Call for Understanding Society Research Data Fellowships

Deadline 5pm on 13 December 2022

_Understanding Society_ is one of the largest household panel studies in the world and a major infrastructure investment for UK health and social sciences. By enabling researchers to track individuals over time, the data can be used to assess the causes and consequences of change in individuals’ circumstances (such as the birth of a child, marriage, separation, retirement) for themselves and their families (e.g. poverty, income, health, parenting). It also allows researchers and policymakers to gain a deeper understanding of issues such as poverty, unemployment or mental health, by allowing researchers to examine whether conditions are persistent or transitory. The data is also amenable to evaluating policy change as before and after measures are reported at the individual and household level. At the same time, _Understanding Society_ provides significant opportunities for methodological research. This has often been focused on formal experiments carried on the Innovation Panel, but there are many opportunities for methodological research on the main survey as a result of changes in design over time (e.g. changing modes due to the pandemic).

The _Understanding Society Fellowship Programme_ enables researchers to take time out to focus on research projects based on the Study’s data. Funding is available for 12-month Fellowships to undertake a project based on _Understanding Society_ data, with additional resource for follow up dissemination and impact generation activities. Practical support will also be available from the Study team, for example, to advise on data and analysis plans and communication and impact strategies. Each fellowship call has a specific theme; previous rounds have included a focus on our biomarker and genetics data, methodological research on representativeness and mixed modes, the creation and analysis of event histories, research focusing on family dynamics, the use of linked administrative data, and policy focused projects. Details of fellowships awarded in previous rounds can be [found here](#).
The December 2022 call focuses on three themes: policy evaluation; understanding youth nonresponse; and cross-country comparative research. We will announce the topics of our next call in 2023.

**Requirements of a fellowship**

Specifically in this round of funding we are seeking applications on these themes:

**Policy evaluation**

Policy evaluations provide a vital tool to understand whether a policy is working as intended or not, for whom and why. As a multi-topic panel study *Understanding Society* data (including the BHPS) provides a unique opportunity to assess the changes in behaviours and social, economic or health outcomes arising from key policy interventions.

According to the National Audit Office, only 8% of ‘major government projects’ are robustly evaluated, while 64% are not evaluated at all, with the consequence that is not always clear how billions of pounds spent on key policies are making a difference to the lives of citizens. One consequence is that evaluative evidence is under-utilised as a way of strategic learning, driving change and celebrating success.

This call for Policy Evaluation Fellowships is designed to stimulate new and creative applications of *Understanding Society* data for evaluations, building on the current crop of research projects. For example, previous research includes evaluations of specific benefit changes, smoke free places, impact of Ofsted school reports on parental behaviour, welfare-to-work programme, the health impact of neighbourhood renewal in Northern Ireland, and introduction of the plastic carrier bag charge in Wales.
Ideas for policy evaluations could be based on natural experiments or quasi-experimental designs, utilising comparison across time, comparison between groups or comparison between regions and places (e.g., using matched areas, devolution or gradual geographical rollout of policies). As the same individuals and households are surveyed on a regular basis, the Study can be used to assess pre-intervention baselines and post-intervention effects. The Study provides interview dates enabling such measurements to be made with greater precision. With the cross-cutting nature of many social issues, understanding whether particular policy interventions are generating positive spill-over effects or unintended consequences is also valuable.

Research could make use of linked administrative data where individual data-sets on their own have limitations, e.g., to look at a wider range of outcomes or identify a beneficiary group. We are interested in ideas that both adopt a robust evaluation method and can help inform social learning and policymaking. Additionally, you can also see how well your idea aligns with a particular government department’s Area of Research Interest.

**Youth nonresponse -**

In longitudinal studies, a particular nonresponse problem is presented by people in their youth, specifically during the period of life when young people leave their parental home, typically for work or study, move addresses, sometimes multiple times in a year, and lead busy lifestyles. Young people are often lost permanently to the study (attrition) once they stop participating.

We are interested in research that identifies the triggers and factors associated with nonresponse by young people. The research could describe the characteristics and experiences of young people who are more likely to continue participating compared to those who are more likely to drop out and how this affects longer-term measures. For example, are those who don’t leave the parental home at a young age more likely to continue responding and do they differ from others in terms of marital, parental and
employment outcomes? Note, some potential predictors of attrition (e.g. events that took place since the last wave at which they were interviewed, such as leaving the parental home, marriage, obtaining employment) will not be directly observed from the sample member, but may be available from the household data collected from other (ex-) household members.

Our interest is in projects which can either describe the group at higher risk of attrition, and explore their identification in the data using existing information (e.g. from their households), and therefore create predictors for nonresponse correction; or in projects that look into potential methods for correcting for such nonresponse, e.g. by developing statistical methods for taking into account this NMAR situation in this specific context.

Cross-country comparative research -

*Understanding Society* is one among a worldwide group of household panel surveys. There are broadly equivalent studies in each of the United States (Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID)), Australia (Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA)), Germany (German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP)), Switzerland (Swiss Household Panel (SHP)), Korea (Korean Labour and Income Panel Study (KLIPS)), Japan (Keio) (Keio Household Panel Survey (JHPS/KHPS)), China (China Family Panel Studies (CFPS)), South Africa (National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS)), Canada (Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID)) and Russia (Russia Longitudinal Monitoring Survey (RLMS)). For the most part, these studies, like *Understanding Society*, are well-established multi-topic, multi-purpose longitudinal studies.

A number of recent publications have used *Understanding Society* data as part of a cross-country comparative analysis. We feel that there is much more that can be done in terms of comparative research using the Study and this call for fellows is intended to highlight the potential of using our data as part of a multi-country research project.

We are therefore encouraging applications that propose to analyse the Study’s UK (or national) data comparatively alongside data from at least one other national longitudinal
household panel survey. There are no limitations set on the research topic but, in addition to the research outputs themselves, the project should produce reusable code and documentation that, among other things, provide detail on how any issues of non-equivalence and harmonisation across the studies have been dealt with.

Potential applicants should be aware of two resources that already encourage cross-national comparisons. The Cross National Equivalent File (CNEF), prepared by the Department of Human Sciences at the Ohio State University, contains equivalently defined variables for Understanding Society and its national equivalents listed above. The file is a simplified version of the panels but provides some derived variables that are not directly available on the original surveys. The Comparative Panel File (CPF) is an open science project to harmonise the world’s major and longest-running household panel studies from seven countries, including the UK. CPF provides an open-source code to construct a comparative dataset based on original data from the surveys. The code can be further modified and extended.

Applicants should be clear in their application about how they will gain access to the non-UK data, including providing indicative timescales if there are likely to be issues that may delay the research.

**For all projects** the following outputs are required:

- the syntax you have written for your project which, if appropriate and acknowledging your authorship, would be shared on the Study website and/or used to create new datafiles for the Study;
- an *Understanding Society* working paper which summarises your methodological approach;
- an *Understanding Society* blog or podcast summarising your fellowship.

Additionally, of course, we expect that you will submit your research to peer review journals and present it at relevant conferences.
On all topics we particularly welcome projects that also aim to actively promote policy learning, with additional funding potentially available for such activities, including beyond the end date of the fellowship if helpful. Fellowships that wish to pursue policy engagement for their project will be supported by the Understanding Society policy and partnership unit to engage widely with policy makers, including Understanding Society’s co-funder group, and work with them to disseminate findings and generate impact.

Fellows will be required to attend three meetings with other fellows and Understanding Society team members during their fellowship: a kick-off meeting to meet other fellows in this cohort and to present their plans; a second meeting to share progress updates and receive feedback and support; and a final public workshop at which they will present their findings.

Communication and impact plans will reviewed and discussed with each fellow at the first fellowship network meeting. To facilitate sharing among fellows, fellowships under this call should begin in May/June 2023.

Selection Criteria and Eligibility

Applications will be assessed on the basis of their scientific merit and potential to demonstrate the usefulness of the Study as a research resource and/or generate policy impact. Any researcher based in one of the following organisations is eligible to apply (except the University of Essex):

- Higher education institution
- Research institute
- What Works Centre
- Government department or one of their sponsored agencies
- Devolved administration or one of their sponsored agencies
- Public service delivery organisation and sub-national tier of government
• Registered charity, a community interest company (CIC) or a non-governmental organisation (NGO).

People can only have an Understanding Society Fellowship once, so previously successful applicants should not apply. We welcome applications from researchers at any career stage. Early career researchers (ECRs, < 3 years post PhD) should identify a mentor in their own institution. Applicants not from higher education or a research institute should identify a collaborator based in an academic institution, who is able to support their project.

Funding will be provided for the fellow’s salary, including NI and pension costs for up to 12 months (full or part time). Where an applicant is not from higher education or a research institute, we will cover £5,000 of the academic collaborator’s salary which should cover, at a minimum, meeting the fellow three times during the fellowship, commenting on code produced and data analyses, and providing feedback on a draft paper.

The planned project must be achievable in the timescale of the project, and the application should demonstrate this. As noted above, we would be happy to discuss additional funding/time after the completion of the main fellowship to promote policy impact or create a well-documented shareable data file or user guide.

**How do I apply?**

People wishing to be considered for a fellowship under this call should apply using the application form by **5pm on 13 December 2022.** You are strongly advised to discuss your ideas with a member of the Understanding Society team in advance of submitting your application. Please contact Jack Kneeshaw (**kneejw@essex.ac.uk**) in the first instance who will put you in touch with the appropriate person to discuss your ideas with you.
Please feel free to seek guidance on the scientific direction of your proposal, data issues, communication and impact plans as well as practical queries. A signed statement of support from your Head of Department (or equivalent) must be included.

The timeline for this Fellowship call is set out below.

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<tr>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>Advert</td>
<td>21 October 2022</td>
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<tr>
<td>Closing date (6 weeks)</td>
<td>13 December 2022</td>
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<td>Notify if shortlisted (or not)</td>
<td>Mid-January 2022</td>
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<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Late-January 2023</td>
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<td>Notify</td>
<td>Late-January 2023</td>
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<td>Expected start</td>
<td>May/June 2023</td>
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<td>Kick-off Fellowship meeting</td>
<td>Early-July 2023</td>
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<td>Work-in-progress workshop</td>
<td>Winter 2023-2024</td>
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<tr>
<td>End of project event</td>
<td>May/June 2024</td>
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Application guidelines

1. Details of all researchers involved in the project should be provided. This must include the applicant for the Fellowship. If you are an early career researcher (<3 years post PhD) a mentor from your host institution should also be included on the project and they should write a supporting statement. Note that the mentor will not be funded as part of the Fellowship. If you are from a third sector organisation, an academic collaborator should be included on the project, and they should write a supporting statement. The academic collaborator will have £5,000 of their salary covered.

2. Please provide a short title for the project. A list of fellows, their project titles and, in time, outputs will be added to the Study website.
3. Please provide an executive summary of no more than 250 words. This should provide an overview of the proposed project including how it will contribute to informing policy, and to social science research.

4. Please outline (max 250 words) how your Fellowship will add value to Understanding Society (value added data, methodological understanding, policy engagement, highlighting unique features of the Study etc).

5. Please provide a brief summary of your own expertise in relation to delivering the project and support you may need from your host institution or the Understanding Society team.

6. Outline your project plan. You should have a clearly specified research question, methods, analysis and impact and dissemination plans (max 2 sides). You should be clear about the data that you will use, including the size of the analysis sample and whether it is sufficiently powered.

7. Please detail your plans for dissemination, knowledge exchange and for generating impact. You should indicate who your main audiences will be and what activities you will undertake in order to disseminate your findings to them. Any specific costs associated with these activities should be identified, except open access publication which should be covered by your own institution.

8. Please describe your project milestones and the deliverables you will achieve at the end of months 3, 6, 9 and 12. Final payments will only be made upon delivery of the required outputs set out at the top of page 3. If you are proposing additional work beyond your fellowship period to promote impact or develop a shareable datasets please clearly identify relevant additional milestones.

9. Provide an estimate of costs produced by your host HEI finance office. These should include the fellowship salary, NI and pension contribution. Staff costs are funded at 100% but we cannot cover indirects. The Fellowships fund your own salary costs if you have a research-only contract or for those on research and teaching contracts, the salary costs (normally starting at the most junior point of the lecturer scale at the
institution concerned) of an individual to undertake the normal duties of the applicant for the duration of the Fellowship. **Other costs necessary to complete your fellowship** for example, travel, training, conference attendance and knowledge exchange activities should be clearly articulated and justified in the proposal. The fellowship can last up to 12 months, full or part time.

Dissemination and knowledge exchange activities, or additional work to create shareable well documented datasets, can be funded for up to 12 months after the completion of your fellowship. These should be discussed with us in advance of completing your application and separately identified in the application form.

The maximum budget per fellowship is **£70,000** for staff and dissemination related-costs.

10. Please provide a supporting statement from your host organisation. This should be from a senior member of staff. This statement should outline the organisation’s commitment to the project, detailing the resources that will be provided and the support that will be given to Fellows.

11. Please attach a two page CV.

**Assessing applications**

External peer reviews of the fellowship applications will be undertaken, and shortlisted applicants will be invited to discuss their proposals with the team. The criteria against which applications will be judged are:

- Does the fellowship project have clear aims?
- Does the application clearly demonstrate the scientific benefits of the proposal?
- Is the proposed analysis feasible (e.g. is it sufficiently powered)?
- Are the proposed research methods appropriate for the aims of the fellowship?
- Does the project demonstrate the value of the Understanding Society resource?
- Does the project have an appropriate dissemination and knowledge exchange plan?
- Are the milestones and overall project goals realistic and achievable in the timeframe?
- Are the costs justified? Does the project represent value for money?
- For early career researchers and applicants from third sector organisations, is there sufficient support in place for the Fellow?

Please send your completed form together with a 2-page CV to Jack Kneeshaw kneejw@essex.ac.uk by 5pm on 13 December 2022.