**MSc Social Data Science**  
**Desk based research to identify market leaders, their USPs and positioning**

**Planning – Aug 2024**

1. **Background**

Should Birkbeck offer a MSc Social Data Science? What is the current market like and how are courses positioned in this space? How would this course fit into Birkbeck’s existing portfolio?

Analysis of five UK courses has been undertaken alongside the provision of a list of all other similar courses alongside FTE. FTE is from 2021/22 and so comes with obvious limitations.

1. **Key observations**

The five courses analysed in detail suggest course content leans into different themes with these broadly being:

1. Politics (this is the most common theme reflected in course content and course titles)
2. Geographic
3. Social media

Some courses are more technical with some learning of computer science tools but none of the courses analysed required a computer science background and with Durham specifically stating it would not want applicants with a computer science background. Entry requirements tend to require good numeracy, a willingness to be numerate alongside a 2:1 or 2:2 with relevant work experience.

All courses offer a good selection of modules which tend to be 15-20 credits rather than 30 credits. As discussed in a previous piece of research this gives the appearance of choice and flexibility to the applicant even if the same number of topics are within a 30 credit module.

None of the courses are expensive - UCL being £15 000 for home students and one of the more expensive courses.

Interestingly, there are three programmes with identical titles ‘Data Analytics for Government’ offered at Cardiff, Oxford Brookes (not visible on website however so perhaps recently removed) and Southampton. Southampton states *‘This UK social data science master’s course is ideal if you are currently working in official statistics or the* [*Government Statistical Service (GSS)*](https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/)*.’* and similarly Cardiff *‘This programme has been designed so that it can meet the continuing education and training needs of those who work with data in Government.’* Could this be an opportunity for Birkbeck to build a relationship with relevant Government department?

Essex also pitches their course as *‘The close partnership with Essex County Council, Essex Police and other public sector organisations ensures the development of necessary skills to apply data science for public good within a strong academic framework.’*

The FTE quoted below is indicative only because it’s out of date. However, Westminster state on their website that this course is now ‘full’. They do this for all their Sept 2024 programmes and could be pure marketing spin however, it suggests numbers are higher than the ‘4’ quoted below from 2021/22 and this is likely a trend with other programmes.

*Birkbeck’s proposal compared with other similar courses (based on module comparison)*

* Based on the sample of courses analysed below, Birkbeck’s course is most similar to that offered by Sussex in that it is quite skills based and orientated around machine learning etc. It doesn’t particularly lean into e.g. politics or social media although these, alongside health would be available in the module selection
* It would need to sit alongside, compliment and differentiate itself from Birkbeck’s MSc Social Research course
* If this is skills-based course, would it be necessary to have ‘The History and Foundations of AI’ as a core module? Could it be an optional module?

1. **Birkbeck’s proposed programme** (red = new module)



1. **Birkbeck’s MSc Social Research**

Compulsory modules

* Investigating the Social World
* Masterclass in Social Research

Core modules

* Advanced Topics in Quantitative Social Research
* Applied Social Data Analysis in R
* Experiments in Social Science
* Introduction to Quantitative Social Research
* Qualitative Research Design
* Qualitative Social Research Methods

MSc Social Research dissertation

1. **A compare and contract of content and USPs**

Durham selected as course title suggests a different positioning of the topic and one which Birkbeck should consider and UCL because it is a programme offered close to Birkbeck and again in a space that Birkbeck could occupy.

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| Course name | [Westminster MA AI, Data and Communication](https://www.westminster.ac.uk/computer-science-and-engineering-data-science-and-informatics-media-and-communication-courses/2025-26/september/full-time/ai-data-and-communication-ma) | [Essex MSc Social Data Science](https://www.essex.ac.uk/courses/PG01314/1/MSc-Social-Data-Science) | [Sussex MSc Human and Social Data Science](https://www.sussex.ac.uk/study/masters/courses/human-and-social-data-science-msc) | [Durham MDS Data Science (Social Analytics)](https://www.durham.ac.uk/study/courses/master-of-data-science-social-analytics-g5p423/) | [UCL MSc Social and Geographic Data Science](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/prospective-students/graduate/taught-degrees/social-and-geographic-data-science-msc) |
| Entry Requirements | A minimum of an upper second class honours degree (2:1)  OR a lower second class honours degree (2:2) and substantial relevant work experience. | A 2.2 degree in American Studies, Economics, Finance, International Relations, International Studies, Political Science, Political Studies, Statistics, or United States Politics.  Or a 2:2 degree with 2 two relevant modules – mainly politics, some econ/law/stats | A 2:1 in Psychology, Economics, Business, or another Social Science subject with a good level of numeracy.  Or an undergraduate degree in a different subject area and can demonstrate that you have ability with data and a reasonable level of Maths | A 2:1 in ANY degree that DOESN’T include a strong data science component.  Candidates with a degree in Social and Behavioural Sciences are strongly encouraged to apply. | A 2:1 degree “relevant discipline” – see below:  The programme is particularly suitable for students with an undergraduate degree that has a quantitative component in social science. Applicants with relevant professional experience in data science, geographic information science, social data science or computing will also be considered. |
| 2021 FTE (?) | 4 | 4 | 21 | 8 | 14 |
| Fee – Home / International | £9,700 / £17,500 | £10,000 / £22,400 | £11,025 / £22,575 | £13,500 / £31,500 | £15,100 / £31,100 |
| Focus | Social / Digital Media data / AI analysis | Heavily political research | Data science / Machine learning | Heavy data science | Geographical data |
| USPs | Full for 2024 – possibly implies this has increased a lot in size since 2021  Talk about the niche this programme exists in as a positive for employability – between data and communication  looking at data from the perspective of how its use effects society.  More analysis of the use/effects of AI relatively – Renamed course from **Data, Culture and Society** noteworthy  Graduates gone on to work for Hearst UK (media company), PWC, UK Gov, UN | Pushes strong links with local/public sector.  Graduates going into public sector / NGOs /political research  Lab sessions  Assessments include simulations / presentations  Entry reqs + text make this feel VERY narrow/tailored | Part time available  Points towards increase in AI / Data Sci skills need in future for job market. 90% in 20 year prediction quoted from UK Gov Digital Strategy. | This course reads a lot more like a strict conversion course – notes itself as a conversion course | Part time available  Pushes itself as “rigorous” and “challenging”.  Emphasis on academic side of things. Academics are active researchers / good foundation for PhD. Compared to less specific employability information.  Very generic in terms of the career options available – consultancies, governmental jobs named. Focuses more on the “unique interdisciplinary” aspect. |
| Modules **(Compulsory)** | **Data in Communication and Society**  **Data System Concepts and Fundamentals**  **Data and Digital Research Methods**  **Major Project**  Social Media  Political Economy of Communication  Data Mining and Machine Learning  The Politics of Global Complexity  Artificial Intelligence and Society  Digital Cultures  Digital Media and Critical Theory  Data Visualisation and Dashboarding  Hack Lab and Creative Technology  Digital Media Business: Strategy and Entrepreneurship | **MA Dissertation**  **Data for Social Data Science**  **Data Science and Decision Making**  **Research Design**  (Roughly four of below)  Information Retrieval  Machine Learning  Text Analytics  Natural Language Engineering  Introductory Econometrics  Econometric Methods  Microeconometrics  Panel Data Methods  Applications of Data Analysis  From Cradle to Grave: Social Justice in Childhood, Adulthood, and Death  Comparative Environmental Politics  International Environmental Politics  Quantitative Methods  Conflict Resolution  Conflict Resolution and Peace  Advanced Quantitative Methods  Introduction to Quantitative Analysis  Advanced Quantitative Analysis: Models for Cause and Effect | **Dissertation (Human and Social Data Science)**  **Data Science Research Methods**  **Mathematics and Computational Methods for Complex Systems**  **Systems for Information Management**  **Data Science Masters Research Proposal**  **Machine Learning**  **Wider Topics in Data Science (L7)**  Applied Natural Language Processing  Digital Journalism  Media, Law and Ethics  Policy Making and Policy Analysis  Programming through Python  Artificial Intelligence & Global Digital Policies  Industrial and Innovation Policy  Machine Learning and Statistics for Health (L7)  New Developments in Digital Media  Race, Culture and the Media  Techno-Feminism History and Practice | **Data Science Research Project**  **Critical Perspectives in Data Science**  **Social Science: Questions, Concepts, Theories and Methods**  **Programming for Data Science**  **Introduction to Statistics for Data Science**  Introduction to Computer Science  Introduction to Mathematics for Data Science  Text Mining and Language Analytics  Data Exploration, Visualisation and Unsupervised Learning  Ethics and Bias in Data Analytics  Strategic Leadership  Machine Learning  Computational Social Science | **Principles of Spatial Analysis**  **Data, Politics and Society**  **Introduction to Social Data Science**  **Advanced Topics in Social and Geographic Data Science**  Environmental GIS  Principles and Practice of Remote Sensing  Mining Social and Geographic Datasets  Climate Change Impacts to Hydro-Ecological Systems  Urban Policy  Introduction to Citizen Science and Scientific Crowdsourcing  Cartography and Data Visualisation  Coastal Geohazards  Cities and Climate Change  Designing and Managing Citizen Science |

1. **Social Data Science courses offered elsewhere**

The following is a list of all courses which may be relevant to discussion. They have been extracted from a 2024/5 course database using the following key words: culture, social, poli, government and society.

It provides FTE Totals (new entrant) where data is available, some programme could have been launched since 2021/22 and we don’t hold that data.

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| **Institution** | **Title of the Terminal Award** | **FTE 2021/22** |
| Durham University | Data Science (Social Analytics) | 7.5 |
| London School of Economics and Political Science | Applied Social Data Science | 22 |
| University College London | Social and Geographic Data Science | 14 |
| The University of Edinburgh | Data Science for Health & Social Care | 11 |
| The University of Essex | Social Data Science | 4 |
| The University of Manchester | Data Analytics and Social Statistics | n/a |
| The University of Manchester | Data Science (Social Analytics) | 5 |
| The University of St Andrews | Data Literacy for Social and Environmental Justice | n/a |
| The University of Sussex | Human and Social Data Science | 21 |
| University of Exeter | Social Data Science | 8 |
| University of Oxford | Social Data Science | 26 |
| Harper Adams University | Data Science for Global Agriculture, Food and Environment | 1 |
| King's College London | Big Data in Culture and Society | 39 |
| London School of Economics and Political Science | Media and Communications (Data and Society) | 16 |
| The University of Edinburgh | Data, Inequality & Society | n/a |
| The University of Edinburgh | Data, Inequality & Society | n/a |
| The University of Edinburgh | Data, Inequality & Society | n/a |
| The University of Edinburgh | Narrative Futures: Art, Data, Society | n/a |
| The University of Edinburgh | Narrative Futures: Art, Data, Society | n/a |
| The University of Edinburgh | Narrative Futures: Art, Data, Society | n/a |
| The University of Liverpool | Media, Data and Society | n/a |
| The University of Sheffield | Cultural Data Management and Communication | n/a |
| The University of Westminster | Data, Culture and Society | 4 |
| University College London | Data Science and Public Policy (Economics) | n/a |
| University College London | Data Science and Public Policy (Political Science) | n/a |
| The University of Strathclyde | Data Science for Politics and Policymaking | 15 |
| London School of Economics and Political Science | Data Science for Public Policy | n/a |
| The University of Liverpool | Economic Policy and Data Analytics | n/a |
| The University of Surrey | Economics (Policy Evaluation and Data Analysis) | n/a |
| The University of Warwick | Politics, Big Data and Quantitative Methods | 5 |
| The University of Essex | Politics, Communications and Data Analytics | n/a |
| Cardiff University | Data Analytics for Government | 3 |
| Oxford Brookes University | Data Analytics for Government | n/a |
| University of Southampton | Data Analytics for Government | n/a |