

Minutes of the Committee of Professors of Statistics, UK and Ireland

Annual Meeting held on 2nd May, 2003 at the Royal Statistical Society, London.

Present:

Ashby, Bailey, Bhansali, Bowman (chair), Coad, Copas, Crowder, Evans, Francis, Gilchrist, Gittins, Goldstein, Green, Jennison, Kent, Krzanowski, Matthews, O'Hagan, Patil, Renshaw, Senn, Silverman, Stander, Subba Rao, Steel, Taylor, Weber, Wood, Wynn, Zhigljavsky

1. Welcome

The chairman welcomed members to the meeting.

2. Appointment of minutes secretary

Mark Steel was appointed to take minutes.

3. Minutes of 2002 meeting

After adding the Treasurer to the attendance list, these were approved.

4. Matters arising

Henry Wynn reported that there was not yet much progress on the issue, raised at the last meeting, of securing DTI money to support statistics in conjunction with the Smith Institute.

5. EPSRC issues (Allison McCaig)

Allison McCaig, an Associate Programme Manager for Mathematics reported on EPSRC issues.

Alasdair Rose has been replaced by Annette Bramley and the Associate Programme Managers are now Helen Carter, Carol McAnally and Allison McCaig.

Research Grants

Success rates for grants in responsive mode were reported to be lower than in the previous year (31% versus 38%) and still lower than the average in Mathematics (50% in the previous year, 42% this year). COPS members strongly expressed the view that success rates in statistics should not be lower than the average, and blamed the absence of a separate panel and the discriminatory approach to statistics given the different cultures within mathematics. An attitude survey was proposed, with action on the part of the EPSRC to reduce the number of large grants in favour of smaller grants. The low success rates for start-up grants was also mentioned as a major factor in discouraging junior staff. It was stressed that this is not really an issue of money, but rather that the system currently used by EPSRC does not work properly.

Doctoral Training Grants

A peer review system was introduced in 2003 and the 2002 values were top-sliced by 15% (to enhance stability). Enhanced stipends for statistics and OR were now possible and flexibility was increased. The DTG was awarded to the university, but it was hoped

universities would follow the EPSRC guidelines in spending the money. The number of EPSRC-funded PhD's awarded had dropped in 2002 in absolute terms and as a percentage of those in all of Mathematics and Statistics. COPS members expressed the view that the latter percentage (13.5%) was far too low. On the issue of EU students, EPSRC would like to give flexibility, but so far this has not met with approval at government level. It was pointed out from the floor that if studentships are funded from the same budget as grants, it becomes less attractive to ask for studentships.

Allison McCaig further addressed issues of collaborative training accounts, postdoctoral fellowships, advanced and senior fellowships (very few applications from Statistics), Environmental Mathematics and Statistics (jointly with NERC), Novel computation, Multidisciplinary critical mass research, Research networks, Strategic Advisory Teams and Public Awareness. There was further discussion that focussed on the procedures of allocating money, in particular the single panel with few statisticians and the very different cultures within Mathematics and Statistics which tend to disadvantage Statistics applications. It was felt that a genuine dialogue and a critical review of these issues is needed.

6. International Review of Mathematics

Bernard Silverman gave a presentation on this review, which aims at an international comparison of the research strengths in UK Mathematics and Statistics. It is intended to compare the whole of the field and no comparison between areas within Mathematics or institutions will be attempted. OR is not included in the Review. Peter Cooper (LMS) briefly indicated some motivating issues, such as EPSRC spending patterns and the need to go beyond the RAE. There was some discussion on policy implications and practicalities regarding the planned visits to departments. (A 6-month lead-time was promised and it was not intended to incur large amounts of extra work.) Further feedback was requested on this issue.

7. Shortage of Statisticians

Tony O'Hagan presented preliminary work on the flows of people in education and jobs involving statistics. He presented a diagram with some key flows and invited comments. He is still looking for funding to undertake this research. The main aim is to gain a better understanding of the flows and the reasons for the lack of statisticians, which could lead to targeting of specific factors in order to contribute to a solution of the problem.

8. Graduate Training Programmes 2003

of curriculum and pathways will be investigated, along with the structure of qualifications, assessment and testing. Attitudes and perceptions (choice behaviour) will also be addressed. The establishment of a network of local centres of Mathematics teaching is a key issue in attempting to tackle the problem and impose some degree of numeracy (in one of its many possible meanings) across the board. Issues specific to HE are the transition from schools to HE and the adaptation required to smooth that transition, the use of undergraduates and postgraduates as classroom assistants and the HE role in the supply of maths teachers and teacher trainers. The ensuing discussion involved issues of geographic variation, gender and the use of qualified retired people. COPS members mentioned the pressures to maximize pass rates in view of league tables. There was also discussion on the different speeds with which students in different systems absorb mathematics. It was asked whether mathematics was a special case, or whether the same concerns should be raised in the case of, say, modern languages. There was more discussion on the costs (very small compared to the overall education budget, according to Adrian Smith) and the international level of UK maths education. The use of local training facilities and distance learning in stimulating recruitment into teaching was also discussed. Finally, there was mention of the possible effects of foundation years and four-year degrees and of the general perception of mathematics as "uncool".

10. Financial report

Julian Stander reported that expenditure can be covered with the current level of fees.

11. Other agenda items

In view of the importance of the major topics discussed earlier in the meeting, other agenda items were deferred due to lack of time.

12. AOB

The possibility of holding next year's meeting in Glasgow was mentioned.