



Department
for Education

Attitudes to education: the British Social Attitudes survey 2019

Research report

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Social Science in Government

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Executive summary

NatCen's annual British Social Attitudes Survey (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 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 2019, the Department commissioned a set of questions measuring public attitudes in relation to the following topics: children's mental health, rules in secondary education, skills that schools should teach, preparing young people for the job market, continued education and future job security, including the effect of increased automation. Key findings from the DfE funded questions on the 2019 wave of the survey are summarised below.

Children's mental health

Pressure from social media and online activity was considered the most significant factor contributing to poor mental health in children by 81% of respondents.

Women were more likely than men to identify pressure from social media, school stress and poor relationships with other children as factors contributing to children's poor mental health.

Respondents with no educational qualifications were less likely than others to agree that pressure from social media and a difficult home life were factors towards poor mental health in children.

Conduct and discipline in schools

Two thirds (66%) of respondents said secondary schools should be much more or a little more strict in how they deal with children who break the rules, and only 5% said that schools should be a little or much less strict.

The proportion of respondents who thought schools should be more strict increased with age from 52% of those aged under 25 to 77% of those aged 75 and over. Adults in households without children (69%) were more likely to say schools should be more strict than were those in households with children (62%), and those with children in secondary school (64%).

A majority of respondents (58%) said that pupils should not be allowed to bring their mobile phones to school. If secondary school children were allowed to bring their phones to school, there were mixed views about whether they should be allowed to use their phones during break times with half of the respondents (52%) saying that they should. Most (74%) thought that pupils should not be allowed to use their mobile phones in class to help them learn.

Respondents with a child in secondary school were less positive towards pupils using their phones during break times than those with no children in secondary education (45% compared with 53%).

Views on skills and qualities children should learn at school

When asked what skills or knowledge they would have found useful to learn at school but did not get a chance to, more than half of all respondents (54%) said it would have been useful to have learned how to manage money. The proportion was highest among younger people aged 18 to 24 (75%).

Responses were mixed about what skills and qualities should be taught at school. Most (88%) thought schools should develop skills and knowledge that would help young people to get a good job. A similar proportion (84%) agreed that schools should teach young people personal qualities such as character or resilience. Lower proportions thought that it was essential or very important for schools to promote gaining qualifications or certificates of achievement (72%), or skills and knowledge for a career in science or technology (60%).

Overall, there does not appear to have been much change in the attitudes of respondents since 2016, when the question was first asked. There has been a slight increase in the proportions who thought it as essential or very important for schools to develop young people's personal qualities such as character or resilience, from 77% in 2016 to 84% in 2019.

Preparing young people for the job market

Two thirds of respondents (65%) thought it was more difficult for young people to find a job now than it was when they completed their full-time education. However, responses varied by educational level with a much higher proportion of people with no formal qualifications (74%) thinking that it was more difficult for young people to find a job now compared with people with degrees (54%).

Half of the respondents (55%) thought young people were not very or not at all well prepared for work when leaving secondary school. Younger people aged 18 to 24 years

were more likely than older respondents to say that pupils were not well prepared for work when leaving secondary school.

When asked what the most important factor was for helping young people to find a job, the most common answer (24%) was good basic skills such as reading, writing and maths.

Views on continued education and job security

The analysis includes all respondents in education or employment and those who were unemployed and available for work. It excludes those who were permanently off work because of illness or disability, the retired, and those looking after a home full-time.

When asked whether they thought they would need to learn a completely new set of skills in the next ten years in order to continue having a job, 52% said it was very or quite likely that they would have to do this.

Only a minority of respondents (17%) were 'very' or 'quite' worried that their job would be replaced by machines or computer programmes in the next ten years. This group were most likely to think they would have to learn completely new skills (77%).

When asked how they would prefer to learn any new skills, more than half of all respondents (58%) said they would prefer to learn by a mix of classroom teaching and online study. The remainder were more likely to prefer classroom learning to online study (32%, compared with 10%).

Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE) has commissioned questions on NatCen's British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey on a number of occasions since its inception in 1983. In 2019, DfE commissioned a set of questions measuring public attitudes in relation to the following topics: children's mental health, rules in secondary education, skills that schools should teach, preparing young people for the job market, continued education and job security. A list of the questions referred to within this report is provided in the appendix. 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 and over 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 the DfE were included in both sections of the survey, but a greater number were included in the self-completion section, due to the sensitivity of the question topics and the risk of social desirability bias.

Data collection was carried out between July and October 2019 in England, Wales and Scotland, with a response rate of 44.3%.² The achieved sample for the DfE questions, asked of respondents in England only, was 2,783 for the face-to-face questionnaire, 2,241 for the self-completion booklet.³ However some DfE questions went to fewer respondents and therefore sample sizes vary. 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.

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.

¹ Apart from in 1988 and 1992 when its core funding was used to fund the British Election Study series.

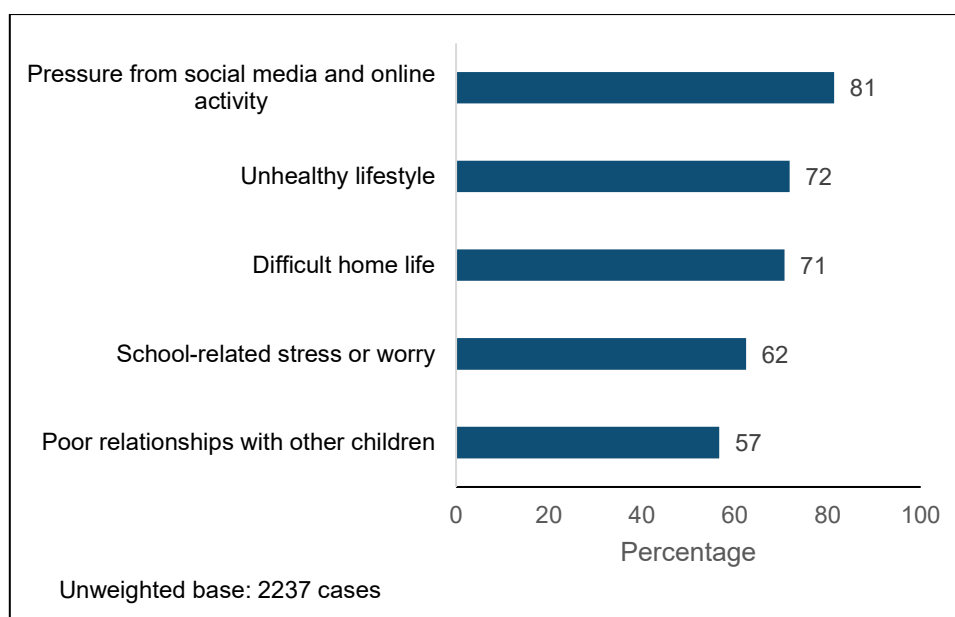
² This is the lower limit of the response rate, which is calculated as a range from a lower limit where all unknown eligibility cases (e.g. address inaccessible, or unknown whether address is residential) are assumed to be eligible and therefore included in the unproductive outcomes, to an upper limit 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 2019 was 44.8%.

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, B, and C.

Children’s mental health

Respondents were asked about various factors that might contribute to poor mental health among children. They were most likely to agree that pressure from social media and online activity contributed to children’s poor mental health a great deal or quite a lot (81%). Over two thirds thought that an unhealthy lifestyle and a difficult home life each contributed a great deal or quite a lot to children’s poor mental health (72% and 71% respectively). Fewer thought that school-related stress or worry (62%) or poor relationships with other children (56%) contributed to poor mental health.

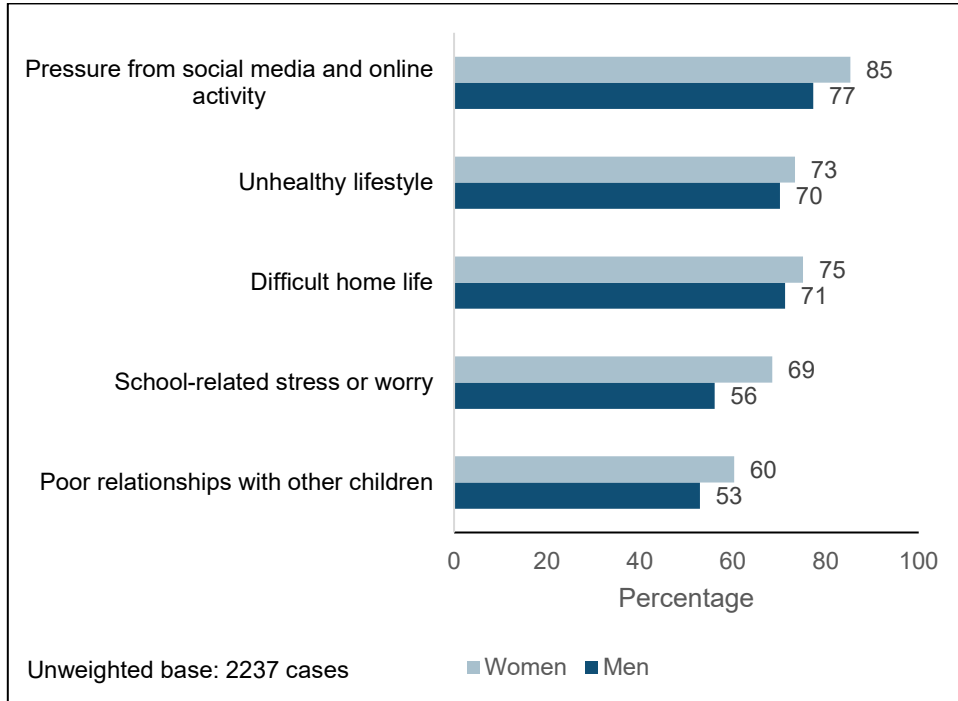
Figure 1 Factors contributing to children’s poor mental health ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’



There were some variations in response by gender and education. Women (85%) were more likely than men (78%) to agree that pressure from social media and online activity contributed to poor mental health in children. Women were also more likely than men to say that school stress contributed to children’s poor mental health (69%, compared with 56% respectively), and to say that poor relationships with other children were a contributing factor (60% and 53% respectively).

Those who lived with children had similar views to those with no children in their household.

Figure 2 Factors contributing to children’s poor mental health, by gender



Respondents with no educational qualifications were less likely than others to agree that pressure from social media and online activity is a factor for poor mental health in children (65%, compared with at least 85% of those with qualifications at GCSE level or above). Similarly, 60% of those with no qualifications agreed that a difficult home life contributed to poor mental health in children compared with 75% of those with degrees and 76% of those with A levels or similar qualifications.

Conduct and discipline in schools

How strict should secondary schools be?

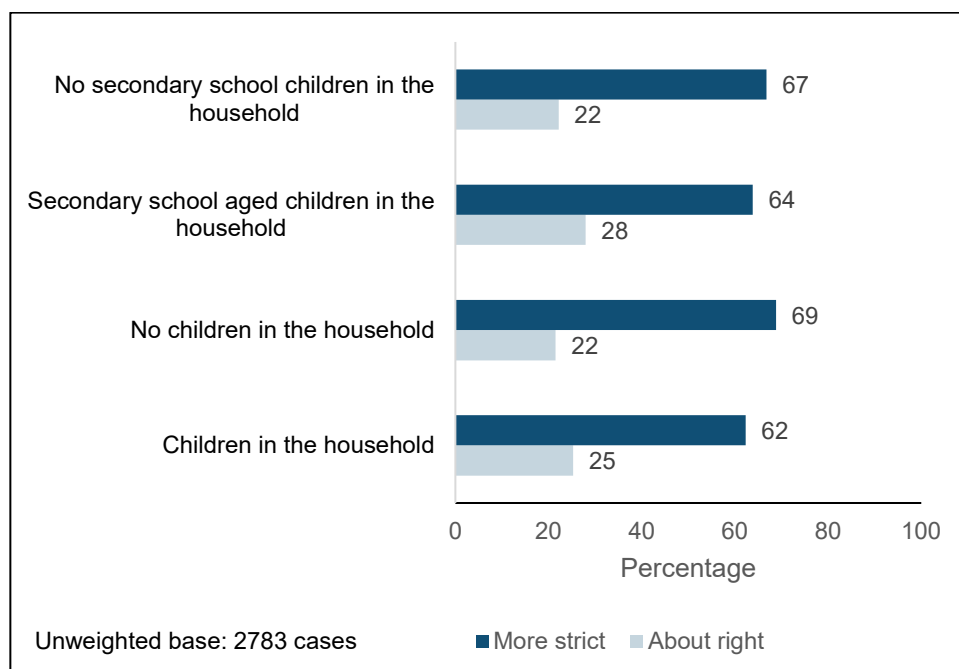
Respondents were asked their views on whether secondary schools should be more or less strict when dealing with children who break the rules. Two thirds (66%) agreed that schools should be much more or a little more strict compared with 23% of the respondents who said schools were about right. Only 5% said schools should be less strict.

Attitudes varied by age, with clear differences between younger and older respondents. Just over half (52%) of those aged 18 to 24 said schools should be more strict, with the proportion increasing with age to 76% and 77% of those aged 65 to 74 and 75 and over respectively.

Views varied between respondents in households with children and those without. Respondents who lived with children were less likely to support stricter punishment in schools compared with those who had no children in the household (62%, compared with 69% respectively). There was, however, a less pronounced difference between parents of secondary school pupils and others (64%, compared with 67%).

Respondents with degrees were less likely to agree that schools should be more strict than respondents with lower qualifications or no qualifications (54%, compared with 71% or 72%).

Figure 3 How strict secondary schools should be, by whether respondents live with children



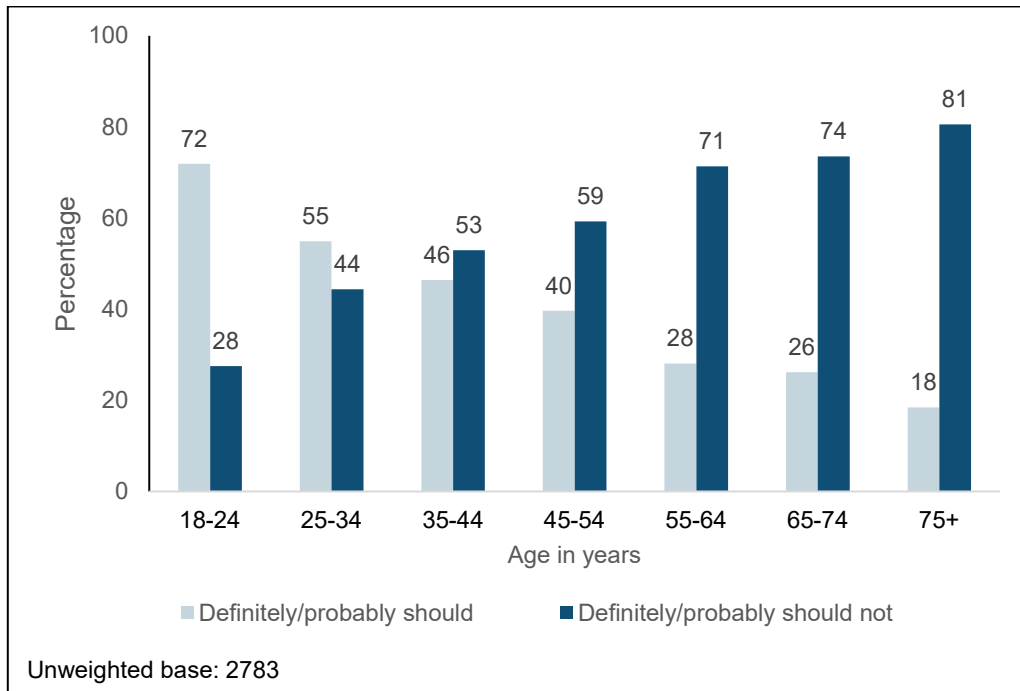
Mobile phone use in secondary schools

More than half of respondents (58%) thought secondary school pupils probably should not or definitely should not be allowed to bring their mobile phones to school. If mobiles were allowed in secondary schools, around half (52%) of respondents thought that pupils should be allowed to use them during break times. Just a quarter (25%) thought children should be allowed to use their mobile phones to help them learn in class.

Attitudes varied with age. The majority (72%) of respondents aged 18 to 24 said secondary school pupils should be allowed to bring their mobile phones to school. This proportion declined steeply with age, and only 18% of respondents aged over 75 agreed with this. There were similar but less pronounced differences by age in the proportions who thought pupils should be allowed to use their phones at break times, from 69% of 18 to 24 year olds to 38% of those aged 75 and over.

Even among those aged 18 to 24 years, a minority (44%) thought pupils should be allowed to use their phones to help them learn in class. This proportion also declined strongly with age, being lowest among those aged 65 to 74 (16%).

Figure 4 Should pupils be allowed to bring their mobile phones to school, by age



There were also different attitudes towards mobile phones in schools according to whether respondents had children in secondary school. Respondents with a child in secondary school were more likely to say that children should be allowed to bring their mobile phones to school than were those who did not have a child in secondary school (45%, compared with 40% respectively). But parents of secondary school children were less likely to say that pupils should be allowed to use their mobile phone during break times (45%) than those who did not have a child in secondary school (53%).

Skills and qualities children should learn in school

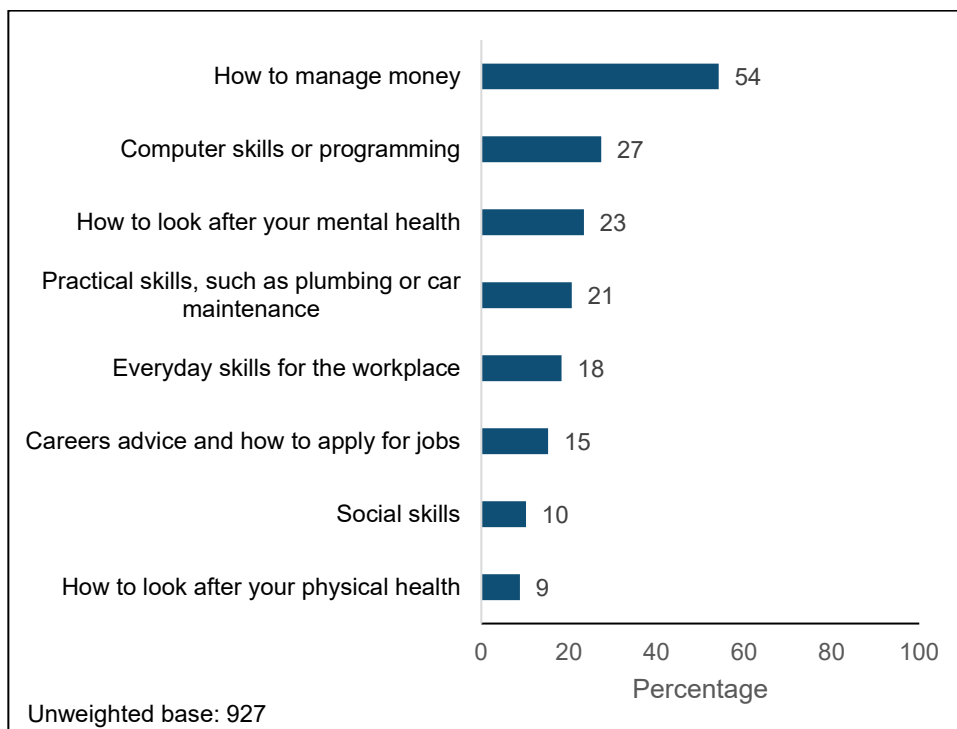
Adults' own skills and knowledge

Respondents were asked about skills or knowledge they thought it would have been useful to have learned at school, but that they did not have the chance to learn about.

More than half of all respondents (54%) said it would have been useful to have learned how to manage money. This percentage was highest among young people aged 18 to 24 (75%, compared with between 33% and 59% in older age groups). Respondents with no qualifications were the least likely to say that it would have been useful to have learned how to manage money (35%), compared with between 55% and 64% of respondents with qualifications at GCSE level or above.

Money management was much more likely to be seen as useful than the other skills or knowledge asked about, for example computer skills (27%), how to look after their mental health (23%) or practical skills such as plumbing or car maintenance (21%).

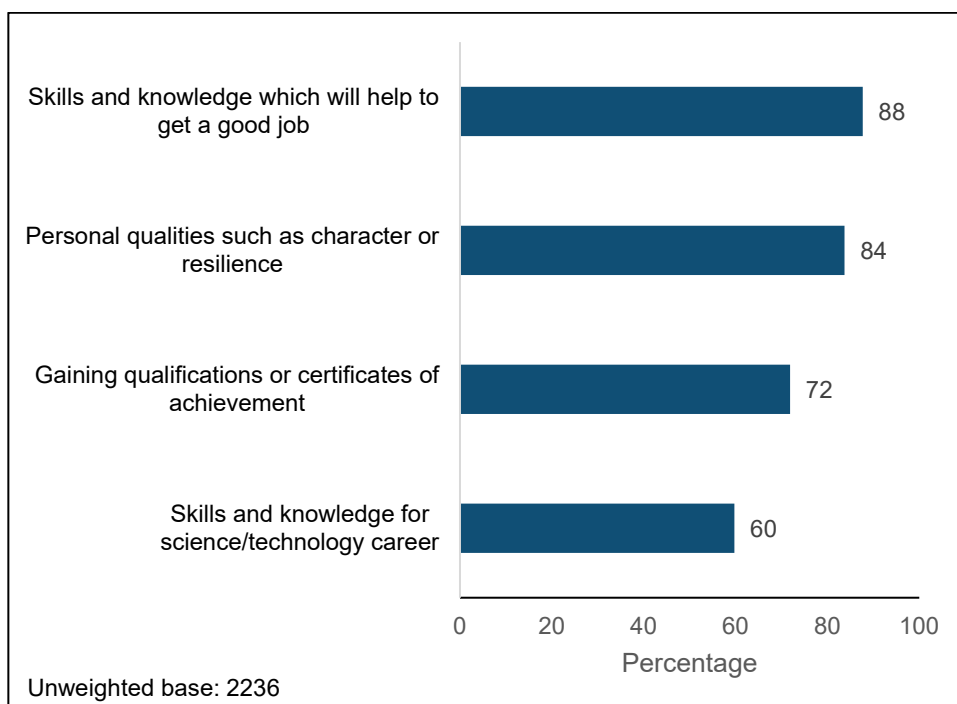
Figure 5 Skills or knowledge that adults wished they had learned at school



Young people's skills and qualities

Responses were mixed about the skills and qualities that schools should develop in young people. Most respondents (88%) agreed that it was essential or very important for schools to develop skills and knowledge that will help young people to get a good job. Most respondents (84%) also agreed that schools should aim to teach young people personal qualities such as character or resilience. Fewer thought gaining qualifications or certificates of achievement (72%) or skills and knowledge for a career in science or technology were essential or very important (60%).

Figure 6 What skills and qualities young people should be taught at school



The attitudes varied between groups. A majority of older respondents aged over 75 (69%) said skills and knowledge for a career in science or technology were essential or very important compared with 53% of younger respondents aged 18 to 24.

Respondents with no qualifications were more likely to consider skills and knowledge for a career in science or technology essential or very important (66%, compared with 61% or less of those who had GCSE level qualifications and above).

People who had a degree were most likely to hold the view that it is essential or very important for schools to help young people develop personal qualities such as character or resilience (92%, declining to 73% of those with no qualifications).

The question was first asked in 2016. There were no marked differences in the proportion of people agreeing that schools should deliver relevant skills and knowledge to help young people later in their working and personal life.

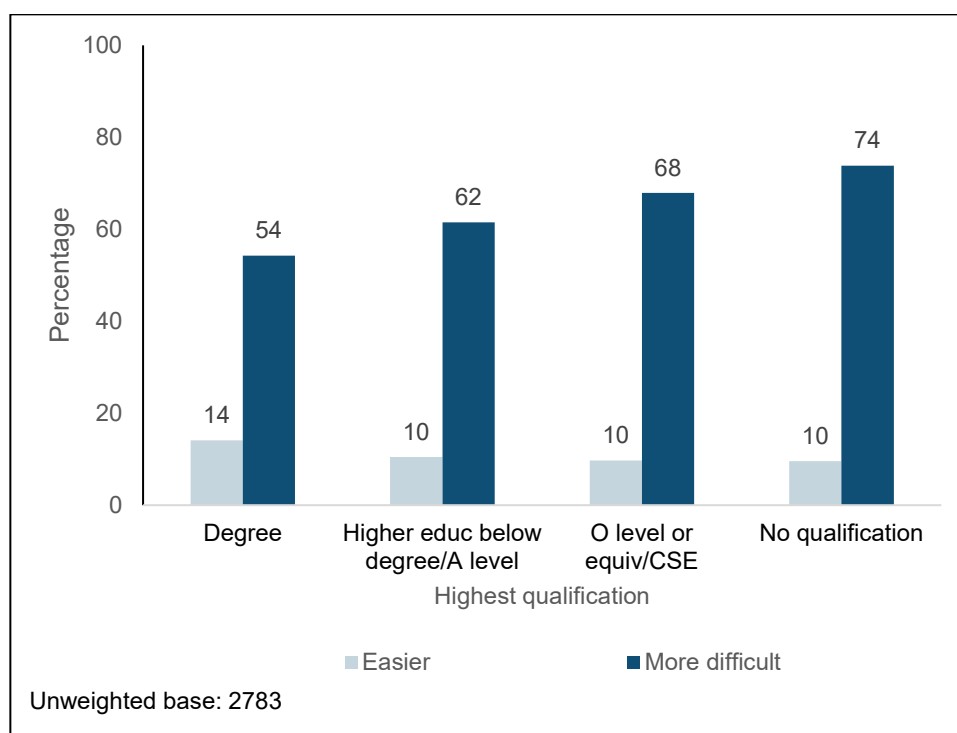
There was, however, some variation in the level of importance respondents placed on personal qualities such as character or resilience. The proportion of respondents saying that teaching young people personal qualities such as character or resilience was essential or very important increased from 77% in 2016 to 81% in 2019. There was also a change in the degree to which these qualities were valued, with the proportion who thought it was essential for schools to teach them increasing from 34% in 2016 to 45% in 2019.

Preparing young people for the current job market

Respondents were asked whether they thought it is easier or more difficult for young people to get a job now than it was when they completed their full-time education. Almost two thirds (63%) said they thought that it was more or much more difficult now compared with 11% who thought that it was much easier or easier. A quarter (23%) thought that it was neither easier nor more difficult.

There were some differences in attitudes by gender and educational qualification. Women were more likely (67%) to think that it was more or much more difficult now than men (58%). The proportion who thought it was more or much more difficult now to find a job than when they completed their education varied with level of qualifications, from 54% of people with degrees to 74% of those with no qualifications.

Figure 7 Comparison of young people's job prospects now with when respondents left education, by respondents' level of qualifications



In 2016, when the question was first asked, a larger proportion of people (69%) thought it was more or much more difficult for young people to find a job compared with 63% in 2019.

More than half of respondents (55%) thought young people were not very well or not at all well prepared for work when leaving secondary school. There was a significant

difference between older and younger respondents. Younger people were more likely to say secondary schools prepared pupils for work not very or not at all well (70% of 18 to 24 year olds and 64% of 25 to 34 year olds, compared with between 45% and 56% in older age groups).

Respondents were also asked to say what they thought the most important factor was, for helping young people find work. Good basic skills (reading, writing and maths) were seen as most important (24%), followed by necessary qualifications (22%) and work experience (16%).

There were some differences with educational qualifications; 31% of those with no qualifications and 29% of those with O level or equivalent qualifications considered good basic skills to be most important, compared with 18% of respondents with degrees.

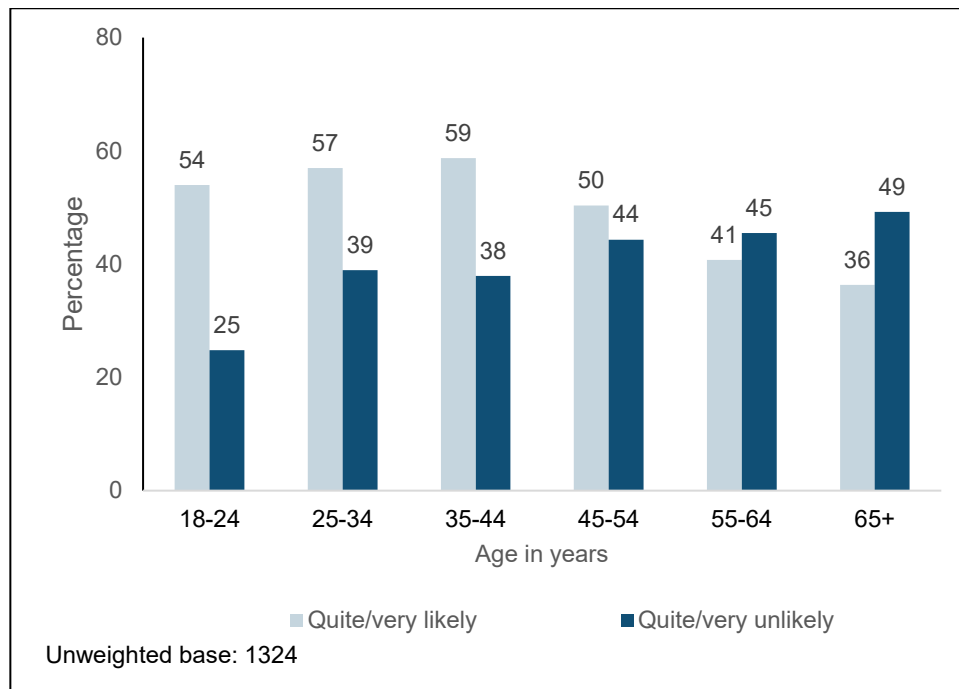
These responses were similar to those in 2016, when these questions were first asked.

Continued education and job security

Respondents were asked what they thought about learning new skills, and how their future job security might be affected by increased automation. The analysis includes all respondents in education or employment and those who were unemployed and available for work. It excludes those who were permanently off work because of illness or disability, the retired, and those looking after a home full-time.

Most of these respondents (52%) said it was very or quite likely that they would have to learn a completely new set of skills in order to continue having a job. This included more than half of those aged under 45, but decreased among older respondents and was lowest among respondents aged 65 and over (36%).⁴

Figure 8 Expected need to learn new skills to stay in employment, by age



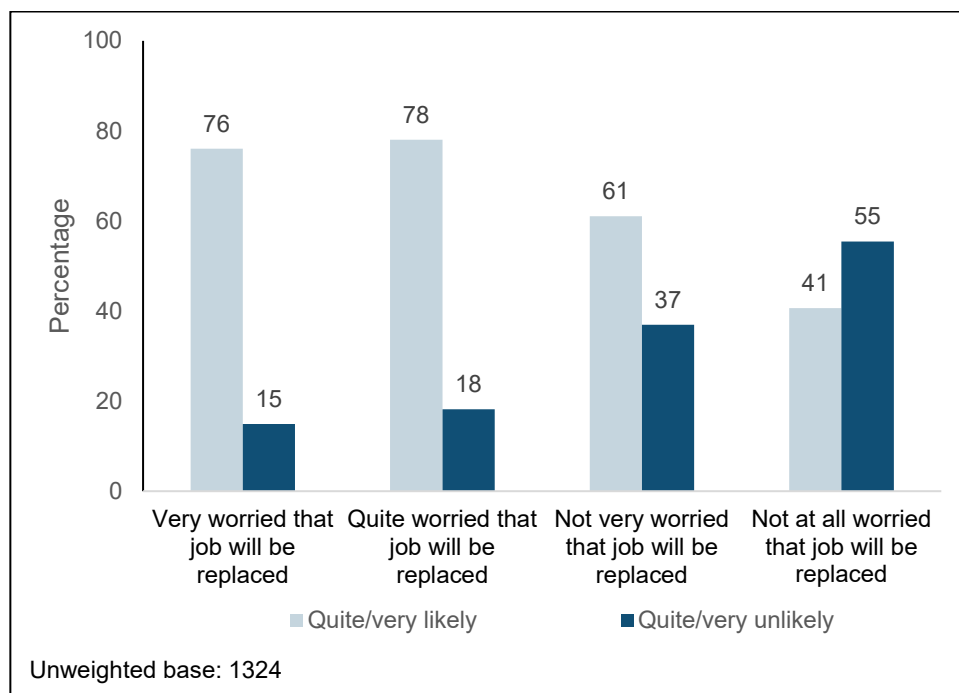
Attitudes were affected by whether respondents were worried that their job might be done by machines or computer programmes in the next ten years. Three quarters (75%) were not very worried or not at all worried about this, and only 17% of respondents were very or quite worried about their job being replaced.

Respondents who were worried that their job would be replaced by machines or computer programmes were more likely to believe that they would need to learn new

⁴ This group comprised 59 out of the 689 respondents in this age group. Most respondents aged 65 and over were retired or otherwise out of the job market.

skills than those who were not worried. 77% of those who were very or quite worried, said that it was be very or quite likely that they would have to learn new skills, compared with 61% of those who were not very worried (still the majority) and 41% of those who were not at all worried.

Figure 9 Expected need to learn new skills to stay in employment, by how worried respondents are that their job will be replaced by machines or computer programmes



Respondents were also asked how they would prefer to be taught any new skills. As elsewhere in this section of the report, the analysis includes all respondents in education or employment and those who were unemployed and available for work. It excludes those who were permanently off work because of illness or disability, the retired, and those looking after a home full-time.

More than half of these respondents (58%) said that they would prefer a combination of face-to-face classroom and online learning. 32% said that they would prefer to be taught in a classroom, and only 10% chose an online course.

Variations in preference by age were not statistically significant. Classroom-only learning was more popular among those with lower or no qualifications. Two fifths (39%) of those with no qualifications preferred classroom-only learning compared with 24% of those with a degree. Correspondingly, the proportions preferring a mix of classroom and online learning increased from 41% of those without qualifications to 65% of graduates.



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