Attitudes to education: the British Social Attitudes survey 2018

Research report

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Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE) has commissioned questions on NatCen’s British Social Attitudes survey (BSA) on a number of occasions since its inception in 1983. In 2018, as part of a joint contract with the Government Equalities Office (GEO), DfE commissioned a set of questions measuring public attitudes in relation to the following topics: children’s lives, teachers’ pay and workload, foreign languages and higher education. A list of the questions referred to within this report is provided at Annex 1. This briefing paper presents headline analysis of the results to these questions.

Carried out annually since 1983,¹ BSA is an authoritative source of data on the views of the British public. It uses a random probability sampling methodology to yield a representative sample of adults aged 18+ living in private households in Britain. The majority of questions are asked by an interviewer face-to-face in the form of a Computer Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI), while a smaller number are answered by respondents in a self-completion booklet. Questions commissioned by DfE were included across both sections of the survey.

Data collection was carried out between July and November 2018 in England, Wales and Scotland, with a response rate of 41.9%.² The achieved sample for the questions commissioned by DfE, for the face-to-face questionnaire was 2,884 and the achieved sample for the self-completion booklet was 2,269³. The data have been weighted to account for unequal selection probabilities and non-response bias, and calibrated to match the population profile on the basis of age, sex and region. For the purposes of this report, only responses from respondents in England are included in the analysis, reflecting the geographic extent of DfE’s responsibilities.

Significance testing was carried out using logistic regressions, taking the sample design into account. This was performed across each crossbreak for a specified answer code of the dependent variable. If the test is significant it means there is evidence of an association between the crossbreak variable and (the specified answer code of the) dependent variable. All differences described in the text (between different groups of people or survey waves) are statistically significant at the 0.05 level or above, unless otherwise specified.

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¹ Apart from in 1988 and 1992 when its core funding was used to fund the British Election Study series.
² This is the lower limit of the response rate, which is calculated as a range from a lower limit where all unknown eligibility cases (e.g. address inaccessible, or unknown whether address is residential) are assumed to be eligible and therefore included in the unproductive outcomes, to an upper limit where all these cases are assumed to be ineligible and therefore excluded for the response calculation. The upper limit of the response rate for BSA 2018 was 42.4%.
³ Respondents were randomly allocated one of four versions of the questionnaire and self-completion booklet, labelled A to D. Questions commissioned by DfE were included in versions A, C and D.
Executive summary

NatCen’s annual British Social Attitudes survey (BSA) uses a random probability sampling methodology to yield a representative sample of adults aged 18+ living in private households in England, Wales and Scotland.

The Department for Education (DfE) has commissioned questions on NatCen’s British Social Attitudes survey (BSA) on a number of occasions since its inception in 1983. In 2018, the Department commissioned a set of questions measuring public attitudes in relation to children’s lives, teachers’ pay and workload, foreign languages and higher education and the education system. Key findings from these questions are summarised below.

Children’s lives

- The majority of respondents (85%) agreed that children today are under more pressure from advertisements than children were 10 years ago.
- Furthermore, only about 1 in 10 (12%) people thought that children today are happier than children were 10 years ago.
- About half of the respondents (52%) thought that children today had better educational opportunities than those 10 years ago.

Teachers and the education system

- Nearly half of the respondents (47%) said that teachers worked too hard while 43% thought that teachers’ workload was around the right amount. A similar proportion (44%) also thought teachers were paid about the right amount.
- Respondents with family or friends working as a teacher were more likely to say teachers worked too hard or that teachers were not being paid enough, compared to respondents who did not know a teacher.
- Respondents were fairly equally split on whether they had heard of the change in GCSEs grading system with 53% saying yes, 46% saying no, and 1% did not know.
- There was an overwhelming consensus (83%) of the importance of studying a foreign language GCSE at school, while 61% agreed that studying a foreign language GCSE will become more important in ten years’ time.
Higher education

- Three-quarters (74%) of respondents felt that students should choose the course they study at university based on how interested they are in the subject, while less than a fifth (18%) said it should be based on how much they are likely to earn after graduating.
- Respondents had conflicting views on who should pay the living costs of students going to university. Over a third (38%) reported that students should pay most of the living costs, while 35% said that the government and students should pay the same amount.
- Views on paying fees were clearer, with three-quarters (74%) saying the government should pay either half or most of the fees.
- Public opinion on the cost of university was relatively polarised, with 52% saying it should vary depending on parents’ earnings compared to 44% who felt the cost should be the same for all.
- More than half of respondents (58%) thought that no interest should be charged on student loans while 34% favoured a lower rate than is normally charged on loans from a bank.
- The analysis suggests conflicting attitudes towards university students’ future financial health. While almost half (46%) said that people who went to university ended up being better off than those who did not, 71% also agreed that the cost of university creates debts that cannot be repaid.

International students

- Respondents were three times as likely to agree that international students brought a significant benefit to the British economy (67%) than agree that international students imposed a significant cost (22%).
- When comparing the benefits and costs of international students, half of respondents (50%) thought the benefits were much or a little greater than the costs, whereas 14% said the costs were much or a little greater than the benefits.
1. General views on children’s lives

Respondents were asked about their attitudes towards the following statements:

- Children today are happier than children were 10 years ago
- Children today are under more pressure from adverts than children were 10 years ago
- Children today have better educational opportunities than children did 10 years ago

Public opinion on the different aspects of children’s lives varied considerably. The majority of respondents (85%) agreed that children today are under more pressure. Furthermore, only about 1 in 10 (12%) people felt that children today are happier than children were 10 years ago.

Figure 1: Attitudes towards children’s lives today compared to those 10 years ago

Since 2008, when this series of questions was first asked, responses have remained broadly stable. However, the proportion of people who agree that children today have better educational opportunities has decreased from 59% in 2010 to 52% in 2018.

Attitudes towards children’s educational opportunities varied by education as people with no qualifications (64%) were more likely to say that children today had better education opportunities than degree holders (45%).
Women (87%) were more likely to agree that children today were under more pressure from adverts than children were 10 years ago compared to their male counterparts (82%). Similarly, people aged 65 and above (90% of 65-75 year olds; 89% of 75+ years) were more likely to agree with this statement than respondents aged 18-24 years (80%).
2. Teachers and the education system

Respondents were asked their views on teachers’ workload and pay. Almost half of respondents (47%) said that teachers worked too hard while 43% thought that teachers’ workload was around the right amount.

Figure 2: Views on teachers’ workload

Unweighted base: all respondents in England (2,491)
Meanwhile 44% thought that teachers were paid about the right amount while a similar proportion (42%) reported that teachers were not paid enough.

**Figure 3: Views on teachers' pay**

![Bar chart showing views on teachers' pay](image)

Attitudes towards teachers’ workload and pay were analysed by demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. Older people aged 75 years and above (36%) were least likely to say that teachers worked too hard compared to respondents aged 18 to 74 years (45-52%). Similarly, 24% of people aged 75 and above agreed that teachers were not paid enough, whereas 55% of respondents aged 18 to 24 years thought this.

Differences across education qualifications were also observed. Degree holders were the most likely to say that teachers worked too hard (60%) compared to 36% of those with no qualifications. Degree holders were also most likely to agree that teachers were not paid enough (57%), while only a quarter of those with no qualifications (25%) agreed with this.

The trends in social class mirrored that of education qualifications. At least half of respondents in managerial and professional occupations agreed that teachers worked too hard (53%) compared with 38% of those in lower supervisory and technical occupations. Additionally, one in two (50%) respondents in professional and managerial occupations said that teachers were not paid enough compared to people in lower social classes ranging from intermediate to semi-routine and routine occupations (33-41%).
Notably, there was a linear relationship between whether respondents knew a teacher in their personal capacity and their attitudes towards teachers. Respondents with family or friends working as a teacher were more likely to say that teachers were not being paid enough (42%) and that they worked too hard (47%).

Figure 4: Attitudes on teachers’ workload and pay by whether respondent has family or friends who are working as a teacher

Changes to the GCSE grading system

Respondents were asked about their awareness of the changes to the GCSE grading system. Public opinion was almost equally split on whether they had heard of the change in GCSEs grading system with 53% saying yes, 46% saying no, and a further 1% saying they did not know.

The proportion of 18-24 year olds (68%) who were aware of this change was more than twice that of 75 year olds and above (33%). Similarly, 69% of degree holders and 65% of respondents in managerial and professional occupations said they knew of this change relative to 26% of those with no qualifications and 41% of people in semi-routine and
routine occupations. Respondents with children in their household\(^4\) (56\%) were also more likely to have heard of this change compared to those with no children in their household (50\%). Unsurprisingly, the difference is even greater in households where children were in secondary school. Over three-quarters of those with 11-15 year olds have heard of this change, and the majority (84\%) of respondents with 16-17 years olds in their household were aware of this.

**Foreign languages in school**

Respondents were also asked their opinions on studying a foreign language GCSE at school today, and how its perceived importance might change in ten years’ time.

There was an overwhelming consensus (83\%) on the importance of studying a foreign language GCSE at school.

**Figure 5: Attitudes towards studying a foreign language GCSE at school**

![Bar chart showing attitudes towards studying a foreign language GCSE at school](image)

Public opinion on the importance of learning a foreign language in the future was generally high, with 85\% saying it will be ‘much more/more important’ (61\%) or ‘about the same’ (24\%) (Figure 6).

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\(^4\) The variable ‘having any children in the household’ is about the household itself and does not reflect whether or not the respondent is a parent. Respondents living in households with children may or may not be the parents of those children. Likewise, respondents living in households without children may have children who live elsewhere, or who are now adults.
Notably, when looking at attitudes towards studying a foreign language today, older people were more likely to say studying a foreign language is important than younger people. Most respondents above the age of 65 years (88%) agreed with this statement compared to less than three-quarters (72%) of 18-24 year olds.

Degree holders (90%) and professionals (88%) were also more likely to think that learning a foreign language is important than those with GCSEs or equivalent (75%) and those in semi-routine and routine occupations (78%). However, when looking at attitudes towards studying foreign languages in ten years’ time, the educational trend is reversed.

Whilst respondents with no qualifications were less likely to report that learning a foreign language is important today, they were the most likely to think that it would become more important in ten years’ time. More than two-thirds of those with no qualifications (69%) said learning a foreign language will be more important in ten years time compared to 60% of degree holders and those with A levels. However, once respondents who said that learning a language would be just as important in ten years’ time were included in the analysis, there were no significant differences across education levels, with 87% of degree holders and those with no qualifications saying studying foreign languages would be as or more important in ten years time.

Additionally, 63% of people with no children in the household agreed that the importance of learning a foreign language in the future would increase compared to 58% of respondents with children in their household.
3. Higher education and international students

Respondents were asked their views on the costs and value of higher education, subject choice and the impact of international students on the British economy.

Subject choice

Almost three in four (74%) respondents felt that students should choose the course they study at university based on how interested they are in the subject while 18% said it should be based on how much they are likely to earn after graduating. A further 5% did not choose either of these statements and 2% did not know.

Tuition fees and living costs

Respondents had conflicting views on who should pay the living costs of students going to university. Over a third (38%) reported that students should pay most of the living costs, even if this puts some students off studying while 35% said that the government and students should pay the same amount.

Figure 7: Views on who should pay for the tuition fees and living costs associated with higher education
Views on who should pay the fees were clearer, 39% thought that students and the government should share the cost of tuition fees equally. A third (35%) said the government should pay most of the fees. This means around three-quarters (74%) think the government should pay either half or most of the fees.

Women (43%) were significantly more likely than men (35%) to think that the government and students should be paying the same amount of fees. A slightly higher proportion of men (37%) compared to women (33%) said that the government should pay most of the tuition fees. However, this difference was not statistically significant.

Trends across education were also observed. Degree holders (46%) were most likely to favour the government paying most of the tuition fees compared to those with lower education such as GCSEs (27%) and no qualifications (34%). Conversely, degree holders (31%) were least likely to favour the government and students sharing the cost of tuition fees equally compared to those with GCSEs (47%).

Attitudes towards paying for living costs of students did not differ by any demographic or socio-economic marker.

Public opinion on the cost of university was relatively polarised as 52% said it should vary depending on parents’ earnings while 44% felt that the cost should be the same for all.

**Figure 8: Attitudes on the cost of university**

![Proportion of respondents who agreed with these statements (%)](image)

Older people and respondents with no children in their household were more likely to agree that the cost of university should vary according to parents’ earnings. More than half (59%) of 65-74 year olds and 55% of respondents with no children in the household expressed
this view compared to 42% of 18-24 year olds and 48% of respondents who had children living with them.

**Student loans**

More than half of respondents (58%) thought that no interest should be charged on student loans while 34% favoured a lower rate than is normally charged for loans from a bank. Conversely, 5% felt that student loans should be charged at a normal rate or a higher rate than is normally charged while 2% did not know. A further 1% said students should not have to pay for higher education.

Women (61%) and those with children in their household (64%) were more likely to say that no interest should be charged on student loans than men (55%) or those without children in their household (54%).

There was no clear relationship between age and thinking that no interest should be charged on student loans. However, young people aged 18 to 24 years (28%) were less likely to favour a lower interest rate than older respondents aged 65 to 74 years (42%).

Figure 9: Attitudes on student loans by age
Cost of going to university

Respondents were asked their views on the following statements “In the long run people who go to university end up being a lot better off financially than those who don’t” and “The cost of going to university leaves many students with debts that they can’t afford to repay”.

The analysis suggests conflicting attitudes towards university students’ future financial health. While almost half (46%) said that people who attended university ended up being better off than those who did not, 71% also agreed or strongly agreed that the cost of university created debts that cannot be repaid.

Figure 10: Views on the cost of university
Degree holders were most likely to say that people who attended university became better off financially (55%). However, there were no significant differences across education qualifications on views that university left many with debt they cannot afford to repay.

Figure 11: Attitudes on the cost of university by education qualification

Patterns across social class were also observed as half of those in professional and managerial occupations (51%) reported that people who attended university were better off financially than those who did not compared to 40% of respondents in semi-routine and routine occupations. Differences in social class were not observed in attitudes towards student debt. However, people with children in their household (75%) were more likely to say that university leaves many students in debt they cannot afford to repay, compared to people without any children in their household (69%).
Is university worth it?

Although approximately seven in ten (71%) reported that the cost of university left students with debt they cannot repay, almost half (45%) also disagreed that ‘a university education just isn’t worth the amount of time and money it usually takes’. Only 18% thought that a university education is not worth the time and money.

Figure 12: Views on whether university is worth the time and money

Respondents were also asked about whether ‘university just isn’t worth the amount of time and money it usually takes’. Those who were educated to a degree level were most likely to disagree with this statement (63%) compared to respondents with no qualification (36%).

Figure 13: Views on whether university is worth the time and money by education
Attitudes across time

Attitudes towards higher education have remained broadly stable since 2013. There was a slight increase in the proportion of respondents who agreed that university leaves many students with debts they cannot repay from 68% in 2013 to 71% in 2018. The proportion of people who said that a university education was not worth the time or money has remained stable since 2013 at 18%. Similarly, there have been no significant changes to views that people who attend university become better off financially from 2005 (50%) to 2018 (46%).

Figure 14: Attitudes on higher education from 2005-2018

Unweighted base: all respondents in England, self-completion (1,966)
International students

Attitudes towards international students were generally positive. Respondents were three times as likely to think international students brought a significant benefit to the British economy (67%) compared to them imposing a significant cost (22%).

Figure 15: Views on the impact of international students on the British economy

Men (70%) were more likely than women (65%) to report that international students brought significant benefits to the British economy. Although the relationship across education and social class was not linear, degree holders (86%) were more likely to hold this view than those with no qualifications (52%). Similarly, professionals (77%) were also more likely to support this statement than those in semi-routine and routine occupations (59%).

There were stark differences in views that international students imposed significant costs on Britain across gender, age, education and social class. Men (52%) were more likely to disagree with this statement than women (41%). Younger people (51% of respondents aged 18 to 44 years) were also more likely to disagree with this statement than those aged 75 years and above (28%). Additionally, degree holders (71%) and those in professional and managerial occupations (61%) were more than twice as likely to disagree than people with no qualifications (25%) and those in lower supervisory and technical occupations (29%).
When comparing the benefits and costs of international students, half of respondents (50%) thought that the benefits were much or a little greater than the costs, compared to 14% who said that the costs were much or a little greater than the benefits.

**Figure 16: Views on whether the benefits international students bring outweighed the costs**

Consistent trends in education qualifications were observed in attitudes towards international students. People with higher qualifications were more likely than those with lower qualifications to disagree that international students impose significant costs. They were also more in support of the view that the benefits international students bring outweighed the costs. For instance, degree holders (74%) were almost twice as likely to favour this statement compared to people with no qualifications (32%).
Professionals and 18-24 year olds (both 63%) also reported that the benefits outweighed the costs relative to those in lower supervisory and technical occupations and people aged 75 years and above (respectively 36%).
Annex

CAPI section (face-to-face)

I would now like to ask you some questions about children

X14 [Happ10yr] CARD X14 (Repeat: 2010)
For the following statements please think back to children 10 years ago compared with children today.
How much do you agree or disagree with each of these statements...
Children today are happier than children were 10 years ago?
Agree strongly
Agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Disagree
Disagree strongly

X15 [Adve10yr] CARD X14 AGAIN (Repeat: 2010)
(And how much do you agree or disagree that...)
Children today are under more pressure from adverts than children were 10 years ago?
Agree strongly
Agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Disagree
Disagree strongly

X16 [Edu10yr] CARD X14 AGAIN (Repeat: 2010)
(And how much do you agree or disagree that...)
Children today have better educational opportunities than children had 10 years ago?
Agree strongly
Agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Disagree
Disagree strongly
I would now like to ask you some questions about teachers.

**KNOWTEA2 CARD X1**

X1

Are you, your partner, or any of your family or friends currently working as a school teacher of pupils aged 5 to 18? Please don't include teachers that you only know in a professional capacity, such as your child's teacher at school. If you know more than one, please choose the first on the list to apply.

**CODE ONE ONLY**

Yes - Myself 1
Yes – Immediate family/partner 2
Yes – Other family member 3
Yes – Close friend 4
Yes – Other friend or acquaintance 5
No 7
(Don’t know) 8

**Tchwk CARD X2**

X2

Generally speaking, do you think teachers work too hard, not hard enough, or is their workload about right? Please select one of the options from the card.

Far too hard 1
Too hard 2
About the right amount 3
Not hard enough 4
Not nearly hard enough 5
(Don’t know) 8
(Refusal) 9

**Tchpay CARD X3**

X3
Generally speaking, do you think teachers are paid too much, not enough or about the right amount? Please select one of the options from the card.

- Far too much: 1
- Too much: 2
- About the right amount: 3
- Not enough: 4
- Not nearly enough: 5
- (Don’t know): 8
- (Refusal): 9

GrdRef ASK respondents in England only

- NEW
- X4

In England the grades which are awarded for GCSEs are being changed from the A* to G system to one which runs from 9 to 1.

Before this survey, had you heard of this change?

- Yes: 1
- No: 2
- (Don’t know): 8
- (Refusal): 9

I would now like to ask you some questions about foreign languages in schools

Modern Foreign Language: 2 items

Impfl ASK respondents in England and Wales only

- NEW
- X5

How important, if at all, do you think it is for students to study a foreign language GCSE at school? Please choose one option from the card

- Very important: 1
- Fairly important: 2
- Not very important: 3
- Not at all important: 4
- (Don’t know): 8
ASK respondents in England and Wales only

**Impfl10**  CARD X6  NEW

**X6**

Now thinking ahead to 10 years from now, do you think studying a foreign language GCSE will have become more or less important, for school students?
Please choose one option from the card

- Much more important 1
- More important 2
- About the same 3
- Less important 4
- Much less important 5
- (Don’t know) 8
- (Refusal) 9

**ASK ALL**

**X7 - InStuEc2 - Face-to-face (New).**

**Card X7**

I would now like to ask you some questions about international students who come to Britain to study.

Using this card please tell me how much you agree or disagree with the following statements.

International students bring with them a significant benefit to the British economy.

- 1 Agree strongly
- 2 Agree
- 3 Neither agree nor disagree
- 4 Disagree
- 5 Disagree strongly

**ASK ALL**

**X8 - InStuCs2 - Face-to-face (New).**

**Card X7**
International students impose significant costs on the British economy.

1 Agree strongly
2 Agree
3 Neither agree nor disagree
4 Disagree
5 Disagree strongly

ASK ALL

X9- InStuBen2 - [Renamed InStuBn2 in final data] - Face-to-face (New).

Card X8

Overall, do you think the benefits for Britain of international students outweigh the costs they bring, or do the costs outweigh the benefits?

1 The benefits to Britain are much greater than the costs
2 The benefits to Britain are a little greater than the costs
3 The benefits and costs to Britain are about equal
4 The costs to Britain are a little greater than the benefits
5 The costs to Britain are much greater than the benefits
6 (SPONTANEOUS) It depends

University:

I would now like to ask you some questions about the funding of university education.

ASK ALL

unisubj CARDX9 NEW

X10

Some feel that students should choose a university course based on how much they are likely to earn after graduating. Others feel that students should choose a course based on how interested they are in the subject.

Which of the statements on this card comes closest to your view

Students should choose a course they study at university based on…?

How much they are likely to earn after graduating 1
How much they are interested in the subject 2
Who should pay the tuition fees of students going to university? Should it be...

... the government who pays most of the fees, even though this will mean higher taxes or lower spending elsewhere

... should it be students that pay most of the fees, even if this puts some students off studying

... should the government and students pay the same amount?

[Spontaneous] It depends

[Spontaneous] The government should pay all of the fees

[Spontaneous] Students should pay all of the fees

(Don’t know)

(Refusal)

And who should pay for the living costs of students at university? Should it be...

... the government who pays most of the living costs, even though this will mean higher taxes or lower spending elsewhere

... should it be students that pay most of the living costs, even if this puts some students off studying

... should the government and students pay the same amount?

[Spontaneous] It depends

[Spontaneous] The government should pay all of the living costs

[Spontaneous] Students should pay all of the living costs

(Don’t know)
Thinking about students attending university after school, should the costs of attending university be the same for all students or should the costs of attending university vary based on how much their parents earn?

INTERVIEWER READ OUT IF NECESSARY: The costs of attending university includes tuition fees and necessary living costs such as accommodation, food, clothes and books.

Please choose an option from the card:

- The costs of attending university should be the same for all students
- The costs of attending university should vary depending on parents’ earnings
- [Spontaneous] Students shouldn’t have to pay costs to attend university
- (Don’t know)
- (Refusal)

Now thinking about the loans taken out by students to cover the costs of going to university, how much interest, if any, do you think should be charged on these loans?

INTERVIEWER: IF RESPONDENT DOES NOT UNDERSTAND WHAT INTEREST IS: When someone borrows money it is common that they pay an additional amount back, on top of the amount they originally borrowed, which is called interest. Other loans may not be subject to interest and a person will only pay back the amount they borrowed.

- No interest should be charged on student loans
- A lower rate than is normally charged for loans from a bank
- A normal rate, such as might be charged on loans from a bank
- A higher rate than is normally charged for loans from a bank
- [Spontaneous] Students shouldn’t have to pay for higher education
- (Don’t know)
- (Refusal)
Self-completion questions

**UniFBet** - *(Self Complete – Repeat: 2013)*
In the long run people who go to university end up being a lot better off financially than those who don’t.

1 Agree strongly
2 Agree
3 Neither agree nor disagree
4 Disagree
5 Disagree strongly
8 Can't choose

**UniDebts** *(Self-complete – Repeat: 2013)*
The cost of going to university leaves many students with debts that they can’t afford to repay

1 Agree strongly
2 Agree
3 Neither agree nor disagree
4 Disagree
5 Disagree strongly
8 Can't choose

**UniNWort** *(Self-complete – Repeat: 2013).*
Please tick one box on each line to show how much you agree or disagree with each of these statements.

**UniNWort** - A university education just isn’t worth the amount of time and money it usually takes

1 Agree strongly
2 Agree
3 Neither agree nor disagree
4 Disagree
5 Disagree strongly
8 Can't choose