

**Alternatives to the Mainstream Economic Growth Paradigm in Business
Administration Curricula at Dutch Research Universities**

Master Thesis

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Abstract

This Master's thesis sheds light on the reasons for including or excluding alternatives to the mainstream economic growth paradigm in/from the Bachelor curricula of Business Administration (BA) programmes offered at Dutch research universities to the current extent. Fourteen pre-selected members of staff, mostly course coordinators, divided over nine universities were interviewed. Out of the fourteen courses, eight turn out to cover economic growth related subject matter to at least some extent. Only four courses discuss alternatives to mainstream growth and/or alternatives to profit maximisation. Results show that teaching staff of courses that do not discuss alternatives to mainstream growth often say this has to do with disciplinary requirements, as well as cost-benefit considerations; many do not consider the alternatives to be part of the basics that should be taught to BA students. Some think it should be taught but say that they do not have enough time in the course they themselves teach. Teaching staff of courses that do discuss alternatives, regularly also by discussing the focus on profit maximisation, often do this because of their value orientations; they feel students should be able to reflect on this subject in a critical manner. Lastly, those that discuss alternatives to traditional growth orientation often have educational objectives higher up the RBT pyramid. So, whereas those that discuss traditional economic growth and no alternatives mainly stick to remembering and understanding, those that teach about alternatives often strive for students to apply what they have heard or read, and to analyse or evaluate what they encounter in a case by using what they have heard or read. If BA curricula are to encourage an economic climate that prioritises wellbeing, or environmental and social justice, changes are in order.

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List of Abbreviations

<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Description</i>
BA	Business Administration
ECs	European Credits
EEA	European Economic Area
EEB	European Environmental Bureau
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
MEEM	Master Environmental and Energy Management
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RBT	Revised Bloom's Taxonomy
SD	Sustainable Development
SDC	Sustainable Development Competencies
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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1. Introduction

Many countries in the global North have been after economic growth from the seventeenth century onwards (Dale, 2018). At that point in time, a shift occurred from more cyclical thinking to more linear thinking. In this time of scientific triumph, rational calculation and quantification became the norm and improved material conditions were sought (Dale, 2018). Improvement and progress became key not only to capitalists, but to society at large, which wanted to become better off. Moreover, nature became mainly a resource to enable increased production and had a marginal role, if any, in economic thought (Fressoz & Bonneuil, 2018). Twentieth century wars led to an even stronger focus on growth; free trade and consumption were to combat communism (Fressoz & Bonneuil, 2018). As Western production and consumption increased, so did the reliance on energy and fossil fuels. As countries could no longer provide in their own energy needs, fuels were imported from non-Western countries in increasingly larger quantities (Fressoz & Bonneuil, 2018). Furthermore, issues related to pollution became more frequent. In other words, so-called natural resources were running out, pollution became problematic and the Great Acceleration was born: a time of “unprecedented and accelerating human-induced global socio-economic and environmental change” (EEA, 2021). Consequently, a new era is said to have started: the Anthropocene (Steffen et al, 2015), or the age of humans.

In many countries, the economy is measured by looking at the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and GDP has been rising since the start of the Great Acceleration (Steffen et al, 2015). Whereas GDP used to be the equivalent to progress, it now becomes clear that progress is more than GDP, or maybe even something entirely different. After all, GDP growth currently goes hand in hand with detrimental environmental and social impacts (EEA, 2021), which are effects that cannot be described as progress.

Now that environmental and social impacts become more visible, more and more voices ask for change and some nations seem to take steps to change their outlook on progress, albeit small steps. For example, Bhutan has embraced Gross National Happiness as opposed to GDP (Tshewang et al., 2021); however, it should be noted that there is also much critique on Bhutanese practices regarding human rights (Pellegrini and Tasciotti, 2014). Another example of a country that announced changes is New Zealand. The country has a yearly wellbeing budget¹ and the Treasury considers “a broad range of wellbeing impacts” (New Zealand Treasury, 2021) when advising the government; however, the ‘New Zealand Economy’ web page of the country’s Treasury still discusses GDP in the first paragraph and advocates the importance of economic growth (New Zealand Treasury,

¹ A wellbeing budget is established each year in order to contribute to the five long-term wellbeing objectives: Just Transition, Future of Work, Physical and Mental Wellbeing, Māori and Pacific, and Child Wellbeing (Government of New Zealand, 2021).

2020). In short, whereas the realisation that change is necessary seems to dawn, little action seems to be taken to drastically change and to shift focus to truly sustainable behaviour that encourages social and environmental justice². Economic growth still takes centre stage and is still the mainstream economic paradigm.

Currently, economic growth is also the paradigm that is widely used in education (Jones, 2021). Díez-Gutiérrez and Díaz-Nafría (2019) remark that, as opposed to what it is portrayed as, education is not neutral and that the curriculum, among other things, “build[s] a network in tune with the prevailing social system” (p. 126), which is growth-oriented capitalism in the Global North. This contrasts with the image of schools as places in which critical thinking and reflection is encouraged. This is a shame, since, as Knappe et al. (2019) state, schools are the perfect place for “experimentation and conceiving or developing alternatives” (p. 895).

In conclusion, the planet and its inhabitants are suffering as a consequence of human interventions; many people’s ecological footprint is too large. Moving away from growth, from growth that exploits the world, or from unconditional growth could therefore contribute to environmental and social wellbeing. By exploring the presence of alternatives to the mainstream growth paradigm in education, researchers and practitioners in this field can obtain a clear picture of the current impact of their efforts on education. This consequently allows them to adjust their efforts if desired. The research objective is therefore to enable those critical of mainstream economic growth theories to determine which educational gaps related to economic growth exist and why they exist by providing insight into the current state of economic growth teachings in Business Administration Bachelor programmes at research universities in The Netherlands in order to facilitate environmental and social justice.

The main research question that will be answered in order to meet this objective is

Which are the reasons for excluding or including alternatives to the mainstream economic growth paradigm from/in the Bachelor curricula of Business Administration programmes offered at Dutch research universities to the current extent?

In order to enable the answering of this question, the following sub questions will be answered first:

- 1) *Which courses discuss subjects related to economic growth or its alternatives?*

² Social and environmental justice here refers to the fair distribution within society of the benefits and burdens that go hand in hand with a healthy, thriving natural environment, as well as fair participation in decision-making (Pickett et al., 2013). The social aspect focuses on the fair distribution and decision-making, the environmental aspect on a thriving natural environment.

- 2) *To what extent are alternatives to the mainstream economic growth paradigm included in the curricula of Business Administration Bachelors at Dutch research universities?*
- 3) *Why are alternatives to the mainstream economic growth paradigm excluded from, or included in, the curricula to the current degree?*

In chapter 2, the core topics of my research are explored further by presenting the conceptual framework and the literature review. Chapter 3 discloses the methodology that was used and chapter 4 contains the results. Finally, chapter 5 elaborates upon the findings and chapter 6 finalises this thesis with research limitations and recommendations for future research.

2. Literature review

The previous part shows that education could play a large role in changing the dominant narrative. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) therefore stresses that education plays a key role in sustainable development (UNESCO, n.d.). More specifically, they state that higher education in particular should “promote peace, justice and human rights”, should encourage research that is “commensurate with a long-term plan for sustainability”, should “move away from the model of one-way, North-South knowledge ‘transfers’” and, finally, should “[p]romote dialogue and the exchange of knowledge and well-informed opinions even when they run contrary to the positions and/or beliefs of the government in power” (UNESCO, 2010, p. 20). Environmental and social justice thus depend on what we teach. What the quote by UNESCO also shows is that education entails more than knowledge transfer and skill development. As Ehrensall (2001) argues forcefully, and as Díez-Gutiérrez and Díaz-Nafría (2019) underline: ideology is also part of the educational package. It is for this reason that Kaufmann et al. (2019) call for the politicization of education in which power relationships are made explicit and in which a variety of realities are included. Milana et al. (2016) also discuss power differences and argue in favour of societal sustainability, with the focus on ‘societal’. They “challenge the mainstream conception of sustainable development on which adult education and learning policy draws, including underlying ideas about (economic) growth and prosperity” (p. 528); they feel education still very much mirrors society’s focus on growth and consequently call for change. Prádanos also maintains that it is essential to transform education “to generate a society able to deal with the complex socio-environmental challenges of the Anthropocene” (2015, p. 154).

The arguments above can be applied to all educational fields, and are also very relevant to business programmes. In her work, Bobulescu argues that Degrowth pedagogy in

particular has “transformational potential in business education” (2022, p. 188). Focusing on changing the narrative in business education is key, since business programmes play a large role in determining future managers’ way of thinking about growth and environmental and social justice; business students are some of the change agents of the future. Ehrensall (2001) also provocatively states that the current business school produces “the culture of short-termism and greed” and stresses that “what gets taught and researched at universities matters, in the sense that it influences what students think, and hence shapes the horizon of the societies that we live in” (p. vii). In short, business education is one of the key drivers of a different economic system.

2.1 Conceptual framework

In order to shape this research, I have developed the conceptual framework that is shown in Table 1. The first variable is staff considerations. Members of the academic teaching staff often have “considerable decision-making scope in the design of their courses” (Rögele et al., 2022, para. 2.2). This means that the staff can exert much influence over the course content, which makes it relevant to investigate why they would decide to include certain elements. Staff considerations is consequently the independent variable of this study; it will clarify the ‘reasons’ mentioned in the research question. Multiple categories were established based on research done by Rögele et al. (2022) and these are discussed in section 2.2.

The extent of the inclusion or exclusion of alternatives to the mainstream growth paradigm is the dependent variable. Extent is classified based on the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy categories (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) and include remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating and creating. Since alternatives may not be included at all, the category ‘missing’ was added. Section 2.4 specifies the categories further. Lastly, the mentioned ‘alternatives’ to mainstream growth include ‘Degrowth’, ‘Green Growth’ and ‘Agrowth’ as the key concepts; section 2.3 will detail the reasons for choosing these concepts, as well as their meaning.

Table 1. Conceptual framework

Independent variable	Dependent variable
<p data-bbox="201 297 464 331"><u>Staff considerations</u></p> <p data-bbox="201 499 722 584">Consideration categories (Rögele et al., 2022)</p> <ul data-bbox="252 600 660 842" style="list-style-type: none"> • Disciplinary requirements • Attribution of responsibility • Value orientations • Cost-benefit considerations • Other 	<p data-bbox="807 297 1305 432"><u>Extent</u> of inclusion or exclusion of <u>alternatives</u> to the mainstream growth paradigm</p> <p data-bbox="807 499 1390 584">Extent of inclusion or exclusion (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001)</p> <ul data-bbox="858 600 1102 949" style="list-style-type: none"> • Missing • Remembering • Understanding • Applying • Analysing • Evaluating • Creating <p data-bbox="807 1016 967 1050">Alternatives</p> <ul data-bbox="858 1066 1094 1256" style="list-style-type: none"> • Degrowth • Green Growth • Agrowth • Other

2.2 Staff considerations

In order to operationalise staff considerations, I chose to include the list of staff consideration categories that was developed by Rögele et al. (2022). Rögele et al. (2022) focused on professors' considerations about including or excluding sustainable development competencies (SDC) in or from their teachings. They cite UNESCO as part of their explanation why SD should be included in education: "The principal objective of higher education institutions should not simply be to educate the individual but also to provide future generations with the skills and knowledge necessary to address global challenges such as poverty, conflict and climate change" (UNESCO, 2010, p. 19). Since alternatives to the mainstream growth paradigm aim for these same goals, the different growth considerations fit into SD education perfectly and Rögele et al.'s (2022) considerations were consequently used.

Rögele et al. (2022) list the following factors that influence academic's staff deliberations for including sustainable development (SD) issues:

- Disciplinary requirements
- Attribution of responsibility
- Value orientations
- Cost-benefit considerations

The first category, disciplinary requirements, includes considerations with regard to the mandatory content of a curriculum. Every curriculum has to adhere to the requirements that have been set for a particular Bachelor or Master programme. These requirements ensure that a dentist is taught everything they need to know about dentistry and not, or to a lesser extent, about how to run a business. Remarks about what should or should not be included in Business Administration curricula consequently belong to this category.

Attribution of responsibility, the second category, includes both internal and external attribution. Internal attribution entails that the member of staff feels responsible for including teachings on SD due to the role they have; they express a sense of duty. External attribution means that a member of staff feels that the responsibility to include SD is one that is shared with "students, colleagues and the university" (Rögele et al., 2022, para. 4.4.1). External attribution can exist next to internal attribution.

Value orientation is the third category and has to do with the values of members of staff. Rögele et al. (2022) distinguish three options here. First, some staff members fear a future in which sustainability is ignored. This can include beliefs that students with knowledge on this topics have better chances at obtaining a place of employment. Second, some members of staff feel it is important clarify what is SD is and what SD is not, and to foster critical thinking in their students with regard to the use of the term 'sustainability'. Third, some staff members have studied topics related to SD because of the significance they attach to SD. This 'historical-biographical significance', as Rögele et al. (2002) call it, leads the staff to naturally include SD.

Finally, with regard to cost-benefit considerations, four lines of thought were discerned. First, members of staff can feel obliged to include SD regardless of the effort this requires. Second, some may feel that "the benefits to the students outweigh any time or effort needed to adapt . . . courses" in such a way that they include SD (Rögele et al., 2022, para. 4.4.3). Third, staff can feel including SD is too costly, in the sense that they consider other competencies or knowledge to be more important. Last, members of staff can experience personal gain from teaching SD; students that obtain SD-related competencies can increase the staff's motivation to teach.

In order to allow for staff considerations that deviate from the framework developed by Rögele et al. (2022), the category 'other' is included as an independent variable.

2.3 Alternatives to mainstream economic growth paradigm

As the core concepts of the dependent variable, I chose 'Degrowth', 'Green Growth' and 'Agrowth'. There are several initiatives and schools of thought that propose alternatives to the mainstream growth paradigm; however, since these initiatives are quite young and sometimes not fully developed yet, there is debate about their exact nature (Drews et al., 2019) and their feasibility. This study will not try to solve or explore either of these issues; instead, it will explore the alternatives' presence in business education. 'Degrowth', 'Green Growth' and 'Agrowth' were chosen as core concepts because, during their study into anti-growth terminology, Drews et al. (2019) found that university professors consider them to be distinct segments. In other words, there seems to be consensus among professors, at least to some degree, about the ability to denote three separate strands of alternatives to the mainstream growth paradigm. However, as will become clear in the following sections, variety still exist within these three categories.

Degrowth is "a planned downscaling of production and consumption in wealthy, overconsuming countries to transition to a steady-state economy that exists within biophysical limits and can be sustained", according to Stuart et al. (2021, p. 9). What is stressed, is that there is a difference between countries. In other words, Stuart et al. (2021) do not wish that all countries downscale; only the ones that consume more than they should if the earth's biophysical boundaries are to be respected. What also becomes clear is that downscaling should be done deliberately and in a predetermined manner. Degrowth scholars make a case against focusing on growing GDP, or economic growth; instead, they say, the focus should be on "the health and wellbeing of our people and our planet" (Kallis et al., 2020, p. xv). In recent years, an international degrowth movement has been taking shape. As of 2008, there have been regular degrowth conferences, which allow for international cross-fertilisation. Researchers know where to find each other and they collaborate to explore the field further. At the same time, a common framework is still under development. For example, Muraca and Schmelzer (2018) show that, within Europe alone, there are multiple degrowth models which are interlinked yet also separate. Van den Bergh (2011) also lists a variety of views and shows how they can oppose each other especially with regard to practical implementations, such as consumption quota.

Green growth, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "is about fostering economic growth and development while ensuring that the natural assets continue to provide the resources and environmental services on which our well-being relies" (OECD, 2017, p. 2). This type of growth relies on resource decoupling, where resource use does not necessarily rise when GDP increases, and on impact decoupling, where resource use remains separate from environmental impact. As the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) states, it is the "delinking [of] economic

development from environmental deterioration” (UNEP, 2011, p. xi). Vazquez Brunt and Sarkis (2012) state that the OECD definition of green growth is too close to neoclassical economics, since it commodifies nature. Instead, they argue, environmental and social innovation should take centre stage and structural policy and managerial changes are necessary to promote true green growth. However, the European Environmental Agency (EEA) does not think absolute decoupling can be achieved on quick enough and on a large enough scale (EEA, 2021). Moreover, in 2019, the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) published a report arguing for the need to move away from green growth strategies and for wealthy countries to focus on downscaling strategies (Parrique et al., 2019).

Lastly, Agrowth includes a movement that generally does not want to pay attention to growth at all (Drews et al., 2019). This line of thinking is quite different from that of the supporters of degrowth, who are in favour of deliberate downscaling. In the case of agrowth, growth could still occur. Van den Bergh stresses how agrowth “can contribute to reducing scientific and political polarization in the long-standing debate on growth versus the environment” (2018, p. 53). In his argument, he mentions peoples’ fear of downscaling, argues the impossibility of green growth and he then suggests agrowth as a proper alternative. Missemer (2017) goes as far as arguing that the now deceased Georgescu-Roegen, who some consider to be the person who inspired degrowth, may have been in favour of agrowth instead of degrowth. He states that Georgescu-Roegen did not seem to have decline as his objective but the bioeconomic programme, which may or may not have let to decline. Focusing on happiness instead of growth is also seen as an example of agrowth, since both shift focus away from growth (Gerber and Raina, 2018). Some researchers and practitioners are not necessarily in favour of agrowth full stop but consider it to be part of a larger mainstream growth alternative. For example, Gerber and Raina (2018) make a case for post-growth, which they state should include agrowth and degrowth, among other alternatives. Justice plays a large role in their arguments, since they state that agrowth could be particularly useful to certain subaltern populations, who not necessarily need growth or degrowth.

In short, there is still much debate about a variety of alternatives to neoclassical growth. If these subjects are included in curricula, it is therefore to be expected that they are not posited as givens but as possible alternatives to the mainstream idea about growth, which may encourage critical thought among students.

2.4 Extent of inclusion of alternatives

In order to classify ‘extent’, the cognitive process dimension of the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy (RBT) (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) is used (Figure 1). The cognitive process dimension, which Forehand (2005) describes as “processes used to learn” (p. 4), includes

the following educational objectives: remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating and creating.

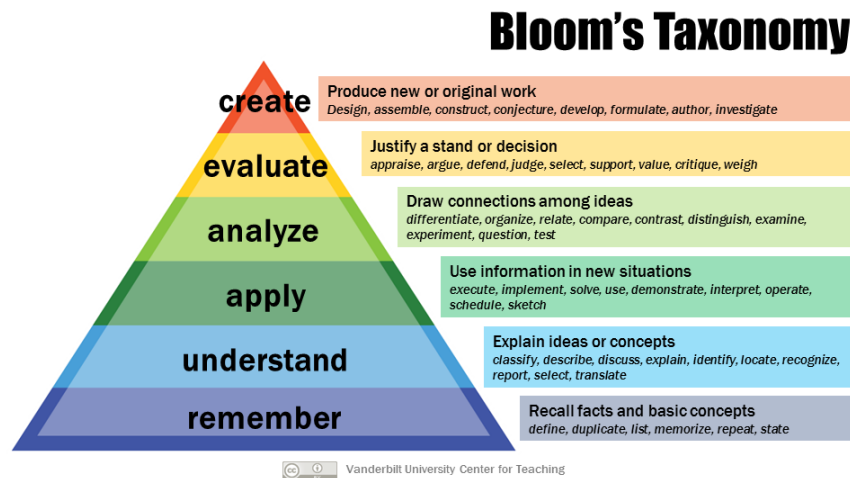


Figure 1. Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching, n.d.)

In order to share Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) cognitive process dimensions in a clear manner, I have chosen to list them in the Table 2.

Table 2. Cognitive process dimensions (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, pp. 67-8)

Remember	"Retrieving, recognizing, and recalling relevant knowledge from long-term memory" (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, p. 67) .
Understand	"Constructing meaning from oral, written, and graphic messages through interpreting, exemplifying, classifying, summarizing, inferring, comparing and explaining" (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, p. 67) .
Apply	"Carrying out or using a procedure through executing, or implementing" (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, p. 67) .
Analyse	"Breaking material into constituent parts, determining how the parts relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose through differentiating, organizing and attributing" (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, p. 67).
Evaluate	"Making judgements based on criteria and standards through checking and critiquing" (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, p. 68).
Create	"Putting elements together to form a coherent or functional whole; reorganizing elements into a new pattern or structure through generating, planning, or producing" (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, p. 68).

Since alternatives to the current growth paradigm may not be included at all, the category 'missing' was added to the RBT. Table 3 shows what the extended RBT looks like for my

research purposes, which means it has been modified to accommodate the alternatives to mainstream growth.

Table 3. Operationalisation RBT

Missing	Alternatives to the mainstream economic growth paradigm are absent from the course.
Remember	Students are expected to recognise and recall alternatives when they come across these alternatives again.
Understand	Students are expected to be able to interpret, classify, summarise, compare or explain one or more alternatives.
Apply	Students are expected <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to be able to give examples of applications of alternatives; - or to apply the alternatives to a theoretical case study; - or to implement alternatives, or elements thereof, in an actual project.
Analyse	Students are expected to analyse situations and to determine how alternatives to the mainstream economic paradigm relate to this situation. Students thus differentiate, organise and attribute.
Evaluate	Students are expected to make judgements about situations in which alternatives are either used or not used, based on criteria and standards through checking and critiquing.
Create	Students are expected to generate, plan or produce actual ideas or activities related to alternatives to the mainstream economic growth paradigm.

3. Methodology

Now that the main concepts have been expanded upon, this chapter will shed light on the data sources that have been used, as well as the ways in which data was gathered and analysed.

3.1 Data sources

There are two types of universities in the Netherlands: universities of applied sciences and research universities. I chose to focus on the latter in order to be able to build upon research that was done by Rögele et al. (2022) and Drews et al. (2019); Rögele et al. (2022) looked into university teaching staff's considerations regarding curriculum content and Drews et al. (2019) discussed researchers' opinion clusters with regard to anti-growth positions. In

order to determine which Bachelor programmes to include, I checked whether the programme met one of the following requirements:

- the programme is called Business Administration;
- the programme is called International Business Administration;
- the programme is called International Business;
- the programme is called Bedrijfskunde, which is the Dutch translation of Business Administration;
- the programme is called Internationale Bedrijfskunde, which is the Dutch translation of International Business Administration

These programmes were chosen because they have very similar contents; they discuss topics related to fields such as operations, marketing, strategy, finance etc. I did not look into the more technical business programmes, often called 'Technische Bedrijfskunde', in order to try to study a more homogenous population; Technische Bedrijfskunde, or Industrial Engineering, has a very different curriculum. I felt a more homogenous population was desirable because it allows me to compare answers more easily. After all, other programmes will have different disciplinary requirements which will consequently influence coordinators' deliberations. Fourteen programmes met the criteria and they are listed in Table 4.

Table 4. Dutch research universities that offer bachelor degrees in Business Administration or International Business Administration

Research University	Title Bachelor programme
Erasmus University Rotterdam	Bedrijfskunde (Business Administration)
	International Business Administration
Maastricht University	International Business
Open University	Bedrijfskunde (Business Administration)
Radboud University Nijmegen	Bedrijfskunde (Business Administration)
	Business Administration
	International Business Administration
Tilburg University	International Business Administration
University of Groningen	Bedrijfskunde (Business Administration)
	International Business
University of Twente	International Business Administration
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam	Bedrijfskunde (Business Administration)
	International Business Administration
University of Amsterdam	Business Administration

3.2 Data collection, data analysis and data removal

In order to present the section in a structured manner, collection and analysis methods will be shared per research sub question. Data removal will be discussed separately.

3.2.1 Courses on economic growth or its alternatives

In order to apply focus and to target the most promising courses and contact their coordinators, I created a shortlist with courses most likely to include subject matter related to economic growth or its alternatives. Including all courses would improve the reliability and validity of this study; however, it would also require much more time and time for a Master's thesis is quite limited.

First, up-to-date overviews of the entire curricula of the fourteen programmes and their corresponding course descriptions were found online. In order to establish a shortlist of courses most likely to contain subject matter related to economic growth or its alternatives, I first planned to analyse the course descriptions by making use of the result of the computational-linguistics analysis that was done by Savin et al. (2021). Savin et al. (2021) established which words researchers associate most strongly with the terms 'economic growth' and 'green growth'; Appendix 1 includes the lists of words. However, creating a shortlist in this manner already resulted in having to include over 60 courses based on them mentioning the word 'economics' in their course description alone, which means this approach soon transpired to be too time consuming considering the general scope of a Master's thesis.

Eventually, all courses that had 'economics' in their title were selected. If the word 'economy' appeared in the majority of a course's learning goals, it was also selected. Moreover, also courses that had the word 'sustainable', 'sustainability' or 'responsible' in their title were selected. Finally, if course descriptions specifically mentioned 'economic growth', 'degrowth', 'green growth', 'agrowth', or another type of growth related to the economy they were selected as well. In short, a course was selected if it met one or more of the following requirements:

- Course title includes 'economics' or 'economy'
- Majority of course's learning goals include 'economics' or 'economy'
- Course title includes 'sustainable' or 'sustainability'
- Course title includes 'responsible' or 'responsibility'
- Course description specifically mentions 'economic growth', 'degrowth', 'green growth', 'agrowth' or another type of growth related to the economy

This selection meant 21 courses were selected for further research. As mentioned, scope was an important factor in determining this selection. However, by choosing these selection criteria and not others, I have tried to optimise the validity of this research.

The reasoning behind the choices I made is as follows. First, since economic growth has a close relationship to economics, it makes sense to include all classes that focus on economics. If a class focuses on economics, economics would appear in the title or appear in the majority of a course's learning goals. Second, mainstream growth alternatives are closely related to sustainability and responsibility; responsible growth and sustainable growth are both terms in use. Here I chose to only include courses with titles containing these words, since this signals that the concepts are key to the course. Moreover, if the words were used in course descriptions, they often also referred to other contexts, such as making sure that people stay with a company for longer, so sustainable HR, or such as measuring responsibly, i.e. measuring in a valid manner. Third and finally, I ensured all courses containing the words 'economic growth', 'degrowth', 'green growth', 'agrowth' or any other type of growth related to the economy were included, since this signals that the economic growth theme plays a large enough role in the course to justify mentioning it in a relatively short course description.

3.2.2 Extent of inclusion and reasons for including or excluding

Once the course shortlist was created, course coordinators were asked to participate in an interview about the content of their course through email. The coordinator of every selected course was included; purposive or intentional sampling was used in order to avoid excluding important participants (Arrogante, 2022). If coordinators had not responded after a week, I sent them a reminder. After a third reminder and request for alternative connections, I would try to contact another teacher of the course directly. In the end, I managed to speak to fourteen teachers, of which eleven were indeed the course coordinator.

Interviews took place through Teams and every interviewee agreed to record the interview. At the start of each conversation, interviewees were told the purpose of the research: to contribute to my Master's thesis by providing information about the implicit or explicit presence of 'economic growth' or alternatives to economic growth in the course, as well as about the reasoning behind including or excluding content in or from the course related to this subject. Interviewees were then shown the consent form included in Appendix 4, and were asked if I was allowed to use their names in my research report, or if they wished to remain anonymous. I also told the interviewees that they were free to change their mind about their choice at any time and that they could inform me about this through email. Interviewees were also told that they could receive the thesis once it was finished if they wanted to – all interviewees said they would appreciate this. Appendix 2 includes the questions for the semi-structured interview.

The interviews provided the data to answer sub question two about the extent to which subjects are included, and sub question three about the reasoning behind including or

excluding certain subjects. Recorded interviews were transcribed to enable conceptual analysis based on the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001) and the consideration categories established by Rögele et al. (2022). Table 5 summarises the used data gathering and data analysis techniques.

In the end, several people wished to remain anonymous. In order to guarantee their anonymity, I chose to anonymise all data. The sample size is simply not large enough to guarantee anonymity if only those who requested it would have been anonymised. This is also the reason why bits and pieces have been removed from certain phrases used in this thesis; certain information would immediately clarify who someone is, for example based on the book that is used. If information was taken out, this is always mentioned, if possible with a specification of what was taken out, for example by writing *[number]*. Transcripts have not been included in this thesis for the same reason: they contain too much information that would risk anonymity, even with these precautions; however, both my supervisors have received the transcripts for review-purposes. Even in the supervisor-versions, all names, course titles, university names etc. have been taken out. In order to provide readers with enough information to evaluate my conclusions, Appendix 5 contains anonymised phrases that resulted from the analysis. Many interviews were in Dutch, since this was the interviewee's and interviewer's native tongue, and only some were in English, so all phrases have been translated to English, once more, to ensure anonymity.

Table 5. Data gathering methods and data analysis methods per research question

Question	Data gathering	Data analysis
Sub question: which courses	Curricula descriptions and course descriptions - on the institution's website	Content analysis, using the requirements that were set out in section 3.2.1
Sub question: extent to which alternatives are included	Semi-structured interviews with course coordinators	Quantitative analysis and conceptual analysis based on the RBT by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001)
Sub question: reasons for including or excluding alternatives	Semi-structured interviews with course coordinators	Quantitative analysis and conceptual analysis based on the staff considerations by Rögele et al. (2022)

3.2.3 Data removal

All data was stored on my private cloud and my private device. As mentioned, anonymised transcripts have also been shared with the thesis supervisors. The University of Twente will remove my thesis out of their database once they are no longer required to keep it on record for inspection purposes. The data stored on my private cloud and private device will be removed once the thesis has been graded with a sufficient grade. The thesis itself I will keep; however, the transcripts will be removed no later than July 2023, which is one year from the time of writing.

3.3 Ethical considerations

In order to ensure that research is done in an ethical manner, the University of Twente has made it compulsory for staff and students to hand in their research proposal for an ethical review. This research was therefore also subject to this review, which ensured its execution in a responsible manner. Moreover, as stated, every interviewee was asked to give their informed consent, after having read the informed consent form that was drawn up by the university. This means that every interviewee was asked to state whether they allowed me to 1) cite them with name and function revealed, 2) cite them anonymously without identifying context or 3) only use the interview as an information source. Furthermore, every interviewee was allowed to terminate their participation at any time without giving a reason, which has not happened.

An ethical issue that may have arisen is that interviewees have been hesitant to openly share their true considerations. The content of a curriculum has a significant effect on its students; it determines what they will and will not learn to a large extent. The reasoning behind what to include in the curriculum is therefore expected to be thorough and well thought-through. Interviewees may consequently have felt forced to paint a picture different from reality, in order to ensure that people will respect their decisions and to ensure they do not lose face. Rosier pictures may have been painted subconsciously as well. I have tried to limit the former issue as much as possible by giving interviewees the choice to remain anonymous, which may have enticed them to be more open; however, this issue is difficult to overcome entirely and should therefore be kept in mind when looking at the results.

4. Results

In order to present the results in a structured manner, they will be shared per research sub question.

4.1 Courses on economic growth or its alternatives

As was explained in the methodology, in order to determine which mandatory courses discuss subjects related to economic growth or its alternatives, I looked at the online course descriptions and created a shortlist. Table 6 is a summary of what was found and Appendix 3 shows the actual course titles.

The described methodology resulted in a selection of 21 unique courses out of 218 unique courses in total. Unique means that courses that are taught in multiple programmes were only counted once. Two selected courses were given in two programmes, a Dutch version and an English version, and four selected courses were taught in three programmes, a Dutch version, an English version and an English international version. This means that if all courses were counted this would result in 31 courses out of 316 courses in total.

Apart from two programmes, namely *Bedrijfskunde* at the University of Groningen and *International Business Administration* at the *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*, all programmes had at least one course containing the word 'economics' in their title. A course from *Bedrijfskunde* at the University of Groningen was included as well, based on the majority of its learning goals, four out of five, containing the word 'economy' or 'economics'. Economic growth was only mentioned once, in a course from the *International Business* master at *Maastricht University*. Finally, five courses were included due to the course title containing the word 'responsible' and one course was included due to its title containing the word 'sustainability'. No course descriptions contained the concepts 'degrowth', 'green growth' or 'agrowth'.

Coordinators of these 21 courses were invited for an online interview. In the end, I conducted 14 interviews. This means that two-thirds of the desired research population was actually included. There was at least one participant for each university; however, many respondents stressed that they could not give information about other courses in the programme, only about the course they themselves coordinated and/or taught. A course therefore does not represent a university's programme. The conclusion elaborates on the consequences of this sample size.

Out of the fourteen courses, eight turned out to discuss subject matter related to economic growth. The seven courses that were not represented by a member of staff did not refer to growth or profit maximisation³ in their course descriptions or learning goals; however, this does not have to mean that it is indeed absent. This means that out of the 14 programmes, which equals 2340 ECs, a small part of approximately 48 ECs or eight courses can be confirmed to discuss subject matter related to economic growth. Considering the fact

³ From the interviews it transpired that some staff discusses profit maximisation instead of economic growth in order to critically reflect on the continuous pursuit of growth. This term has consequently been taken on board in a second screening of the course descriptions.

that most interviews stressed the small role economic growth played if it featured in the course at all, this is likely to be no more than 8ECs in total, which equals 1EC per course that said to discuss economic growth related subject matter. This means that, based on the information I have been able to gather, around 0.35 per cent of all 14 programmes combined seems to be dedicated to economic growth, either in a traditional or a critical manner. Of course, these are very rough estimates; however, combined with the fact that only one course description mentions economic growth and one other course that mentions profit maximisation, it gives the reader a very general idea of the importance that is currently attached to this subject: not much.

Table 6 Course selection

Research University	Title Bachelor programme	Selected courses
Erasmus University Rotterdam	Bedrijfskunde (Business Administration)	1x economics in title 1x responsible in title
	International Business Administration	Same as Dutch programme
Maastricht University	International Business	1x economics in title 1x economic growth in course description
Open University	Bedrijfskunde (Business Administration)	1x economics in title
Radboud University Nijmegen	Bedrijfskunde (Business Administration)	1x economics in title 3x responsible in title
	Business Administration	Same as Dutch programme
	International Business Administration	Same as Dutch programme
Tilburg University	International Business Administration	2x economics in title
University of Groningen	Bedrijfskunde (Business Administration)	1x majority learning goals include 'economics'
	International Business	2x economics in title
University of Twente	International Business Administration	1x economics in title 1x responsible in title
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam	Bedrijfskunde (Business Administration)	1x economics in title
	International Business Administration	1x sustainability in title
University of Amsterdam	Business Administration	3x economics in title

4.2 Extent of inclusion of alternatives to mainstream paradigm

Table 7 provides an overview of the extent to which courses have included economic growth or mainstream growth alternatives. All fourteen courses have been scored, which means there will be fourteen strikes divided over each column. The scoring of the category 'Degrowth, green growth or agrowth' was based on whether the course includes the philosophy behind the concepts. This was done by providing interviewees with a definition of the concepts, so they could assess whether the course's content matches the definitions without explicitly mentioning the concepts. Only one course explicitly mentions two out of the three concepts: degrowth and green growth. Finally, an alternative that many interviewees put forward was that they discussed alternatives to profit maximisation, so this option has been taken on board as well. This column does not contain fourteen strikes because by the time profit maximisation came up in an interview, several interviews had already been held, which means not all interviewees have been able to say if, and if so to what extent, they include profit maximisation.

Table 7 Extent of inclusion

	Mainstream growth	Degrowth, green growth or agrowth	Alternatives to profit maximisation
Missing	6	11	8
Remember	4		
Understand	2		
Apply	2	2	
Analyse		1	1
Evaluate			2
Create			

As was already discussed in the previous section, a little over half the courses that were included cover economic growth or alternatives to mainstream growth. If mainstream growth is included, GDP is often defined (remember) and sometimes alternative measurements are presented to the students (understand). The number two in the 'apply'-row is there because these courses ask students to apply the degrowth and/or green growth philosophy, which means students also have to be able to apply the mainstream economic growth concept. As will become clear from the next section, most teachers state that business studies and macroeconomic concepts are not a good match. Some teachers agree with this but have taken growth on board by applying it to the micro level, to the organisation. This has then resulted in the discussion of profit maximisation. What is striking is that, when

people have opted to include alternatives to economic growth or to profit maximisation in the course, this is always done by asking more of the students than only remembering or understanding. I will look deeper into this in the discussion. Lastly, the category 'create' never occurred. Some did not mention it at all and some commented that a Bachelor course generally does not advance beyond analysing and some minor evaluating.

4.3 Reasons for including or excluding alternatives

Interviewees were asked about the reasoning behind including or excluding alternatives to the mainstream economic growth paradigm in their course. Responses were categorised according to the categories established by Rögele et al. (2022), which are:

- Disciplinary requirements
- Attribution of responsibility
- Value orientations
- Cost-benefit considerations

Appendix 5 contains lists of all selected quotes per category. The ones highlighted here either represent a typical remark, so a remark that was very similar to remarks made by multiple interviewees, or a remark that stood out. Each category will be discussed in turn.

Undoubtedly, most remarks can be placed in the 'disciplinary requirements' category. What is striking here is that, apart from two remarks, all utterances relate to why alternatives are not included, or should not be included, in the Business Administration curriculum. In other words, this category is used less to explain why alternatives are in fact included. Three types of remarks stand out. First, typical remarks argue why growth subject matter belongs to an economics programme and not a business programme. Second, typical remarks argue why alternatives to mainstream growth do not belong to the economics basics, or to the economics canon and tradition. Finally, typical remarks argue that these alternatives will not be useful for BA students. These are examples belonging to these three types:

- "Yes, economic growth; isn't that more of a question for economics courses?" (personal communication, June, 2022)
- "We need to get the basic understanding. And the basic understanding is provided by these neoclassical theories" (personal communication, June, 2022)
- "Well, yes, I think that someone who works for a company can't do anything with this. Yes, I want... a shareholder, they just want to see a good result and they don't want to philosophise about degrowth or anything like that" (personal communication, June, 2022)

In line with these reasons, it was also mentioned that economics taught to BA students should enable them “to understand economic news” and content related to economic growth or its alternatives were therefore deemed unnecessary.

The ‘attribution of responsibility’ category contains remarks from a mix of those that do and that do not teach about alternatives to growth. Only very few remarks that were made belong to this category. Most remarks relate to why alternatives to mainstream economic growth should be taught elsewhere in the programme, for example: “I don't think that fits in with what we want to offer, so to speak. I say this would fit perfectly, I think, into a [year number] course in macro or micro economics perhaps” (personal communication, June, 2022). In this case, the interviewee did not teach about alternatives themselves; however, a similar remark was made by an interviewee who did teach about alternatives. They wanted to stress that it was not only their responsibility but a shared responsibility by all programme staff. Finally, one interviewee expressed a strong feeling of internal responsibility, saying they felt it was their duty to teach students to critically reflect on this subject by offering them critical points-of-view.

Apart from one remark, the ‘value-orientation’ category only contains phrases from teachers that teach about subjects that relate to alternatives to mainstream economic growth. Among these, only one interviewee mentioned a reason that is related to future developments for which discussing these subjects is important: “I do see that as my duty, yes, to make students critical in that respect. These are the people who will soon govern our country. Not all of them will reach the post of minister, but some may, or will become very important managers in companies. These are the people who will soon be making decisions. Well, I think it's very important that they do so with... with the right knowledge and skills, and I try to contribute to that” (personal communication, June, 2022). Most arguments in this category relate to the need to foster critical thinking in students; offering alternatives to the mainstream growth paradigm is then considered a means to do this, for example: “And that they . . . can find their own truth and from that reasoning be able to look at certain issues, such as income inequality, with a critical eye” (personal communication, June, 2022). The most striking remark in this regard is from a teacher who does not include alternatives in their teaching but at the same time feels it would benefit students: “just to provide a broader perspective to the students, it would be really.. actually it would be really important to talk about things like these” (personal communication, June, 2022). Time is then named as a limiting factor; this will be discussed in the next category.

‘Cost-benefit considerations’ is the runner-up when it comes to the amount of remarks related to the category. A subject that featured heavily in this category is time; more specifically the ECs of a course. Most remarks therefore relate to the third sub category

mentioned by Rögele et al. (2022), which is that other competencies or knowledge are deemed more important to discuss in the limited time available. Some examples:

- “If you would have more time, you could discuss more, or a different perspective that seems to be closer to what we observe and what is reality” (personal communication, June, 2022)
- “We are already pleased to be able to offer the current syllabus” (personal communication, June, 2022)
- “Of course, there is only so much room in the programme and I... I don't know if you know something about this, but it is always a nightmare to change the programme, because everybody wants to have [number ECs] points and we all have [number ECs] points courses. Everyone wants to keep that and of course no one wants to surrender any points” (personal communication, June, 2022)

The content of schoolbooks is also mentioned as a reason for not including alternatives to mainstream economic growth; alternatives are simply not mentioned in the book that is used and also not really in any other ‘good’ schoolbooks, for example: “So these teachers just thought: what should we have as a book, well, then you want to have a good introductory textbook” (personal communication, June, 2022). In this case the benefits therefore do not seem to outweigh the costs of looking for more or different teaching materials. Benefits did outweigh the costs for another teacher, who was asked to include more sustainability topics by the Faculty Student Council. In the end, despite the time and effort it would cost, changes were made: “The Faculty Student Council has been very insistent on more sustainability. They also asked for it and then I said yes, I want to do something with that. It took a while, because you can't do it as quickly as they want” (personal communication, June, 2022). To conclude this category, no one mentioned feeling obliged to teach these topics and only one interviewee mentioned that teaching about alternative ways of looking at things, so not necessarily alternatives to mainstream growth, provided them with motivation to teach: “I find this kind of thing very interesting to discuss or debate with students” (personal communication, June, 2022).

Another aspect that was mentioned more than once but did not fit perfectly with one of the existing categories is teachers’ stance with regard to alternatives to economic growth. I will elaborate further on this extra category in the discussion; here I only want to mention that a person’s stance on this topic influences whether they will even consider incorporating it into a course they teach. Utterances related to this matter are as follows:

- “The Degrowth Movement and I don't know what else is out there. Is all nice, idealistic stuff, but in practice, of course, it doesn't work like that. Yes, the, the fact is that ultimately growth remains. And there are a few idealists who think

differently about that. But they are not the ones to be taken seriously” (personal communication, June, 2022)

- “I don't find this discussion very interesting. So is... because ultimately I think... that that's the for... for example, definition one and two [green growth and degrowth], they are not mutually exclusive at all. The question is simply: what is in GDP and that's just a choice, that's a political choice, that's a policy choice. And the moment you include pollution and externalities in GDP, they are both the same. So I think it's a, a yes, that's always dangerous to say, but it sounds like, it is a bit of a symbolic discussion, as I see it” (personal communication, June, 2022)

The first utterance is a bit more extreme than the second; however, both show that this is a subject about which people can have strong opinions and that these can influence what ends up in a course. Interviewees were also asked who determines what content is discussed in a course and, although some mention a programme director or a Bachelor coordinator, most course coordinators have quite some room to change the content of the courses they coordinate as they see fit. Their opinions therefore have a significant impact on course content. In this case, negative attitudes with regard to degrowth and green growth contribute to them being excluded from the course.

5. Discussion

The results will now be combined in order to answer the main research question, after which implications of these findings will be discussed.

5.1 Answer to main research question

The answers to the sub questions presented in the previous chapter allow me to answer the main research question:

Which are the reasons for excluding or including alternatives to the mainstream economic growth paradigm from/in the Bachelor curricula of Business Administration programmes offered at Dutch research universities to the current extent?

The results show that reasons related to disciplinary requirements are popular and especially frequent among those who do not teach about alternatives. Whereas every interviewee but one felt it was necessary to move away from the narrow definition of economic growth, so measuring GDP, many stated they felt this should only be discussed in programmes focused solely on economics. Some interviewees agreed but felt the macroeconomic topic could be translated to micro level by discussing businesses' focus on profit maximisation. This means that if changes in the BA curricula are desired in this regard, the teaching staff's view of the economic canon for BA students should be targeted. Moreover, the courses that discuss

alternatives to growth or profit maximisation are coordinated by people that do this because of their value orientations. Efforts to change the BA curriculum could consequently also focus on developing staff's value orientations. In addition to this, a programme's hiring policy could also be changed to include an assessment of whether people value environmental and social justice. Reasons regarding the attribution of responsibility popped up as well, though much less often, and were mostly used in two ways. First, some interviewees remarked that the course they teach does not include alternatives to mainstream growth but that they felt that other courses in the programme should. This reason only popped up when dedicated economics courses were part of the same programme as the course that was taught by the interviewee. On the other hand, there were those that stated their course includes alternatives and that they felt other courses should include the philosophy behind it as well. This seems in line with the reasoning that was often used by those who have chosen to teach about alternatives to mainstream growth-orientation, be it macro level or micro level; they value it and therefore feel it is important to teach about it and not just in the course they teach themselves.

When it comes to extent, if alternatives to the mainstream growth paradigm, both macro and micro, were taught, this was often done to a larger extent, so more advanced layers from the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (RBT) were targeted, and the reasoning behind this often belonged in the value orientation category. In this case, interviewees especially stressed the importance of teaching critical thinking, both in general but also in relation to pursuing growth as a business or as a society. Since critical thinking is a not plain knowledge but a skill, teachers may be more inclined to move up the RBT. Moreover, what seems to match the fact that this topic is taught because interviewees truly value it, they also choose higher categories to ensure that students take this on board for the long run. Multiple interviewees specifically mentioned this: they felt it was important that students stay critical when they leave the university and they felt remembering or understanding would not lead to this result.

Much reasoning also fell within the category of cost-benefit considerations; however, elaboration does not need to be long because almost all remarks boiled down to one thing. Time was mentioned as the number one enemy of discussing alternatives to mainstream growth. Whether the subject would truly be included if courses contained more ECs I cannot say. If interviewees mentioned time as a factor, I often asked them if this meant they felt other subjects were more important. Not one interviewee agreed with this. Instead, some pointed back to disciplinary requirement issues, so they stated that micro issues take precedence because they are more relevant to business students, for example. Another reason that would pop up is also related to disciplinary requirements: the basics have to be dealt with and alternatives are not part of these basics. In short, other knowledge or

competencies were indeed deemed more relevant but saying this out loud seemed to bother several interviewees. This could be because they were talking to someone who felt the subject was important enough to write a master's thesis about; however, most also felt the growth-mindset needed to change if a more sustainable world was to be reached, so they may also have felt conflicted since it then may feel odd to say the subject is not important enough to teach about.

Lastly, the results show that one aspect did not necessarily fit in with the categories established by Rögele et al. (2022), which is teachers' stance with regard to the discussed alternatives to economic growth. If teachers' stance towards subjects such as degrowth is negative, they may be much less inclined to include it in their teaching. A potential reason for why this category was missing is that Rögele et al.'s (2002) research population consisted of participants of a training programme to enhance their SD teaching capabilities; the population was therefore unlikely to be very critical of sustainable development. Moreover, the subject of sustainable development's potential is much less debated. As was pointed out before, there is still quite some debate regarding the exact meaning of degrowth, green growth and agrowth, and even more debate regarding their feasibility. For now, it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions about this potential extra category, since interviewees were not specifically asked about their stance towards the highlighted alternatives. Some interviewees simply brought it up but more thorough research would be needed to shed more light on this matter.

5.2 Implications

Figure 2 was published in the Dutch national newspaper Trouw on 28 June 2022, while I was finalising this thesis. The text translates into: "What if we measure ecological growth instead of economic growth..?".

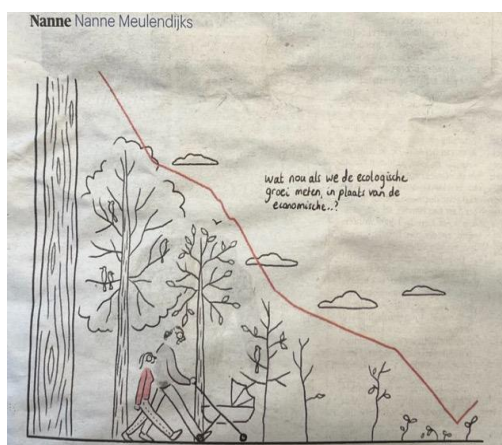


Figure 2 Ecological growth (Meulendijks, 2022)

It is an interesting figure to look at, next to two remarks from two different interviewees:

- “And that, of course, is the basic economy that I am trying to explain, and that is where I am perhaps briefly mentioning the environment, maybe” (personal communication, June, 2022).
- “And one of the things we indeed make the students think about is: is the environment part of the economy? Or is the economy part of the environment? These are kind of the two pictures we draw in that regard” (personal communication, June, 2022).

As these remarks illustrate, there seems to be quite a large gap between what is taught in one course or sometimes maybe even a programme, and another. Whereas some teachers have embraced the fact that business students should be taught in a different manner to reach different environmental and also social outcomes, others feel that what they consider to be the canon should be taught, since this is what is most relevant to business students, or maybe even since it is easiest: “the purpose of taking this course is also that students simply get a passing grade for it, because that is what they need, to eventually get a Bachelor's degree” (personal communication, June, 2022).

If alternative ways of looking at growth, be it on micro or macro scale, are not taught because they are not part of the basics, then the question arises how they can then ever become part of these basics, of the tools available to a person who enters the business that eventually is to contribute to our society's wellbeing, which is currently still measured by considering GDP growth. As one of the interviewees put it:

Gee, you have model A that says economic growth, but the other three say something else. So what does that say? Yes, then I personally could tell a lot more about an economy than: okay, yes, it was 3% this year. Yeah, great, but we did have Corona and everyone is in the hospital and everyone has this.... Yeah, what does that say? (personal communication, June, 2022)

Critically reflecting on subjects such as GDP growth or profit growth in our teaching, even if you as a teacher do not think alternatives such as degrowth are viable, are important to foster a future business climate in which its players think critically in order to make well thought through decisions that lead to an environment, including people and businesses, that will thrive, also in the long run.

Fortunately, some courses and programmes have already embraced this direction. Out of the fourteen courses that were included, three discuss alternatives to economic growth and three discuss alternatives to profit maximisation. Two of these courses overlap,

so four courses actually tackle the focus on GDP growth or profit growth. The individuals teaching the course seem important drivers; however, the curriculum as a whole also seems to play an essential role: multiple interviewees pointed out they were thinking about making changes because the programme as a whole seemed to be making a shift and they were consequently eager to get on board, so group effort seems to be a great motivator. I personally hope teachers will manage to break away from what was described in the introduction as a dawned realisation that change is needed without actual behavioural change and that more teachers will soon follow the example some of their peers already set.

The research objective was to enable those critical of mainstream economic growth theories to determine which educational gaps related to economic growth exist and why they exist in order to facilitate environmental and social justice. Based on the findings, the first step seems to be to start a discussion with programme directors and course coordinators about whether or not alternatives to growth belong to the basics that should be taught to BA students. As it stands, many course coordinators will need persuading on this front, or at least a conversation about potential benefits and drawbacks of replacing some of the traditional curriculum with, as one interviewee called it, real-life economics; with economics that enables students to make different choices than their management-predecessors in order to ensure both environmental and social justice. Interviewing the course coordinators about this subject seems to have sparked interest, since many were keen to discuss the topic, and these conversations may therefore have left the door open for future discussion.

6. Conclusion

What will conclude this thesis is a critical review of the research limitations. Moreover, suggestions for future research will be shared.

6.1 Research limitations

To start with, I have been unable to include all courses of the selected programmes in this research. A master's thesis comes with limited time, which made it impossible to accomplish this; however, it does mean a skewed image of the field may have arisen. I have tried to limit this effect by making a solid selection, in which at least all economics courses were included. Then there is of course the matter that not all courses from the shortlist have been included. Some course coordinators did not reply at all after several reminders and unanswered phone calls, some responded that they simply did not have fifteen minutes to spare. In cases such as the latter, I have asked coordinators if there were other teachers of the course I could talk to. This resulted in success on three occasions; however, sometimes the other teachers also did not have time until after my thesis would already have been

handed in. Teachers who are not coordinators could in turn not always say with certainty why certain content had been included or excluded; however, it transpired that many of them were aware of at least some of the considerations and had sometimes also been part of the decision-making process. This makes sense since, Dutch power distance is quite low (Hofstede, 1980). The results of my research should therefore be considered with all of this in mind; a third of the originally targeted population is missing, luckily this also means two-thirds was represented. Would I have had all the time and resources in the world, I would have opted to include all courses; courses less likely to include this subject matter would then be included by sending out a questionnaire. This way, I would be able to paint a more complete picture without taking much of peoples' time. I would then also have expanded the definitions of the alternatives to growth so that subjects such as shorter workweeks, a measure that is put forward by the degrowth movement, could also pop up, in HRM courses for example. I would also have sat down with all the programme directors, since they are also a gatekeeper in determining course content. The question is whether all the extra time and effort would have resulted in much more interesting information. This study is meant as an exploration and considering the fact that most courses with economics as its main theme were included, the current findings are sufficient to enable gauging the current state of the alternatives to growth teachings in BA programmes. Including programme directors would probably be the most rewarding, since this would shed more light on the reasoning behind the choices made.

In the literature review I already commented on the fact that there is still debate about the definitions of mainstream growth alternatives. Moreover, the concepts are also quite new and may therefore be relatively unfamiliar territory to teaching staff. This means that some courses may discuss subjects that relate to these topics without explicitly mentioning them. I have tried to circumvent this issue by including a more general question about interviewees' teachings concerning alternatives to economic growth, before I ask about specific alternatives. Moreover, when asking about degrowth, green growth and agrowth in particular, I have provided interviewees with definitions of the concepts, so they were able to recognise some of the elements from their course content even if they were not familiar with the terms, or did not completely agree on the chosen definition. However, considering the extent of the theories, the definitions did not include all available information, which means that the teaching staff may have included some elements of alternative growth theories in their classes without this transpiring in my research.

I would like to finalise this section with a few remarks on what I would have done differently in hindsight. Before the interviews started, a semi-structured interview script was created in order to ensure all related theory would be discussed. Moreover, it would allow for proper comparisons between interviewees. During the final analysis, I realised I have not

always asked explicitly about whether teachers felt responsible to teach about alternatives to economic growth or whether they potentially felt someone else in the curriculum was responsible for this. The reason for this is because, beforehand, I thought this question would only be relevant if courses actually included alternatives to mainstream growth; however, in hindsight it would have been interesting to know either way. Something else I would have done differently is the inclusion of profit maximisation. Profit maximisation is a subject that is closely related to economic growth and it would have made sense to ask teachers about it. Although unlikely, some may not have said anything about them discussing profit maximisation because they did not connect it to economic growth. The reason I say it is unlikely is because all conversations were quite elaborate and all interviews have at least described their course content by and large. Still, if I would have included it from the start, I could have drawn firmer conclusions about whether courses discuss profit maximisation, which is more or less micro growth, and to what extent and why. If I had had the option, I would also have scheduled the research differently. Teaching staff is always very busy but even more so towards the end of the year. Talking to staff and management may therefore be easier closer to the start of the academic year.

In short, whereas I have tried to overcome limitations as much as possible, there remain factors that reduce the reliability and validity of this research to some extent. Despite this, considering the explorative nature of the thesis, valuable insights can still be taken from it. After all, information on fourteen courses divided over fourteen Bachelor programmes gives the reader quite some insight into the growth-related teaching and the reasoning behind choices made at BA programmes at Dutch research universities.

6.2 Future Research

This thesis has contributed to existing literature by showing what the current status is of BA education in The Netherlands with regard to economic growth. As elaborated upon in the literature review, others have commented on the need for BA education to include alternatives to the mainstream focus on growth (Bobulescu, 2022; Ehrensall, 2001); however, it was unclear exactly to what extent this was currently the case. Moreover, while Rögele et al (2022) looked into professors deliberations with regard to sustainable development education, they focused on a group that had already shown an interest in this matter, leaving out those that may not be very motivated to include this subject matter in their teachings. This thesis has functioned as a thermometer, it has exposed the status quo, in order to allow others to go from here.

There are of course many lines of inquiry that could be further explored with regard to this topic; however, the ones I discuss here, tie in closely with either the results or the shortcomings of my own research. First, as said before, profit maximisation could be a good

microeconomic alternative for the macroeconomic pursuit of traditional economic growth; including it in research into BA teaching would give a more thorough insight into whether programmes include alternatives to the growth imperative. Another possible research topic, one that could spark debate about awarded ECs within programmes, is if teachers will indeed teach about alternatives to mainstream economic growth if they have more ECs to teach. If it turns out they would not, more research would be needed to find out more about the reasoning behind not teaching about alternatives to the pursuit of growth. Third, based on the results, research into the way teachers' opinion with regard to different alternatives to mainstream growth influences their decision whether or not to teach about this subject could expand upon the research done here. This would be especially interesting for programme management, since it could influence their decision-making with regard to hiring as well as to the requirements they set for a programme's content. Finally, related to the latter point, including programme directors would provide more insight that would add to the outcome of this thesis. Not all, but at least a handful of interviewees referred to their programme director when they talked about who influenced the content of the course they taught. Programme directors could consequently provide valuable insight into their deliberations and the overall decision-making process.

Considering the immense challenge ahead of staying within the planetary boundaries, combined with the potential impact of all those that are currently studying or will be studying Business Administration, research that will help guide BA education to enable positive change is essential. As interviewees pointed out, BA programmes are not studied by ten or twenty but by hundreds of students at a time. Staff's choices can consequently inspire as much as 1000 students within a matter of hours. Future research should therefore go hand in hand with future action in practice. I can only hope that this thesis will advance both research and practice and that it will contribute to positive change, even if it is in the slightest of ways.

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Appendix 1 - Words associated with 'economic growth' and 'Green Growth'

Savin et al. (2021) established the most discriminating words among scientists for the concepts economic growth and Green Growth. Certain “[w]ords are stemmed so that, for example, the term ‘pollut’ comprises ‘pollute’ and ‘pollution’” (p. 6).

Table 1

Most discriminating words by topic among scientists for the theme economic growth.

Topic	Most discriminating terms (frequency and exclusivity)
1	Money, welfar, unsustain, environment, citi, inequ, poverti, destruct, problem, graph
2	Develop, incom, industri, sustain, increas, factori, live, pollut, emiss, standard
3	Prosper, growth, wealth, product, limit, good, materi, exponenti, paradigm, qualiti
4	Gdp, capit, consumpt, expans, human, job, econom, resourc, employ, measur

Table 2

Most discriminating words by topic among scientists for the theme green growth.

Topic	Most discriminating terms (frequency and exclusivity)
1	Green, oxymoron, forest, greenwash, wind, industri, carbon, possibl, defin, prosper
2	Tree, solar, pollut, technolog, good, panel, environment, limit, growth, extern
3	Sustain, ecolog, windmil, imposs, natur, economi, effici, paradox, gdp, illus
4	Environ, energi, renew, climat, chang, develop, better, live, econom, power

Appendix 2 – Script semi-structured interview

Script semi-structured interviews with course coordinators

Introduction:

Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this interview. The interview is part of my Master's thesis, which looks into the curricula of Business Administration Bachelor programmes in the Netherlands.

1. Do you mind if I record this interview?
2. Is it correct that you coordinate the course [insert course here], which is part of the Bachelor [insert programme name here] at [insert institution here]?
3. How is the course organised (lectures, workshops, readings etc.)?
4. Do you also teach part of the course? If so, which parts?
5. When was the last time you [taught or coordinated] this course?
6. Are you familiar with all the course content, or are there parts for which I should contact one of your colleagues?
7. Who determines which topics are included in the course?
8. To what degree is 'economic growth' included in the course?
9. What are your thoughts on pursuing economic growth?
10. Are you aware of any suggested alternatives to pursuing economic growth?
11. [Show operationalisation table of Revised Bloom's Taxonomy]
To what degree are alternatives to 'economic growth' included in the course?
12. (If Degrowth, Agrowth or Green Growth have not been mentioned in question 11)
 - a. Do you know what is meant by [insert missing concept]?
 - b. If yes: what is your definition of the term?
 - c. [Provide interviewee with definition.]
 - d. To what degree is [insert missing concept] included in the course?
 - e. [Show Table 3 – Operationalisation RBT] Where would you place [insert missing concept]?
13. [Summarise answers to question 8, 11 and 12 and ask for confirmation.] Why have these topics been included to this degree? OR: why have no alternatives to mainstream economic growth been included in the course?
 - a. If not mentioned: Do you feel students should be informed about these topics?
If yes: Who do you think is responsible for this?

- b. If not mentioned: Do you think students would benefit from knowing about these topics in their future career? If yes: how?
- c. If not mentioned: Do time and/or effort have anything to do with your decision (not) to include these topics in the teachings?

Table for question 8:

Table: Revised Bloom's Taxonomy for this topic

Missing	Alternatives to the mainstream economic growth paradigm are absent from the course.
Remember	Students are expected to recognise and recall alternatives when they come across these alternatives again.
Understand	Students are expected to be able to interpret, classify, summarise, compare or explain one or more alternatives.
Apply	Students are expected <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to be able to give examples of applications of alternatives; - or to apply the alternatives to a theoretical case study; - or to implement alternatives, or elements thereof, in an actual project.
Analyse	Students are expected to analyse situations and to determine how alternatives to the mainstream economic paradigm relate to this situation. Students thus differentiate, organise and attribute.
Evaluate	Students are expected to make judgements about situations in which alternatives are either used or not used, based on criteria and standards through checking and critiquing.
Create	Students are expected to generate, plan or produce actual ideas or activities related to alternatives to the mainstream economic growth paradigm.

Appendix 3 – Selected universities and courses

Research University	Title Bachelor programme	Selected courses – course titles
Erasmus University Rotterdam	Bedrijfskunde (Business Administration)	- Economics - Responsible Business Leadership
	International Business Administration	See above
Maastricht University	International Business	- Economics and Business - Corporate Governance
Open University	Bedrijfskunde (Business Administration)	- Algemene Economie voor Management
Radboud University Nijmegen	Bedrijfskunde (Business Administration)	- Introduction to Economics and Business - Project Responsible Organisation 1 - Project Responsible Organisation 2 - Project Responsible Organisation 3
	Business Administration	See above
Tilburg University	International Business Administration	- Microeconomics for IBA - Macroeconomics for IBA
University of Groningen	Bedrijfskunde (Business Administration)	- Organisatie en Omgeving
	International Business	- Economics for IB - Global Political Economy
University of Twente	International Business Administration	- Strategy, Marketing and Economics (SME) - Change Management, Corporate Governance, Business Ethics, Leadership and Strategic & Responsible Foresight (CHANGEL)
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam	Bedrijfskunde (Business Administration)	- Managerial Economics
	International Business Administration	- Global Sustainability
University of Amsterdam	Business Administration	- Economics - Principles of Economics and Business 1 - Principles of Economics and Business 2

Appendix 4 – Informed consent form

Respondents answered this question during the interview; both the explanation, as well as the question and the respondent's answer were recorded.

Informed consent form for individual interviews for studies in MSc MEEM

Title research or acronym: *Alternatives to the Mainstream Economic Growth Paradigm in Business Administration Curricula at Dutch Research Universities*

I declare to be informed about the nature, method and purpose of the investigation. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study. I keep the right to terminate my participation in this study without giving a reason at any time.

My responses may be used solely for the purposes of this study. In its publications, they may (*please tick one of the options*):

- be cited with my name or function revealed
- be cited anonymously, thus without identifying context
- only used as information source

Dutch translation of options // Nederlandse vertaling van de opties:

- worden geciteerd met vermelding van mijn naam of functie
- anoniem worden geciteerd, dus zonder identificerende context
- alleen gebruikt als informatiebron

During the course of the interview I keep the right to restrict the use of (some of) my answers further than indicated above.

Name participant:

Date: Signature participant:

Appendix 5 – Interview quotes per reasoning category

All Dutch sentences have been translated to English using DeepL PRO in order to safeguard anonymity; otherwise it would have been very easy to recognise some based on the language they spoke.

Disciplinary requirements

- “Now everyone wants to do climate change . . and of course a university like that lags a little behind with the development of those programmes”.
- “Yes, economic growth; isn't that more of a question for economics courses?”
- [Should the ideas behind Degrowth, Green Growth and Agrowth be included in the economics subject within business administration?] “Yes . . We have known this for 50 years, that we are running up against the limits of growth and time after time we seem to be doing too little with it. So yes, we have known for 50 years that this should be part of the core of economics subjects. So if it's not doing that by now, then yes, we have to ask ourselves why that is”.
- “These mainstream economics contents, well they are the basis of what should be taught”.
- “. . . would take us too far, since this is a bachelor course”.
- “But you see, this is where everything comes from. You have this Degrowth and Agrowth theories or perspectives. . . in order to understand where these movements come from, we need to get the basic understanding. And the basic understanding is provided by these neoclassical theories”.
- “Well, yes, I don't think anyone who works for a company can do anything with that. Yes, I want... a shareholder, he just wants to see a good result and not philosophise about Dewgrowth or anything like that. And those are the people that... that we're training here. I mean, well, I think, if you teach a subject like that within an economics course, it's a completely different matter, eh, then you have to learn the whole paradigm about the economy as a whole, as a world, system, and that fits in perfectly. But thinking in terms of business administration, it has a completely different role”.
- “Hey, that's a profession of standards, in quotes, for existence I think there is some kind of corpus and knowledge that we think should be passed on . . . If I give an introductory economics course tomorrow, most people think it should start with perfect competition and then later you move on to monopoly as an exception”
- “Because then it might infer: I have chosen it. No, that's not quite true, because if I had chosen it, I might have done another course. So you have an idea somewhere of what that is. And then you have sort of... those things meet. I could be very stubborn and completely

go my own way. But somewhere that is not the intention. Because then those students get an Erasmus programme or a master's degree. And then they get a... so you have to... You try somewhere to conform to what is needed I think”.

- “But the purpose of this course is for students to be able to read the Financial Times and have an idea of what GDP means”.

- “The programme is currently thinking: And to what extent should we supplement basic knowledge? Or are there certain elements that should be replaced in basic knowledge?”

- “And that is, indeed, a very traditional approach. But from an economic point of view, that is of course also quite understandable, because this is a course that is, or was, designed to provide a general economic background for people who are actually studying, say, business administration. So it is not an economic study. And that's why, say, the number of elaborations is limited. Hey, we really focus on things like: what is essential, what do people who study business administration need to know in terms of an economic background?”

- “And, of course, economic growth and the vision of economic growth; that is indeed one of the points where I think that yes, this is something that has indeed been thought about differently in recent years. And I would therefore, if I were to adapt the course at this time, give a picture, so to speak, of what these other ideas are about and which direction they are heading in. But I would keep that rather limited because yes, there is, hey, the reality is not yet so far that it demands, that it would be directly, say, included in our teaching”.

- “Yes, also intuitively I don't think it fits the field. That's just me. I do understand that you can have very interesting discussions about: what is the growth of a company or the goal of a company? And of course, the sum of that, perhaps, is economic growth and or however we measure that. But on a societal level, because that's what you're talking about with economic growth, yes, that's not what you do as a business expert, of course”.

- “Yeah. As I said, the goal of that part of the macro part of the course is maybe to enable students to understand economic news. So what they read in the newspaper and to basically give them a bit of an understanding of the kind of economic context that their business later on is moving in. And I think for that, yeah, understanding inflation, understanding very basic concepts: what is a recession and unemployment? How is it defined even? I think these are very important building blocks that you need before you can sink any further, I think”.

Attribution of responsibility

- Terms do not occur in their own course, but the interviewee answers the question: [OK, and do you think they belong in the economics course of business administration?]

Interviewee: "Oh, absolutely, yes, I would, I would expect them back yes".

- "I don't feel responsible for what the other course coordinators put into their subjects. No"

- "Yes, then you should, I think, go back to the main goals of a [*Bachelor programme*] programme, I think".

- [Question: these alternatives to mainstream economic growth so less important]

Interviewee: "Yes, I don't want to say less important, but that doesn't directly fit, I think, what we want to offer so to speak. I say this would fit perfectly, I think, in a [*year number*] course in macro or micro economics perhaps".

- [Question: deliberate choice not to include alternatives for growth] "Partly searching for: is this the subject within which we should have that focus? . . . that discussion is ongoing".

- "I do see that as my mission, yes, to make students critical in that regard".

- "And then I think, then there are still so many subjects you know, because then there are subjects that they... there are more subjects that they get about growth and and where these kinds of things can be covered. That doesn't all have to happen in the [*number*] year of course. And personally I think that is far too little if it only has to come from me in the [*number*] year, yes, that is never going to be enough".

Value orientation

- "In terms of education, I think it is good that students get both sides of that debate".

- "Just to provide a broader perspective to the students, it would be really ... actually it would be really important to talk about things like these".

- "And that they . . . can find their own truth and reason from there to look at certain issues, such as income inequality, with a critical eye".

- "In three years' time, they really won't know those prospects. But hopefully by then you will have contributed something. Well, how do you properly build an argument and from what perspectives?"

- "And I think it's a good thing in any case that we confront students with this earlier in their studies, because of course they are offered a lot of Neo-Classical in their studies. So that is a very long time. If I put it in a charitable way: growth is good and 'greed' is good and this... yes, it does at least tilt it a little".

- [Question: do students really need to know about Degrowth and Green Growth?]

Interviewee: "Yes, I think it is really important that students see more than just the usual. I would find that really lacking".

- “And I don't think it's necessary for us to offer all models at university, because that's not possible at all. But I think that if you offer a number of them, you at least enable students to be aware of: hey, there might be blind spots. And I think you have to do that as a university, and then hopefully later on when students go out into the world and they start working, they will have enough to take this with them. I think that's important”.
- “Suppose the neoclassical model is the only one you learn, then you don't actually learn anything at all like 'oh there might be something else besides this'. And I think that if you offer multiple ways of looking at economics and looking at prosperity, it at least makes you aware of the blind spots that are in each of those models”.
- “I do see that as my task, yes, to make students critical in that respect. These are the people who will soon govern our country. Not all of them will reach the post of minister, but some may, or will become very important managers in companies. These are the people who will soon be making decisions. Well, I think it's very important that they do so with... with the right knowledge and skills, and I try to contribute to that”.

Cost-benefit considerations

- “So these teachers have just thought: what should we have as a book, well, then you want to have a good introductory textbook”
- “One of the subjects where we have the feeling that perhaps more elements should be included when it comes to sustainability, because in the books we have this is not yet very much built in”.
- “If you would have more time, you could discuss more, or a different perspective that seems to be closer to what we observe and what is reality”.
- “When I arrived here, I found this is taught usually and in this *[course]*. So I just stick to what has always been done here before”.
- “There is then zero time to, to even look beyond those different classical concepts”.
- “We are already happy to be able to offer the current syllabus”.
- “Yes, I find this kind of thing very interesting to discuss or debate with students”.
- “The Faculty Student Council has pushed very hard for more sustainability”.
- “It would perhaps be ideal if everyone could have it, but then again that has to do with.... Yes, there is always a trade-off. Look, on the one hand you want students to have a choice, because that is important, it motivates them”.
- “There is of course only so much space in the programme and I... I don't know if you know something about that, but it's always a hell of a thing to change the programme, because of course everyone wants such *[number ECs]* points and we all have *[number*

ECs points courses. Everybody wants to keep that and of course nobody wants to give anything”.

- “We don't have the time as supervisors of this course to have an intensive exchange of ideas with our students. And the purpose of taking this course is also that students simply get a sufficient grade for it, because that is what they need, ultimately to get a Bachelor's degree”.

- “Given the very limited amount of time, what is most useful for students who want to study business?”

- “And as I said in one and a half weeks, it's also a very tough selection to make”.