

What is Sociology?

Have you ever wondered what the full story is behind the important issues in our society? Perhaps you've felt that you wanted to know more than what you can read in the papers or see on TV. For instance, why is the Western world so obsessed with celebrity now? Or how will the unemployment that so many are now experiencing affect their lives, even after they have found work? What drives women to prostitution - lack of money or lack of education? And have you wondered about the changes in technology and the effect they are having on society: How are people using Facebook and other sites? And do mobile phones make our lives more or less stressful?

Sociology is not just about Britain. It also deals with global issues like the environment, migration and 'globalization' itself. How do these social changes affect people at every level of their social life? Is it possible to be a true citizen of Europe or must you be British or French or Polish? What if your parents came from Trinidad or Bangladesh? Which comes first? Or are there other ways to look at identity? How important is the job that you do for your sense of self and your future? Are national governments able to ensure that most people have a job and will be supported with health and social care when they need it? Or are most government policies made with the demands of vast transnational corporations in mind?

Sociologists try to answer these and hundreds of other important questions, because sociology is the study of society, how it is organised, and the principles that govern the way it works. Sociologists carry out research into questions of fundamental importance on health, education, gender, ethnicity, family, religion, work and many other areas.

If you become a sociology student you will not be provided with quick answers. What you will discover is how to think about these issues for yourself: what are the questions behind the questions? Generations of students have found that sociology makes them look at the world in new ways and this is why so many of us who teach it feel passionately about it – and why it is still pioneering after more than a hundred years.

Sociology in the UK has a long and proud history and has been taught in British universities for over a century. It is a flourishing discipline, with hundreds of academics teaching over 20,000 students in the UK. A recent international benchmark report* said that British sociology was perhaps second only to that of the US, a much larger country.

The high quality of British sociology, the open intellectual atmosphere of many UK sociology departments, and the entrepreneurial spirit of universities have made British sociology very attractive to many from abroad alike. British universities have welcomed waves of scholars and students from other countries.



How do I study sociology?

Around 40 British universities have sociology departments and many more teach sociology courses, so those wishing to study in the UK have a wide choice when they choose which part of the country to come to.

The British Sociological Association website (www.britisoc.org.uk) has a dedicated section for people thinking of studying sociology. Here you will find a link to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) site in the UK, where you can search for sociology courses either as a single subject or in combination with others.

Most sociology departments have their own section on their university or college's website. Sociology covers a very wide range of topics, so every department offers a different variation on the subject. University and college sites will also contain information about what qualifications are needed for entry. It is not usually a requirement that you have already studied sociology at school in order to take it at a British university.

What will I do with a sociology degree?

People who study sociology go on to a wide variety of jobs, including working in health and education, the criminal justice system, the advocacy and rights sector, marketing and communications, urban regeneration, housing, community organisations, social policy and private sector companies.

You will gain a range of very valuable skills. You will learn how to work independently. You will learn how to find information, extract what is important from it and turn it into an argument. Most courses now include exercises in team working, so you will learn to work in collaboration with others, but also how to work effectively without close supervision. All sociology degrees teach research methods. From these you will learn how to generate new knowledge and information using a very wide range of tools from the large social survey interpreted through statistics, to in-depth interviews, to analysing the language used in media texts or situations like GP surgeries. You will learn to conduct research both with others and on your own.

A sociology degree is attractive to employers worldwide because it will give you a range of valuable skills, such as how to generate new knowledge and information using a wide range of tools, how to work in teams, and how to work effectively without close supervision. These skills, and your insights into the workings of society, are the reasons that many employers see a sociology degree as highly relevant.

* ESRC International benchmarking report on sociology, 2010



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