Peter Courtney

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Education

PhD in Economics, VU Amsterdam & Stellenbosch University
Joint degree — 2022 – Jul 2027 (expected)

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
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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
Assessment has been found to substantially improve learning when results can be compared between schools, yet in at most a quarter of countries are all primary school students tested comparably. I recover comparable learning outcomes, without a new test, from assessments that are incomparable because their difficulty varies between schools. Because students sit their secondary school's assessments soon after 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 scale of grades comparable between schools. I show that between 2018 and 2022, the gap between rich and poor schools halved on school-set grades but did not narrow on comparable grades. Re-ranked on comparable grades, about three-quarters of primary schools change learning quintile. Comparable grades explain up to 2.5 times more variation in national secondary leaving examination results than school-set grades do. Students sort into secondary schools on comparable grades, not school-set grades. Estimating the value added of secondary schools requires comparable grades on entry, which my method provides.

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
A within-child movers design estimates sorting and the causal effect of the border separately. Sorting explains one-half to two-thirds of the border gap in grade repetition; crossing into the former KwaZulu Bantustan raises a child's risk of repeating a grade, and crossing out lowers it, by roughly 10–13%. 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.

Guest post on my job market paper on the World Bank's Development Impact blog (2026). 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.