Course Syllabus

ECON 490: Seminar in Applied Economics – “Answering Questions with Economics”

Vancouver School of Economics, University of British Columbia
2019W1 – (Fall 2019)

Instructor: Jonathan L. Graves
Instructor Email: jonathan.graves@ubc.ca (or use Canvas)
Office Hours: TBD (or by appointment)
Office Location: IONA 158

Lecture Times: TBD
Lecture Location: TBD

Course Website: canvas.ubc.ca

TA Office Hours and location will be provided early in the term: all sections of ECON 490 share a TA, who offers drop in office hours on a weekly basis.

Prerequisites: This course is restricted to fourth year students within a declared BA non-honours major in Economics. Students must have successfully completed all of ECON 325 and ECON 326 and one of ECON 301 / 304 and ECON 302/ 305. I assume familiarity with basic econometrics, including multiple regression and statistics. I also assume you understand the basic economic models associated with intermediate microeconomics and macroeconomics.

Part 1: Key Course Details

Course Description:

This course is built around a key problem: how do we take a question and use our economic tools to answer it? This may seem elementary, but it can be surprisingly challenging! We tackle at this problem in the context of applied economic research. We will do four things in this course:

- Explore the tools, models, and skills necessary for answering questions
- Discover how to formulate a good question about a topic that inspires you.
- Learn how to answer your question in a convincing way.
• Practice communicating your results through writing and speaking.

Along the way we tackle a number of important topics, like the connection between theory and applied work, causality, and data science. However, the focus always will be on taking an idea you care about and building a research topic around it; a process your instructor will guide you through in 1-on-1 meetings. The best ideas come about because you are passionate about them!

This section emphasizes methodology (how do we conduct and carry out research) as opposed to topic (studying economic development economic, for example). This gives you, the student, a great deal of flexibility in terms of the question and topic you tackle. Emphasis in-class will be on microeconomic applications, but students with broader interests are also encouraged to attend.

The course format will be a mixture of lectures, small-group discussions, computer labs, and presentations. We will review some necessary background in early lectures, then learn some new and commonly used models specific to your topics. We will get also get hands-on practice with real data through interaction in computer labs, and learn how to use statistical software.

We will also learn how to communicate our results clearly both in written form, and in presentations. Evaluation will be primarily based on (i) in-class participation, (ii) oral presentations, and (iii) your research paper. The paper itself has several, smaller, “lead-up” assignments to help you build up to the final paper while getting feedback and assistance along the way.

This semester may also have a community engaged learning (CEL) option, in which students undertake a project motivated by a community partner, in lieu of completing their own project. This option is offered via a selective process, to ensure that students and their community partners are happy with the final arrangement: if you are interested in the CEL option, please contact the instructor immediately.

Learning objectives:

Upon completing this course, students will be able to:

• Understand the research process in the context of economics
• Create economically interesting research questions
• Identify or construct data useful in answering their research question
• Understand statistical tools suitable for answering their research question
• Assess the quality of different specifications in the context of a research question
• Apply statistical software to implement chosen specifications
• Evaluate and interpret the results of statistical software when applied to data
• Compare and integrate different results to answer the research question
• Critique research and incorporate responses to criticism
• Interact with others to communicate the results of their research project
Recommended and required materials:

We will use the software package STATA for our applied work in class; it is required that you buy a copy of STATA for this course; version SE is ideal for most projects. STATA is also available in the Arts Computer labs, but you can also buy a license for it online from STATAcorp at a discounted student price. A 1-year license is $89 (US) and a 1-semester license is only $45 (US). It’s important to purchase STATA sooner rather than later; in order to get the student pricing they need to verify your student status, which can take a few business days.

- The one exception to this is if you're an expert or highly capable using software like Python or R; in that case, talk to me instead. You may be able to get out of buying STATA, depending on your project.

The textbook for this course is A.H. Studenmund’s "Using Econometrics (7th edition)" which you can buy either online or from the UBC Bookstore. If you prefer a supplementary textbook, another written reference which covers many of the topics in this class can be found in Mostly Harmless Econometrics by Angrist and Pischke. You can find a link to purchase it on their website, but fortunately it is also available free as a PDF online via ResearchGate.

- A final recommended reference is Mastering Metrics also by Angrist and Pischke. This is about $30 online, and is a “non-technical” version of the above textbook.

Communication: I welcome emails from my students, but please ensure they are coherent, respectful and appropriate to a business setting. All emails should be prefaced with [ECON 490] in the subject line. Emails that do not adhere to this guideline may not reach my inbox, and so you may not receive a reply. I get a lot of spam emails, so if you don’t hear from me in a timely fashion (1-2 business days), please send a follow-up email.

- There is a limit to what can be discussed through an email, so longer discussions should be taken up in my office hours.
- If appropriate, I may also post replies to student questions to the entire student body. If, for whatever reason, you do not wish your question to be posted, please indicate so in the email.

Assessment:

The final course grade will be determined according to the following weighting:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Weight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Final Paper</td>
<td>80%</td>
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<tr>
<td>- 65% final submission</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- 15% intermediate submissions*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>- 10% your presentation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- 5% your peer evaluation of other presentation</td>
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Final Paper Description: The final paper is really the point of the course: a professional piece of scholarly work, covering your research project for the semester. It's like a mini-thesis. This is composed of two parts:

1) Final paper submission: You can find a detailed rubric on Canvas for the paper, along with tips and resources for writing it (including some templates). We will also devote time in class to understanding how to write a good final paper. This is graded primarily on the quality of your research (not on the “quality” of the results), along with your ability to communicate your findings.
   - The final paper is graded in detail by the instructor, based on the rubric, and forms the basis for the majority of your grade in this course.
2) Intermediate submissions: to help us produce the final paper, you will complete a number of shorter exercises during the semester to help develop your paper. You can find a detailed list of these on Canvas.
   - These are primarily formative in nature, and are graded by the instructor but on a 100%/D/F scale; while you will receive detailed feedback, the goal is primarily to develop your thinking, not to evaluate its quality.

Critically, you must complete all of the intermediate submissions to complete the course. You cannot avoid submitting them; failure to submit any of these submissions will result in failure of the course.

Presentation Description: The presentation is a short oral discussion of your work. I usually provide several different formats for this project; in the past this has included videos. This semester, we may also provide a poster session option – more information will be communicated later in the course.

- The presentation is reviewed both by your peers, and the instructor. You can find a rubric for the presentation on Canvas.
- Part of your presentation grade will also come from your peer review of another student’s presentation; you can find this rubric on Canvas as well.

Participation Description: The grade for participation comes from a number of readings, reflections, and activities we will do as a class during the semester. These can include online discussions, in-class discussions, reflection exercises, and other items.

Policy on attendance and participation: Since this course is a mixture of lectures and hands-on work, it’s important that you stay engaged and attend. I don’t take attendance, but I expect it unless you have a compelling reason not to attend. Some classes will be explicitly optional; for example, when we cover a topic not relevant to all students. This will be communicated on a weekly basis, as we progress through the course.

Policy for late work and regrades: Late work will be penalized at a rate of 50% per day late, but pro-rated by the number of hours later, rounded up to the nearest hour. For example, if you have in an assignment 1 minute late, it will be penalized at 1/24 X 50% = 2.1%. If you hand in an assignment 4 hours later, it will be penalized at 4/25 X 50% = 8.33%.
• There is one major exception to this, which concerns the final paper. Usually, I try to make this due as late as possible – therefore, I will communicate late penalties once the deadline for the paper is set (which depends on the final exam schedule). Generally, they are much stricter than above!
• Remember, all intermediate submissions for the final paper must be completed, even if you’re not going to get any points for them.

Regrades can be requested by asking, in writing, for a regrade communicating clearly the rationale for the regrade; a better rationale is more likely to result in a better regrade. The deadline for such a request is 2 weeks following the grade, or 2 weeks following the publication of grades if the item is a final paper.

**Respect and academic misconduct:** It is very important that every student be treated with respect and given due courtesy by others in the classroom environment. If you feel uncomfortable with the behaviour of another person in the classroom, please bring it to my attention.

In addition, basic workplace etiquette is required of everyone. Treat this class like you would a meeting with your colleagues at a (future) job. This includes:

• Coming on time, and not disrupting others when unavoidably late.
• Avoiding texting, playing with your phone, Facebook, email, chatting or other electronic distractions. If you MUST take a call, leave the classroom quietly and discreetly.
• **Muting cellphones**, muting laptops, and other noisy devices.
• **Chatting only about course related topics** and doing so quietly and discreetly.
• Not eating food during the class; beverages are OK, but be reasonable.
• Raising your hand if you have a question or comment, and not interrupting others when they are speaking.

Seriously disrespectful or inappropriate behaviour will not be tolerated, and may result in a student being asked to leave the class or even withdraw from the course.

All submissions in this course (including assignments) are governed by the UBC policies on Academic Misconduct. Cheating and plagiarism will be dealt with by the department or dean, and results in penalties as outlined in the calendar (including, but not limited to, failure of the course or submission). Given the importance of this course to your degree, these are likely to be very serious. For example, plagiarism on the final paper is likely to result in an automatic failure, and subsequent inability to graduate.

**Publication in the IONA Journal:** As part of this course, you should seriously consider publishing your research! Here’s a blurb from our VSE Student journal:

"The IONA Journal of Economics is a UBC student-led academic journal that features outstanding economic-focused research papers written by UBC undergraduate students. Students of all faculties and any year level may submit their work to the journal by January 11th 2020. We request that all research papers submitted are at least 1,500 words in length and have received a grade of 80% or higher. Submissions and questions can be sent to editor@ionajournal.ca."
Part 2: Policies and Important Links

This course is governed by all standard UBC policies and guidelines, as outlined by the UBC Senate as follows:

UBC provides resources to support student learning and to maintain healthy lifestyles but recognizes that sometimes crises arise and so there are additional resources to access including those for survivors of sexual violence. UBC values respect for the person and ideas of all members of the academic community. Harassment and discrimination are not tolerated nor is suppression of academic freedom. UBC provides appropriate accommodation for students with disabilities and for religious and cultural observances. UBC values academic honesty and students are expected to acknowledge the ideas generated by others and to uphold the highest academic standards in all of their actions. Details of the policies and how to access support are available here:

https://senate.ubc.ca/policies-resources-support-student-success

You should read and be familiar with the preceding set of policies. These include specifically (but are not limited to) the following, which are included here for your reference:

VSE Statement on Academic Honesty

It is the policy of the Vancouver School of Economics to report all violations of UBC’s standards for academic honesty to the office of the Dean of Arts. Those standards can be found here: (http://www.calendar.ubc.ca/vancouver/index.cfm?tree=3,286,0,0). In addition to the explicitly stated violations in that document (for example, plagiarism), any student who hires a tutor/editor to help with any portion of their work will be given an automatic grade of zero on their final paper. Additionally, students who falsify their references, or act in any such dishonest manner, will also be given a grade of zero on their final paper. Further penalties may be levied by the President's Advisory Committee on Student Discipline. Those further penalties could include a notation on your transcript indicating that you have committed an academic offence, failure of the course, a grade of zero in the course and/or suspension from the university. Speak to your instructor in person if you have any questions regarding the standard for academic honesty at UBC.

Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities: Academic accommodations help students with a disability or ongoing medical condition overcome challenges that may affect their academic success. Students requiring academic accommodations must register with the Centre for Accessibility (CA). CA will determine that student's eligibility for accommodations in accordance with Policy 73: Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities. Academic accommodations are not determined by your instructors, and instructors should not ask you about the nature of your disability or ongoing medical condition, or request copies of your disability
documentation. However, your instructor may consult with CA should the accommodations affect the essential learning outcomes of a course.

**Conflicting Responsibilities:** UBC recognizes that students may occasionally have conflicting responsibilities that affect their ability to attend class or examinations. These may include: representing the University, the province or the country in a competition or performance; serving in the Canadian military; or observing a religious rite.

They may also include a change in a student’s situation that unexpectedly requires that student to work or take responsibility for the care of a family member, if these were not pre-existing situations at the start of term.

Students with conflicting responsibilities have a duty to arrange their course schedules so as to avoid, as much as possible, any conflicts with course requirements. As soon as conflicting responsibilities arise, students must notify either their instructor(s) or their Faculty Advising Office (e.g. Arts Academic Advising), and can request academic concession. Instructors may not be able to comply with all such requests if the academic standards and integrity of the course or program would be compromised.

Varsity student-athletes should discuss any anticipated and unavoidable regular-season absences with the instructor at the start of term, and provide notice of playoff or championship absences in writing as soon as dates are confirmed.

Religious observance may preclude attending classes or examinations at certain times. In accordance with the UBC Policy on Religious Holidays, students who wish to be accommodated for religious reasons must notify their instructors in writing at least two weeks in advance. Instructors will provide an opportunity for such students to make up work or examinations missed without penalty.

**UBC Early Alert:** University students often encounter setbacks from time to time that can impact academic performance. If you run into difficulties and need assistance, I encourage you to contact me by email or phone during my office hours, before or after class, or by dropping into my office (IONA 158). I will do my best to support your success during the term. This includes identifying concerns I may have about your academic progress or wellbeing through Early Alert. With Early Alert, faculty members can connect you with advisors who offer students support and assistance getting back on track to success. Only specialized UBC advisors are able to access any concerns I may identify, and Early Alert does not affect your academic record.

For more information, visit earlyalert.ubc.ca.

For information about addressing mental or physical health concerns, including seeing a UBC counsellor or doctor, visit students.ubc.ca/livewell

**Course schedule subject to change:** This schedule is tentative and subject to change as we progress through the term.

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