

Sociology dissertation: Supporting students to use quantitative data

About 65 sociology students do a dissertation in year 3. We worked with Dr Gemma Edwards, the convenor of the Sociology Dissertation, to encourage and support students to use quantitative data in their dissertations.

Few students using quantitative data in their dissertations

The collaboration started with the recognition that very few students use quantitative data in their dissertations. Auditing dissertations by students in both Sociology and Politics confirmed this view; for example, out of the dissertations submitted in the 2011–2012 academic year, only 8 included

statistical output and 1 used mainly quantitative methods.

Sociology dissertations take a variety of formats with some students working on theoretical projects; however, most students aim to relate sociological theories to empirical evidence. Thus, more students could be making use of quantitative data in their dissertations.

Course Aims and Objectives

- Provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate their capacity to undertake a piece of independent research;
- Allow students to choose a topic of study of particular interest and to engage in an in-depth examination of the topic making use of advanced bibliographic skills and, where appropriate, to engage in original investigation, data collection and analysis.
- To encourage students to explore the contribution the discipline makes to an understanding of social life and social order.
- Enable students to develop their sociological skills under the guidance of the module co-ordinator and a supervisor, in particular, their skills in the selection of a researchable topic, the development of a research proposal, the conduct of research, the analysis of results, the oral presentation of their project, and the process of structuring, writing and formatting a word dissertation.
- Allow students to gain expertise in the area of sociology that forms the topic of their dissertation.

The benefits of using quantitative data for students

As sole researchers with a time constraint, it is difficult for dissertation students to generate a good evidence base. Thus, secondary data analysis can help students develop rewarding research projects and demonstrate critical engagement with theory.

As convenor of the Sociology Dissertation, Gemma Edwards also finds that data from the large social surveys such as British Social Attitudes (BAS) is often ideal for the research questions that interest students. For example, students are commonly interested in questions about how attitudes and practices change over time, questions students can struggle to address if they collect their own data.

“Sociology students as we know are often interested in issues to do with change over time and looking at trends, how attitudes and practices change over time. But they shy away from going and doing some secondary survey analysis because they feel less confident”

Dr Gemma Edwards, Lecturer at the University Manchester

Building awareness and confidence

Sociology students at the University of Manchester receive training in quantitative methods during their second year; thus, the solution was not necessarily more quantitative methods training. Instead, our approach concentrated on getting students to make use of their quantitative skills by increasing awareness of the quantitative data available and helping to build their confidence.

Support came through lectures, workshops and guides examining sources of data and how it might be used. We also offered drop-in sessions to support students individually, which were staffed by postgraduate students.

Advice in the early planning stages

A key element to the approach was to offer advice and support in the early stages.

As students developed their research proposals, workshops and lectures covered 'Quantitative Data Sources' and 'How to design (and carry out) a quantitative analysis for a dissertation'. The drop-in sessions also provided advice about formulating research questions and the relevant datasets.

Ways of using quantitative data

Another element of the project was emphasising the different ways of bringing quantitative data into dissertations.

In addition to discussing research questions that might suit a 'quantitative' approach, we highlighted how quantitative data can help justify and frame research questions and proposals.

For example, student interested in examining young peoples attitudes towards gender roles through in-depth interviews, might be encouraged to frame their work with reference to attitudes among the British population. In this case, they might be directed to the British Social Attitudes reports published by NatCen.

Learning outcomes

Knowledge and understanding:

- a knowledge of theoretical and methodological perspectives
- a critical understanding of the social world in relation to their topic
- an understanding of the relationship between processes, institutions and individuals which underpin the wider social order
- an understanding of how social science debates relate to their field of study

Intellectual and analytical skills:

- an ability to critically evaluate social science research and literature
- a capacity to engage in social scientific research analysis
- an ability to understand and apply theoretical perspectives within the social sciences
- a critical understanding of methodological approaches

Practical skills:

- an ability to undertake, plan, administer and complete a piece of scholarly, independent research
- an ability to present research work and findings orally and written
- a capacity to relate academic knowledge to processes within the social world utilising specialised social science concepts and terminology
- where appropriate, to design and carry out a social investigation related to the topic of the dissertation using identified methods

Transferable skills:

- an ability to communicate effectively in informal and formal group settings
- a competence in handling, analysing and presenting social science methodologies
- a capacity to read, interpret, assess and represent sophisticated written evidence
- an ability to carry out supervised but self-directed and self-managed projects

Encouraging students to make use of published statistics and reports can help students develop stronger research proposals and demonstrate engagement with range of empirical evidence available to sociologists.

Online tools

We also supported students by highlighting tools for accessing quantitative data online, without needing specialist statistics software. For example, the British Social Attitudes Information System (www.britsocat.com) is an online interface for accessing British Social Attitudes (BSA) data and is especially useful for developing time-series.

We also highlighted tools for accessing data from

- Europe wide surveys (<http://www.ccesd.ac.uk>)
- the 2011 Census (<http://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011>)
- Neighbourhood Statistics (<http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk>)
- the World Bank (<http://stats.ukdataservice.ac.uk/>).

Evaluation

An audit of dissertations submitted following the collaboration found students had used more quantitative data, with 15 opting for secondary quantitative analysis.

Resources

- ‘How to design (and carry out) a quantitative analysis for a dissertation’ and ‘Quantitative Data Sources’ slides (PowerPoint)
- ‘Quantitative Data for Dissertations’ guide for students (Word)
- Workshop handouts ‘Finding a dataset’ and ‘Evaluating a dataset’ (Word)
- Our Briefing paper [Managing dissertations](#) discusses ways of supporting dissertation students to use quantitative data
- A short video of Gemma Edwards discussing our work on the Sociology Dissertation (www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/essted/resources/videos)

About this resource

‘Sociology Dissertation’ was developed by the ESSTED team in collaboration with Gemma Edwards, the convenor of the Sociology Dissertation at the University of Manchester.

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