Choosing Your PhD Topic (And Why it’s Important!)

Honours Outreach Programme Talk
October 2\textsuperscript{nd} 2012

Paul H. Jensen
University of Melbourne
Defining this Talk

- Doing a PhD is really challenging, but rewarding
- Lots of factors influence successful completion of a PhD including:
  - Student (intelligence, perseverance)
  - Institution (resources/support, quality of students)
  - Supervisor (quality, connections, availability)
  - Research topic/questions (importance, tractability)
- All are important, but I assume away #1-3
- Also I assume that you are going to become an academic
Why is the Topic Important?

Some PhD topics are determined by supervisor

However, choice of topic/question is important:
- Faster PhD completion
- Higher quality research (and impact)
- Bearing on your 1st job placement
- Probable research area post-PhD

Understanding the importance of good research questions will help in your entire (academic) career

So, start investing in good research questions now!
Good Research Questions...

- Characteristics of ‘good’ research questions?
  - Novelty (it must push the frontiers of knowledge)
  - Importance (the answer should help shape the world)
  - Tractability (answerable using existing technology)

- Academia is full of bright people who have under-achieved (or don’t have a legacy) because:
  - They invest too much time in weak ideas/papers
  - They aren’t creative enough to developing new ways of tackling interesting problems
  - They follow fads, not fundamentals
Some Tips (for empiricists)

- New datasets often enable you to ask (and answer) interesting questions
- If using older datasets, think carefully about any novel facets and try to exploit them
- Using international data seems appealing, but have often been cherry-picked
- Don’t bite off more than you can chew! Don’t try and answer “Why is Africa so Poor?”
- Ask sharp and focused questions (and keep refining your question)
From PhD Student...

- How did I fare on the issues raised above?
  - PhD topic (outsourcing) went out of vogue quickly
    - BUT I learnt fundamentals of contracts and incentives
  - Primary research data (highly novel) was used
    - BUT it soaked up way too much of my time collecting it
  - It took me 5 years to complete my PhD
    - BUT my research questions were really, really crisp!
  - Research provided evidence on an important policy debate
    - BUT it was hard to get published in top journals
    - AND I never did research in that area again
To Professor...

- How have I handled these challenges?
  - Finished PhD and moved to Melbourne in 2003 to work on a brand new research area (innovation)
  - Created new (survey or linked) data on Australian firms which opened up new research questions
  - Asking questions relevant to Australian policy (and often using Australian data), but with truly novel features (enabling A* publications)
  - Working on new data infrastructure (in science policy) which will open up new research terrain
  - Promoted to Professor in 2012
In Conclusion

- I hope I have convinced you about the importance of your choice of research topic:
  - You will have to live with it for your entire PhD
  - It may have an effect on your career trajectory
  - No doubt that i) writing clear research questions and ii) rank-ordering them fast-tracked my career

- Melbourne Institute is a very lively place with:
  - Lots of great, novel data (HILDA, MABEL, etc)
  - Loads of support for students (mentoring, advice)
  - Strong policy-relevant research base