

Statistical bulletin

Education, England and Wales: Census 2021

Usual residents aged 16 years and over who have academic, vocational, or professional qualifications, as well as the number of schoolchildren and full-time students, Census 2021 data.



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Release date:
10 January 2023

Next release:
To be announced

Table of contents

1. [Main points](#)
2. [Schoolchildren and full-time students](#)
3. [Highest level of qualification](#)
4. [How highest level of qualification varied across England and Wales](#)
5. [Future publications](#)
6. [Education, England and Wales: data](#)
7. [Glossary](#)
8. [Measuring the data](#)
9. [Strengths and limitations](#)
10. [Related links](#)
11. [Cite this statistical bulletin](#)

1 . Main points

- There were 11.5 million schoolchildren and full-time students (20.4%) in 2021 across England and Wales, out of a total 56.4 million usual residents aged five years and over.
- More than 3 in 10 usual residents aged 16 years and over had Level 4 or above qualifications (for example, Higher National Certificate, Higher National Diploma, Bachelor's degree and post-graduate qualifications); this was 33.8%, or 16.4 million people.
- In 2021, almost one in five (18.2%, 8.8 million) reported having no qualifications.
- Across England and Wales, apprenticeships were the highest qualification for 5.3% of people (2.6 million).
- The region with the highest percentage of the population with Level 4 or above qualifications was London with 46.7% (3.3 million).

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2 . Schoolchildren and full-time students

Census data can be used to identify the number of schoolchildren and students (aged five years and over) in full-time education. This is one way of looking at education across the two nations.

Across England and Wales, there were 11.5 million schoolchildren and full-time students in 2021, out of a total 56.4 million usual residents aged five years and over.

The overall number of schoolchildren and full-time students aged five years and over has increased since 2011, when it was 10.8 million. However, as a proportion of all usual residents aged five years and over, the percentage in 2021 (20.4%) is very similar to 2011 (20.5%).

Of the total number, 10.9 million schoolchildren and full-time students were in England (20.4% of the usual resident population aged five years and over) and 588,000 were in Wales (19.9%).

Figure 1: The number of schoolchildren and full-time students in 2021 has increased since 2011 in England and Wales

Schoolchildren and full-time students aged five years and over, 2011 and 2021, England and Wales

Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

The census counts students at their term-time address. There was some evidence of changes to the term-time population resulting from the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Read more about [how the ONS ensured an accurate estimate of students at their term-time address](#).

3 . Highest level of qualification

Census 2021 helps us to understand education in England and Wales through usual residents' highest level of qualification.

Residents of England and Wales aged 16 years and over (48.6 million) were asked to record any qualifications (including academic, vocational, and professional qualifications) they had achieved in England, Wales or worldwide. This is used to calculate the highest level of qualification (so, the highest level of qualification that an individual reported irrespective of previous qualifications listed) using the following categories:

- no qualifications: no formal qualifications
- Level 1: one to four GCSE passes (grade A* to C or grade 4 and above) and any other GCSEs at other grades, or equivalent qualifications
- Level 2: five or more GCSE passes (grade A* to C or grade 4 and above) or equivalent qualifications
- apprenticeships
- Level 3: two or more A Levels or equivalent qualifications
- Level 4 or above: Higher National Certificate, Higher National Diploma, Bachelor's degree, or post-graduate qualifications
- other qualifications, of unknown level

For equivalent qualifications, see [Measuring the data](#).

Across England and Wales, 33.8% of usual residents aged 16 years and over (16.4 million) indicated that their highest level of qualification was at Level 4 or above.

The second most common category was no qualifications (18.2%, 8.8 million).

Apprenticeships were the highest qualification for 5.3% (2.6 million) of people.

Although highest level of qualification is broadly comparable between 2011 and 2021, there are caveats. The categories remain the same as they were in 2011 and are derived in the same way, however the way the questions were structured and how the respondent was routed in the qualification questions changed substantially from 2011. For more information, see our [Qualifications question development for Census 2021 article](#). These changes to the collection methodology mean that a reasonable proportion of respondents will have identified a different qualification level than they did in 2011 even though they still hold the same qualifications. Therefore, any change in qualification levels when compared with 2011 will be partly a result of the methodology changes and be partly indicative of real change. As such, we advise interpreting these with caution, avoid drawing conclusions from the differences or using them to inform planning or evaluate policies.

Figure 2: In 2021, the most common highest level of qualification was at Level 4 or above across England and Wales

Highest level of qualification, usual residents aged 16 years and over, 2011 and 2021, England and Wales

Notes:

1. The structure and content of the Census 2021 questions on qualifications were largely different from those in the 2011 Census. These changes partly caused the differences over the decade. Take care when comparing highest level of qualification in 2011 with 2021; figures are for reference purposes only.

4 . How highest level of qualification varied across England and Wales

England had a higher percentage of people who indicated their highest level of qualification was Level 4 or above (33.9%, 15.6 million), compared with Wales (31.5%, 807,000).

Conversely, Wales had a higher proportion of people indicating no qualifications (19.9%, 510,000) than England (18.1%, 8.3 million).

Level 4 or above qualifications, and no qualifications, in England

In England, the region with the highest proportion of people with Level 4 or above qualifications was London (46.7%, 3.3 million). The percentage in London was considerably higher than in the next highest region, the South East (35.8%, 2.7 million). In particular, the local authorities of the City of London (74.2%, 6,000) and Wandsworth (62.6%, 171,000) had the highest proportion of people with Level 4 or above qualifications.

The region with the lowest proportion of people with Level 4 or above qualifications was the North East (28.6%, 622,000), whereas the region with the highest proportion of people with no qualifications was the West Midlands (21.1%, 1.0 million). The local authority with the highest proportion of people reporting no qualifications was Sandwell (28.9%, 77,000). This was followed by Boston (27.6%, 16,000) and Leicester (26.7%, 78,000). The local authority with the lowest proportion of people reporting no qualifications was the City of London (6.6%, 500).

Level 4 or above qualifications, and no qualifications, in Wales

In Wales, the proportion of people with Level 4 or above qualifications was highest in Cardiff (40.0%, 119,000), and Monmouthshire (39.4%, 31,000) and lowest in Blaenau Gwent (21.6%, 12,000), and Merthyr Tydfil (25.0%, 12,000).

Conversely, the proportion of people with no qualifications was highest in Blaenau Gwent (27.9%, 15,000). The local authority with the lowest proportion of people reporting no qualifications was Ceredigion (14.7%, 9,000).

Apprenticeships in England and Wales

In England, 5.3% (2.4 million) of people reported an apprenticeship as their highest level of qualification. This was slightly lower than in Wales (5.6%, 143,000).

Across the regions of England, the proportion of people reporting an apprenticeship as their highest level of qualification, ranged from 3.2% (228,000) in London to 6.6% (145,000) in the North East.

Across both England and Wales, the local authority with the largest proportion of people reporting an apprenticeship as their highest level of qualification was Barrow-in-Furness (10.9%, 6,000), Scarborough (8.1%, 7,000) and Copeland (8.1%, 5,000). In Wales, the highest proportion was in Flintshire (6.6%, 8,000), followed by the Isle of Anglesey (6.6%, 4,000).

To compare how qualification levels varied across local authorities in England and Wales, use our interactive map. In addition, we have created an index score, which is used to summarise how well-qualified people in an area are (using the range of qualification levels) relative to other areas. However, if you want to compare the percentage of people who hold any of the specific classification levels (for example, Level 4 or above) then you can change to this option.

Figure 3: Highest level of qualification varies across local authorities

Highest level of qualification, usual residents aged 16 years and over: index score ranked and percentage distribution, 2021, local authorities in England and Wales

Notes:

1. The highest level of qualification index score is a summary measure that can be used to compare how highly qualified population groups are. It assigns every individual aged 16 years and over a value based on their highest level of qualification, excluding those whose highest level of qualification was unknown. The index score is then the average value of all individuals in the selected area. The index score was used to rank local authorities from least highly qualified to most highly qualified. This ranking is for relative comparison and should be used alongside the percentage of people in the area who reported each of the different highest level of qualification categories for the full picture.

Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

5 . Future publications

More detailed data and analysis on education will be published in the coming months, alongside the release of multivariate data. Read more about our [education analysis plans](#) and the [release plans for Census 2021](#) more generally.

6 . Education, England and Wales: data

[Highest level of qualification](#)

Dataset | Released 10 January 2023

This dataset provides Census 2021 estimates that classify usual residents aged 16 years and over in England and Wales by their highest level of qualification. The estimates are as at Census Day, 21 March 2021.

[Schoolchildren and full-time students](#)

Dataset | Released 10 January 2023

This dataset provides Census 2021 estimates that classify all schoolchildren and full-time students in England and Wales. The estimates are as at Census Day, 21 March 2021.

7 . Glossary

Highest qualification

The highest level of qualification is derived from the question asking people to indicate all qualifications held, or their nearest equivalent.

This may include foreign qualifications where they were matched to the closest UK equivalent.

In full-time education

Indicates whether a person aged five years and over was in full-time education on Census Day, 21 March 2021. This includes schoolchildren and adults in full-time education.

8 . Measuring the data

Equivalent qualifications

The equivalent qualifications for "highest level of qualification" are as follows (please note, this is not an exhaustive list and therefore does not include every possible qualification):

- Level 1 and entry level qualifications: any GCSEs at other grades, O levels or CSEs (any grades), Foundation Welsh Baccalaureate, one Advanced Subsidiary (AS) level, NVQ (National Vocational Qualification) level 1, Basic or Essential Skills, skills for life, literacy and numeracy, Level 2 Scottish Vocational qualifications
- Level 2 qualifications: five or more GCSEs (A* to C or 9 to 4), O levels (passes), CSEs (grade 1), Intermediate Welsh Baccalaureate, one A level, two to three AS levels, NVQ level 2, Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) General, City and Guilds Craft, Level 2 Scottish Vocational qualifications
- Level 3 qualifications: two or more A levels, four or more AS levels, Advanced Welsh Baccalaureate, NVQ level 3, City and Guilds Advanced Craft, Ordinary National Certificate (ONC), Ordinary National Diploma (OND), BTEC National, International Baccalaureate, Level 3 Scottish Vocational qualifications
- Level 4 or above qualifications: degree, foundation degree, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Master's degrees, Higher National Diploma (HND) or Higher National Certificate (HNC), NVQ level 4 or above, professional qualifications (for example, teaching or nursing)
- Other: Any other qualifications, equivalent unknown

Highest level of qualification index score

For Census 2021, we use a qualification rank index score to compare how highly qualified population groups are. It converts a person's highest qualification into a single metric and creates an average rank score for the population.

The ranking system is based on the qualification levels attained at different phases of education: secondary education, post-16 further or upper secondary education and higher education.

Rank assigned to qualification levels and types

Rank 4 is the highest rank, and 0 is the lowest.

Rank 4

Higher education qualifications of Level 4 or above.

Rank 3

Upper secondary and advanced further education qualifications at Level 3 and apprenticeships.

Rank 2

Qualifications equivalent to secondary education (Level 2).

Rank 1

Qualifications below secondary education (Level 1 and entry level).

Rank 0

No qualifications.

Please note, apprenticeships data collected by the census did not include the level or type of an apprenticeship. Advanced further education was deemed the best fit overall for traditional trade or craft and modern apprenticeships.

The index score assigns every individual aged 16 years and over in the population a rank based on their highest level of qualification, excluding those whose highest level of qualification is unknown. The index score is then the average rank of all individuals in that population.

The theoretical maximum value for the index score is 4.00, indicating that 100% of individuals in a population have obtained Level 4 or above qualifications. The minimum value for the index score is 0.00, indicating that 100% of individuals in a population have obtained no qualifications.

However, the scores for the index do not always relate directly to the proportion of the population who are highly qualified. For example, a population with a score of 3.0 does not simply have twice the proportion of highly qualified people as a population with a score of 1.5. It is recommended that group order or decile, but not the raw score in isolation, are used in interpreting the index. As the index is a compound summary measure to evaluate differences in raw scores between two population groups, the index must be used in conjunction with the component rank proportions. For example, if population A has a score 0.35 higher than population B, this is primarily explained by population B having a 7.0% higher proportion of people with no qualifications.

The index does not account for differences in population characteristics within an area and can be sensitive to the number of people with a certain characteristic. At lower-level geographies or with smaller population groups, the population differences will have a greater effect on the index score. For example, an area with a higher student population is likely to have a lower index score, because they may not have completed their highest qualification level yet.

Reference date

The census provides estimates of the characteristics of all people and households in England and Wales on Census Day, 21 March 2021. It is carried out every 10 years and gives us the most accurate estimate of all the people and households in England and Wales.

We are responsible for carrying out the census in England and Wales but will also release outputs for the UK in partnership with the Welsh Government, the National Records of Scotland (NRS) and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). The census in Northern Ireland was also conducted on 21 March 2021, whereas Scotland's census was moved to 20 March 2022. All UK census offices are working closely together to understand how this difference in reference dates will affect UK-wide population and housing statistics, in terms of both timing and scope.

Response rate

The [person response rate](#) is the number of usual residents for whom individual details were provided on a returned questionnaire, divided by the estimated usual resident population.

The person response rate for Census 2021 was 97% of the usual resident population of England and Wales, and over 88% in all local authorities. Most returns (89%) were received online. The response rate exceeded our target of 94% overall and 80% in all local authorities.

Read more about question-specific response rates at local authority level in [Section 4 of our Measures showing the quality of Census 2021 estimates methodology](#).

9 . Strengths and limitations

Quality considerations, along with the strengths and limitations of Census 2021 more generally, can be found in our [Quality and Methodology Information \(QMI\) for Census 2021](#). Read more about the [Education quality information for Census 2021](#).

Further information on our quality assurance processes is provided in our [Maximising the quality of Census 2021 population estimates methodology](#).

10 . Related links

[Census maps](#)

Interactive content | Updated 10 January 2023

Interactive map tool that visualises Census 2021 data on different topics down to a local authority area and neighbourhood level.

[Education quality information for Census 2021](#)

Methodology | Released 10 January 2023

Known quality information affecting education data from Census 2021 in England and Wales.

[Education variables, Census 2021](#)

Supporting information | Released 10 January 2023

Variables and classifications used in Census 2021 data about education.

[Education in Wales \(Census 2021\)](#)

Statistical bulletin | Released 10 January 2023

A summary by Welsh Government of Census 2021 data about education in Wales.

11 . Cite this statistical bulletin

Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 10 January 2023, ONS website, statistical bulletin, [Education, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)