

Call for Understanding Society Research Data Fellowships

Deadline 5pm on 22 August 2024

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 August 2024 (for a January 2025 start) call focuses on three themes: exploiting the Study's social and biomedical data; research on ethnicity and immigration; and methodological issues around whole-household participation. We will announce the topics of our next call in the first part of 2025.

Requirements of a fellowship

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

Social and biomedical data -

Fellowships under this theme should undertake projects built around quantitative analyses of the combined social and [biomedical data](#) from *Understanding Society*.

As part of the main survey, from Wave 1 onwards participants are asked a number of questions about their general health. In Wave 2 and Wave 3 adult participants received a follow-up health assessment visit from a registered nurse. A range of bio-medical measures were collected from around 20,000 adults, which included blood pressure, weight, height, waist measurement, body fat, grip strength and lung function. Blood samples were also taken at these visits and biomarker data is available including:

- Measures of fat in the blood (cholesterol and triglycerides)
- An indicator of diabetes (Glycated haemoglobin HbA1c)
- Measures of inflammation and the immune system– the body's way of responding to harm (High sensitivity c-reactive protein, fibrinogen and CMV seropositivity)
- Measures of anaemia (Haemoglobin and ferritin)
- Liver and kidney function
- Hormones that build up the body – (testosterone, DHEAs, IFG-1)

In addition to these biomarkers, the health assessment data also includes:

- Proteomic panels for cardiometabolic health and neurological processes

- Epigenetic clocks have been constructed

Polygenic scores are available in the Special Licence version of the dataset.

A genome-wide scan (Illumina human core exome array) has been conducted on DNA samples from approximately 10,000 people. Methylation profiling has been conducted on DNA samples from approximately 3650, consisting of 1425 individuals from the British Household Panel Survey component of Understanding Society and another 2230 from the General Population Sample. Using the Illumina Methylation EPIC BeadChip we have integrated over 850,000 Methylation sites across the genome.

Projects should contribute new scientific knowledge about the two-way relationship between people's social, economic, environmental circumstances and their health. They should also build understanding of the value of, and capacity for, using biomarkers, proteomics, epigenetics and genetics in the social sciences.

Ethnicity and immigration -

UK is a multi-cultural society with minoritized ethnic groups making up around 26% of the residential population of England and Wales, and non-UK born 17% (2021 Census for England and Wales). This direction of change in population composition since the 1950s, has led to interest, debate and discussions about inequality, discrimination, diversity, trust and social cohesion, and identity. Since the late 1960s, UK has implemented laws to combat racial and ethnic discrimination, with their domains, scope and reach increasing with each iteration, the Equality Act 2010 having the widest scope. To understand these issues and examine how effective these laws have been in combatting discrimination large scale quantitative data collection was needed. Since the 1960s there have been a few surveys that focussed on some of these topics, however, these were cross-sectional surveys, with moderate sample sizes, and limited in scope.

Understanding Study, that started in 2009, is a unique resource for ethnicity and immigration research. In addition to having sufficiently large sample sizes of different minoritized ethnic and migrant groups (made possible by its large sample size and an Ethnic Minority Boost sample and Immigrant and Ethnic Minority Boost sample), questions focussing on topics such as ethnic identity, remittances, harassment, migration history, religiosity and so on, and taking a multi-dimensional approach to measuring ethnic and cultural background (by asking questions on own, parents, grandparents countries of birth, religion, language at home during childhood, census ethnic group question, parents' ethnic group), it is a multi-topic longitudinal household survey, collecting data from and on its core sample members and their entire households annually. Using address information of responding households, survey data can be linked to geographical information at different levels of geography, such as neighbourhood deprivation, ethnic composition, and so on. Thus, *Understanding Society*, enables researchers to go beyond looking at simple snapshots and investigate dynamic processes, understand the role of households and local communities, and examine the experiences of minority groups across multiple life domains and over the life course. To know more about these unique features please read the [Ethnicity and Immigration Research User Guide](#).

Fellowship applications focussing on (1) key policy questions about minoritized ethnic and migrant groups, (2) topics such as religiosity, ethnic identity, language, remittances, or (3) methodological research such as comparing survey response behaviour or (interview) mode effects across minoritized ethnic and migrant groups are welcome. There should be a justification provided as to why your proposed research could not be conducted using any other resource.

Whole-household participation -

At each wave of the survey we ask each adult member of each household (aged 16+) to complete a questionnaire, but in a substantial minority of cases, not all do so. There is interest in the effect of partial household response (households in which at least one adult participates but at least one does not) on analysis and estimation and in ways of minimising

this effect, either through statistical adjustment of some kind or by finding ways to reduce the extent of partial household response. Partial household response is likely to particularly affect research that requires aggregation to household level (e.g. of income) or that investigates intra-household relationships.

We would welcome fellowship applications that aim to do some combination of the following:

- Describe the nature of partial household response and its effects on the data;
- Assess the impacts of partial household response on analysis and estimation;
- Develop analysis/adjustment methods that take partial response into account;
- Identify data collection techniques likely to reduce the extent of partial household response.

These issues could be addressed in a specific analytical context of broad interest to *Understanding Society* data users (e.g. studying the association between household income and voting intentions) or the research could seek generic solutions.

For all projects the following outputs are required:

- at 6 months, delivery of a clearly-specified set of outputs that indicate that the fellowship is progressing on track – these may be drafts of code/analysis/papers, or be in the form of a short report of activity with a clear plan for the second 6 months of the fellowship;
- and at the end of the fellowship:
 - 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.

Where the theme is appropriate, 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 be reviewed and discussed with each fellow at the first fellowship network meeting. To facilitate knowledge sharing among fellows, fellowships under this call should begin in or around January 2025.

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 a higher education institution, a research/policy institute or third sector organisation is eligible to apply (except the University of Essex), but 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 from a third sector organisation 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 from a third sector organisation, we will cover £5000 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 22 August 2024**. You may wish 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.

Advert	26 June 2024
Closing date (2 months)	22 August 2024
Notify if shortlisted (or not)	Mid-September 2024
Interviews	Early-October 2024
Notify if successful (or not)	Early-October 2024

Expected start	January 2025
Kick-off Fellowship meeting	Late-January 2025
Outputs/deliverables at 6 months	June 2025
Work-in-progress workshop	Summer 2025
Finalised outputs/deliverables; end of project event	December 2025

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 £5000 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 to achieve the aims of the fellowship proposal?
- 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 22 August 2024.