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Statistical literacy

getstats

Choosing what to buy, planning a journey, deciding on medical treatment, calculating earnings and benefits, and how to save and invest...these are all statistically rich decisions. Which is why we want to build statistical understanding across society, ensuring that we all get the most out of data.

One of the key ways we do this is through our **getstats** campaign. **getstats'** aim is to improve how we handle numbers – the practical numbers of daily life, business and policy. As part of this campaign, we have initiated several programmes that help key professions improve their statistical literacy. We have also focused our policy work on the statistical skill base inside and outside of government.

An [advisory board](#) leads the **getstats** campaign. The **getstats** campaign and individual projects have been funded and supported by the [Nuffield Foundation](#), [SAS](#), the [Institute and Faculty of Actuaries](#) and many others. We are very grateful to all our partners.

'In the data rich world... those nations, governments, businesses and individuals who use the power of numbers will prosper. Those who 'get stats' will get on. Those who do not, will get left behind.' - John Pullinger, CB, past president of the RSS and National Statistician

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Statistical literacy initiatives

Statistical literacy initiatives that support the getstats campaign focus on three areas:

- Media
- Politicians and policymakers
- Education, including higher education

We have also worked, proactively and reactively, with several other areas of interest.

The media

The media has been a key audience for **getstats** since the launch of the campaign in October 2010. We have made considerable progress, including some advance in achieving longer-term change.

We strive to improve the confidence and skills of journalists in handling numbers through [providing resources for journalists](#) via our [Science Journalism Training Programme](#); our [Statistical Excellence in Journalism](#) awards provide recognition for the best work.

Politicians and policymakers

Our work with politicians and policymakers seeks to improve the standing and use of statistics in policymaking, and extend the skills of civil servants in their handling and use of statistics.

Initiatives include:

- The **getstats** in Parliament programme of events for parliamentarians, raising the profile of statistics and statistical literacy among MPs, Lords and their staff
- Developing the skills of civil service staff and policymakers through events and workshops

We hold a regular series of **getstats** in Parliament events and have held various other events for politicians and policymakers in Westminster, and at party conferences.

For example, the event '[Scotland's referendum: statistical perspectives](#)' was held near the Scottish Parliament on 26 March 2014 by our Glasgow and Edinburgh Local Groups and our Business and Industrial Section, discussing statistical aspects of the referendum and its potential consequences.

Previous projects have included a pilot statistician-Parliament pairing scheme in association with the House of Commons Library and the Government Statistical Service.

Education

Our work covers primary, secondary and higher education.

Initiatives include:

- The Guy Lecture
- Responding to consultations regarding the content of A level, GCSE and core maths qualifications
- Wide range of teaching and education activities, including
- Providing teaching resources
- Supporting the Maths Teacher Training Scholarship programme

[More information is available on our education page.](#)

In other areas

We have worked with several other areas of interest, including:

- **Public:** In 2013 we held two major public events with Ipsos MORI and Kings College London, accompanied by new research. The first considered trust and understanding in statistics, and the second considered public misperceptions. The latter research gained considerable media interest, including quotes in the press, and continues to do so. The Work and Pensions Committee cited the research in their May 2014 report on Fraud and error in the benefits system. Both events secured 250 attendees.

In 2014 we held a series of 180th anniversary lectures that have been popular. We have launched a Statistical Ambassador project to encourage statisticians to engage with public audiences.

- **Voluntary sector:** Through our work with the StatsUserNet programme, we have provided input to the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) review of the voluntary sector's use of statistics and data. We are liaising with Pro Bono Economics to broaden their remit to include pro bono statistical work for the voluntary sector.

In addition, the **getstats** campaign is supported through a wide range of activities, including:

- [StatsLife](#) – our news website publishes articles about the importance of statistical literacy and statistical thinking, and has resources on how to promote and communicate statistics.
- [Significance magazine](#) and website has popular articles exploring the power of statistics in everyday life.

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Improving statistical knowledge

We provide resources to help the public as well as journalists and teachers find out more about statistics. Issues like money, life expectancy and understanding the society we live in and the world around us can all be informed by understanding statistics.

Our [resources section](#) on StatsLife offers a range of materials that will improve your statistical knowledge.

For the general public:

- Glossary – our guide to understanding technical statistical terms
- TV and radio – where you can find statistical inspired media
- Reading – our reading guide to finding out more about stats

For journalists:

- Presentations – slideshows for seminars on improving statistical and scientific literacy
- Handouts and further reading – publications that can be handed out to attendees
- Exercises – practical tasks that will support initial lessons

For teachers

- Resources that bring statistics to life in the classroom

We created this portal as part of our **getstats** campaign.

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Get involved

Get involved with improving statistical literacy and help improve everyone's statistical skills and confidence.

Members can be involved in a wide variety of ways:

- Our projects – see our [call outs to members page](#)
- Projects run by others – see our [call outs to members page](#), or standing projects such as STEM Ambassadors

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getstats Board

The **getstats** Board advises the campaign. Its members (see below) are committed to its goals and objectives.

[Robert Chote, Chair of the Office for Budget Responsibility \(OBR\), Chair of the getstats Board](#)

He has been chair of OBR since October 2010. Previously he served as director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies from 2002 to 2010, as an advisor to senior management at the International Monetary Fund from 1999 to 2002, as economics editor of the Financial Times from 1995 to 1999, and as an economics and business writer on the Independent and Independent on Sunday from 1990 to 1994.

He is a member of the Finance Committee of the University of Cambridge and a Governor of the National Institute for Economic and Social Research. Robert was educated at Queens' College, Cambridge, at City University in London and at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University in Washington DC.

'A thriving democracy needs good statistics, well explained and well understood. Only then can we adequately understand the world around us and make sensible decisions about the choices that individuals and society confront.'

[Professor Sir Ian Diamond FBA, FRSE AcSS, Principal and Vice-chancellor of the University of Aberdeen](#)

Sir Ian is a social statistician who has worked most notably in the area of population, health, environmental noise and with local authorities. His research has involved collaboration with a number of government departments. He took up his current post in April 2010. Before this he was chief executive of the Economic and Social Research Council, also, from 2004 to 2009 chair of the Research Councils UK Executive Group.

'As we move into the century of data the need for everyone to understand how to use statistics and to be able to spot errors in data has never been more necessary. I am pleased to be able to support everything getstats does to help this to happen.'

[Mark Easton, BBC News Home Editor](#)

Mark's career as a journalist began when he joined his local paper after leaving school. He has won numerous awards – including an RSS award for excellence – for his reporting. Mark's ambition is to be a chronicler of the story of changing Britain – the way we live in the UK and the many ways in which that is constantly changing – and views an understanding of numbers, data and statistics as an essential component of how that story is told and understood.

'If we want to understand what is happening to our society, the answers will be found in numbers. It is only by understanding and respecting statistics and data that we can recognise trends, evaluate policy and consider how best to make Britain a better place.'

[Professor Harvey Goldstein FBA, Professor of social statistics at the University of Bristol](#)

Harvey was awarded our Guy Medal in Silver in 1998 and elected a fellow of the British Academy in 1997. He has been a member of our Society's Council and chaired its education strategy group. His research interests are in the way educational tests are developed and analysed and he has written extensively on the use (and misuse) of item response modelling in educational testing.

'I believe it is really important to support getstats in order to help produce quantitatively literate citizens for a society increasingly dependent on statistical data in order to function democratically and equitably.'

[Dr Dougal Goodman OBE FREng, Chief Executive of The Foundation for Science and Technology](#)

Dougal works between parliament, Whitehall, business and the research community to promote policy debate concerning scientific, engineering, technology and medical issues. He is a non-executive chair of the Lighthill Risk Network, a consultant to the marine insurance market and a visiting professor at University College London and the University of Cranfield. Previously, he worked for the British Antarctic Survey and BP.

[Dr Julian Huppert, MP for Cambridge](#)

Julian's political interests include science, education and evidence-based policy. He sits on the Home Affairs Select Committee and is a member of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Statistics. After completing a doctorate in biological chemistry at the University of Cambridge, he worked as a research scientist studying the structures of DNA and tutored students. He was a councillor in Cambridge (East Chesterton) for eight years before being elected as an MP.

'We are all surrounded by numbers and statistics everyday of our lives. By learning what they mean and how to use them we have a better understanding of the world around us and can play a greater part.'

[Professor Denise Lievesley CBE AcSS, Head of the School of Social Science and Public Policy at King's College London](#)

Denise has taught at and led organisations in the UK and overseas. She has been chief executive of the English Information Centre for Health and Social Care; director of statistics at UNESCO and of the UK Data Archive, also a special adviser at the UN's African Centre for Statistics. She is a past president of our Society. She has always campaigned for the use of evidence-based public policy and is committed to protecting the integrity of official statistics, free from political influence.

'Statistical understanding is such an important component of empowering the citizen. I subscribe to the World Bank definition of 'empowerment' – the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Central to this are actions that build individual and collective assets, and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational and institutional context governing the use of these assets. Trusted and trustworthy statistical information and the ability of citizens to use these data effectively are central to this.'

[Professor John Macinnes, Professor of sociology at the University of Edinburgh](#)

John is the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)'s strategic advisor on quantitative methods Training. His research interests are: social demography; quantitative methods; sociology of gender and national identity in Scotland and Catalonia. In his capacity as ESRC's adviser on quantitative methods training, John is taking the lead in developing a new, generic statistics curriculum for undergraduate social science and humanities undergraduate courses.

'In the rapidly emerging digital society we will be confronted with a relentlessly increasing volume of data about every imaginable sphere of life. I want more people to understand Statistics because it will enable them to tell when this data is being used well, and, more often, when it is being misused as 'policy based evidence'

[Dame Jil Matheson DCB, former National Statistician](#)

Jil was National Statistician from 2009 to summer 2014, where she was also Chief Executive of the UK Statistics Authority, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the Government Statistical Services. Before this she worked in Whitehall for more than 30 years, including from 2004-8, as the ONS's Director of Census, Demographic and Regional Statistics.

'Statistics really matter. They help all of us understand the world we live in, and inform all the most important aspects of public debate.'

[Stephen Penneck, past president of the International Association for Official Statistics](#)

Stephen retired from his post as director general of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in 2012. He has wide experience as a government statistician, including in economic statistics, surveys and methodology. Since retirement Stephen has published articles and given lectures on a range of topics including business statistics, open data, governance and trust, and quality. He is a fellow of our Society and a Chartered Statistician.

[Professor Bernard Silverman FRS, chief scientific adviser \(CSA\) at the Home Office and Professor of statistics in the Department of Statistics, University of Oxford](#)

In his role as CSA, Bernard advises the Home Secretary, ministers and policy officials on all the topics relevant to Home Office business. He leads Home Office science including applied science and technology and advises on policy and operations in crime and migration inter alia. He is a highly cited researcher whose published work is centred on computational statistics, the understanding of new statistical methods made possible and necessary by increases in computational power.

'Statistics are too important just to leave to experts, and it's crucial that people grasp the basic principles so that they can make good judgements—whether about their own lives or about wider public issues.'

[Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter OBE FRS, Winton Professor of the Public Understanding of Risk, University of Cambridge](#)

David leads a small team which attempts to improve the way in which the quantitative aspects of risk and uncertainty are discussed in society, and discusses risk, probability, statistics and uncertainty on his 'Understanding Uncertainty' website and regular TV and radio contributions. With Michael Blastland, he published 'The norm chronicles' in June 2013, to critical acclaim. He is a highly cited researcher and mathematical scientist. He has been a consultant on a range of UK and international projects. He played a leading role in the public inquiries into children's heart surgery at the Bristol Royal Infirmary and the murders by Harold Shipman.

'We get bombarded with numbers, and I feel very strongly that people should be able to take them apart and see which ones are worth taking any notice of.'

[Professor Neville Davies, Professor of statistical education, Plymouth University](#)

Neville is Professor of Statistical Education at Plymouth University. He has taught and carried out research in statistics for 40 years. He is the originator of the international internet-based CensusAtSchoolproject, designed to raise awareness about population censuses and provide real data, learning and teaching curriculum-enrichment resources in schools across the world.

'All citizens have a right to know why it is important to be able to get trustworthy information from the enormous amount of data in the world around us; they should be able to understand good and bad data-based arguments, including being sceptical about anecdotes used to further a cause; and they should be able to do certain statistical tasks for themselves. That's where the **getstats** campaign comes in.'

The Importance of Statistics

by RSS GetStats Board Members

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'We are all surrounded by numbers and statistics everyday of our lives. By learning what they mean and how to use them we have a better understanding of the world around us and can play a greater part.' Dr Julian Huppert, MP for Cambridge.

'Statistical understanding is such an important component of empowering the citizen. I subscribe to the World Bank definition of 'empowerment' – the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Central to this are actions that build individual and collective assets, and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational and institutional context governing the use of these assets. Trusted and trustworthy statistical information and the ability of citizens to use these data effectively are central to this.' Professor Denise Lievesley CBE AcSS, Head of the School of Social Science and Public Policy at King's College London.

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