

Harmonised Concepts and Questions for Social Data Sources

GSS Harmonised Principle

Educational Attainment

About This Document and Update History

GSS Harmonised Principle

About this document

This document forms part of a series of GSS Harmonised Principles, designed to provide approved harmonised questions, definitions and outputs for a variety of social and business related topics. The use of harmonised questions, definitions and outputs will provide greater consistency for survey producers and comparability when using data.

For more information, please see the Introductory Document, available on the GSS website:

<https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/statistics/methodology-2/harmonisation/>

For more information, please see the Introductory Document, available on our website.

This is Version 5.6 published in June 2017

This document has been updated to Version 5.6 to reflect the change away from 'Primary Principles' and 'Secondary Principles' to 'GSS Harmonised Principles'. There has been no change to the harmonised questions. Additionally, this document was previously part of the Principle titled '*Other Primary Principles*' which combined several Principles together. It was decided to split these into separate Principles to make them easier to find.

Previous versions:

(The versions below refer only to the 'Educational Attainment' element of the previous '*Other Primary Principles*')

Version 5.4 published in May 2015

This document was updated to Version 5.4 to correct minor formatting errors and to change the term '*Harmonised Standards*' to '*Harmonised Principles*' as agreed by the National Statistics Harmonisation Group.

Version 5.1 published in October 2010.

This document was updated to Version 5.1 to reflect corrections of spelling and changes in format of the document.

Version 5.0 published in February 2009.

This document was updated to Version 4.0 to reflect changes in the format of the document, placing 'Inputs' before 'outputs'.

Version 4.0 published in June 2008.

This document was updated to Version 4.0 to reflect changes in the contact details for the Harmonisation Team.

Version 1.0, was published in June 2004.

Version 1.0 was part of a series that replaced the Harmonised Concepts and Questions document. We had worked to make our guidance easier to find and clearer to use. Other than the formatting and layout changes, there were no new changes to questions or outputs in this version.

Contents

GSS Harmonised Principle

Introduction	4
Educational Attainment:	
Inputs	5
Outputs	5
Annex A: Educational Attainment as a Classificatory Variable: Discussion	6

Introduction

GSS Harmonised Principle

Contact us

For more information about Harmonisation or to join our mailing list, please visit our website at

<https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/statistics/methodology-2/harmonisation/>

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Educational Attainment

Inputs

ANY QUALIFICATIONS

- **Do you have any educational qualifications for which you received a certificate?**

1. Yes
2. No

IF QUESTION 1=NO

WHICH QUALIFICATIONS

- **Do you have any professional, vocational or other work-related qualifications for which you received a certificate?**

1. Yes
2. No

IF QUESTION 1=YES OR QUESTION 2=YES

HIGHEST QUALIFICATION

- **Was your highest qualification ...**

1. at degree level or above
2. or another kind of qualification?

Educational Attainment

Outputs

There is a need for a simple classificatory variable for educational attainment. On many current surveys, the variable which serves this purpose asks about years of continuous full-time education. This variable is widely regarded as unsatisfactory, and increasingly so, as more people acquire academic qualifications after a break in their education and as analysis is increasingly required to take vocational qualifications into account (see Discussion in Annex A).

The level of highest qualification attained is of greatest interest to most users, yet owing to the multiplicity of qualifications it is a difficult area in which to achieve simple but pertinent questions and categories. The categories which cognitive testing showed could be collected with adequate reliability and validity for broad classificatory purposes are given as provisional outputs.

Provisional Output Categories: Educational Attainment

Degree, or Degree equivalent and above	XXXX
Other qualifications	XXXX
No Qualifications	XXXX

Annex A

Educational Attainment as a Classificatory Variable: Discussion

In 2004, ONS developed a set of simple questions which would measure educational attainment through the **highest qualification** obtained. Several major government household surveys, including the LFS and GHS, already have a set of questions which collect **all** qualifications; **highest** qualification, in a scale of the analyst's choosing, can then be derived. These surveys have a substantive interest in qualifications. It would not be feasible to ask so many questions and to collect all qualifications on a survey which needs only a simple classification of educational attainment and has no interest in qualifications as such.

The set of questions which ONS developed to meet this need tried to collect the highest qualification directly, without asking for any other qualifications. This approach would only be successful if:

- (1) respondents judged their highest qualification according to a common scale which was also the scale required in analysis;
- (2) they included vocational as well as academic qualifications; and
- (3) they were able to recognise equivalencies between qualifications in a scale which they were shown and any qualifications they held which were not on the prompt card.

The cognitive testing confirmed the findings of previous pilots and of tests for the 2001 Census: that the conditions noted above are not met with adequate reliability or validity to justify their use. Further work might be done to try to refine this approach, but it seems unlikely to be successful without increasing the number of questions unacceptably for simple classificatory purposes.

A different approach might seek to build on the positive findings of the cognitive test to define a variable which would have more useful categories than the current simple measure of educational attainment (years of continuous full-time education), and which could be expected to collect reliable and valid data. The categories of this variable would, the test suggested, have to be very simple. Moreover, cognitive testing can only suggest areas for further investigation, so any new set of questions would need testing cognitively and quantitatively.

The categories which the test suggested could be collected with adequate reliability and validity for broad classificatory purposes were:

- has degree or degree-level vocational qualification, or above
- has a qualification below degree level
- has no educational or vocational qualifications

A degree was the only clearly recognised qualification which also seemed to define a group at the top of everybody's scales. Other commonly recognised qualifications, like A Level, could not do so because there are many actual and possible equivalents, which respondents found difficult to place, and qualifications of a similar level which different respondents would place above and below the commonly recognised qualification.

We note that qualifications cross-analyses are often presented in terms of these three categories. The General Lifestyle Survey (GLS) – formerly GHS shows that nearly a third of adults say they have no qualifications and just over one in ten adults have a degree or degree-level qualification or higher.

If there is agreement that a variable with the three categories above would be the most useful to collect reliable and valid data in a simple set of questions *for classificatory purposes*, a suitable question or questions should be developed and tested. The cognitive test showed that there would be some remaining problems to address, such as what counts as a qualification, but it is likely that solutions could be developed.

COMPOSITION OF THE PROPOSED OUTPUT CATEGORIES **Higher Education & professional/vocational equivalents**

Degree or Degree equivalent, and above

- Higher degree and postgraduate qualifications
- First degree (including B.Ed.)

Annex A (continued)

Educational Attainment as a Classificatory Variable: Discussion

- Postgraduate Diplomas and Certificates (including PGCE)
- Professional qualifications at degree level e.g. graduate member of professional institute, chartered accountant or surveyor
- NVQ or SVQ level 4 or 5

Other Higher Education below degree level

- Diplomas in higher education & other higher education qualifications
- HNC, HND, Higher level BTEC
- Teaching qualifications for schools or further education (below Degree level standard)
- Nursing, or other medical qualifications not covered above (below Degree level standard)
- RSA higher diploma

A levels, vocational level 3 and equivalents

- A level or equivalent
- AS level
- SCE Higher, Scottish Certificate Sixth Year Studies or equivalent
- NVQ or SVQ level 3
- GNVQ Advanced or GSVQ level 3
- OND, ONC, BTEC National, SCOTVEC National Certificate
- City & Guilds advanced craft, Part III (& other names)
- RSA advanced diploma

Trade Apprenticeships

GCSE/O level grade A*-C, vocational level 2 and equivalents

- NVQ or SVQ level 2
- GNVQ intermediate or GSVQ level 2
- RSA Diploma
- City & Guilds Craft or Part II (& other names)
- BTEC, SCOTVEC first or general diploma et
- O level or GCSE grade A-C, SCE Standard or Ordinary grades 1-3

Qualifications at level 1 and below

- NVQ or SVQ level 1
- GNVQ Foundation level, GSVQ level 1
- GCSE or O level below grade C, SCE Standard or Ordinary below grade 3
- CSE below grade 1
- BTEC, SCOTVEC first or general certificate
- SCOTVEC modules
- RSA Stage I, II, or III
- City and Guilds part 1
- Junior certificate
- (In future: entry level qualifications, as yet undefined)

Other qualifications: level unknown

- Other vocational or professional or foreign qualifications

No qualifications

Note: The above list is not a complete listing of all qualifications. In particular, it does not give all the names which have been used by BTEC or City and Guilds, nor does it give names for vocational qualifications from other awarding bodies besides BTEC, City and Guilds, RSA and SCOTVEC, so it is not complete, although it should cover the majority of vocational qualifications awarded.