

LEARNED SOCIETY AND PROFESSIONAL BODIES STATEMENT ON QUANTITATIVE SKILLS

18 October 2012

Quantitative skills are vital to research, policymaking, education and society at large. They are an essential element of studying or researching across the social sciences – and many areas of the humanities.

Yet too many social science students leave university with inadequate quantitative skills and expertise in their applications to their chosen areas of study. This leads to a shortage of such candidates going on to doctoral training. This then feeds into inadequate numbers going on to become university researchers.

We need these skills, linked to subject-based expertise, as many of our current social and research challenges require an interdisciplinary approach, often involving quantitative approaches. To understand social dynamics, economic change, policy challenges, cultural phenomena and human behaviour in the round, researchers have to be able to deploy a broad range of skills and techniques. We are not trying to privilege one type of method over another – such as quantitative over qualitative. Our concern is that there is a ‘market failure’ in quantitative skills. The evidence points towards a serious problem with quantitative skills, not in other approaches.

Beyond universities, these skills are valuable for employment in all sectors: business, charities and the public sector. In a wide range of jobs, quantitative skills are now essential. Businesses need their staff to be able to make effective use of statistics and probability. As citizens and consumers, we also need a sound grasp of statistics to help make well-informed decisions, whether it is deciphering league tables on schools, or choosing a critical medical treatment.

We welcome the creation of a network of up to 15 specialist Quantitative Methods Centres in universities, a £15.5 million Nuffield Foundation-led programme to promote a step-change in quantitative training. This is a positive step, but we will need more concerted, well planned and longer term action, from government, schools, universities, learned societies and others, if we are to address this long-standing skills shortage for the sake of our economy, our citizenry and, indeed, for the future health of research in a wide range of disciplines.

Professor Sir Adam Roberts, President, British Academy

Professor Mary James, President, British Educational Research Association

Dr. Peter Banister, President, British Psychological Society

Professor John Holmwood, President, British Sociological Association

Professor Charlie Jeffery, Chair, Political Studies Association

Dr. Rita Gardner, Director, Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)

Professor Colin Jones, President, Royal Historical Society

Hetan Shah, Executive Director, Royal Statistical Society

David Walker, Director, RSS getstats

Professor Nick Ellison, Chair, Social Policy Association

Dr. Patten Smith, Chair, Social Research Association