Peter Courtney

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Education

PhD in Economics (joint degree), VU Amsterdam & Stellenbosch University 2022 – Jul 2027 (expected)
Additional courses (Tinbergen Institute): Development Economics, Health Economics
Recognised Student (visiting), Blavatnik School of Government, Oxford; host Clare Leaver Jan – Mar 2026
Visiting Researcher, FAIR, Norwegian School of Economics, Bergen; host Vincent Somville Mar – Apr 2026
MSc International Development Studies (Economics of Development), *cum laude*, Wageningen 2019 – 2021
BCom Honours in Economics, University of Cape Town 2018
BSocSci Philosophy, Politics and Economics, with distinction, University of Cape Town 2015 – 2017

References

Menno Pradhan
VU Amsterdam & Tinbergen Institute
M.P.Pradhan@uva.nl
Supervisor

Servaas van der Berg
Stellenbosch University
svdb@sun.ac.za
Supervisor

Debra Shepherd
Stellenbosch University
debrashepherd@sun.ac.za
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Nic Spaull
Gates Foundation
Nic.Spaull@gatesfoundation.org

Fields

Primary: development economics, economics of education. Secondary: economic history, public economics.

Job Market Paper

Making School-Set Assessments Comparable: How School Assessments Hide Learning Inequality
At most a quarter of countries test every primary-school leaver comparably. I recover comparable learning outcomes, without a new test, from assessments that are incomparable because their difficulty varies across schools. Because students sit their secondary school's assessments within months of arriving, I can compare primary schools through students who share a secondary school, and secondary schools through students who share a primary school. Two-way fixed effects chain these comparisons from 1.2 million South African students into a common scale. The gap between rich and poor schools halved on raw marks between 2018 and 2022 but did not narrow on the common scale. Re-ranked on the common scale, about three-quarters of primary schools change learning quintile. The common scale predicts the national secondary leaving examination, sat five years later, better than raw marks do. Easier assessments do not buy a higher-achieving secondary school.

Working Papers

Provision Not Deployment: What a Teacher Post Buys in South African Schools
About half of a formula-owed teacher post reaches class size (IV). With the teachers they already have, schools could cut the class the average student sits in by up to a fifth, from 43 to 35 students.

Invisible Borders, Living Institutions: How Apartheid's Bantustans Still Shape Schooling
Crossing into the former KwaZulu homeland raises a child's risk of repeating a grade, and crossing out lowers it, by roughly 10–13% (within-child movers design); schools inside pay 9.2% less per educator head on the same national pay scale.

Work in Progress

- Land value taxation in Cape Town: machine-learning valuation of more than 800,000 parcels
- Closing small schools: a constrained optimisation of South Africa's school network
- What Makes Housing Reform Acceptable? Tax and Planning in England (with Francis J. DiTraglia, University of Oxford)

Book Chapters (peer-reviewed)

- Bridging the 20-Year Literacy Divide: African Language Reading Progress in South Africa (with N. Mohohlwane and N. Mtsatse). In *Tracking Changes in South African Reading Literacy Achievement*, Brill, 2023.
- Mathematical Stunting in South Africa: An Analysis of Grade 5 Mathematics Outcomes in TIMSS 2015 and 2019 (with N. Spaull and J. Qvist). In *Early Grade Mathematics in South Africa*, Oxford University Press,

2022.

Policy Papers

- Education, Inclusive Growth, and Fiscal Consolidation. SA-TIED Working Paper 247, UNU-WIDER, 2025.
- Inclusive Development in South Africa (with A. Donaldson et al.). SA-TIED Working Paper 273, UNU-WIDER, 2025.
- Education and Growth. Bureau for Economic Research, 2025.
- Rationalising Micro, Multigrade and Under-Subscribed Schools in South Africa. TDD Research Note 19, RESEP, 2024.
- Teacher Knowledge and Teacher Age (with N. Spaull). TDD Research Note 10, RESEP, 2022.

Op-eds in *News24* and the *Mail & Guardian*; work covered in the *Financial Mail*, *News24* and *BusinessTech*.

Presentations

2026 CSAE Workshop, Oxford; Blavatnik School of Government, Oxford; Oxford South Africa Discussion Group; FAIR, NHH Bergen; SA-TIED Phase II Close-Out Conference; RESEP, Stellenbosch; VU Amsterdam; Conference on Quantitative Education Research, Stellenbosch
2025 World Economic History Congress, Lund; Department of Basic Education, South Africa; SALDRU, University of Cape Town; RESEP, Stellenbosch; VU Amsterdam; SA-TIED and Operation Vulindlela webinar, GTAC
2024 SA-TIED Seminar, Pretoria; RESEP, Stellenbosch; VU Amsterdam
2023 Swedish Economic History Meeting, Lund; Pretoria–Stellenbosch PhD Workshop in Economics; RESEP, Stellenbosch
2022 Spatial Economics Workshop, Stellenbosch; RESEP, Stellenbosch

Teaching

Seminar Tutor, Institutional Economics (BSc PPE), Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam	2026
Thesis Supervisor, four BSc theses; second assessor, one MSc thesis, VU Amsterdam	2024 – 2026
Teaching Assistant, Economics of Education, Stellenbosch University	2022
Tutor, Philosophy, Politics and Economics, University of Cape Town	2018

Fellowships, Grants and Awards

C. Lowell Harriss Dissertation Fellowship, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy	2025
Emergent Ventures grants (three), Mercatus Center, George Mason University	2024 – 2025
Oppenheimer Memorial Trust Doctoral Scholarship	2022
Orange Knowledge Programme Fellowship (MSc), Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs	2019 – 2021
Dean's Merit List, University of Cape Town	2015, 2017

Research and Policy Experience

Independent Consultant, education data and policy: Western Cape Education Department, Usawa Agenda (Kenya), Gates Foundation, Bureau for Economic Research	2025 – present
Research Associate, J-PAL Africa: Shakuma violence-prevention evaluation	May – Dec 2022
Research Assistant to Roy Havemann, *How to Fix a Country* (Jonathan Ball, 2024)	2023 – 2024
Agricultural Economics Intern, UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)	Sep 2020 – Aug 2021

Other

Software: R and Stata (advanced), Python, Git, GIS, LaTeX. **Data:** South African administrative records.
Languages: English (native), Dutch (beginner). **Citizenship:** South African, Irish (EU), British.