

Topic guide: Education

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Introduction

Education and skills are crucial in determining major outcomes and decisions in life such as going to university, choosing one’s career, meeting potential partners, employment trajectories, income and health. They are also the main paths for people to achieve upwards social mobility. That is why parents, the government and employers consistently look to education, including early years learning, to deliver opportunities and a fairer society. Each stage of education matters as it opens up or restricts further opportunities.



The effects of education and skills policy and returns to education can only be properly measured over a long period of time. Therefore good quality longitudinal data and research are important if policymakers are to improve their understanding when making decisions which could have consequences for a generation.

The interaction between institutional performance, different stages of education, parental background, individual aspirations and behaviour, gender, ethnicity, disability, deprivation, family life, place and social norms all combine to create a complex picture which researchers try to disentangle in order to understand causal relationships and correlations, and assess the impact of policies.

This research is vital for science, improving the education and skills system and debating how it can continue to adapt to social changes. At the same time, expectations from education continue to grow, partly due to fears that the next generation may experience poorer living standards than their parents. Of course, as more ‘advantaged families’ deploy additional strategies to improve the attainment of their children it can make it even harder for education reforms to effectively increase social mobility.

Understanding Society provides a unique window through which to examine education and skills across the life course. This is not only because of its longitudinal design, large UK sample size and ethnic minority and immigrant boost samples – research is also facilitated by its linkage with administrative data, such as the National Pupil Database for England.

This guide sets out the education content contained in *Understanding Society*, the UK Longitudinal Household Study. It is aimed at data users, both new to the Study as well as those who are familiar with it but want to explore the education content. The guide provides examples of different kinds of analysis that are feasible with the data and points to further resources that users will find helpful.

Education content in *Understanding Society*

Description of questions	Waves	Source of information (file name)
Data on adults		
Education across the cohorts: highest level of education attained by each adult member of the study, updated every year to see continuing education. Derived variables at each wave include all sources of information.	Asked on entry into the panel, then updated each year.	Adult interview file (w_indresp).
Family background of adult respondents: highest level of education achieved by each parent.	Asked once at the first interview of each adult respondent.	Adult interview file (w_indresp).
Cognitive function: various measures of cognitive function using tests of word recall, arithmetic, number series, verbal fluency	Wave 3.	Adult interview file (c_indresp).



Understanding Society

THE UK HOUSEHOLD LONGITUDINAL STUDY

Data on children and young people		
<p>Parent's attitudes and behaviours: for instance helping children with homework, frequency of leisure time together, relationship with children, parenting styles, aspirations for university.</p>	<p>Waves 1, 3 and 5.</p>	<p>Main adult interview file (w_indresp).</p>
<p>Information about child's school reported by parents: do all children attend the same school, private or state school.</p>	<p>Waves 1, 3 and 5, with fed-forward information.</p>	<p>Child data set (w_child).</p>
<p>Young person's attitudes: e.g. importance of doing well at school, perceptions of parents' interest in education, labour market and educational aspirations.</p>	<p>Multiple – most questions rotate every other year in the youth questionnaire.</p>	<p>For young people completing the youth question this information is in the youth data file (w_youth). For 16-21 year olds, labour market and educational aspirations are in the main individual interview file (w_indresp).</p>
<p>Young person's behaviours: bullying at school, misbehaving at school, parents' attendance at parents' evening, playing truant, frequency and time spent on homework, whether receives help and from whom, attends other types of classes e.g. private tutoring or dance lessons.</p>	<p>Multiple – most questions rotate every other year in the youth questionnaire.</p>	<p>Youth questionnaire (w_youth).</p>

Linked data		
<p>Exam results: test results and teacher assessments spanning from age 5 (reception year) to age 18 (A-level results) across a range of subjects, alongside pupil characteristics, absences and exclusions are available from the National Pupil Database for children and young people with a valid consent.</p>	<p>Linked data is currently available for the consents given in wave 1 and covers academic years 2001/02 to 2012/13</p>	<p>Secure Access; due to the sensitive nature of the data, researchers need to apply through the UK Data Service, and access the data through a secure system.</p>
<p>School identifiers: school codes are available for researchers who wish to link to school characteristics – e.g. Ofsted reports, school composition, performance tables, teachers, financial resources</p>	<p>School codes are available for waves 1, 3 and 5</p>	<p>Special License: researchers need to apply through the UK Data Service in order to receive the data.</p>

Exploring education data in *Understanding Society*

This section looks at some of the patterns uncovered in *Understanding Society* data in the area of education. Although the figures are weighted these are only exploratory analysis of particular topics and so should be seen as jumping off points or providing a flavour of what is possible.

Ofsted ratings of schools and mother's educational attainment

Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), the inspectorate for school quality in England (with equivalent inspectorates in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), carries out regular inspections on the performance of education and childcare providers. Ofsted grades, ranging from 1=outstanding to 4=inadequate, can be linked to children and their families using the school codes available in *Understanding Society*. Combining Ofsted ratings with the highest qualification of mothers of children in the survey reveals inequality in access to outstanding schools.

Figure 1: The proportion of children in schools with different Ofsted grades, according to their mother's level of educational attainment

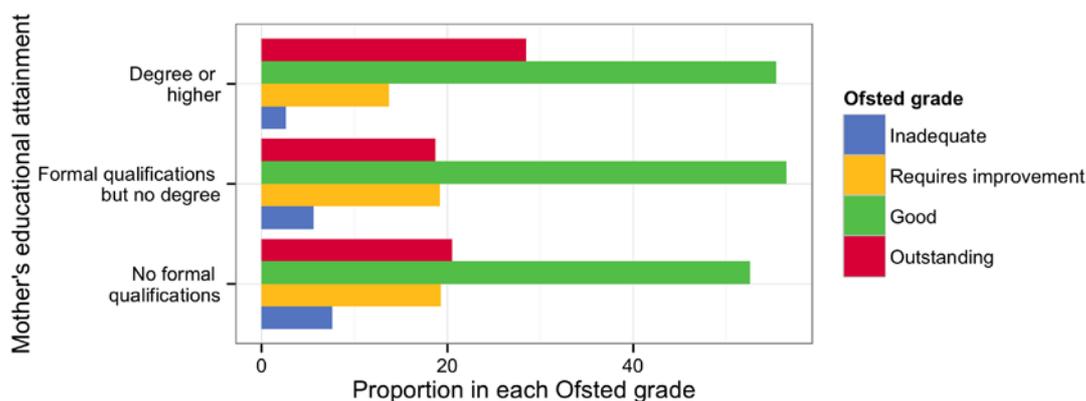


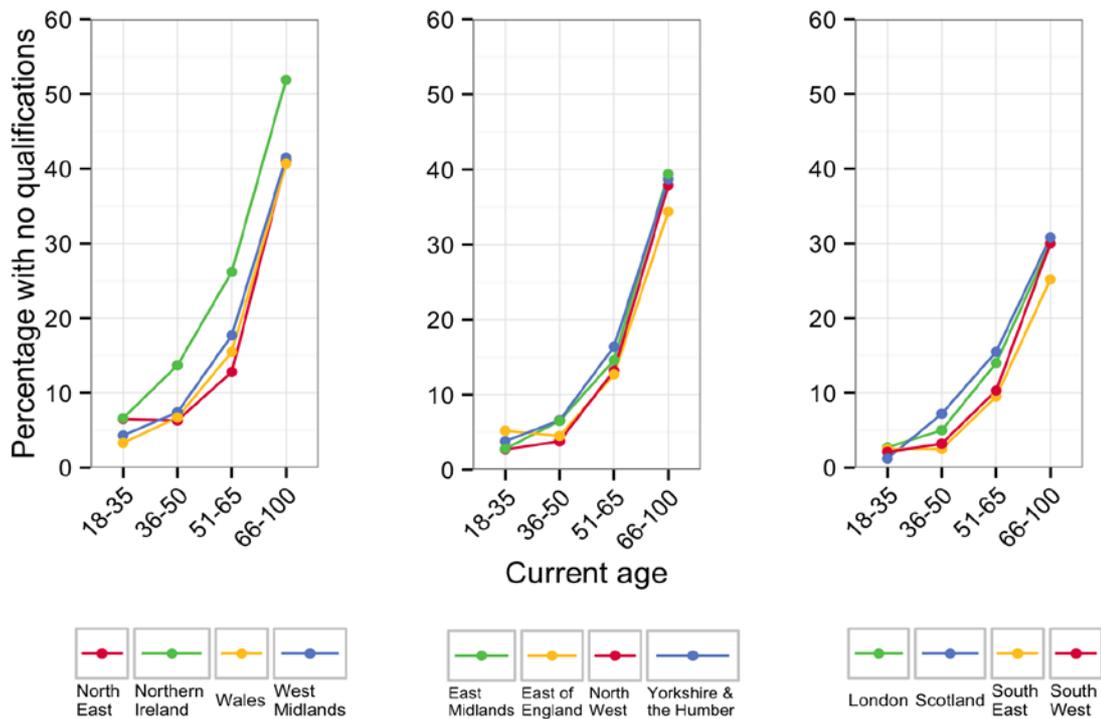
Figure 1 shows that children whose mothers have no formal qualifications are more than twice as likely to be in inadequate schools (the worst Ofsted grade) than children whose mothers have a degree. Similarly, children whose mothers have a degree or higher are more likely to be in outstanding schools than children whose mothers do not – having either no formal qualifications, or qualifications short of a university degree. Access to better schooling is one of the ways that better-educated parents ensure that their children attain good qualifications. However, for schools which seek to work with parents to improve standards and stimulate additional support, this may pose a problem. If the worst schools have limited access to better educated parents then they may be fighting an uphill battle to improve, notwithstanding that some schools are also providing adult skills classes.

Geographical disparities in educational attainment across the life course

One of the unique features of *Understanding Society* is that it is a study of 'all the cohorts' as it contains the whole age range of the population. This allows users to see how educational attainment has changed across cohorts. Two of the big variations in educational attainment are across the generations, and between different home nations and regions of the UK. For instance, Figure 2 shows the proportion of people who have no formal qualifications for each region – including school leaving certificates and vocational qualifications – is much higher for older cohorts, i.e. those aged 51–65, and 66 and above, than for younger cohorts.

There is also a strong regional variation. The home nations and regions are clustered into three groups and show an interesting pattern. Although regional inequalities, as measured by those with no qualifications, exist across all cohorts these are lower for the younger generation - but nonetheless still there. The lagging regions (left panel) have a long-tail of older cohorts with no qualifications. It will thus take a decade or more to significantly narrow the educational gap between the regions, notwithstanding the continued long-term impact of education gaps amongst younger cohorts. To illustrate with the extremes, in Northern Ireland 26% of people aged 51 to 65 have no qualifications – but in the South East that figure falls to 10%.

Figure 2: The percentage of different age groups with no qualifications, across different UK regions. Data are weighted and taken from wave 5

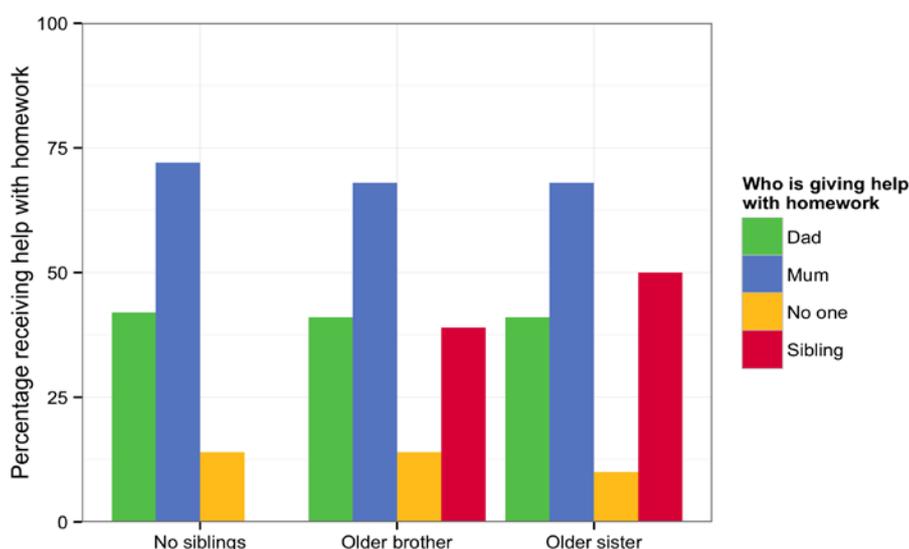


Help with school homework – gender and sibling differences

Although some schools are decreasing the burden of homework – and a few even rejecting it altogether – for most children it is an important part of learning and revising for exams. Whether children receive help from family members is a combination of the child’s needs, their parents’ decisions and the availability of various resources – is there someone in the house with the relevant knowledge to help complete the homework for instance, and does their employment pattern match up with when the children need to do homework?

Figure 3 below explores whether children receive help from anyone at home in completing their homework. Young people aged 10-15 are asked this question every other year in the separate questionnaire they receive. Figure 3 shows clearly that women and girls are giving more help with homework – although lots of men and boys are helping as well. More young people say they receive help with their homework from their mother (including natural, step, adopted, and foster mothers) than their fathers. Similarly, more children with an older sister say that they receive help from a sibling than those with an older brother – although clearly both boys and girls are helping their younger siblings. Few children say they receive help from no-one – but those with an older sister (10%) are less likely to say that than children with an older brother or no siblings (both 14%). Although they receive slightly more help from their mothers than children with an older sibling, children with no siblings could be potentially missing out compared to their peers with an older sibling.

Figure 3: The proportion of children aged 10-15 with (i) no siblings, (ii) an older sister, and (iii) an older brother who receive help with their homework from different sources. Data are weighted and taken from the youth questionnaire at wave 4.



Selected publications

A range of education and skills research across the cohorts is now being carried out using *Understanding Society*, here are a few examples:

Berrington, A., Roberts, S., and Tammes, P. (2016) ['Educational aspirations among UK young teenagers: exploring the role of gender, class and ethnicity'](#), *British Educational Research Journal*. doi: 10.1002/berj.3235

Burgess, S., Dickson, M., and Macmillan, L. (2014) [Selective schooling systems increase inequality](#), CMPO Working Papers University of Bristol, No. 14/323. Bristol: University of Bristol. Centre for Market and Public Organisation.

Faber, B., Sanchis-Guarner, R., and Weinhardt, F. (2015) [ICT and Education: Evidence from Student Home Addresses](#). NBER Working Paper No. 21306

Tippett, N., Wolke, D., and Platt, L. (2013) ['Ethnicity and bullying involvement in a national UK youth sample'](#), *Journal of Adolescence*, 36(4):639-649. doi: 10.1016/j.adolescence.2013.03.013

Tumino, A. (2016) [Retirement and cognitive abilities](#), *ISER Working Paper Series, No. 2016-06*. Colchester: University of Essex. Institute for Social and Economic Research.

Data Access

Scientific leadership and management of the study are carried out by the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) based at the University of the Essex.

The data are released through the UK Data Service (UKDS) in SPSS, Stata and tab-delimited formats. For the standard file it is a matter of registering with the UKDS, selecting the data files and a few clicks to download them. The most recent release of *Understanding Society* in the UKDS catalogue is [here](#).

For some of the educational data there are more strict access requirements; either through a Special License application for the school codes, or the Secure Data Service for access to the linked National Pupil Database data.



Special License applications are made through the UKDS, and users whose applications are successful can download the data to their own machines. Special License data must be kept under conditions of greater security than data under the ordinary End User License. [The Microdata Handling and Security: Guide to Good Practice](#) explains how to meet these conditions. Researchers wishing to use the school codes should apply through the UKDS [here](#). Researchers might also be interested in geographical identifiers such as [Local Education Authorities](#).

In order to access the linked NPD data, researchers need to apply through the UKDS to access the Secure Data Service. After their application is approved, researchers need to attend a training course on non-disclosure and how to use the Secure Lab, which is a secure environment accessed remotely. This is only available at present for researchers based in a higher education institution in the UK. Researchers wishing to use the linked *Understanding Society* NPD data should apply through the UKDS [here](#).

User Support

Understanding Society has a wealth of information [online](#)

The website provides a highly comprehensive online source of information regarding individual variables, methodology, survey design and implementation. It is also an up to date source of training courses, resources, publications and other relevant news regarding longitudinal research. A comprehensive user guide is published online, and updated each year. In addition we have developed specific guides about major content areas – including for the [cognitive ability measures](#), the [National Pupil Database](#), and [ethnicity](#). The [main user guide](#) provides information on how to select the appropriate weights for analysis. <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/mainstage>

Help and support for using *Understanding Society* can be found in the [Online User Forum](#). After a short registration users can read past issues, FAQ's and experiences or report any issues or queries of their own.

The team at *Understanding Society* also offers [online training courses](#) which provide plenty of worked examples of how to prepare and analyse *Understanding Society* data. Presently courses are available in Stata, SAS and SPSS.

Stay in touch

- Email the team at info@understandingsociety.ac.uk
- Follow us on Twitter [@usociety](#)
- [Sign up](#) to receive our quarterly newsletter.
- Policy research and collaboration – get in touch with our Policy Unit: rajpatel@essex.ac.uk