ADR UK Research Fellowship
GRADE: GRading and Admissions Data for England
Funding opportunity specification

1. Introduction

ADR UK (Administrative Data Research UK), in partnership with the Office of Qualifications and Examination Regulation (Ofqual), the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and the Department for Education (DfE), invites applications for Research Fellows to conduct research and analysis to demonstrate the policy impact potential of the linked datasets under the GRADE (GRading and Admissions Data for England) initiative. The data shared through this initiative includes three main sources of administrative data:

- **Ofqual** – including data on GCSE and A level examinations and qualifications collected from awarding organisations
- **DfE** – including extracts of the National Pupil Database (NPD) for GCSE and A level students
- **UCAS** – including data from the university application process.

Researchers can apply for a fellowship grant of **12 months** in duration, up to a maximum of **£130,000 per annum** at 100% full economic cost (FEC). ADR UK will fund 80% full economic costs subject to ESRC’s funding policy.

Applicants should read our [General Research Fellowship Specification](#) in conjunction with this Funding Opportunity Specification. The deadline to apply is **17:00 on 1 December 2021**.

2. GRADE (GRading and Admissions Data for England)

The GRADE (GRading and Admissions Data for England) initiative has led to the creation of linked administrative datasets to allow external researchers to conduct independent research and evaluation. The Ofqual–DfE–UCAS datasets are the result of a data sharing agreement.
signed between the three departments in August 2021. Researchers will access the data via the Office for National Statistics’ (ONS) Secure Research Service (SRS).

Further detail on the Ofqual–DfE–UCAS datasets is given below.

2.1. Ofqual data

Ofqual data includes information on each GCSE and A level qualification as provided by awarding organisations and taken by pupils in England, regardless of their age. The backbone of the Ofqual data shared as part of this initiative is the ‘summer awarding’ data: the data collected for each qualification taken by pupils prior to grades being issued to centres and students in August each year. The Ofqual data will also include the grade awarded to pupils who asked for a review of marking and moderation.

The Ofqual dataset includes detailed information on the qualifications taken (e.g. subject, awarding organisation, tier of entry), as well as granular data on pupils’ attainment (e.g. grades and marks). Information about pupils, such as gender and age, is also contained in this dataset. For 2020, given that exams were cancelled and alternative approaches to grading taken, each entry was associated with a centre assessment grade and calculated grade, which were used to determine the awarded grade. These alternative grading approaches will also be included in the dataset, along with details of pupils’ prior attainment used for the standardisation model developed in 2020: an indicator of Key Stage 2 attainment for GCSE pupils and indicators of GCSE attainment for A level students. Key information on the school or college attended (type and geographical location) will also be provided.

2.2. DfE data

The NPD is compiled for the DfE from data supplied by local authorities, centres and awarding organisations. The NPD is a collection of data covering all pupils within schools in England up to the age of 19. It constitutes the main source of information for the computation of accountability measures and is widely used for research purposes.

There are four main extracts of the NPD shared as part of this initiative:

1. The NPD exam results datasets contain pupil-level results data by qualification taken for Key Stages 4 and 5, covering A levels, GCSE and other general and vocational/technical qualifications, as provided by awarding organisations. It includes aggregated achievement indicators, such as those related to EBacc, Attainment 8 and Progress 8.
2. **The NPD pupil datasets** contain data on pupils, including demographic and protected characteristics, such as gender, age, language spoken, free school meal eligibility and special educational needs. Information on the centre attended by pupils is also available, covering the type of school or institution, its description, whether the main language is English or Welsh and the school admissions policy.

3. Additional information on pupils is also available in the **census datasets**. This includes further socio-demographic characteristics (e.g. ethnicity) and socio-economic indicators (e.g. IDACI score, Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index).

4. The NPD also contains data on pupil’s **prior attainment** including achievement indicators, teacher assessments and test results for Key Stages 1 and 2.

### 2.3. UCAS data

UCAS data is based on the information gathered to operate the university application process. This implies data submitted by applicants to the UCAS undergraduate scheme and by the HE institution receiving prospective students’ applications. UCAS data features three main data tables:

1. The **applicant dataset** contains information on applicants to the UCAS undergraduate scheme. For each applicant, this dataset includes data on demographic characteristics (e.g. gender, age, geographical region) and socio-economic characteristics (e.g. ethnicity, socio-economic background, deprivation index).

2. The **apply qualifications dataset** is at qualification level and contains information on qualifications declared by the applicant during their application. Crucially, this includes the A level grades predicted by teachers.

3. The **applications dataset** contains the data included in the application made by each applicant, the offer made by each HE provider and the response from the applicant. This allows researchers to have access to a wealth of data, including: the applications that did not receive an offer; if an offer was received, which kind of offer (e.g. unconditional, conditional); and whether each offer was accepted as a firm or insurance offer.

### 2.4. Data coverage

From the above description it is possible to infer that, given the purposes for which data were initially collected, the coverage of different data sources may be slightly different:
• Ofqual data features those who completed at least one GCSE or A level course in England in the summer session 2017, 2018, 2019 or 2020. Ofqual data is collected by qualifications, and features pupils of any age.

• DfE data is collected by Key Stage. DfE data only features students in Key Stage 4 and 5 for all state schools, non-maintained special schools, sixth form colleges, further education colleges and independent schools in England in the academic years 2016/17, 2017/18, 2018/19, 2019/20.

• UCAS data refers to university applicants that are a subset of Key Stage 5 learners (from DfE data) and A level students (from Ofqual data). It features applicants to university through the UCAS main scheme at the age of 18 for the 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020 application cycles and were English (UCAS data).

More detailed information on the data (full data specification and further details on the data) is available on the GRADE data sharing project collections page.

**Figure 1.** GRADE data at a glance

External researchers will be only able to access data that has been **de-identified and pseudonymised**. Personal identifiers (including forename, surname, date of birth, school or college attended) are used for linking the data from different organisations. However, external researchers will not have access to this information. Personal identifiers were only used to generate a meaningless unique identifier that allows tracking of learners and centres across the different data tables.
3. Research opportunity and interests

Data owners Ofqual–DfE–UCAS have collectively summarised their research interests in relation to this data linkage below, though other questions are also welcomed providing you can demonstrate policy-relevance and likelihood of impact and uptake. Research topics which could be developed include, but are not limited to:

1. **Scrutiny of the standardisation model introduced in summer 2020**: The data shared will cover all the data used for the development and testing of the standardisation model augmented with additional background information on students from DfE (and also on their university applications through UCAS). Although there is no intention to use the standardisation model again, this research will allow researchers to, for example, conduct independent evaluation of the standardisation model used as a result of examination cancellations during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. **Impact of awarding approaches on students and schools/colleges**: The data shared will allow independent evaluation of summer 2020 grading and of the judgements made in awarding grades. In particular, it will allow exploration of whether any particular group of students or schools/colleges were particularly advantaged or disadvantaged by any awarding approach. See initial research already been conducted in this area.

3. **Relationship with other measures of attainment (validity related questions)**: A key question in relation to 2020 awarded grades and centre assessment grades (CAGs) is around their validity. From a quantitative perspective this can be explored, for example, by studying the relationship between CAGs (or awarded grades) and other measures of attainment (such as prior attainment). For A levels, it will also allow researchers to study the relationship between CAGs and UCAS predicted grades, and offers received by universities, which will help to inform university admissions policy.

The data covers the period 2017–2020. This will allow the possibility of benchmarking 2020 results to previous years. The GRADE project has already conducted research using the linked datasets, which has provided useful evidence to further evaluate summer 2020 and inform policy thinking in relation to summer 2021 arrangements. [Two research reports are available to view online.](#)

Evidence of policy relevance and impact potential for research topics beyond those indicated above can take many forms; for example, a letter of support or other documentation from relevant existing collaborations/partnerships between universities and their wider communities, such as local authorities or public service providers, including with the charitable and voluntary sector. If you are unsure about what would be best to submit as evidence please get in touch with the ADR UK team using the contacts provided in this document.
4. Fellowship objectives and expectations

The ADR England Research Fellowships scheme has been developed to meet the following three objectives:

1. **Useful Research**: We are looking for proposals that will act as ‘pathfinders’ for conducting research and deriving insights from the dataset(s), which showcase the potential for policy impact and public benefit.

2. **Useful Data**: To develop the data as a useful research resource for future users.

3. **Useful Engagement**: To foster opportunities between academia, government, the third sector and the public that allow fresh thinking to flourish and maintain public acceptance for the use of data for research purposes.

Applicants should read the *General Research Fellowships specification* for more information on these objectives. In addition to proposals fulfilling the funding opportunity criteria and objectives, other expectations placed on ADR UK Research Fellows are set out in the General Research Fellowships specification and will be in place for this fellowship. In particular, we would like to draw applicants attention to the importance of:

- Agreement to the principle of a dual publication strategy for research outputs, with easily digestible outputs aimed at government policymakers and wider society published in addition to papers submitted to academic journals (with support from ADR UK).

- Requirement to address any conditions set by Ofqual–DfE–UCAS to ensure lawful data access can be approved. The ADR UK Research Fellowship proposal should also be retrospectively amended accordingly (if applicable).

- At least one ‘Data Explained’ output to summarise and record their learnings about the data for the benefit of others, during or within one month of the funded period ending. Templates and guidance will be provided for Fellows. These will be made available to future users of the data via the ONS SRS.

- Produce a [project page](#) for the ADR UK website detailing their research.

- Produce at least one [blog](#) for the ADR UK website discussing the importance of the work for the public good (additional blogs are optional). Guidelines will be provided.

- Produce at least one ‘Data Insight’ (~2-4 pages) showcasing the findings of the work at a relevant point during or at the end of the funded period. A Data Insight template will be provided, and all Data Insight outputs will be checked before leaving the secure research environment.

- Contribute to collective [stakeholder engagement events](#) organised by ADR UK.
• Attend at least one session of the ADR England Children & Young People Representative Panel to present their work to the Panel for feedback. Further information can be found in the Fellowship Terms and Conditions.

With the support of the ADR UK Communications & Engagement team, Research Fellows are encouraged (but not expected) to conduct further communications and engagement activity in relation to the funded work and in line with the funding conditions set out in the grant agreement. Please note that this list is not exhaustive and applicants should consult the General Research Fellowships specification and T&Cs for our complete set of expectations and requirements.

5. Eligibility

For the purposes of this Funding Opportunity we will be following our standard eligibility rules as set out in our General Research Fellowship Specification.

6. Funding

Please consult our General Research Fellowship Specification and Je-S guidance for details on eligible costs.

ADR UK will cover the costs of running the stakeholder engagement event(s) described above in expected outputs and engagement. Currently these are running virtually and do not incur a cost, but they may be run in-person in the future if possible. For ease of managing your own travel and subsistence for these events, we ask that you plan for and cost for one trip to London in your application (two days). If these costs can't be used within the project, we will allow you to re-purpose them in line with standard UKRI practice.

7. How to Apply

There are two to two parallel application processes to be completed for the GRADE Research Fellowship. These include: (1) the Je-S Electronic Submission System; and (2) the research project application form. These are detailed in turn below.

Applicants are required to submit their separate Je-S and RAS applications by Wednesday 1 December and should consult our assessment process guidance document for more information.
7.1. **Research Funding Application (Je-S)**

*Je-S* is the electronic submission system which is used by all Research Councils to provide a common electronic system that supports research administration. In particular, you should note the registration requirements for making a Je-S submission. Please also refer to the Je-S Guidance for this scheme in conjunction with this funding opportunity Specification. Only those proposals submitted through the Je-S system will be accepted for processing and proposals submitted through Je-S will be taken to be the final version.

7.2. **The research project application form (RAS)**

To request access to the Ofqual–DfE–UCAS datasets, external researchers will need to submit a research project application to the ONS SRS. Accredited researchers must submit a research proposal by completing an application for project accreditation in the Research Accreditation Service (RAS). Before submitting the project application form, researchers are advised to refer to the research project application example guidance. They can also see an exemplar research project application provided by ONS. In addition to the list of those involved in the research, the application form will prompt researchers to provide a description of the research they are proposing, and details of the methodology they intend to employ.

Crucially, researchers will be requested to provide the specifics of the data required. Researchers are expected to apply for the data they need for their research by selecting the relevant data items as prompted on RAS. This means that they will have to specify which data researchers are requesting access to. This can be:

1. Ofqual only
2. linked Ofqual and DfE
3. linked Ofqual and UCAS, or
4. linked Ofqual, DfE and UCAS.

It should be noted that DfE only data and UCAS only data cannot be requested as part of the GRADE initiative and therefore only proposals involving Ofqual data will be considered for funding.\(^1\)

\(^1\) DfE data and UCAS data are already accessible through the ONS SRS.
Researchers can make reference to the ONS Secure Research Service Data Catalogue, where all available datasets and any associated access restrictions are listed.

In completing the project application form, researchers will have to state how, and for which purpose, each data source will be used, making a clear connection between the aim of the research and how this contributes to the purposes of this initiative and to each participating organisation’s remit (see Table 1 below). This will constitute a key element for the accreditation of the project proposal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Organisation’s remit</th>
<th>Reasons for sharing data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ofqual</td>
<td>Non-ministerial government department with jurisdiction in England.</td>
<td>Regulate for the validity of qualifications, ensure fairness to learners in England and promote public confidence in the system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DfE</td>
<td>UK government Department.</td>
<td>Responsible for education, children's services, higher and further education policy, apprenticeships, and wider skills in England, and equalities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCAS</td>
<td>Charity operating the application process for British universities.</td>
<td>Provide evidence into higher education access and outcomes (Higher Education Research Act 2017, Section 79).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. Organisations’ remit and reasons for sharing data – an overview.*

### 7.3. The supplementary form

Depending on the specifics of the data requested through the project application form, researchers may be required to submit a supplementary form.

Applicants who are required to submit the supplementary form will be notified shortly after the submission of the Je-S and RAS form. They will receive the supplementary form via email along with instructions on how to complete and submit it. The supplementary form will be assessed alongside the research project application submitted to ONS through RAS. The data owners’ review will not start until the supplementary form is submitted.
7.4. **Assessment criteria**

Your Research funding application (Je-S application) will be reviewed by a Panel of experts and be assessed against the following criteria, with each proposal assessed individually on its own merits:

- Likelihood of demonstrating the potential of administrative data research for public policy impact.
- Scientific merit.
- Feasibility to deliver in the timeframe and feasibility of addressing the research questions with the data available.
- Appropriate knowledge and experience, collaborations and training (ECR).
- Value for Money.

Your ONS SRS Research application form also will be subject to two checks after submission:

- An administrative check to assess whether all the necessary information has been provided and with a sufficient level of detail
- A feasibility check, to assess that the research project can be conducted with the data that has been requested.

Your Je-S application and ONS Research Application form will then be shared with Data Owners (Ofqual–DfE–UCAS) so that they can check:

- Is there public benefit?
- Is there demonstrable analytical merit?
- Is the project feasible?
- Are any relevant privacy implications sufficiently mitigated?
- Has the project successfully completed a formal ethical review?

ADR UK will issue further guidance to applicants requiring a supplementary form depending on the data requested.

7.5. **Researcher Accreditation**

To access the necessary data, an ADR UK Research Fellow will also need to be an Accredited Researcher. If you are not already an Accredited Researcher, you can apply for accreditation through the Research Accreditation Service (RAS). Researchers who are yet to become accredited researchers can still submit a research project application, but they will have to be accredited before being able to access the data.

On completion of submitting their RAS Application, you will be required to sign up to an online Safe Researcher Training Course. This course needs to be completed before data can be accessed. Once you have completed the training and your project has been given final approval, you will be given access to the ONS Secure Research Service (SRS). If you are already an accredited researcher, you can access your portal through the RAS homepage.
Please note, project mentors and research assistants will also need to be Accredited Researchers and be named on Research Accreditation Panel (RAP) applications if they are to see any data or outputs ahead of publishing. Approval by Ofqual–DfE–UCAS to use the database(s) will be essential (see 7.4 below).

7.6. Researcher Institutional Approval

A Head of Department letter of support from the researcher’s organisation (their university or other institution) is required as part of the application. The letter should confirm what the data access arrangements are and include whether the organisation is AOC certified or committed to applying for certification where relevant. Details regarding AOC certification, or the use of a safe room or SafePod to access data, are found on the ADR UK website.

9. Contact information

A range of further supporting guidance for this Funding Opportunity is available on the ADR UK website. Having read these, if you still have enquiries please contact us as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Query category</th>
<th>Contact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Funding opportunity and other general queries</td>
<td><a href="mailto:hub@adruk.org">hub@adruk.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Je-S System queries</td>
<td><a href="mailto:JeSHelp@je-s.ukri.org">JeSHelp@je-s.ukri.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accredited Researcher queries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Data linkage queries</td>
<td><a href="mailto:data.sharing@ofqual.gov.uk">data.sharing@ofqual.gov.uk</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research question and Methodology queries</td>
<td><a href="mailto:data.sharing@ofqual.gov.uk">data.sharing@ofqual.gov.uk</a></td>
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<td>DfE specific queries</td>
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<tr>
<td>UCAS specific queries</td>
<td><a href="mailto:data.sharing@ofqual.gov.uk">data.sharing@ofqual.gov.uk</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ofqual specific queries</td>
<td><a href="mailto:data.sharing@ofqual.gov.uk">data.sharing@ofqual.gov.uk</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data or metadata queries/data feasibility</td>
<td><a href="mailto:data.sharing@ofqual.gov.uk">data.sharing@ofqual.gov.uk</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10. Timetables

A flow diagram of how the processes interact, and indicative timelines is available to view. Given the process described above, the potential need for additional information, and the possibility that the proposal initially submitted may require revisions, it is difficult to anticipate how long it will take to get a research project accredited. However, please use the indicative timelines below for planning purposes. Please note these dates may be subject to change.

10.2. Indicative Timetable for the Funding Decision

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Funding opportunity launch</td>
<td>1 September 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicant webinar</td>
<td>16 September 2021 (TBC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing date for Je-S &amp; RAP proposals</td>
<td>1 December 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding Panel meeting</td>
<td>Early March 2021</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10.3. Indicative Timetable for gaining access to the data (successful Fellows only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preparation of Researcher Accreditation Panel (RAP) form</td>
<td>1 December 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Data Owner approval</td>
<td>Mid-May 202222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAP panel approval</td>
<td>Mid-May 2022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data available in SRS project space including relevant metadata</td>
<td>Mid-June 2022</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10.4 Indicative Timetable for awards and project start (successful Fellows only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UK Research Fellowship Offer Letter Negotiations start</td>
<td>Mid-May 2022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADR UK Induction Meeting for Research Fellows</td>
<td>Mid-May 2022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data available in SRS project space including relevant metadata</td>
<td>Early June 2022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latest start date</td>
<td>15 July 2022 (TBC)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 1: Other relevant Fellowship documents and guidance

- ADR UK General Research Fellowship Specification
- ADR UK Research Fellowship FAQs
- ADR UK Je-S Guidance
- Terms and Conditions