

## **Insights podcast: Studying for a PhD at ISER**

With Cara Booker

### **Chris Coates**

Hello and Welcome to the Insights the podcast from Understanding Society. Understanding Society is a longitudinal survey that captures life in the UK in the 21st Century. Every year we ask each member of thousands of the same households across the UK about their daily lives. In this episode we're looking at the some of the people who use the data we gather. I'm talking to Cara Booker, a senior research fellow at the Institute for Social and Economic Research where Understanding Society is based, about studying for a PhD and what to do with the doctorate once you've got it.

### **CC**

So, Cara, thank you for joining us, what are the routes to studying a PhD at ISER? What are the options for people?

### **Cara Booker**

Yeah, thanks for having me. So we have five PhDs that we offer through ISER, we have a PhD in Economics, one in Survey Methodologies, a Health Research PhD, an Applied Social and Economic Research PhD, and a PhD in Biosocial Research. All of these are plus-3/plus-3.5-year standard length of a PhD, and students can choose which one they want to come and study under. We have supervisors who are experts in each of these areas, so you get kind of a well-rounded experience when you come to ISER and complete your studies.

### **Chris Coates**

Presumably, not all of those are, I mean some of those are learning about surveys and how to run a survey, that kind of thing, but some of them are learning how to carry out research, are they?

### **Cara Booker**

That's right. I mean even the survey methodology one is not just about running a survey but how to do analyses on the survey itself, for like you know doing different experiments on the survey and analysing those, or looking at different ways of how the surveys are carried out and what impacts participants' participation, but also retention, recruitment all of those things.

We are a very quantitative-focused programme, all of our programmes are, so a lot of our students are doing quite heavy statistical and applied methods. So our economics and health research and applied economic and social research are mostly based on quantitative data, mostly longitudinal quantitative data, on which they're doing all sorts of types of analyses on those. Within those, even within the economics or health research or applied social and economic research, because we are using surveys, we have to have some knowledge of how the surveys are carried

out might impact what we can and cannot say about our findings or their findings, but the survey methodologies is much more specific about how surveys are carried out while the others are more related to analysing, using the data that comes from surveys in different ways so like different types of questions.

### **Chris Coates**

So obviously that's going to cover quite a wide range of things, what skills is one likely to get while studying at ISER?

### **Cara Booker**

There is a variety of skills, I mean, most of the skills that you need for a PhD are around conducting analysis, being a critical thinker, using advanced statistical methods, maybe learning, honing your skills on different statistical packages , working with your supervisor or working with other students. So there are lots of skills that are particular to conducting a PhD but also things around practising presentations.

Again you have to write a thesis, so you're practising writing for academics, but you might also be involved in different types of projects. Depending on what your end goal is after a PhD, you might want to go into kind of a non-academic field so we try and provide experiences for students to write in a less academic way, so kind of writing reports or writing things that you might experience for jobs after your time at ISER.

### **Chris Coates**

So, what makes ISER a good place to study a PhD?

### **Cara Booker**

ISER is very collegial we've got great expertise in say survey methodology, in economics and health research. We have Understanding Society right here in our department which helps with having a good grasp of what's going on in the survey field but also being able to use the study in different ways, having experts around that can help you with the ins and outs of things.

We have seminars and all sorts of events that we put on, that students are allowed to participate in and even be a part of, whether that's the planning or the teaching or presenting or just attending. They have lots of opportunities for meeting other researchers, for presenting their own work, for going on visits if they can, for working together, for working as research assistants in small projects, so there's lots of things that we try and involve them in, that are good for their CV but are also good for their future outside of a being a student but will also help them to be better researchers and more critical thinkers learning from different disciplines.

The institute is very interdisciplinary – we've got lots of different people coming from different perspectives and it's really good to get that additional way of thinking. So if you're coming from a more survey methodology or sociological approach, we have

you know lots of economists or health researchers and vice versa that can kind of help you shape how you might think about things, or give you new perspectives about how questions might be answered, what kinds of methods you might use that you don't normally use in the specific fields you may branch out and use them because you have the expertise within our department and you're getting more information or more knowledge about why you might want to use those methods.

### **Chris Coates**

Let's assume I'm a PhD student, I'm coming to the end of three or so years, what can I do now, if I have a PhD from ISER, what sort of work can I do?

### **Cara Booker**

Yeah, this is something that we talk with our students throughout, so kind of from the start giving them an idea of what kind of careers they're thinking about, and we've alumni – people who've graduated from ISER – go to many different places, so some of them stay in academia, and have become professors, lecturers, independent researchers. We've had some that have gone outside of academia to work for different government agencies, we have some that work for the Department of Work and Pensions, the NHS, the Office for National Statistics. Some of them have gone on to work for smaller charities, or local charities.

There are a few that, we've just had one alumni who announced that she's starting to work for the World Bank, and I know we've had a few others that have also worked for the World Bank. So it's really a wide range of places that you could work for when you leave ISER with a PhD from here, and it really depends on what motivates you.

We have people again who have come here from other countries and gone to different countries, or gone back to their home countries. We've had people who are from the UK, there's an alumni who is now working in the US. So, there is lots of opportunities and I think one of those reasons why there is lots of opportunities is the skills that you gain. You may not necessarily be working specifically on your topic but you have the skills to branch out into many, many topics – got those two pillars that you can use to further your career once you leave here.

### **Chris Coates**

Thank you, Cara. That's it for this episode. You can find out more about Understanding Society and how our data can change practice and inform policy on our website, [understandingsociety.ac.uk](http://understandingsociety.ac.uk), and by following us on social media. There's more about the Institute for Social and Economic Research at [iser.essex.ac.uk](http://iser.essex.ac.uk).

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