

Shared Institutions

**The public's view on the role
of universities in national
and local life**

More in Common and UCL Policy Lab

October 2025



**More in
Common**



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About More in Common

More in Common is a think tank and research agency working to bridge the gap between policy makers and the public and helping people in Westminster to understand voters who feel ignored or overlooked by those in power. Our British Seven segmentation provides a unique lens at understanding what the public think and why. We've published ground-breaking reports on a range of issues from climate and refugees to culture wars to crime. We are a full-service research agency offering polling and focus group research and are members of the British Polling Council.

About UCL Policy Lab

The UCL Policy Lab brings together extraordinary expertise and everyday experience, connecting researchers and the broader community with the tools and resources required to bring about real social and policy change.

Foreword

In this moment of declining trust in our national institutions, it is more important than ever to listen to the public's concerns and understand how they view and experience our shared institutions.

That is why I welcome this report by the UCL Policy Lab and More in Common, a timely exploration of how the public sees the role and value of universities today.

The work confirms that the British public still holds a deep affection for our universities — indeed, they remain a source of national and local pride. A crucial finding in the pages of this report is the public's sense that, in a Britain where so much is believed to be broken, universities stand out as a source of local pride.

It is heartening that the British people remain proud of their universities, viewing them as world-leading yet rooted in place.

However, these positives are not the whole picture.

Many people have clearly become frustrated by a perceived lack of wider benefit for all. In particular, for those who don't attend university. The report makes evident where we need to listen to these emerging concerns. It also helps us understand what we must do to deliver for everyone in Britain today, whether that is meeting the skill needs of the country, showing how our research can transform lives, or ensuring that underrepresented or working-class communities see the benefits of our work, and that our doors are open to them.

These questions go to the heart of maintaining what we sometimes call the universities' "social licence to operate".

There is so much work across UK universities that already seeks to meet these challenges. I am proud of UCL's efforts so far, whether that is our civic engagement in London, our partnerships across the UK, or our work on widening access and participation.

Yet these findings show that we must keep in mind that there is always more to do. That starts with listening.

Michael Spence
President and Provost, UCL

Key findings

- **Britons view universities positively:** most people see them as good for the country, with 63 per cent saying universities have a positive impact and only 6 per cent saying negative. For many, they remain a source of national pride.
- **Universities are valued on a national, local and personal level:** people see their main roles as training professionals (49 per cent) and conducting research (37 per cent). Locally, three in five (61 per cent) of those living near a university say it has a positive impact on their area. On a personal level, people highlight both career development and personal growth, with one in three saying helping students grow into independent adults is a key role.
- **Education divides views on universities:** graduates are far more positive about universities than non-graduates (81 per cent, versus 55 per cent). Non-graduates are more likely to see universities as benefiting only students and as rigged in favour of the wealthy. Older Britons show greater scepticism towards the value of degrees. Focus groups suggest these views are driven more by personal experience than media narratives. Such divisions are not seen as strongly when comparing different parts of the UK.
- **Universities face a political threat as some voters are sceptical of the sector.** While views of the university system are less polarised than for other British institutions – and universities have not become the centre of a culture war as they have in some other countries – Reform UK supporters are notably critical of certain aspects of higher education. Responding to their concerns may be necessary to prevent a wider polarisation of the higher education debate.
- **Universities' role in research may be key to reaching these voters** if it can be shown to benefit their lives. Voters across education levels and political allegiances see it as one of the most important roles universities play, and see universities more positively when informed about university research. In contrast, awareness of universities' research is low with only 44 per cent of non-graduates being fully aware that universities conducted research and 19 per cent 'not at all' aware.
- **Cracks are emerging on the value of degrees:** while campus culture war debates and free speech rows often garner headlines, the public's primary concerns about our universities are related to the value of a degree. Nearly half of Britons (47 per cent) believe too many low-quality degrees are offered, and 71 per cent would prefer a focus on vocational education, highlighting doubts about whether all courses deliver good outcomes. Across politics, age and educational background a majority of Britons support the government's decision to drop the 50 per cent university attendance target.

- **Two visions for higher education:** Focus group discussions reveal two views of the role of higher education with some focusing on a career focused 'clear path' and others preferring a broader view of 'opening doors'. This split is a key difference between those who are optimistic about the university sector, and those who are not: 35 per cent of those who have a positive view of universities say that one of their key roles is "Helping students grow personally and become independent"; this drops to just 18 per cent among those who have a negative view of universities.
- **Britons want universities to balance their national and international roles:** the public want universities to focus on Britain's interest first, through research, training, and community impact, but not to be closed off from the wider world. Britons remain positive on international students, with a majority saying they are a benefit to the UK and that numbers should remain the same or increase along with an openness to them staying after study to 'contribute' to the UK.
- **Balancing the books:** The financial difficulties universities face have cut through with the public. 53 per cent believe that some universities may close in the coming years. Very few Britons support either a rise in home tuition fees or cuts to research programmes at universities. Instead, they favour cutting courses or increased taxpayer funding. The public tend to think that universities and the Government share responsibility for solving these financial challenges.

1. Public starting points on the university system

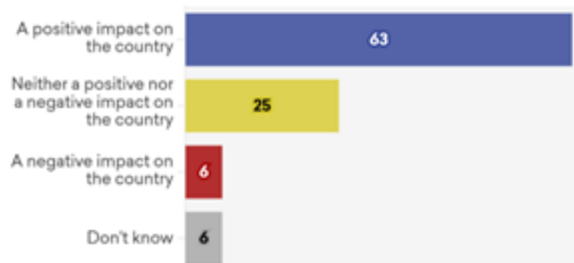
At a time in which Britons broadly see the country as broken, the public lack faith in [many institutions](#), and seven in ten think that the country is getting worse, universities stand out as an area that the public views with relative positivity. For many, universities are a source of pride. While there are some real concerns, the picture is broadly a positive one.

Most people see universities as a net good for Britain: 63 per cent say universities have a positive impact on the country, just 6 per cent say negative, while a quarter say they have neither a positive nor negative impact. This translates at a local level, with three in five (61 per cent) of those who live near a university saying it has a positive impact on their community.

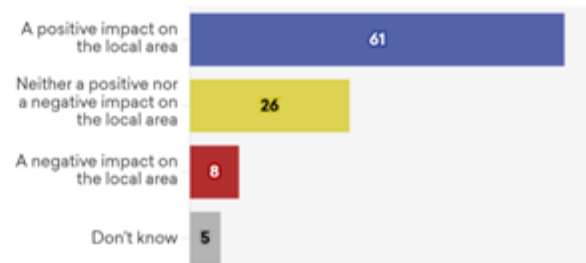
Asked who benefits from universities, Britons are similarly positive: 59 per cent say that universities are good for the country on the whole, compared to a quarter (26 per cent) who think they are only good for those who attend them.

Around three in five Britons think that universities are a net positive to local areas, and the country as a whole

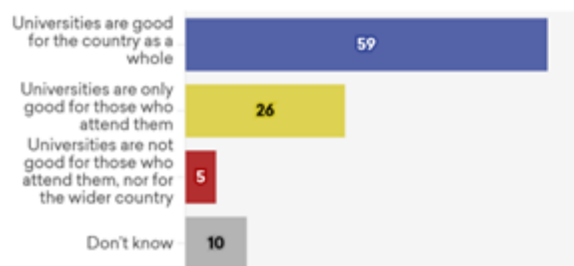
On the whole, do you think universities have...



Thinking about the university/universities in your local area, do you think they have...



Which of the following comes closest to your view?



The perceived responsibilities of universities can be broken down into three broad levels: the national, the local and the personal.

The national role

Asked about the most important roles that universities have to play in society, national responsibilities naturally rise to the top of the list: the top answer, selected by half (49 per cent) of Britons, is *training professionals (teachers, nurses, doctors, lawyers)*. This is raised consistently in focus groups; Britons clearly see training the next generation of professionals as universities' primary purpose.

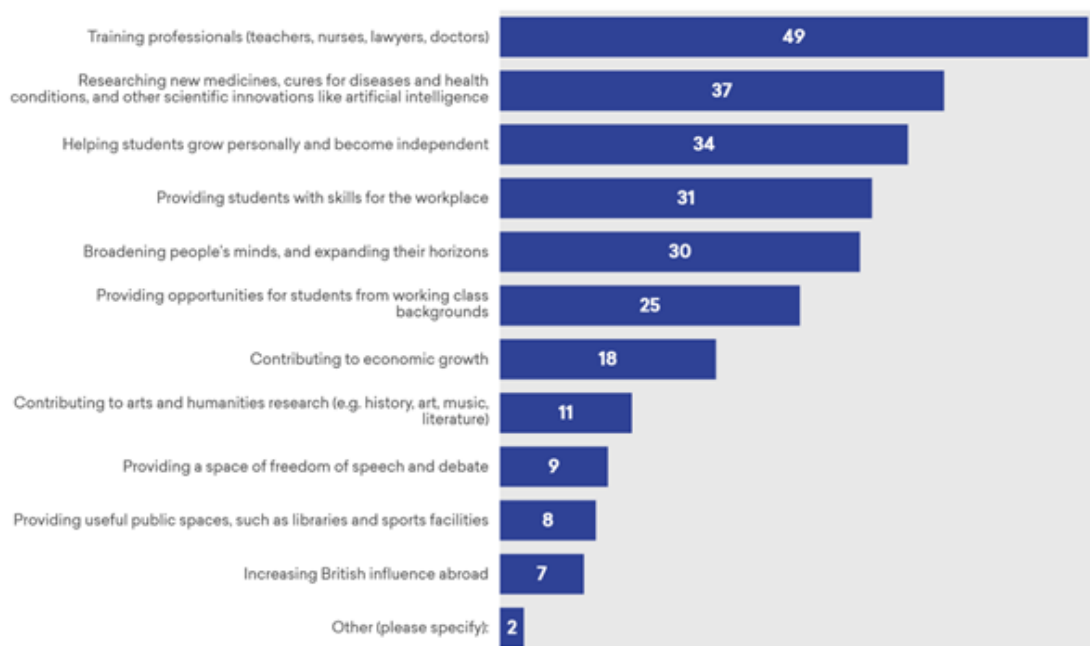
"You're hoping they're training the best of the best, don't you? So you're getting the best doctor, you're getting the best vets and everything like that. You're getting the people that can save lives and do amazing things with it. So you're hoping that that system breeds that into the wider country.."

Ian, chef, Frome

The second most important role that Britons see for universities is *medical and scientific research*, which 37 per cent select. University research is not something that emerges unprompted frequently in focus groups, yet when it does it is often seen as a key role that universities play - particularly in relation to medical and technological breakthroughs.

What do Britons see as the main purpose of university?

Which of the following do you think are the most important roles that universities play?



Awareness of universities' research role is relatively low with only 53 per cent of Britons saying they are fully aware that universities conduct research. Among non-graduates, this drops to 44 per cent, while 19 per cent are 'not at all' aware

However, even among participants who are more broadly sceptical about universities and who are not fully aware that universities conduct research, the mention of research can sometimes boost support. This is reflected in the polling: a split-sample experiment shows that mentioning research in a question wording can increase the proportion of Britons who feel universities make a positive contribution to the country by 8 percentage points.

When asked if universities should focus on research that will lead to major scientific breakthroughs in the long run or practical answers to day-to-day questions, respondents favoured the former by 59 per cent to 41 per cent. Focus groups showed that some participants had a belief in the potential benefits of research at universities, as supposed to in the private sector or state-run bodies.

"[It's] the apolitical nature of discoveries and research at universities. I think that's important to have that research, that discovery done in as neutral a space possible where it's about research and the discovery",

Rupert, teacher, Woolwich

"They can look more long-term, they can take more risks and that because it is just research and so it could lead to a breakthrough or it could lead to nothing, but they're the ones with licenced and it's not going to make or break the profits that they can give to their shareholders or whatever it is or whether they can get re-elected. It is not changing that. It's just let's go. Let's see where this leads us."

Joseph, asset manager, Essex

These findings suggest that universities need to do more to talk about their research role to the wider public, who do not automatically make the link between the institutions and their research outputs.

"I think now that you've said it, just thinking about it, sometimes when you're reading articles, even if it's just a Facebook post, sometimes you do quite often see 'University of Cambridge have discovered this'. It's quite a common thing that I do read. But yeah, I didn't initially think of that when we started speaking about universities"

Hannah, account manager, Chippenham

There is also a seeming lack of awareness of – and a curiosity about – how research is funded at universities.

“I feel quite embarrassed that I forgot about the research side of things. I'd be interested to know who funds that. Is it the students themselves as part of what they're paying towards? Who pays for the researchers? And the research element, who is that done by? (...) But yeah, it is essential to have researchers, because who else would be researching? So yes, it has changed my mind a little bit.”

Joanne, office manager, Taunton

Many also identify providing opportunities for working class students as an important role for universities. With slightly more non-graduates (27 per cent) identifying this as a key role compared to graduates (21 per cent).

“I don't mind having a university. It gives people a lot of opportunities.”

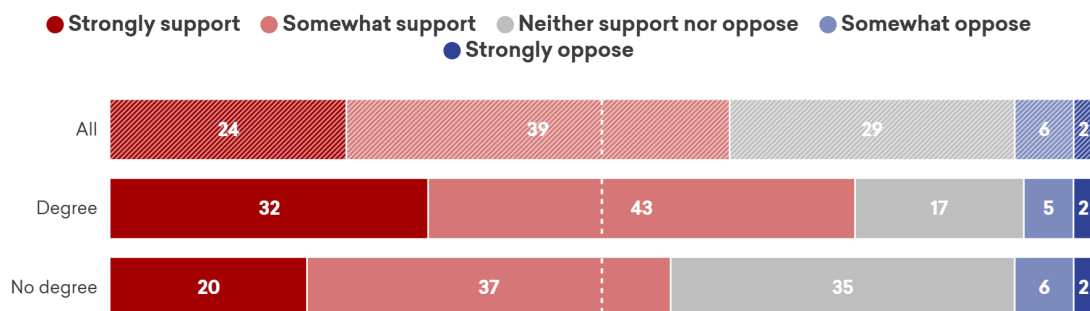
Amy, HR manager, Oxford

The public backs the Government's recent decision to drop the target for 50 per cent of young people to attend university. 63 per cent support this target, compared to just 8 per cent who oppose it. This is a viewpoint that spans across politics and educational background, with majorities of every voter group, and both graduates and non-graduates in support. Notably, support actually rises to three quarters (75 per cent) among those who have attended university.

Nearly two-thirds of Britons support dropping the 50% university attendance target

The Government has said it will no longer aim for 50% of young people to go to university, but instead to aim for two thirds of young people to participate in either higher education (including a university degree), apprenticeships or technical education.

To what extent do you support or oppose this decision?



The local role

Britons also tend to believe that universities have a responsibility to the local communities they are in.

In general, those who live near a university tend to view them positively, three in five (59 per cent) saying they have a positive impact on the local area. The top local benefits of universities for the public are *bringing skilled graduates into the area* (selected by 63 per cent), *making the area more vibrant* (56 per cent) and *bringing in customers for local businesses* (52 per cent). In focus groups, participants who live in university towns tend to talk about their local university positively (and in some cases with pride) - regardless of whether they have a personal connection to the university - citing both the economic benefits, and the cultural role universities play locally.

"I'm sort of in the university town and with all the students and the hustle and bustle and the liveliness and the, yeah, I just think it's great. I would much prefer that than a real quiet town."

Richard, retail manager, Derby

This supports recent emphasis on the role of shared spaces and high streets in maintaining communities. [Previous research](#) from More in Common, UCL Policy Lab and Citizens UK has emphasised the importance of associational spaces to social cohesion. Universities may play a role within this - both by providing public spaces and facilities, and also by bringing business to local businesses and high streets.

"It does help these university cities, it does help local businesses and whatnot, because obviously you do get an influx of people from not necessarily just around the country, but all around the world. So having a university city and all the accommodation that's required and all those businesses that probably keep going, it's because of the students."

John, IT consultant, Exeter

"I feel like local businesses would be massively impacted by students living in the area. They sort of help keep some of these businesses going. They're probably 80% of their customers, so I think if the university wasn't in the area then as a community and as a place, yeah, I think you would see that really struggle."

Amy, HR manager, Oxford

Yet there are also concerns on a local level. The main negatives people associate with universities at a local level are practical pressures on housing and public services. 59 per cent of those who say universities have a negative local impact point to *housing shortages and higher rents*. 55 per cent cite *antisocial behaviour*, while 38 per cent cite *pressure on local services such as GP surgeries and transport*. In focus groups with residents of university towns, they often raise the strain on the rental market, and drinking or partying late at night. However, these are rarely framed as hostility to the institution itself; they are generally seen as side-effects that require more active management by universities, but also by councils and landlords.

*"There's a major influx of building student accommodations at the minute (...)
Most of the young people can't even get on the house ladder at the minute.
But yet we're building students' accommodation."*

Mark, design engineer, Wolverhampton

Universities may therefore benefit from a focus on their local role as a good neighbour, both in accentuating the positives and managing the negatives.

The personal role

For the public, the individual motives for attending university are twofold: Britons see it both in terms of career development, and also of personal growth and development.

One in three people (34 per cent) say *helping students grow personally and become independent adults* is a key role of universities, while a similar share (31 per cent) say *providing students with skills for the workplace* and 30 per cent cite *broadening people's minds, and expanding their horizons*.

Graduates and parents of students are more likely than the public overall to highlight these roles. In focus groups, parents with children in higher education also speak more readily about confidence, maturity and independence as outcomes of the system.

"I would say it gives our children time to grow up a bit. None of us, well, I don't think any of us know what we want to do, but I think they need that time to mature or to understand what they need, which direction they're heading"

Laura, director, Swansea

"I think it instils a bit of discipline as well. If you've got to go in, you've got to be at lectures at set time, you've got a routine"

Martin, operations director, Northampton

As explored in greater detail in section 3, the benefits of university for personal development and growth could be outweighed by doubts about the value of degrees. Nearly half of the public (47 per cent) say universities offer too many low-quality courses, and there is a widespread perception that the value of a degree is diluting as participation has expanded. If Britons feel that the value of degrees is declining, it threatens to undermine what Britons see as the crucial personal benefits of university.

2. Fault lines and consensus

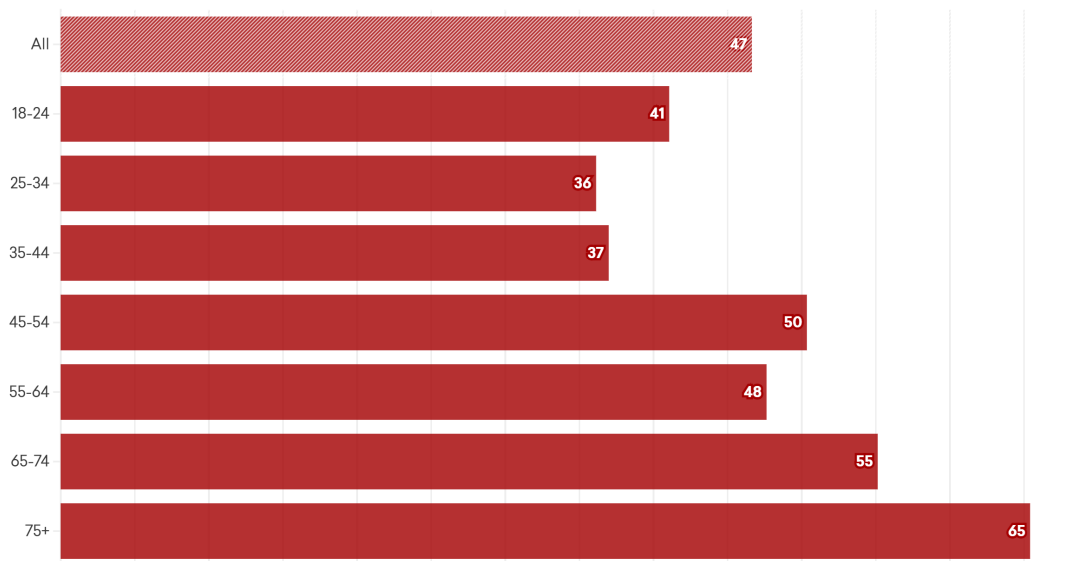
While Britons broadly remain positive about the role of universities, there are clear differences in perceptions of higher education. Older Britons, those without degrees, and those who vote for Reform UK, tend to show higher levels of scepticism toward universities.

Views on the value of some university degrees are closely tied to age. Two-thirds (65 per cent) of those over 75 say that universities offer too many 'Mickey Mouse' degrees, compared to just 47 per cent of the wider public. Interestingly, the very youngest adults (18-24 year olds) are notably more likely to say that universities offer too many Mickey Mouse degrees than those slightly older than them: 41 per cent of under 25s believe this, compared to 36 per cent of 25 - 35 year olds.

Older Britons are much more likely to believe that "Universities do offer too many low-quality or 'Mickey Mouse' degrees"

(Proportion who agree with this statement)

Some people say that universities these days offer too many low-quality or so-called 'Mickey Mouse' degrees. Which of the following comes closest to your view?



One of the strongest predictors of attitudes towards universities is personal experience. There is a clear graduate gap; those who did not attend university are far less likely to believe that the university system benefits the country equally: 81 per cent of those with a degree say universities have a positive impact on the country, compared with 55 per cent of those without. Non-graduates are also twice as likely as graduates to believe that universities only benefit those who attend them (31 per cent versus 16 per cent), and more likely to see the system as rigged in favour of the rich and powerful (49 per cent versus 37 per cent).

"I know there must be research on medicine, safety, robotics and stuff like that, but I don't know much information on how it affects us, what they do because I've never been, I don't really look into it. I don't know what they offer."

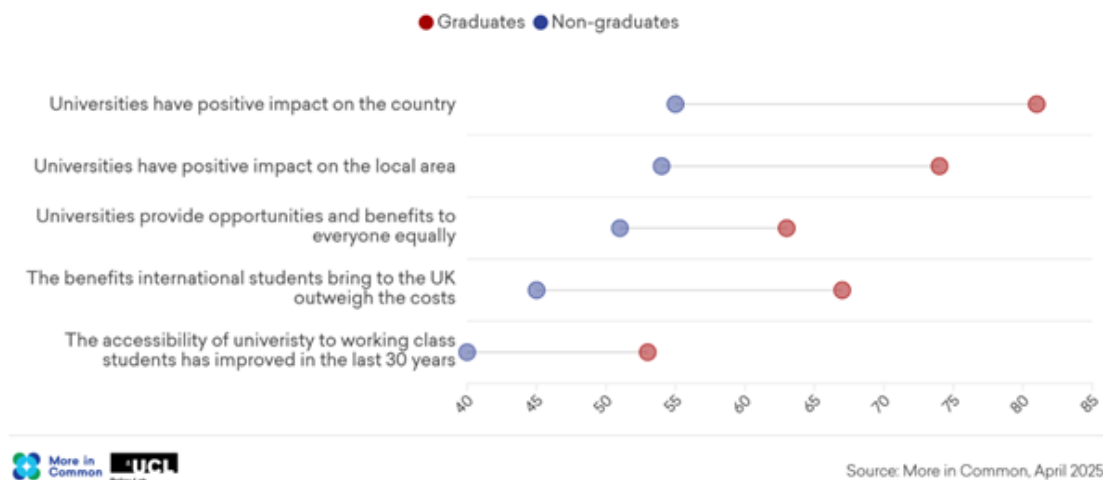
Mark, sales assistant, Worcester

Non-graduates also seem less optimistic about the expansion of university intakes: only two in five believe universities have become more accessible to working-class students over the past 30 years, compared with 53 per cent of graduates. This is important given that non-graduates are more likely to see one of the most important roles of universities as providing opportunities for working-class students (27 per cent versus 21 per cent of graduates).

Bridging this gap would require universities to demonstrate their value more clearly, both by showing the impact of research and economic contribution, and by proving greater accessibility and fairness in admissions.

The graduate gap in attitudes toward universities

Proportion who agree with each statement, by education history

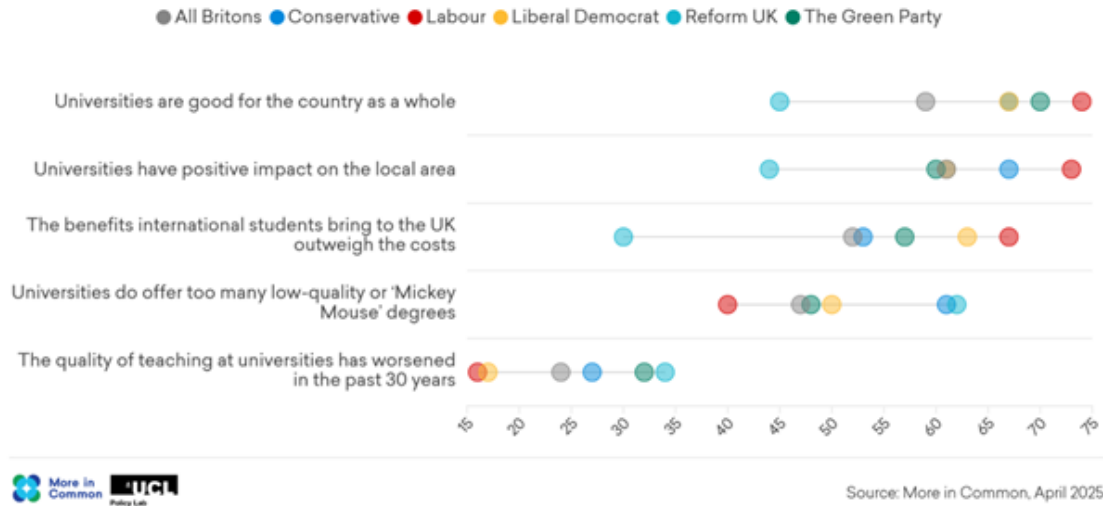


Reform voters are more cynical about universities than the public as a whole, in line with a broader mistrust of institutions. Even so, a majority of 2024 Reform voters (54 per cent) believe universities have a positive impact on the country - only nine points below the national average. The gap widens when asked who specifically benefits from universities: 45 per cent of Reform voters say universities benefit the country as a whole, 36 per cent say they only benefit students, and 9 per cent say they do not benefit anyone. This points to scepticism rooted in a concern that the benefits of universities are not shared evenly across society.

On views toward international students: in line with broader attitudes on migration, only three in ten Reform voters believe international students bring more benefits than costs to the UK, compared to more than half (52 per cent) of the wider public.

Reform UK voters tend to be more pessimistic than average about the role of universities

Proportion who agree with each statement, by 2024 vote



Despite this, fundamental attitudes to universities are not deeply polarised. Majorities of every voter group believe they have a net positive impact. In focus groups, participants tend to draw on personal experiences rather than political arguments. Whether someone went to university, or has children who did, is far more predictive of their views than voting history or party support. Reform voters' greater scepticism is likely linked to this graduate gap, as they are the group least likely to have attended university. A broader disillusionment with institutions may reinforce that outlook, but Britain appears less politically polarised over higher education than many other countries.

3. The value of a degree

For the public, the debate about the future of our university system centres around the value of university degrees.

Nine in ten British graduates are glad they went to university, while 10 per cent say they regret it. In focus groups with those who regret their degree, the sense that it brought little career benefit is central. Many describe seeing friends and colleagues in similar jobs who did not go to university and therefore avoided the debt, making them feel their degree was a mistake.

"In hindsight, if I could go back, I probably would not go to university because reason being, because like I said, I'm working with people who have not been to university the differences, but we're on same salaries, but the difference is I've got a hundred grand debt and they don't."

Wasif, pharmaceutical manager, Manchester

For some, this experience has led them to question the value of degrees without a clear career path. In focus groups, many argue that vocational courses are a better option for students, seeing non-vocational degrees as too risky and not worth the debt. This is reflected in poll findings: 71 per cent think the government should focus on technical and vocational education and training, compared to 29 per cent who want a focus on expanding higher education places.

"There probably was more value to a degree back then, but I definitely think it's diminished a lot more now unless you're doing something like law, medicine, accountancy, that leads to a natural career."

Imran, sales director, Reading

"I think for the more traditional subjects, so medicine, law, those kinds of subjects, absolutely I think there's probably a place.(...) And I certainly know for my children, unless they are going to go down that traditional route and very academic subjects, engineering, that sort of thing as well, I think I would very much be pushing them to go the other way and not take on that level of debt."

Sarah, accountant, Bristol

One of the key dividing lines between those who are optimistic and those who are pessimistic about university is how they view the value of non-vocational degrees. Among those with a more negative view, a common concern is that degrees

outside traditional career-focused fields – such as medicine or law – lack a ‘clear path’, leaving graduates struggling to find jobs after university.

In contrast, those with a more positive outlook often see the absence of a fixed, or as they may see it rigid, path as a strength. They believe young people should be encouraged to follow their passions, and see university as a way to ‘open doors’, helping students discover their direction in life.

“For some vocational things, yes, but there is a clear path to follow. But I did law at uni and now I work in finance and do nothing anywhere close to what I did. And what I think actually uni has become is just opening the other doors (...) So it is not really exclusively pigeonholing you, it's letting you understand what you're interested in (...) But you still get that degree where then it's like, okay, I've come out with a degree so I can pivot most directions.”

Joseph, asset manager, Essex

“So that degree just gave me the opportunity to diversify. So I don't think people necessarily have to come out following that path.”

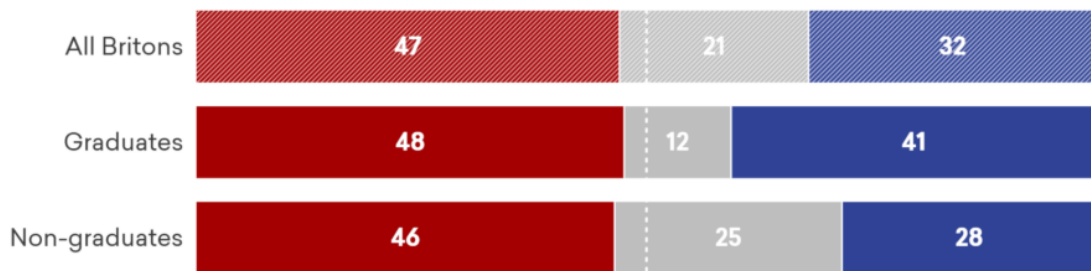
Claire, solicitor, Bristol

More broadly, there is concern that universities offer too many low quality or ‘Mickey Mouse’ degrees: nearly half (47 per cent) believe that this is an issue, compared to a third (32 per cent) who disagree. Notably, this is a view shared by an almost equivalent proportion of both graduates and non-graduates with only two points between them (although graduates are more likely to disagree).

Nearly half of Britons believe that universities offer too many low-quality degrees

Some people say that universities these days offer too many low-quality or so-called 'Mickey Mouse' degrees. Which of the following comes closest to your view?

- Universities do offer too many low-quality or 'Mickey Mouse' degrees
- Don't know
- Universities on the whole offer high quality degrees



Focus group discussions shed light on what people mean when they talk about 'Mickey Mouse' degrees. Participants rarely object to subjects on the grounds of being too niche or obscure. Instead, they make a clear distinction between course content and employability. Degrees are labelled 'Mickey Mouse' not because they cover unconventional areas, but because they fail to equip students with skills or translate into jobs.

"Don't knock some of these degrees... there's obviously a niche there somewhere."

Joanne, office manager, Taunton

"It almost doesn't matter the content. If it doesn't lead to a career, that's when I would consider it Mickey Mouse."

Lyn, retired business manager, Swindon

Rather than cutting niche courses, the public expect universities to ensure that all degrees, whatever the subject, lead to useful outcomes, through professional placements and high-quality professional guidance. Similarly, Britons place greater importance on being taught by someone who is good at teaching and explaining (68 per cent) than by someone who is primarily a strong researcher in their field (32 per cent). Focusing on teaching quality, and framing degrees as creating a clear path to a future career, while still opening doors and allowing

students to pursue their academic passion, answers both sides of the value question.

"I think universities should probably follow along [apprenticeships]... you've got companies on board that maybe need employees and looking for them."

Amy, HR manager, Oxford

4. National or international institutions

It's clear that many Britons view our university system as a source of pride. The public see universities as national institutions, with the rights and responsibilities that flow from that. In focus groups, people often describe universities as civic institutions with responsibilities beyond enrolled students, be it through research, shared facilities, or helping to address skill shortages.

"I still think we should be proud of them. I still think that people look up to English universities and the top ones and we're still up there as like, yeah, that's where people want to go."

Sarah, accountant, Bristol

"It does help these university cities... those businesses probably keep going because of the students."

John, IT consultant, Exeter

But while many Britons view universities as national institutions, there seems to be limited demand for greater demonstration of patriotism. Britons take a relaxed, almost agnostic approach to flags on campus: a third (35 per cent) say that universities should fly the union flag, while nine per cent say they should not (this polling was conducted before the 'raise the colours' flag protests). Most (56 per cent) believe it should be up to the individual university to decide. In focus groups, questions of national pride are sometimes met with indifference: participants wouldn't mind greater shows of patriotism, but in general there is little appetite for the pageantry seen on some American campuses.

"If they did I wouldn't think it was weird, but I also wouldn't expect them to."

Beth, education consultant, Liverpool

"Even if they tried, we'd just laugh and say 'alright mate, calm down.'"

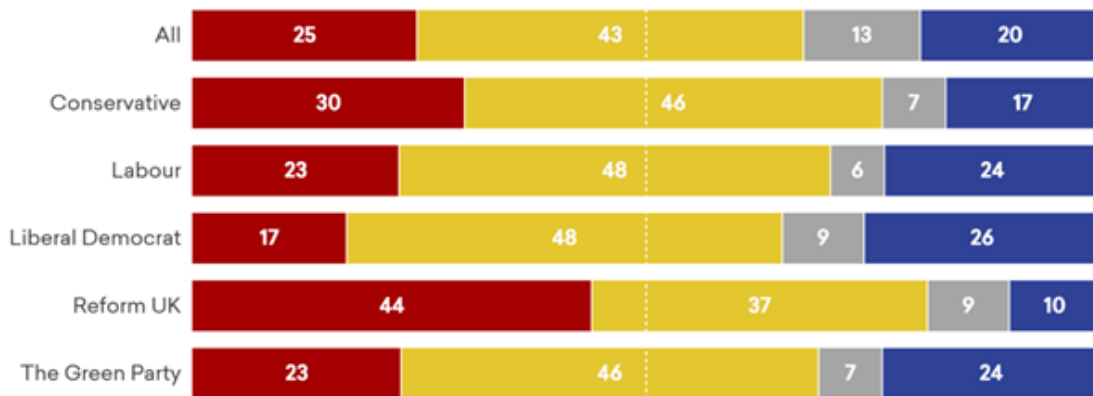
Joseph, asset manager, Essex

Asked whether universities should be national or international institutions, the public want them to strike a balance between the two: 25 per cent of Britons believe that universities should function as national institutions that focus on the country's needs, while 20 per cent think they should be global institutions that focus on collaboration; meanwhile the largest proportion - 43 per cent - want universities to be national institutions with global connections.

Britons want universities to strike a balance between being national and international institutions

Which of the following comes closest to your view?

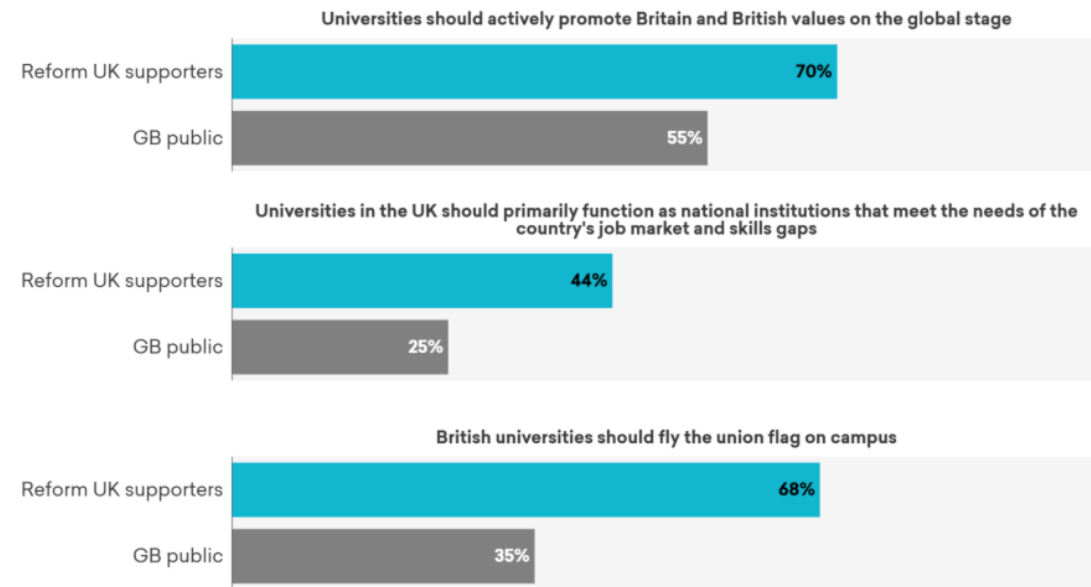
- Universities in the UK should primarily function as national institutions that meet the needs of the country's job market and skills gaps
- Universities in the UK should be national institutions but maintain international connections and collaborate with other universities from around the world on medical, scientific and other research
- Don't know
- Universities in the UK should function as global institutions that are internationally connected and collaborate on research with institutions from other countries



While most Britons do not expect universities to make patriotic displays, such gestures may resonate with Reform UK voters. This group stands out in their expectations of how universities, as national institutions, should behave. Reform supporters are nearly twice as likely as the national average to believe universities should fly the Union Flag on campus (68 per cent, compared to 35 per cent), more likely to believe they should focus on national interests rather than cooperating internationally (44 per cent compared to 25 per cent of the wider public), and that universities should promote British values on the global stage (71 per cent compared to 55 per cent). Given their lower overall trust in the sector, visible acts of national pride – or communications that emphasise national interests ahead of global ones – may help universities connect with this more sceptical audience.

Reform UK supporters are more likely to expect universities to show national pride and promote British values

(% who agree with each statement)



International students

Britons are broadly in favour of UK universities taking in international students, with a few caveats. A slim majority, 52 per cent, say the benefits international students bring outweigh the costs against only 30 per cent who believe the opposite. When asked about numbers, 39 per cent prefer international student numbers to stay about the same and 24 per cent prefer higher numbers, while 23 per cent want numbers to come down. For many Britons, the fact that international students are coming from across the world to study in the UK is a source of pride, and evidence that the university system 'must be doing something right'.

"(Universities) attracted a diverse array of people from around the world. So obviously there's a big desire to come here to learn. So it must be doing something right from that point of view."

Ian, chef, Frome

Yet there are also clear concerns: the three in ten Britons who believe the costs of international students outweigh the benefits, doubles to 58 per cent of 2024

Reform UK voters. In focus groups, participants cite concerns about housing and course capacity.

“There are situations where people from Britain are being pushed out because there's not enough space on the courses they want to do. I think at that point, that's when it becomes a problem.”

Hannah, account manager, Chippenham

But while this seems to be rooted in broader concern about migration, participants in focus groups are clear that they would not approve of efforts to reduce net migration simply by targeting international students.

Only 16 per cent believe the government would be delivering on their promise of reducing net migration if they did so solely by cutting international student numbers. Notably, Reform voters are the most likely to feel that this approach would be unsatisfactory: 81 per cent say this would not be meeting the government's commitment, and only 12 per cent say it would.

Notably, in focus groups and polling, it is clear that for many Britons, support for international students is contingent on the perception that they remain in the UK and contribute after graduating. Half of the public (51 per cent) think that international students staying and working in the UK after their studies is a good thing for the country, compared to only 17 per cent who think it is a bad thing. 37 per cent of those who backed Reform in 2024 think this is a bad thing, while nearly as many (33 per cent) see it as a good thing. Additionally, Reform's newer supporters (those who switched to the party since the general election) tend to think international students staying in the UK is a good thing, by a margin of 41 per cent to 35 per cent.

Clear planning for how international students can contribute to the UK for when they graduate, could help to neutralise the minority opposed to international students.

“There's not enough British people being able to go to these universities to get these degrees to work in hospitals, as doctors, surgeons or whatever. And then they're getting shipped back to their country with all of this great education and then it's just getting lost, in a sense. It's not actually staying in the UK. I'd rather it stayed in the UK personally. That's me personally.”

Harry, 31, window cleaner, Minehead

While some concerns exist on the impact of international students, these findings indicate there is more space for a nuanced conversation about the costs and benefits of international students than is sometimes assumed.

5. Fees and funding

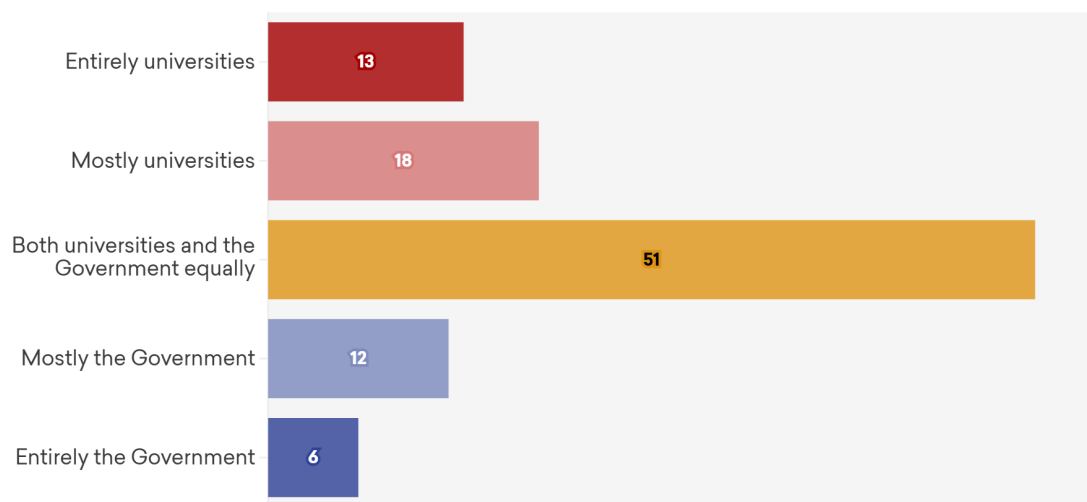
Concerns about the financial future of universities have cut through: 42 per cent of Britons say they are worried about universities closing down, and 53 per cent believe that this is likely to happen in the coming years.

For the public, these challenges should be shared between the Government and the universities themselves. Asked who is responsible for fixing universities' financial challenges, only 13 per cent think universities themselves should be 'entirely' responsible; even fewer (6 per cent) believe that the Government is solely responsible. The majority of Britons believe there is some balance of responsibility between the two, including more than half (51 per cent) who think that universities and the Government are *equally* responsible.

But while the public want a balance of responsibility, it's clear that for Britons, this balance should lean toward universities, with 31 per cent saying universities are entirely or mostly responsible compared to 18 per cent who say the same about the Government.

The public believe that universities and the Government share responsibility for solving the sector's financial challenges

When universities are experiencing financial challenges, whose responsibility do you think it is to fix them?



Given a list of potential directions for cost-cutting, the public are hostile to fee rises for UK undergraduates. The most acceptable levers are reducing the number of courses (28 per cent), increasing government funding (25 per cent) and increasing the numbers of international students (21 per cent).

Universities face a challenge in tackling their financial difficulties without further undermining the perception that degrees have lost their value. In focus groups, parents of students share their children's experiences and lament the impact of cost-cutting measures like redundancy or reduced contact hours. For some, these are sometimes seen as direct symptoms of a financially unsustainable sector, and proof that going to university is no longer worth the fees. In this context, it's no surprise that increasing domestic fees is among the least popular measures to tackle universities' financial issues, preferred by only 4 per cent of Britons.

"I honestly can't think of very much really because, as a parent, they don't seem to be making any money, sort of making staff redundant, shutting down departments or the rest of it. Also, all the lectures seem to be online, so children don't actually need to go. They can just catch up whenever they feel like it and it just seems very, very expensive for what you're getting."

Laura, director, Swansea

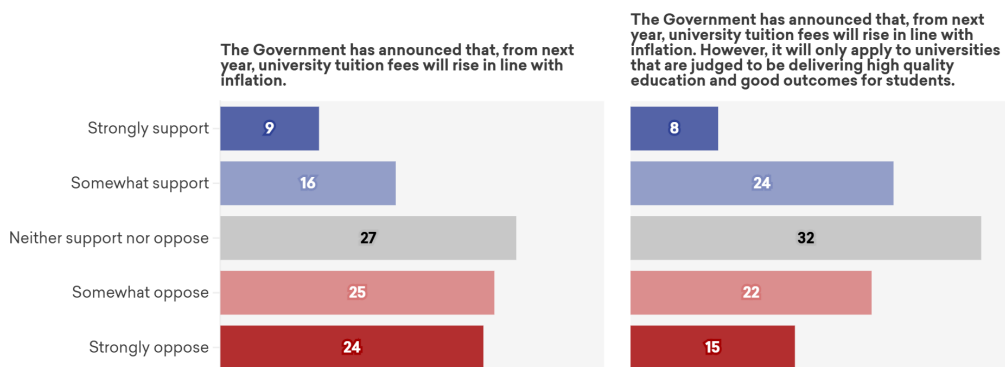
"I think most of us were agreeing earlier that what you're actually getting for the fee is maybe not the best at times. So I don't think raising the fees would be a good idea."

Joe, Norwich

While increasing fees is unpopular, the Government's approach of tying rises to new quality standards can help to neutralise this opposition: using a split sample experiment (in which half of respondents are shown a message about tuition fees rising with inflation, and the other half see a message that includes mention of "high quality education and good outcomes for students"), opposition to tuition fee rises drops from 49 per cent to 37 per cent, while support rises from 25 per cent to 32 per cent.

Britons tend to oppose a rise in tuition fees, but tying the increase to new quality standards reduces opposition

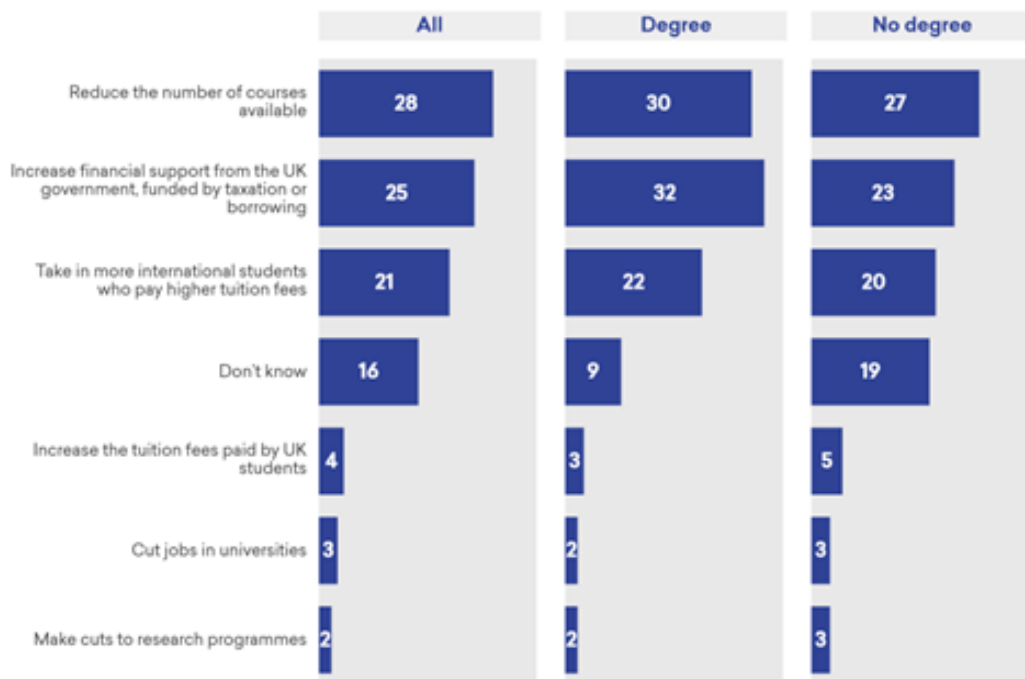
To what extent do you support or oppose this?



Reducing the number of courses is a popular approach, selected by 28 per cent of Britons – and remains popular across graduates and non-graduates alike. It is clear from focus group conversations that the public don't want to see a bonfire of non-vocational courses: even niche or unconventional degrees are seen as important, so long as they can provide tangible value to students. However, there is clearly a public appetite for universities to specialise their offer to students, rather than providing such a broad range of courses.

Britons would rather reduce the number of courses - while only 4 per cent would prefer to increase tuition fees

Several UK universities are facing financial difficulties, with some running a budget deficit or in debt. Which of the following do you think is the best way for universities to raise money?



Meanwhile, taking in more international students is among the more popular suggestions to increase income: Britons would choose this over redundancies, increased domestic fees or research cuts. However, it is less popular among Reform UK supporters, selected by only 16 per cent compared to 21 per cent among the wider public. As described above, support for international students is contingent on the view that they are remaining and working in the UK after their studies. If the university sector aims to raise income by taking in more international students, this needs to be communicated with a focus on these students' academic merits and economic contribution, rather than their higher fees.

Strikingly only 2 per cent identified cuts to research programmes as the best way for universities to make ends meet, reflecting the broader findings on the positivity with which research is viewed. At the same time there was a lack of awareness

exposed by focus groups of how research is funded. Indicating that a wider public debate about how university research is funded, including the role of international students in that could be worthwhile.

In coming years, if difficult financial decisions must be made, it will become increasingly important for universities to demonstrate their wider societal value. The role of research will likely be critical in doing so (cutting research programmes is the least popular measure tested), as well as illustrating the tangible value for students of their university experience.

While increased financial support from the government is relatively popular, the policy's support is far higher among graduates (32 per cent) than non-graduates (23 per cent). If universities are to receive support from the government, there will be a challenge in convincing the public that this money will be well spent. In some focus groups - particularly with non-graduates - universities are described as financially irresponsible or complacent. Some believe that universities and students may be 'passing the buck' to other taxpayers.

"I think since Covid it's shone a massive light on the fact that they've been really complacent for tens, if not hundreds, of years, that this money's going to roll in every year and they just need to learn how to run a bloody business. They have millions of pounds coming through complacently going, yeah, there's loads of kids coming next year and loads of kids coming the year after."

Chris, company director, Manchester

This places an even greater premium on universities demonstrating they are well-run and making responsible financial decisions.

Conclusion

At a time when faith in many institutions is fraught, the public still trust universities and believe they have something important to offer the country. In the public imagination, universities are more than just businesses; they are national institutions. This is a source of pride, but it also comes with responsibilities. The public expect assurance on teaching quality and students' employability, while also wanting universities to look outward, contributing to wider society on a local and national scale.

While Britons still view universities positively, there are warning signs. The most striking of which is the divide that having a degree creates in perceptions of universities' value to the country, along with cracks emerging in the perceived value of degrees themselves.

Addressing concerns now will help the sector avoid being drawn into polarised political debates and ensure it continues to meet public expectations. The findings suggest that universities may benefit from:

- **Highlighting research and innovation:** research is among the most important roles Britons associate with universities, yet it rarely comes up unprompted in focus groups and awareness is limited. Raising the visibility of research discoveries (both large breakthroughs and everyday innovations) would strengthen public recognition of universities' value beyond teaching and resonate with those who don't go to university.
- **Focusing on the local:** residents of university towns speak of their local university with pride, but also concern. Prioritising local contributions – such as shared facilities, outreach and local skills – while working with landlords and councils to manage challenges around housing, will be crucial to maintaining a positive relationship with local people. This includes demonstrating how international students can contribute locally and to the UK.
- **Being proud nationally:** Britons are not demanding grand patriotic displays, but they do see universities as national institutions. Visible, understated shows of national pride (emphasising how universities serve national demands over international profile) may help to reassure sceptical voters, particularly Reform supporters, that universities act in Britain's interests.
- **More clearly illustrating the link between university and the workplace:** Britons see universities' core role as training the next generation of skilled professionals, while their biggest concern is the declining value of degrees. Demonstrating stronger links between courses and career outcomes, through placements, employer partnerships, and professional skills development – or more clearly articulating how broader skills developed at university translates into the workplace – would help answer this concern.