

Our First Thirty Years

Our website www.radstats.org.uk contains the paragraph:

We believe that statistics can be used to support radical campaigns for progressive social change. Statistics should inform, not drive policies. Social problems should not be disguised by technical language

Have the aspirations and activities of the Radical Statistics Group changed over the past thirty years?

Our beginnings

A few like-minded statisticians called a meeting in 1975 to find out whether statisticians who were also ‘radical’ could usefully work together. Seventy people expressed interest in this idea, so a group was formed that came to be called the **Radical Statistics Group** (RSG).

The early history of RSG is recorded in its newsletters, and I strongly recommend readers to peruse the scanned copies on www.radstats.org.uk

Founder members would have known one another through the Royal Statistical Society (RSS), but some of them were also active in the **British Society for Responsibility in Science** (BSSRS). This organisation had been set up in 1969 by Maurice Wilkins (1916-2004) [1,2,3], sometimes referred to as ‘The third man of the Double Helix’, who continued as a long-serving president. During the 1970s, Alan Dalton (1946-2003) [4] led a courageous BSSRS campaign for workplace safety. Dalton’s publication ‘Asbestos killer dust’ in 1979, brought about a libel case that left Dalton and the Hazards Bulletin bankrupt. BSSRS suffered financially but was not destroyed. Another group of BSSRS scientists focussed upon ‘food’. Tim Lang and Charlie Clutterbuck [5,6] were leading the interest in agribusiness, producing their Pluto Press Arguments for Socialism paperback a few years later.

The RSG wanted to work informally, operating from an office address provided by the umbrella group BSSRS. Another group affiliated to BSSRS was the **Politics of Health Group** (POHG). A shared common purpose, combined with a mix of academic expertise and background experience led to some important collaborative publications between the groups [7,8]. These could be the subject of further articles, but here we shall follow the progress of RSG.

The report of the Inaugural Meeting [9] gives a well expressed account of why the RSG was needed and these reasons remain valid to-day.

Here are some quotes from the first newsletter:

'We are a fairly scattered group, geographically, so it may be inevitable that some members are less able to come to meetings, but it would be a pity if the group consisted of a few activists and a large number of sympathetic but inactive members.'

'While much of the activity of the Radical statistics group will be centred around the study groups, many important issues transcend any single group. The newsletter is forum where views on these issues may be aired.'

The challenge to-day

Things have changed. Our subgroups are not so active, and perhaps we should rejuvenate them. There are many issues where public policy and general understanding could benefit from a statement using clearly presented statistics. Have we the energies displayed by our founder members to rise to the challenges posed to-day?

Our concerns to-day match those expressed in 1975. Quoting from the Inaugural Meeting [9]:

'The main feelings expressed were concern at the lack of critical discussion of the uses of statistics and of the relationship between statisticians and those who "consume" his output.'

' One possible function for the group would be to provide statistical information and "expertise" for "action groups", claimants, unions and the like. This would attempt to redress the imbalance in a situation in which the administration has many technical resources at its disposal, but the man in the street has none.'

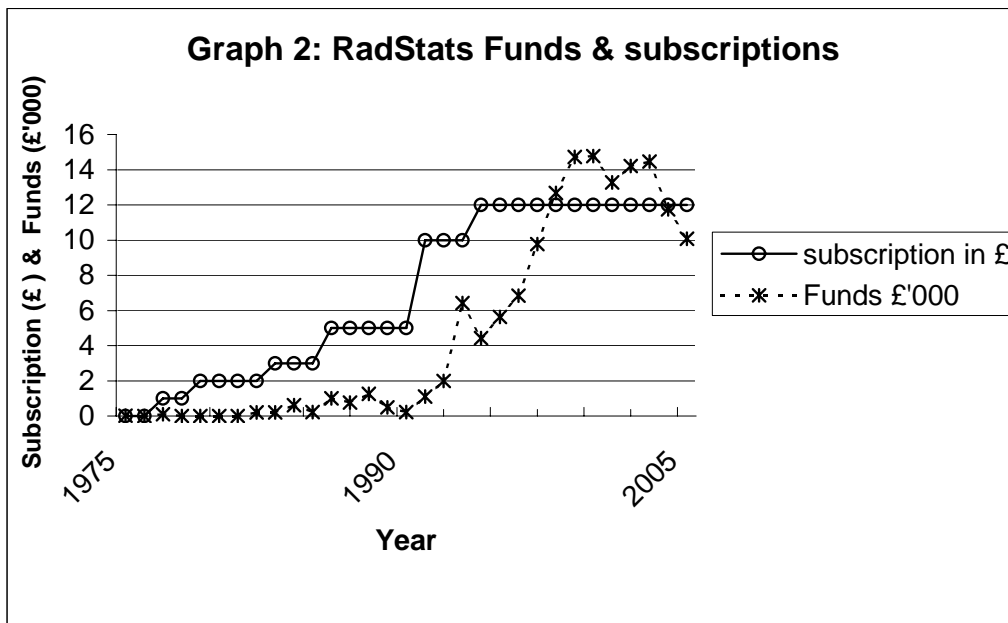
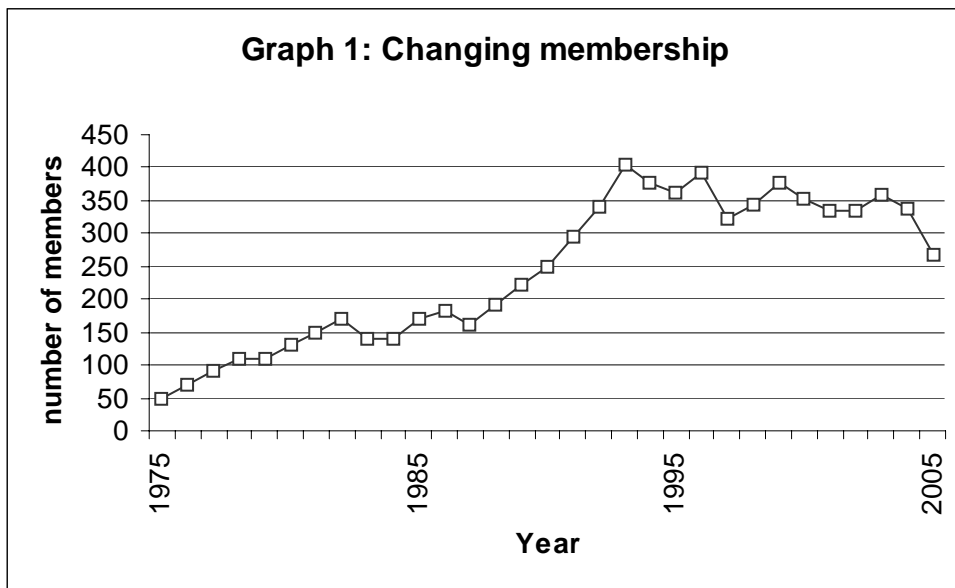
After thirty years we should examine how far we have achieved these aspirations. Certainly our members have contributed to many publications consistent with these aims. Many of our members are prominent in challenging perceived 'abuses of statistics', but is there enough awareness of our influence even amongst the membership?

The email list: radstats@jiscmail.ac.uk allows many of us to let off steam, challenging misguided notions. The arguments generate much heat, but these are not collated for publication. Before the advent of electronic communication, these arguments would have been aired in

face-to-face meetings in subgroups, and may have resulted in a press release or pamphlet. Thus lifestyle and working conditions have changed; we substitute emails for meetings. How far are members prevented from being more active by the pressures of work?

Bigger and richer

As shown in graph 1, our numbers increased steadily until the mid-90s, but recently membership has fallen.



Graph 2 illustrates a sharp increase in funds in the early 90's. This was due to several successful publications in that period. The

accumulated funds have enabled us to sustain the present low subscription of £12 that has not changed since 1994.



The Radical Statistics Group opened an account at the Co-operative Bank Limited in March 1977.

Founder members

This article has not featured our founder members, who will have interesting stories to tell. Their names are recorded in the newsletter Archive, so they should be prepared! Two appear in the cartoon above [10]. There will be more news about them in future newsletters.

Comments are invited from all members on how RSG has made a difference over the past thirty years.

References

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2. Maurice Wilkins Talks on Social Responsibility in Science LSC 11th May 1999
3. <http://www.i-isis.org.uk/wilkins.php>
4. Fearless campaigner who took on deadly industries, Alan Dalton. <http://www.hazards.org/alandalton>

5. Lang T (2000). 'The state of UK food policy', *Radical Statistics*, 73, 42-51
6. Clutterbuck Charlie, Lang Tim (1982). *More than we can chew*. London: Pluto.
7. Lang Tim, Hines Colin (1995). 'GATT and food security', *Ceres: The FAO Review*, 151, 27, 1, January-February, 19-23.
8. Lang Tim (1995). 'Food and Poverty: beyond blaming the poor', *Primary Health Care*, 5, 8, September, 10-16
9. RadStats: Newsletter Archive, issue 1 (1975). www.radstats.org.uk
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Student poll is 'not valid'

This was the headline in 'The Times Higher' in October [1] citing criticisms of the National Poll of 170,000 HE students made by Harvey Goldstein, professor of statistics at Bristol University and Ivor Goddard, the director-general of the Royal Statistical Society. Both were members of the steering committee for the pilot version of the National Student Satisfaction Survey (NSS) [2], that has strong reservations about publishing results of the survey; Professor Goldstein's letter, expressing reservations, had been published in THES last year shortly after the preliminary results of the HE student satisfaction survey were produced. Earlier, in June 2004 the Education Guardian had carried an article that presented mixed reactions to the survey but included some doubts about the questions asked [3].

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) had reneged on an agreement to include statistical "uncertainty intervals" where response rates were low. As Professor Goldstein expresses it: -
"It was generally agreed that a condition for the survey's validity was the provision of statistical uncertainty intervals for the scores.....Since these intervals now seem to have been dropped, it is not possible to make scientifically valid comparisons between institutions"

The THES article explained that *"Under the NSS, students rated various aspects of their university experience on a scale from one to five.*