

Distr.
GENERAL

June 2014

ENGLISH ONLY

**UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION
FOR EUROPE (UNECE)
CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS**

Work Session on the Communication of Statistics
(18-20 June 2014, Geneva, Switzerland)

Session 3: Quick wins on low and zero budget

Gathering user insight, building relationships and sharing good practice
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1. Introduction

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is the UK's largest statistical producer, but there are more than 150 organisations across the UK producing official statistics. The majority of professional government statisticians work outside ONS and the large community of around 7,000 staff involved in the provision of official statistics, analysis and advice, is known as the Government Statistical Service (GSS). The GSS is led by the National Statistician and is facing the challenge of an ever increasing demand for more data on a timelier basis. Other pressures include tight budget constraints and increased competition from private data providers.

The communication of official statistics in the UK has come under recent scrutiny from Parliament, and there has been a drive by many, including the National Statistician and the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, to increase the impact, accessibility and reach of official statistics. This has led to a range of initiatives to improve the presentation and dissemination of official statistics, as well as a drive to increase the level of informal engagement with a wider audience of interested parties. Coordinating these activities and sharing lessons learnt from them is challenging, especially given the decentralised nature of statistical production in the UK.

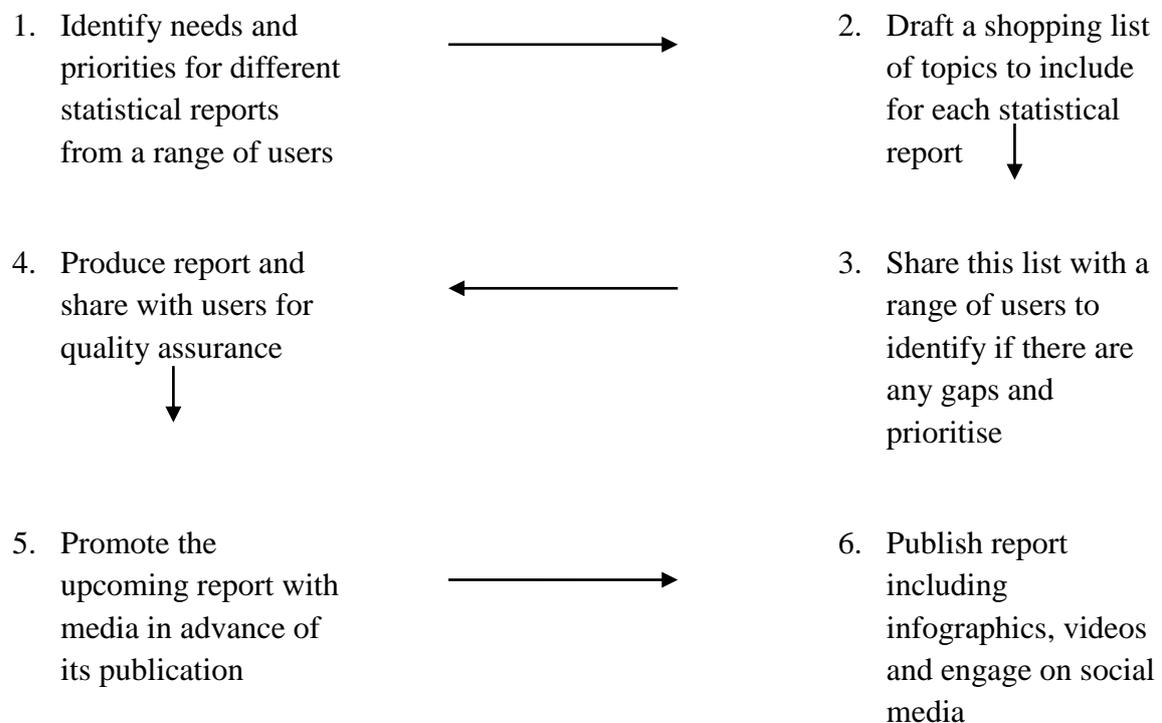
In October 2012, the National Statistician and the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority established a GSS Good Practice Team (GPT). The role of the team was to identify, develop and share good practice across the GSS, particularly in relation to improved statistical commentary. After a successful six month pilot, the team expanded and is now fully established with six full time members. The new GPT has a wider remit to identify, develop, promote and share good practice across the GSS in the priority areas of presentation, dissemination and user engagement. This paper describes ONS and GPT initiatives in these areas and shows how GPT has worked collaboratively with ONS, the wider GSS and other interested parties, to improve statistical products on a low budget.

2. Building relationships

A key part of the ONS Strategy and the GSS Strategy is for official statistics to have an impact, be it in public debate or policy formation. Statistics underpin many of the decisions that people make every day, but without the correct statistics, or even the knowledge they exist, many decisions could be made without the correct information.

A quick win ONS has developed in recent years is building relationships with a wide range of users, from policy makers, to academics and private businesses. We have introduced a few new steps when creating statistical products on new topics, which have had a huge impact in how the data is consumed and used.

Here is an example of the lifecycle of a statistical report:



At stage 2 a brainstorming session takes place in which we identify what people are talking about. So for example on graduates there has been lots of debate on the value of going to university, the types of jobs graduates work in and how this has changed over time. Once a list of topics are identified to include within a report it is then shared (stage 3) with a wide range of users, including those we have identified as discussing the topic, for their thoughts. This usually provides additional ideas and from the replies allows us to build up a list of priorities and ensure the final report meets the needs of a wide range of users. Stage 5 is crucial to get journalists to know that something new is coming and onto their radar. There is a fine line between letting them know what will be included within the report and what the messages are, with the latter they have to wait until the publication. But with a strong

relationship this can prove extremely effective at maximising the media coverage, taking the report to a much wider audience than those who would otherwise see it.

Here is an example of the front page of a recent report on Graduates in the labour market. The key points highlight some of the different messages that answered many of the questions of what to include within the report.

Full Report - Graduates in the UK Labour Market 2013

Coverage: **UK**

Date: **19 November 2013**

Geographical Area: **UK and GB**

Theme: **Labour Market**

Theme: **Children, Education and Skills**

Key points

- In 2013 there were 12 million graduates in the UK.
- Steady increase in the number of graduates in the UK over the past decade.
- In April to June 2013 graduates were more likely to be employed than those who left education with qualifications of a lower standard.
- Non-graduates aged 21 to 30 have consistently higher unemployment rates than all other groups.
- Non-graduates aged 21 to 30 have much higher inactivity rates than recent graduates.
- Over 40% of graduates worked in the public administration, education and health industry.
- Graduates were more likely to work in high skilled posts than non-graduates.
- Annual earnings for graduates reached a higher peak at a later age than the annual earnings for non-graduates.
- In 2013 those graduates that had an undergraduate degree in medicine or dentistry were the most likely to be employed and had the highest average gross annual pay.
- Graduates from the top UK universities earned more than graduates from other UK universities.
- Male graduates were more likely to have a high or upper middle skill job than female graduates.
- Six in every ten people who lived in Inner London were graduates.

Working with the media in advance increases the likelihood that they will devote time to reporting the story. This in turn increases the audience for the report and engages in a wider public debate about the findings. Here are some examples of the resulting media coverage:

Half of recent UK graduates stuck in non-graduate jobs, says ONS

Percentage of recent graduates working in jobs which do not require degree up to 47% from 39% before financial crisis

Katie Allen

The Guardian, Tuesday 19 November 2013 14.07 GMT

 [Jump to comments \(236\)](#)



Medical (95%) and media (93%) graduates are the most employable – although media graduates earn a median salary of £21,000 compared with £45,600 for those holding medical degrees. Photograph: Christopher Furlong/Getty Images

The report on graduates and its subsequent media coverage led on to BBC Radio having a debate with listeners about why graduates are no longer getting as many top jobs as before. This then led to a request from a member of the UK parliament to analyse how those on apprenticeships compared to graduates, which led to even more discussion around the data.

Graduates earning less than those on apprenticeships

Graduates are more likely to find themselves in low-paid jobs and are earning less than people who decide to do an apprenticeship instead of going to University, figures from the Office for National Statistics show



Many graduates will not be getting their money's worth from their increasingly expensive degrees Photo: Alamy

Investing time to identify what the user wants and ensuring that the media channels know that a new report is coming is instrumental to ensuring you maximise the impact of your work. These steps have very little cost but they yield great wins.

3. Gathering user insight

Many producers of statistics are always striving to improve their products and quite often these improvements are based upon the ideas of the producer or the organisation they work in. In recent years at ONS these ideas have seen the introduction of a YouTube channel and infographics to improve dissemination.

With the increasing use of social media, in particular Twitter, it is much easier to follow discussions around the statistics we produce, and sometimes these discussions can be both positive and negative.

This information can be used to make improvements, but the challenge is to understand what to improve. Through gathering contacts built up on social media and through regular day to day work, the Labour Market team in ONS conducted a project in 2013 where they went out and spoke individually with a wide range of users to find out exactly what they use and how and why they use it. This took place with a series of face to face meetings where users were given a laptop and asked to demonstrate what labour market products they use and a series of questions around the different products.

These meetings provided a valuable insight into how people use some of our products on a regular basis and also allowed us to develop new relationships with people. This information is being used to deliver many improvements in 2014.

4. Collaboration and coordination

The Statistical Products Working Group (SPWG) has been set up to coordinate improvements to statistical products within ONS and includes at least one representative from each ONS business area. The GPT has a wider remit, in line with the GSS Strategy, to coordinate and drive forward improvements and encourage collaboration across the whole of the GSS – collaboration not just amongst statisticians, but with other professionals and users, including those within the international community.

Building the community

Labour market statisticians utilised their membership of SPWG to share the success of their new initiatives within ONS, and have inspired other business areas to follow their lead. GPT also heard about these new initiatives through SPWG and has worked with labour market statisticians to disseminate their innovative approaches to a wider audience of producers across the GSS. This has been done using dedicated GPT case study pages on the GSS website, through workshops and presentations and more generally by word of mouth.

A selection of other low cost initiatives introduced by GPT to encourage an exchange of ideas and experiences across the GSS and improve the impact and accessibility of official statistics in the UK are described below. These initiatives are expected to encourage producers to improve their statistical products, work collaboratively and seek out opportunities to develop and sustain more regular informal dialogue with a broad range of interested parties.

i) Peer review

In early 2013 the GPT piloted a GSS peer review process with a small group of career young statisticians from a range of government departments. Its success in highlighting quick wins for improving the structure, content and presentation of statistical bulletins has resulted in peer review processes being set up within a number of departments across the GSS. The GPT is on hand to provide advice and support in setting up departmental peer review schemes, and can provide tailored workshops to establish guidelines for constructive feedback. The GPT

also provides a range of related documentation available on the GSS website, including case studies and ‘top-tips’ on setting up and conducting peer reviews.

Why do a peer review?

- Getting feedback from someone who hasn’t been involved in writing your statistical release is a great way of identifying ways it can be improved. Lots of potential gain for little pain!
- Small changes, such as reducing technical jargon, simplifying sentence structures and the addition of more white space on a page, can often increase the impact and accessibility of the statistics.
- It’s an opportunity to raise awareness of a broad range of statistics and presentation styles and share knowledge and good practice across teams and organisations.

What is the process?

- **Who?** Someone unfamiliar with the topic.
- **What?** Review the content and structure of the publication and provide honest constructive feedback to the author on a range of agreed areas. Reviewers should be encouraged to confidently question content and style in the knowledge that if they don’t understand something, others aren’t likely to either!
- **When?** Anytime! Within the publication cycle if time permits or shortly after publication to inform the next release.
- **How?** Review the publication over an agreed timescale and provide written and/or oral feedback directly to the author or via a third party such as the GPT. The quality and tone of the feedback should follow these general rules:

Feedback should be:

- clear and concise;
- constructive and objective;
- focussed on the content of the release, not on the person or team who produced it; and
- recognise good practice as well as identifying areas for improvement.

ii) User reference panels

Over the last 18 months the GPT has helped establish and run a number of groups made up of influential users of statistics. Members of these groups include representatives from the BBC, Full Fact - a UK fact checking organisation - and the Royal Statistical Society. Members are asked to provide informal feedback on the presentation of statistics in selected statistical bulletins. This provides valuable insight for producers on the accessibility, impact and relevance of their publications. It also gives users an opportunity to question producers about the style, content and presentation of their statistics, and offer suggestions on how to improve communication of the stories behind the statistics.

Why were user reference panels set up?

- The first panel was set up following the internal review of three high profile ONS statistical releases. Top management and senior statisticians within ONS scrutinised the presentation and dissemination of the latest statistics for Preliminary Estimates of GDP,

Retail Sales and Population and Migration and agreed a range of necessary improvements. Influential users of these statistics were then invited to join a panel and provide their feedback on the bulletins, in an attempt to agree more widely what ‘good’ looks like.

What is the process?

- **Who?** Topic experts, researchers, representatives from relevant charities, action groups and voluntary organizations, the media and other interested parties are invited to participate.
- **What?** Panel members are given two to three weeks to review the content, structure and style of the publication and provide written feedback on the presentation, impact and accessibility of the statistics.
- **When?** As needed, but on average panel members are asked to review one or two publications every quarter.
- **How?** Some panels meet face to face with producers, whilst others give and receive only electronic feedback.

How have the panels evolved over time?

- The success of the original panel has led to an expansion of the initiative to include some subject specific panels – one on health and care and another reviewing poverty statistics across the GSS.
- ONS has also used a panel of undergraduates to review publications. This has brought yet another quite different perspective of feedback to our attention. This group of users was particularly interested in the ease of access to statistics on mobile devices.

User panels have helped shape improvements to a number of high profile statistical bulletins. GPT has also received positive feedback from both panel members and producers regarding their experiences of participating in this process.

iii) Departmental ‘champions’

The GPT, whilst working with departments to improve statistical commentary, has had the opportunity to identify enthusiastic and motivated individuals, who have been instrumental in driving forward change in their department. The GPT asked these individuals to volunteer as departmental ‘champions’, and has established a network of commentary champions across the GSS. It is hoped these champions will soon become a self sustaining network, helping to further improve the dissemination of statistics across the GSS.

What does the role involve?

- The role of commentary champions has recently been formalised, with the adoption of Terms of Reference to ensure a clear understanding of goals, objectives and expectations.
- Champions are expected to identify, promote and share good practice initiatives within their department and share their experiences with each other and with the GPT.
- They are encouraged to help facilitate sharing seminars to celebrate their successes in improving statistical commentary and provide case studies to disseminate on the GSS website.

The GPT stays in regular contact with champions via email and telephone and hosts face to face meetings with them twice a year. These informal group meetings provide a forum to celebrate success, exchange ideas and help identify, understand and overcome barriers to change across the GSS. The success of the commentary champion network has led to the recent establishment of a small network of user engagement champions across the GSS.

iv) Sharing seminars

Over the last 12 months, the GPT have helped organise a program of seminars for GSS members to celebrate success and share their experiences with colleagues both within and across departments. These seminars can range from short informal lunch time sessions to lengthier half day workshop style sessions. The title of each session is carefully chosen to evoke interest and maximise participation rates. The seminars are advertised internally within departments and on the GSS website, complemented by a library of web resources including guidance material, case studies and examples of good practice.

For example, the labour market statisticians have shared their experiences at lunch time seminars within ONS and have provided material to be hosted on the GSS website. This allows others to be inspired by their actions and to learn from their experiences.

5. Conclusions

A collaborative spirit and increased use of informal communication channels are vital to ensure producers of official statistics build meaningful two way interaction between themselves and their current and prospective audience.

Producers of official statistics need to understand and appreciate the benefits that regular user input and interaction can bring and how adapting their products accordingly can lead to increased interest and media coverage. It is vital that the success of new initiatives and approaches in all areas of statistical production are celebrated and shared widely both domestically and internationally in a timely manner. This helps maximise the potential benefits of new approaches.

Social media offers an opportunity for low cost, informal interaction with a wide audience. Once strategic direction has been set and coordination is in place the potential to reach, understand and interact with a wider audience can be exploited quite easily. This approach is likely to help producers of official statistics better understand their audience and place user needs firmly at the core of their activity. Products can then be adapted to ensure official statistics are relevant, clearly understood and reach those who need and want to utilise them.