

Guest Editorial

The classical image of training in official statistics is probably a room full of eager young statisticians listening intently to a teacher, explaining how a census or a survey is to be conducted; or how national accounts are to be compiled.

Whilst there is no doubt that solid learning of specialized and sectoral statistical skills is still important, almost everything about the picture above has changed: The thematic scope of official statistics has extended tremendously with development agendas, that require the measurement of topics such as the environment, disaster resilience, good governance and human rights. The ICT revolution has led to a data landscape, where our capacities to process and manage data – from micro to macro data - have grown exponentially. Official statistics coexist with Big Data and Geospatial information and a new information architecture integrating all these elements has to be built. Official Statisticians are increasingly being called upon to be data stewards, requiring skills such as the management of large systems, the capability to communicate data effectively to users or the ability to uphold principles of data ethics. As already enshrined in the United Nations Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, a statistician’s responsibility does not stop at the end of the statistical production process. The statistician has to be concerned for the responsible use of data: It has to be part of the professional duty of the statistical community to ensure good data communication and data literacy. I would go even further and frame it as “good data culture”.

Just as the necessary skills for a successful statistician of the future have changed fundamentally, so have the modalities of training: the classroom romantic conjured up in the image above has been increasingly complemented, if not replaced by virtual training, self-training, e-learning, continuous training on the job, etc. So it is only timely and appropriate to dedicate this Special Issue of the Statistical Journal to “New developments in Training in Official Statistics” and look in depth at the many ways in which the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of statistical training have changed.

Because in a world, where the gap between the demand for and the supply of quality statistics seems to

be growing larger every day, training remains critically important. It is inherently an investment in the future. Continuous capacity development is the only resilient and sustainable path to facing the challenges of the ever more complex data universe of tomorrow.

What is the role of international organizations and in particular the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) in this context? Our primary job is to support the functioning of the global statistical community as a professional community of knowledge solidarity. This was never more apparent than during the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis: Knowledge platforms, which we created on our website, were a practical way to support national statistical systems in the middle of the crisis by allowing the exchange of practical country experiences with respect to modified data operations, access to new data sources and communication of new and modified data products.

In general, our capacity building activities are of course based on our mandate to support the implementation of global statistical standards in our areas of expertise. This was traditionally done through a spectrum of activities reaching from country projects, involving one-on-one training, to regional training workshops to the provision of technical guidelines and practical manuals. Thematic regional workshops were, during a long period of time, our key training delivery modality. They were considered effective, especially if they did not only succeed in the direct knowledge transfer to participants, but also created multiplier effects at the country level. Moreover, these workshops often created informal regional expert and knowledge networks. Over the past years, our training tool box has of course been extended to include e-learning tools, a development that was only accelerated through the COVID-19 pandemic.

In fact, the emergence of e-learning courses created an opportunity for our office to start building another important new training tool – namely a website of high quality e-learning courses, containing not only the division’s own material, but providing access to relevant partner e-learning courses covering global statistical standards. A fundamental quality criterion in this context is naturally ‘full compliance’ with the relevant official standard.

Finally, another unique service provided by UNSD in the field of global statistical training on official statistics is the creation of the Global Network of Institutions for Statistical Training (GIST), which connects the many existing excellent national and regional entities active in the field of training of official statisticians. Connecting them adds value, as it allows to exchange experiences, materials and even trainers and to work jointly towards the development of training quality standards.

Training has been, is and always will be critically important. After all, skilled human resources are the most precious asset of any national statistical system. I want

to, therefore, reiterate my congratulations to the IAOS Journal editorial team for taking on this important topic and assembling many valuable and thought-provoking articles in this Special Edition. I am sure the readers will enjoy them and will find inspiration to implement some of the good ideas in their respective fields of responsibility. This is in the best tradition of the professional knowledge solidarity that so well characterizes our global official statistical community.

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¹The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.