

Peter Courtney

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Dear Members of the Search Committee,

I am applying for the advertised position. I am completing a joint PhD in economics at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Stellenbosch University, supervised by Menno Pradhan, Servaas van der Berg and Debra Shepherd, and expect to finish in July 2027. My fields are development economics and the economics of education.

My research asks how school systems can raise learning under tight budgets, starting with the measurement of learning. In most countries, primary schools set and grade their own assessments, so marks are not comparable across schools. My job market paper, “Making School-Set Marks Comparable: Test Difficulty and Hidden Learning Inequality”, puts those marks on a common scale without a new test. Each secondary school sets the same assessments for students from many primary schools, making their marks comparable; a two-way fixed-effects estimator chains this network of comparisons across 1.2 million South African students.

The scale changes the picture: the raw-mark gap between rich and poor schools halved between 2018 and 2022 but did not narrow at all on the common scale, which also predicts the national school-leaving examination five years later, better than raw marks do. Requiring no new testing, the method runs on administrative data governments already hold.

Two further papers use the same administrative data to ask why resources do not reach the classroom; the job market paper began inside the first, as its measure of learning. “Provision Meets Deployment: What a Teacher Post Buys in South African Schools” finds that although the pupil–teacher ratio is 32, the average student sits in a class of 43. Because provinces allocate posts on last year’s enrolment, I isolate the posts each school is owed: only about half of each reaches class sizes; the rest is absorbed into slack. “Invisible Borders, Living Institutions” uses a within-child difference-in-differences among children moving schools within 30 km of the former KwaZulu Bantustan border to show that crossing into the former Bantustan still raises the risk of repeating a grade by about 10%.

I have taught Institutional Economics seminars in the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam’s PPE programme, supervised four bachelor’s theses, and designed the empirical assignments for Stellenbosch University’s Economics of Education course. I build data courses around visualisations and simulations that students code themselves, so they see what an estimator does before deriving it, and can teach microeconomics, statistics and econometrics, and development and education economics.

My CV, job market paper and supporting materials are enclosed, with updates at [courtney.ac](https://www.courtney.ac). Letters of reference from my supervisors and Dr Nic Spaull (Gates Foundation) will arrive separately. I am available for virtual interviews, including during the European Job Market (14–17 December). Thank you for your consideration.

Yours sincerely,

Peter Courtney