Econ 594: Applied Economics

Spring / Summer 2018

Research paper and presentation

The main objective of the course is to have students write an empirical research paper in economics. In light of this, the aim of the lectures in May is to present applied econometrics material to provide specific tools (as opposed to general concepts) that can then be directly used for writing the paper. Since there is a limited number of lectures each week, students are expected to spend an important part of their time in May working on their paper project to have as much material as possible completed for the presentations that will take place in the month of June.

The goal of the students’ presentation in June is two-fold. First, having to prepare a presentation provides a strong incentive to make substantial progress on the paper project in May and early June. It is indeed essential to have an early start in order to meet the final deadline for paper submission on August 3rd. Second, the presentation is the ideal opportunity for students to get feedback from their peers and the instructor. In particular, after seeing the presentation, the instructor will be able to provide good indications of how much extra work required for the paper to be of the quality expected for a major MA research paper at UBC.

The rest of the document provides more detailed information and suggestions on the paper project. The project is divided in three phases. The topic of the paper will be selected and preliminary work completed during Phase I in May. Phase II is the presentation that will take place in the first half of June. Phase III is the redaction of the final version of the paper that will take place in the second half of June and in July.

**PHASE I: PAPER TOPIC AND PRELIMINARY RESEARCH (MAY 2018)**

As mentioned in the course syllabus, students in this section of 594 are expected to write an empirical paper using cross-sectional or panel data. Accordingly, most of the papers will be in “micro” oriented fields. Of course, the first step of the project is to find a suitable topic. There is no single rule that can be followed for finding a “good topic”. But clearly, even the best ideas will not yield much unless you also find a suitable data set. A typical approach for finding a topic that interests you is to first look at the existing—and preferably recent—literature, through a variety of sources including:

- Syllabus of field courses you have taken research in the Winter semester
- Recent working papers. For example, take a look at recent papers on the websites of faculty members at UBC or at the NBER (http://www.nber.org/papers/)
- Take a look at recent issues of journals. Both general purpose journals (Canadian Journal of Economics, American Economic Review, Journal of Political Economy, Quarterly Journal of Economics, etc.) and field journals (Journal of Labor Economics,
Some of the instructors in the field courses have asked you to write a research paper proposal. It is certainly appropriate to pursue this project and write the actual research paper as part of this class.

Once you have a good idea of the topic, you then need to find a suitable data set for your project. Possible options include finding a Canadian data set for which you can reproduce an analysis done for another country (typically the United States) in an existing paper. Or perhaps you can use the same data (or an updated version of the data) used in another paper to see what happens when you use a different estimation method or a different underlying economic model (to test different hypotheses with the same data). Note, though, that a simple replication study of an existing paper is not a sufficient contribution for a 594 paper. This being said, first trying to replicate an existing study and then going beyond the study with innovations of your own can be a very effective way of writing a good empirical paper.

Data Resources:

There are a large number of rich data sets available on the internet. For Canada, the primary source of data is Statistics Canada. Members of the UBC community have access to a large number of data sets through what is called the Data Liberation Initiative (DLI). Most of the data sets available through DLI are posted on the website of the UBC data library at: http://data.library.ubc.ca/. You can first click at “New Data Additions” to get a sense of what kind of data sets are available, or do a more detailed search using the links or search capabilities provided on that site.

A large number of other data sets are available for other countries. Two particularly useful places to look at are:

The NBER data collection: http://www.nber.org/data/

The ICPSR at the University of Michigan: http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/

I would recommend browsing through these data resources (or other resources) even if you don’t yet have a clear idea of your topic. Many researchers get good paper ideas by noticing interesting data sets, and then going through the literature to see whether these kinds of information have been used in other studies. And, of course, please don’t hesitate to drop by during my office hours to discuss these issues.

Note also that authors of empirical papers published in the Canadian Journal of Economics, the American Economic Review, the four American Economic Journals and an increasing number of other journals have to post their data sets on a publicly accessible web site. It should, therefore, be relatively easy to access data from recent papers published in these journals in case you plan to write a paper using more or less the same data. Some authors also make data sets available on their web sites.
All students should have a topic and a suitable data set by the end of May. Having a suitable data set does not simply mean listing a web link where that data set is available. By the time of the presentation, students should have at least completed some initial processing of the data set to produce descriptive statistics on the main analysis variables. Please see me early on if there is any technical reason (e.g. data set not readily available on the web) why there may be delays in obtaining your data set.

**PHASE II: PRESENTATION (WEEKS OF JUNE 4-8 AND 11-15)**

Each student has to present her/his project in the weeks of June 4-8 and June 11-15. A total of 30 minutes will be allocated to each student. Plan for a 20-25 minutes presentation so that we have time for discussion. A detailed schedule of the presentations will be posted on the course website at the end of May.

The grade for the presentation will mostly be based on the presentation document i.e. the slides (Power Point, PDF, etc.) that you will use for the presentation. Here’s a suggested structure for the presentation

1. The project in a nutshell
   a. What is the question that you want to answer?
   b. Why is it interesting?
   c. How are you going to answer it? (briefly)

2. Motivation/background
   a. Quick review of the existing literature
   b. What is missing in the literature (motivation for your own research)

3. Proposed empirical approach
   a. Underlying economic model (if applicable)
   b. Estimation approach/method

4. Data and preliminary results
   a. Description of data set
   b. Descriptive statistics computed from the data
c. Preliminary results (if available)

5. “TO-DO” list for the next month and a half.

Ideally, the presentation should contain all the elements of a “first draft” of your paper. All you will then have to do is to refine your analysis and write up the paper in the second half of June and in July.

PHASE III: WRITING THE FINAL VERSION OF THE PAPER.

The length of the typical paper is expected to be around 25 pages (double spaced), including tables and figures (supplemental material should be included in an appendix). You should model your paper on papers that are published in scholarly journals with an abstract, an introduction, a couple of main sections, and a short conclusion. For example, the *American Economic Review* publishes (or used to publish…) a number of “shorter” articles in addition to full length papers. These articles are typically around 12 journal pages, and the rough rule of thumb is that one page of a double-spaced manuscript takes about half a page in a journal. So a 25 pages paper is about the same length as a shorter *American Economic Review* paper. These shorter pieces are very valuable scholarly contributions, provided that they:

1. Get right to the point, i.e. use a linear structure to avoid constantly losing valuable space on asides that do not contribute to the main argument.
2. Only present a limited number of tables and figures that illustrate the key elements of the empirical findings. It is easy to generate endless sequences of numbers but your duty as a researcher is to “digest” all the numbers yourself, and only present to readers a limited number of tables and figures that support your points in the clearest possible way. You can always put additional material in an appendix (not part of the 25 pages count).

I have also put up some notes on my web site (teaching tab) giving you suggestions on how to prepare tables and figures.

Please also keep in mind that the grade you will get on your paper depends on the quality of the empirical analysis (and of the writing), and not on whether you get t-statistics above 2. There is an unfortunate misconception among many students (and sometimes more seasoned researchers…) that an empirical paper is a “failure” if you don’t find any significant effects. What counts for your research paper is do things right, report the results as clearly and honestly as possible, and draw appropriate conclusions that will obviously depend on the size and significance of the estimated effects.

The final version of the paper is due on Friday August 3, 2018. I accept email submissions, but the paper will only be considered as officially submitted once I send you an email reply acknowledging that I have indeed received the paper. Please contact me immediately if you don’t receive the reply within 24 hours.