



Public Attitudes to Higher Education Survey 2022

The UPP Foundation and
Higher Education Policy Institute

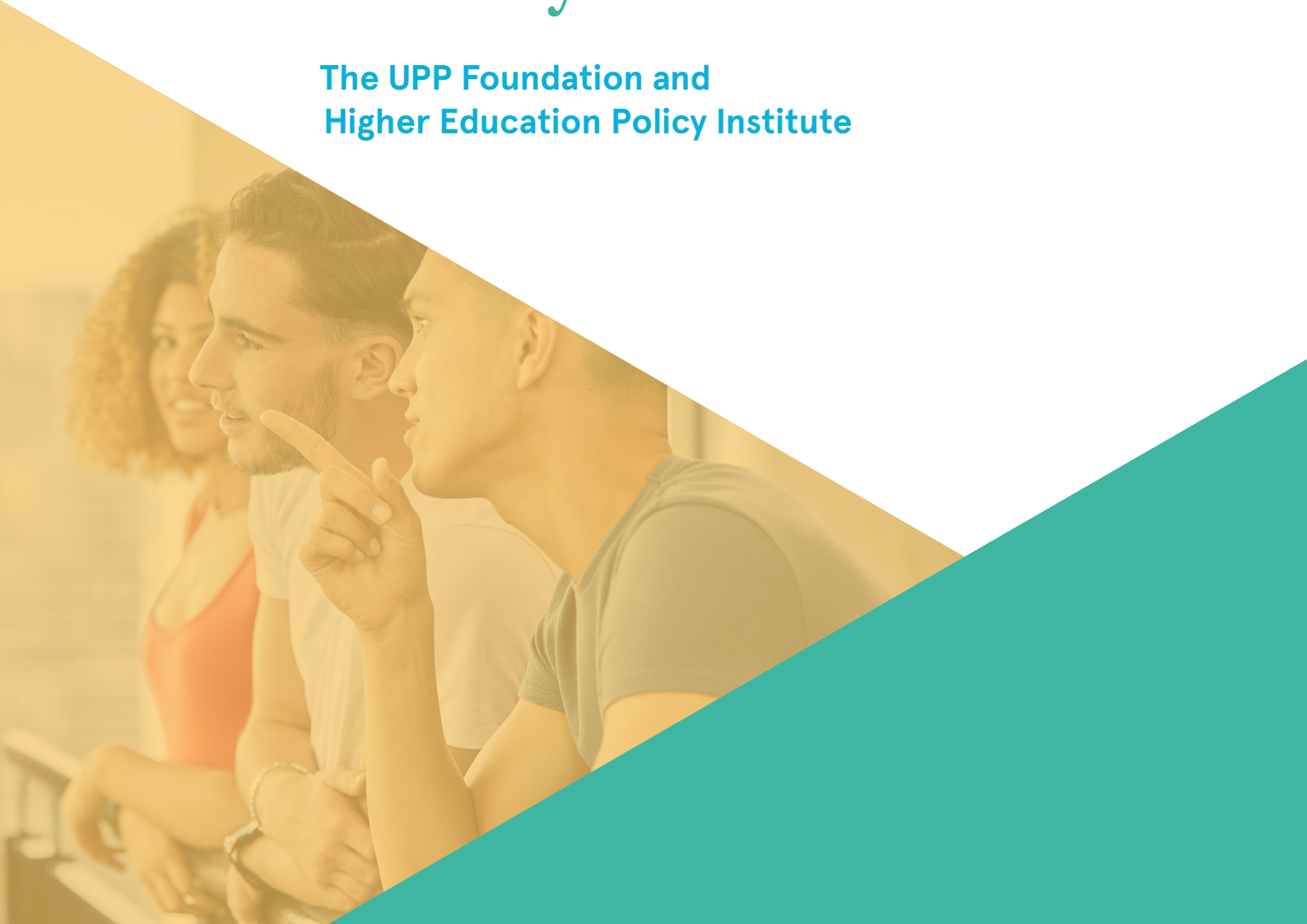


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Foreword



There is a sense at home and abroad that the UK is going in the wrong direction. Public services are struggling, various sectors – including universities – are prone to strikes amid the worst industrial relations for nearly half a century, and political turmoil has led people to question whether society is quite as stable as we previously hoped. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, progress seems uncertain. The pressing need to tackle global challenges, like climate change and war in Europe, also means the current malaise feels somehow different to what has come before.

Whether the problems are temporary or systemic, the answers to them must lie, in part, in UK universities, which are not only educating the next generation of employees but also pushing at the boundaries of knowledge on how to better the world. So – with the caveat that our polling was conducted in August 2022 – it is pleasing to see the consistently high levels of support for UK higher education institutions in this second wave of the UPP Foundation / HEPI Public Attitudes to Higher Education

Survey, which has been overseen by Public First. In particular, it is notable that support for universities among voters in England runs higher than support for universities among voters in the United States.

However, there remains, as in 2021, some areas of concern where public perceptions are either moving in the wrong direction or continue to be problematic. Fewer people think universities are important to the UK economy than last year; and one-in-five people think 'a university degree is a waste of time'. We also find that 57% of the public say that freedom of speech at English universities is under threat.

All of these issues have different contexts and require different approaches. Some need concerted action to tackle them, whereas for others it is about how the sector engages with the outside world. But broadly speaking the polling shows there will need to be a sustained advocacy job done either side of the next general election if more people are to understand the true value of higher education.

This year we asked questions about cost of living. We think there are lessons for both the Government and the higher education sector. Most people fear that the cost-of-living crisis will deter people from enrolling in higher education and a majority want to see student maintenance grants return. While polling and behaviour are often at odds, we certainly agree that policy needs to fit current circumstances, and the real concern is not just access, but student continuation. The best way to help hard-pressed students is to link the existing maintenance support package to a more accurate measure of inflation so that it maintains its value.

Yet if universities and students' unions want to understand why the Government hasn't done this, they should look at our report. Sadly, few people prioritise students in the battle for public support when they are pitted against other groups. This probably explains why Westminster governments of more than one colour have opted to shift the costs of higher education onto the main beneficiaries – graduates – and away from taxpayers.

In the short-term it is incumbent on all of us to press the case for student maintenance and outline the consequences of inaction. Over the longer-term we need to build a better evidence base on the true costs of being a student of the sort that used to be regularly provided by the Student Income and Expenditure Survey.

Finally, one of the most dispiriting findings this time around, as last time, is how many people have only very rarely, or never, knowingly visited (or even apparently engaged passively with) a university. For example, over half of those from the lowest social grade (DE) have never visited a university, and 62% of DE respondents reported no interactions at all with a university in the last year. Given the importance higher education institutions play in England's national and civic life and their extensive work with businesses, charities and other educational institutions, it is clear universities need to do more to welcome people on to campus and also to make their existing support for museums, theatres, schools, libraries and other civic organisations, not to mention employers and the healthcare sector, much more visible. That way, we can hopefully turn a negative finding into a more positive one in future iterations of this important annual survey.

After all, there are sound reasons why it is sometimes said that the difference between a regular city and a great city is the presence of a university.

Richard Brabner – Director of the UPP Foundation and ESG and

Nick Hillman – Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI).

Executive Summary

In 2021 we published the first UPP Foundation / Higher Education Policy Institute study of public attitudes to higher education. This looked at public attitudes towards universities as institutions, the value of university degrees, and included a thematic chapter covering views on freedom of speech and other cultural issues on campus.

For 2022 we have repeated our questions on views of universities and institutions and on overall value. For our 2022 theme, we picked the issue at the top of the list of public concerns: cost of living. Public First were commissioned and polled over 1,994 adults over the age of 18 in England between the 26th and 31st of August 2022. This report summarises the findings of this poll.

In part one of this report we have commissioned new polling to update on last year's findings on public perceptions of universities as institutions and on the value of university degrees. In particular, we focus on what has changed over the last academic year. It also provides an update on the segmentation analysis and on questions around freedom of speech.

Part two of this report is a new section for 2022 which looks specifically at the cost of living for students, including questions around financial support, maintenance loans, and how students rank with the public compared to other groups when it comes to additional financial support.

Key Findings

Public perceptions of universities

The public believe that universities play an important role in research, education, jobs and the economy.

75% of our poll respondents agree that a university degree is an impressive achievement; 77% agree universities are important to research and innovation; and 57% agree they are important to the UK economy as a whole (with only 12% saying they are unimportant).

There are some findings which indicate low confidence in the value of a university degree

A fifth (22%) agree with the statement “a university degree is a waste of time”, which rises to 32% of 18-24 year olds. Over half (53%) agree that “studying topics which do not clearly lead to a profession is a waste of time”; and 58% agree that “a university degree does not prepare students for the real world.” On the whole however, 52% believed that the advantages of getting a university degree outweigh the disadvantages.

Support for public investment in universities remains high.

Despite increased concerns about the cost of living and level of taxation in the UK, half (50%) still agree that university research should receive funding from the taxpayer, which represents no significant change from 2021 (52%). People are more likely to say the proportion of the population going to university should stay the same or increase than say it should decrease.

Nearly half of respondents hadn't interacted with a university in any way over the course of the year, including with university research, students or at their place of work.

Only 18% of our sample had actually visited a university in the 2021/22 academic year; those from AB (28%) social groups were significantly more likely to have done so compared to DE (11%).

57% say that freedom of speech at English universities is currently under at least some threat, but only 22% say that it is under "a great amount of threat".

When the question is worded differently, with respondents give a choice between whether freedom of speech is more protected or more under threat by universities and students, we find people are more divided: 35% say it is more protected and 36% say it is more under threat.

The sentiments of the majority of our segments stayed the same - with one exception.

The "University Pessimist" segment has become more solid in their personal opposition to higher education this year. Over half of this segment now say they would definitely not want to go to university (54%) compared to a third in 2021 (34%). A third (34%) would now say they would probably or definitely not want their children to go to university, compared to a fifth (20%) in 2021.

Cost of living

The public feel the cost of living crisis will have a significant effect on the behaviours of prospective students and current students - but support for prioritising students for financial support is low.

71% agree that the cost of living will deter people from going to university, and when asked directly, 57% agree the government should provide additional support to students to help them with the cost of living.

But only 10% of respondents put students among the top 3 groups they would prioritise for support with the cost of living (compared to 57% for those on minimum wage, 47% for pensioners and 42% for families with young children).

Nearly two-thirds of poll respondents (64%) think maintenance grants should be reintroduced.

44% of the public agree that the amount of maintenance loan students are eligible to borrow should increase so that students do not have to take on paid work and can focus on their studies; and 60% agree it should increase at least in line with inflation.

69% of respondents agree maintenance loans should always be high enough to cover student rents - rising to 81% of parents with children at university.

20% of parents would not expect to make any financial contributions to support their children if they decided to attend university.

This rises to 33% of DE parents. 20% of AB parents would expect to provide support of £1000 or more each month compared to 5% of C2DE parents. 53% of parents believe their children will be entitled to additional financial support on top of maintenance loans (such as grants, bursaries, scholarships).

There is an overall expectation that students should undertake some part-time work to cover living costs while at university.

63% of respondents agree with the statement that "students should expect to work part time to cover their living costs while at University". Agreement was higher amongst those aged 65 or older (72%) compared to those aged 18-24 (40%).

Methodology

Public First ran a poll of 1,994 adults over the age of 18 in England between the 26th and 31st of August 2022. The polling sample and questions were related to universities and higher education institutions in England due to the devolved nature of higher education in the UK.

Research was carried out online, and results weighted to be representative by interlocked age and gender, region and social grade. Quota and weighting targets were matched to those used in the 2021 report to enable comparisons between the answers. Public First is a member of the British Polling Council, and company partners of the Market Research Society.

Full tables for 2022 can be found [here](#) and for 2021 [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.

We replicate the novel segmentation produced in last year's research. To do this, we re-ran in full the questions used to generate those segments, and performed Linear Discriminant Analysis.

We also 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.

Social Grade Classification

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 workers	15
E	State pensioners, casual and lowest grade workers	10

An update on segmentation

As in 2021, we produced a [novel segmentation](#) from the polling data, splitting the UK adult population into 7 groups based on a variety of attitudes they hold towards universities.

We replicate these segments with the new sample, approximating how new respondents would likely be assigned into these segments had they been part of the initial research carried out last year.

New details and changes in the segments.

By generating these segments again with the 2022 results, we can compare

the opinions of our segments to last year on some of the key questions. As we are generalising the segmentation carried out last year to the new data, some of these differences will represent a change in the sorts of people who are being categorised as one segment or another, as well as general opinion changes. Much like if we were to compare those who currently plan to vote Conservative with those who said they would last year, the results not only indicate changing views among those who would have planned to vote Conservative last year, but also changes in the make-up of the group who comprise current Conservative voters.

The segments for 2022 were as follows.

The Salary Improvers (16%): 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.

The Elite Promoter (10%): For the Elite Promoters group, the importance of a university degree is clear, however, they believe that the institutions act as tickets for elites.

The Research Supporters (10%): The Research Supporters are keen supporters of universities, principally as research institutions.

The University Optimists (6%): Effectively sitting at the opposite end of the spectrum of HE opinion to the Pessimists, the University Optimist group is overwhelmingly positive about all things relating to universities and their impact.

The Career Delayers (16%): 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”.

The University Pessimists (11%): The most negative group about the role that universities play in the UK are the University Pessimists. They are less likely to view universities in a positive light across a wide range of metrics.

The Broadly Uninterested (30%): A large group which tend to be disengaged on a range of issues relating to Universities. Some tend to respond to questions with high levels of agreement bias, some tend to say "Don't Know". Ultimately, this group do not have strong opinions on Universities and we leave them out of the analysis. *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.

2022 Segmentation Composition

		Total	Salary Improvers	Career Delayers	Elite Promoters	University Pessimists	Research Supporters	University Optimists	Broadly Disinterested
Gender	Male	48%	44%	38%	57%	55%	47%	53%	50%
	Female	52%	56%	62%	43%	45%	52%	47%	50%
Age	18-24	11%	7%	8%	10%	3%	10%	6%	18%
	25-34	17%	14%	17%	16%	15%	12%	8%	24%
	35-44	16%	18%	13%	19%	12%	17%	18%	18%
	45-54	17%	23%	15%	17%	17%	17%	21%	13%
	55-64	16%	14%	19%	15%	25%	21%	18%	10%
	65+	23%	24%	29%	23%	28%	24%	29%	17%
Socio-economic Group	AB	27%	28%	20%	24%	19%	43%	32%	27%
	C1	26%	26%	26%	26%	28%	19%	38%	25%
	C2	22%	21%	26%	21%	26%	13%	16%	23%
	DE	25%	25%	28%	28%	27%	23%	14%	25%
University	Attended University	39%	43%	32%	35%	17%	61%	64%	38%
	Did not attend University	61%	57%	68%	65%	83%	39%	36%	62%
EU 2016	Leave	42%	37%	50%	50%	69%	24%	33%	36%
	Remain	39%	43%	36%	30%	18%	60%	57%	40%
2019 vote	Conservative	41%	41%	46%	50%	54%	30%	31%	36%
	Labour	27%	26%	25%	23%	15%	36%	42%	30%
	Liberal Democrat	8%	10%	7%	6%	3%	14%	11%	9%
	Urban	23%	22%	16%	29%	12%	21%	30%	29%
	Suburbs	31%	30%	31%	31%	38%	31%	31%	29%
	Large Town	12%	15%	11%	13%	10%	9%	13%	12%
	Small Town	19%	20%	22%	17%	22%	19%	13%	16%
	Village	11%	9%	16%	8%	16%	14%	8%	8%
	Rural Area	4%	3%	4%	2%	2%	5%	5%	5%

Part One: Public perceptions of universities

In this section, we explore views of the public on universities as institutions – what roles they play locally and nationally; how people think about their funding; whether people think the sector is going in the right direction and how often people have interacted with them.

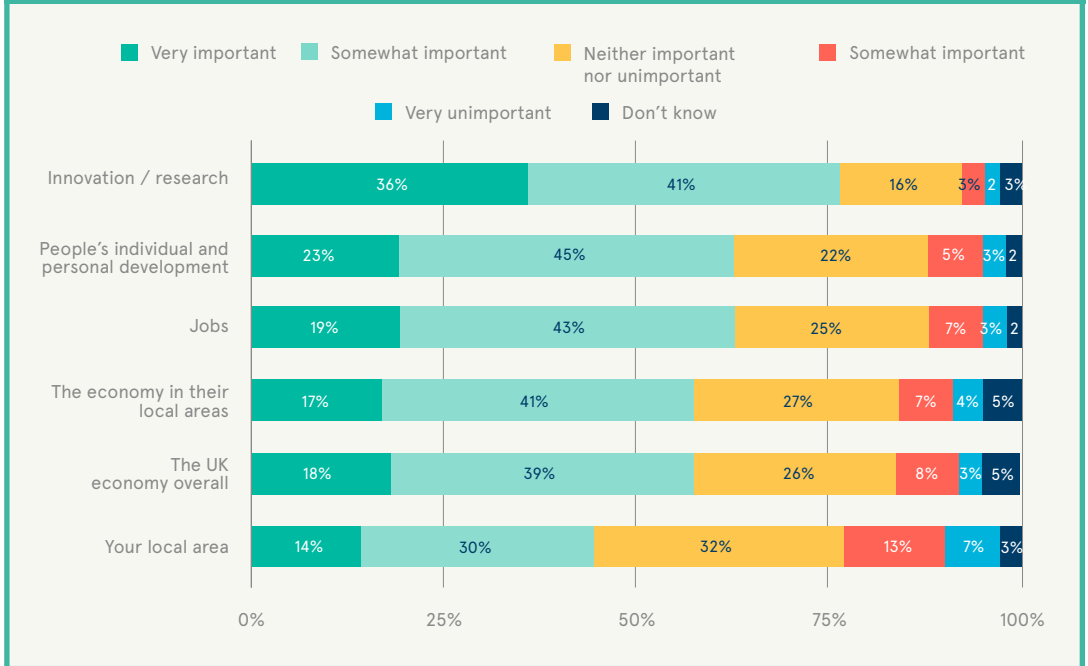
1. The public believes that universities play an important role in research, education, jobs and the economy.

77% agree universities are important to research and innovation; 75% of respondents agreed that a university degree is an impressive achievement; and 57% agree universities are

important to the UK economy as a whole (with only 12% saying they are unimportant). But as in 2021, the role of universities in their local area is where respondents think universities are least important.

The belief that universities are important to a local area was also higher among younger respondents, and those with higher formal educational attainment. As we might expect, urban areas also showed a higher proportion here: over half (60%) of those in cities in the UK said universities were important to their local area.

How important or unimportant do you think universities are for the following?



On the question of university's value to the UK economy overall, there are a number of trends which can be observed based on educational level, social grade and 2016 referendum vote.

The proportion who view universities as important for the UK economy overall rises from 45% among those who have GCSEs or equivalent as their highest attainment level, to 76% who

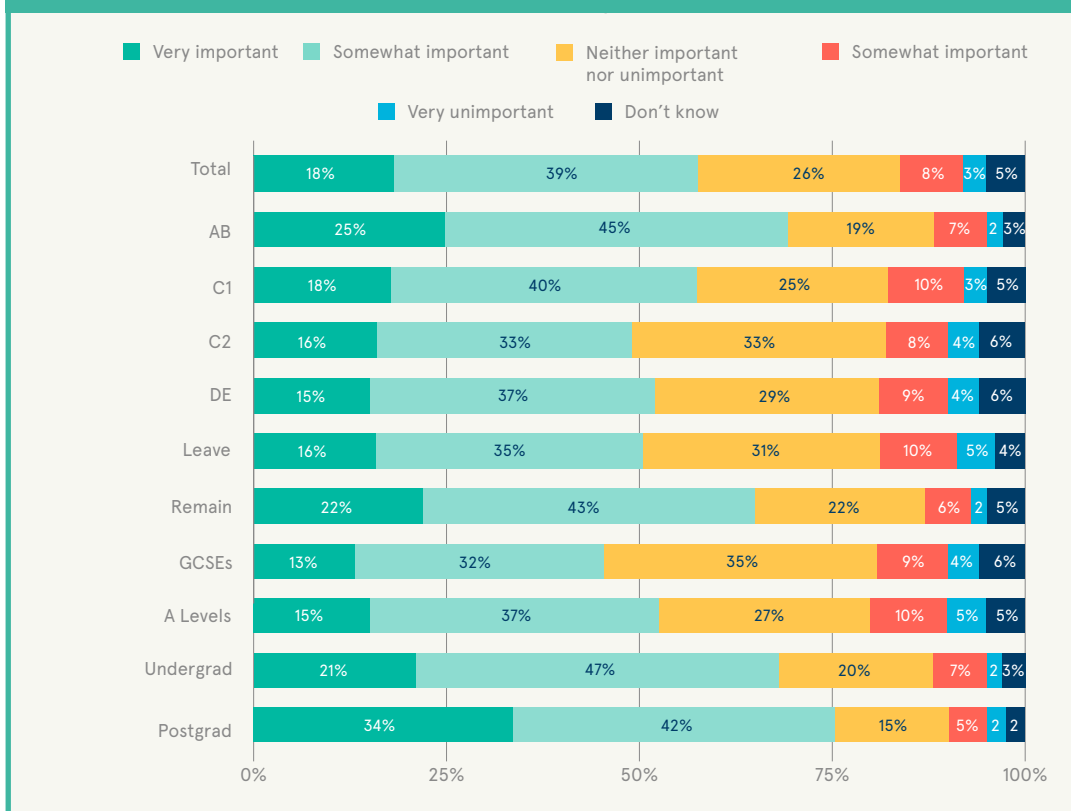
achieved non-doctorate level post-graduate qualifications; 70% of AB respondents compared to 52% of DE voters; and 65% of remain voters vs. 51% of leave voters..

Across all social grades people view universities as being less important for the UK economy in 2022 compared to in 2021; dropping from 64% stating they were either very or somewhat important in 2021 to 57% in 2022.

How important or unimportant do you think universities are for the following: The UK economy overall

	Total			AB			C1			C2			DE		
	2021	2022	+/-	2021	2022	+/-	2021	2022	+/-	2021	2022	+/-	2021	2022	+/-
Total important	64%	57%	-7%	76%	70%	-6%	66%	58%	-8%	57%	49%	-8%	55%	52%	-3%
Neither	24%	19%	3%	16%	19%	3%	22%	25%	3%	31%	33%	2%	28%	29%	1%
Total Unimportant	7%	11%	4%	7%	9%	2%	6%	13%	7%	8%	12%	4%	9%	13%	4%
Don't know	1%	3%	2%	1%	3%	2%	5%	5%	0%	6%	2%	8%	8%	6%	-2%

How important or unimportant do you think universities are for the following? The UK economy overall

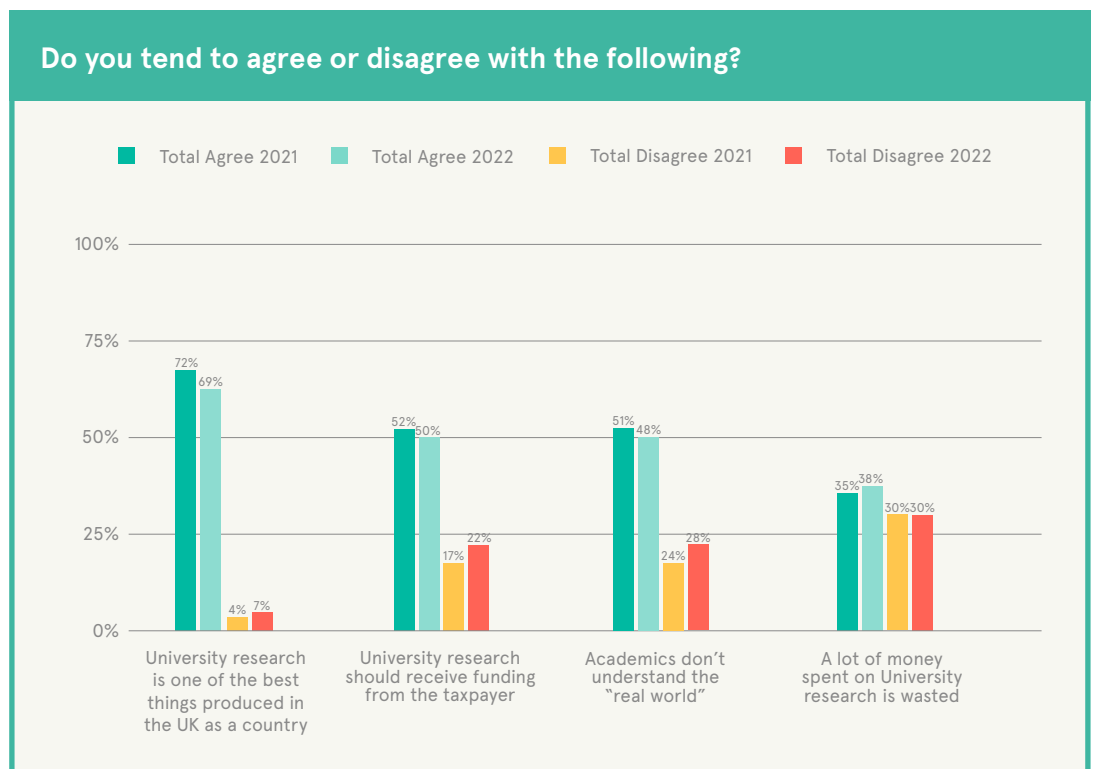


2. Support for public investment in universities remains high.

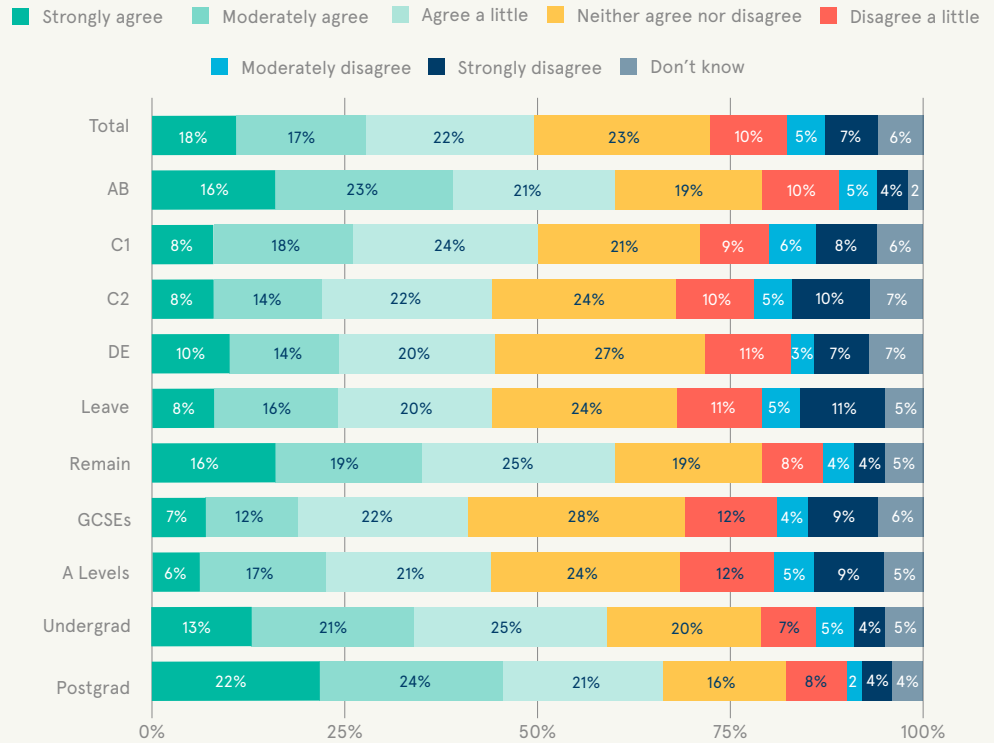
Despite increased concerns about the cost of living and level of taxation in recent months, half of our respondents (rounding to 50%) agree that university research should receive funding from the taxpayer, with no significant change from 2021 (52%). And university research is still highly valued – 69% of our sample agree that “university research is one of the best things produced in the UK as a country”, only a slight drop from 2021 – though the sector should be mindful that over a third of our sample believe

that a lot of money spent on university research is wasted.

Across different demographic cross breaks, people are more likely to support the idea that universities should receive public funding rather than oppose. Those who are more likely to engage with universities are more likely to support the idea that they receive public funds; support is stronger amongst those in higher AB socio-economic groups compared to C/D respondents, with those who voted remain compared to those who voted leave, and with those who have an undergraduate or postgraduate qualification themselves.



Do you tend to agree or disagree with the following?: University research should receive funding from taxpayer

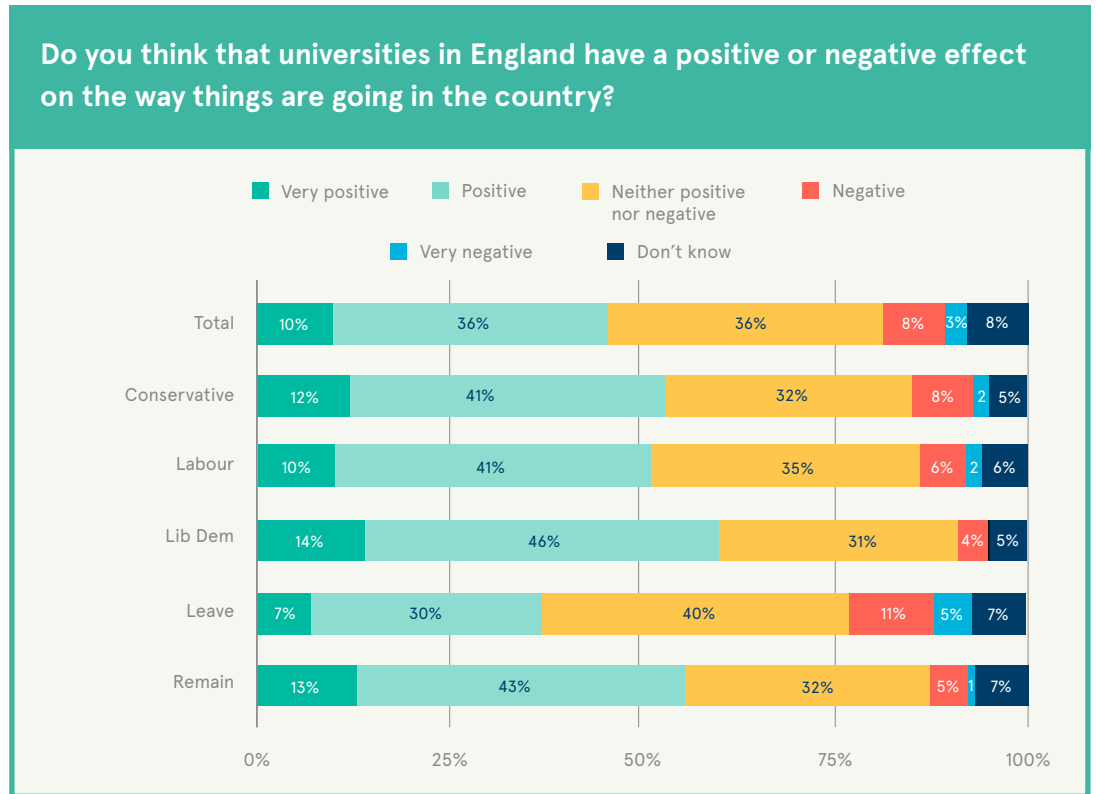


3. A third of respondents say the university system in England is generally going in the right direction.

33% of respondents in the survey believe that the university system is going in the right direction – consistent with our findings from 2021. There is little difference between

respondents from different voter groups, either split by voting intention or by their votes to leave/remain in the EU referendum. 46% think that universities have a positive or very positive impact on the way things are going in the country as a whole (compared to only 11% who think they have a negative effect).

“46% think that universities have a positive or very positive impact on the way things are going in the country as a whole.”

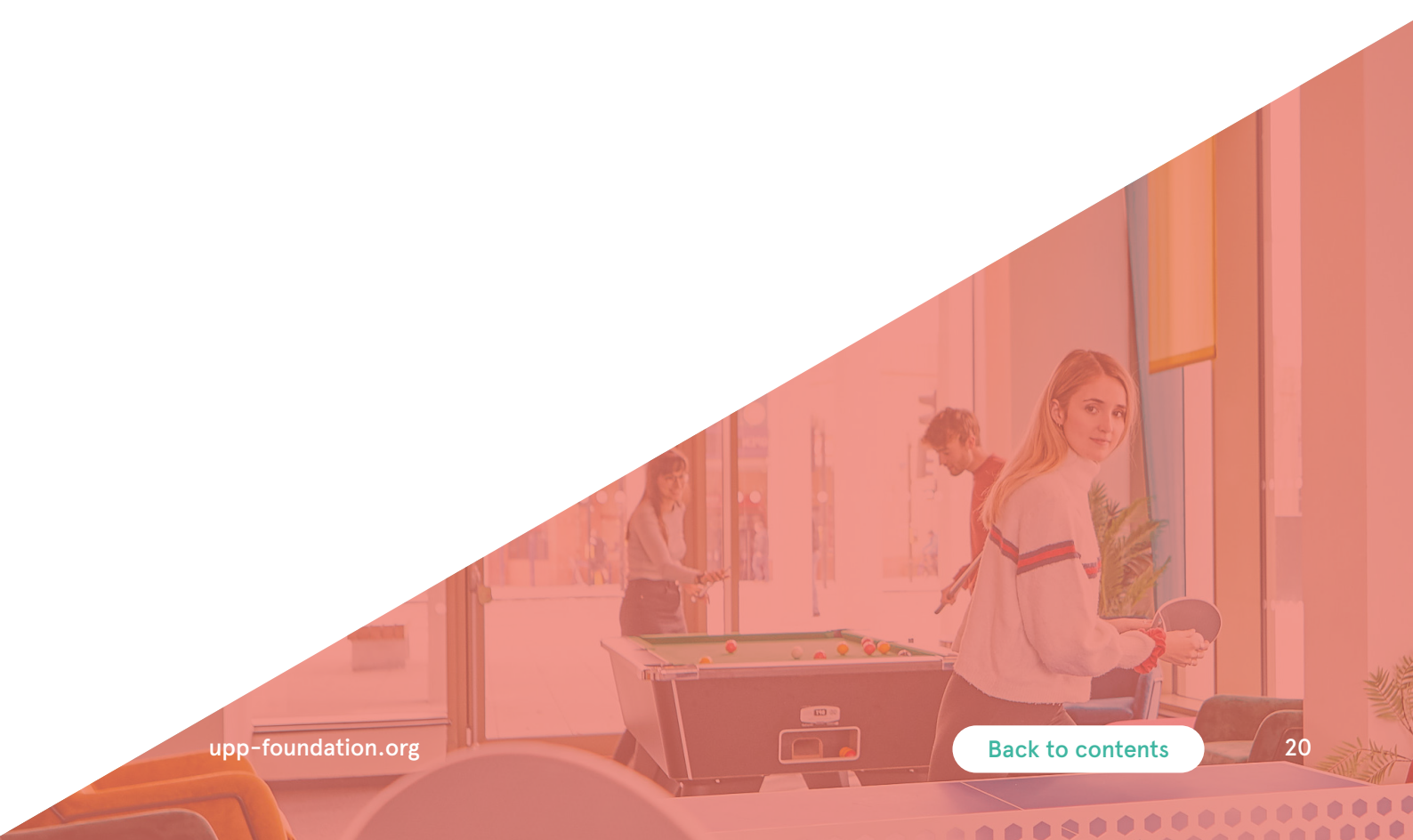


When compared to a similar question asked in the Pew Research questionnaire about universities in the US, English respondents are still much more positive as a proportion

compared to their American counterparts when it comes to the impact of universities.

“When contrasted to the US, there is much less of a political distinction between Conservative respondents and Labour respondents than between US Republicans and US Democrats, where there is a stronger partisan split.”

Do you think universities are going in the right or wrong direction: US vs. UK													
	2022 Results					Pew Results (2029)			2021 Results				
	Total	Leave	Remain	CON 2019	LAB 2019	US Total	US Republican	US Democrat	Total	Leave	Remain	CON 2019	LAB 2019
Total Right Direction	33%	32%	36%	35%	32%	38%	26%	46%	32%	30%	37%	36%	36%
Neither / DKs	47%	49%	46%	46%	47%	N/A	N/A	N/A	47%	45%	46%	40%	46%
Total Wrong Direction	20%	21%	23%	22%	21%	61%	73%	52%	20%	25%	17%	17%	24%
Right Direction on as proportion	63%	62%	67%	65%	61%	38%	26%	47%	63%	54%	68%	60%	67%
Wrong Direction on as proportion	37%	38%	33%	35%	39%	62%	73%	53%	37%	46%	32%	40%	33%



4. Nearly half of respondents hadn't interacted with a university in any way over the course of the previous year and only 18% visited a university campus in 2021-22

Only 18% of our sample had visited a university in the 2021/22 academic year, with those in AB (28%) social groups significantly more likely to have done so compared to DE (11%).

"This is unsurprising given the impact of COVID and ongoing restrictions to activity throughout 2021 and 2022 - but is a low baseline for the sector to recover from in future years."

We asked respondents to think back to before the first national lockdown in England, in March 2020. 38% had never visited a university in England before that date and over a quarter had visited more than 5 years ago (27%). Over half (57%) of those in the lowest social grade (DE) said they had never visited a university in England, and women were more likely to never have visited than men (45% vs 32%).

There is also a strong correlation with age, with older people being far more likely to have never visited than younger respondents (27% of 18-24 year olds vs 50% of 65+ year olds).

This year we also asked about ways in which respondents might have interacted with a university without actually visiting a campus - including meeting with staff or students, participating in research or reading about research carried out at a university. 49% of respondents answered they had done "none of the above" when presented with our list, and 62% of DE respondents reported no interactions compared to 33% of AB respondents.

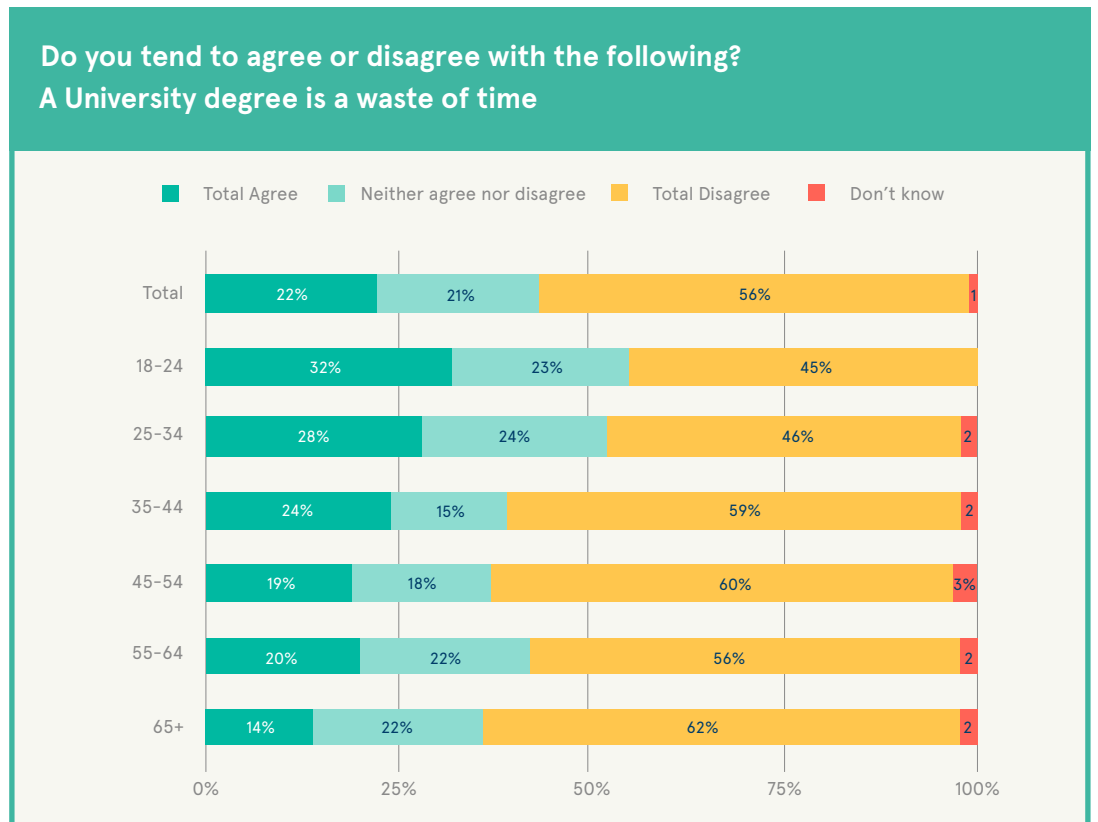
Interactions with universities in 2021–2022: split by social grade

	Total	AB	C1	C2	DE
Read about research carried out at a University	16%	25%	17%	12%	10%
Interacted with a University student in your own time	16%	19%	17%	14%	11%
Interacted with someone who was in training, such as a trainee doctor or teacher	11%	18%	10%	11%	7%
Seen or heard a speaker from a University on television or radio	11%	18%	12%	8%	7%
Interacted with someone who works at a University in your own time	11%	16%	11%	9%	7%
Participated in research ran by a University	10%	13%	10%	8%	9%
Interacted with a University student as part of your work	8%	12%	8%	6%	4%
Interacted with someone who works at a University as part of your work	7%	10%	9%	5%	3%
Attended an event where student volunteers were working	6%	9%	6%	5%	4%
Attended an event held by a University hosted off-site	5%	10%	4%	3%	3%
Worked directly with a University as part of your work	5%	9%	4%	4%	2%
Been taught or trained by a member of a University at your work	4%	6%	4%	4%	2%
Attended an event run by a student volunteer	4%	7%	3%	3%	3%
Don't know	1%	0%	1%	1%	1%
None of the above	49%	33%	48%	54%	62%

As in 2021, there are some findings which indicate low confidence in some aspects of a university's core offer - but overall public believes the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

Two fifths (39%) of our sample agree that "a university degree is necessary to get a good job" and a fifth (22%)

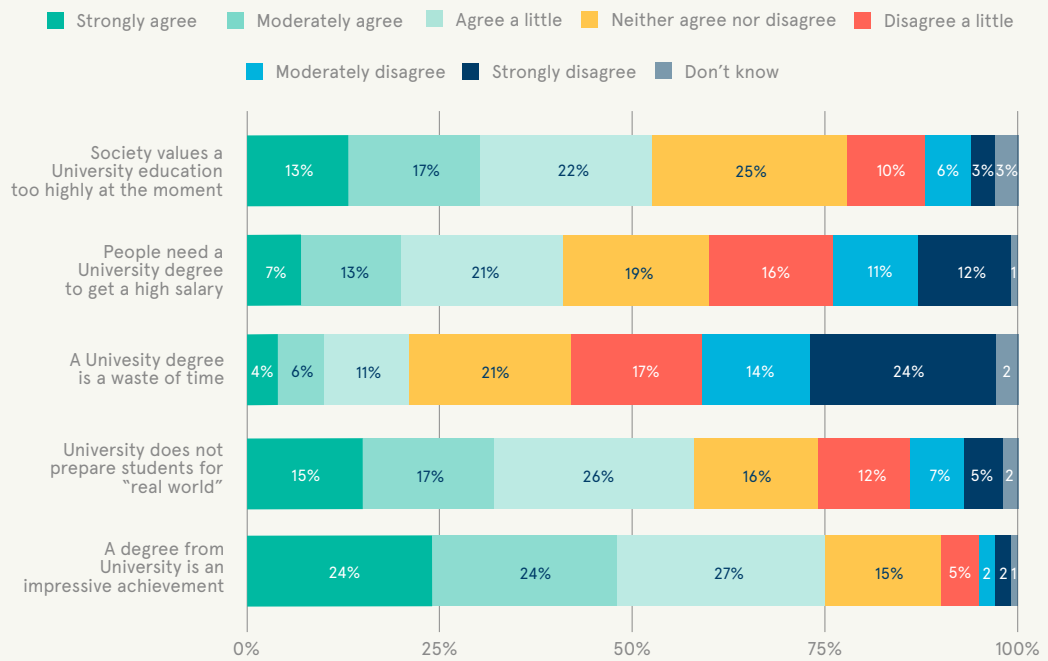
agree with the statement "A university degree is a waste of time", and younger respondents were more likely than older to agree that a degree was a waste of time - 32% of 18-24 year olds compared to 20% of 55-64 year olds and only 14% of 65 year olds.



Over half (53%) agreed that "studying topics which do not clearly lead to a profession is a waste of time" compared to only 26% who disagree; and 58% agree that "a university degree does not prepare students for the real world.

Overall however, **52% think that the advantages of getting a university degree definitely (25%) or probably (27%) outweigh the disadvantages.**

Do you tend to disagree with the following?



5. Respondents are split on what proportion of the population should be going to university.

Views towards the number of people attending university remained broadly the same as in 2021 - with the most popular response being that the same proportion of the population should

go to university as currently attend. This view is held relatively consistently across social grades. As in 2021, around a quarter of the public would prefer there were a smaller proportion of the population going to university than there currently is, compared to 17% who would want to see a greater proportion.

“If you could choose, would you prefer for there to be...” by social grade, 21/22 comparison.

	Total		AB		C1		C2		DE	
	2021	2022	2021	2022	2021	2022	2021	2022	2021	2022
A greater proportion of the population going to University than there currently is	17%	17%	19%	22%	18%	18%	17%	13%	12%	14%
The same proportion of the population going to University as there currently is	36%	37%	37%	37%	38%	35%	36%	43%	33%	33%
A smaller proportion of the population going to University than there currently is	27%	26%	34%	30%	25%	27%	23%	22%	25%	23%
Don't Know	21%	21%	10%	11%	19%	20%	24%	22%	29%	30%

An update on the segmentation analysis

The sentiments of the majority of our segments stayed the same, with one key exception. The University Pessimist segment has become more solid in its personal opposition to higher education this year.

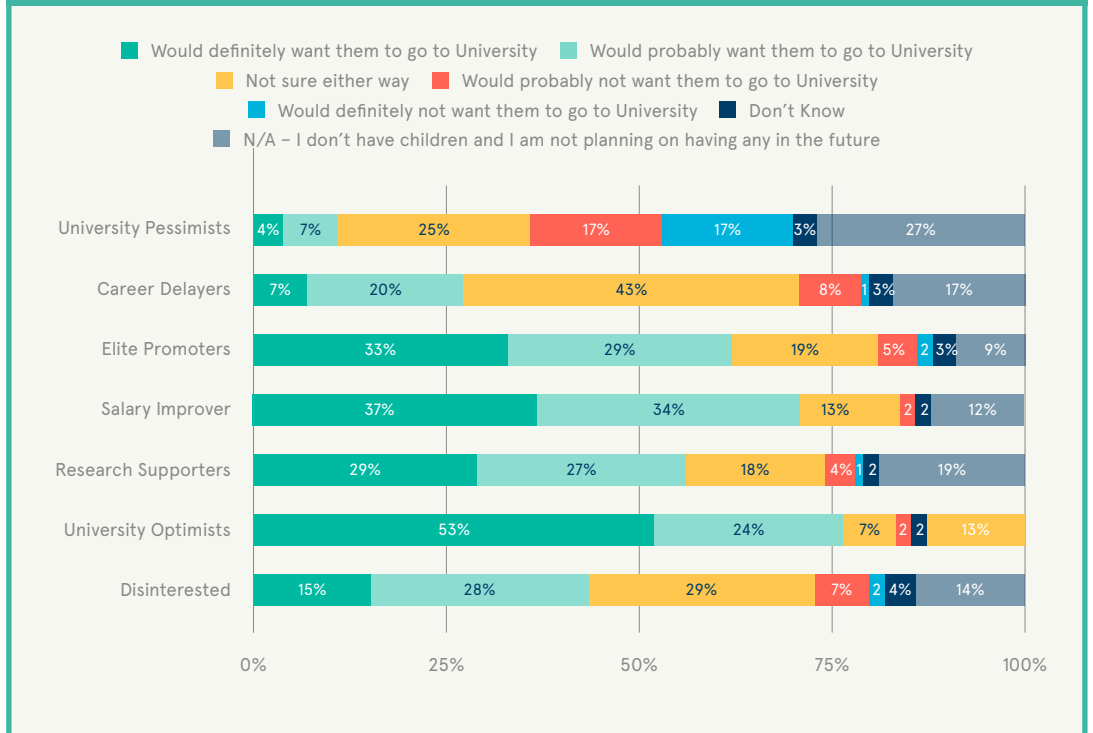
This group are the least likely to engage with universities in any way. They are the most likely to have voted Conservative in 2019; the least likely to have attended university, and predominantly come from lower socio-economic groups, who comprise current Conservative voters.

University Pessimists are increasingly extreme in their personal opposition to higher education this year.

They are exceptionally disconnected from all aspects of University output. 66% of this sample agree with the statement "A university degree is a waste of time compared to 49% in 2021". 18% of University Pessimists say universities are unimportant to the local economy compared to 10% in 2021. Only 6% of the segment agree universities in England have a positive effect on the way things are going in the country.

Over half of our University Pessimists sample now say they would definitely not want to go to university (54%) compared to a third (34%) in 2021. Similarly a third (34%) now say they would probably or definitely not want their children to go to university, compared to a fifth (20%) last year.

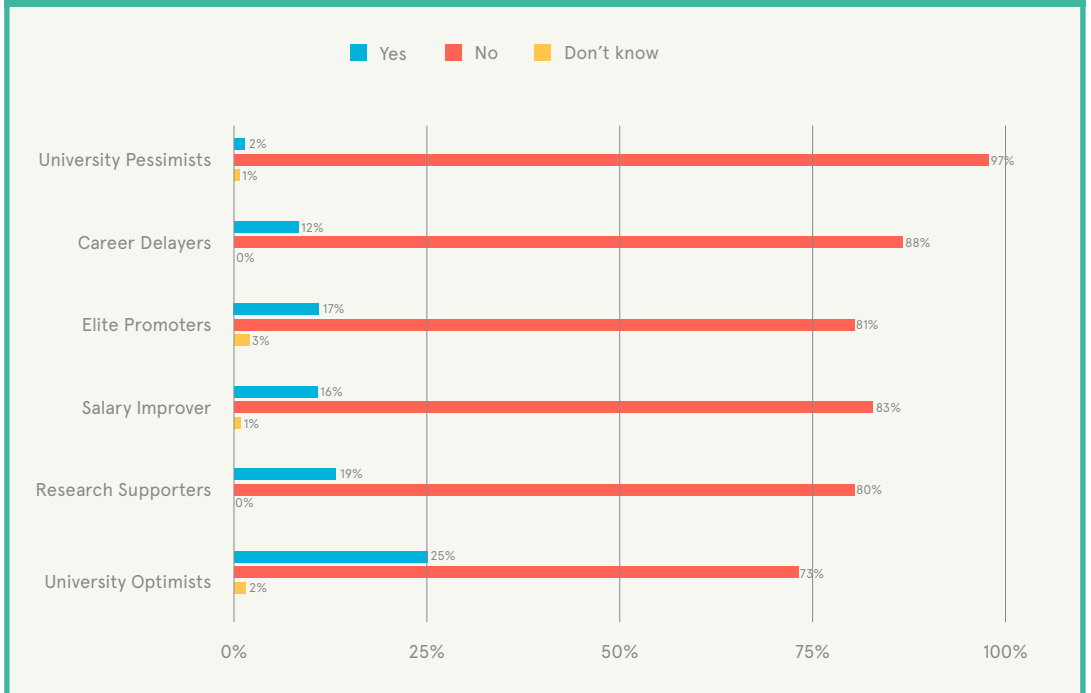
If you have children now, or if you are thinking about having children in the future, do you think you would want them to go to University or not?



With a new question that tested some broader ways in which a person may have engaged with universities over the last year, 97% of this segment said that they had not visited a university in 2021/22. 71% hadn't engaged with a university at all in the last year,

including not reading about research carried out at a university, interacting with a university student socially or at work, or not recalling seeing or hearing a speaker from a university on television or radio.

Have you visited a University between September 2021 and August 2022?



Freedom of speech

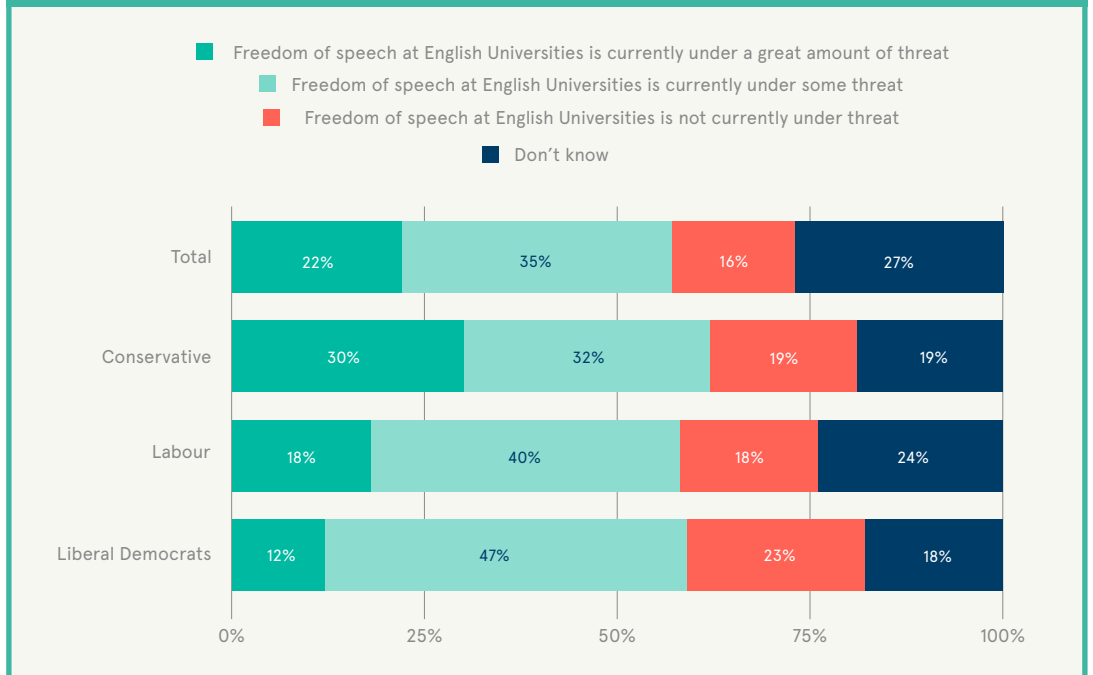
In 2021, we explored opinions on freedom of speech in universities. We showed that, far from the typical narrative of “left-wing” or “liberal” opponents to controversial speakers at university, the public is relatively consistent on who they tend to believe should or should not speak at a university.

This year we expanded on these findings, asking questions about whether as it stands universities are felt to be protecting or threatening freedom of speech.

- 1. 57% say that freedom of speech at English universities is currently under at least some threat, but only 22% say that it is under “a great amount of threat”.**

There is an aversion to saying that free speech at universities is under no threat at all. 30% of Conservative voters say that freedom of speech is under a great amount of threat, compared to 18% of Labour voters, and just under a fifth of both groups say that freedom of speech is not currently under threat at all.

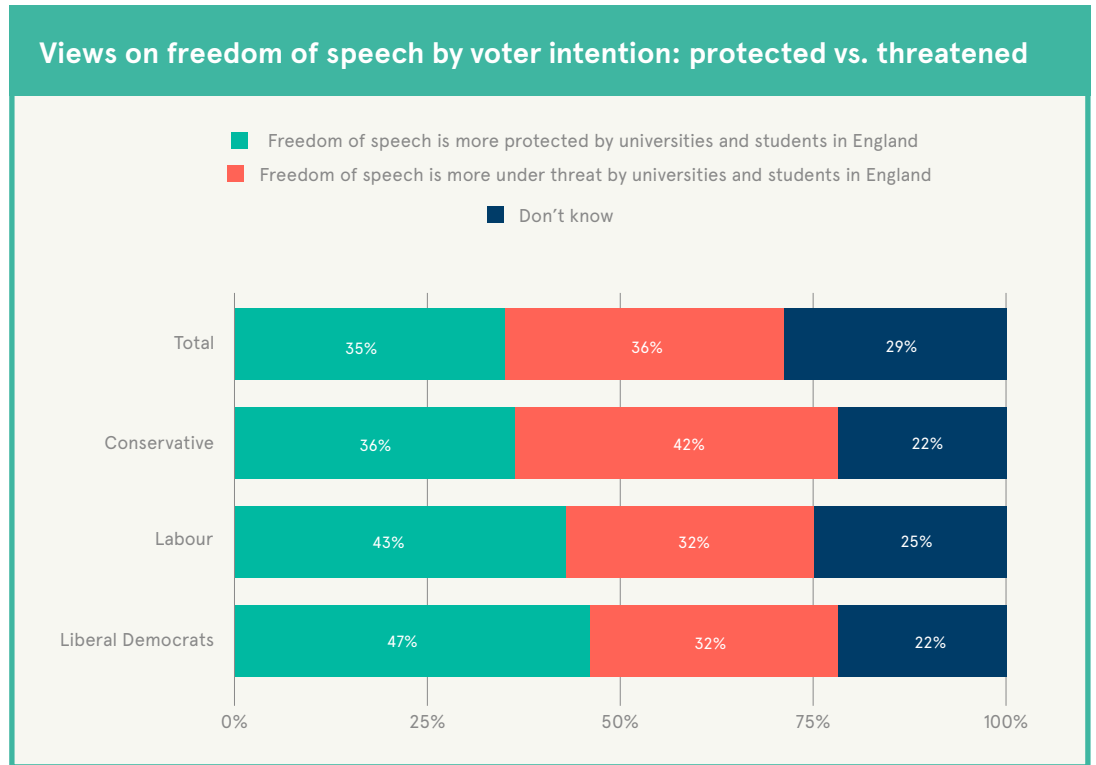
Views on freedom of speech by voter intention



2. **With an alternative wording, where we force a choice between whether freedom of speech is more protected or more under threat by universities and students, we find people are more divided.**

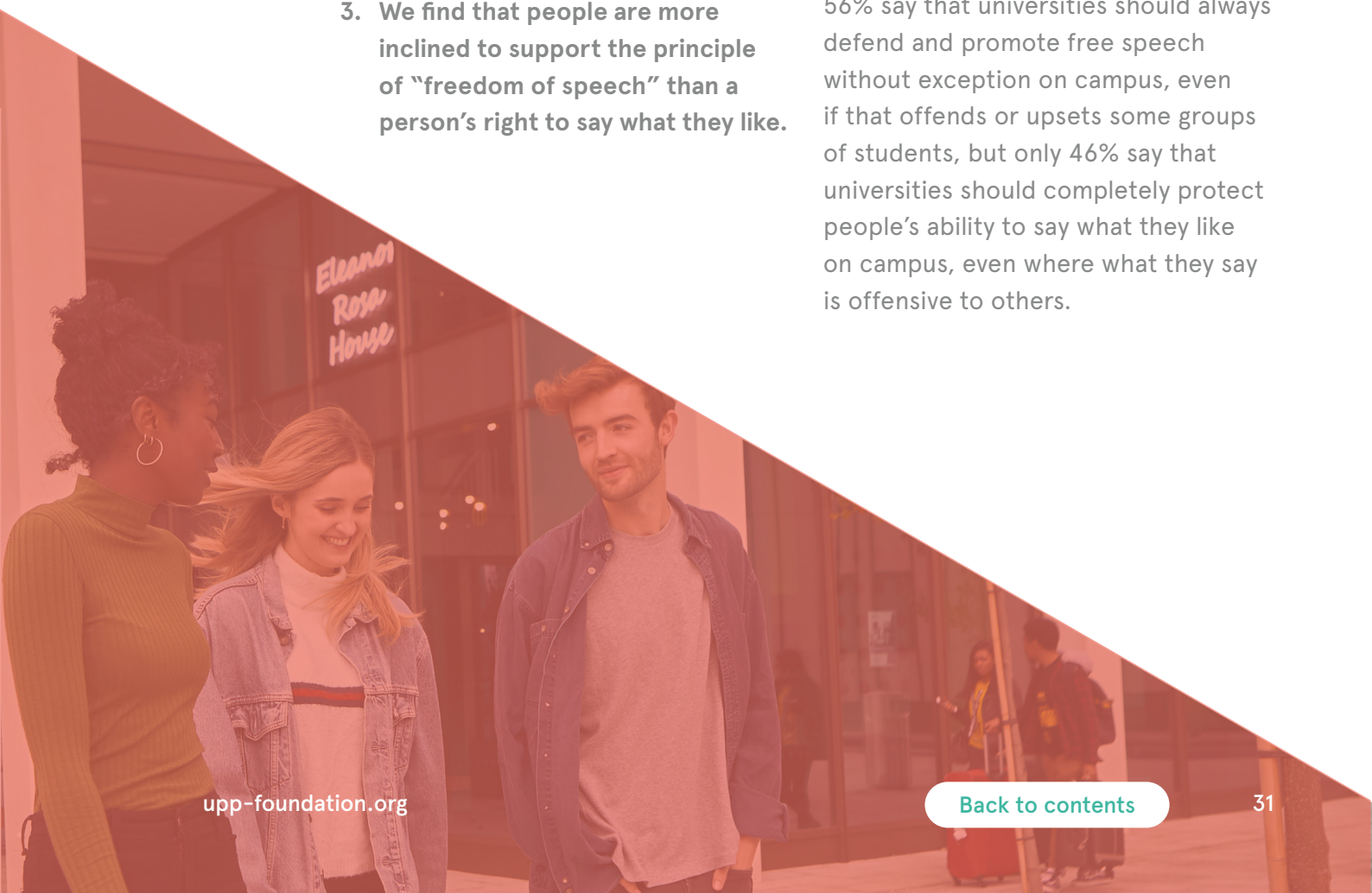
35% say it is more protected and 36% say it is more under threat. There are political splits on this, but they are not as pronounced as we might expect; those who say they will vote Conservative are around 10 percentage points more likely to say that freedom of speech is under threat than Labour supporters.

“56% say that universities should always defend and promote free speech without exception on campus.”

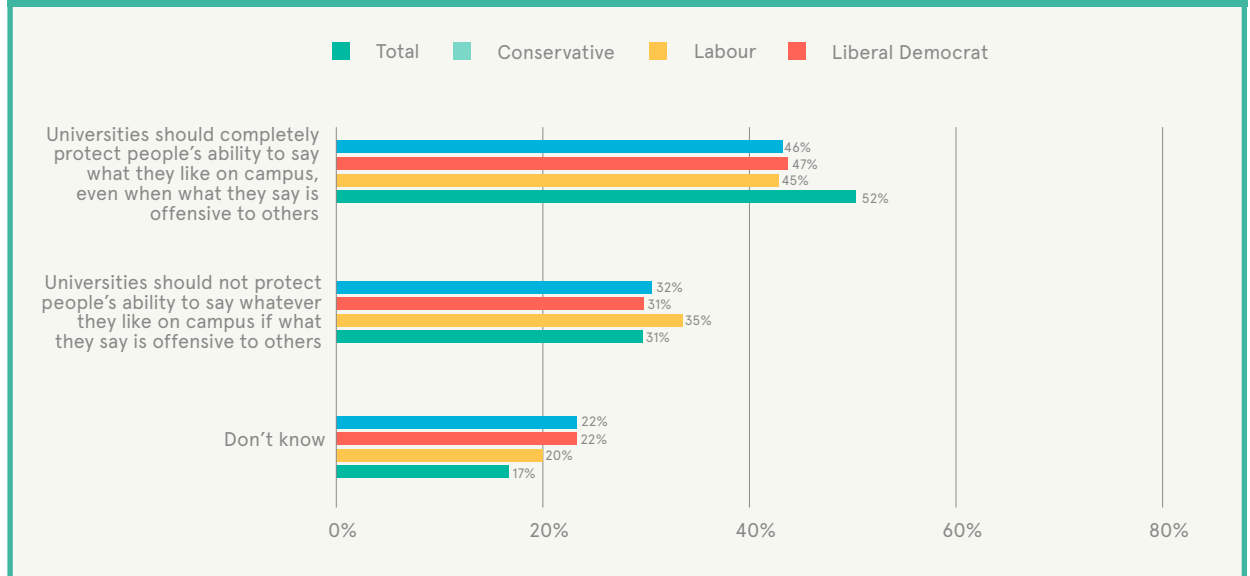


3. We find that people are more inclined to support the principle of “freedom of speech” than a person’s right to say what they like.

56% say that universities should always defend and promote free speech without exception on campus, even if that offends or upsets some groups of students, but only 46% say that universities should completely protect people’s ability to say what they like on campus, even where what they say is offensive to others.



Universities and freedom of speech: which of the following comes closest to your view?

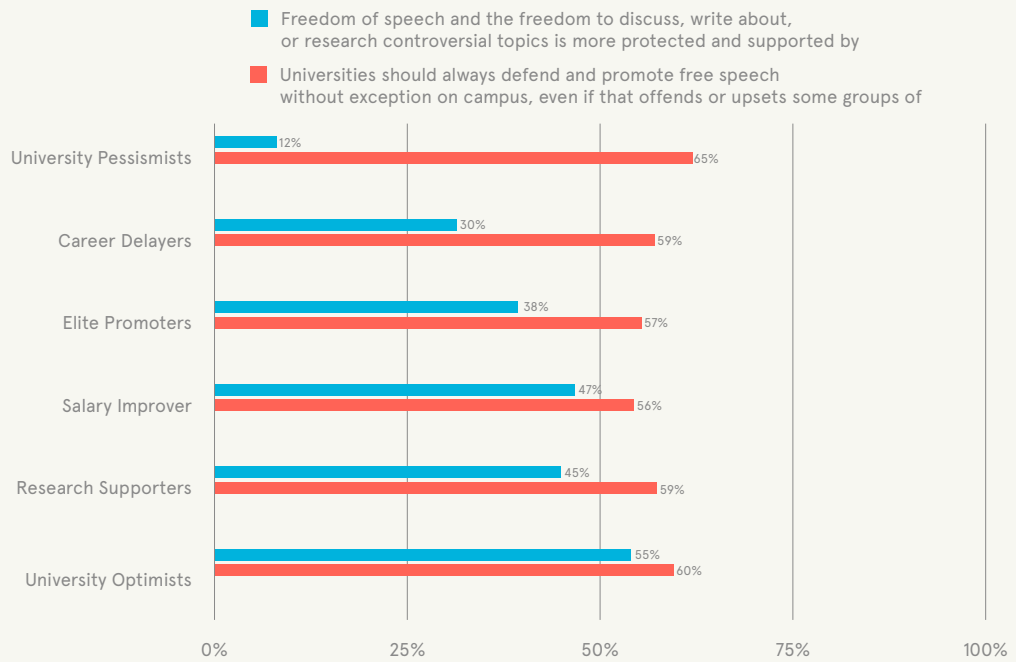


4. Our segments are relatively united on the importance of protecting freedom of speech in the abstract, and disagree mostly on whether universities are successfully protecting freedom of speech.

University Pessimists, Career Delayers and Elite Promoters tend to believe that free speech is more under threat than it is supported at universities, while Salary Improvers, Research

Supporters and University Optimists believe the opposite. University Pessimists, as some of the most engaged with this political discussion, show the greatest rates of concern for freedom of speech. 58% of University Pessimists believe that it is more under threat than supported. 45% of the University Pessimists say freedom of speech is currently under a great amount of threat, followed by Elite Promoters on 29%.

Universities and freedom of speech: which of the following comes closest to your view?



Part Two: Cost of living

“71% agree that the cost of living will deter people from going to university.”

Cost of living – unsurprisingly – has been the dominant concern for the public in 2022. 79% of poll respondents in August put it as among the top three issues currently facing the country. In light of this, we decided to look in more depth about public perceptions of the current student finance system, and how the public thinks rising cost of living will impact students specifically. In particular, we look at whether students should be prioritised for financial support from the government, how much money the public generally expect students need to live, and whether they expect students to work whilst studying.

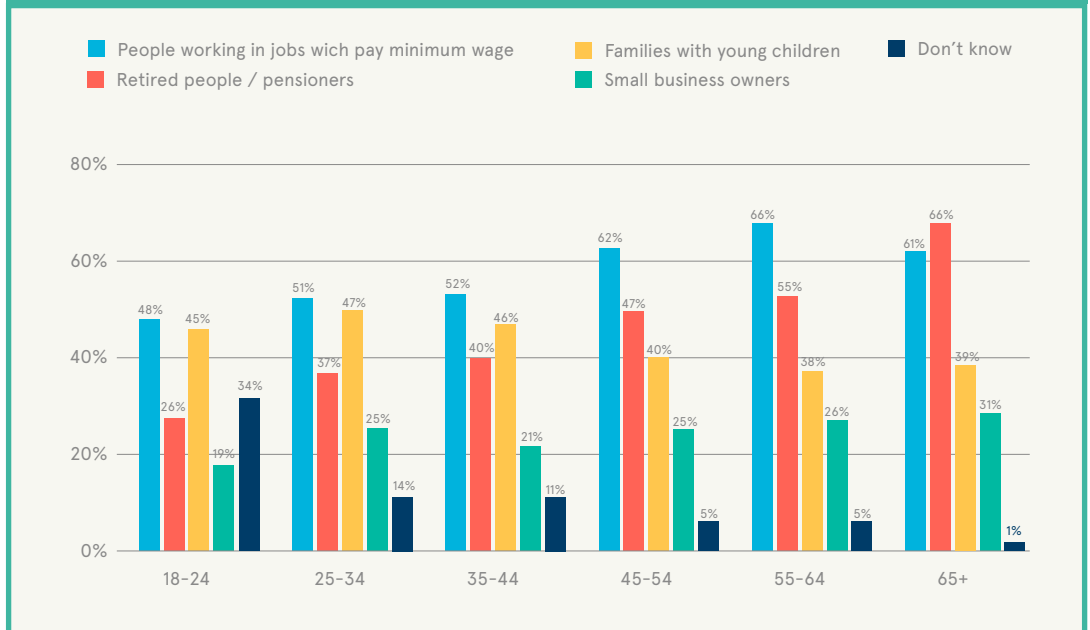
- 1. The public feel the cost of living crisis will have a significant effect on the behaviours of prospective students and current students – but support for prioritising students for financial support is low.**

71% agree that the cost of living will deter people from going to university, and when asked directly, 57% agree the government should provide additional support to students to help them with the cost of living.

Age seems to shape these views; for the youngest group over a third put students, which falls off steeply to just 1% of those aged 65 and over. Despite this, younger respondents still would prefer to prioritise minimum wage earners and families with young children than students, while the oldest group expresses a clear preference for prioritising retirees. Students are more readily accepted as a priority group for business discounts, with 19% saying they should be prioritised here, above apprentices, small businesses owners and recent graduates. This makes them the top choice for 18–24s where 48% put students among the top three groups to prioritise, falling steeply to 10% of those aged 55 and over.

¹ For the purposes of the polling we took university students as a distinct group who would be considered by policymakers for bespoke cost of living support – but we acknowledge that there may be significant overlap between groups in reality.

Who should be a priority for additional government support to tackle the cost of living?



2. Our poll found a fifth of parents who have children under 18 say they would not expect to make any financial contributions to their children if they decided to attend university, either expecting them to be covered by loans or to support themselves financially.

Over half (53%) of parents believe their children will be entitled to additional financial support other than loans, such as grants, bursaries or scholarships. 16% of DE parents also say they don't know how much they would give their children if they attended University, compared to just 5% of AB parents.

Expected parental contribution per student by social grade					
	Total	AB	C1	C2	DE
Less than £100 each month	8%	5%	9%	10%	11%
£100 - £249 each month	20%	20%	22%	19%	19%
£250 - £499 each month	16%	18%	14%	16%	12%
£500 - £749 each month	8%	12%	10%	6%	2%
£750 - £999 each month	6%	10%	6%	5%	2%
£1,000 - £1,499 each month	6%	13%	3%	3%	3%
£1,500 - £1,999 each month	2%	2%	2%	1%	1%
£2,000 - £2,499 each month	2%	4%	3%	0%	0%
£2,500 - or more each month	1%	1%	0%	1%	0%
Don't know	11%	5%	12%	13%	16%

There is a substantial social grade gap in the amount which parents expect to support their children. Those who are better off are more likely to expect to make a financial contribution to their child's university education. Among AB parents, 20% would expect to provide support of £1000 or more each month to their children, compared to 5% of C2DE parents (or 9% of C2DE parents who expect to financially support their

children in some way, once we exclude those who don't know or expect their children to get support in other ways).

Parents who would not expect to make any financial contribution are more likely to expect that their child(ren) would be supported fully by maintenance loans and other forms of financial support than to fully support themselves financially.

“Over half of the most financially comfortable respondents say the maintenance loans are right compared to a third of the least financially comfortable.”



3. Nearly two thirds of respondents believe maintenance grants should be reintroduced for the poorest students; though two-fifths also agree that the average amount students can currently borrow per month in maintenance loans is “about right”.

Nearly two thirds (64%) believe that maintenance grants should be reintroduced. 60% agree the amount of maintenance loan students are eligible to borrow should increase at least in line with inflation. Those who intend

to vote Conservative tend to say the overall maintenance loan is the right amount (50%), while those who plan to vote Labour lean towards saying it is too little (39%, to 36% who say it is right).

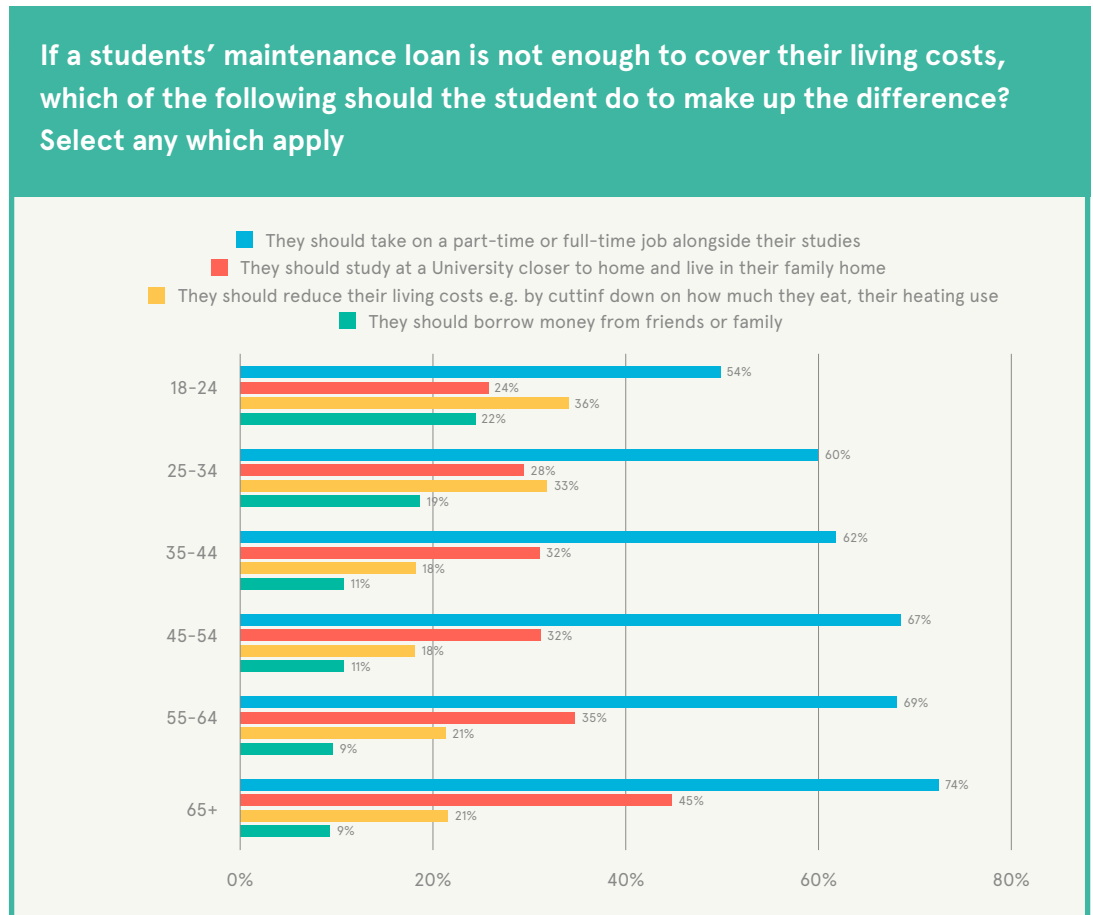
Those who are having more financial difficulty themselves more often tend to say that the amount offered in maintenance loans is too little; over half of the most financially comfortable respondents say the maintenance loans are right compared to a third of the least financially comfortable. Younger respondents tend to say this is too little, with 42%

of 18-24s saying so, but the oldest groups are more unsure: 29% of 65+ “Don’t Know”, and only a quarter say it is too little. Parents who have children who have attended university are more likely to say this is too little (35%) than parents who have children who have not attended university (22%).

Only 8% of respondents disagree that maintenance loans should always be high enough to cover student rents, with 69% agreeing. This rises to 81% of parents with children at university. Agreement is relatively consistent across demographic groups; 64% among those with GCSE attainment, 68% among Conservative voters, 71% among those aged 65 and over.

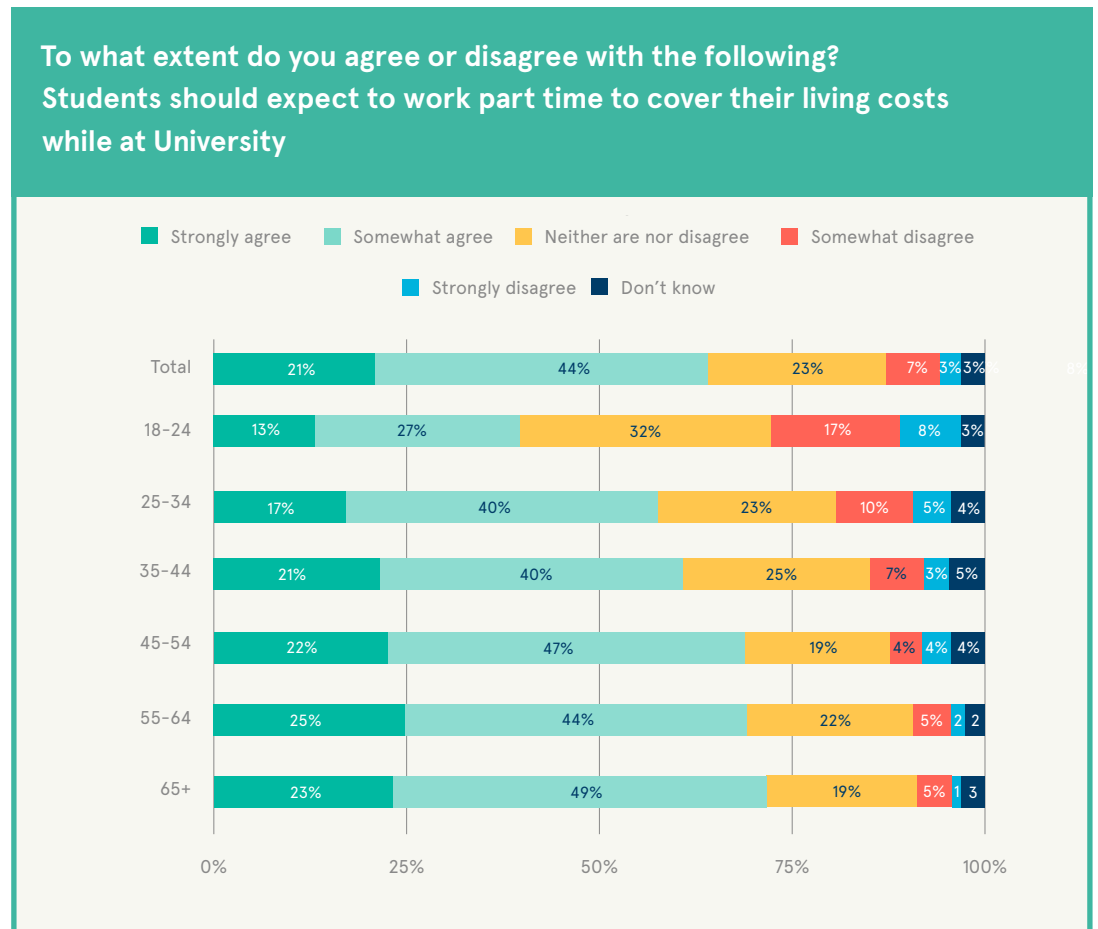
4. A consistent finding in this research is that the public tend to expect

students to take on work to help cover the cost of living. 63% agree with the statement that “students should expect to work part time to cover their living costs while at University.” This includes 58% of those who themselves have completed an undergraduate degree or higher. The greatest resistance to this comes from the youngest group: 40% of 18-24 year old respondents agree compared to 72% of those aged 65 or older. Younger respondents were more likely to say they should reduce living costs or borrow money from friends and family, while older groups were more likely to suggest that students who cannot afford their costs should study at a university closer to home.



Two fifths of our sample agree that the amount of maintenance loans students are eligible to borrow should increase so students don't have to take on paid employment and can focus on their studies instead (with 44% agreeing

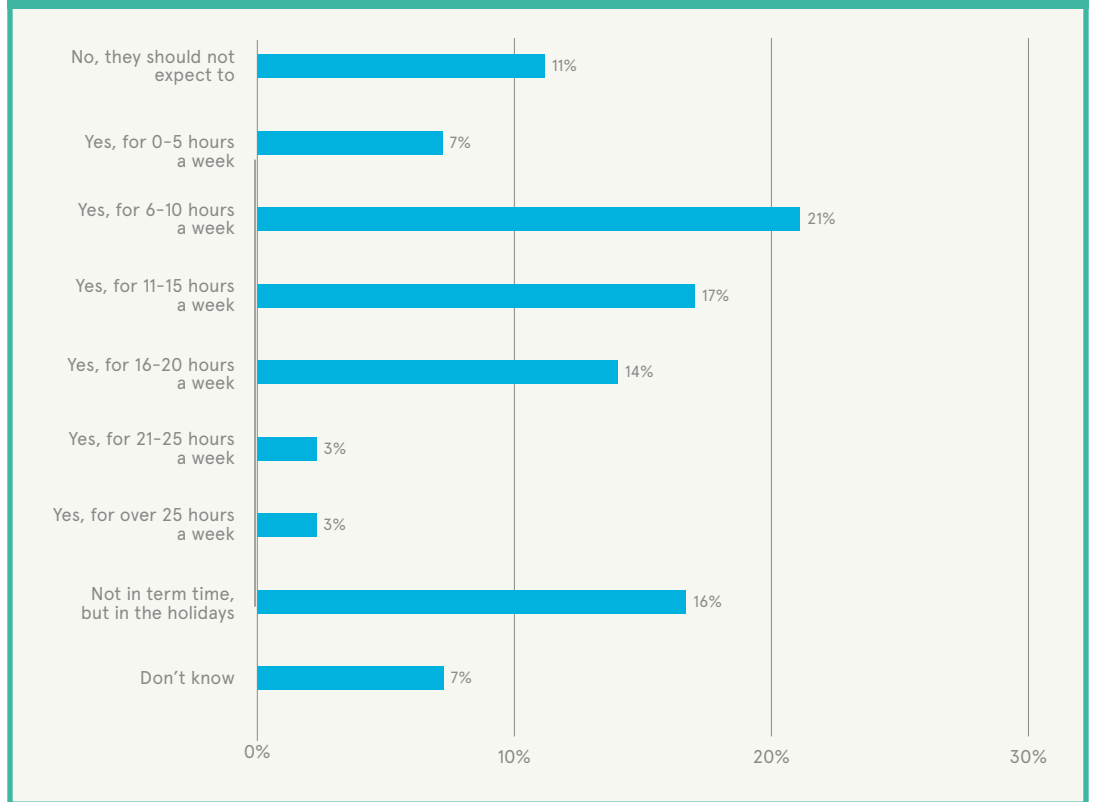
with 23% disagreeing). And around a quarter of the public agree both that students should expect to work, and that maintenance loans should increase so that students do not have to work.



We also asked a similar question in a different format; asking respondents to indicate how many hours students should expect to do formal paid work if at all, and allowing respondents to say they should not work in term-time

but in the holidays. 66% indicate that students should expect to work at least some hours during term-time, with 16% saying students should only work during the holidays.

Do you think students should expect to undertake paid work during their time at university, to help cover their costs?



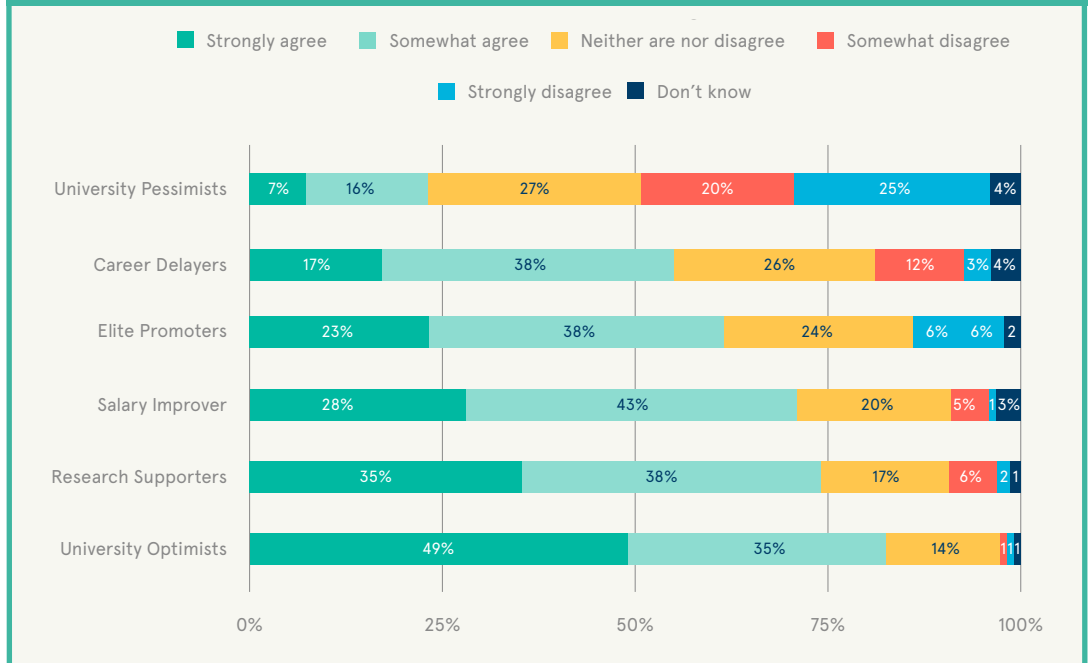
5. We also looked at how our segments responded to the cost of living questions. With the exception of University Pessimists who are divided, every segment is supportive of reintroducing grants to help the poorest students.

Similarly all but the Pessimists agreed that maintenance loans should be high enough to ensure that every child could afford to go to university if they wanted to.

Salary Improvers are the segment most likely to say that students should be prioritised by Government efforts to help with cost of living at 15%. It is interesting that although

these segments are based on general attitudes towards higher education, age still tends to have a greater relevance to whether someone thinks students should be prioritised for support. An 18-24 year old is just under three times as likely to say students should be prioritised than a University Optimist. In a direct question on whether the Government should provide additional support to students to help them with the cost of living, the University Pessimists disagreed, but all other segments tended to agree.

**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following?
Government should provide additional support to students
to help them with cost of living**

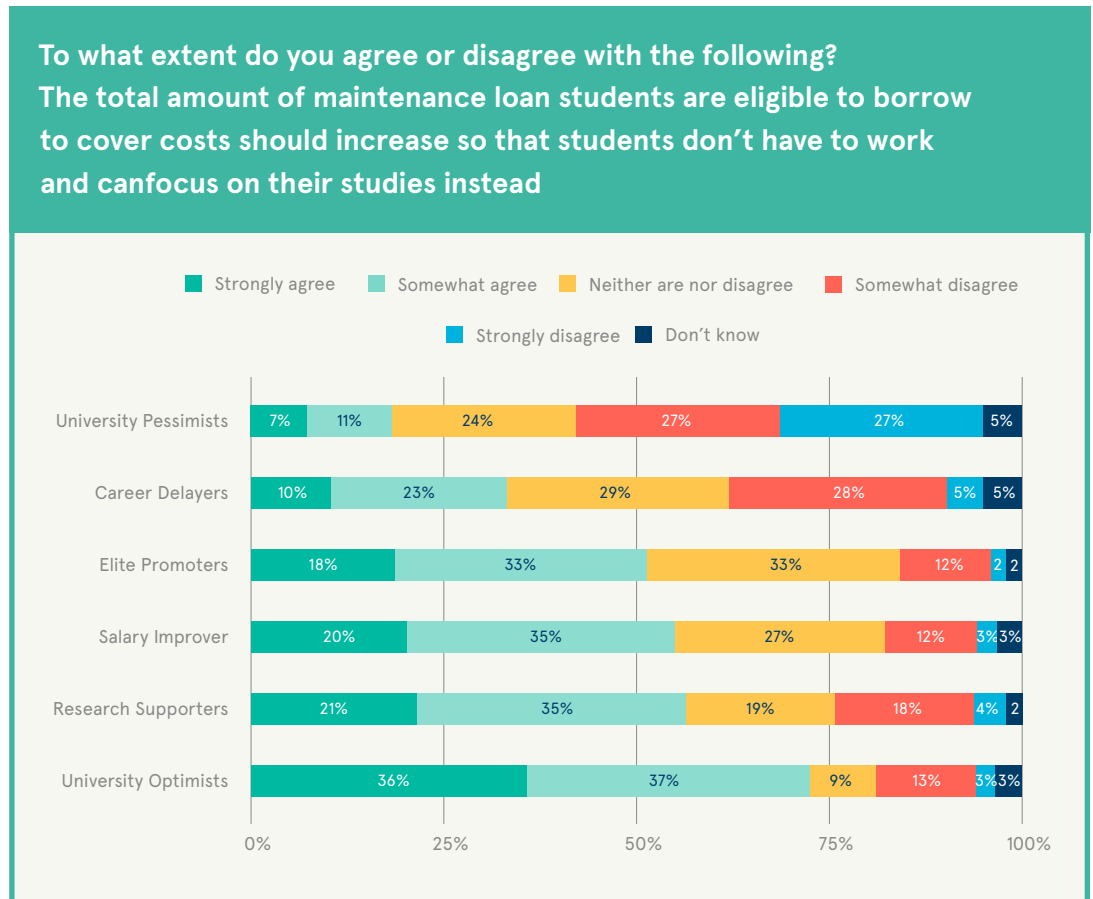


In general, Research Supporters and University Optimists tend to want maintenance loans to cover more of a student’s expenses than other groups. This is most pronounced on personal expenses, university society membership fees and optional trips as part of a university course. A majority of every group, even University Pessimists, think maintenance loans should cover a student’s rent. 17% of University Pessimists say that none of the living expenses which we mention should be covered by a maintenance loan. This list included university expenses such as textbooks, rent and household bills, food expenses and groceries, and travel expenses. This group often shows antipathy towards university students, and it is particularly clear in this instance.

Research Supporters and University Optimists are the most likely to say the current maintenance loan is too little, with around half of both groups agreeing this. A quarter of University Pessimists (26%) say that the loan amount is too much, easily the most of any segment. For every segment, taking on a part-time or full-time job is the most commonly suggested option for students who cannot afford their living costs. Notably though, 42% of University Pessimists say that students who cannot afford their living costs should not go to university as they cannot afford it. All segments agree that students should expect to work part time to cover their living costs while at University, with the lowest rate of agreement among the Research Supporters. When we ask how many hours, if any, students

should expect to work, the University Pessimists again stand out with 40% saying they should expect to work 16 hours or more per week, compared to just 13% of University Optimists saying the same. The proposal to

increase maintenance loans is a bit more divisive among the segments. University Pessimists tend to disagree, and Career Delayers are divided. Other segments lean towards agreeing.



Elite Promoters tend to agree with increasing loans; 50% say they agree with increasing maintenance loans. When we later ask in the poll whether students get enough money from maintenance loans and just waste it, we find the Elite Promoters divided (the only segment besides University Pessimists who tend to agree with the statement). We expect this is a result of the Elite Promoters view

of universities as elite institutions, where students spend more time partying than studying. However, when it comes to the issue of supporting students to attend university, their concerns for the equity of access take priority. 77% of Elite Promoters agree that the cost of living at university is so high it will deter some people from attending University in the next year or two.

Conclusion

The 2022 public perceptions of universities report re-emphasises the importance of public opinion in the wider higher education debate.

As in 2021, we found in our polling this year that the value of higher education can't be taken as a given - and that the public interprets the value of higher education in varying and nuanced ways. Some of these would come as a surprise to the sector, whilst others may be more familiar. In spite of an increase in activity across the sector that is aimed at communicating the benefits of universities to the general public, we have seen very little change when it comes to public perceptions of the value of degree, of a university education, and of university research.

This year's report shows that the number of people visiting and interacting with universities has declined, setting a low base of engagement post-pandemic for the sector to build on. Alongside this, we have found that there has been a further decline in the views of the group most difficult to engage (University Pessimists). This highlights a growing concern about the proportion of people who are or will become completely disengaged and even pro-actively against the higher education sector.

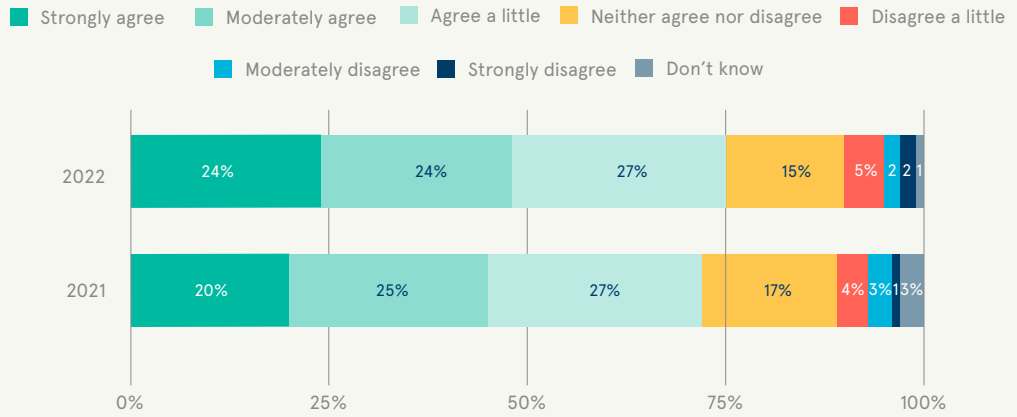
This should be seen as an early warning sign and a signal for action that the sector needs to continue - and strengthen - its public facing communications.

Politicians pay attention to the public's views on the role and value of the higher education system. It is not enough to be able to demonstrate in data that your university is having an economic or social impact if there is no corresponding belief amongst the general public that such an impact exists.

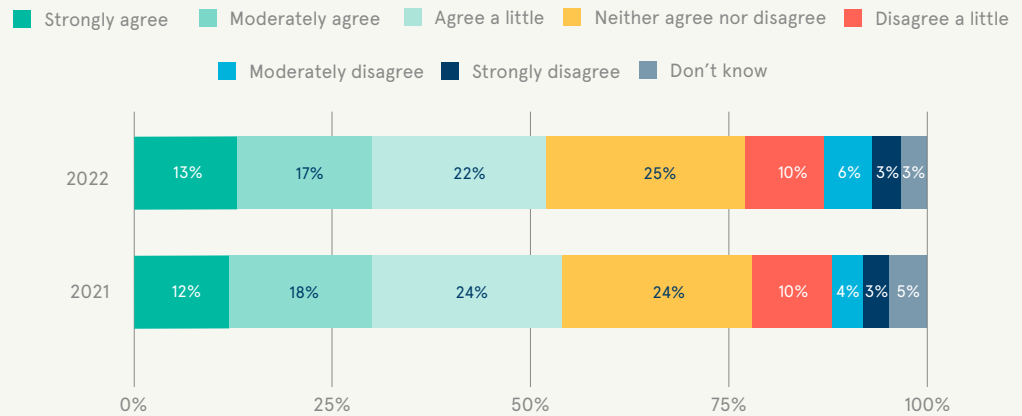
Appendix



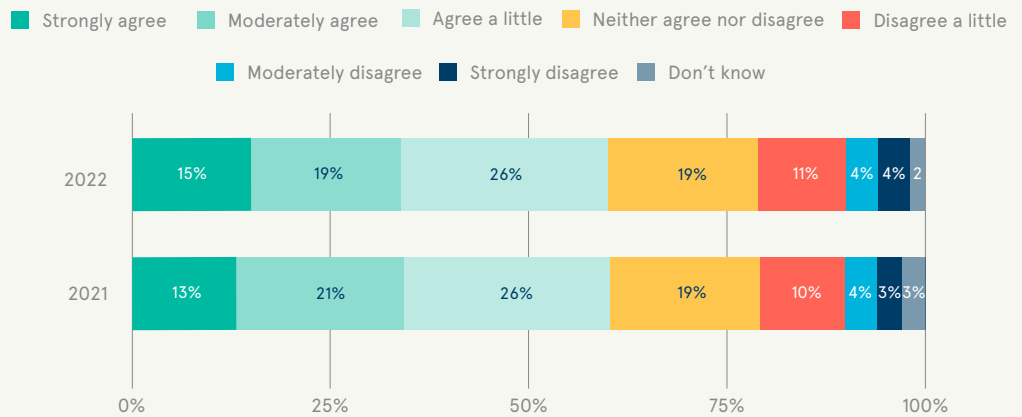
A degree from a university is an impressive achievement



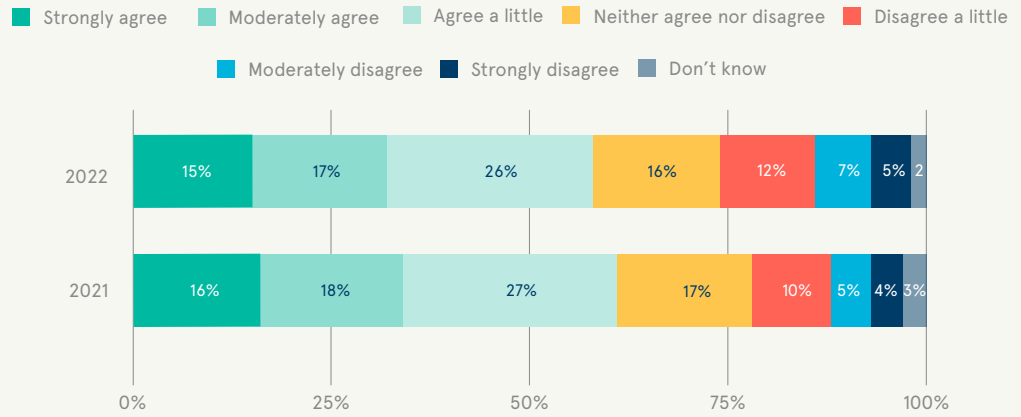
Society values a university education too highly at the moment



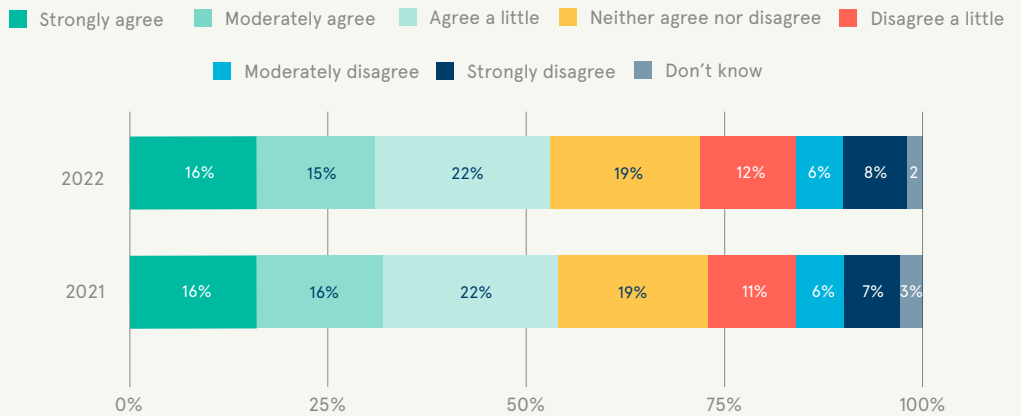
Enjoying a subject is enough of a reason to do a degree in it



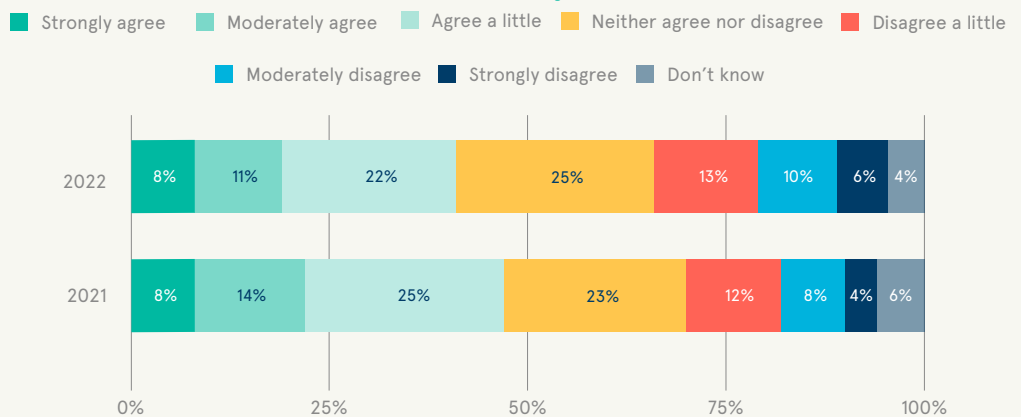
University does not prepare students for the “real world”



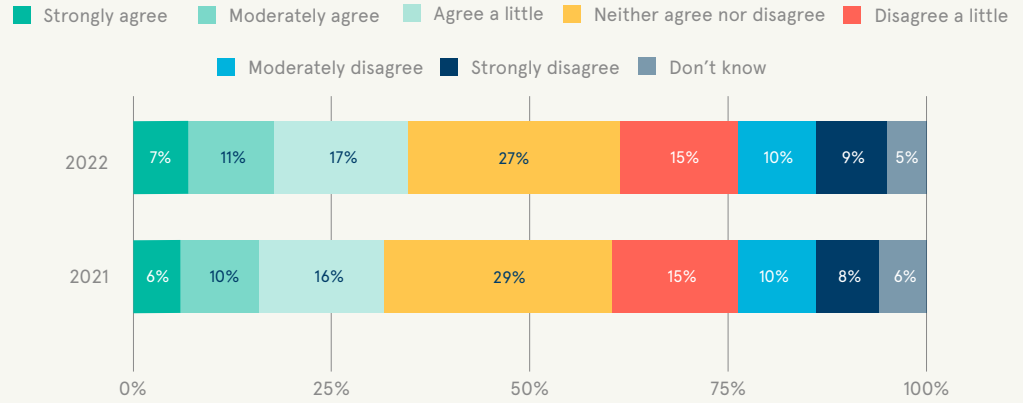
Studying topics which do not clearly lead to a profession is a waste of time



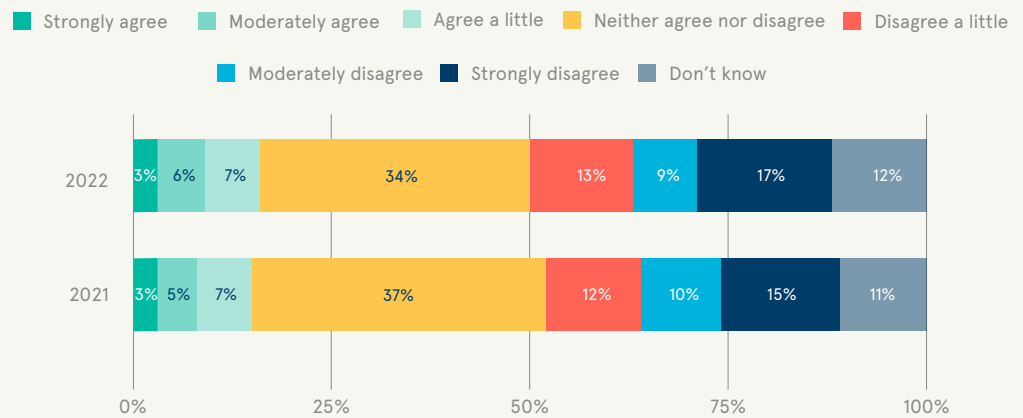
University students spend more time partying than studying



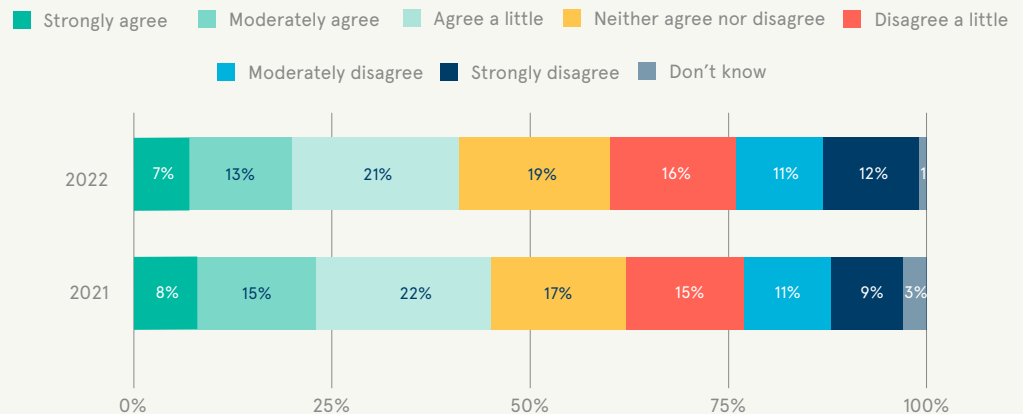
University teaches everyone to think and act the same and imposes a set of values on everyone



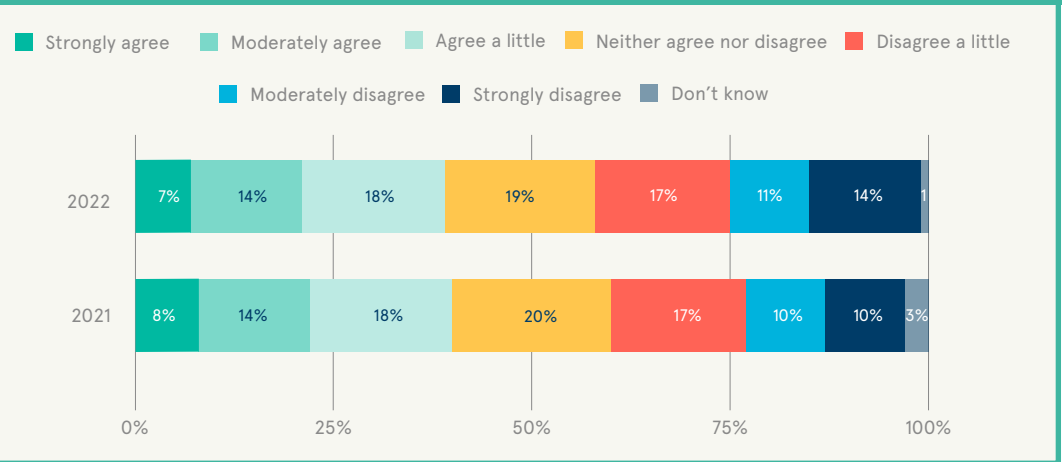
People who have a university degree are less patriotic



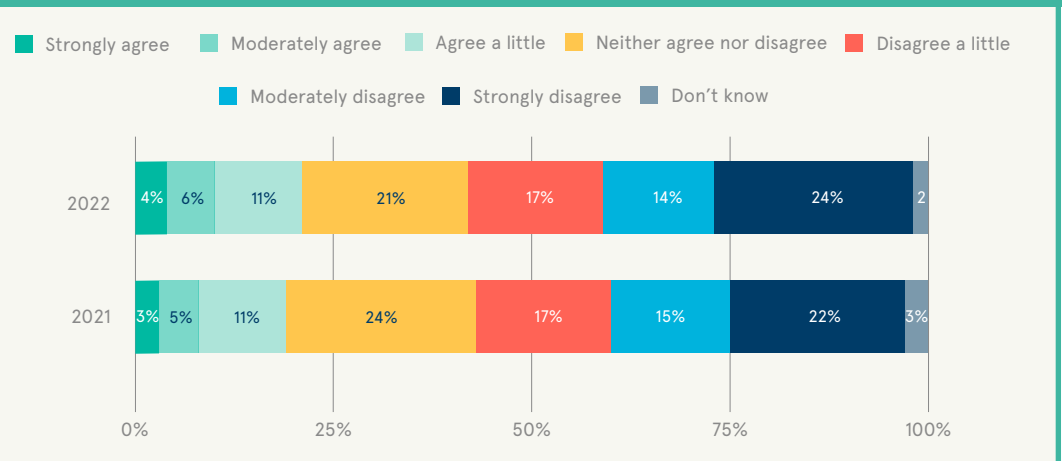
People need a university degree to get a high salary



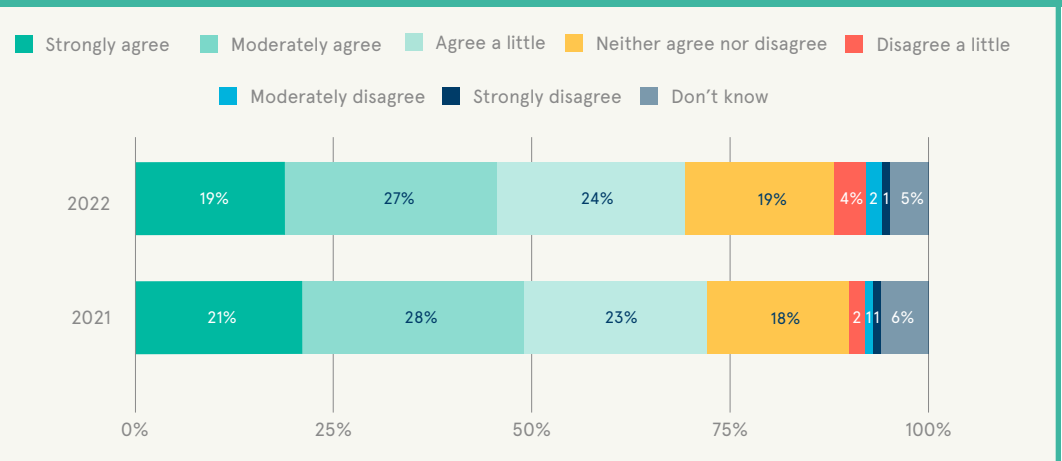
A university degree is necessary to get a good job



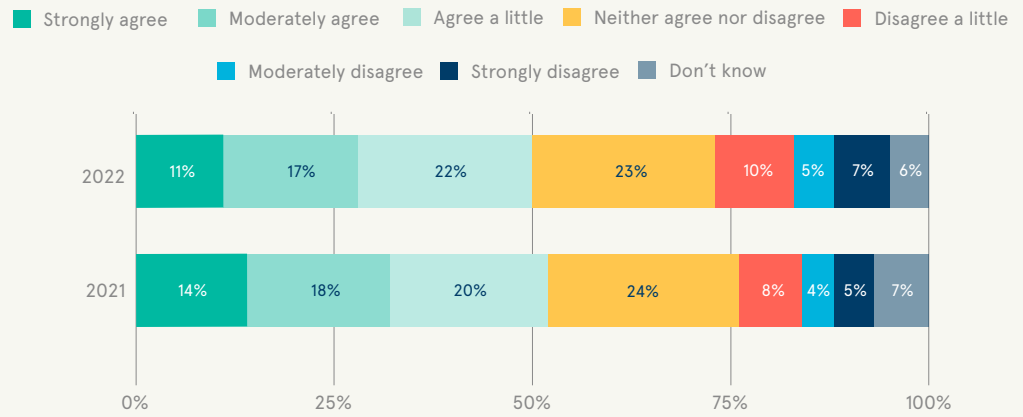
A university degree is a waste of time



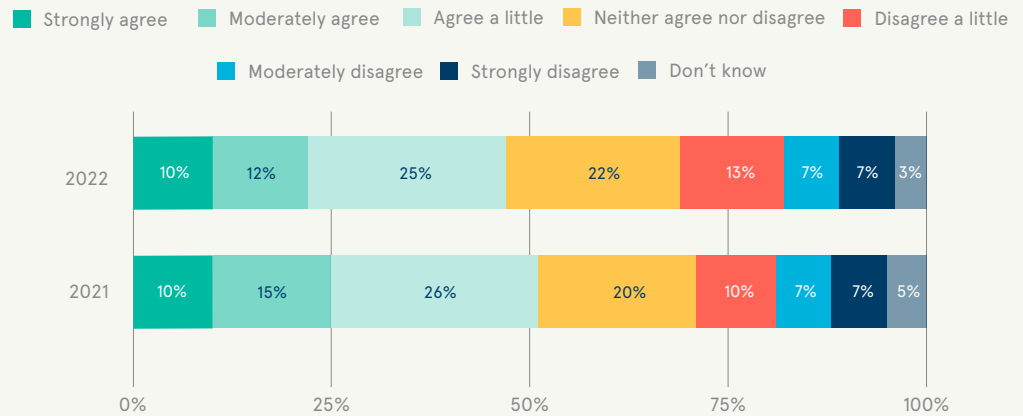
University research is one of the best things produced in the UK as a country



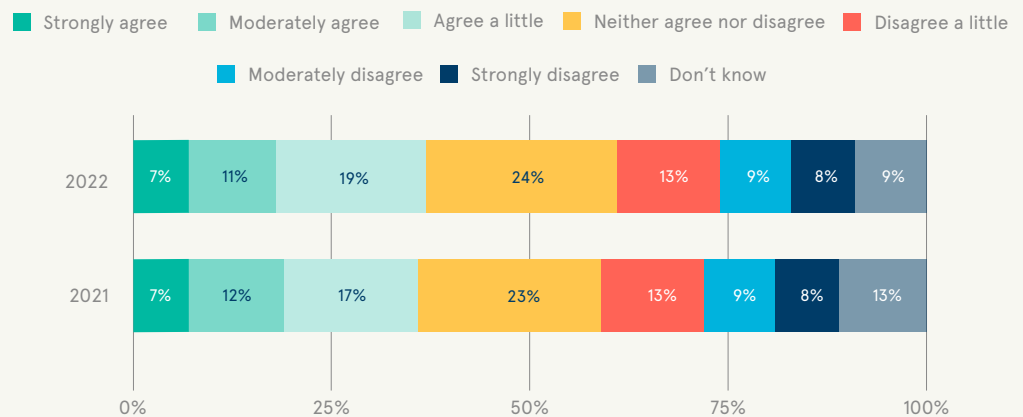
University research should receive funding from the taxpayer



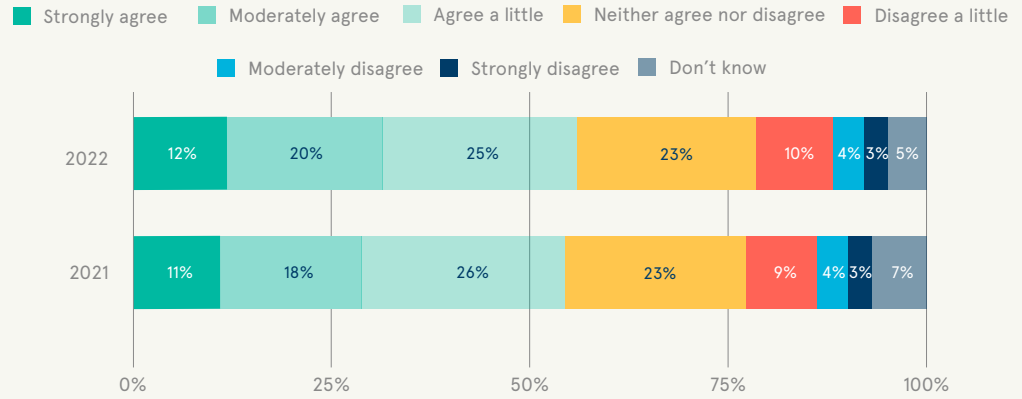
Academics don't understand the "real world"



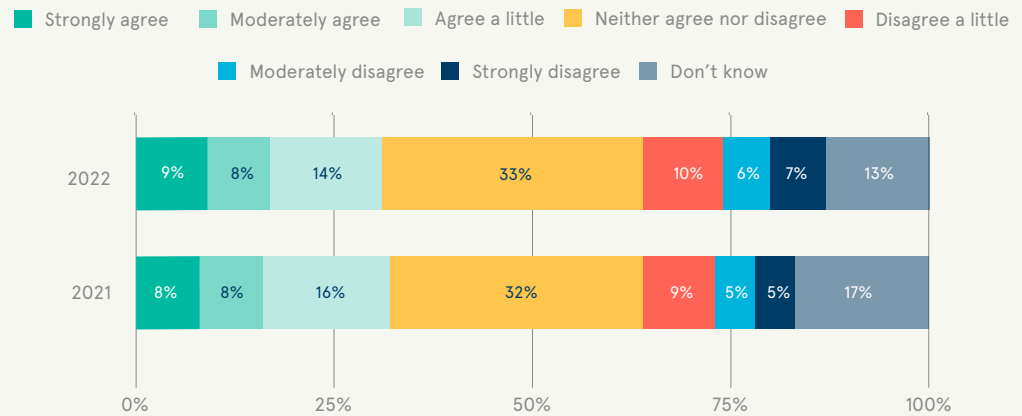
A lot of money spent on university research is wasted



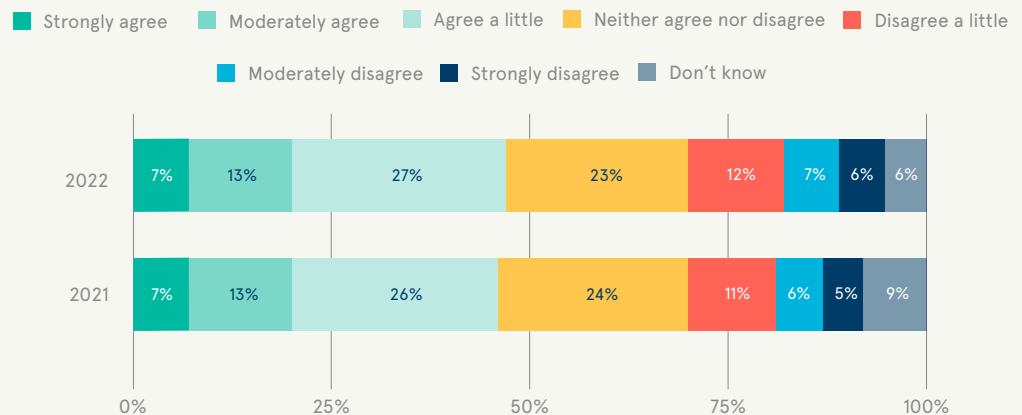
People who go to university are more likely to have friends from a range of social and educational backgrounds



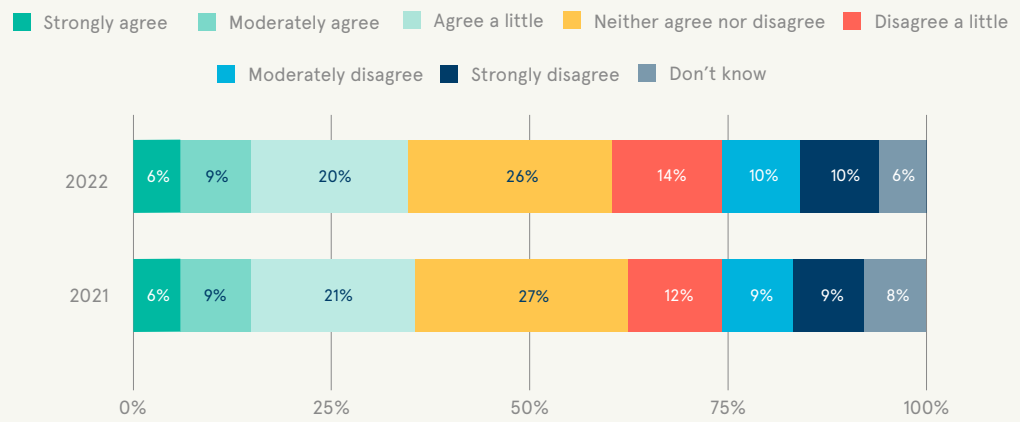
Universities teach a "left-wing" perspective



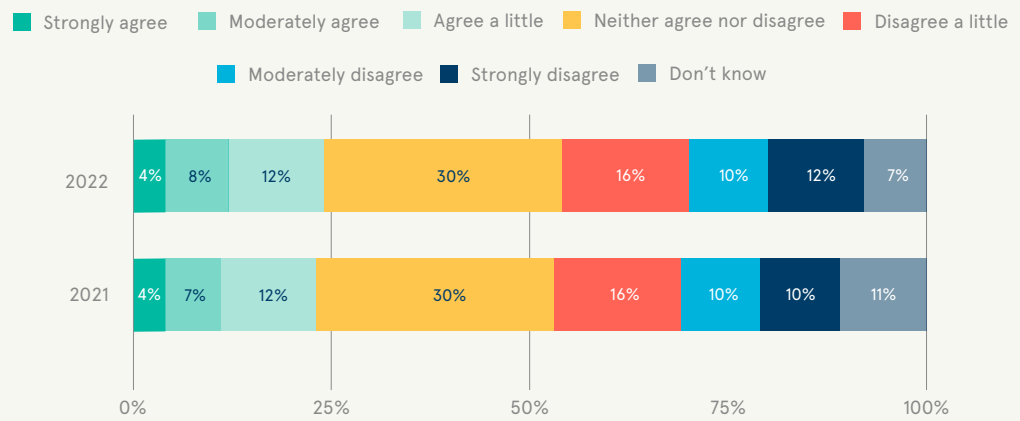
Universities are elitist



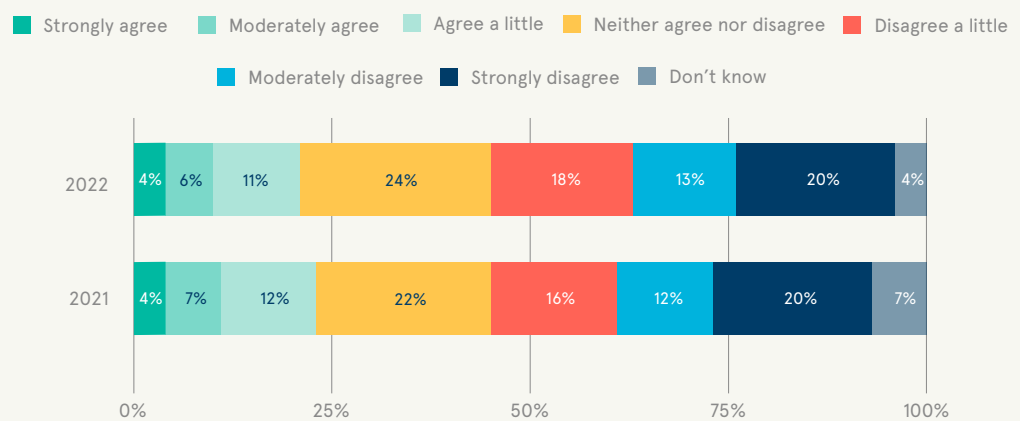
University educated people are pretentious



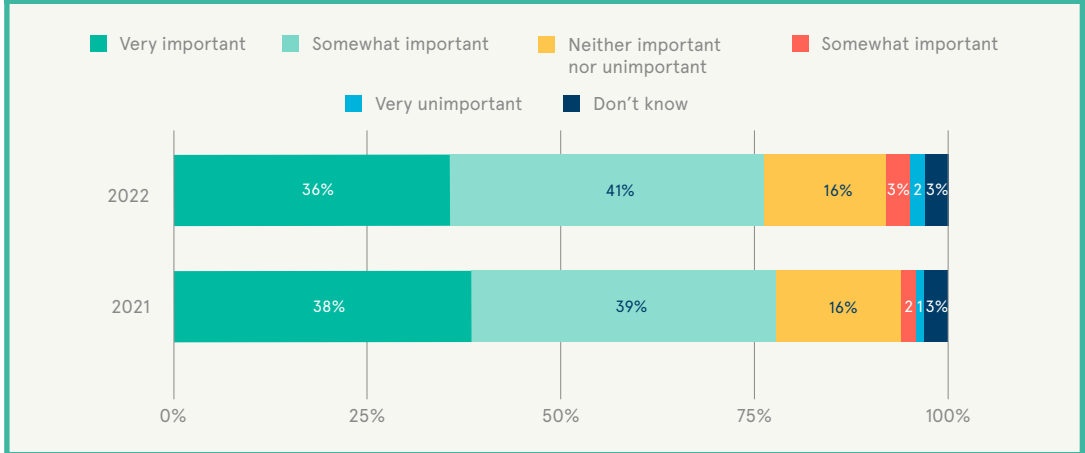
University education makes people more conservative



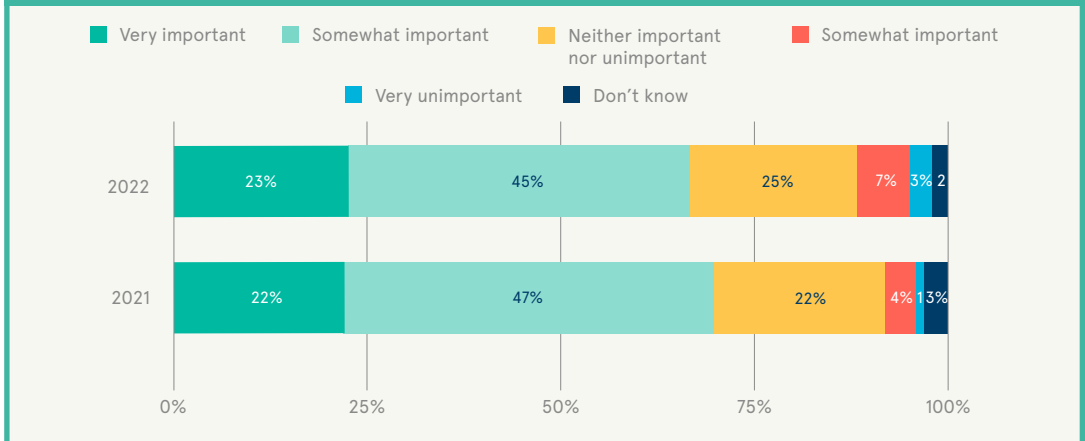
People who do not go to university are more closed-minded



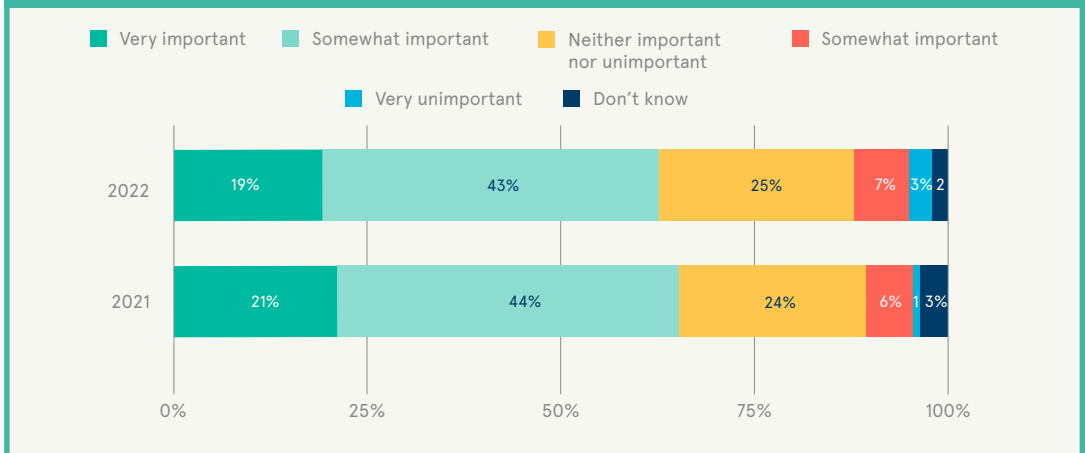
How important or unimportant do you think universities are for the following? Innovation/research



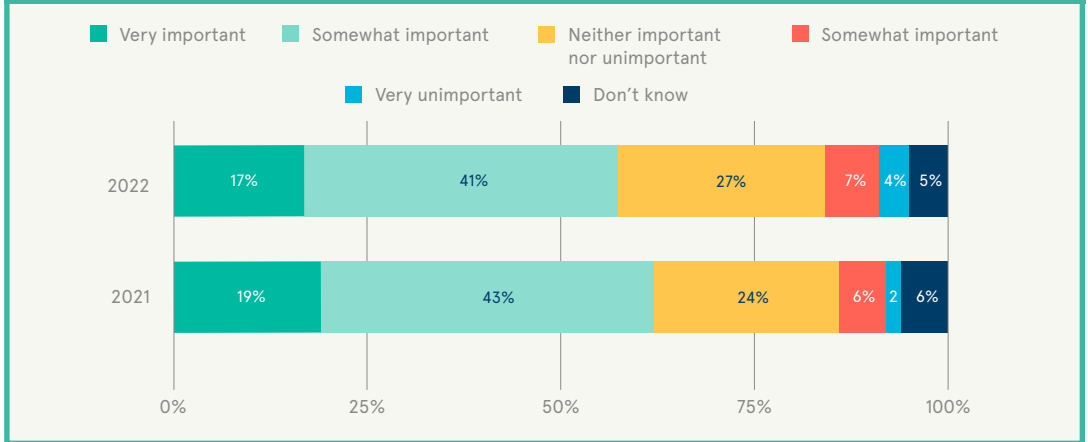
How important or unimportant do you think universities are for the following? People's individual and personal development



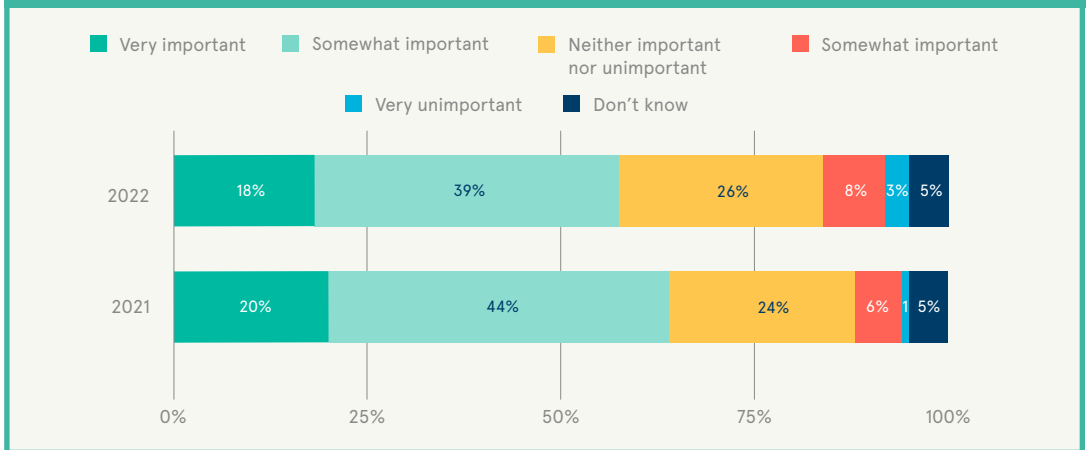
How important or unimportant do you think universities are for the following? Jobs



How important or unimportant do you think universities are for the following? The economy in their local areas



How important or unimportant do you think universities are for the following? The UK economy overall



How important or unimportant do you think universities are for the following? Your local area

