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Teaching Economic Statistics to Undergraduates in Italy: Structure and Contents

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Claudio Quintano (https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/cf_dev/AbsByAuth.cfm?per_id=717727)

University of Naples - Dipartimento di Statistica e Matematica Per La Ricerca Economica

Paolo Mazzocchi (https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/cf_dev/AbsByAuth.cfm?per_id=1920019)

Parthenope University - Department of Statistics & Mathematics for Economic Research

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Abstract

In the last years the focus on the research assessment has increased in Italy. In march 2010, the University of Bologna organised a workshop on research assessment in Statistical Sciences. In 2008, a committee was created within the Italian Statistical Society (SIS) for the reform of the structure of the Scientific Disciplinary Sectors (SDS) in accordance with the guidelines of the Ministry of Education (MIUR). In addition, the following SIS committees were created to accomplish these tasks: encourage the shared statistical yardsticks (2008); recruit the university professors (2008); etc.

This contribution outlines the profile of the subjects regarding the SDS "Economic Statistics" (ES) focusing the attention on the academic year 2007-08, even though it is common knowledge that the study opportunities would have changed quite a bit after the introduction of the recent Ministerial Decrees (October 2004; March 2007; September 2010).

The aim of this paper concerns the "identity" and the "didactic contents" of ES among the disciplines constituting the courses of the Faculties of Economics, Political Sciences, Law, Statistical Sciences and Engineering in Italian universities.

Issues regarding either the "identity" of the EC and its "didactic contents" are topics that have already been studied (Guarini and Tassinari 1984; Cuffaro and Davì 1995; Quintano 1995 and 1996; Giovannini, 2008).

The "identity" topic considers the "research activity role" and the "statistical techniques" applied to the study of the survey fields.

In regards to the "didactic contents" offered to undergraduate students, there has been a question of growing attention in policy and academic circles in recent decades as England (1997) and Gärtner (2001) presented through their content examinations of undergraduate programs among the major European universities.

Although ES is a discipline which does not have many corresponding subjects in foreign countries, this research takes information from the "Cineca" database (www.cineca.it) and the data was collected with a questionnaire sent via e-mail. To give structure to the contents found in the ninety-eight institutions' course syllabi, the authors predetermined the content using a list of traditional and more recent concepts and models related to the subject (the authors refer to the top eight textbooks used in the ES courses to define a "topics classification outline"). The topics classification outline presented several problems to evaluate the weight given to different topics by each teaching (e.g. the frequent contents overlay due to the use of reference textbooks characterised by very different settings).

In this research two main approaches have been used to study the contents of teaching ES to undergraduates in Italy. More precisely, the authors suggest using a statistical approach being connected with the Factor and Cluster Analysis (CA) for the first approach (Katiliutė, 2010) while they applied the Multiple Correspondence Analysis for the second analytic strategy (Lucev 1984A-B; Martini and Fabbris, 2007). The CA was performed using both the hierarchical and K-Means procedures therefore employing two different algorithms for creating clusters.

The authors attempted to identify common denominators among the "didactic contents" and the results of the analysis expanded upon the most meaningful dimensions which represent the content approaches adopted in Italian universities.

Keywords: undergraduate teaching, higher education, economic statistics curricula, cluster analysis, factor analysis

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