transferability, substitution rules, access to 200-level electives, advising, college transfer credits, and progression. To address concerns about comparability with the traditional pathway and pre-empt possible student attempts to systematically use the LT courses for their Econ major requirements, the department initially retained the A- threshold on the first attempt if students wanted the courses to count toward entry requirements into the Major, notably as a prerequisite to our gatekeeper course Econ 201 (Intermediate Microeconomic Theory I).

After their successful roll-out, ECON 113 and 115 were quickly embedded into all Economics programs through coordinated curriculum modifications. The Economics Major, Minor, Extended Minor, the Business–Economics Joint Major, and the Political Science–Economics Joint Major all incorporated Econ 113 and 115 as introductory options, initially keeping the A- substitution rule to maintain standards while broadening access. This structural integration enabled a dual-pathway model: a quantitative traditional entry with Econ 103 and Econ 105, alongside the new literacy-targeted entry with Econ 113 and Econ 115 with a grade threshold. Both routes led to the same intermediate core in the Economics Major, reinforcing that LT principles courses were distinct but legitimate pathway into the discipline. As enrolments grew, the department monitored performance and outcomes. Early evidence suggested that students who earned A- or higher in Econ 113 or 115 performed comparably in intermediate theory to who had taken Econ 103 or Econ 105, respectively, easing existing concerns. The revisions in faculty perception paved the way for faculty consensus to expanded access to more lower division courses and upper division electives based on the LT route and led to several rounds of curricular refinement. After sustained discussion and review of student performance data, the substitution threshold for ECON 201 was lowered to B- in 2024,

allowing more students from the literacy-targeted pathway to enter the major. For students in the Econ minor as well as students not pursuing any Economics degree, the number courses for which Econ 113 or 115 counted as a substitute prerequisite in lieu of Econ 103 or Econ 105, respectively, was expanded considerably starting in 2023. By 2025, all lower-division Econ elective courses and the majority of 300 level Econ elective offerings, which previously required Econ 103 or 105, allowed for Econ 113 or Econ 115 substitution instead, with only a minimum grade of C-. In 2025, the department also created the new Certificate in Economics Fundamentals using 113/115 as its core as a small-stakes degree in basic economic reasoning.

3 Design Philosophy and Course Structure

Course Design and Pedagogical Approach In 2021, as part of the renewed effort to introduce literacy-targeted principles courses at Simon Fraser University, the department chair at the time, Anke Kessler, asked one of the authors to design the course outlines for ECON 113 (Introduction to Microeconomics) and ECON 115 (Introduction to Macroeconomics). Having previously taught the traditional macro principles course ECON 105, the author viewed this initiative as an opportunity to rethink the goals and structure of introductory economics for a student population largely composed of non-majors. The design of the courses was guided by three core educational objectives. First, the courses aim to help students understand the key economic ideas and policy debates that are relevant to contemporary microeconomic and macroeconomic issues. Second, students are encouraged to develop their own positions on these policy questions. Third, the courses seek to cultivate students' ability to articulate and defend economic arguments in a clear and coherent manner. While the latter two objectives can only be achieved imperfectly in large lecture settings, explicitly stating them as course goals helps foster critical thinking and counteracts a passive "listen, repeat, and forget" mode of learning that often characterizes large introductory courses. A central design principle of ECON 113 and ECON 115 is relevance. Topic selection prioritizes economic issues that are likely to affect students' lives directly, either as consumers, workers, voters, or future professionals. Whenever possible, core economic concepts are introduced through real-world applications rather than abstract models. Lecture time is deliberately devoted to helping students connect economic ideas to everyday experiences, current events, and policy debates encountered in the news or on social media. This approach is intended to make economic reasoning feel immediately useful rather than purely academic. Closely related to this emphasis on relevance is the use of narrative and storytelling as organizing devices. Rather than presenting the course as a sequence of disconnected topics, the material is structured as a coherent narrative in which concepts build on one another over time. Storytelling is used both as a pedagogical strategy—by anchoring ideas in concrete examples—and as a way of framing the course as a "story" about how economies function and why economic reasoning matters. Historical context and institutional detail also play an important role in the course design. Economic concepts are situated within their historical development, both in terms of real-world events and competing schools of economic thought. Policy discussions are presented explicitly as debates rather than as settled facts, and

students are encouraged to recognize the trade-offs and value judgments involved in economic policymaking. For example, when discussing monetary policy, lectures include historical perspectives on central banking and differing views on the effectiveness and limits of monetary interventions. In addition, the courses devote attention to institutional details—such as how financial institutions, markets, or policy bodies actually operate—whenever this helps clarify economic mechanisms. Active learning is incorporated through the use of in-class experiments and games, which allow students to “learn by doing.” These experiments are designed to illustrate key concepts, such as bubbles or public goods provision, while also creating shared classroom experiences that can be referenced throughout the course. The emphasis on relevance, narrative, and application is reflected in the choice of examples used in both the macroeconomic and microeconomic components of the curriculum. In macroeconomics, financial systems are introduced through students’ own housing and mortgage decisions; inflation is discussed in the context of ongoing labor disputes and strikes; economic growth is illustrated using the case of China; and trade deficits are examined through U.S.–China relations and their political consequences, including the rise of protectionist sentiment. Discussions of asset bubbles draw on the Vancouver real estate market and are often paired with classroom experiments to illustrate speculative dynamics. In microeconomics, current tariff debates are used to motivate discussions of trade policy, outsourcing, and geopolitics; externalities are explored through issues such as climate change, pipeline expansion projects, and Indigenous rights; and public goods problems are illustrated through in-class public goods games. Taken together, these design choices reflect the central aim of the literacy-targeted principles courses: to equip students with a usable understanding of economics that enhances their ability to interpret real-world economic issues, engage in informed debate, and apply economic reasoning beyond the classroom.

4 Preliminary Evidence

This section presents enrolment trends over time as well as some preliminary patterns of key statistics such as student composition, academic preparation, and performance, both in the LT pathway and regular pathway. Since the LT courses have been in the curriculum since Fall 2023, our data only span 3 academic years, and it is too early to draw definite conclusions (most of the statistics are drawn from the most recent available year, 2024/25). However, the evidence so far supports the notion that the student body in the LT courses is not negatively selected, and that the courses allow for broader participation without compromising student learning.

Summary Statistics

Table 1 below presents aggregate summary statistics for students enrolled in the traditional principles sequence Econ 103/105 and the literacy-targeted sequence ECON 113/115 for the most recent academic year where we have data (2024/2025). For the traditional pathway, we additionally report totals from the academic year immediately preceding the introduction of the LT courses.

We see that incoming academic preparation is similar across pathways: average high-school grades for

students in ECON 113/115 are comparable to those observed in ECON 103/105 in both periods.² Downstream enrolment patterns are similar as well, although once we exclude mandatory courses and intended Econ majors, there is roughly a 15 percentage point gap between the traditional and the LT pathway in the fraction of students who take further 200 level non-mandatory economics courses. One reason could be that students not majoring in either Economics or Business, but intending to take more Econ courses positively select into the traditional pathway, as it has fewer restrictions on downstream course eligibility, reflecting the LT pathway's role as a terminal literacy course for many non-majors rather than a preparatory sequence for advanced economics study. The percentage of eligible students taking the Economic major gateway course Econ 201 supports this notion as well, where the numbers are negligible in the LT pathway.

As to in-course outcomes, we see that despite the fact that average grades have been rising (likely as a result of grade inflation) in the traditional course, grades in the LT pathway are considerably higher on average, with an average grade points of 3.0 points, corresponding to a B letter-grade, compared to 2.6 average grade points, corresponding to a B- letter-grade. There are several possibly explanations for this gap, including instructor effects, differences in student motivation and academic rigour of course content, and varying academic preparedness. The data don not allow us to fully decompose all effects, but as we will see below, difference in student body composition are a almost certainly a contributing factor.

Enrolment Trends

Prior to the introduction of the LT pathway, the combined enrolment in the traditional principles courses had been falling steadily from 2,640 students in 2016/17 to 2,277 students in 2021/22. The drop of roughly 15 percent over 5 years could be attributed primarily to demographic factors (lower birthrates) and a decline in international student demand.

Figure 1 presents the trends in enrolments over the period from 2016 to 2025, focusing on Fall only to allow for a slightly longer time horizon and better comparability between the traditional and the LT principles courses, as the latter are not offered in the summer term. Since the introduction of ECON 113 and 115 in Fall 2022, demand for the LT principles courses increased from 165 students in their first offering to nearly 900 students by 2024/25. It is clear that the LT pathway did somewhat shift demand away from the traditional courses. As we will see below, this trend was primarily driven by the migration of BBA students for whom the LT pathway is recommended to economize on course credits. At the same time, the numbers do not support the conclusion that the LT offerings cannibalized Econ 103/105; rather, the latter helped to stabilize enrolment, offsetting declines in the traditional pathway.³ One key factor here is that the LT pathway is more popular among domestic students, whose admission numbers have been stable compared to the comparatively steep decline in international students in recent years.⁴

²There are essentially no students from other post-secondary institutions – colleges or other universities – in our Economic principles courses, since those students would normally have taken these courses prior to being admitted to SFU.

³The trends are consistent with data from the University of Toronto, where LT principles course drew in new students without reducing enrolment in the traditional quantitative stream Benjamin, Cohen and Hamilton (2020).

⁴Like other Canadian universities, SFU's ability to admit international students has been directly affected by the 2024 imposition of federal caps on study permits and a new requirement for Provincial Attestation Letters (PAL), which reduced

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Econ 103/105		LT Courses
	2021_22	2024_25	2024_25
<i>Observations</i>			
Headcount	2,180	1,467	897
<i>Characteristics at Admission</i>			
Incoming GPA (high-school)	86.1	85.0	86.4
Percentage International/Unfunded	13.3	15.8	8.3
<i>Outcomes</i>			
Average grade in this class	2.46	2.58	3.01
Percentage taking further econ (incl. other 103/105)	59.4	54.6	53.3
Percentage taking further econ (mandatory excluded)	37.1	37.7	19.6
Percentage eligible taking 200-level courses	20.1	19.2	5.3
Percentage eligible taking Econ 201	15.2	16.9	3.5
<i>Excluding Econ Intended Majors</i>			
Headcount	1,863	1,184	856
Percentage taking further econ	54.4	48.0	52.7
Percentage taking further econ (mandatory excluded)	28.3	27.0	17.4
Percentage eligible taking 200-level courses	13.8	11.1	4.3
Percentage eligible taking Econ 201	9.2	9.3	2.5

^a **Note:** The table reports aggregate (total) descriptive statistics for traditional principles courses (ECON 103/105) in the academic year prior to the introduction of the literacy-targeted (LT) pathway (2021/22) and in the most recent academic year available (2024/25), as well as for the LT principles courses (ECON 113/115) in 2024/25. The summer term, where the LT courses are not offered, is excluded to make both pathways more comparable. The percentage international/unfunded students are Fall semester data only.

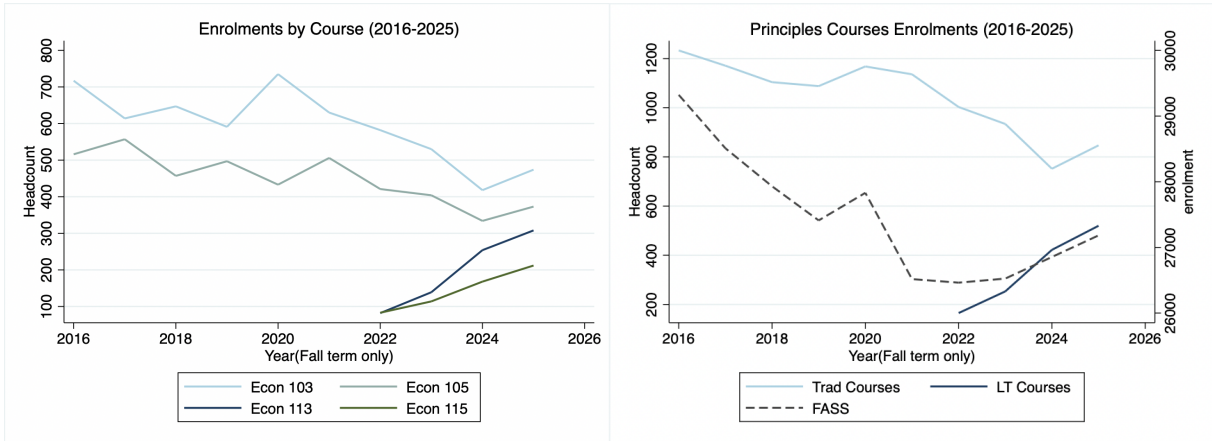


Figure 1: Enrolment Trends (Fall term)

Who Takes the LT Pathway?

One central objective of introducing the LT pathway had been to make principles courses more attractive for students for whom introductory economics is not a requirement of their intended degree, broadening participation among students who are unlikely to take a more quantitative, content-heavy introductory course. At SFU, this group comprises all students whose academic plan does not include either economics or business (Major or Minor) or engineering science (Major only). Table 2 below summarizes headcount enrolment among this group of students by pathway during each academic year, beginning with the academic year 2021/22 which preceded the introduction of Econ 113 and Econ 115. To ensure comparability, we once again restrict ourselves to enrolments that exclude the summer offerings of Econ 103 and Econ 105. We that enrolment of students who take the principles courses as an elective has been comparatively stable, both in terms of headcount and as the share of overall enrolment in these courses, which stayed at roughly 35% over the past few years. However, it is notable that the contribution of the LT courses to that enrolment has been increasing steadily, up from 15% in the first year of offering to 37% in the last year we have data available. This does suggest that the LT pathway serves students whose needs and preferences were not met by the traditional principles model—a result consistent with Bayer et al.’s (2020) evidence on the importance of relevance, accessibility, and personal connection for non-majors. Referring back to Table 1, one group for this may be relevant are domestic students, who are more concentrated in the LT pathway where they make up about 92% of the student body, compared to roughly 84% in the traditional pathway. While this pattern may be in part attributable to the comparatively high number of Econ intended Majors from outside of Canada, the relative rise of international student enrolment in Econ 103/105 after the introduction of Econ 113/115 while overall international admissions were falling suggests a sorting based on preference as well.

Another lens through which the student body can be examined is composition by intended degree and/or allocations for British Columbia.

Table 2: Principles Enrolment by Degree Requirement

Acad. Year	not required		headcount		LT contribution	
	Trad.	LT	not req.	overall	to not req.(%)	to overall(%)
2021/22	834	0	834	2180	0	0
2022/23	741	138	879	2318	15.7	23.5
2023/24	700	281	981	2526	18.4	27.2
2024/25	541	326	867	2367	37.6	37.9

^a **Note:** Enrolment Summary Statistics for Econ principles courses by pathway and academic year, excluding summer term, before the introduction of Econ 113/115 and thereafter. Last available data are 2024/25 academic year.

faculty admission in both the traditional and the LT principles courses. This information is detailed in the first three columns of Table 3. As before, we distinguish between cohorts that took the traditional courses in the academic year before and after the introduction of the LT pathway, with the last available year of data as our most recent benchmark, and exclude summer enrolments of Econ 103/105 for comparability. The categories listed single out Economics intended Majors, Business Majors, and Engineering Majors, for whom Economic principles courses are part of their degree requirement.⁵ As expected, intended Economics majors are much more concentrated in Econ 103/105, since they would have to had to achieve a grade above A- in Econ 113/115 in order to have those courses count as prerequisites for Econ 201, which is compulsory in the Econ major. Irrespective of pathway, students who pursue a Business degree make up the largest group. Since the LT courses comprise fewer credits and are recommended for BBA students to fulfill their lower-division economics requirements, it is not surprising that we observe a shift from the traditional to the LT courses over time among Business majors: the fraction of BBA students in the traditional principles courses dropped considerably after the introduction of the LT option, where most recently BBA students now make up almost 60% of the student body. Generally speaking, and keeping in mind that BBA students could also take the more established, and more frequently offered, Econ 103/105 to fulfill their degree requirement, the success of the LT pathway with Business majors indicates that ECON 113/115 meet the curricular and pedagogical needs of a key partner faculty.

The diversity in representation of students from other major categories – specifically the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (ARTS other), Sciences (SCI) and Applied Sciences (APSC other) – does not appear follow the same pattern, though: their enrolment share in the traditional pathway remained fairly stable after the introduction of Econ 113/115. This may be surprising at first glance, but it easily accounted for by the fact that the migration of BBA students masks other trends in relative enrolment. This can be seen from the last three columns in Table 3, which shows composition trends by academic plan, excluding Business students. We see that, across the board, students for whom Econ 103 and/or 105 is not required by their degree program have become more concentrated in the LT pathway, with ARTS students now making up roughly 30 percent of non-Business enrolment. This is true despite the fact that Econ 103/105 provides more accessibility and convenience as a result of more offerings per term (often two sections, scheduled at different times) and location. The latter in particular is significant, since Econ 113/115 are

⁵Engineering students only need to take Econ 103, which they cannot substitute for by taking Econ 113.

Table 3: Student Composition

acad plan	percent of student body			percent of student body (BUS excl)		
	Econ 103/105		LT	Econ 103/105		LT
	2021_22	2024_25	2024_25	2021_22	2024_25	2024_25
ECON intended	14.5	19.3	5.6	25.0	28.4	10.9
BUSINESS	41.8	31.9	58.0	–	–	–
ENSC	5.4	11.9	1.1	9.3	17.4	2.6
APSC excl ENSC	7.6	9.4	9.2	13.0	13.8	22.0
ARTS excl ECON	13.8	14.4	13.0	23.8	21.1	31.0
SCI	8.8	6.5	7.8	15.1	9.6	18.6
Other	5.3	5.6	6.2	13.9	9.6	14.9

^a **Note:** Student body composition in traditional Econ principles courses (Econ 103/105) in the academic year before introducing the LT courses, as well for all principles courses in the last academic year where data were available. Sample excludes summer term enrolment.

not being offered at SFU’s Surrey campus, which comprises roughly 20 percent of the enrolment in the traditional pathway. These trends indicate that the LT pathway has successfully expanded participation in economics among students from groups historically underrepresented in quantitative introductory courses.

Academic Preparation and Performance

One frequent concern about literacy-targeted courses is that they may attract weaker students. Our data do not support this claim. We saw earlier that the average High-school grade among incoming cohorts is higher in the LT pathway, which is partly driven by the above-average grades of the largest group of students in that pathway, namely those being admitted into the highly-competitive Business program. As Table 4 illustrates, the grade of a typical BBA student is about half a point higher than that of their typical Econ intended counterpart.⁶ The negative academic preparation gap among students who intend to study economics is not confined to the comparison with BBA majors, however. Across all academic plans or faculties, the incoming high-school grades of a typical Econ 113/115 student is higher than that of a typical ECON 103/105 student, and sometimes considerably so. This pattern is not consistent with the idea that students choosing LT courses are academically weaker on average. The similarity in incoming preparation across pathways suggests that differences in enrolment composition arise not from academic ability, but from differences in program requirements, student preferences in scheduling and location, and perceived accessibility of the pathways. The fact that there is little evidence for negative selection in the student pool of the LT pathway also paves the way the core result from Benjamin, Cohen, and Hamilton (2020), namely that with appropriate gatekeeper grade thresholds, students completing LT courses are no less prepared for an Econ Major than those having completed the regular principles courses.

Turning to outcomes, we see that across most academic plans, average grades in ECON 113/115 are similar to, or slightly higher than, those in ECON 103/105. The difference is (jointly) statistically significant, but since there are a multitude of factors (instructor, content, student interest and motivation), we cannot

⁶Indeed, average incoming GPA among the Econ intended group tends to be lower than that of other group, with the exception of students in other FASS programs.

Table 4: Academic Preparation and Outcomes

acad plan	avg high-school grade			mean grade points		
	Econ 103/105		LT	Econ 103/105		LT
	2021_22	2024_25	2024_25	2021_22	2024_25	2024_25
ECON intended	83.2	80.5	88.4	2.00	2.23	2.35
BUSINESS	88.6	88.1	90.0	2.61	2.72	3.09
ENSC	86.8	87.2	90.0	2.72	2.96	2.87
APSC other	85.5	85.7	86.9	2.83	3.00	3.41
FASS other	82.3	81.4	87.4	2.04	2.06	2.68
SCI	86.6	86.3	87.9	2.82	2.82	3.10
Other	82.8	83.6	87.1	2.31	2.39	2.73

^a **Note:** Composition Summary Statistics for the traditional Econ principles courses (Econ 103/105) in the academic year before introducing the LT courses, as well for all principles courses in the last academic year where data were available. Sample excludes summer enrolment.

attribute the elevated grades in the LT courses to any specific determinant without additional data. Yet, it is probably fair to say that the magnitude and consistency of these differences indicate that LT students are not disadvantaged in demonstrating course competencies. For example, Business students achieve an average grade of 3.09 in ECON 113/115, compared to 2.73 in ECON 103/105. Students in Applied Science (other than engineering) and Science also show modestly higher grades in the LT pathway, despite comparable high-school entry averages. Again, the pattern suggests that there is no negative selection into literacy-targeted courses, nor that higher grades in the that stream necessarily reflect a lack academic rigour. Instead, they may simply stem from better academic preparation (including peer effects), increased student motivation, or an improved learning environment that reduces cognitive load associated by de-emphasizing coverage-heavy models in favour of a smaller set of durable concepts.

5 Conclusion

Key Take-aways

1. Vision and evidence of likely success is not enough. The #1 reason that major initiatives fail is because people are fearful and resistant to change. So. Getting people on board is not easy – change management required, stakeholder consultation important but many concerns do not align with evidence. Need strategies to lead change, minimize resistance and conflict, and increase engagement. Important also to evaluate change. Change management tools: Communication, coaching, resistance management, training. Communication: Communication and influence stakeholders, develop key communication messages regarding the project. How do you create effective change? Communicate, Communicate, Communicate Meaning and Purpose, Seeing Progress, Co-creating the future together (100% partnership), Doing something worthwhile, Knowing your contribution counts

Resistance is inevitable but not necessarily logical, a natural function of change, an attempt to protect the individual but not to be taken personally, a learning process. Anticipate points of resistance by groups or

individuals. Consider people with history. Forecast how faculty may react, Recall unique challenges from previous assessments, and how they were successfully overcome. Change is difficult if requires brain to overcome fear and uncertainty, requires brain to learn something new, or involves re-learning something that worked fine. Solutions: build coalitions, remain visible and engaged, be accountable for future success or failure

2. Be ready when the time is right. Plans were on the shelf when Business asked for major program changes

3. Overall, our preliminary data support the view that literacy-targeted principles courses can broaden participation in economics while preserving preparation for students who pursue further study. The addition of a literacy-targeted pathway can strengthen program sustainability and flexibility without compromising academic standards.

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