ROYAL STATISTICAL SOCIETY

DATA | EVIDENCE | DECISIONS

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Sent by email

7 October 2024

Dear Chi Onwurah,

Congratulations on your election as chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Select Committee.

We are writing to introduce you to the Royal Statistical Society's work on AI. Your committee has an important role to play in ensuring that the UK is able to innovate and make the best use of AI, while ensuring that appropriate safeguards are in place. The RSS has recently established an AI Task Force – consisting of AI practitioners and experts in AI ethics and governance – and we would be pleased to support you in your committee's work on the subject.

The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) is a membership society and charity that brings together all who have an interest in, and appreciate the value of, data and statistics. We are a professional body and learned society that advocates for the importance of data and statistics. The vision of the RSS is to have a world where data is at the heart of understanding and decision-making.

AI can unlock many benefits – from increasing productivity (in public and private sectors) to helping tackle the most significant societal challenges like climate change. But it also brings challenges ranging from encoding human biases in decision-making to misinformation to copyright infringement. Data and statistics have vital roles to play in both helping the UK harness the potential of AI, and to protect against harms. Computational statisticians and data scientists are playing crucial roles in developing new technologies and in using them innovatively; statisticians are experts in evaluation methodology and are vital to ensuring that AIs are properly tested before being used.

We would like to share with you our briefings on the need for investment in open-source development, a dedicated unit for developing AI evaluation methodologies, and a public register of cases where an AI tool is used in the public sector.

We welcome the government's new Action Plan to identify how AI can deliver better outcomes and drive economic growth. However, big tech companies based outside of the UK continue to pose a real challenge. We appreciate that the government's finances are challenging, but – as detailed in our briefing on open source – a relatively modest investment would allow us to better compete internationally and allow more knowledge sharing and training so public trust can be improved.

Additionally, to build public confidence in AI systems, we need robust evaluation methodologies to keep pace with the rapidly evolving technology. The UK's statistical community has a proven track record in establishing evaluation leadership in the context of health. We should build on this achievement by investing in a unit of statisticians and data scientists within the AI Safety Institute to develop new evaluation methodologies for AI.

We must also be mindful that AI is increasingly impacting people's lives. A publicly available register that sets out where complex algorithms and AI tools are being used will help improve transparency and avoid controversy (for example, the Ofqual grade assignment algorithm that tried

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to account for the impact of Covid-19). As detailed in our briefing, in cases where citizens are directly affected by technology, risk assessments should be conducted, setting out the decisions that have been made and the limitations of the model.

We hope you find the briefings helpful. Please let us know if you would like further information or if a member of your committee's team would like to meet to discuss these issues.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Sarah Cumbers
Chief Executive Officer

Dr. Andrew Garrett
President