

LOOKING THROUGH THE ACADEMIC MICROSCOPE

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ABSTRACT. This note details the process of finding an appropriate topic for an undergraduate dissertation.

Think about the question you would like to address in the presentation. It is often tempting to think about a journalistic question, e.g., “What is the impact of use of mobile phones in Africa?” or “Impact of urban crime in UK?”. You can write very nice newspaper article on these topics but would be hard pressed find a question that can be systematically analysed. An *academic question* is one that can be answered with systematic analysis and resulting insights that have social significance. It is important to look for a question that is neither too ambitious like “How can we eradicate poverty?” nor too trivial like “Increasing electricity generation in UK?”.

An example of a good academic question is “Does foreign aid have a positive impact on economic growth?” If you would like to tackle this question theoretically, there are various growth models in which you can plug in the foreign aid variable and analyse its impact. To approach this question empirically, you would have to find a good instrument that unravels the endogeneity between economic growth and foreign aid.

Finding the appropriate question is extremely important and takes a very long time. The process of finding a good academic question is also the process of finding a feasible answer. Once you have found the right question, it should not take you a long time to find the right answer. So, the earlier you start, the better it is.

Literatures develop around very specific questions. So, the easiest way to approach the dissertation is to embed yourself in a literature that has already articulated a very clear academic question. You could try to go and articulate a new question yourself but that would take a long time. Unfortunately, you would not have the time to articulate a new academic question while doing an undergraduate dissertation at Cambridge.

The best way to introduce yourself to a literature is to look for a survey article. A survey article tends to review all the questions and sub-questions in a area and lays them out for you to explore in a dissertation. The survey would also tell you which questions have been

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fully explored and where there is gap in the literature. A good dissertation is able to explore these remaining gaps in the literature.

Journal of Economic Literature and *Journal of Economic Perspective* are the journals that exclusively publish survey articles. You would also find survey articles in some of the top journals like *AER*, *JPE*, *QJE* and *RES*. The field journals are also publish survey articles in a specific area. Please make sure that you ascertain that the survey article is sound and is published at a good journal. There are lots of bad articles that get published in Economics. Since you are wholly responsible for the dissertation and the standards in Cambridge are very high, you have to be very careful not to get taken in by a bad journal articles.

You will live with your dissertation for a very long time. Choose something that you are instinctively interested in. Also, while you are choosing the topic, please ensure that you also brush up on the background skills that you would require for the dissertation. For empirical dissertation, this would require you to brush up your knowledge of programmes like Eviews and Stata as well as revising the empirical techniques used in the literature. For a theoretical dissertation, it would have to brush up skills like solving a hamiltonian or finding a sub-game perfect Nash.

Dissertation has a increasing returns to scale production process. If you invest the fixed cost early enough, you can virtually ensure a good result. The only people who do badly are people who start too late.