Inferential Interests

February 2021

INFERENTIAL INTERESTS

EXCLUSIVE

WITH ECSSC SPEAKER

PETER TAYLOR

FROM ACEMS

5

Amazing Tips For Early Career Academics Inside!

ECSSN

Early Career and Student Statisticians Network 2021

Irma Mooi-Reci

discusses Stata for students, sociologists and surveys on MY FAVOURITE PROGRAM

INDUSTRY INSIDER!

THRIVE DURING YOUR FIRST YEAR AT THE **AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS** with **CEDRIC WONG**

FEATURED

FEBRUARY 2021 ISSUE 1

NERVOUS NEWBIE NIGHTMARES?
How to use your beginner status to your advantage!

EXCLUSIVE
FIVE PAGE SNEAK PEEK INTO OUR CONFERENCE SPEAKERS FOR 2021!

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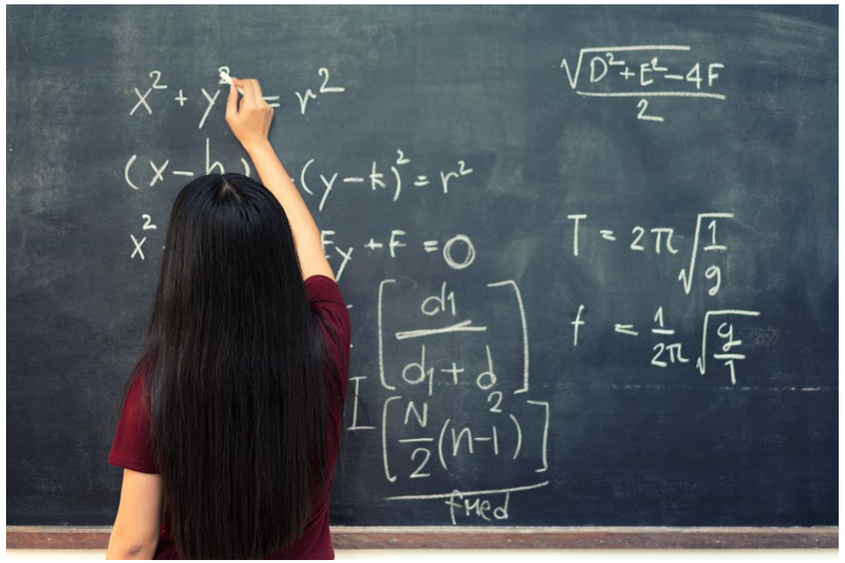
Surviving the First Year

Catriona Croton



Hi everyone! Welcome to our first in a series of posts and articles on your work life as a statistician or data scientist. First up are 5 tips to surviving your first year as an academic. Read our tips, then comment on our blog with your own!

1) Prepare, prepare, prepare for lectures… then wing it

At the beginning, when you are excited and nervous, you will spend a day, a week, a month, preparing obsessively for your inaugural lecture. You will read everything you can find - not only the required material, and the optional material, but the answer to every conceivable question. You will know the material forwards and backwards, upside-down and inside-out. Or so you think… until you give that first lecture and up pops a hand, and a student asks a really great thought-provoking question. A thought-provoking question that you had never thought of and have no idea how to answer.

Welcome to lecturing!

By the end of the semester, you will have accepted you can't know all questions in advance. No more obsessive day-long preparation for you. You read over the material and slides a few times, and give a better lecture than you did at the start. Now you are relaxed enough to listen and engage with your students. You are prepared to admit when you don't know, and will get back to them. This is when lecturing becomes fun.

2) Take the student feedback seriously, but objectively

The first set of student feedback you receive will likely be a very strange combination of ego-boosting compliments and tear-you-down put-downs. Which do you believe? Neither. And both. Let me explain.

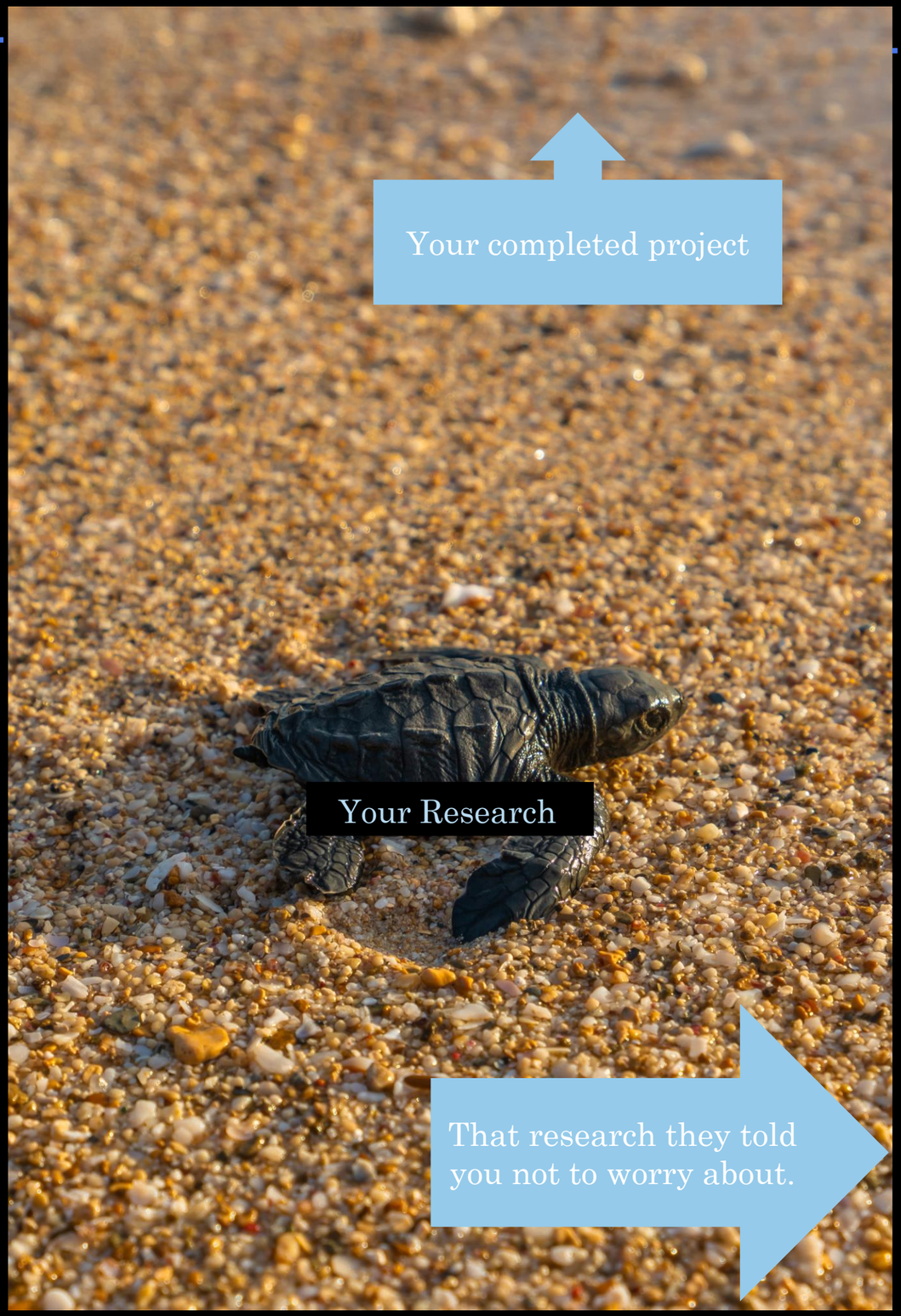
Remember a volunteer sample is inherently biased – the students who respond to these automated surveys are those with a strong opinion either way. So they will tend to either love you and the subject, or hate it. *The sound on the lecture recording was terrible. You are an excellent lecturer and I really liked having recordings. Your font choice is abysmal and the second assignment was way too long. I really enjoyed your subject, which I wasn't expecting as I have always hated statistics.* How to deal with this dichotomy?

To start, you want to read through the feedback carefully. You will likely focus on the few negative ones and skim all the positive ones – that is how many people are wired. Call a supportive friend and talk it through. Now put it away for a few days, then fish out the feedback and read it again as though it is a dataset that has nothing whatsoever to do with you. What are the details of the negative comments? Even if they took an irrational dislike to your font choice, the logical reasons they used to back up this emotional response are likely real for that student. If they state that the assessment was too long, probably it was for them. Do other people agree? Analyse it – you are good at that! - and see what results you produce. That is the take home message of what you need to improve on next year. **Act on this.**

3) Start your research early and have more than one project

As a wise person once told me, think of research projects as baby turtles. Make sure you have lots because some of your babies won't hatch, and of those that do hatch, some won't make it to the water. And, to really lean into this analogy, of those that do make it to the water, some are eaten by circling sharks.

Some of your research projects won't get past ethics, or the researcher who was spearheading it leaves to go to another university, or the data you needed just wasn't recorded, or the response rate is terrible for your carefully crafted survey. If you have only one project, your research output is now zero. But, if you have multiple projects, you will be able to lose a few and still be able to get at least one of your baby turtles published.



4) Choose your research projects carefully

The first time you are approached to participate in a research project you will be flattered. Which is great, BUT consider the project objectively. Is this research project aligned with your career goals? Doing a project on the northern hairy-nose wombat's grazing habits may not align with your career in statistics in economics, no matter how much you like the researchers involved.

If you do decide the project is a good fit, then make sure you are rewarded for your time, which means clarifying expectations. Decide which outputs are important to you and have an agreement in writing for this with key stakeholders before you start. For example, you may want to ensure your name is on all or some outputs – papers, grants, conference and poster presentations. Email to state this clearly and politely when the negotiations and discussions are still underway for organising the project. You may feel silly, but it is better than the alternative.

5) Keep track of *every* little thing you do

You will forget that webinar you attended, that interview you gave to the reporter, and that student feedback you were proud of. So, create a word document and write it down AS SOON AS IT HAPPENS. Then when it comes to filling your forms for confirmation or promotion, there are all the things you have done neatly written down in one place. Every few months, email it to yourself, so if your computer takes a sabbatical you still have all the details nice and safe.

2 My Adventures in the Australian Bureau of Statistics

Cedric Wong

Australian Bureau of Statistics

Introducing Cedric, one of our team here at the ECSSC 2021, who will tell us about his work day at the ABS in the Brisbane Office. He has a Bachelor (Honours) degree in Economics from The University of Queensland and enjoys playing tennis and attending rock music concerts.

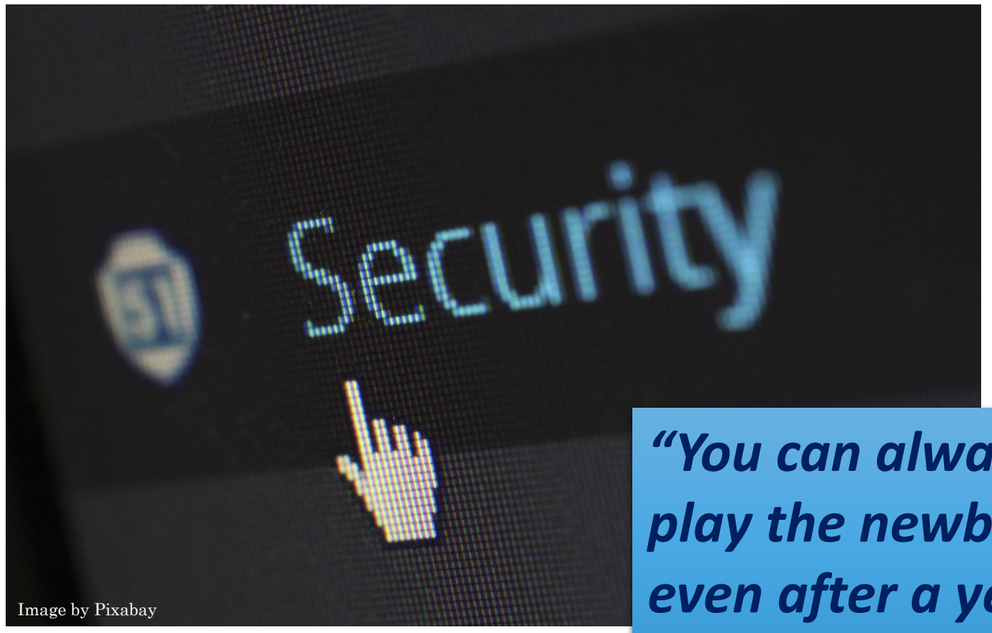


Image by Pixabay

"You can always play the newbie card even after a year."

On October 19, 2015, I started my career as a statistician – nervous and excited – as I stepped into the office of the Australian Bureau of Statistics. I was greeted with a friendly staff member at the ABS and my nervousness disappeared. Five and a half years later, I most certainly can call the ABS my second home. The most enjoyable aspect of working in the Methodology Division at the ABS is the challenging tasks and the satisfaction of solving a problem, whether it is statistical coding, a mathematical problem or a client's query.

For anyone who is new to full time work or about to start full time work as a fresh graduate, I have a couple of tips for you! When you first start working in a new role, there will be lots to read and digest and so it is inevitable to have questions. While thinking through and attempting to find answers is great for learning, it is just as important to actually ask someone these questions. This will prevent you from being stuck in an endless loop of the "chicken and egg" situation. I remember a time when I was working on a piece of simulation R code one of my colleagues wrote, and I was stuck on a section of code which specified a set of key input parameters. I was still new to the team; I didn't want to bother my colleague about a minor issue like this. I read through pages and pages of documents about the theory behind the code, but I ended up with more questions not less. *Did we use this particular set of input parameters because the theory says so? Or did we use them so that our simulation satisfies the theoretical definition?*

After a few hours of confusion, I worked up the courage to ask my colleague. It turned out that the answer I was looking for was quite straightforward – **follow the theory and trust the maths**. The moral of the story is, don't be afraid to ask questions! As one of my former supervisors once said - *there is never a silly question, and you can always play the newbie card even after a year*.

Secondly, establish a morning routine before work. I found this very helpful, especially in the first few months, to mentally prepare for work. What works for me is to make my bed before having an apple for breakfast. By making the bed, I feel like I have accomplished my first task of the day – yes, it is small, but it is done and I am ready for more tasks at work. As for the apple - an apple a day keeps the doctor away (although I do have some doubts over this because I know my doctor too well!). I also set my alarm to the exact same time every morning so that I catch the same morning train to work. There is comfort in the familiar.

I am currently in the Data Access and Confidentiality Methods section. I am researching on a multiplicative perturbation method that satisfies a form of Pufferfish Differential Privacy, using ABS Agriculture Statistics as a test case. This project is part of the ABS's aim to continue improving the existing data confidentiality methods by maximising data utility, while providing state of the art privacy protection to our data providers. One example is the log-Laplace multiplicative perturbation method that I am investigating. I have taken ownership of this project when I rotated into my current section as part of the ABS Methodology Division staff arrangement which provides staff members with working experience in a diverse range of statistical discipline areas.

Cedric Wong

Over the six years I have been at ABS, I have worked on projects such as the Australian Labour Force Survey statistical impact measurement project using state space modelling and developing a new dwelling selection sampling method for the ABS Monthly Population Survey. I have developed knowledge in sampling methods, statistical modelling and machine learning techniques and developed and consolidated my skills in statistical programming languages such as SAS and R - I used only a little Matlab during my honours year at my university so statistical coding was fairly new to me when I first started.

For those who are wondering, I also have an after-work routine that helps me wind down. The convention is to limit your screen time but I like to do things a bit differently. TikTok and YouTube are my friends after work. Cooking dinner also helps me to relax and regather myself after a long day at work. The music of choice when I am cooking is rock music (surprise surprise) and sometimes a true crime podcast called Case File on Spotify.

3 Podcasts & Music

SA ROC

Ancestral Mathematics in Hip Hop and R&B? Yes, yes there is!

Released 13 years ago, Supernova is a great introduction to the mathematical theme throughout Sa-Roc's musical stylings. I know hip hop isn't for everyone, but Sa-Roc can enchant even the hardest hip-hop haters with her soft soulful voice and skilful rhymes.

As an Apache and Aztec student statistician, I was strongly pulled into Sa-Roc's music. Songs like Dark Matterz discuss the mathematics our ancestors used directly. While many Australians may not be able to relate as strongly to the ties to Aztec ancestry, Sa-Rocs chill vibes, soft voice and passionate lyrics uplift your heart and renew the passion for mathematics. Whenever I am dreading learning a new formula, I always pop in the Sa-Roc and play through her 10 album discography - all of which have mathematical themes. I personally recommend Supernova, Stardust and Extra-terrestrial respectively for an excellent listening experience.

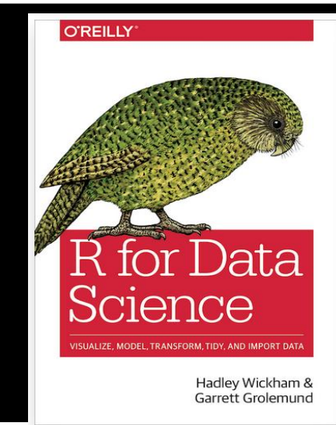
The Random Sample

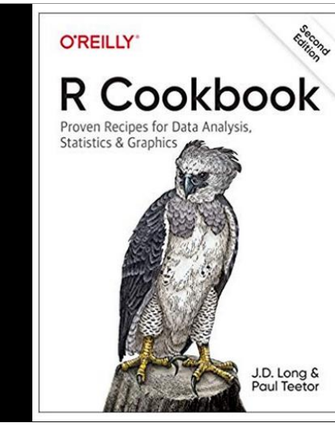
I'm embarrassed to admit I only learned of The Random Sample recently. After one episode, they immediately became my favourite podcast of all time. Each episode features a discussion with those most experienced in their fields and the December 23rd podcast on Imposter Syndrome particularly inspired me as a student. How often have women and nonbinary folk in the field felt Imposter Syndrome? Dr. Sophie Calabretto and Prof. Asha Rad address these issues in the equality of mathematical fields. Prof. Asha Rad discusses the lack of women of colour awarded in mathematic fields and how to rectify this issue. In another podcast – Maths and the Power of Perseverance – they discuss the struggles of overcoming bias, both racial and gendered, in the mathematical field. Both Dr. Calabretto and Prof. Rad are hilarious, witty, fascinating to listen to and they work together so well in a podcast format. It was enjoyable to begin my Random Sample journey here, and with 44 episodes I expect my binge to last all weekend!

4 library(books)

R for Data Science by Hadley Wickham and Garrett Grolemund

R Cookbook (2nd Edition) by James (JD) Long and Paul Teetor





Both of these books are valuable resources for data scientists and statisticians starting out in R, both are written by R gurus, both are available in print and as free pdfs – and they both have birds on the cover! So which one do you read first?

That depends on your personality type. If you like leaping into the deep end, to learn as you go, then Hadley and Garrett's book is for you. The first chapter in *R for Data Science* plunges you into data exploration through visualisation with `ggplot2`, with a number of examples, and it is in the second chapter that coding basics are covered. If you have programmed before in another language, especially for statistics and data science projects, you may find this book more your style. Note that the online pdf contains corrections and edits that the current edition of the physical book doesn't; if you are using a physical copy – and sometimes it is nice to hold an actual book in your hand instead of sitting in front of a computer - make sure you refer to the online version as well as you move through. If you like this book, then a natural progression is to *Advanced R*, and have a listen to an interview with Hadley, who is now Chief Scientist at RStudio, here on *The Random Sample* podcast series.

But if you are a very logical person who likes to dip your toe in the water, and then slowly wade in, pool noodle at the ready – the *R Cookbook* may suit you better as a first book in R. The chapters build up logically and sequentially, starting with downloading and installing R, coding basics, efficient use of RStudio, importing and exporting datasets, data structures, and so on. There are fewer detailed examples, and so you may wish to cover the basics using this book, and then use this as a reference guide while working through your course notes or *R for Data Science*. Make sure you check out Chapter 12 on Useful Tricks.

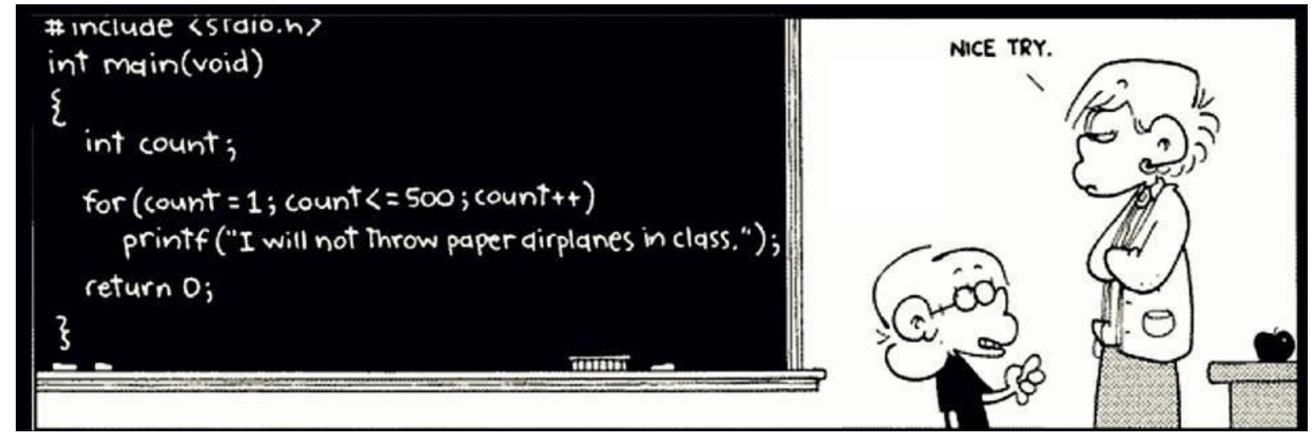
Both books assume you already have data science and statistical knowledge, and are looking to learn how to do the manipulations and analyses in R, rather than the theoretical underpinning of what you are doing. So the brief summary is both are great, valuable and well worth checking out – which one you start with depends on you!

5 Regression to the Meme

Chelsea Parlett-Pelleriti is a Data Scientist and PhD Student regularly spending her time making great memes, check her out!

Click tweet to play the classic scene from SB2021!

Foxtrot © Bill Amend

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I will not throw paper
airplanes in class.I will not
throw paper airplanes in
class.I will not throw
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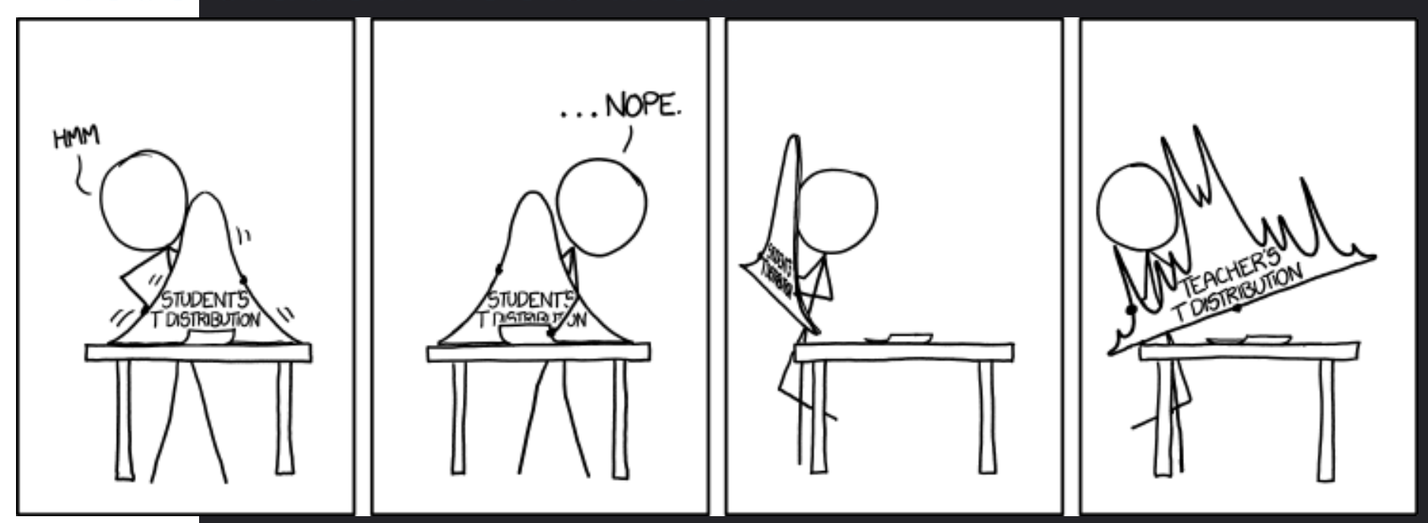
Those student feels tho...



XKCD © Randall Munroe

6 P ≤ 0.05 Significant Speakers of the ECSSC

With Director of ACEMS Peter Taylor

As told to Catriona Croton

One of our keynote speakers for the ECSSC2021 conference, **Peter Taylor**, joins us to talk about non-linear study paths at university, the future of the profession and what he has changed his mind about over his career. Peter is the Director of Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Mathematical and Statistical Frontiers (ACEMS) and his research interests are in stochastic modelling and applied probability.

On choosing what to study and having a non-linear study path:

Back when I was a high school student at a careers event, I was told *You should become a civil engineer* as I was good at maths and liked the outdoors. So I enrolled at the University of Adelaide, and it took me about one term to realise civil engineering was completely not for me. I really enjoyed the maths, but not the drawing and keeping standards. I don't even like making things - I should have known. Even then I didn't move straight into maths – I changed to science and was going to become a physicist, and it was only in second year I realised I could do maths. Back then Adelaide University had a Bachelor of Science in mathematical science as a separate degree, which is what I eventually did. So I ended up doing maths by default. I didn't actually ever do formal statistics because that was a separate department, and because I had started in engineering, I couldn't do statistics at a first year level. So, the first time I was in a statistics class was when I was teaching it at the University of Western Australia after I did my PhD. So that was interesting *(laughs)*.

On mentoring people into the mathematical sciences:
My maths teacher in year 12 was a very senior teacher – he wrote the textbook that was subsequently used in South Australia – and I don't want to be arrogant, but I was one of the best students he would have come across. But he never sat me down and told me I could become a mathematician. And I think he should have. I try to do that now if I come across people talented in maths. I say *you have many options in life, but one of them should be maths.* Especially with girls – there is not enough positive reinforcement around possibilities in the mathematical sciences. As teachers, we often have the power to make a difference in someone's life with just a few words by opening up that option. Right now there are good opportunities in statistics, data science, mathematical modelling and the students who are suited should be aware that is possible to have a career in this area. You see a lot of frustrated mathematicians and teachers in the ranks of other professions.

On studying maths/statistics/data science now:

Moving between degrees is different now - it isn't as easy to move as when I was studying as there are entry requirements and costs. Having said that, we changed the Melbourne University model about 10 years ago to teach broad-based undergraduate degrees and specialize at the master's level. This is a little unique compared to most other Australian degrees. If you want to become an engineer, you do a Bachelor of Science and an engineering systems major, and then you qualify as an engineer at the master's level. The students are more flexible when they graduate.

ACEMS
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MATHEMATICAL AND STATISTICAL FRONTIERS

What a maths/stats university degree gives you:

I don't think universities are really about preparing you for a particular job. A maths/stats university degree these days means you're not afraid to sit in front of a computer and fire up a package. But it also means that you know how to frame problems and you're a good analytical problem solver. I also think having confidence in tackling a problem is really important. There are a few times in my life where I've been asked to do something that's really completely outside my comfort zone.

For example, when I was working in Adelaide, I ended up as part of the Australian delegation to the International Telecon Union in Geneva, which was formerly part of the United Nations. It was a really interesting experience. I had no idea about telecommunications standards. But once you spent a couple of weeks there and you say a few stupid things, make a fool of yourself a couple of times, you do learn stuff. You learn by stepping inside.

"He never sat me down and told me I could become a mathematician."

On ACEMS and career-long learning:

Being cross-disciplinary is the essence of ACEMS. We have a whole spectrum of people; we range from machine learning to be applied statisticians, theoretical statisticians, mathematical physicists, and a few optimisers as well. It's really important that that you don't put boundaries between the disciplines as we can all learn from each other.

I never learned about one of the most basic stochastic processes that exist, which is Brownian motion diffusion processes. I never learnt it formally; I learnt it piecemeal. Probably the same as inferential statistics as well. So if I find that I'm always filling in details about those things. You need to keep learning as everyone misses out on something along the way.

On the overlap between statistics and data science:

I've become much more open-minded to machine learning and data science than I previously was. I thought modelling was absolutely paramount. I would use a model to solve a problem, and infer from that model - pretty much what most statisticians would do.

Quite a lot of computer scientists hit the problem with a neural network or a random forest, or something similar. Sometimes that can be dangerous. I'm not going to step away from all the warnings that a mathematical scientist would normally make, but the fact is, a lot of the time these guys do get good results – they are successful at what they're trying to do.

I actually think statistics has suffered in the past by defining itself to be too small. There are a lot of old fashioned traditional statisticians saying data science is not statistics. And it should be. Statistics should have claimed all the stuff about pattern recognition and image processing and so on. Because it is statistics. It might not be done quite the same way with proper experimental design and all the rest of it, but it is a way of analysing data and making inferences and, like it or not, it is very successful. I don't think we should be precious over the word “statistics”. Look at marketing, which is one of the biggest successes of data science. Data scientists wouldn't do it if they didn't make money from it. So sitting back and saying they're not doing it right is probably is a bit silly.

“You never really understand something if you don't use it.”

On a new useful technique he has recently learnt:

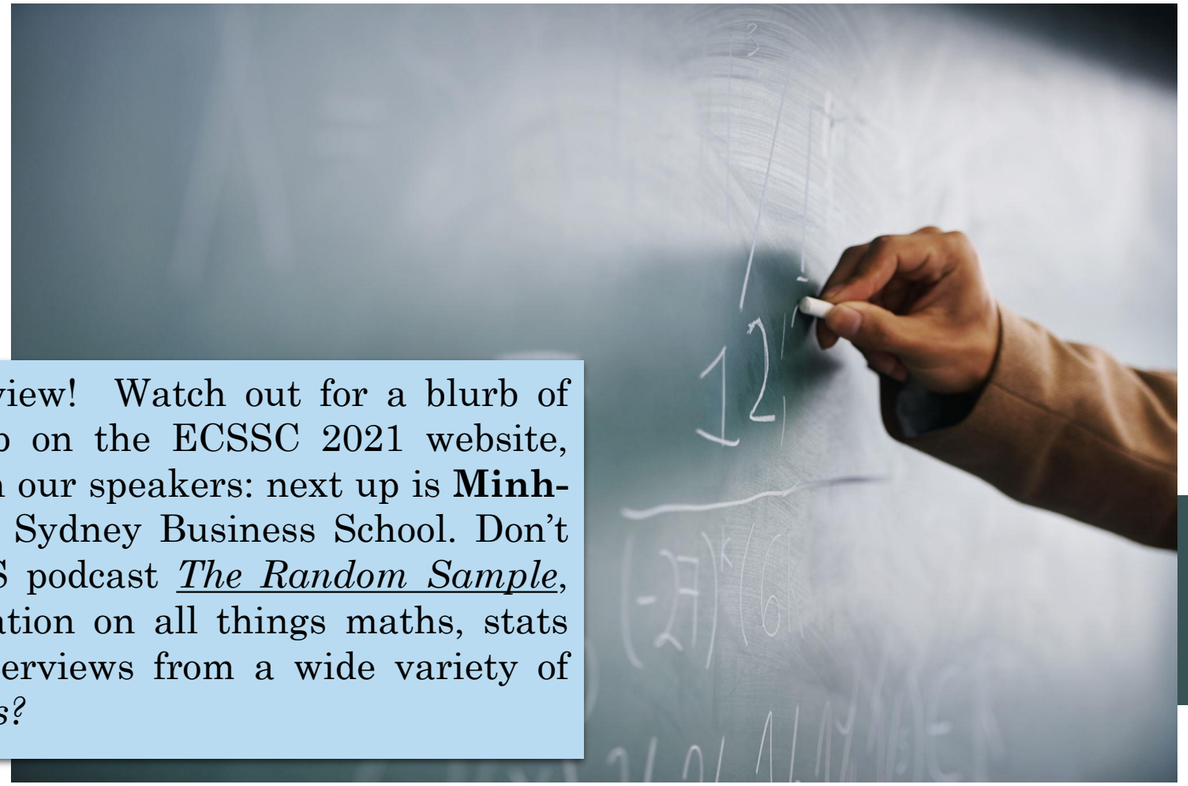
It's not really recent, but it is this idea of coupling. I was motivated to learn about coupling through my student Peter Braunsteins, when he invented it for himself in his Masters project. Let's say you've got a time series. You have randomness that's driving a process and you want to prove that slightly different versions of this might be related in some way. For example, think of a queue where one version has capacity for N people and another version has capacity for N+1 people. You want to work out the consequences of, for example, increasing your capacity to accommodate more people. If you're running a business, it might increase your revenue, but maybe it also cost you money; so you got a decision to make. You can simulate the queue with the same random variables, but slightly different rules. One rule is if you reject the customer if the queue gets to capacity, whereas the other rule is you let it build up a bit more. So you can think of a time series where you had the same innovations each at each time point, which had different rules, and you can actually establish relationships between things. The idea is that you simulate or analyse two processes as if they have the same random variables driving them. I've gone to a lot of talks of my career and I heard people talk about coupling, but I never really used it. And you never really understand something if you don't use it.

On the future for statistics, applied mathematics, and data science:

I hope the future is that the boundaries disappear and that we will become experts in modelling, optimization, both Bayesian and frequentists, because there's no reason to be in one camp or the other. And machine learning. Younger people, I think, need to be very, very good at programming. And I don't think it matters which program; it could be shiny, Matlab, Python or C#. It is more important that you can use one or more programs as the step between using none and one program is far larger than the step between using any given one and any other.

On one way for our readers to prepare for changes in the profession:

I would come back to programming, and also to being open to challenges as well. Being confident that what you've got behind you is going to help you approach new problems. The profession will change enormously and you have to be open to that happening.



Thank you Peter for the interview! Watch out for a blurb of Peter's keynote talk coming up on the ECSSC 2021 website, along with more interviews with our speakers: next up is **Minh-Ngoc Tran** from University of Sydney Business School. Don't forget to check out the ACEMS podcast *The Random Sample*, which is a goldmine of information on all things maths, stats and data science, including interviews from a wide variety of topics, such as *Why Study Maths?*

7 My Favourite Program

First in a series of ECSSN exclusive interviews into statisticians' favourite programs

Irma is an Associate Professor (Reader) in Sociology and Social Policy at the *School of Social and Political Sciences (SSPS)* at the University of Melbourne, Australia. She is a leading expert on labour market research and life course dynamics, and is internationally known for her work on the socio-economic consequences of employment instability, unemployment and joblessness for workers and their families. She is here to tell us about her favourite statistical and data science program.

Tell me - which is your favourite statistical/data science program and when & why did you first start using it?

My favourite program is Stata as it is user friendly, intuitive and, more importantly,
covers a full range of analyses from basic descriptive statistics to more advanced modelling. You can write your own codes and programming loops, and there is lots of free online support and resources which are very helpful.

I started using Stata in 2004 during my PhD as I felt it best met my needs. I really wanted to invest time and resources to learn in-depth a statistical program; I don't regret my choice of Stata as it is a great program and I have been able to use it throughout my career.

Did you study formally how to use the program or did you dive in? Which courses or books did you use to get up and running?

I learned to use Stata's more advanced tools during one of my PhD courses on survival analysis offered by Stephen Jenkins at the University of Essex, and this was most invaluable. To this day, I still look at my notes and materials from that course when I do survival analysis! My research area on unemployment and labour markets investigates (among others) transitions to work or how fast people find employment after periods of joblessness, and so I was using survival analysis as a time-to-event model to estimate transitions to work.

I continued to practice and was able to estimate more complex models thanks to Stata's easy and intuitive way of programming, but also thanks to a range of PhD courses that I took at ICPSR summer school in Ann Arbour, Michigan. Next, I "learnt by doing", while using Stata's online support forums, which helped a lot. I remember that one of my favourite commands during my PhD was the command `tsspell` written by NJ Cox which was very useful to identify spells of runs.

What are your favourite resources now?

Now I get more out of technical books on research methodology. Thinking carefully about the conceptual model and substantive assumptions about how certain processes work helps me get the most out of technical tools and skills. Soe of my favourite books in this area:

- *Seven Rules for Social Research* by Glenn Firebaugh
- *The Book of Why* by Judea Pearl and Dana Mackenzie (provides conceptual tools to understand what you can and cannot do using big data; or how to articulate substantive assumptions about how our worlds operate)
- *Counterfactuals and Causal Inference* by Stephen L. Morgan and Christopher Winship

I would highly recommend these books to PhD students and junior researchers. What they all have in common is that they push researchers to think carefully about their research design and conceptual models and show how to best use different statistical approaches to causal inference, before delving into data analysis.

Tell me about where you work now – what is a typical day for you?

A little background on me - until two weeks ago I was Head of the Discipline of Sociology and so my typical day looked quite different from the 'standard' typical days. Despite the very busy schedule during my 4-year term with many meetings and administrative tasks, I did manage to do research. What helped me was to start my day with a list of tasks that I needed to do in that day and week. I always worked on the list before I turned on my computer, and I followed the list very diligently as it gave me the support that I needed to get through a hectic day. It also gave me a sense of accomplishment when I ticked off a task on the list.

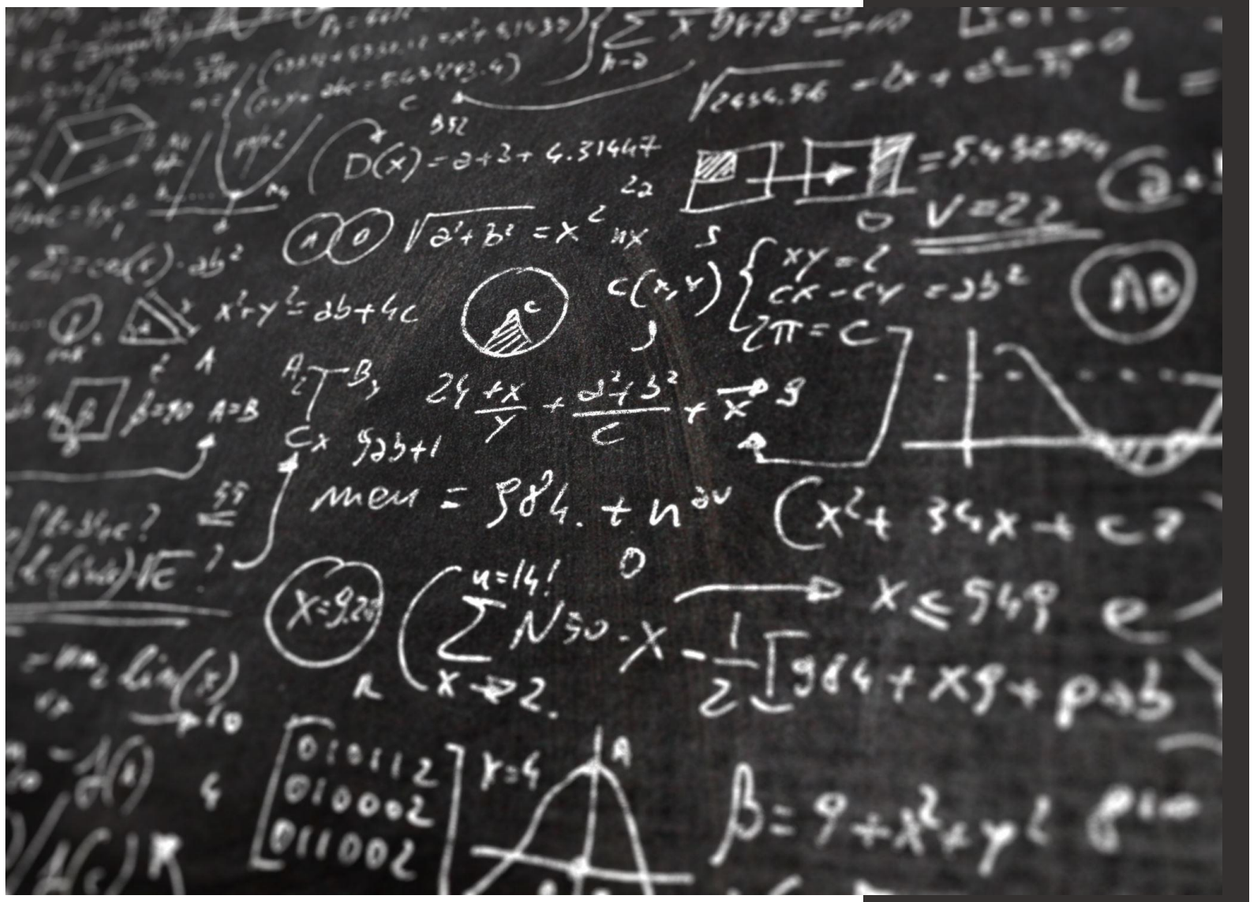
No matter how hectic or crazy the day, I always try to devote two hours on research related activities every day. This can include writing of papers or analysis, depending on the team I am working with. Of course, as the academic year goes on my schedule becomes more hectic and difficult to combine all the tasks at once.

What new tool or technique have you recently learnt in this statistical/data science program that you feel is useful in your area?

My work is based on survey data on unemployment histories to investigate the effect unemployment has on individuals work and family life and on the outcomes of their children. Lately, I have used multi-level modelling more frequently than in the past to deal with the nested structure of my data and estimate cohort-age-period effects. I have found Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal's book on multi-level modelling using Stata very useful along with Snijder and Bosker's book *Multilevel Analysis: An Introduction to Basic and Advanced Multilevel Modeling*.

What do you feel is the future for data science/statistics in your area?

The future for data science/statistics in the area of sociology and social policy is very bright. Especially with the increased data availability there is an increasing demand for people who can use, analyse and interpret data. Being a data scientist with a background in sociology and social policy offers a double opportunity because it helps put analyses in a broader societal context, helps to inform policy making and improve people's lives. Therefore, social context and social policy combined with skills in data science and analytics is a match made in heaven.



Thank you very much Irma for the interview!

Irma co-wrote a book (with Erik A. Mooi and Marko Sarstedt) called *Market Research using Stata*, which is recommended for PhD students, researchers, even practitioners and experts conducting market research who wish to look beyond an excel spreadsheet to get more from their data. It is a very general and approachable book, with an easy to read style, that is a step by step guide to doing market research.

8 Letter from the Editors

Catriona Croton and Splithoof Rivera

We are excited to show you our first Inferential Interests Magazine. We delve into data science and statistics matters for the Early Career and Student Statisticians Network community leading up to our virtual conference in **July 2021**. Don't forget to register here!

The first interview of our keynote speakers for the conference is Peter Taylor. Many of you will have heard of Peter already through his work at ACEMS and Melbourne University, and he shares his career journey and thoughts on the future of data science and statistics. On this topic, we share our 5 Top Tips for Surviving the First Year of Academia – please add your own tips in the comments on our blog.

Additionally, in this issue, renowned sociology researcher Irma Mooi has a chat in My Favourite Program about Stata, and shares her book recommendations. Cedric, one of ECSSC team members, walks us through his typical day at the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and check out the section on books, music and podcasts, all with a data science and statistics focus. Finally, have a look at Regression to the Meme (we can't resist a cheesy pun!).

Please share your thoughts in the comments – we would love to hear from you. Also, watch out for our upcoming podcast on *The Random Sample* where we chat further to Peter about a range of issues facing the early career and student stats and data science community.

Looking forward to seeing you (virtually) at the conference,

Split and Cat

Statistical Society of Australia Mentoring Program

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For further details: https://www.statsoc.org.au/News-and-media-releases/10057584.

Watch out for more on the mentoring program in coming issues!

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