Syllabus

Introduction to Record Linkage with Big Data Applications
2 credits/ 4,00 ECTS Points

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Video lecture by
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September 10- October 29, 2025

Short Course Description

The course will address methods to combine data on given entities (people, house-holds, firms etc.) that are stored in different data sources. By showing the strengths of these methods and by showing how each of them are performed in practice using R, the course will demonstrate the various benefits of record linkage. Participants will also learn about potential challenges that record linkage projects may face.

Course Objectives

By the end of the course, students will…
- be familiar with a host of record linkage applications from different countries or jurisdictions that link a variety of data sources and use different types of linkage
- know how to improve the quality of linkage identifiers by applying pre-processing routines
- be familiar with different methods of increasing the efficiency of record linkage
- be able to understand, select and apply appropriate record linkage methods (e.g., deterministic and probabilistic linkage)
- be able to evaluate the success of data linkage
- be able to perform each step in the record linkage process using the R software

Prerequisites

Students should have knowledge of basic statistical concepts. They need to have an intermediate knowledge of R. Familiarity with regular expressions, the R packages ggplot2 and tidyverse is useful but not required.

Class Structure and Course Concept

This is an online course using a flipped classroom design. It covers the same material and content as an on-site course but runs differently. In this course, you are responsible for watching video-recorded lectures and reading the required literature for each unit prior to participating in mandatory weekly one-hour online meetings where students have the chance to discuss the materials from a unit with the instructors. Although this is an online course where students have more freedom in when they engage with the course materials, students are expected to spend the same amount of time overall on all activities in the course

– including preparatory activities (readings, studying), in-class-activities (watching prerecorded videos, attending the live online meetings), and follow-up activities (working on assignments and answering quizzes) – as in an on-site course. As a rule of thumb, you can expect to spend approximately 3h/week on in-class-activities and 9 hours per week on out-of-class activities (preparing for class, readings, assignments, studying for quizzes). Therefore, the workload in all courses will be approximately 12h/week. Please note that the actual workload will depend on your personal knowledge.

Mandatory Weekly Online Meetings

Wednesdays, 11:00 AM *EDT/5:00 PM CEST, starting* September 10, 2025

Meetings will be held online through Zoom. Follow the link to the meeting sessions on the course website on https://umd.zoom.us/ If video participation via Internet is not possible, arrangements can be made for students to dial in and join the meetings via telephone.

In preparation for the weekly online meetings, students are expected to watch the lecture videos and read the assigned literature before the start of the meeting. In addition, students are encouraged to post questions about the materials covered in the videos and readings of the week in the forum before the meetings (deadline for posting questions is Tuesday, 1:00 PM EDT/7:00 PM CEST, i.e. 24 hours before each online meeting; questions not posted in time will not be counted for the grading and may not be answered in the online meeting).

Students have the opportunity to use the BigBlueButton feature in Canvas to connect with peers outside the scheduled weekly online meetings (e.g., for study groups). Students are not required to use BigBlueButton and can of course use other online meeting platforms such as Google Hangouts, Skype or Microsoft Teams.

Grading

Grading will be based on:
- 3 online quizzes (worth 10% each, 30% in total)
- Participation in the weekly online meetings (20% of grade): engagement in discussions during the meetings and submission of questions in the weekly discussion forum on the course website (deadline: Tuesday, 1:00 PM EDT/7:00 PM CEST, i.e. 24 hours before each online meeting)
- 3 homework assignments (worth 50% in total)

A+   100 - 97
A   96 - 93
A-   92 - 90
B+   89 - 87
B   86 - 83
B-   82 - 80
Etc.

The final grade will be communicated under the assignment "Final Grade" in the Canvas course. Please note that the letter grade written in parentheses in Canvas is the correct final grade. The point-grade

displayed alongside the letter grade is irrelevant and can be ignored. Dates of when assignment will be due are indicated in the syllabus. Extensions will be granted sparingly and only with prior arrangement with the instructors.

Technical Equipment Needs

The learning experience in this course will mainly rely on the online interaction between the students and the instructors during the weekly online meetings. Therefore, we encourage all students in this course to use a web camera and a headset. Decent quality headsets and web cams are available for less than $20 each. We ask students to refrain from using built-in web cams and speakers on their desktops or laptops. We know from our experience in previous online courses that this will reduce the quality of video and audio transmission and therefore will decrease the overall learning experience for all students in the course. In addition, we suggest that students use a wire connection (LAN), if available, when connecting to the online meetings. Wireless connections (WLAN) are usually less stable and might be dropped.

Long Course Description

The demand for using different data sets in a "combined way" to analyze research questions is increasing. This is where record linkage comes into play as the common technique to integrate separate data sets.

The course will provide an introduction to record linkage: it will address methods to combine data on given entities (people, households, firms etc.) that are stored in different data sources. By showing the strengths of these methods and by providing numerous practical examples ranging from linked survey and administrative data to Big Data applications, the course will demonstrate the various benefits of record linkage. Participants will also learn about potential challenges record linkage projects may face.

The schedule of the course will follow a prototypical record linkage process:
- the need for common identifiers (e.g., names, addresses, birth dates) and the importance of assuring high data quality even during the planning phase of each project,
- preparation of these identifiers before the actual linkage,
- increasing the efficiency of the matching step (different blocking techniques),
- alternative ways of conducting the comparison step, namely rule-based, distance-based and probabilistic record linkage,
- as data protection requirements are an important issue in many applications, methods of privacy preserving record linkage are discussed,
- evaluation and visualization of different quality aspects of the linkage result.

Numerous practical examples will give participants an opportunity to create and discuss their own ideas for promising record linkage projects. By the end of the course participants will be able to assess the feasibility of, plan and manage record linkage projects as well as to perform each step along the linkage process using the R software.

Readings

Mandatory Readings
Christen, Peter (2012). Data Matching: Concepts and Techniques for Record Linkage, Entity Resolution, and Duplicate Detection. Berlin: Springer.

Complementary Readings
Additional required as well as recommended readings for each class are provided below for each specific unit.

Academic Conduct

Clear definitions of the forms of academic misconduct, including cheating and plagiarism, as well as information about disciplinary sanctions for academic misconduct may be found at

https://www.president.umd.edu/sites/president.umd.edu/files/documents/policies/III-100A.pdf (University of Maryland).

Knowledge of these rules is the responsibility of the student and ignorance of them does not excuse misconduct. The student is expected to be familiar with these guidelines before submitting any written work or taking any exams in this course. Lack of familiarity with these rules in no way constitutes an excuse for acts of misconduct. Charges of plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct will be dealt with very seriously and may result in oral or written reprimands, a lower or failing grade on the assignment, a lower or failing grade for the course, suspension, and/or, in some cases, expulsion from the university.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

In order to receive services, students at the University of Maryland must contact the Accessibility & Disability Service (ADS) office to register in person for services. Please call the office to set up an appointment to register with an ADS counselor. Contact the ADS office at 301.314.7682; https://www.counseling.umd.edu/ads/.

Course Evaluation

In an effort to improve the learning experience for students in our online courses, students will be invited to participate in an online course evaluation at the end of the course. Participation is entirely voluntary and highly appreciated.

Week 1: Introducing record linkage in the age of Big Data

Video lecture: available Tuesday, September 2, 2025

Online meeting: Tuesday, September 9 2025, 11:00 AM EDT/5:00 PM CEST

Required Readings:
Christen (2012), chapters 1 (sections 1.1-1.3) and 2.

Bender, S., Jarmin, R., Kreuter, F. and Lane, J. (2021): Privacy and Confidentiality, In: Foster, I., Gahin, R., Jarmin, R. S., Kreuter, F. und Lane, J. (eds.): Big Data and Social Science – A Practical Guide to Methods and Tools, Chapter 12, 2nd Edition, Chapman & Hall.
https://textbook.coleridgeinitiative.org/chap-privacy.html

Sakshaug, J.W. (2021). Measuring and Controlling for Non-Consent Bias. In Linked Survey and Administrative Data. In: A.Y. Chun, M.D. Larsen, G. Durrant, and J.P. Reiter (Eds.), Administrative Records for Survey Methodology. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, pp. 155-174.
https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/9781119272076.ch7

Recommended Readings:
Christen, P., and Belacic, D. (2005): Automated Probabilistic Address Standardisation and Verification, Australasian Data Mining Conference Proceedings.
http://cs.anu.edu.au/~Peter.Christen/publications/ausdm2005-christen-address.pdf

Topics:
- Introduction
- What is RL? What is it not?
- Privacy issues
- Consent
- Process of record linkage

Week 2: Collecting and pre-processing linkage identifiers & blocking techniques

Video lecture: available Tuesday, September 9, 2025

Online meeting: Tuesday, September 16, 2025, 11:00 AM EDT/5:00 PM CEST

Online quiz 1: due Monday, September 22, 2025, 11:00 AM EDT/5:00 PM CEST

Required Readings:
Christen (2012), chapters 3 (sections 3.1-3.5 and 3.8) and 4 (sections 4.1-4.5, 4.8 and 4.13).

Recommended Readings:

Christen, P. (2012): A survey of indexing techniques for scalable record linkage and deduplication. IEEE transactions on knowledge and data engineering, 24(9), 1537-1555. https://doi.org/10.1109/TKDE.2011.127

Randall, S. M., Ferrante, A. M., Boyd, J. H. and Semmens, J. B. (2013): The effect of data cleaning on record linkage quality. BMC medical informatics and decision making, 13(1), 64, https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-6947-13-64

Topics:
- Identifiers: Which are useful? How to ensure their quality?
- Importance and limitations of preprocessing
- Basics of dealing with strings in R

Week 3: Data preprocessing and core concepts of data quality for linking

Video lecture: available Tuesday, September 16, 2025

Online meeting: Tuesday, September 23, 2025, 11:00 AM EDT/5:00 PM CEST

Homework assignment 1: Monday, September 29, 2025, 11:00 AM EDT/5:00 PM CEST

Recommended Readings:

Spolsky, J. (2013): The Absolute Minimum Every Software Developer Absolutely, Positively Must Know About Unicode and Character Sets (No Excuses!). https://www.joelonsoftware.com/2003/10/08/the-absolute-minimum-every-software-developer-absolutely-positively-must-know-about-unicode-and-character-sets-no-excuses

Wickham, H., Grolemund, G. (2017): R for Data Science. Bejing: O'Reilly. Chapters 11 and 14. https://r4ds.had.co.nz

Topics:

- Potential pitfalls with character encoding
- Regular expressions
- Lookup tables
- Blocking

Week 4: Comparison and classification of record pairs

Video lecture: available Tuesday, September 23, 2025

Online meeting: Tuesday, September 30, 2025, 11:00 AM EDT/5:00 PM CEST

Online quiz 2: due Monday, October 6, 2025,11:00 AM EDT/5:00 PM CEST

Required Readings:

Christen (2012), chapters 5 (sections 5.1-5.5, 5.9 and 5.17), 6 (sections 6.1-6.3) and 8 (sections 8.1-8.3).

Recommended Readings:

Doidge, J. C. and Harron, K. (2018): Demystifying probabilistic linkage. International Journal for Population Data Science, 3(1). https://doi.org/10.23889/ijpds.v3i1.410

Draisbach, U. and Naumann, F. (2013): On choosing thresholds for duplicate detection. In Proceedings of the 18th International Conference on Information Quality (ICIQ). https://hpi.de/fileadmin/user_upload/fachgebiete/naumann/publications/2013/On_Choosing_Thresholds_for_Duplicate_Detection.pdf

Fellegi, I. P. and Sunter, A. B. (1969): A Theory for Record Linkage, Journal of the American Statistical Association, 64, 1183-1210. https://courses.cs.washington.edu/courses/cse590q/04au/papers/Felligi69.pdf

Topics:

- Distance-based linkage
- Probabilistic record linkage

Week 5: Probabilistic record linkage and blocking (application)

Video lecture (Antoni, Borgs): available Tuesday, September 30, 2025

Online meet: Tuesday, October 7, 2025, 11:00 AM EDT/5:00 PM CEST

Homework assignment 2: Monday, October 13, 2025, 11:00AM/EDT/5:00PM CEST

Topics:

- Implementation of blocking
- Comparison of record pairs
- Classification of matches

Week 6: Advanced topics, software options and literature review

Video lecture (Antoni, Bender, Sakshaug): available Tuesday, October 7, 2025

Online meeting: Tuesday, October 14, 2025, 11:00 AM EDT/5:00 PM

CEST Online quiz 3: due Monday, October 20, 2025 11:00 AM EDT/5:00 PM CEST

Required Readings:
Christen (2012), chapter 7 (sections 7.1-7.3).

Ghani, R. and Schierholz, M. (2021): Machine Learning, In: Foster, I., Gahin, R., Jarmin, R. S., Kreuter, F. and Lane, J. (eds.): Big Data and Social Science – A Practical Guide to Methods and Tools, Chapter 7, 2nd Edition, Chapman & Hall. https://textbook.coleridgeinitiative.org/chap-ml.html

Recommended Readings:

Schild, C.-J., Schultz, S. and Wieser, F. (2017): Linking Deutsche Bundesbank Company Data using Machine-Learning-Based Classification. Technical Report 2017-01, Deutsche Bundesbank Research Data and Service Centre.
https://www.bundesbank.de/resource/blob/604828/f3227be248777d3f414b89b395e875cd/mL/research-data-company-data-data.pdf

Python Record Linkage Toolkit: Classifiers. https://recordlinkage.readthedocs.io/en/latest/ref-classifiers.html

van der Laan, J. (2023). Record linkage using machine learning. https://htmlpreview.github.io/?https://github.com/djvanderlaan/reclin2/blob/master/inst/doc/record_linkage_using_machine_learning.html

Topics:

- Evaluation
- Advanced Classification Techniques
- Software options
- Literature overview
- Record linkage in the age of Big Data – outlook

Week 7: Privacy-preserving record linkage using R

Video lecture (Antoni, Borgs): available Tuesday, October 14, 2025

Online meeting: Tuesday, October 21, 2025,11:00 AM EDT/5:00 PM CEST

Required Readings:

Schnell, R., Rukasz, D. (2019): PPRL: Privacy Preserving Record Linkage.
https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/PPRL/index.html

Schnell, R., Bachteler, T. and Reiher, J. (2009): Privacy-preserving Record Linkage Using Bloom Filters. BMC Medical Informatics and Decision Making 9 (41). https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-6947-9-41

Vatsalan D., Christen P. and Verykios, V. S. (2013): A taxonomy of privacy-preserving record linkage techniques. Journal of Information Systems. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.is.2012.11.005

Topics:
- Encryption of linkage identifiers using Bloom filters
- Blocking on Bloom filters using Multibit-Trees
- Comparison and classification

Week 8: Evaluation and visualization of linkage quality

Video lecture (Antoni, Borgs): available Tuesday, October 21, 2025

Online meeting: Tuesday, October 28, 2025,11:00 AM EDT/5:00 PM CEST

Homework assignment 3: Monday, October 27, 2025; 11:00 AM EDT/5:00 PM CEST

Recommended Readings:

Wickham, H (2016): ggplot2. Elegant Graphics for Data Analysis. Second edition. Cham: Springer. (draft version of third edition available for free here: https://ggplot2-book.org)

Topics:

- Calculating measures of linkage quality
- Visualization of linkage quality