Challenges and Priorities in Developing Statistical Skills and Literacy in Higher Education

Session 2: Statistical Education: Challenges and Priorities

Pietro Gennari
Professor, Master in Statistical Methods and Applications
'La Sapienza' University – Rome

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Defining Education, Training & Literacy in a University Context

Statistical education teaches not only how to perform calculations applying basic or cutting-edge statistical techniques, but also how to use data effectively to answer real-world questions (foundational Knowledge, skill set, and competencies).

Statistical training refers to the specific technical components of statistical education. It includes instruction in the methods, tools, and software that statisticians use to work with data.

Statistical literacy is broader and refers to the ability to understand, interpret, and critically evaluate statistical information encountered in everyday life. This includes the ability to question the source, reliability, and interpretation of data.

Statistical education encompasses both statistical training and statistical literacy. In higher education, the goal should be to blend these two dimensions so that students are not only capable of performing complex statistical analyses but also able to interpret their results, communicate their findings clearly, and understand the broader implications of the data they are working with.

Problem statement

Statistical Literacy has never been more important than today, being increasingly crucial for navigating a data-driven world. As data permeates every facet of our lives—from business and healthcare to governance and environmental management—the ability to understand, interpret, and make informed decisions based on data is no longer optional. It is essential.

However, most people are often not able to use some key statistical tools that are indispensable in everyday life to act as responsible citizens

Key role of Universities in developing both foundational knowledge and data-driven thinking

Statistics is one of the most important quantitative subjects in many university curricula. However, in universities, statistics courses are often viewed as either a necessary evil or a highly specialized subject.

In this presentation, I will take you through the landscape of statistical education, explore the challenges faced by universities, highlight key areas that need reform, and discuss promising initiatives that are already paving the way for improvement.

One such initiative is the **European Master in Official Statistics** (EMOS).

Challenges in University-Level Statistical Education

Statistics can be a difficult subject for many students, especially for those with limited backgrounds and abilities in mathematics.

Statistics is often seen by students as a hurdle to overcome and is often sidelined in favour of other subjects

Curriculum gap: increasing demand for Data Science Skills not satisfied by the number of graduates equipped to meet this need

- The rise of data science and Big Data requires graduates to possess strong computational and analytical skills
- Many institutions have not yet adapted their curricula to reflect these changes. In many cases statistics and data science remain two separate curricula.

Not enough qualified educators to teach statistics and data science who stay current with evolving tools and methodologies.

Pedagogical Challenges

More general problems:

- Overemphasis on memorization, underemphasis on understanding and critical thinking;
- Adoption of traditional versus interactive teaching methods;
- Limited access to pedagogical resources, especially in low-income countries

More specific problems to the teaching of statistics:

- Many university courses emphasize technical/procedural knowledge over practical data analysis and critical thinking.
- Limited emphasis on multivariable thinking and
- Limited real-world data applications

Priorities for Reform in University-Level Statistical Education

Curriculum Development:

- The traditional statistics curriculum must evolve to integrate data science components such as data manipulation, machine learning, and visualization

Development of Computational Skills:

- Developing proficiency in open source programming languages like R and Python.

Hands-on Learning: More real-life data analysis opportunities

- Early introduction to real-world data problems, ensuring that students work with messy, real-world datasets rather than clean, polished data, to build practical skills and prepare students for industry challenges.

Bridging the Gap between Statistical Education and Market Needs

- Partnerships with Statistics Producers and Industries. This involves not only updating the curricula, but also engaging with real-world problems and data. Another approach is through joint projects, internships, and collaborations that allow students to apply their statistical skills in practical settings.

Priorities for Reform in University-Level Statistical Education

Focus on Multivariate Approaches

- Introducing multivariate methods early in the curriculum to prepare students for the complexities of real-world data, allowing them to recognize the impact of confounding variables and disentangle the intricate relationships found in professional settings

Development of Critical Thinking

- Encouraging students to think critically about data, questioning assumptions and evaluating data sources

Addressing the Gap in Undergraduate Education

- While master's programs in statistics are growing, offering diversified opportunities to build a professional career, the number of undergraduate programs is still limited, hindering early development of key skills. Many students still graduate with only a limited understanding of how to work with real-world data, much less the computational tools needed to engage with Big Data effectively.

Pedagogical Innovations in Statistical Education

Technology Integration

- Teaching statistical software and programming along with statistics (e.g. tools like RStudio, Tableau, and Python).

Simulation-Based Learning

- Empirical simulations allow students to experiment with data-driven models, fostering a deeper understanding of statistical processes.

Case Studies and Collaborative Learning

- Use of case studies encourages students to apply statistical reasoning to real-world scenarios, enhancing their critical thinking and making statistics more engaging
- Collaborative projects help students develop essential teamwork and communication skills. Collaborative learning also fosters peer-to-peer interaction, where students can learn from each other and explore different approaches to solving statistical problems

Looking Forward: The Future of Statistical Education

Broader Role of Data Science in University Curricula

- As data science becomes a crucial interdisciplinary skill, universities should adapt their curricula to integrate statistics and computational methods across disciplines. The traditional boundaries between statistics and other fields such as computer science, economics, and engineering are becoming increasingly blurred. Data is the common denominator, and students must be equipped to work with it, regardless of their field of study.

Lifelong Learning and Flexibility

- In a rapidly changing data landscape, students must learn not only specific methods but also how to continually adapt and learn new techniques. In a rapidly changing data landscape, the tools and methods that are cutting-edge today may be outdated tomorrow. By instilling a sense of curiosity and adaptability, students can be prepared to navigate the complexities of data science long after they leave their classrooms.

Looking Forward: The Future of Statistical Education

Collaborations Across Disciplines

- Statistics departments should collaborate with other disciplines (e.g., computer science, economics, sociology) to ensure that statistical education is relevant and applicable to a range of career paths. This interdisciplinary approach will not only make statistical education more relevant to real-world contexts, but also prepare students for the kinds of collaborative, data-driven work environments they are likely to encounter in their careers

Collaboration Between Academia, Statistics Producers (NSOs) and Industry

- Building partnerships between the Academia and NSOs, on one side, as well as between the Academia and Industry, will help keep university curricula relevant and open up new professional opportunities for the students. These partnerships can be implemented with different modalities, such as internship, tutorship, and joint projects for students

The European Master in Official Statistics (EMOS)

- EMOS as one of the most innovative and effective solutions to improving statistical education in universities. It currently brings together 33 master's programs across 17 European countries. It is designed to address the recruitment needs of national and international statistical institutions by training official statisticians.
- Central feature: strong partnership between universities and NSOs. This collaboration ensures that students not only receive academic education in advanced statistical methods but also gain real-world experience through internships, guest lectures from official statisticians, and master's theses conducted in collaboration with NSOs.
- By working closely with NSOs, students gain a deep understanding of the challenges faced in the production and dissemination of official statistics, which increasingly involves integrating diverse data sources, using model-based estimation techniques, and managing unstructured or Big Data. The curriculum also ensures that students become familiar with the international statistical standards, quality frameworks and institutions that govern the global statistical system.

EMOS as a model for improving Statistical Education

- The EMOS program offers a powerful model for improving statistical education beyond Europe, and its influence could expand even further by fostering closer collaboration ties with non-European NSOs, but also with entities such as national central banks, international organisations, research institutes, and private companies.
- These broader collaborations holds the potential to broaden the employment prospects for EMOS graduates and ensure that the EMOS curriculum encompasses the skills necessary for graduates to pursue careers in national and international organisations, which, in turn, gain access to highly skilled talent.
- Looking ahead, it is clear that the future of statistical education lies in initiatives like EMOS that combine theoretical knowledge with practical application.
- To truly prepare students for the demands of the 21st century, Universities must rethink their curricula, adopt innovative teaching methods, and stay engaged with the evolving world of data science. In particular, they must prioritize the development of statistical literacy and computational skills, integrate real-world data engagement into their curricula, and foster partnerships with national and international statistical organizations.

Thank you