

'Statistical illiteracy' leaves citizens at risk of being duped by politicians and businessmen, warns British Academy

A crippling fear of numbers has left large swathes of the British population virtually incapable of seeing through what politicians, officials and even salesmen tell them, some of the country's leading thinkers have warned.



'Statistical illiteracy' threatening Britain's place in the world Photo: ALAMY

By John Bingham, Social Affairs Editor

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The British Academy warned of a virtual epidemic of “statistical illiteracy” affecting businesses, schools, universities, and civil service.

A national numeracy “deficit” is making it increasingly difficult for employers to find staff with the skills needed and threatening Britain’s international economic competitiveness, it argues.

The lack of confidence with numbers is even beginning to have an impact on the way people live their lives, making them less capable of seeing through political spin or commercial sales pitches, they added.

In a paper published today the Academy the says that it is “deeply concerned” about a lack of basic

“quantitative skills” in Britain with “serious consequences” for our future standing in the world.

The problem, it argues, begins in childhood with schools producing students with poor numerical skills, little confidence in their own mathematical ability or, crucially, “an appreciation of their relevance for life”.

Britain is falling “dramatically” behind other countries in terms of the numbers taking of 16 years-old studying maths, it notes.

And by the time they arrive in university students have often forgotten what they did know because of a gap of two to four years since they last studied maths, the Academy adds.

There the problem is compounded further by a “dearth” of academic staff capable of teaching them how to analyse figures which they might need for their studies in a range of subjects including humanities.

“The British Academy is deeply concerned that the UK is weak in quantitative skills, in particular but not exclusively in the social sciences and humanities,” it explains.

“This deficit has serious implications for the future of the UK’s status as a world leader in research and higher education, for the employability of our graduates, and for the competitiveness of the UK’s economy.”

Highlighting a string of studies in which employers “lament” modern graduates’ lack of numeracy, it goes on to warn of implications for everyday life.

“Without statistical understanding citizens, voters and consumers cannot play a full part,” it insists.

“To call politicians, media and business to account, we need the skills to know when spurious arguments are being advanced.”

It remarks that such skills are unsurprisingly essential in Government bodies such as the Office for National Statistics or Government Economic Service.

But it adds pointedly: “These bodies also need their colleagues in the rest of the public sector – and indeed citizens in wider society – to have the skills to understand and critically engage with their data.”