Introduction and background

In 2018, as part of a joint contract with the Government Equalities Office (GEO), the DfE commissioned a set of questions on NatCen’s British Social Attitudes (BSA) Survey to measure public attitudes in relation to the following topics: children’s lives, teachers’ pay and workload, foreign languages and higher education. The BSA is an authoritative source of data on the views of a representative sample of the British public. Data collection was carried out between July and November 2018 in England, Wales and Scotland, with a response rate of 41.9 per cent. 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 2,269.

Key findings from the questions are summarised below.

Key findings

Children’s lives

- Respondents were asked for their reactions to the following statements: children today are happier than children 10 years ago; children today are under more pressure from advertisements than children were 10 years ago; and children today have better educational opportunities than they did 10 years ago.
- A majority of respondents (56%) disagree or strongly disagree that children today are happier and just 12 per cent agree or strongly agree. A majority (52%) feel that children today have better educational opportunities, whereas 22 per cent disagree or strongly disagree. People with no qualifications (64%) were more likely to say that children today had better education opportunities than degree holders (45%).
- A significant majority (82%) agree or strongly agree that children today are under more pressure from advertisements – only 6 per cent disagree or strongly disagree that this is the case.

Teachers and the education system

- Respondents were asked for their views on teachers’ workload and pay. Forty-seven per cent of respondents said that teachers worked too hard and 43 per cent felt that they worked the right amount. Only 7 per cent felt that teachers did not work hard enough.
- In terms of teachers’ pay, 44 per cent of respondents felt that teachers were paid about the right amount; 42 per cent felt that they were not paid enough or not paid nearly enough. Just 4 per cent felt that they were paid far too much.
- Attitudes towards teachers’ workload and pay varied according to demographic and socio-economic characteristics. People aged 75 years and above were least likely to say that teachers worked too hard (36%) compared to respondents aged 18 to 74 years (45-52%). Only 24 per cent of people aged 75 and above agreed that teachers were not paid enough, whereas 55 per cent of respondents aged 18 to 24 years thought this.
- Responses also varied according to qualification levels. Those holding a degree were most likely to say that teachers worked too hard (60%), compared to just 36 per cent of those with no qualifications. Degree holders were also most likely to agree that teachers were not paid enough (57%); just 25 per cent of those with no qualifications agreed with this.
- Fifty-three per cent of respondents in managerial and professional occupations agreed that teachers worked too hard compared with 38 per cent of those in lower supervisory and technical occupations. Furthermore, 50 per cent of 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%).
- Respondents with immediate family or a partner working as a teacher were more likely to say that teachers were not being paid enough (56%) and that they worked too hard (70%).

Changes to the GCSE grading system

- Respondents were asked about their awareness of the new GCSE grading system. Fifty-three per cent were aware of the change and 46 per cent were not.
- There was greater awareness amongst young people, with 68 per cent of 18-24 year olds aware, compared to 33 per cent of those aged 75 and above. Respondents with children in their household were also more likely to have heard of this change (56%) 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 the changes, and the majority (84%) of respondents with 16-17 years olds in their household were aware of them.
Foreign languages in school

- Respondents were asked their opinions about the importance of studying a foreign language GCSE at school, and how this perceived importance might change in ten years’ time. A strong majority of 83 per cent felt that languages were very or fairly important. Eighty-five per cent felt that it would be either more important or the same in the future. Just 13 per cent felt that it would be less or much less important.
- Older people were more likely to feel that learning a language was important. Eighty-eight per cent of those aged over 65 felt that languages were important or very important, compared to 72 per cent of 18-24 year olds.
- Degree holders (90%) and professionals (88%) were 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 asked about the future, the trend was reversed; 69 per cent of those with no qualifications said learning a foreign language will be more important in ten years’ time compared to 60 per cent of degree holders and those with A levels.

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.
- Seventy-four per cent of respondents felt that students should choose the course they study at university based on how interested they are in the subject while 18 per cent said it should be based on how much they are likely to earn after graduating. A further 5 per cent did not choose either of these statements and 2 per cent did not know.
- Thirty-eight per cent of respondents felt that students should pay most of their living costs, even if this puts some students off studying, while 35 per cent said that the government and students should pay the same amount.
- When asked for views on fees, 39 per cent thought that students and the government should share the cost of tuition fees equally. Thirty-five per cent said the government should pay most of the fees.
- 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%).
- Fifty-two per cent of respondents felt that the costs of attending university should vary depending on parents’ earnings, while 44 per cent felt that the cost should be the same for all. Fifty-nine per cent of 65-74 year olds and 55 per cent of respondents with no children in the household expressed this view compared to 42 per cent of 18-24 year olds and 48 per cent of respondents who had children living with them.
- The analysis suggests conflicting attitudes towards university students’ economic future. 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.
- More than half of respondents (58%) thought that no interest should be charged on student loans while 34 per cent favoured a lower rate than is normally charged for loans from a bank. Conversely, 5 per cent felt that student loans should be charged at a normal rate or a higher rate than is normally charged, while 2 per cent did not know.
- Respondents were asked about their reactions to the statement that ‘a university education just isn’t worth the time and money it usually takes’. Forty-five per cent of respondents disagreed or disagreed strongly with this statement, while just 18 per cent agreed or strongly agreed. Those who were educated to degree level were most likely to disagree with this statement (63%) compared to respondents with no qualification (36%).

International students

- Sixty-seven per cent of respondents felt that international students bring significant benefit to the British economy, whereas just 22 per cent felt that they imposed a significant cost.
- There were clear 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%).

The full document can be downloaded from:


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