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British Academy Consultation on the Creation of a Qualification in Undergraduate Quantitative Methods.

**Response by the British Sociological Association and the Council of Heads and Professors of Sociology
Prepared by Professor John Holmwood, BSA President**

We are strongly behind the initiative to reinforce and improve the training in and understanding of quantitative methods within the social science curriculum, including that of sociology. We are also pleased that major bodies like the British Academy, the ESRC and the Nuffield Foundation are committed to this agenda and we are happy to be involved in the further development of its aims

We do, however, have a significant concern with what is proposed on accreditation - in particular the idea that the Royal Statistical Society (or ESRC) should effectively accredit degrees in sociology or, indeed, any subject (other than statistics in the case of RSS). The BSA has been actively involved in subject benchmarking and feels that any changes to curricula should be led at that level and that no professional body lacking relevant disciplinary expertise in a subject should accredit its content. We are firmly of the view that quantitative skills have to be developed in direct engagement with the intellectual concerns of particular disciplines. From our perspective, the need is to incorporate appropriate quantitative skills for sociologists and not to develop a general understanding of statistics. The whole rationale of the project is that such skills should be pursued in context and not in isolation. The logic of this position is that the views of professional experts should prevail.

We understand, and welcome, the recent involvement of ESRC in the shaping of undergraduate degrees, but feel that this kind of involvement should not encroach on proper disciplinary judgments that are the responsibility of the practitioners of that discipline and its subject associations. With the exception of the British Psychological Society, where practical professional requirements operate, no degree schemes in the humanities or social sciences are accredited by subject associations. The BSA itself has no desire to move in that direction.

We also see no advantage in any external badging or kite-marking of degree schemes and would, indeed, regard this as highly divisive. It is equally worth considering that there is no obvious reason why statistical content should be privileged in this way: if statistics, then would not the same argument apply to the kite-marking of English grammar, knowledge of foreign language sources, quality of critical argument, and other generic skills. We are firmly of the view that the current system of subject benchmarking is the best available system of curriculum oversight. We are happy to be involved, together with other bodies, in the development of those subject benchmarks and also in the discussion of an intermediate post-16 qualification (though we are concerned that the reform of AS levels in England has made that more difficult).

We are also concerned about any developments that take place without a proper evaluation of the recent Nuffield Foundation initiative on the creation of undergraduate Centres of Excellence in Quantitative Methods. We feel that this might have a serious impact on the availability of teachers of quantitative methods and their concentration in the new centers.

Finally, we are concerned about any initiative that might affect recruitment in a highly unstable and volatile market for undergraduate applications. There needs to be some time for the new arrangements to bed down before further actions are taken that might affect the number of applicants and therefore the viability of some departments.