The UPP Foundation and Higher Education Policy Institute Public Attitudes to Higher Education Survey

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Foreword

In 1960, Kingsley Amis criticised "the pit of ignorance and incapacity into which British education has sunk since the war", arguing that "more will mean worse."

The history of higher education in England is littered with these regular bouts of scepticism and introspection. This is not surprising. Universities play a significant role in shaping our society and economy – and have done for decades, if not centuries. Institutions that mould who we are as a people face scrutiny and challenge, particularly from those who want to change our nation's story.

Today, the debate about the role of universities in society is, again, hotly contested. Driven by the fallout from a turbulent decade, scepticism towards universities within government is higher than it has been since the 1980s. The sector is therefore braced for a difficult spending review, and we expect to see this scepticism play out in the autumn, when universities (at least the teaching and education side) will be low down on the list of funding priorities for the Government.

So how did we get here? Over the last few years, a narrative has taken hold that the higher education sector and the Government are on separate sides battling for the future of the country. This battle is fought over two terrains. An economic one, with the Government attempting to take back control of where and what people study, believing that standards have slipped and degrees have expanded in areas which are not economically productive. The second is a cultural one, in which universities have found themselves at the centre of a debate about identity and belonging, which tends to pit those who work and study in universities against many of the Government's supporters. Like all narratives this is overly crude and lacks nuance, but there is truth to it.

We should say upfront that we are not impartial observers in this debate. We are unapologetic evangelists for the power of higher education to widen opportunity, transform people's lives and improve society. We have benefited from undergraduate and postgraduate education and – as leaders of two charities working in the higher education sector – we constantly see the good that universities are capable of doing.

But if we are to change the narrative and build a stronger case to government (of any political hue), we need to broaden our sector's appeal to the people who matter to them – the public. That is why we have worked together (supported by Public First, who conducted the polling) to publish a comprehensive report detailing public attitudes to higher education in England.

The polling looked at public opinion across three broad areas: views about universities as institutions, views about degrees and their value, and views on topical 'cultural' issues around higher education. We analysed several cross breaks, such as voting, class, age and educational background. And we identified, via a segmentation analysis of the data, six key groups that shape the debate around universities and the value of higher education as well as an important minority – about 3 in 10 voters – who seem actively disinterested in higher education, even when prompted.

Our impression from the findings is that the public often have a generally positive – if nuanced – view of the sector. If you ask most members of the public for their view on higher education, they will tell you that too many people go to university. But when asked about their own lives, they are more supportive of the idea of higher education. A plurality of people would want to go to university if they were leaving secondary school now, and a majority of respondents would like their own children to attend in the future.

However, the polling clearly highlights the sector's need to engage more with, and demonstrate its value to, all in society. We find support for universities is weaker amongst those groups – Leave voters, older people and the skilled working classes – which helped to win the Conservatives its majority in 2019.

One of the reasons we commissioned this report was to find out whether there are similar partisan splits in opinion on universities compared to the US.

Across the pond, there has been a major shift in views about universities over the last decade. Democrats were 7% more positive about universities than Republicans in 2010 compared with 34% more positive in 2019[1]. Now, some 59% of Republicans have a negative view of universities. To us, this is a major fault line in US higher education which undermines the opportunity to create a long-term positive environment for the sector.

Could a similar partisan split in England be a cause for the challenging relationship between the Government and the sector over the last few years? There are signs of divisions in England along similar lines to those in the US. Our findings show much greater positivity among Remain voters for universities compared to Leavers and a gap (albeit smaller) between Labour and Conservative voters. But the trend is not as strong as in the US. More Conservative and Leave voters in England were positive about universities than negative, and partisan splits are generally driven by high levels of neutrality, rather than negativity.

One of the clearest reasons why there are significant differences in support for universities based on age, vote and class is participation. Graduates are more positive about universities than non-graduates.

You could argue this is good sign – as it would be somewhat troubling if the people who benefited from a university education did not have a stronger connection to the sector than those who did not attend university themselves. But we see it a little differently. While not in the public sector, universities compete for support and resources with other parts of government. Given they are at a natural disadvantage with universal services for public affection, it is incumbent on universities to engage with groups who are less likely to attend university (both to raise participation but also to demonstrate value directly). Yet, the polling shows this is not happening to the extent it should. Around a third of people in England have never visited an English university.

[2] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/29/americans-have-become-much-less-positive-about-tech-companies-impact-on-the-u-s/

A majority of those in more disadvantaged socioeconomic groups have never visited one. We also find that people from advantaged socio-economic groups who themselves did not attend university, are more likely to have visited one than those who did not attend university from less advantaged backgrounds.

We feel it is in our sector's enlightened self-interest to reshape its civic and public engagement activities to better connect with groups who are traditionally less likely to attend university.

Beyond engagement, the other key lesson we take from the polling is the importance of persuasion. Respondents generally feel that society places too high a value on university education. They also – similar to the Government – place less value on degrees which are not 'vocational' or clearly linked to specific jobs and professions.

These are not opinions we share – education is a good in itself. But there is also a practical reason to support degrees which are not linked to specific employment opportunities. In an age of automation when graduates are likely to have many different jobs and careers during their working lives, it is vital that students attain flexible and transferable skills, providing a platform for them to thrive and grow. We believe that this is much more likely to happen if people are given the choice to choose a subject they love, rather than being shoehorned into courses which do not meet their aspirations. But the evidence from this polling shows clearly that we are losing the argument, and we have a job to do here to persuade the public of our case.

Linked to this is how the higher education sector communicates with the public and is able to persuade and influence people who may not share the dominant values in the sector – particularly in relation to issues around identity and belonging. We found that changes to the curriculum garner very different levels of support depending on how they are framed. We demonstrate that the way in which the public sees the issue can be changed drastically by the way the argument is presented. Specifically, people are more inclined to support progressive changes when they are framed as a broadening of perspectives rather than the removal of western-centric viewpoints or "decolonisation".

Our advice is to move away from slogans which the public either do not generally understand or are hostile to, and present activity in a way which seeks to build broad coalitions of support. To do this, it is vital to understand public attitudes, particularly when dominant opinion within universities conflicts with majority public attitudes. By understanding what different groups in society think, we can start to work out a way to persuade them and to learn from them, by linking our actions to their values.

One final point: there is a huge amount of rich data in this report and we hope you find the results as fascinating as we do. Our hope is that the report is used as a catalyst for deep discussions within universities and the wider sector on how to persuade the public of the value of higher education in England and beyond. While there is much to be optimistic about in the findings – particularly the high demand for a university education – what is really striking is the high level of neutrality towards universities. History shows we will always face some scrutiny and challenge but it is vital we grow public support in the years ahead, so we are not faced with such a challenging external environment as we face now.

Before we conclude, we want to place on record our gratitude to Seb Wride and Jonathan Simons from Public First for their expert support for this project.

Richard Brabner, Director UPP Foundation, and Nick Hillman, Director Higher Education Policy Institute.

Executive summary

We conducted detailed polling of 2,000 adults across England in February 2021 to explore a wide range of views around people's perceptions of universities in England.

- **We find that a plurality of people think it is important to get a degree.** 33% say that a person getting a degree from a university is important compared to 23% who say it is unimportant. Equally, when we ask if people themselves would want to go to university if they were leaving secondary school now, 46% think they would want to, and 26% that they would not. A majority of people want their children to go to university.

- In terms of the total number of people getting degrees, **more people say they would prefer the proportion of the population going to university to reduce** than increase (17% say it should be greater, 27% smaller, 36% the same and 21% don't know), particularly among the oldest groups where almost half say that there should be a smaller proportion of the population going to university. However, among younger people, there is a mood in favour of further university entry.

- This slight inconsistency around people's views on the value of university is reflected when we explore the purpose of university. **When asked why degrees are important, people say largely for functional reasons, and there is less value in responses placed on degrees which are not clearly linked to specific jobs. At the same time, we find some evidence for a perceived value of university degrees which goes beyond higher salaries.** People agree (61%) that enjoying a subject is a good enough reason to do a degree in it, indicating that they think the decision should not solely be career based (even if that is an important part of it). Further, a majority agrees (54%) that going to university will lead to participants making friends from a wider range of backgrounds. And of course, outside the scope of this survey, revealed preferences suggest that hundreds of thousands of young people go to university every year, including those who choose to study subjects which are not closely aligned to specific careers.

- Reflecting similar US polling, we explicitly repeat Pew Research Center polling and identify a similar partisan divide in England to the US on questions about whether universities have a positive impact on the country, and whether they are heading in the right or wrong direction. **We find that far more people in England have neutral views on universities than in the US. Nevertheless, 43% think the impact is positive compared to 11% who believe it is negative. Conservative voters, and Leave voters, are more likely to express negative views, echoing the partisan divide in the US, albeit at a lower level.** Conservative and Leave voters are also significantly more likely to think that universities adopt a left-wing stance in their approach to teaching and that academics cannot be trusted to act in the national interest – but there is still net support for academics among Conservative voters. Finally, and unlike in the US, we find a consensus view across subgroups that the university system is moving in the right direction. In England, more people overall and across a majority of all subgroups by voting intention and political voting, say that universities are going in the right direction, rather than the wrong direction.

- We also find broader class divides in the view towards higher education. **Those who are more negatively inclined towards higher education have had less contact with universities. In this context, it is worth noting that around a third of people in England (34%) have never visited an English university and a further 32% haven't visited one in at least five years.** A majority of those in the lower socio-economic groups – those in category DE – have never visited an English university (53%). This distinction does not simply reflect having attended a university. We also find that among those who have never attended university there is also a social grade trend. Some 65% of respondents in the DE group who have never studied at a university have never visited one, compared to 51% in both C1 and C2 groups, and 37% in the AB group. In other words, people from higher social groupings who themselves did not attend university, are still more likely to have visited one.

- The role of universities as the location of – and potential instigators of (in the views of some) – so-called 'culture wars' has been much debated recently. We explore this with specific reference to two issues; who should be allowed to speak on campuses and the content of university curricula. **In the abstract, people are highly supportive of free speech and prefer a system whereby anyone can speak at a university as long as they don't break the law (55%). A further 24% think they should be allowed to speak regardless. However, the concept is most accurately tested when presented with specific scenarios and, under these, opinions change – particularly around racism (where NET -25% think they should be allowed to speak), violent Islamic extremism (NET – 26%), and Holocaust denial. (NET – 49%)**

- Issues around the content of the curriculum garner very different levels of support depending on how they are framed. **We demonstrate that the way in which the public sees the issue can change dramatically by the way the argument is presented. Specifically, people are more inclined to support changes to the curriculum when it is framed as a broadening of perspectives, rather than the removal of western-centric viewpoints or "decolonisation".**

- Finally, we present a segmentation analysis of people's views towards universities – to complement traditional cross breaks by age, social class, voting intention and the like. Our segmentation analysis identifies six key opinion groups which shape the debate around universities and the value of higher education, and an important minority – about 3 in 10 voters – who are broadly disengaged with the entire subject matter. **We find that those who are highly engaged with – and opinionated on – the politics of university degrees and graduates make up a small minority of the population (around 18%).** The segmentation analysis is particularly important because it identifies that the ways in which people cluster do not always align to traditional groups. For example, we find a group we term the 'salary improvers', comprising around 16% of the population. By traditional metrics – graduate status, age, or wealth – they might be assumed to be supportive of universities, and in many ways they are. Yet their defining feature is that they see university as a functional pathway to higher salaries. Were there to be an alternative route created which demonstrated similar wage gains, it is reasonable to presume that this group would support a shift away from higher education resources to pay for that route – whereas other groups may not do so. In other words, understanding what people think, as well as who they are, is vital for universities and for the broader debate on public policy.

Methodology

Public First ran a poll of 2011 adults in England between the 4th and 7th February 2021. The polling sample and questions were related to universities and higher education institutions in England due to the different systems of higher education in each of the four nations. Otherwise, perceptions of the value of higher education would be potentially different and in any case not drawn from a consistent base. As such, all participants and questions are focused on the English higher education sector.

The polling was commissioned to accompany a report by Richard Brabner of the UPP Foundation examining opinions on a range of issues relating to higher education and graduates, to be published by HEPI. Given the breadth of polling findings, this publication sets out analysis of the polling to a fuller extent than it is possible to becovered in Richard Brabner's forthcoming HEPI Debate Paper.

The sample of respondents was recruited through proprietary panels online, where respondents are registered specifically to take part in polls. Attentional checks were employed to ensure respondents were engaging with the questions. Public First is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

Full tables can be found [here]. As with all opinion polls, there is a margin of error in the answers, and the margin of error is greater when sample sizes are smaller (as in some of the crossbreaks of specific groups of people). All polling numbers in this report should be read on this basis.

As part of the analysis, Public First carried out a segmentation of respondents to construct groups of people by their attitudes towards universities. Using the opinion data collected from the poll, respondents are grouped together with similar respondents based on their answers to a range of questions. This allows us to categorise responses loosely and indicates the key opinion groups in England on the topic of higher education.

A statistical technique known as 'K-means clustering' – which groups answers together by commonalities and separates out these clusters from other clusters to form different groups – was employed on a range of questions covering the importance of universities to a variety of areas, including individuals' lives, the benefits and quality of university-led research and the political leanings of graduates. Analysis converged on 8 segments, 2 of which were then jointly categorised as "uninterested" as a result of their propensity either to respond in the middle of the survey, or to agree with nearly all the questions. The remaining 6 segments form the basis of a large portion of the analysis in this report and are summarised in Chapter 1. Opinion data is noisy, and not every person will perfectly fit into the segments provided. Equally, not every segment will have a different view on everything; there are some questions where majority opinion is held across all the segments. Nevertheless, there are crucial areas where differences become clear, and these will be the focus of any analysis of segments. Given that the segments – as in every segmentation exercise – will have 'fuzzy edges' and contain a mixture of opinions which are more or less sceptical of elements of higher education provision, it is not possible to combine segments and add them up so as to say that x% of people are 'pro-university' and y% are 'anti-university'.

We refer extensively in this report to social grades. In doing so, we draw from the classification system of social grades based on occupation designed by the National Readership Survey 50 years ago. It can be summarised as:

Social grade	Description	Estimated % of the adult population in each grade
A	Higher managerial, administrative and professional	4
B	Intermediate managerial, administrative and professional	23
C1	Supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative and professional	28
C2	Skilled manual workers	20
D	Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers	15
E	State pensioners, casual and lowest grade workers, unemployed with state benefits only	10

Chapter 1 – Segmentation analysis

On the basis of a segmentation analysis carried out by Public First, we construct and present six groups of adults clustered by their general views towards higher education in England, as well as an additional grouping who are largely uninterested. They are presented here in descending order of size of the population who sit in each cluster.

Segment 1: The Salary Improvers – 16% of the sample

For Salary Improvers, a university education is critical to getting a good job, and the main function of a higher education institution is to support their students in achieving this:

- 65% of this segment agree that university degrees are needed for a good job
- 66% say they would want to go to a university if leaving school today
- 85% say universities are important for jobs
- 94% disagree that a university degree is a waste of time

43% believe that degrees are over-valued in society, in comparison to 23% who do not. So, while more agree than disagree with this sentiment, it tends to be less than most other segments – perhaps underlying their belief that a degree is needed for a job.

Salary Improvers are typically more divided on issues around politics in universities:

- 33% to 30% agree that universities are "elitist"
- 27% to 20% disagree that universities teach a "left-wing" perspective – a majority here not coming down on either side

Segment 1: The Salary Improvers – 16% of the sample (continued)

This segment is the most divided demographically:

- It is slightly more heavily weighted towards the wealthier ABC1 socio-economic groups (60% of the segment ABC1)
- Individuals in this group are somewhat more likely to be between the ages of 45 and 64, and less likely to be 25-34, with only 10% in this age group compared to a sample-wide proportion of 17%
- 47% have personally attended university, meaning this segment is slightly above the sample average, however the other segments more clearly lean one way or another
- 57% of those in this group who have children say that their children have attended university, lower only than the University Optimist' segment
- The segment leans Conservative, with 43% saying they voted this way at the 2019 election, and it leans Remain with 46% saying they voted this way in the 2016 referendum

Segment 2: The Career Delayers – 15% of the sample

The Career Delayers group are sceptical of the value of university, believing there are other routes to good jobs in society, and that university does not prepare people for the "real world":

- 83% agree that university does not prepare students for the real world
- 88% disagree that you need a university degree to get a high salary
- 59% say society values a university education too highly at the moment

They are relatively divided on whether getting a degree is worth it overall:

- 52% select the middle option when asked if the advantages outweigh the disadvantages of university or vice versa
- 43% say that universities don't teach the skills that people need to get a good job when asked about the main disadvantages of university
- Only 25% say they would personally go to a university if leaving secondary school now, while 48% say they would choose not to go

70% of the Career Delayers have not attended university themselves, and 32% are 65 years old or older, making this the group with the largest number of retirees. This is the segment which has the largest proportion of people for whom GCSEs or equivalent were the highest level of education achieved (29%). 62% of this group is female, the largest proportion of any of the segments. Of those who voted in this segment, the split between Leave and Remain voters is 59% to 41%.

Segment 3: The Elite Promoters – 13% of the sample

For the Elite Promoters group, the importance of a university degree is clear, however, they believe that the institutions act as tickets for elites:

- 78% agree that you need a university degree to get a high salary
- 66% agree that university students spend more time partying than studying
- 62% agree that universities are elitist
- 51% agree that university students are pretentious

Politically, this group is driven by relatively left-wing economic principles. Some 77% agree that ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth (compared to 64% sample-wide). On top of this they tend to lean slightly towards believing that a university education makes people more Conservative (32% agree with this while 26% disagree).

79% of this group is White British, making it the segment with the lowest proportion of White British respondents. 32% have an annual income of under £20,000, a higher proportion than the 26% for the rest of the sample. 20% of this group has been furloughed at some point during the Covid pandemic. This may, in part, be due to the fact that this group has the lowest average age and the largest proportion of 18-24-year-olds (12%) (besides the disinterested segment, described later on). 28% of this group have a post-secondary but sub-tertiary vocational or technical qualification as their highest level of educational attainment.

Segment 4: The University Pessimists – 11% of the sample

Most negative about the role that universities play in the UK is the university Pessimist group. They are less likely to view universities in a positive light:

- 59% say that getting a university degree is unimportant or very unimportant
- 72% agree that universities are elitist
- 47% say universities are unimportant to their local area
- 63% would prefer for there to be a smaller proportion of the population going to university
- 51% agree that universities teach a "left-wing" perspective
- 78% agreeing that university students are pretentious

Segment 4: The University Pessimists – 11% of the sample (continued)

Among this group there was quite a high proportion who had little engagement with universities:

- Only 19% had themselves attended university
- 90% said that neither of their parents had attended university
- Among those with children, 24% say their children had attended university
- 58% have never visited a university in England

57% of this group is male, making it the segment with the largest portion of White British respondents at 93%. 66% of this group voted Leave in the 2016 referendum, and if the 2019 election had been among this group alone the Conservative Party would have won 68% of the popular vote compared to Labour's 17%. 29% of University Pessimists work in skilled manual jobs, meaning this is the group with the highest proportion of respondents from "C2" socio-economic groups, representing skilled manual jobs such as plumbing. 30% of this group say their highest educational attainment is A Levels.

Segment 5: The Research Supporters – 9% of the sample

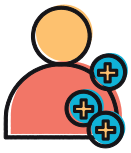
Some of the key distinctions between respondents are driven by those aspects of the service which universities provide which they are positive towards.

In this instance, the Research Positives are keen supporters of universities, principally as research institutions:

- 85% agree that university research is one of the best things produced in the UK
- 57% disagree that a lot of money spent on university research is wasted
- 94% say that universities are important or very important for innovation and research

In the context of the pandemic, we find high rates of positivity towards university research across the sample (this is discussed in Chapter 2). However, the role of university research goes further than this for the research positive group. 56% say that universities have played an important or essential role in the Covid response, and 60% say that universities play an important or essential role in tackling climate change.

Among those in this group who voted in 2019, 44% voted for Labour, while, 26% voted for the Conservatives, making this the segment most likely to vote Labour. It is also the group most likely to vote for the Liberal Democrats, who received 19% of the votes from this group. This group has the largest proportion of Remain voters, with 63% having voted Remain in 2016. 19% of this group have a postgraduate degree.



Segment 6: The University Optimists – 7% of the sample

Less moderate in their opinions than other groups tend to be, the University Optimist group is overwhelmingly positive about all things relating to universities:

- 96% agree that a degree from a university is an impressive achievement, and 56% strongly agree with this view
- 94% regard universities as important for people's personal development

On top of their positivity towards higher education institutions, they tend to be more positive about university students as a whole:

- 74% agree with the statement that those who go to university are more likely to have friends from a range of social and educational backgrounds
- This group is most likely to agree that those who do not attend university are more "closed-minded" (32%), although more still disagree (46%)

In addition, they tend to be more defensive of universities when it comes to the political questions:

- 42% disagree and 17% agree that universities teach a "left-wing" perspective
- 48% disagree that politics on university campuses lean towards one particular viewpoint
- 76% disagree that university-educated people are pretentious

19% of this group live in London, the largest proportion among the segments. In turn, 62% of this group live in urban or suburban areas. This is the segment which contains the highest proportion of people who attended university; 67% of this group has personally attended university, and 28% has at least one parent who did. This segment also has the highest representation of those who have an annual income of £50,000 or above (32%), and 7% with an annual household income of £100,000 or more. 43% of this group fits into the top two social grades (AB) indicating that this is the group with the highest proportion of individuals in intermediate or higher level professional jobs. 5% of this group has a PhD.

Segment 7 and 8: The Broadly Uninterested* – 30% of the sample

This sample is comprised of two separate groups bundled together:

- Those who midpoint or "Don't Know" respond on a wide range of questions (21% of total sample), and
- Those who agree on the vast majority of questions asked – even when contradictory – likely expressing a high level of agreement bias and / or a lack of critical engagement with the issue (8% of total sample)

It is relatively common to find groups of people who are not particularly interested in the topics of a survey, and here we find a group who are largely disengaged when it comes to the topic of higher education. **This is not the same as this group being moderate, or centrist overall (as they are often caricatured), and we cannot make assumptions that they would prefer a moderate approach to any issue, or that they would split for or against on any particular proposal. Only some of them express moderate opinions, and not on all issues. Some have high levels of "Don't Knows" on many issues, and some "Agree" to many things, likely depicting lack of interest. They are accurately called the 'Uninterested' and they are unlikely to become interested – especially as the Don't Knows are uninterested more broadly in public policy issues and politics.**

Those who express high levels of agreement bias are hard to analyse, as there is little to identify when their responses might demonstrate a genuinely strong opinion on a topic and when they demonstrate low-engagement agreement. As an example, 86% agree that universities teach a "left-wing" perspective, and 87% agree that University education makes people more conservative. While these are not necessarily opposing views, it is hard to conclude anything from this except that this group is likely to agree to statements.

As for those who tend towards the middle response or "Don't Know", there is a little more of a shift among this group on certain issues. For example:

- 48% have never visited a university or can't remember when they did
- While many still respond neutrally, a slim majority would say that universities are important for jobs (50%), innovation / research (56%)
- 70% say that it makes them proud that one of the vaccines used against Covid was discovered by a British university

There is also evidence that this group is relatively unengaged in a range of other areas:

- When we ask the respondents to identify themselves on a 7-point scale relating to left-to-right wing political opinion, 54% of this group select the mid-point, 10% select "Don't Know"
- Similarly on the same scale for liberal to conservative views, 46% select the middle and 10% select "Don't Know"

As we might expect, members of this group are not likely to have attended university themselves, with 63% saying they have not. They lean slightly younger, with 62% under the age of 44, and a smaller proportion of this group is White British at 79%. This is also the segment least likely to own a house outright, with 33% in this category compared to a sample average level of 40%. 16% did not vote in the 2016 EU referendum, which is higher than the other segments, and 14% did not vote in the 2019 General Election.

To note: Whilst we believe this group is important for universities and government to consider, or at least not ignore – because they form a large proportion of the electorate – we focus the majority of our exploration of the segments on the other groups. This is because it is difficult to separate out this group of disinterested respondents whose apathy is linked to response bias (ie a tendency to respond in the middle, or agree with every statement – in other words, they are apathetic about even answering survey questions on universities because they are so disinterested) from those who genuinely agree or have mid-strength opinions on many different subjects.

The table below shows a breakdown of how the segments are composed from the poll:

Table A: Composition of segments by traditional crossbreaks

		Total	The Salary Improvers	The Career Delayers	The Elite Promoters	The University Pessimists	The Research Supporters	The University Optimists	The Broadly Dis-interested
Gender	Male	49%	43%	37%	56%	57%	40%	45%	56%
	Female	51%	57%	62%	44%	43%	60%	55%	44%
Age	18-24	11%	9%	8%	12%	11%	10%	6%	14%
	25-34	17%	17%	13%	13%	14%	10%	13%	25%
	35-44	16%	12%	15%	16%	12%	13%	14%	22%
	45-54	17%	18%	15%	19%	16%	22%	23%	14%
	55-64	15%	16%	17%	17%	22%	21%	14%	9%
	65+	23%	27%	32%	23%	25%	25%	30%	15%
Socio-econ group	AB	23%	24%	17%	20%	16%	32%	43%	20%
	C1	31%	36%	32%	28%	29%	34%	25%	29%
	C2	21%	15%	23%	24%	29%	14%	12%	23%
	DE	26%	25%	27%	28%	25%	20%	20%	28%
University	Attended university	41%	47%	29%	31%	19%	61%	67%	43%
	Did not attend university	59%	52%	70%	68%	81%	39%	33%	56%
EU 2016	Leave	43%	36%	50%	49%	66%	25%	30%	41%
	Remain	40%	46%	35%	35%	18%	63%	58%	39%

		Total	The Salary Improvers	The Career Delayers	The Elite Promoters	The University Pessimists	The Research Supporters	The University Optimists	The Broadly Dis-interested
2019 Vote	Conser-vative	42%	43%	48%	48%	55%	23%	35%	37%
	Labour	27%	25%	22%	26%	14%	39%	33%	32%
	Liberal Democrat	8%	11%	6%	7%	3%	17%	16%	5%
Area	Urban	22%	18%	13%	21%	19%	20%	23%	31%
	Suburbs	30%	28%	31%	35%	25%	36%	38%	26%
	Large Town	13%	14%	14%	13%	13%	9%	9%	15%
	Small Town	18%	23%	19%	15%	23%	18%	12%	16%
	Village	11%	11%	17%	12%	15%	11%	11%	8%
	Rural Area	5%	6%	6%	4%	6%	7%	6%	4%

Chapter 2 – Views on universities as institutions

In this section, we explore views of the public on universities as institutions – what they do, how often people have visited them, and what roles they play locally, nationally and globally. The intention is to set a baseline for exploring more complex issues about what universities might do in the future, drawn from how the sector is perceived by the public.

We find:

- **Around a third of people in England have never visited an English university,** and those who hold more negative views about universities tend to have had lower levels of engagement with them
- When asked what universities are important for, innovation / research came out top with jobs and local economies also featuring highly
- **A strong majority of most segments of the population think that universities have an economic impact both nationally and locally.** This is particularly strong in urban areas, but 36% of those living in small towns and 28% of those living in villages also say universities are important to their local area, compared to 37% and 26% respectively saying they are unimportant. However, when 'benefits' are framed more loosely, support for universities falls away – showing the importance of a link to perceptible economic growth
- **84% of the sample said that they were very or quite proud that one of the main Covid vaccines had been discovered by a British university.** Further, 72% of the sample agreed that university research is one of the best things produced in the UK as a country. This includes 80% of AB respondents compared to 65% of DE, and 79% of those who have personally attended a university to study compared to 68% of those who have not

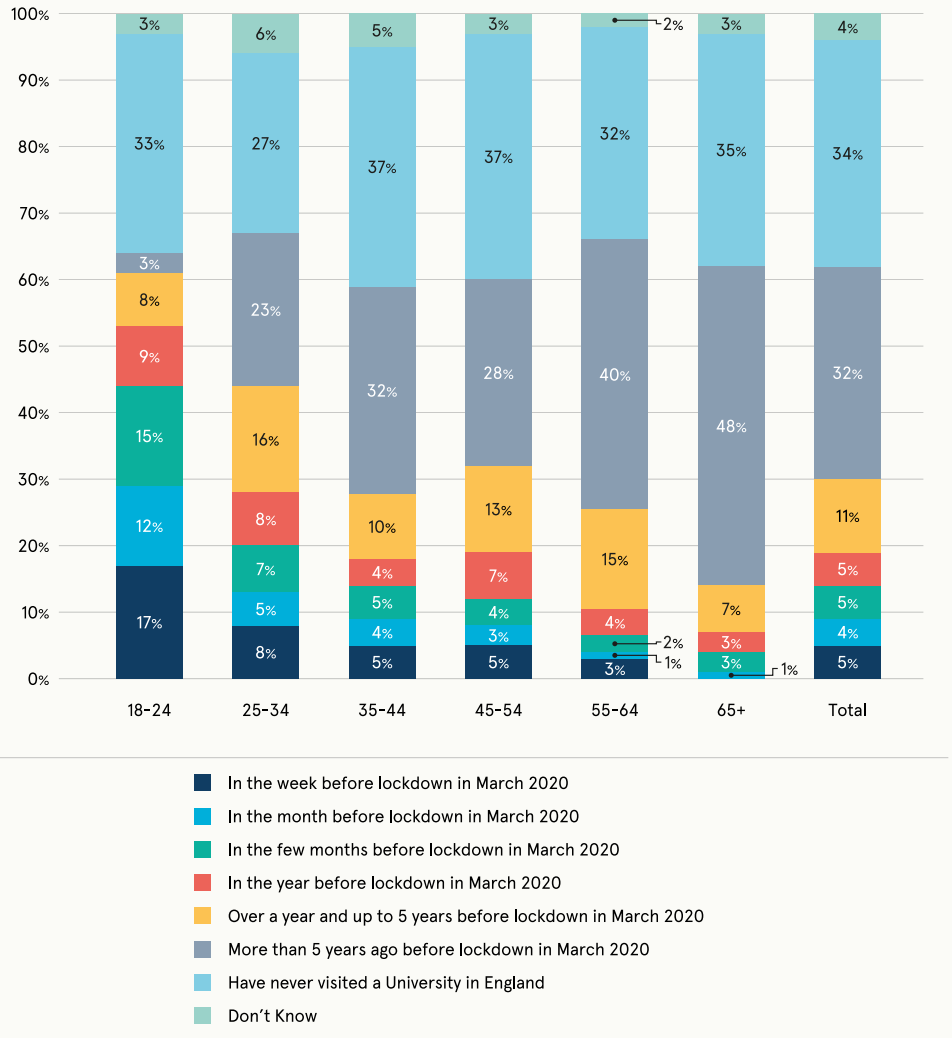
- **People are proud of the contribution that UK universities make globally.** 68% of the sample said it was important for them to know that British universities do well in the global league tables, and a majority across all age and social class sub breaks agree. **When we encouraged people to choose between areas which they believe it would be most important for universities to add benefits to, 51% selected the UK as a whole (over 14% choosing local communities, and 16% choosing the world).**
- When tracking overall sentiment towards HE and matching a Pew Research Center question from the US, we find overall a similar level of positive sentiment towards higher education in England – but with much higher levels of initial neutrality. In the US, there is a strong sentiment of anti-HE feeling among Republican voters; **we find a similar trend among Conservative and Leave voters in England, although overall these groups are positive.**

2.1. Overall engagement with universities

Around a third of people in England have never visited an English university, and those who hold more negative views about them tend to have lower levels of engagement.

We find in our sample that around 34% have never visited a university in England. While there is no age trend on this statistic (perhaps because the older groups, even though university attendance is lower, are likely to have visited universities with their children or have had a longer time period in which to visit), there is a clear trend when we look at how recently (prior to the pandemic) those who have visited a university did so (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Thinking back to before the first national lockdown in England, in March 2020. When did you last visit a university in England before that time, for whatever reason?

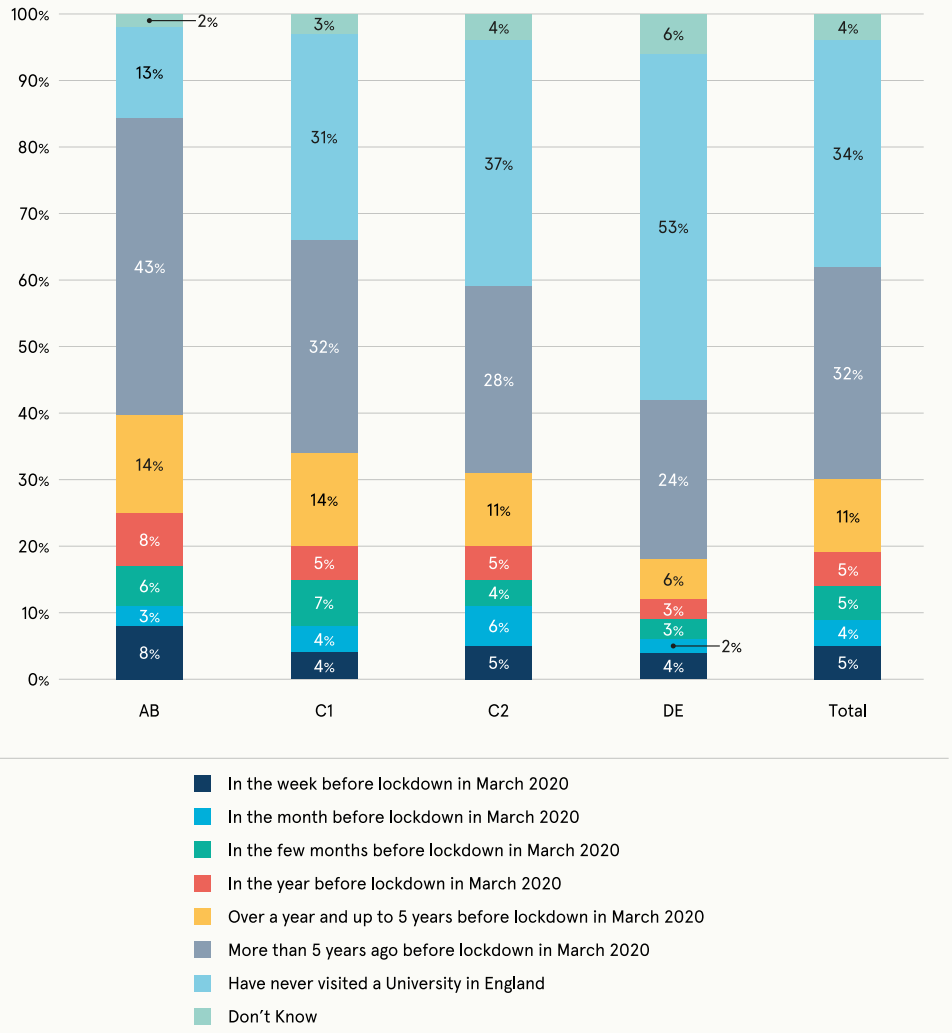


Of those who have visited a university in England in the year before Covid, 24% did so for study, 24% with a family member who is looking to study there, 16% went to attend an event like a public lecture and 14% went just to look around and see the buildings (Table B).

Table B: Reason for visiting a university prior to lockdown, by when the person visited	Visited in the year before lockdown	Visited over a year but under 5 years before lockdown	Visited more than 5 years before lockdown
For study	24%	16%	24%
With a family member / friend who is looking to study there	24%	30%	25%
For my work eg for training	20%	11%	6%
For an event eg public lecture	16%	15%	11%
To use the facilities eg library, sports facilities	15%	7%	6%
To see if I wanted to go and study there	14%	8%	5%
To just see the buildings / look around	14%	13%	12%
Passing through eg to get into other parts of the area	9%	5%	4%

The proportion who had never personally visited a university in England was considerably larger among the DE social group, representing a majority here (53%). There was a distinct trend across social grade (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Thinking back to before the first national lockdown in England, in March 2020. When did you last visit a university in England before that time, for whatever reason?



Although this will be in part driven by the fact that fewer people in the DE group have personally attended a university to study, this does not independently explain the difference. We also find that among only those who have never attended university there is also a social grade trend. 65% of those in the DE group who have never studied at a university have never visited one, compared to 51% in both C1 and C2 groups, and 37% in the AB group. In other words, people from higher social groupings who themselves did not attend university, are still more likely to have visited one.

Following on from this, the reasons why the higher socio-economic groups visited the university were slightly different. More in AB had visited for an event such as a public lecture (17%) or for their work or training (16%), than had among DE (8% and 7% respectively).

Low engagement with universities may play a role in the segments which we identified in the research. For example, 58% of the "The University Pessimists" group have never visited a university in England. Only 12% of those in the "University Optimists" group have never visited a university in England.

2.2. What are the important roles which universities play in England?

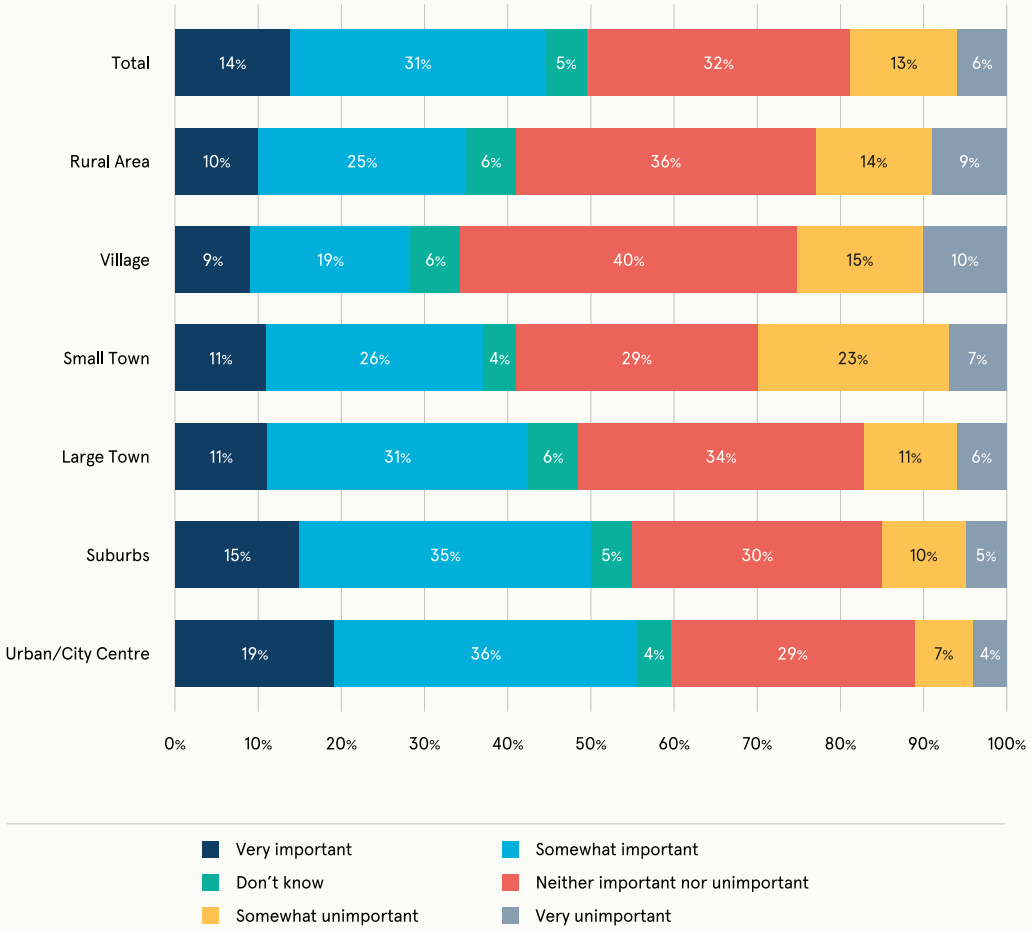
When we asked the public what universities are seen as important for, innovation/ research (78%) came out top (perhaps unsurprisingly) with jobs (65%) and local economies (61%) also featuring highly.

However, these feelings were not universal among our key segments (Table C).

Table C: NET importance of universities for the following (by segment)	Total	The University Pessimists	The Career Delayers	The Elite Promoters	The Salary Improvers	The Research Positives	The University Optimists
Innovation / research	74%	58%	76%	87%	84%	91%	96%
People's individual and personal development	64%	26%	55%	75%	82%	86%	93%
The economy in their local areas	53%	21%	45%	68%	61%	73%	87%
UK economy Total	56%	11%	39%	74%	74%	74%	88%
Jobs	57%	-2%	33%	79%	83%	74%	96%
Your local area	25%	-23%	0%	38%	40%	35%	51%

Universities are seen to play an important part in the economy in England. A significant majority of most segments think that they have an impact both nationally and locally. This is particularly strong in urban areas (which are more likely to have a university in them or close to them). Among those who live in urban areas, 56% describe universities as important for their own local area. However, the belief of the importance of universities for the local area is not exclusive to cities, with 36% of those living in small towns and 28% of those living in villages saying universities are important to their local area, compared to 37% and 26% respectively saying they are unimportant (Figure 3). Unsurprisingly, those segments of the population more hostile to universities were least likely to say that universities had this impact.

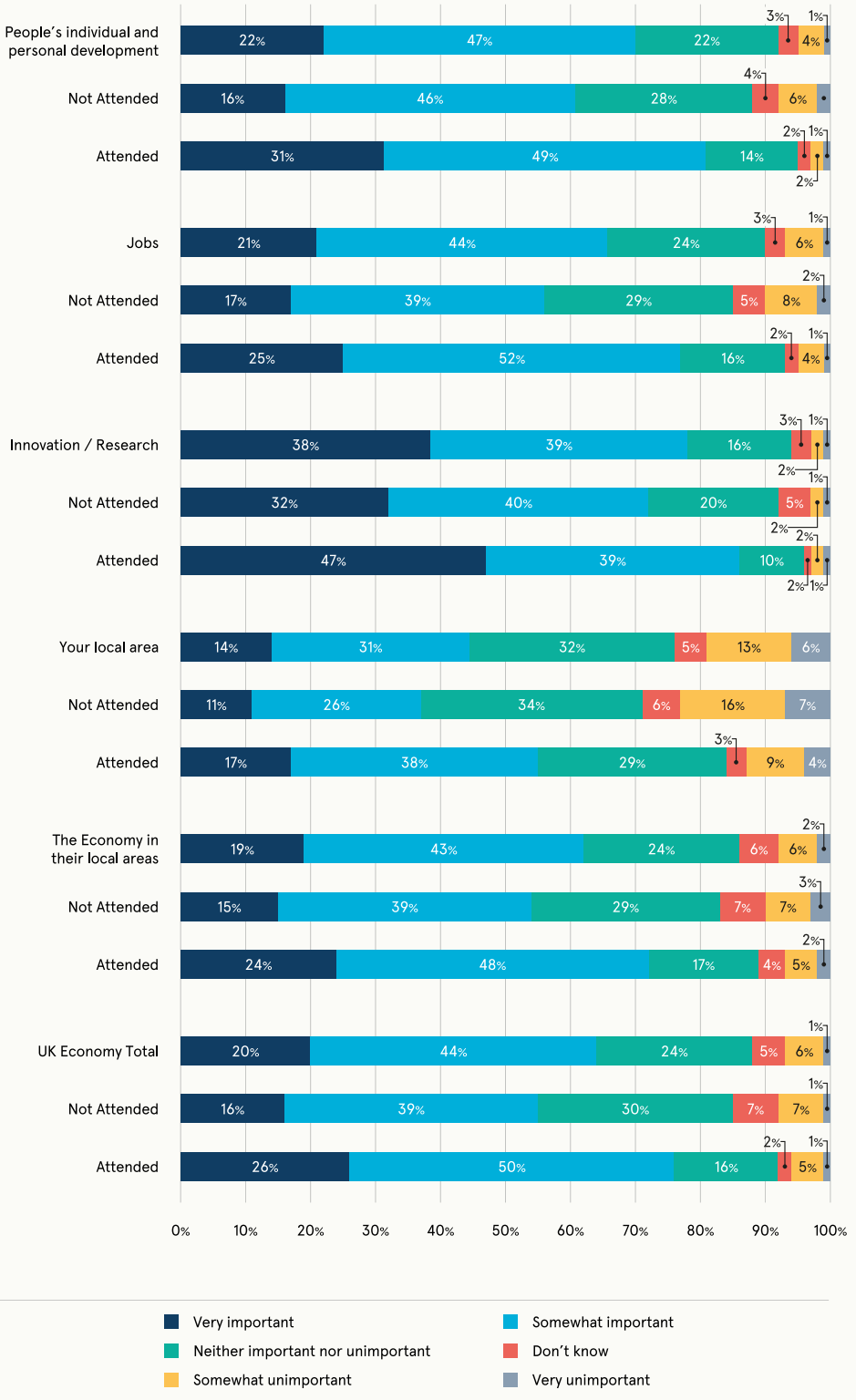
Figure 3: How important or unimportant do you think universities are for your local area



The belief that universities are important for research and innovation is widely held, even amongst the "The University Pessimists" group (58% NET importance). But notably, this group is much less likely to view them as important for jobs (NET -2% importance) and their own local area (NET – 23% importance) specifically. The strength of this perception of importance also varies by whether individuals themselves attended university (Figure 4).

Those who have themselves studied at a university consistently believe the institutions to be more important across the areas we investigated. This is an unsurprising finding in one sense – people who have made a commitment to go to university and incurred substantial cost (both directly and in terms of an opportunity cost to delay entering the labour market) likely did so because they felt it was important; it is likely to have benefited them in terms of their career and their life more broadly; and they probably enjoyed it (as most students do). Nevertheless, the fact that graduates – while different to each other in many respects – tend to unite around pro-university sentiment, is worthy of note.

Figure 4: How important/unimportant universities are to the following overall, and then by whether people personally attended university for study



2.3. Universities as research institutions

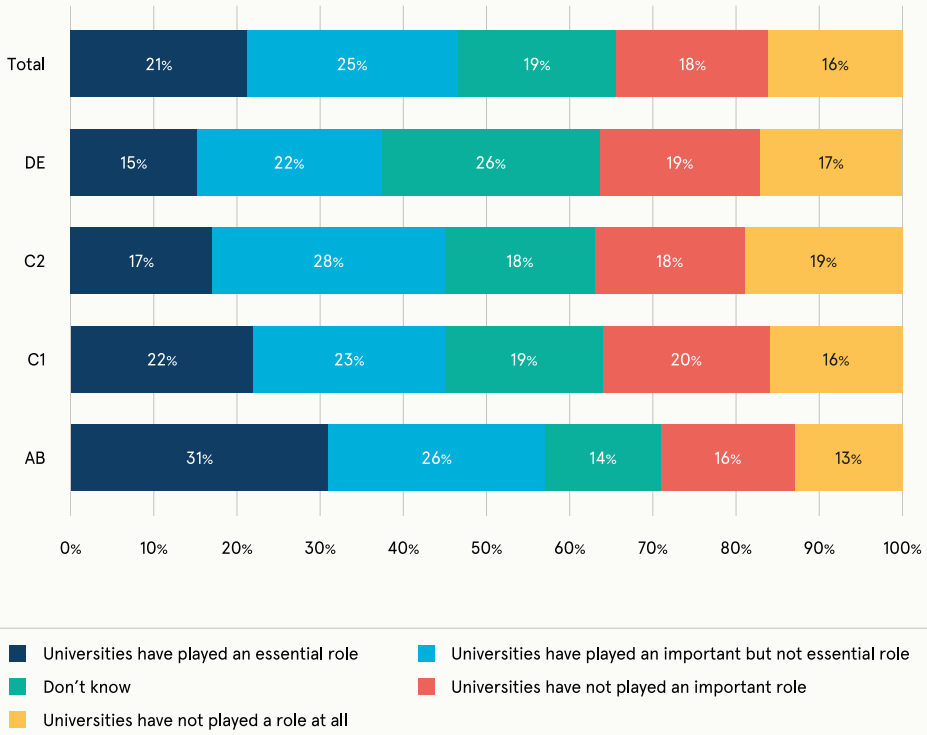
The vaccine development has put research undertaken at UK universities more firmly on the map, with a fifth of people saying that universities have played an essential role in helping the UK address the pandemic. However, we find evidence that this has been noticed more among those in higher social grades, and those who personally attended university for study. A substantial majority, however, are positive about the role which the institutions play in research and innovation, even among those who are inclined to be more negative about universities.

There is a strong sense of pride surrounding the research capabilities of universities in the UK . 84% of the sample said that they were very or quite proud that one of the main Covid vaccines had been discovered by a British university. Further, 72% of the sample agreed that university research is one of the best things produced in the UK as a country. This includes 80% of AB respondents compared to 65% of DE, and 79% of those who have personally attended a university to study compared to 68% of those who have not.

Some 21% of the sample say that universities have played an essential role in helping the UK address the Covid-19 pandemic. 27% of those who have themselves attended university say their role has been essential, compared to 17% of those who have not attended university. Among those in England who have not attended university, the same proportion believe the role of universities during the pandemic to have been essential or important (39%), as those who believe universities played an unimportant role or no role at all (39%). 15% say that universities are playing an essential role in helping the UK address climate change, although the cut-through with the public is notably lower among those who have not attended university themselves (9%).

There is a discernible social grade trend on the perceived importance of the role which universities have played in the pandemic response. A majority of those in the AB group (57%) believe they have played an important or essential role. This decreases to 37% among DE, which is the same proportion which believe the role universities have played is 'unimportant' or that they have 'not played any role at all.' The results clearly indicate that the communication of the role which universities have played in the pandemic has resonated more clearly with those in the highest social grades (Figure 5).

Figure 5: In your view, what role have universities played in helping the UK address the Covid-19 pandemic?



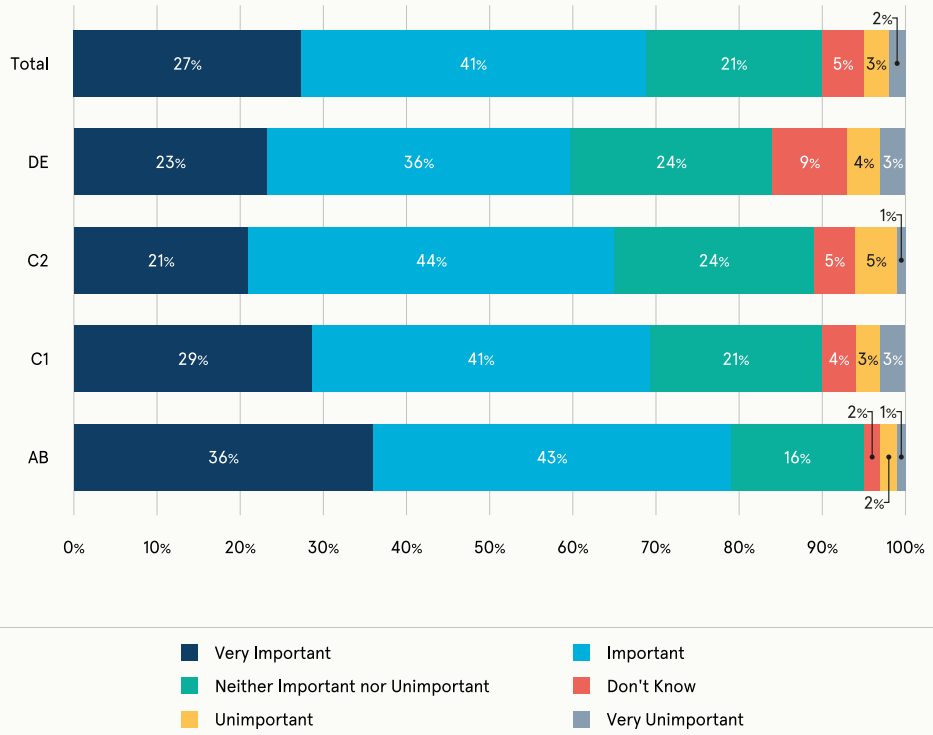
2.4 Universities in the world

The status of British universities in the world is important to people, however they feel that the research which universities do should largely benefit the nation.

68% of the sample said it was important for them to know that British universities do well in the global league tables. Among those who described themselves as "proud" or "very proud" to be British, this figure was 76%, while it was 47% among those who described themselves as "not very proud" or "not proud at all". There was an age trend on this finding too, with 56% of 18-24 respondents saying it was important to them, rising to 79% of those 65 and over. Interestingly, the importance of this was not as different between those who had attended university (73%) and those who had not (64%).

When we look at the political splits, the global performance of British universities was slightly more important to Remain voters (74% say it is important compared to 67% of Leave voters), and to 2019 Conservative voters (77% compared to 66% among Labour voters). There was also a notable trend in socio-economic grade, with those in the DE group less likely to think of this as important (Figure 6). Nonetheless, there is an outright majority across all these groups who say that the performance of British universities on a global level is important to them.

Figure 6: How important or unimportant is it for you to know that British universities do well in global league tables of high performing universities?



When people chose between areas which they believe it would be most important for universities to add benefits to, 51% selected the UK as a whole (over 14% choosing local communities, and 16% choosing the world). Among 2019 Conservative voters, 60% said the UK, compared to 45% of 2019 Labour voters, who were instead more likely to say the world (20% compared to 12%) or local community (19% compared to 13%).

2.5. A partisan perception of HE? – comparing UK findings to US research

2019 research carried out by Pew Research Center in the US showed a clear partisan divide over the direction which universities in the US were taking[2]. We explicitly replicate this analysis but this time for the UK – and we give thanks to Pew for producing the original questions. We find similar patterns in sentiment towards universities in England, and while the trend is less strong, the divide in Republican and Democrat opinion towards higher education broadly maps on to the divide between Leave and Remain voters, and Conservative and Labour voters.

As part of this project we sought to compare findings on perceptions of higher education to those which were identified in Pew Research Center's 2019 analysis in the US. We ran several questions seeking to identify whether the same trends are visible in England.

Firstly, we looked at whether people believe universities are having a positive or negative effect on the way things are going in England. Compared to the Pew results, we find strong neutrality but, overall, people believe that the impact is positive at 43%, compared to 11% who believe it is negative. This compares to 60% versus 26% in the US. If we remove those with no opinion in England to better track onto the US results, we find that respondents in England are generally more positive (79% versus 21% in England, compared to 70% versus 30% in the US). In part, Pew identified that these findings were driven by a greater perception among Republicans that universities were having a negative effect. While there is no clear proxy for the Republican Party in the UK, the closest may be either to look at the Leave/Remain split or Conservative/Labour 2019 vote (Table D).

Table D: Do universities have a positive effect on the ways things are going in the country?

	Total	Leave	Remain	Conser-vative 2019	Labour 2019	US Total	US Republican	US Democrat
Total Positive	43%	35%	53%	41%	49%	60%	33%	67%
Neutral (incl. DKs)	46%	50%	40%	44%	44%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total Negative	11%	16%	7%	15%	7%	26%	59%	18%
Positive as proportion	**79%**	**69%**	**88%**	**73%**	**87%**	**70%**	**36%**	**79%**
Negative as proportion	**21%**	**31%**	**12%**	**27%**	**13%**	**30%**	**64%**	**21%**

[2] The original research, which we adapt in a UK context with thanks, can be found here. "The growing partisan divide in views of Higher Education" https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/08/19/the-growing-partisan-divide-in-views-of-higher-education-2/

The trend is not as strong as in the US, where Republican supporters tended to think the impact was negative overall rather than positive. However, it is clear there is much greater positivity among Remain voters for universities compared to Leave voters. There is also a smaller (but noticeable) 9% gap between Conservative 2019 and Labour 2019 voters.

The Leave/Remain difference may be driven by the rate of university attendance among the opposing sides of the EU referendum, as a larger proportion of Remain voters were graduates (56% of those who attended university tend to think they have a positive impact, compared to 33% of those who did not attend, where a majority do not come down on either side. (54%)). In our sample, 56% of Remain voters have attended university, whilst 72% of Leave voters have not. The attendance proportion does not fully explain the trend however, as among those who have not attended university, Leave voters lean 30% versus 15% positive to negative, and Remain voters 42% to 9% (Table E).

Table E	Remain		Leave	
	Attended university	Did not attend university	Attended university	Did not attend university
Positive	62%	42%	45%	30%
Neutral (incl. DKs)	33%	49%	38%	55%
Negative	5%	9%	17%	15%

Both Leave voters and 2019 Conservative voters express over double the belief in the negative impact of universities than their Remain / Labour 2019 voters, so there is perhaps some cause to believe that the patterns seen in the US are mirrored in England, although to a lesser degree. However, the neutrality levels are higher on this question in England than in the US – and being neutral on universities is the most popular opinion from both Leavers and 2019 Conservative voters. In summary, wider partisan divides seem not to track to partisan divides on the role of universities in England, in the same way in which they do in the US.

We also asked whether people felt that the university system in England is going in the right or wrong direction, or neither.

Table F: Is the university system going in the right or wrong direction?

	Total	Leave	Remain	Conser-vative 2019	Labour 2019	US Total	US Republican	US Democrat
Total Right Direction	33%	30%	37%	36%	36%	38%	26%	46%
Neither (incl. DKs)	47%	45%	46%	40%	46%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total Wrong Direction	20%	25%	17%	24%	18%	61%	73%	52%
Right direction as proportion	**63%**	**54%**	**68%**	**60%**	**67%**	**38%**	**26%**	**47%**
Wrong direction as proportion	**37%**	**46%**	**32%**	**40%**	**33%**	**62%**	**73%**	**53%**

The comparison on this question demonstrates that people in England are broadly of the notion that the university system is moving in the right direction (if any direction at all), while in the US the perception is broadly that it is moving in the wrong direction. In England, more people overall and across a majority of all subgroups by voting intention and political voting, say that universities are going in the right direction, rather than the wrong direction – whereas in the US, Republicans think (by 3 to 1) that universities are moving in the wrong direction, and even a small majority of Democrats agree.

Chapter 3 – Views on the value of university degrees

In this section we explore people's views on university degrees, for themselves and for their children. We also explore wider views on the benefits of university degrees and views on students and graduates.

We find:

- **A plurality of respondents think it is important to get a degree – largely for functional reasons.** Much of the perceived value of a degree is wrapped up in the access it provides to a higher salary, and a 'good' job. **The majority of the public believe studying topics which do not clearly lead to a specific profession is of less value, at least in theory. But we also find some evidence for a perceived value of university degrees which goes beyond higher salaries.** People agree that enjoying a subject is a good enough reason to study for a degree in it, indicating that the decision should not solely be salary based (even if that is an important part of it). Further, there is majority agreement that going to university will lead to making friends from a wider range of backgrounds. And indeed, revealed preferences (outside of this survey) show that students choose topics that are not directly related to professions in large numbers.
- **The majority of people who have children, or are planning to have them, would want their children to attend university.** We find some evidence that this aspiration peaks when people have children in school and particularly secondary school, although the sample is small and should be treated with caution. Most people want their children to get a degree in spite of saying that too many go to university; although the latter is driven by older respondents, with younger respondents favouring continued university expansion.
- **Those who have themselves attended university are much more likely to consider getting a degree important,** and to say that their educational attainment has been important to their current situation in life.
- **University attendance is higher among those who have two parents who attended university themselves, even among the younger groups where overall attendance is higher.** The knock-on impact on this is that those in better-paid, more stable jobs tend to be more likely to have had two parents in university. This raises questions about social mobility.

3.1. The value of degrees

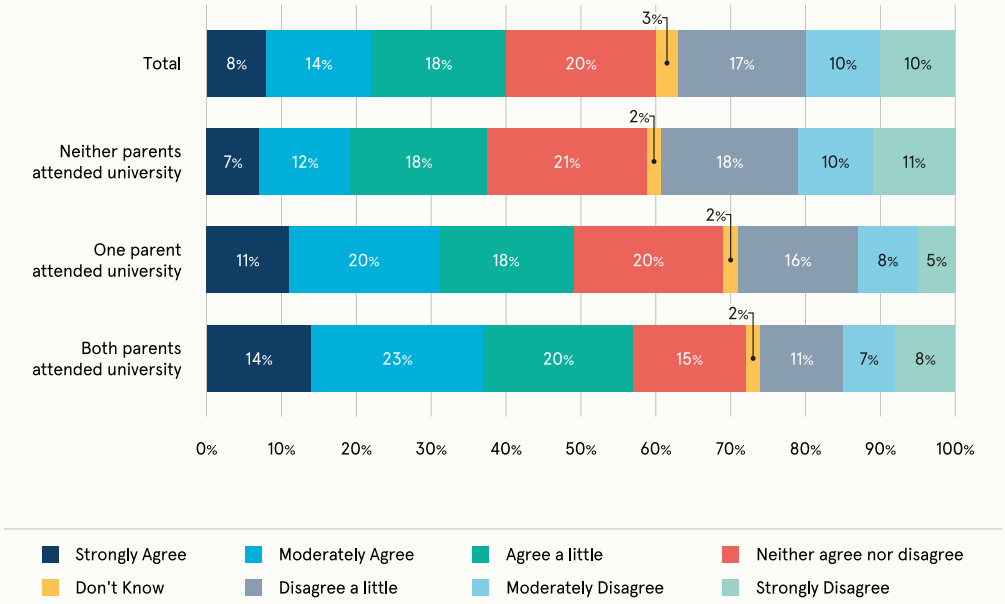
A plurality of respondents believes it is important to get a degree, and almost half of the public would choose to go to university if they were leaving secondary school now. However, people also generally tend to believe that university does not prepare people for the real world. Much of the perceived value of a degree is wrapped up in the access it provides to higher salary, `good' jobs. Indeed a majority of the public believes that degrees which do not clearly lead to a profession are less valuable. Furthermore, and out of the scope of this survey, revealed preferences shows that students choose topics that are less related to professions in large numbers every year.

In general, people in England tend to agree that it is important to get a degree, but there are a number of important caveats to this. On the one hand, 33% say that a person getting a degree from a university is important compared to 23% who say it is unimportant. Equally, when we ask if people themselves would want to go to university if they were leaving secondary school now, 46% they would want to, and 26% that they would not. This is the case for 68% of those who did attend university (of whom 13% would not want to attend if they were leaving now), compared to 31% who did not (of whom 36% would not want to attend). From these initial findings it would seem that people generally value a university degree.

Among those who themselves attended university, 37% say getting on the career ladder or following a chosen career were two of the three main reasons they went to university, with following their interest in a particular subject the third at 33%. Some 45% agree, compared to 35% who disagree, that "people need a university degree to get a high salary". The value of universities for some, it seems, is wrapped up in the fact that they are a route into better paid jobs.

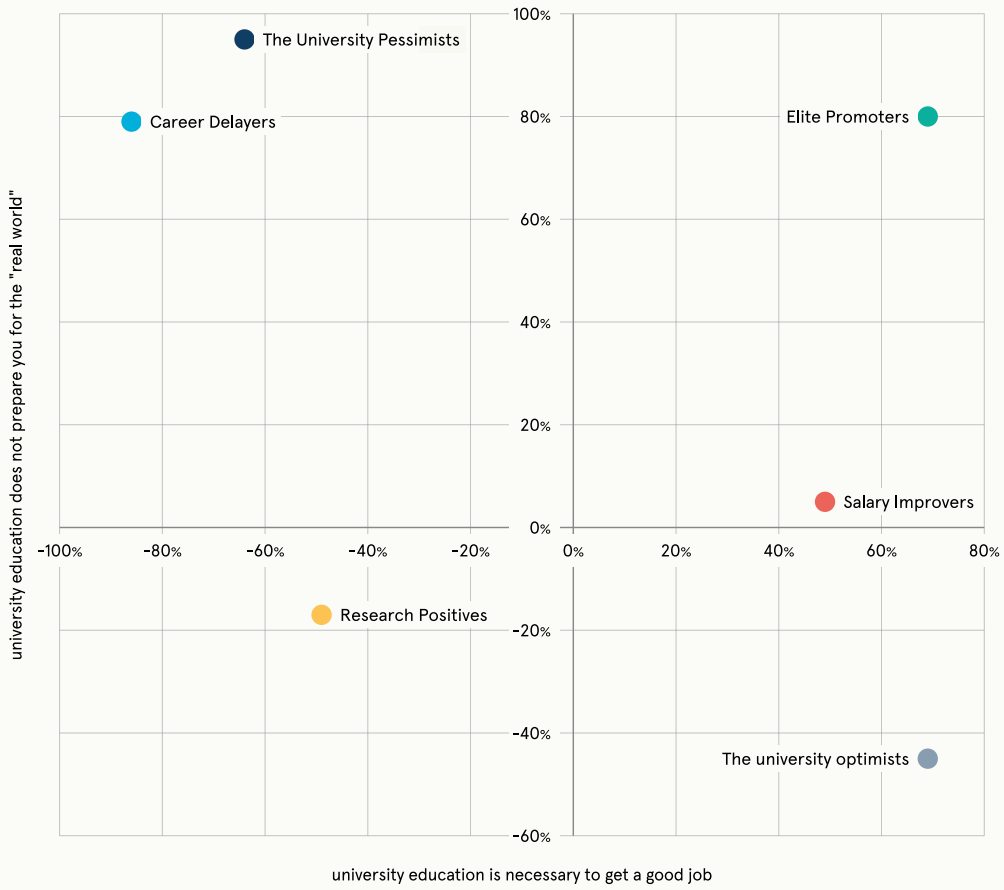
There is an interesting divergence, however, when it comes to whether the career access which university provides comes hand-in-hand with preparation for the "real world". 61% of the sample agree that university does not prepare students for the real world, 18% disagree. This includes 56% agreement among those who have personally attended university. 41% agree that a university degree is necessary to get a good job, while 37% disagree. Again, personal relationships with a university had an impact here, with those whose parents had been to university more likely to agree.

Figure 7: Do you tend to agree or disagree with the following?: A university degree is necessary to get a good job



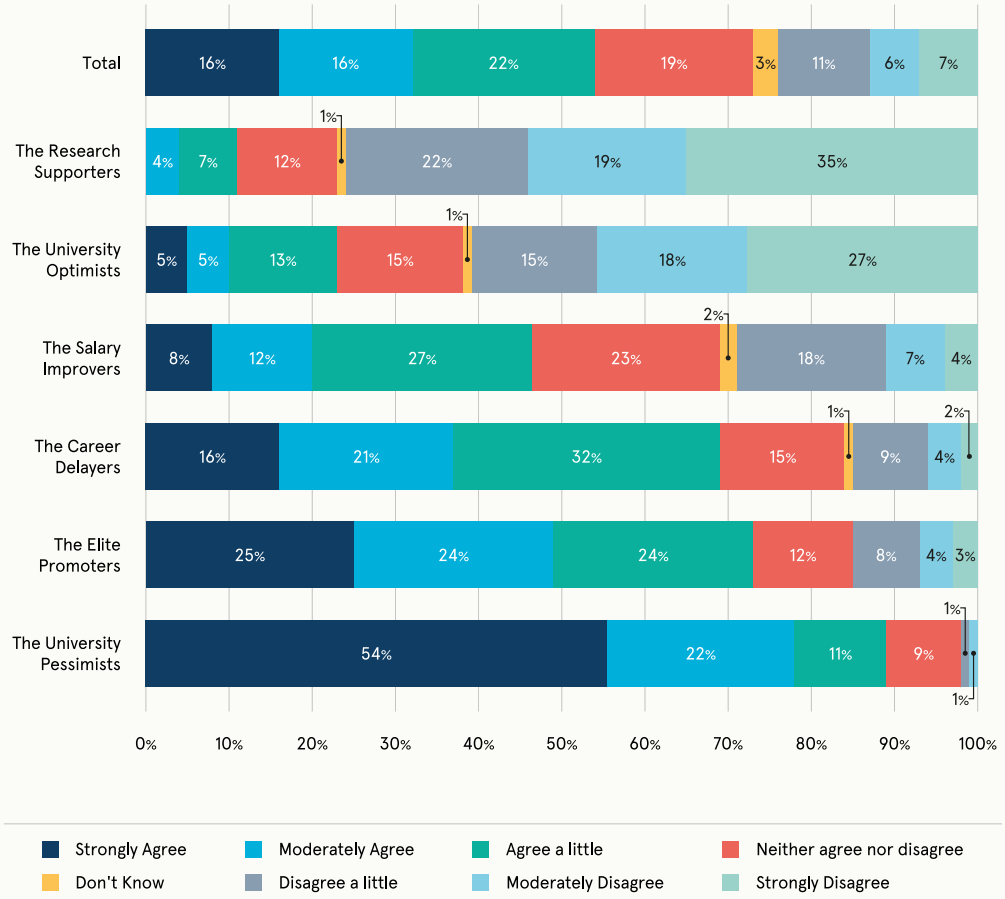
When we compare the segments on these measures (Figure 8), we see some clear differences. The "Elite Promoters" group are strongly of the belief that you need a university education to get a good job, but that it does not prepare you for the "real world". "Salary Improvers" believe that you need a university education to get a good job but are not sure about how well it prepares a person for the real world. "Career Delayers" believe that university education is neither necessary to get a good job, nor that it prepares you for the real world.

Figure 8: NET Agreement on whether university prepares you for the real world, and whether a degree is necessary for a good job



We also take a look at how people feel about degrees which do not clearly lead to a profession. 54% of the sample agree that studying topics which do not clearly lead to a profession is a waste of time, while 24% disagree. The "Research Supporters" and the "University Optimists" groups disagree with this statement most (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Studying topics which do not clearly lead to a profession is a waste of time



This view is more common among Leave voters, where 62% believe studying topics which do not clearly lead to a profession is a waste of time, compared to 48% of Remainers. Among those who have attended university, 48% agree and 33% disagree, compared to 59% and 17% among those who have not.

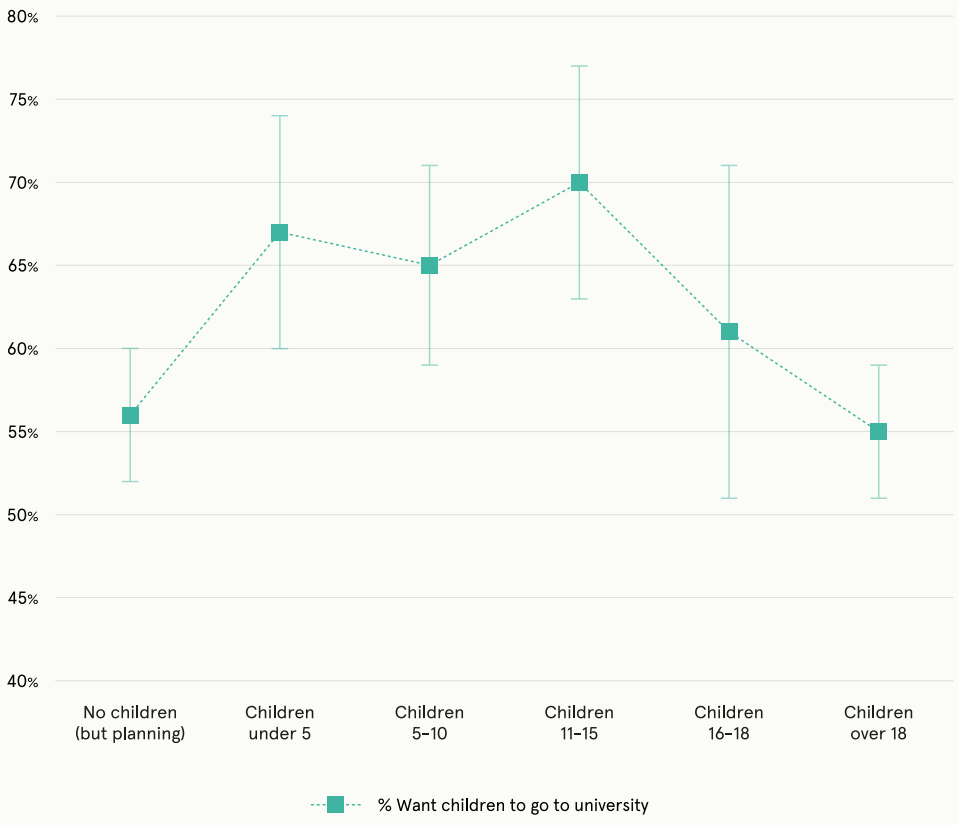
3.2. People's aims and ambitions for their children

The majority of people who have children, or are planning to have them, would want their children to attend university. We find some evidence that this peaks when people have children in school and particularly secondary school, although the sample is small and should be treated with caution.

Among those who answer (rather than saying they do not intend to have children), 59% say they would definitely want or probably want their children to go to university, and only 9% say they would not. Among those who currently have children aged 11-15, 70% say they would definitely or probably want their children to go to university, which drops to 61% among those with children 16-18 and 55% among hose who have children over 18 (where presumably a number answer according to what their children did). Among those who do not currently have children but intend to in the future, 56% would want their children going to university. Whilst the sample is small for these groups, this is at least indicative that there may be a rise in the intention for children to go to university among those who currently have children in the educational system (Figure 10).

Figure 10: % who want their children to go to university at different age of child

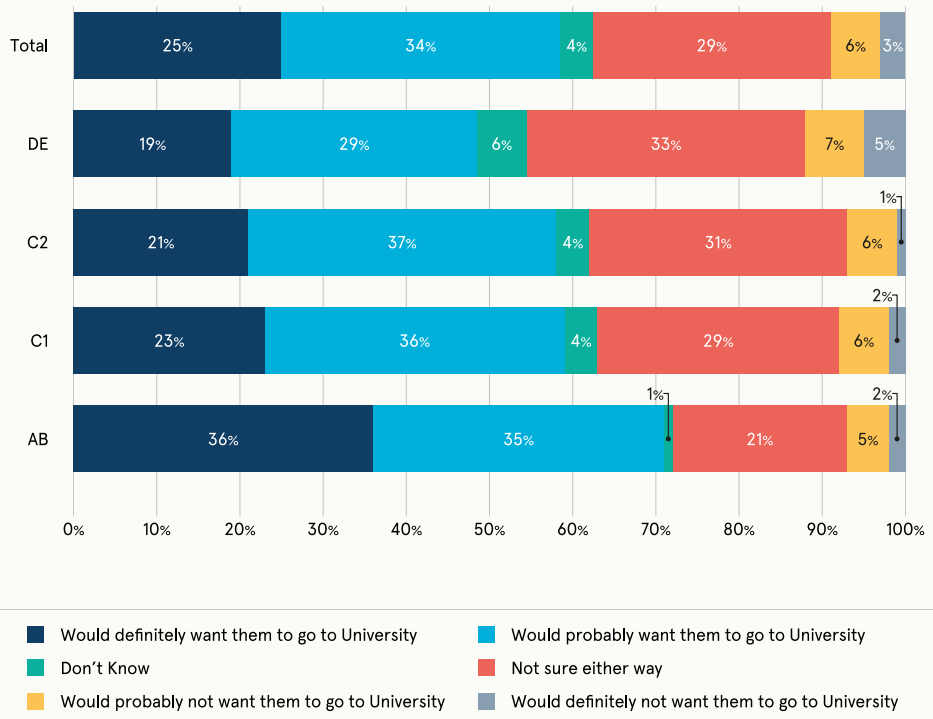
(Note, those with multiple children may overlap groups, and margin of Error shown)



There is a political split on the intentions for children too. Of those who voted Leave and either have children or intend to have them, 51% say they would want their children to go to university, compared to 67% of Remain voters. There is also a notable socio-economic grade trend, with those in the higher social grades more likely to say they would want their children to go to university (Figure 11).

Among lower socio-economic groups, a larger proportion are uncertain. There is also a clear divide between those who themselves attended university, where 72% of those who have or plan to have children would want them to go to university, compared to 49% of those who did not attend themselves.

Figure 11: If you have children now, or if you are thinking about having children in the future, do you think you would want them to go to university or not? (Those who say they have or are planning to have children)



3.3. The differences between those who have been to university themselves and those who haven't

We find that those who have attended university are much more likely to consider getting a degree important, and to say that their educational attainment has been important to their current situation in life.

There are clear differences when we compare those who have been to university and those who have not. Among those who themselves have attended university to study for a degree, 46% versus 16% say getting a degree is important rather than unimportant. On the other hand, among those who have not themselves attended university for study, 24% say it is important compared to 29% who say it is unimportant. 68% of those who have attended university say they would want to do so if they left secondary school now, compared to 31% of those who have not. Only 13% of those who went to university say they would not want to go if they were leaving school now, compared to 36% of those who did not attend.

Among those who say a degree is unimportant, there are still more who would want their own children to get a degree than would not. 33% of those who say a university degree is unimportant and who either have children or are planning to have children, would want their children to attend university, while 21% would not. 40% of this group is unsure, but it is still indicative of the perceived normality of university attendance that even the group who view it is an unimportant would want their children to go.

We asked whether people felt that their highest educational achievement had been important to their current situation in life, allowing them to indicate that their educational attainment had an important positive, neutral, or important negative effect on their lives. We find that 64% of those who have attended university say it has been important to them in a positive way and just 4% important in a negative way. Among those who have not attended university, 31% said their highest education attainment had been important in a positive way and 6% important in a negative way. In summary , very few people feel that their educational background has hindered them, but university graduates are considerably more positive about the impact which their education has had on their lives.

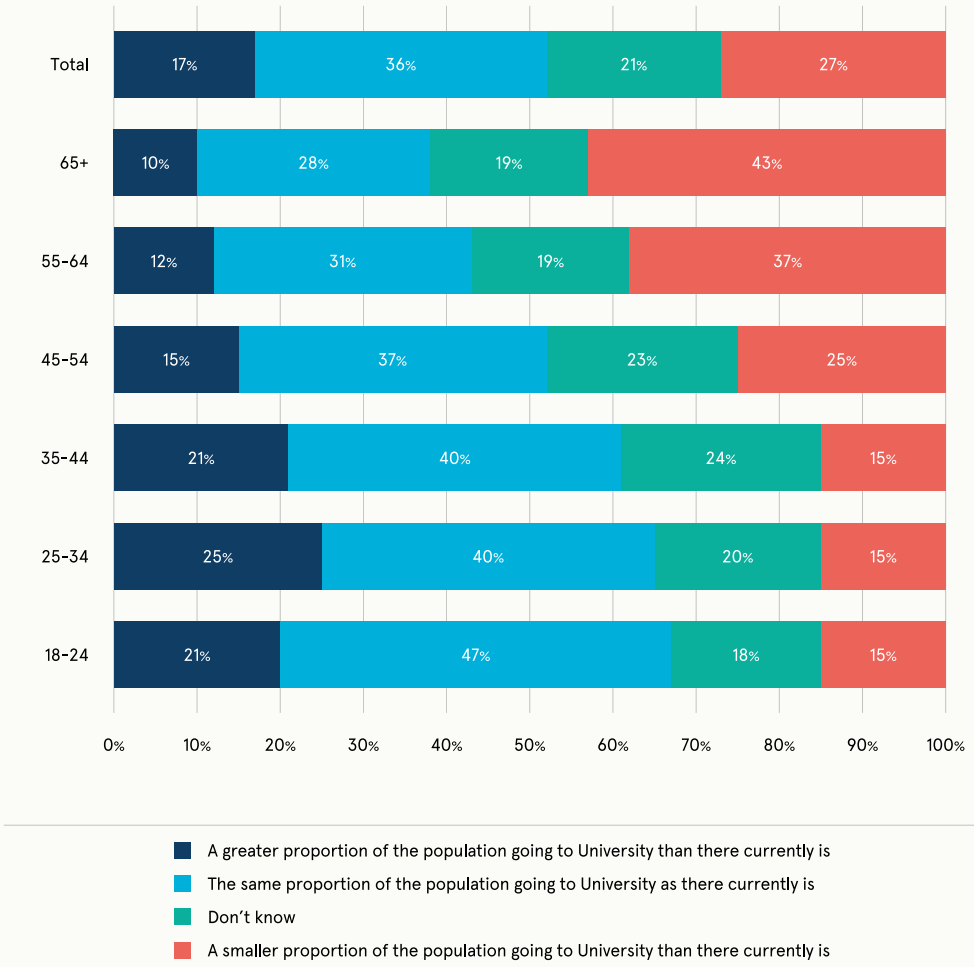
3.4. Is there societal over-valuing of degrees?

In general, people tend to feel that university degrees are currently overvalued by society. Further, more people say they would prefer the proportion of the population going to university to reduce rather than increase. This was particularly high among the oldest groups where almost half say that there should be a smaller proportion of the population going to university. However, among younger people, there is a mood in favour of further university entry, and as per Section 3.2, most people also want their children to attend university.

Whilst people clearly value a university degree, in particular if they themselves have attended a university, this does not tell the full story. We find that 54% of the respondents believe that society currently values a university education too highly. This was very consistent, with 53% of those who have attended a university agreeing compared to 55% of those who have not. Among those who would want their own children to go to university, 54% agree that society values a university education too highly. Among those who say that getting a degree is important, a majority also say that society values a degree too highly at the moment (53%), slightly lower than among those who say getting a degree is unimportant (63%). In other words, people simultaneously think that they want to go to university, or that they would benefit from doing so, while at the same time believe that society values the benefit of a university degree too highly.

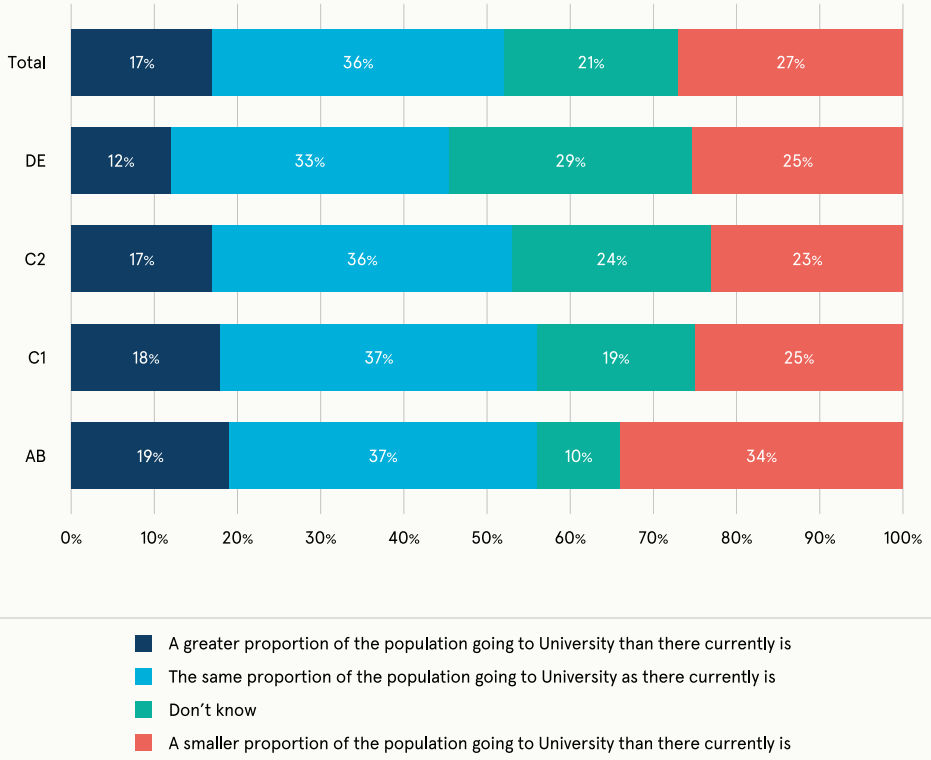
When we ask whether people believe there should be a greater, smaller or the same proportion of the population going to university, we find that 17% say it should be greater, 27% smaller, 36% the same and 21% who don't know. There is a pronounced age trend here, with 15% of the 18-24 group saying that there should be a smaller proportion than currently going to university, rising to 43% of those aged 65 or over (Figure 12). Those who themselves attended university are more likely than those who did not to say that a greater proportion should go to university (23% compared to 12%) although they still lean slightly towards saying that a smaller proportion should go (25%) with a large number preferring it to stay the same (40%).

Figure 12: If you could choose, would you prefer for there to be...



The social grade divide on this is largely driven by Don't Know responses, with 10% of AB respondents unsure of the direction they would like the proportion of people attending university to take, compared to 29% of DE respondents (Figure 13). The result of this is that the higher socioeconomic group is both more likely to believe that a greater proportion should attend, and that a smaller proportion should attend.

Figure 13: If you could choose, would you prefer for there to be...



There are also clear political splits on this. Over a third of Conservative 2019 voters want a smaller proportion of the population going to university (36%), equal to the number who want the proportion to stay the same (36%). Labour 2019 voters, on the other hand, would more clearly prefer for the proportion to stay the same (41%) or increase (23%),

3.5. The more general value of going to university

We find some evidence for a perceived value of university degrees which goes beyond higher salaries.

People agree that enjoying a subject is a good enough reason to do a degree in it, indicating that they believe the decision should not solely be career based (even if that is an important part of it). Further, there is majority agreement that going to university will lead to making friends from a wider range of backgrounds than not attending.

61% of respondents agree that "enjoying a subject is enough of a reason to do a degree in it", although this was somewhat lower among the "Career Delayers" at 52%, and considerably lower among the "University Pessimists" who disagree with this by 45% to 35%. Those who themselves attended university are more likely to agree, with 72% compared to 53% of those who have not attended university.

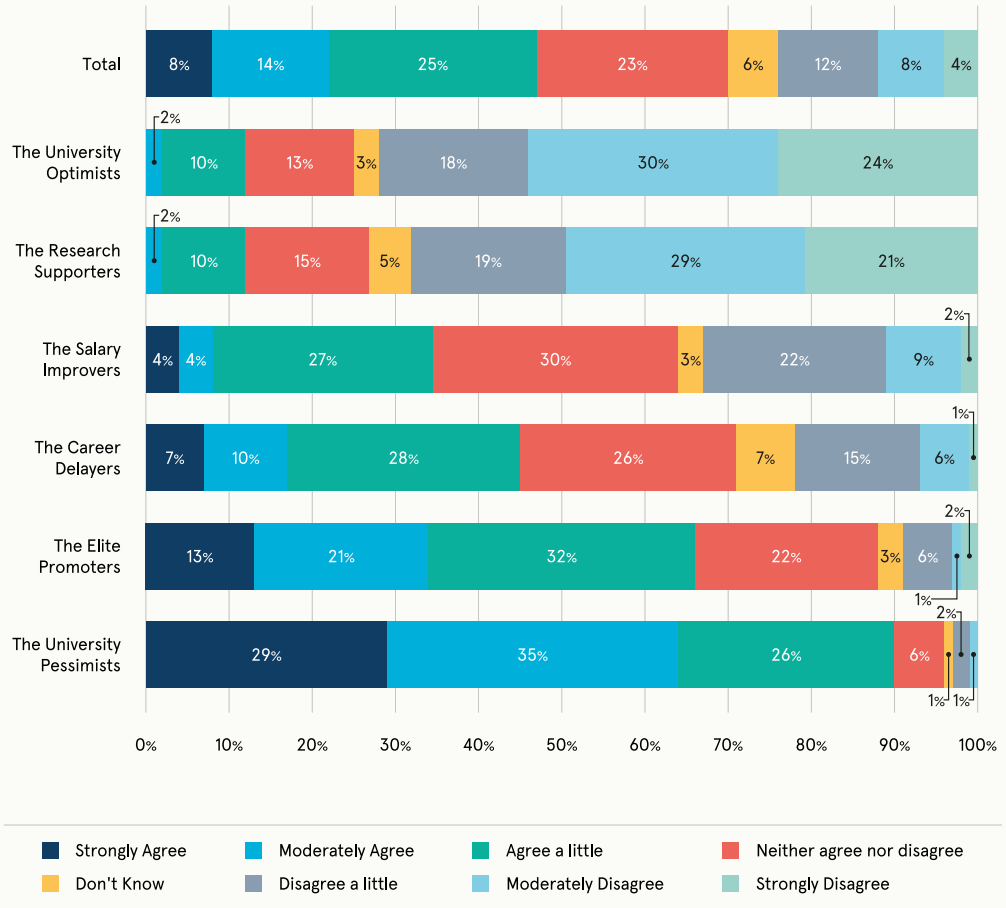
We find majority agreement with the statement "people who go to university are more likely to have friends from a range of social and educational backgrounds", with 54% agreement. As we see in Chapter 4, however, the reality of social and romantic mixing between graduates and non-graduates is, perhaps more complex.

3.6. Perceptions of university students

There is a relatively strong perception that university students spend more time partying than they do studying, although this may be driven by more negative attitudes towards younger people.

When we asked whether people agreed that university students spend more time partying than studying, we find 47% agree and 24% disagree. This perception was notably higher among the "University Pessimists" at 89%, and the "Elite Promoters" segment at 66%. On the flip side, 72% of the "University Optimists" disagree with this, as do 69% of the "Research Supporters" (Figure 14). When we compare those who have attended university themselves, they only agree with this slightly less than those who have not gone to university (43% compared to 50%).

Figure 14: University students spend more time partying than studying



In part this may be driven by a more negative view of younger people, with 57% of those who agree that "young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values", also agreeing that students spend more time partying, whilst 52% of those who disagree with this also disagree with the former (that young people don't have respect for British values).

3.7 Access issues for attending university

University attendance is higher among those who have two parents who attended university themselves. The knock-on impact on this is that those in better-paid, more stable jobs tend to be more likely to have had two parents in university.

Whilst our research did not set out to explore the barriers in accessing higher education, the trends on this issue are difficult to ignore. If we look at just those individuals under 35 years old, those who said that both their parents had attended university were almost twice as likely to have attended university themselves than those who said neither of their parents had attended (85% compared to 44%).

Among the higher social grades (AB) 69% had attended university, whilst among the lower social grades (DE) 79% had not. In addition, 33% of AB respondents had at least one parent who had attended university, compared to 13% of DE (the rates for C1 and C2 were 24% and 21% respectively). This means that, to some extent, the graduate status of respondents' parents is related to their intentions for their children's education. Among those who had both parents attend university, 79% who have or are planning to have children want them to go to university, compared to 57% of those whose parents did not go to university. In other words, those who had both parents attend university are clearly more likely to attend themselves, while those who attended university are more likely to explicitly want their children to attend.

We also found that 45% agreed with the statement that universities are elitist, whilst just 22% disagreed. As with the belief in societal overvaluing of university education, this opinion was fairly consistent across groups; 47% of those who had personally attended university agreed, 44% of those who had not, 46% of Conservative voters agreed, 47% of Labour.

It is clear from our research that university is perceived to be expensive – 64% put this among the top three disadvantages they see in going to university. This view transcended partisan allegiances with 60% of Conservative voters and 68% of Labour voters listing cost as a key disadvantage. Similar views were shared across the age groups with 68% of 18-24s and 60% of those aged 65 or over listing expense as a top disadvantage.

Table G: Main disadvantages from attending university

	Total	The University Pessimists	Career Delayers	Elite Promoters	Salary Improver	Research Positives	The University Optimists
It is too expensive	64%	70%	72%	71%	67%	74%	58%
It is not that helpful for an individual's future	10%	22%	15%	8%	3%	2%	3%
It delays the start of a career and earning money	26%	46%	32%	29%	18%	23%	21%
It is too distracting as an environment	7%	6%	6%	13%	3%	2%	2%
University teaches everyone the same set of values which aren't held by me or my community	6%	13%	3%	7%	3%	2%	1%
It doesn't teach the skills that people need to get a good job	27%	53%	43%	33%	17%	17%	11%
It takes people away from their local community	7%	5%	6%	9%	4%	2%	7%
University can make people grow apart from their family and their old friends	10%	9%	9%	13%	10%	6%	9%
University is too stressful	13%	10%	9%	17%	14%	12%	7%
None of the above – there are no disadvantages to going to university today	10%	2%	6%	5%	16%	14%	28%

Chapter 4 – Views on campus culture

In this section, we explore views on the wider public policy issues concerning HE – particularly around free speech on campus and on the curriculum. We also explore the issue of whether universities are politically skewed to the left, whether university academics act in the national interest, and whether graduates mostly socialise with, and prefer to enter into romantic relationships with, other graduates.

We find:

- **When free speech is presented in a broad sense, people are highly supportive and prefer a system whereby anyone can speak at a university as long as they don't break the law. However, the concept is most accurately tested when presented with specific scenarios and under these, opinions change – particularly around racism, violent Islamic extremism and Holocaust denial.**
- Other divisive issues – such as the content of the curriculum – garner very different levels of support depending on how they are framed. **Using the specific example of curriculum content decisions made by universities, we demonstrate that the way in which the public sees the issue can be changed drastically by the way the argument is presented. Specifically, people are more inclined to support changes to the curriculum when it is framed as a broadening of perspectives, rather than the removal of western-centric viewpoints or "decolonisation".**
- In light of the growing divide in partisanship between graduates and non-graduates, we find a moderate perception that universities teach a "left-wing" perspective. However, this is mostly driven by people who identify as right wing, and there is still considerable neutrality on this topic.

- We find that, despite most people being largely unconcerned about the educational background of a long-term romantic partner, **a substantial number of people would prefer their partner to come from the same educational background as themselves, with more of those who have themselves attended university saying this.** Those who attended university are both more likely to say their close friends come from a similar background (33% compared to 23%) and from a different background (15% compared to 9%) than those who have not attended university, who are more likely to say there is no clear pattern in their close friends on this (61%).
- When tracking sentiment towards university academics and confidence in them to act in the public interest, **we find a strong partisan split. However despite this divide there is net positive sentiment among all voter groups towards academics (in contrast to the US findings where Republicans are net negative).** There was also a social grade trend on this point, however university attendance plays a key role in helping to explain this and magnifies the partisan split. For those of all social groups who attended university, a clear majority across social grades are supportive, but Remain voters who attended and did not attend university are more supportive of academics than Leave voters in those same groupings.

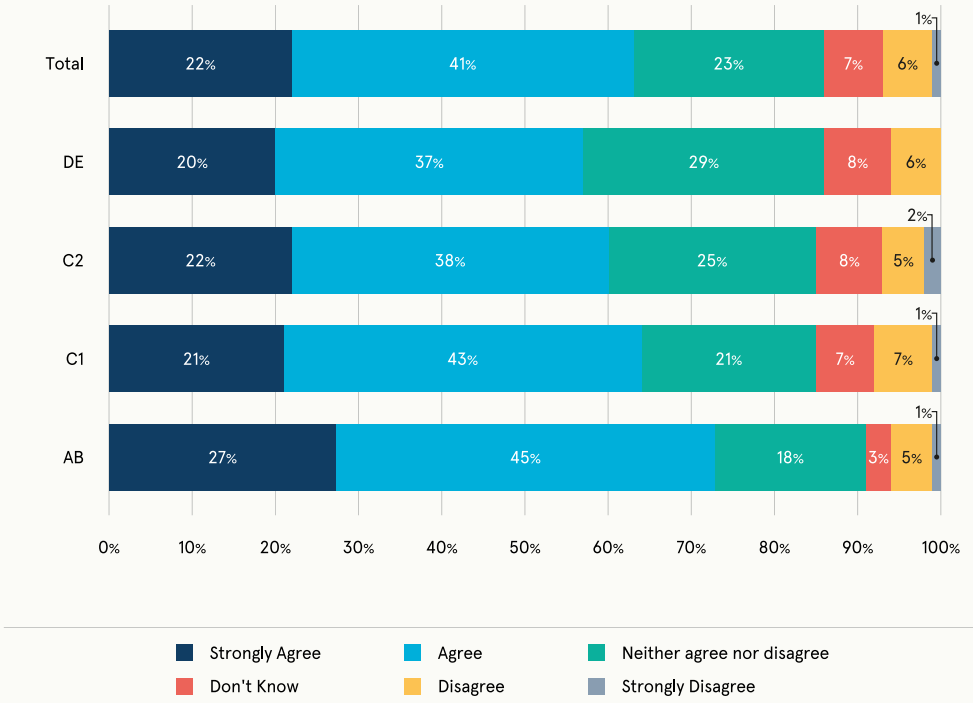
4.1. Views on free speech in the abstract

When presented in a broad sense, people are highly supportive of free speech and prefer a system whereby anyone can speak at a university as long as they don't break the law. However, people also support universities taking steps to restrict people's rights to speak when the purpose is to protect their students.

Discussions about free speech at universities are notoriously divisive and are often presented as fights between an authoritarian student or staff body which wishes to silence specific viewpoints, a university leadership that will acquiesce for a quiet life, and controversial speakers who uphold the values of free speech.

It is evident from our findings that "free speech" is viewed as important in itself; when we ask a general question "universities should uphold the principle of free speech at all costs", we find 63% agree, and 30% do not express an opinion either way. While this was universally popular, there was more uncertainty on this among the C2 and DE respondents (Figure 15). This mirrors other questions where uncertainty and middle response is slightly higher among these groups. There was no political split on this question; both Leave and Remain voters supported it (64% and 65% respectively).

Figure 15: Universities should uphold the principle of free speech at all costs

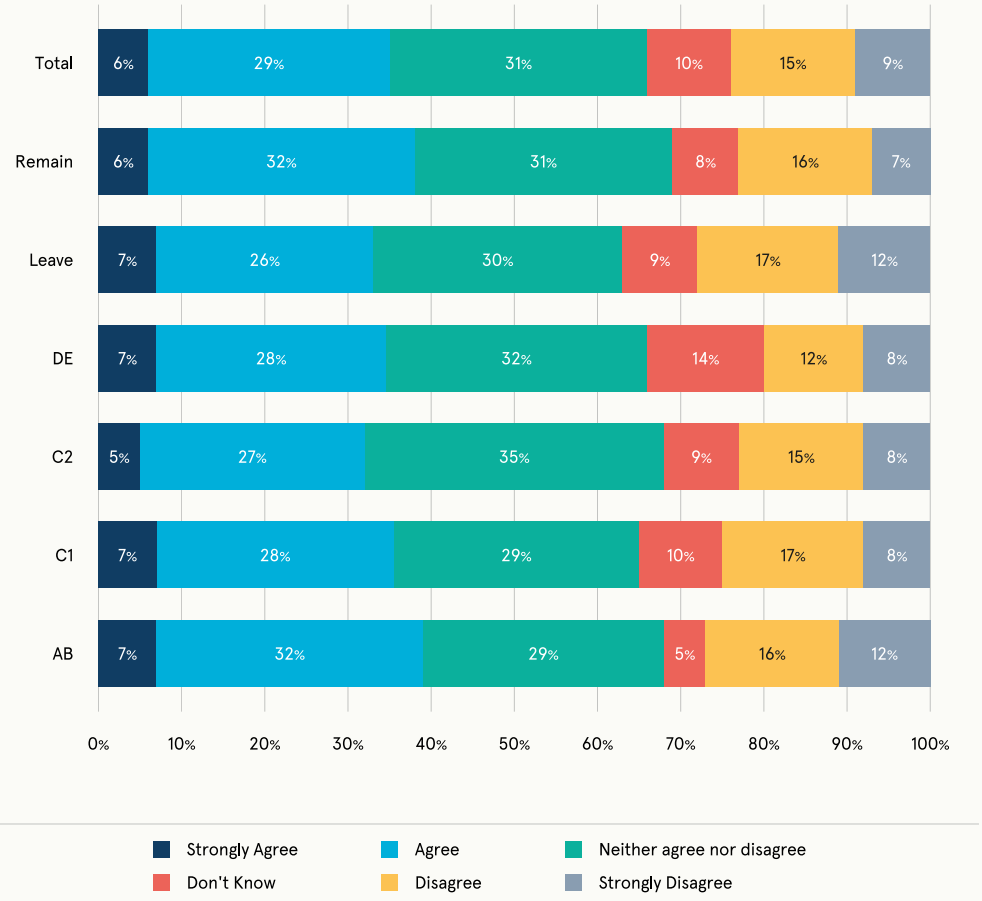


The view is held strongly across the segments, with the "University Optimists" agreeing most at 75%, and the "Research Supporters" least at 59%. Further, when asked directly whether people agree that universities should resist pressure from certain groups to "cancel" speakers and events that the group disagrees with, a majority (54%) agree. Again, there was a higher level of uncertainty among the C2 and DE groups on this and also a noticeable gender split, with men considerably more likely to agree that universities should resist this pressure (62%) than women (46%) who are more uncertain. There was generally a low level of disagreement on this issue.

When it comes to the question of whether universities do a good job promoting and defending free speech among their students, people lean towards saying that they do (44%) with relatively high rates of "Don't Know" responses (35%). Those who themselves have attended a university are more likely to say they do a good job (53%) whilst those who have not are more likely to say they don't know (43%). The only segment which tended to suggest that universities do a bad job more than they do a good job was the "University Pessimists" group, where 45% indicated that they do a bad job and 18% that they do a good job. In general, the argument that universities are doing a bad job is not represented strongly among the public. One of the bigger divides on this is in Leave voters (37%) and Remain voters (53%), although even here most Leave voters who express an opinion tend to say that universities do a good job.

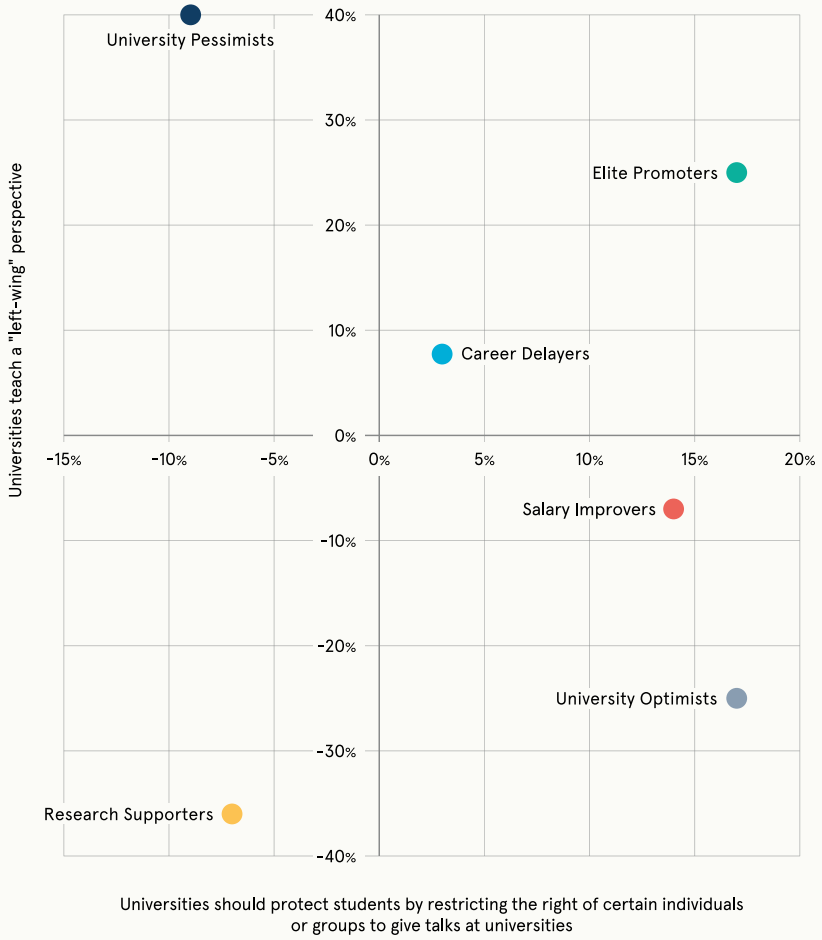
In turn, there was higher agreement than disagreement with the statement that "universities should protect their students by restricting the right of certain individuals or groups to give talks at universities", with 35% agreeing compared with 24% disagreeing. In part, the reason for more nuance here may be that the implication of disagreement is that universities would not protect their students. Again, there is high uncertainty on this, particularly notable among the C2 and DE social grades, and whilst there is a Leave/Remain split it is quite small, with 6% more Remainers agreeing and 5% more Leavers disagreeing (Figure 16).

Figure 16: Universities should protect their students by restricting the right of certain individuals or groups to give talks at universities



The segments displayed some division over this issue, which can be mapped next to their perception that universities teach a "left-wing" perspective (Figure 17). This draws out interesting distinctions, such as the Research Positive group indicating a preference for not restricting who can speak, as well as a belief that universities do not lean towards the left. On the other hand, the "Elite Promoters", for example, lean to believing that universities teach a left-wing perspective, and that they should restrict who can speak to protect students.

Figure 17: Net Agreement universities should protect students by restricting who can speak, and universities teach a left-wing perspective (Note X and Y are on different scales)



4.2. Who should be able to speak at universities

In general, the public are against allowing people who have made racist remarks to speak at universities. Respondents are also less supportive of people being able to speak whose views are differently aligned to their own, ie those who identify on the right of the political spectrum are less likely to support someone with communist views being able to speak at a university, and those who identify on the left are less likely to support someone who defends Donald Trump.

When asked, a majority of respondents say that people should be allowed to speak to students at a university so long as their views are not illegal (55%). In this context, the support for nobody being prevented from speaking to students because of their opinions is around a quarter (24%).

We asked respondents whether they would support allowing speakers with a range of controversial opinions to speak at universities. First, we compare the voters for both Conservatives and Labour on their support for these speakers (Figure 18).

Figure 18: NET belief that an individual should be allowed to speak by vote intention

There is agreement on which speakers should be permitted, and which should not. Across the sample, most people believe that someone who has made racist remarks should not be allowed to speak (55% across the sample). There are differences between the two parties on a few key examples, with Conservative voters generally more likely to support an individual being able to speak on campus who promotes the "positive role" of the British Empire, who believes in reducing immigration levels, who believes transwomen are not women, and who has written books against gay marriage. When the individual is one who has communist views, the trend is in the other direction with Labour voters being more supportive of their right to speak.

To investigate this further, we split individuals by whether they identify themselves to be on the left or right, and whether they consider themselves liberal or conservative. Naturally, people's self-identification on these scales are open to different interpretations;, however the results do indicate that people's perceptions of who should be able to speak are associated far more with the content of what the individual believes than with a general commitment to "freedom of speech" (Table H).

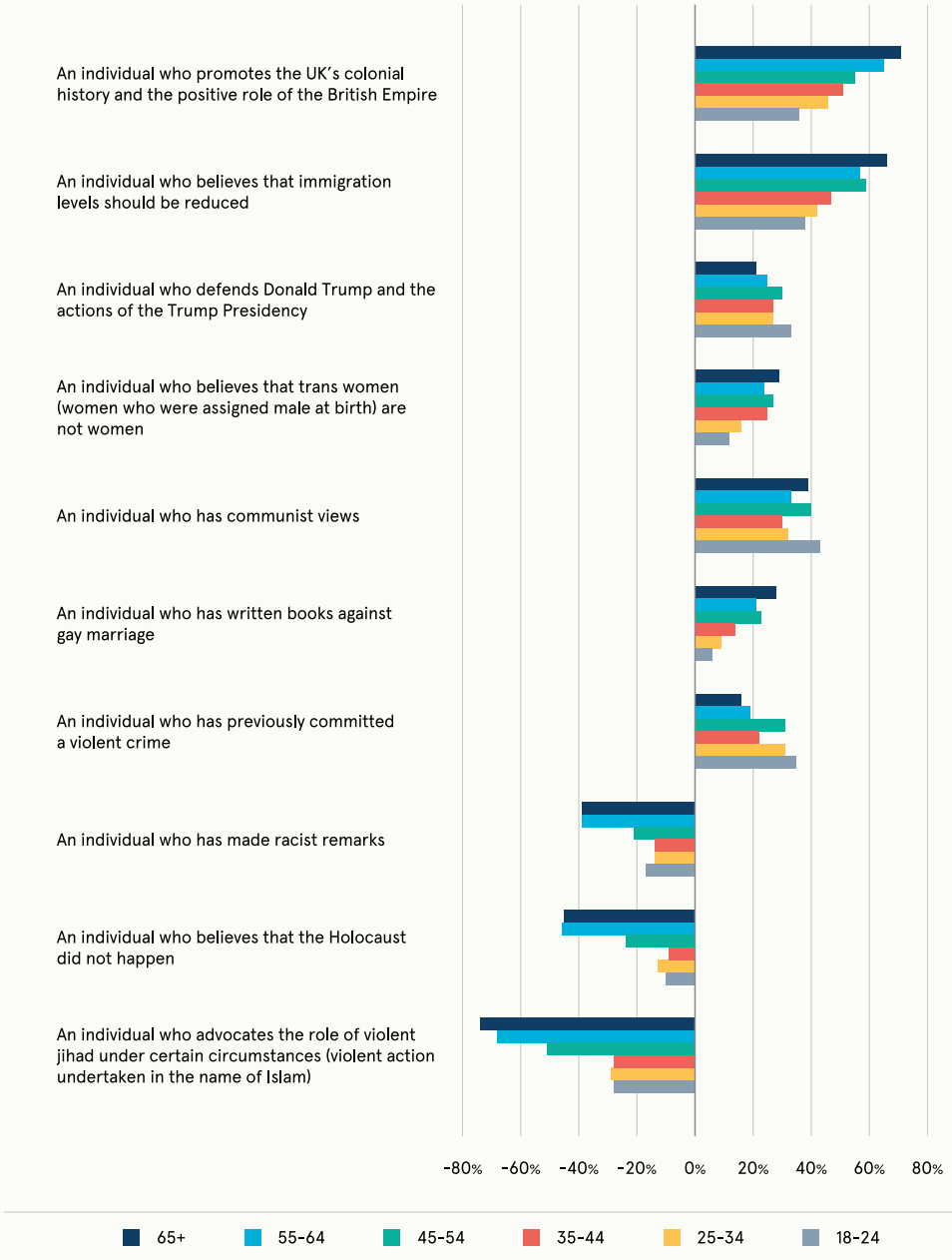
Table H: Who should be allowed to speak on campus?

	Total	Left	Right	Liberal	Conservative
Promotes UK's colonial history	56%	42%	72%	48%	67%
Believes immigration levels should be reduced	53%	49%	66%	50%	64%
Has communist views	36%	61%	42%	56%	35%
Defends Donald Trump and the actions of the Trump presidency	26%	29%	44%	30%	36%
Has previously committed a violent crime	24%	33%	30%	41%	23%
Believes trans women are not women	23%	12%	44%	15%	39%
Has written a book against gay marriage	18%	10%	40%	8%	33%
Has made racist remarks	-25%	-24%	-11%	-24%	-20%
Believe the Holocaust did not happen	-26%	-32%	-14%	-36%	-17%
Advocate the role of violent jihad under certain circumstances	-49%	-55%	-43%	-53%	-47%

The implications of this for discussions of who is more or less welcome to speak at universities are important. People are more inclined to support the right of those who they agree with to a platform, regardless of whether they are generally aligned with a "pro-freedom" mindset.

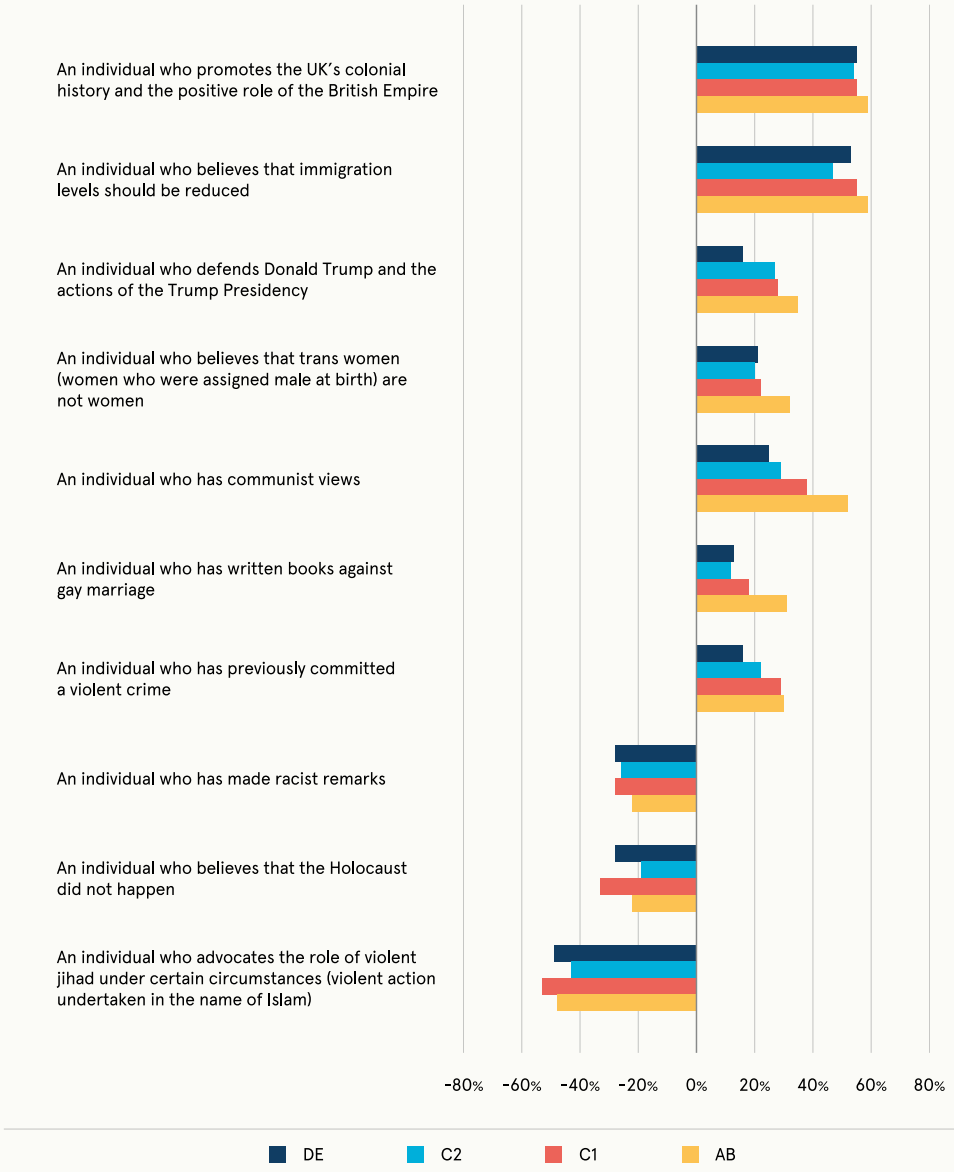
There are some notable demographic trends on these issues too. On age, for example, we find that older people tend to be more clearly in favour of allowing someone who promotes the UK's colonial history and the positive role of the British empire. On the other hand, younger people are more likely to believe an individual who has previously committed a violent crime should be allowed to speak (Figure 19).

Figure 19: NET belief that an individual should be allowed to speak by age



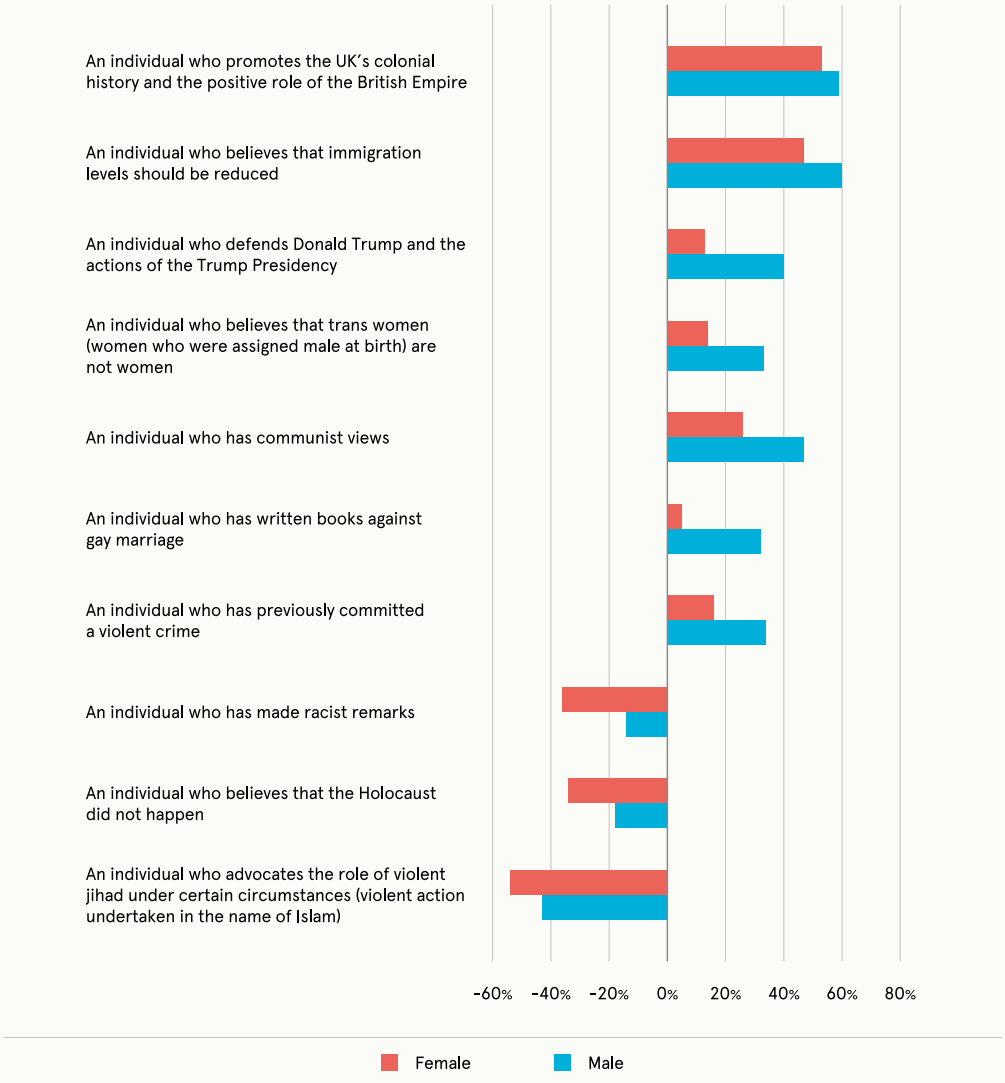
Equally when we look at social grade, we find a tendency for those in the AB group to be more in favour of allowing individuals to speak. This is perhaps most pronounced on communist views, books against gay marriage and on speakers with views on trans women (Figure 20).

Figure 20: NET belief that an individual should be allowed to speak by social grade



There is a notable gender trend too, with male respondents typically more likely to support allowing individuals to speak. This is particularly notable on similar issues to those which the AB group stand out on (Figure 21). Together, the findings indicate that, whilst the public in general agrees on which speakers should and should not be allowed, moves to make it more difficult for universities and student unions to prevent certain speakers from appearing before audiences at their organisations will possibly have a more pronounced appeal to men, older people and those in higher social grades.

Figure 21: NET belief that an individual should be allowed to speak by gender identity

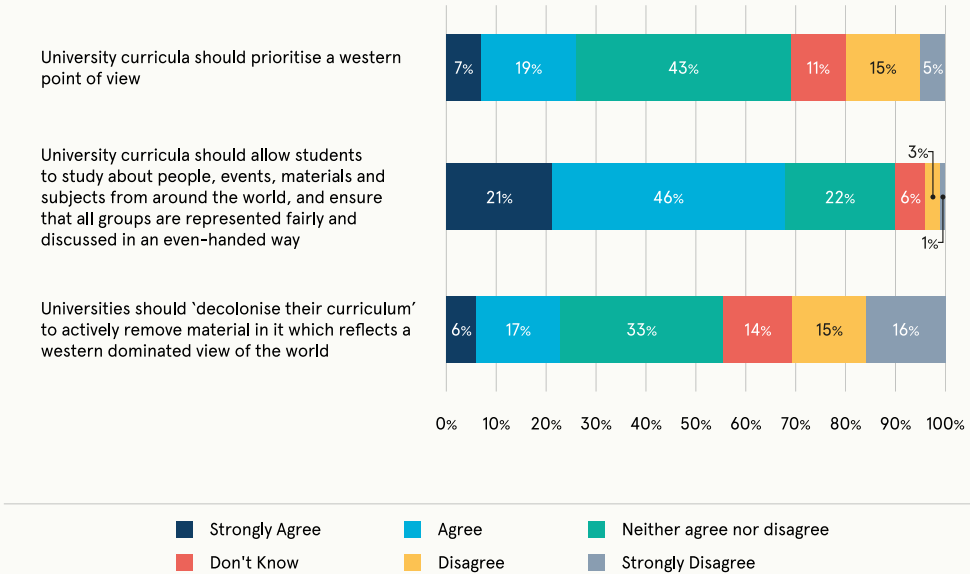


4.3. The content of the curriculum

Using the specific example of curriculum content – where the issue of 'decolonisation' often leads to considerable public commentary and activity within universities, and strong feelings on both sides, we demonstrate the way in which the public sees the issue can be changed dramatically by the way the argument is presented. Specifically, people are more inclined to support changes to the curriculum when it is framed as a broadening of perspectives, rather than the removal of western-centric viewpoints.

We used a case study to examine how much opinion towards an issue (in this case, changing content of university curricula) can be shifted by reframing and rewording of the arguments. We find huge shifts in opinion depending on the way arguments around this area are framed (Figure 22).

Figure 22: Perceptions on curriculum content changing with several wordings



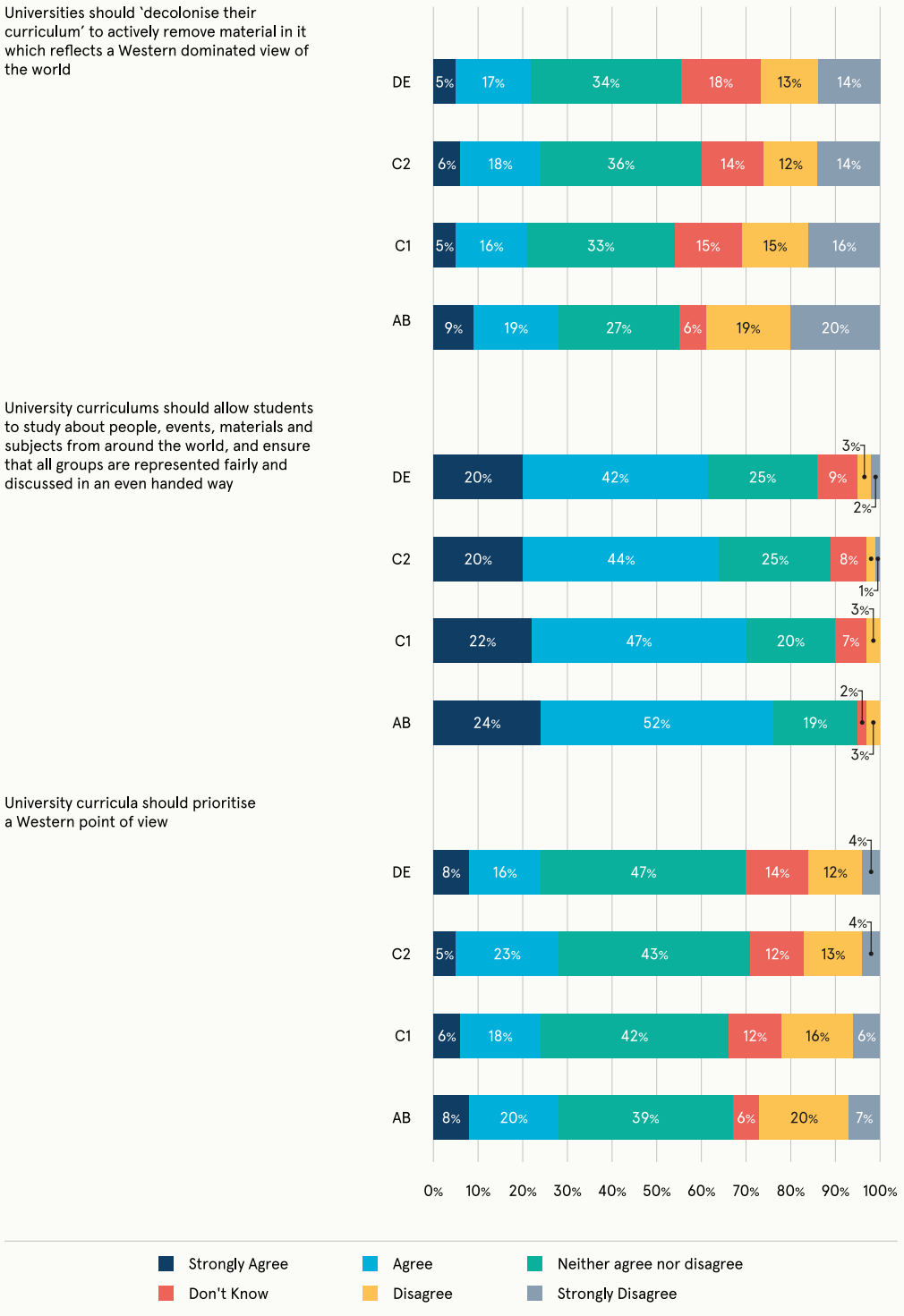
If the emphasis is on a more direct framing – prioritising a western point of view – or a position broadly in opposition to that – to decolonise a curriculum to deprioritise a western point of view – then support is low, though large numbers express uncertainty in both instances. The option for prioritising a western point of view sees more support than opposition, and the opposite is true for "decolonising the curriculum". However, when framed in a more neutral way, to allow choice, the same respondents move strongly in favour of it as a proposition, even though to some extent the end outcome may be similar[3]. These results indicate that the language around this debate is centrally important to the level of support which it receives. The word "decolonise" is perhaps not well understood prompting high levels of uncertain responding, and higher rates of negativity. The same might be said to some degree of a "western point of view", which sees majority midpoint response. Seemingly, more principled discussion of fair-handedness, as in the second option above, sees widespread support (67% agree / strongly agree against 5% disagree / strongly disagree).

There are some political divides on this issue. For example, those who would vote Conservative agree that universities should prioritise a western point of view at 34% to 14%, whilst Labour voters disagree 28% to 21%. However, it would be easy to underestimate the level of non-responses here; a majority of both political parties' supporters express no preference either way on this wording (that is to say they either answer 'neither agree nor disagree' or 'don't know'). When specifically talking about decolonisation, the partisan split is starker, with Conservatives disagreeing 41% to 18%, and Labour agreeing 34% to 22%, but even here just over 40% of both groups express no preference either way.

This uncertainty and lack of response is, as with a number of previous questions, lower among those in AB social grades (Figure 23). This goes both ways, with AB more likely to disagree that universities should decolonise their curricula, and that curricula should prioritise a western point of view. In other words, there is some evidence to suggest that strong views about these issues, on either side, is held more by those in the higher social grades, with those from the lower social grades less likely to express an opinion.

[3] This was not the focus of this piece, and it goes beyond the scope to draw substantive conclusions in this area, but it is worth noting for some these two approaches would achieve the same effect; that of balancing curricula to encompass a wider range if inputs and stimuli. But it is arguable that some of those who argue explicitly for ` decolonisation' wish to see something more radical (in the neutral sense of the word) than "ensuring all groups are represented fairly and discussed in an even handed way" – and so in the eyes of some, these two approaches may not be synonymous

Figure 23: Perceptions on curriculum decolonisation with several wordings by social grade



4.4. Perceptions of the politics of university graduates and academics

In light of the growing divide in partisanship between graduates and non-graduates, we find a moderate perception that universities teach a "left-wing" perspective. However, this is mostly driven by people who identify as right wing, and there is still considerable neutrality on this topic.

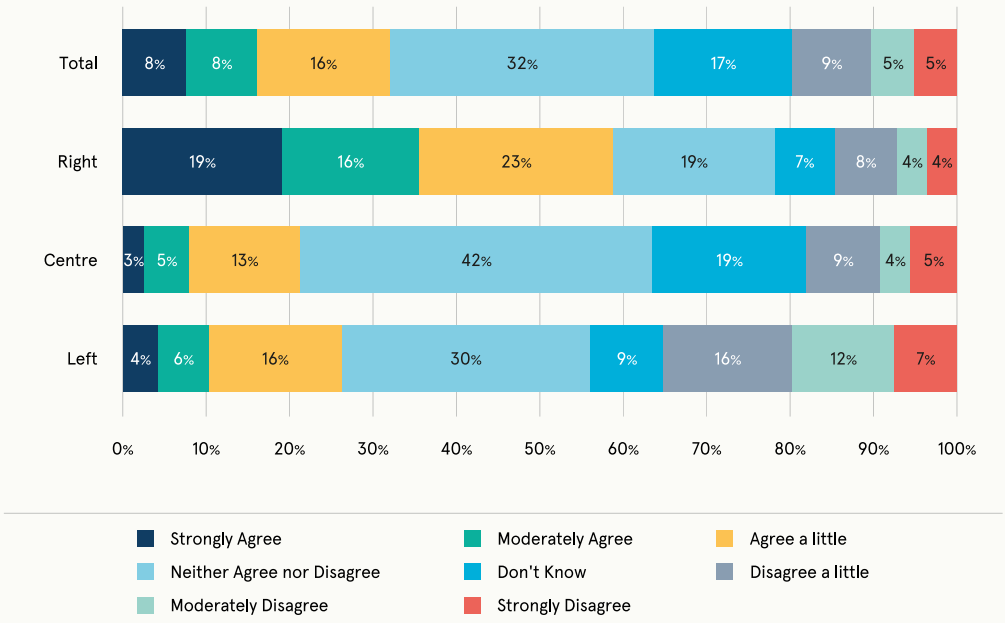
One aspect of the changing political environment which has occupied political commentators in recent years is the partisan divides between those who have attended university and those who have not. In our sample, for example, among those who have attended a university and voted in the EU referendum, 65% voted to Remain, while among those who have not attended university 64% voted Leave. There are numerous suggestions for why this is, including the idea that universities themselves have a political leaning in the way they teach.

We examined both the political views of our own sample, and the perceptions of this political trend among the public. We ask whether people believe that those who have a university degree are less patriotic, we find that 59% disagree and 16% agree. Even among the "University Pessimist" group, only 21% agree with this, whilst many choose not to express an opinion (57% middle response or "Don't Know"), which indicates that the extent to which this opinion holds sway is very limited. Approaching from a different angle, we ask whether people agree that those who do not go to university are more closed-minded. 48% disagree with this, and 23% agree; even among the "University Optimist" group, agreement levels only rise to 32%, and more still disagree (46%).

On the other hand, the statement that universities teach a "left-wing" perspective saw a slight agree lean, with 32% agreeing compared to 20% who disagree. However a large portion of the sample did not express an opinion here (48% midpoint or "Don't Know"). On the flip side, we ask if university education makes people more conservative and find that 22% agree and 36% disagree with this.

The views on these questions are associated with people's own political identification (Figure 24), with those who position themselves on the right more likely to agree that universities teach a "left-wing" perspective, and those on the left more likely to disagree. This also tracks onto partisan allegiances, with a stronger feeling among Conservative voters. Those Conservative voters agree that universities teach a "left-wing" perspective by 44% to 14%, while Labour voters are more divided (26% to 28%).

Figure 24: Agreement that 'universities teach a left-wing perspective' by self-identification on left-right scale



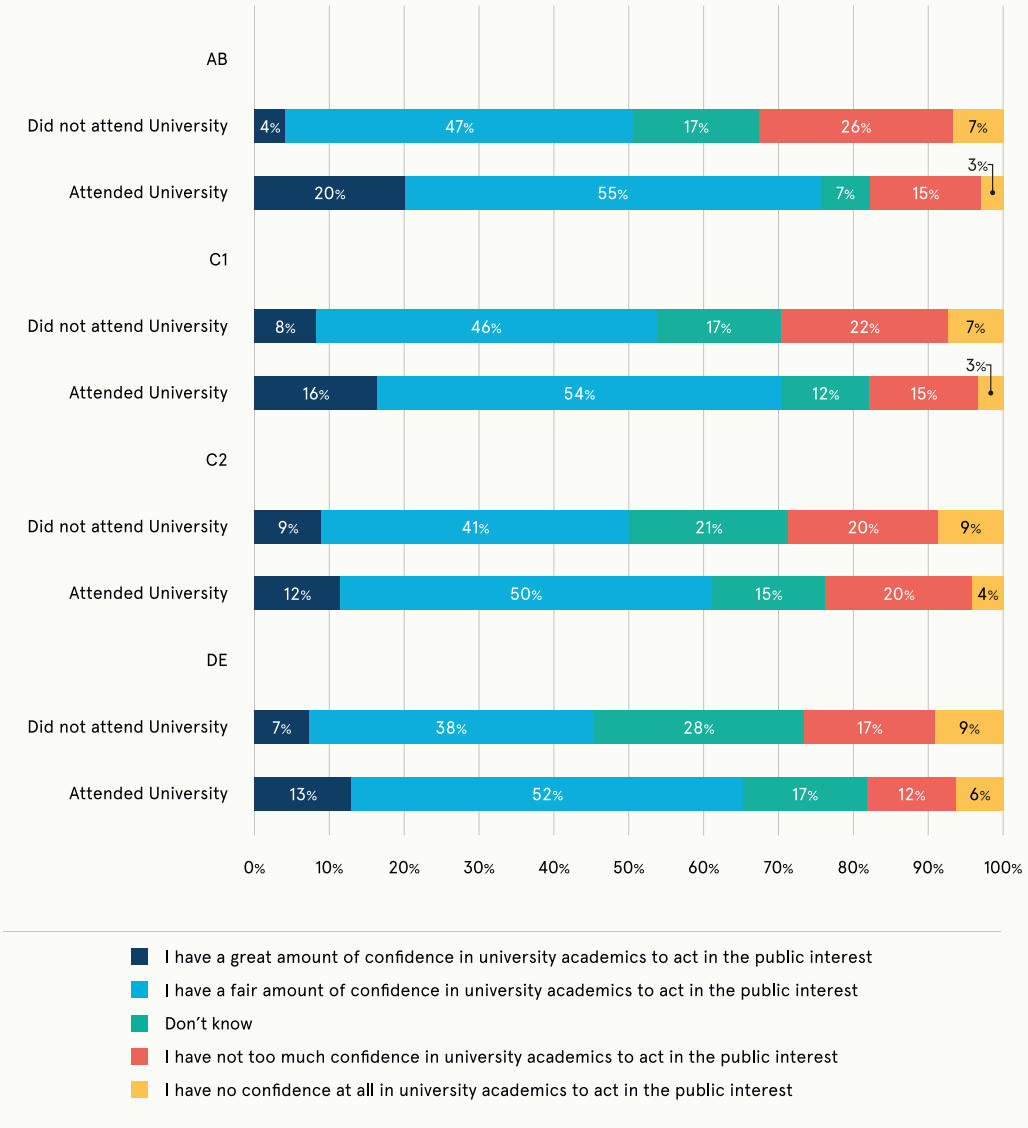
Finally, we once again compared UK responses to US polling on whether individuals have confidence in university academics to act in the public interest.

Table I: Confidence in university academics to act in the public interest

	Total	Leave	Remain	Conser-vative 2019	Labour 2019	US Total	US Republican	US Democrat
Total Confident	58%	50%	70%	55%	67%	68%	48%	83%
Don't Know	18%	18%	14%	14%	16%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total Not Confident	24%	33%	16%	31%	18%	32%	52%	16%
Confident as proportion	70%	60%	81%	64%	79%	68%	48%	83%
Not Confident as proportion	30%	40%	19%	36%	21%	32%	52%	16%

In this instance the top-line proportion is very similar to the US, and again the partisan split is present but less strong when compared to the Republican/Democrat split. There was also a notable gap between those who have themselves attended university, where 70% to 19% are confident rather than unconfident in academics to act in the public interest, and those who have not, who are 49% to 29% confident. Findings by age, and class are much less clear. Whilst there was a social grade trend on this, it is important to note that university attendance plays a key role in the reasons for this (Figure 25). The proportion who are confident in university academics to act in the public interest falls from 68% among AB to 49% among DE. However, when we compare those who attended university in these groups, a clear majority across social grades are confident. In other words, those who have experienced university, regardless of social grade, are more likely to express confidence in academics. Our results indicate that the social grade divides we see in opinions towards university, are in part driven by a lack of experience and engagement between the people in these lower social grades who are non-graduates, and the institutions.

Figure 25: Confidence in university academics to act in the public interest by social grade and university attendance



4.5. University graduate status as a marker of friendship or romantic affiliation

We find that, despite most people being largely unconcerned about the educational background of a long-term romantic partner, a substantial number of people would prefer their partner to come from the same educational background as themselves, with more of those who have attended university saying this.

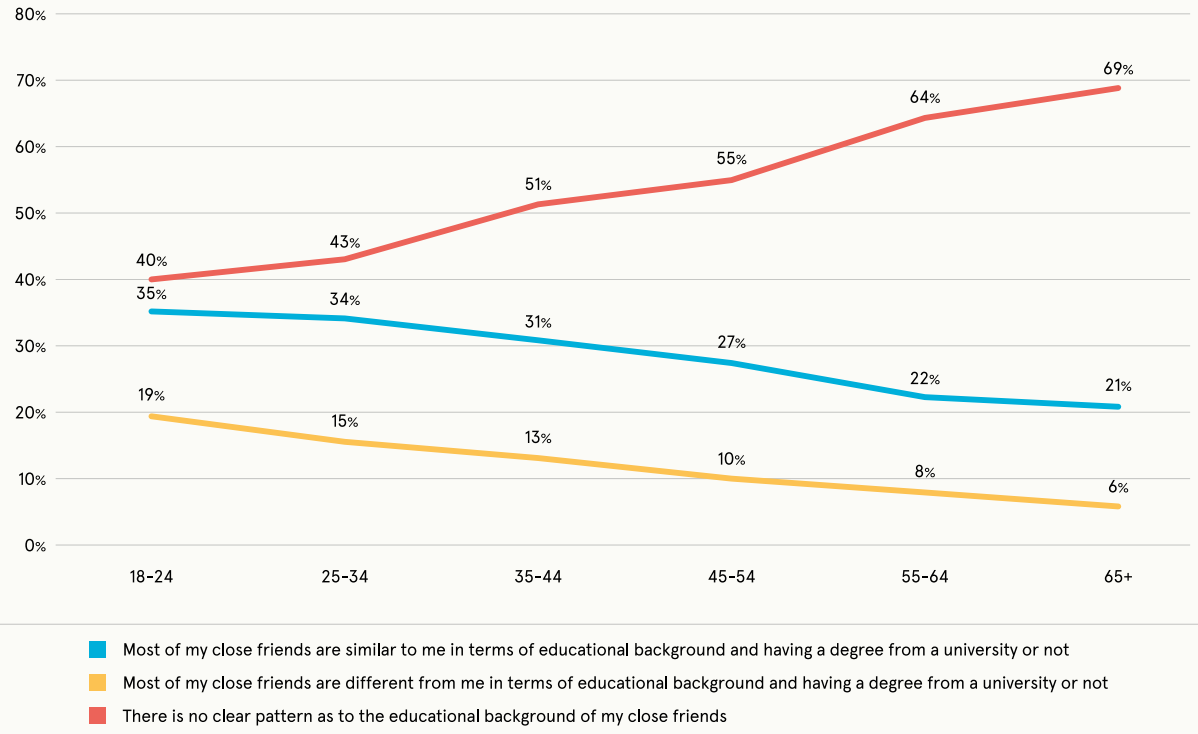
We ask whether people would prefer a long-term romantic partner to come from a similar education background to them in terms of having a degree from a university or not, and find that 17% say they would prefer for a long-term romantic partner to come from a similar background, whilst 69% do not mind.

This compares to 30% who would prefer a long-term romantic partner to be of a similar political leaning to them with 58% saying they would not mind. For those who have themselves attended university, 27% say they would prefer their long-term partner to have a similar educational background to them, compared to 10% of those who have not. The gap was true also for political opinions, with 40% of university attenders saying they would prefer a long-term romantic partner to have similar political beliefs to them compared to 23% of those who did not go to university.

We further ask whether people's close friends tend to be from a similar educational background to them in terms of attending university, and find that those who attended university are both more likely to say their close friends come from a similar background (33% compared to 23%) and from a different background (15% compared to 9%) than those who have not attended university, who are more likely to say there is no clear pattern in their close friends on this (61%).

There is also an age effect, with the rate at which people say there is no clear pattern in their friends rising from 40% among 18-24s, to 69% among 65+ (Figure 26). More extensive research would be required to identify whether this is an age effect (ie as people get older their friendship group becomes more mixed) or a cohort effect (ie the current group of young people will continue to have a less mixed group of friends throughout their lives).

Figure 26: How people tend to say their friends' education aligns with their own, across age groups

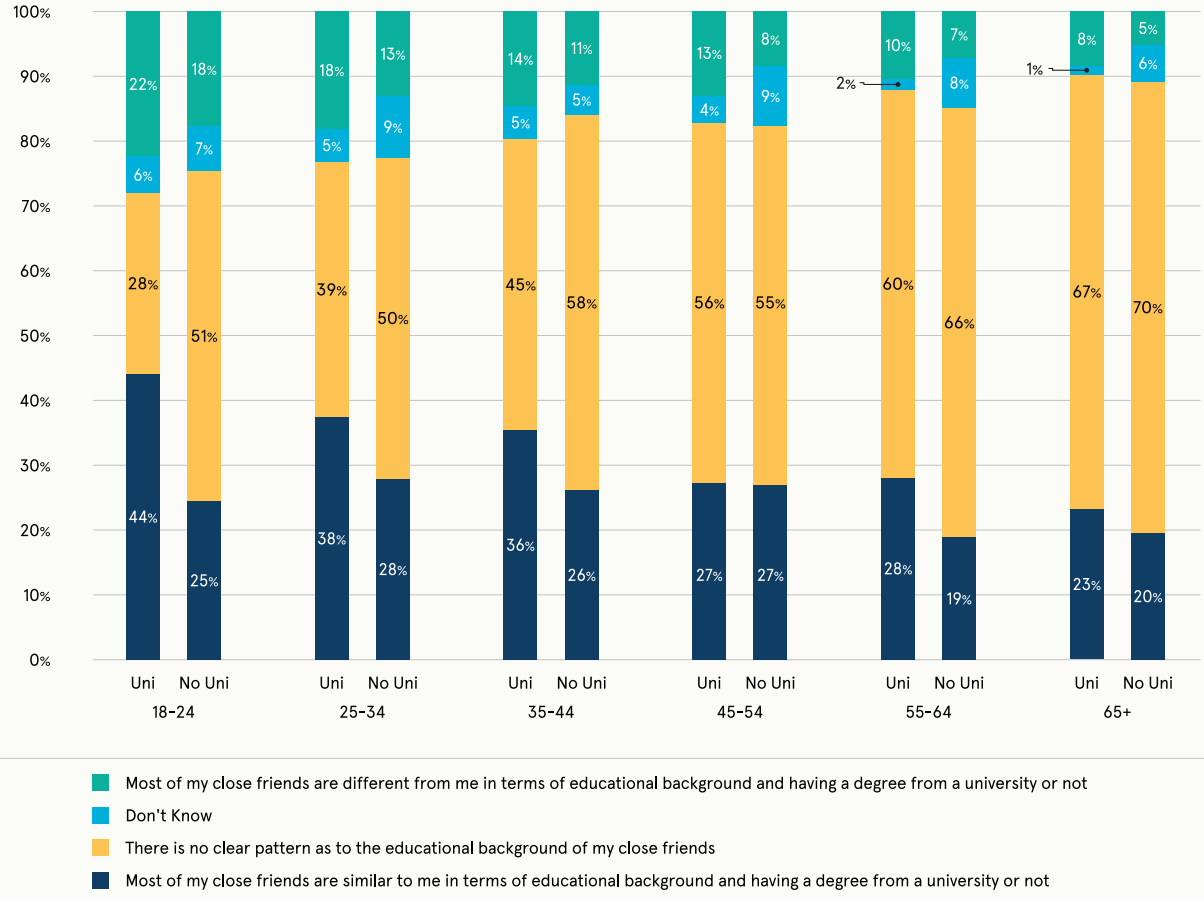


When we split each age group into those who attended university and those who did not, people who have not attended university say there is no clear pattern in the educational background of their friends, which appears to stop in the 45-54 age group (Figure 27). Notably 18-24s who have attended university are very likely to say that their close friends are similar in terms of educational background (44%) compared to those in the 18-24 group who have not attended, where the majority say there is no clear pattern (51%).

These results indicate that those who have not attended university are more likely to see no clear pattern in their friendships by educational status, with graduates reporting more homogeneity in the educational background of their friends (although on small sample sizes). However, there may of course be considerable heterogeneity in friendship groups even when all hold – or all do not hold – graduate status.

The results also give some indication as to the importance of university to a young person's social life. The higher rates of intra-group friendships among graduates is likely driven by the formation of university friendships which persist for a while into a person's career. Our reading of these results is, therefore, that whilst university is seen to broaden people's friendship groups to include those from a range of different social backgrounds, this occurs at the expense of relationships with non-graduates. Those who attend university may well meet people from a range of backgrounds, but once they leave, they are more likely to maintain that friendship bubble into their early adult life.

Figure 27: How people tend to say their friends' education aligns with their own, across age groups, split by university attendance



In our segments, in the "University Optimist" group, 33% said that they would prefer a long-term romantic partner to come from a similar educational background to them, which was not mirrored in the "University Pessimist" group, where only 11% said this.

Conclusion

This piece of work seeks to explore general sentiment towards higher education among voters in England. Its findings can be categorised in three ways:

- **Views towards universities as institutions;** how well people know them, and what they are – and are not – valued for.
- **Views on universities as educational institutions;** the value of degrees, their wider value, the desirability of gaining degrees; and barriers to access.
- **Views on topical 'cultural' or wider issues around higher education;** who should be allowed to speak on campuses, how curricula should be framed, whether academics and universities are left wing or not, whether universities act in the national interest, and the extent to which graduates tend to socialise and form romantic relationships with each other

We also show a proposed segmentation of the English population with regard to their views on universities, and how this both reflects and is predictive of their views on these topics and others.

These are not just findings of abstract interest. Universities are at the centre of many current policy debates – whether directly related to them (eg around tuition fees, or research funding, or managing students whose education has been disrupted due to the Covid pandemic), or whether related to their broader social, economic and civic role in the levelling up and wider economic agenda. Understanding where the adult population of England is – what they like and what they do not like – is of critical importance to aiding effective policy making, both for the Government and the higher education sector.. Ultimately, it is the public which shape what governments of all kinds prioritise. By understanding what different groups in society think, universities will be able to communicate effectively to the public.

This paper illustrates that sharp differences exist by class, age and voting intention as to the view on, and value of, higher education. There are also significant segments of the population who hold broadly utilitarian views towards university degrees.

Yet the paper also shows why demand for a university education remains high – when people are thinking about their own lives, or those of their children, they answer very differently to when they are thinking about higher education in the abstract.

The main lesson from the findings of this report is that people tend to have a stronger appreciation for universities when they have benefited in some way from a university's existence. To grow public support in the years ahead, higher education – be it through participation, research and development or a wider civic role – needs to be central to more people's lives.

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