



ECONOMICS PROF PREDICTS A BOOM

.. but only in the number of students studying 'the dismal science'

THE BIG ISSUE

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There has never been a better time to be an expert in the subject once known as the "dismal science".

Economists are in constant demand in the media, and some faces — most notably David McWilliams and George Lee — are now as well known in Ireland as film stars and footballers. But will their popularity, and the constant discussion of the country's beleaguered economy, rub off on a new generation of students?

Colm Harmon, professor of economics at UCD, predicts a boom.

"In my experience, enrolments in economics go up as the economy goes down," says Professor Harmon. "In the '80s, they had to use two lecture theatres for the subject in UCD, because there were so many doing it.

"Our worst time for enrolments was early in this decade, at the height of the boom."

It is too early to say whether there has been a significant growth in CAO applications for economics courses in universities, but college authorities report a surge in interest in the subject, particularly at graduate level.

Dr Alan Ahearne, lecturer in economics at NUI Galway, has emerged as one of the most respected commentators during the current recession.

He has noticed a big increase in the number of applicants to NUI

Galway's masters degree in international finance.

"The course covers a lot of the issues around international economics and banking. These have been constantly in the news over the past few months, and that is having an effect.

"We are getting a lot of interest from students with backgrounds in business studies, law and engineering."

Dr Ahearne almost stumbled upon economics as a subject when he was studying for his Leaving Cert at St Clement's College in Limerick.

"When I was doing my Leaving, it was a choice of physics and economics. Economics was the least worst option.

"Then, when I actually started the Leaving Cert course, I became fascinated by the subject and I carried that into college.

"At school, we learned early on about micro-economics, such things as supply and demand. You could be looking at apples or bread. I loved the rigour of the subject."

Ahearne studied business studies at the University of Limerick, and only specialised in economics as a post-graduate.

His career thus far shows where studying economics can lead. As a PhD student at the US-based Carnegie Mellon University, one of his mentors was Finn Kydland, winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2004.

After stints teaching at a number of universities and working for accountants Coopers and Lybrand, and Bank of Ireland Treasury, he worked for the US Central bank — the Federal Reserve.

Among his tasks was the preparation of research notes for Alan Greenspan, one of the

most influential global financial figures of the past 20 years.

Jim Power, economist at Friends First and lecturer at DCU and the Smurfit Business School, came to the subject by a similar haphazard route at the Leaving Cert.

"After my Inter (now Junior) Cert, I was studying three science subjects but after a month I decided to drop one of them. I chose economics over biology and I grew to love the subject."

The graduate of economics and politics at UCD believes the subject will grow in popularity in the near future.

"We have a problem of economic illiteracy at the moment. You only have to look at the Government to see it. So, the skills of economists are likely to be in greater demand in the near future.

"People are fascinated by the death of the Celtic Tiger, and how it happened. There was a similar surge in interest in economics during the currency crisis of the early '90s. That was a turning point for economics in this country.

"Students are realising how useful economics is as a training. With few jobs out there at the moment it is a good general discipline."

Most of those who study economics do not actually become economists. "It can be used as a stepping stone into many different careers, including politics, journalism and accountancy," says Mr Power.

Many economics graduates work in financial services.

"It is a very broad subject that applies to different areas," says Professor Colm Harmon of UCD. "It is relevant to health, education and transport. When

you think of a single mother deciding to join the workforce, that is an economic issue."

While a new generation of economists is likely to emerge from the current global recession, Thomas Conefrey of the Economic and Social Research Institute, said that his interest was sparked, in part, by the Celtic Tiger boom.

The Trinity College graduate says: "Just as there is immense interest now in analysing our difficulties and how we can overcome them, similarly, at that time, there was great interest in finding out what had caused this economic boom and how long it was going to last."