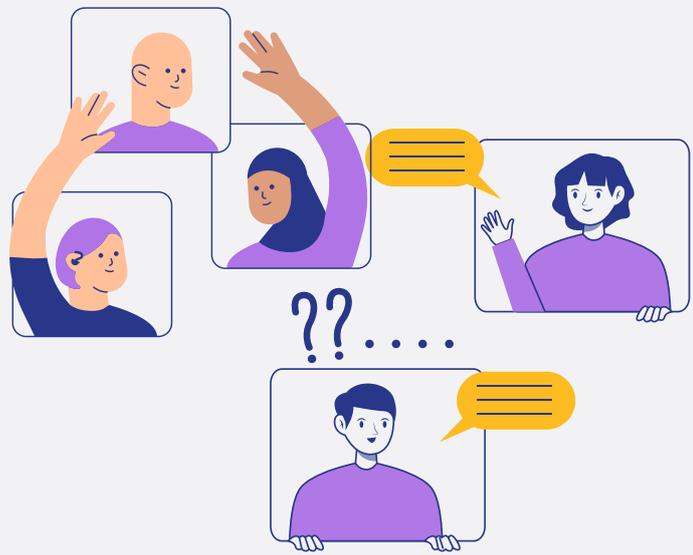


Research Paper: Methodology

# CITIZENS' JURY ON HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING



## About the authors



Carnegie Education Fund is an independent charitable trust that aims to support participation in and improvement of Scotland's higher education system through grants and research. It was established in 1901 as the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland (SC015600).



Ipsos works closely with national governments, local public services and the not-for-profit sector on public service and policy issues. A detailed understanding of different sectors and policy challenges, combined with methods and communications expertise, helps ensure that its research makes a difference for decision makers and communities.

## Introduction

In late 2025, a group of 19 citizens from across Scotland took part in a citizens' jury on the future of higher education funding in Scotland. The jury was part of a project initiated by the Carnegie Education Fund (CEF) to better understand the public's views on the value and purpose of higher education and their priorities for its future funding. Significantly, it was the first recent attempt at detailed engagement with the public on this topic in Scotland.

The citizens' jury was designed and facilitated by Ipsos on behalf of CEF. This paper explains what a citizens' jury is and why CEF chose to convene one now. It sets out how the process was constructed, how participants were supported to engage with complex information, and how deliberation was facilitated. It aims to provide a transparent account of the approach taken, ahead of a series of thematic papers that will present the jury's findings. It is also intended to instigate and contribute to a wider conversation about how Scotland can build democratic legitimacy and civic engagement into decisions about the future of higher education.

## Why engage the public now?

Higher education in Scotland has reached a critical juncture as debates about the sustainability and purpose of the system have intensified, driven by several separate, but interlinked issues.

Although demand for higher education has continued to grow, government investment in universities and colleges has declined in real terms over the last decade. Together with rising costs, this has put increasing pressure on institutional delivery models leading to urgent calls for reform to funding approaches to avoid institutional failure and maintain the quality and reach of provision. At the centre of arguments about funding reform are questions about the long-term affordability of the Scottish Government's policy of 'free tuition' which promises funding for all full-time, first-time undergraduates. The commitment ensures education remains free at the point of access and minimises student debt compared to other UK nations, but critics argue that it is no longer adequately resourced and that its operation is undermining its good intentions.

For students accessing higher education, despite free tuition, rising living costs and constrained maintenance support mean that the affordability of study is reshaping the realities of participation. For many learners, but particularly those from under-resourced backgrounds, financial stress has become a defining feature of the student experience. Consequently, more students are choosing to live at home and must work alongside their studies with implications for retention, wellbeing and the accessibility of different pathways. This has led to calls for changes to delivery and funding models to better reflect the needs of the diverse, modern student.

At the same time, overlaying this, a broader debate about the purpose and outcomes of higher education has been taking place. Scotland's economy is changing – the transition to net zero, the growth of advanced manufacturing and digital industries, and persistent shortages in key public-service professions have sharpened questions about whether its higher education system is delivering the skills the country needs, now and for the future. Policymakers are grappling with difficult choices about whether – and how – to prioritise particular subjects, pathways, modes or types of provision. Choices which carry implications, not only for institutions, but for learners, employers and communities across Scotland.

These issues have all been discussed frequently in political, government and higher education circles, and there appears to be broad agreement that funding reform is needed. The Scottish Government originally committed as part of its post-school reform programme to 'lead the development of a new funding model for all types of provision' but, more recently, has announced work to develop a 'Framework for the Sustainability and Success of Scotland's Universities'. However, there are differing views on the shape that reform should take, and discussions and deliberations are dominated by government officials, sector experts and university and business leaders.

Despite their role in funding higher education provision through taxes and as key beneficiaries of the system, there has, as yet, been no effort to engage the public or wider civic voices in discussions about its future. It is this gap that the citizens' jury has sought to fill.

Previous [survey](#) research, conducted in December 2024 by Ipsos, on behalf of CEF (as the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland) demonstrated the strength, breadth and complexity of public opinion on higher education access and funding. The citizens' jury provided the opportunity to dive deeper into these perspectives, to offer unique insights into the aspects of higher education funding that are most important to the public and to demonstrate how they would approach potential trade-offs or difficult choices that may need to be made when deciding on future funding approaches.

Research on democratic participation in Scotland is clear that shutting the public out of major policy debates risks deepening existing declines in public trust, weakening the perceived legitimacy of institutions and is more likely to entrench the status quo. Broadening participation, by contrast, brings in perspectives that are otherwise absent from formal policy arenas, leading to more imaginative policymaking and is essential to maintaining confidence in decision-making, strengthening transparency and countering public disengagement with democratic processes.

## What is a citizens' jury?

A citizens' jury brings together a small group of individuals, acting as a representative 'mini-public', to hear evidence, deliberate, and reach a conclusion on the research question. Originally developed by the Jefferson Centre (now the [Centre for New Democratic Processes](#)) in the 1970s, citizens' juries are designed to facilitate informed discussions on often controversial, value-laden issues that may have important social implications. Citizens' juries also provide an opportunity to explore how the public's views may change over time and adapt in response to new information.

Citizens' juries typically take place over multiple days or sittings to allow participants time to become informed about complex topics before forming opinions through group deliberations. During the initial learning stage of the process, experts provide balanced evidence explaining the nuances of complicated subjects to the jury. Participants have an opportunity to raise questions and have them answered by the experts, allowing them to develop a deeper understanding of the subject. The jury is then given time to engage in reflective discussions and informed deliberations with one another, allowing views to develop, be challenged, change, and solidify into co-created conclusions.

As a complex topic with multiple converging challenges, a wide range of potential solutions, and different considerations and trade-offs, higher education funding was considered an ideal topic for a citizens' jury. While polls capture public opinion in a quantitative, statistical way, they do not dig into the detail beneath those opinions. A citizens' jury can help to explore and uncover the nuances of the Scottish public's views and provide a vehicle to share these with policy and decision-makers.

## What was the aim and remit of the jury?

Against this context, CEF commissioned Ipsos to conduct the citizens' jury to explore the public's views on the future of higher education funding in Scotland. The research had two overarching aims:

- To generate a deeper understanding of the public's views on the purpose and importance of higher education in Scotland and their priorities for the future of provision; and
- To develop a set of principles to inform debate and decisions about the future funding of higher education, particularly in universities, including priorities for public spending.

In addressing these aims, the jury were presented with and sought to answer the overarching question: 'How should higher education funding in Scotland be prioritised?' This was further broken down into three sub-questions:

- What is the purpose and value of higher education in Scotland?
- What should be the Scottish Government's priorities for resourcing higher education in Scotland?
- How should higher education in Scotland, particularly in universities, be funded?

The higher education landscape is complex, and it was a requirement of the research that there were clear parameters to the enquiry to provide adequate detail to encourage meaningful deliberation from the public while avoiding confusion. As such, for the purposes of the research 'higher education' was defined as the provision of formal education at level SCQF 7 and above, outside of schools. This includes university degrees as well as some college and apprenticeship provision.

A central assumption underpinning the project was that higher education is a public service. For this reason, the jury was focused on funding for the provision of learning and teaching rather than wider institutional funding for universities and colleges which would cover activities outside the scope of the research e.g. further education provision and academic research.

## Who took part in the jury?

Sampling and recruitment of the citizens' jury participants (or 'jurors') were conducted using a civic lottery method called sortition. This was carried out by the [Sortition Foundation](#), an organisation specialising in representative random sampling. The Sortition Foundation sent out 6,600 invitation letters to addresses across Scotland randomly selected from the Royal Mail Postcode Address File. Deprived areas were over-sampled to account for the lower response rates typically seen in these areas. Invitations were open for three weeks, collecting a total of 182 responses.

Demographic information was gathered from individuals when they expressed an interest in participating. Based on that information, 22 jury members were selected using stratified random sampling to create a sample that broadly reflected the Scottish population (based on age, gender, education, ethnicity, disability or health condition, work status, and geography). This approach allows for the creation of a balanced jury, despite certain demographic groups responding disproportionately more than others to the invitation. Selecting 22 members allowed space for some members dropping out before or during the process, with the aim to retain a jury of 20 members. A final group of 19 jurors participated in all sessions.

Once recruited, participants were contacted by the Ipsos research team, who welcomed them to the process, answered any queries and established any support they may need to take part. Support was provided to any participants who indicated they may have technical trouble joining the workshops. For example, one participant had no internet connection or suitable device for joining video meetings. They were provided with a laptop and mobile broadband dongle and given one-to-one instructions on how to use the devices and join the meetings. Test meeting links were also provided to any participants unfamiliar with Zoom or concerned about their ability to participate in discussions. Workshop materials were also provided in advance to participants who requested additional time to review the information. To support participation, and in line with industry standards, jurors received a payment for their time attending the sessions and participating in the online community.

## What did the jury do?

The citizens' jury was grounded in recognised industry best practice and followed [key principles of deliberative engagement](#).

Participants met online across six three-hour sessions held between late October and early December of 2025 (See Figure 1). Sessions were held online to enable participation from people who would not have been able to attend in-person sessions due to additional barriers related to travel, time, or other practicalities. In addition to the six workshops, participants also joined an online community, a private website functioning as a dedicated social network for participants to continue conversations, maintain engagement, and gather additional insights in between workshops. The online community also served as a space to compile materials from each workshop to allow participants to review the content in their own time.

FIGURE 1: CITIZENS' JURY WORKSHOP STRUCTURE



## LEARNING PHASE

The first three sessions comprised the learning phase of the jury, where participants were introduced to the higher education landscape in Scotland and some of the challenges it faces.

During each of the learning sessions, short videos summarising key topics were played. The videos were developed by CEF with input from sector representatives and experts and reviewed by the Ipsos research team. The aim of the videos was to provide short, accessible and engaging introductions to topics that would provide a baseline to help inform the jury's deliberations. They were intended to provide high-level information that did not require much debate, to give participants a sense of the shape of the sector and its challenges (e.g. "who delivers higher education in Scotland?" and "how is higher education in Scotland funded?"). It was challenging to condense the level of detail and complexity into short (no more than 5 minute) videos, but these were well-received by participants, who often said they had learned new information, and they provided a good platform for discussion.

These introductory videos were complemented by presentations delivered live by expert speakers, designed to provide more detailed information and perspectives on chosen topics e.g. higher education pathways, fair access, and higher education funding models. Speakers were identified by CEF and instructed by Ipsos to use clear and accessible language, avoiding overly technical terms. They were asked to share evidence grounded in facts and to make sure facts and opinions were clearly distinguished. Recognising that there are diverse perspectives on higher education in Scotland, to reduce the risk of bias, and to provide balanced evidence, the jury heard from a range of speakers representing different perspectives (e.g. the views of colleges, universities, students, and employers). Jurors were advised to listen critically and to question the speakers.

After the videos and presentations, participants had a chance to discuss the information with one another in small breakout groups and reflect on what they had learned. In the breakout groups, participants agreed on any questions to ask the expert speakers which were then answered by the experts either during the session, or afterwards via a Question and Answer (Q&A) document that was shared with participants in the online community.

The range of information materials, in the form of videos, presentations, group discussion, and the online community ensured learning was adapted to a variety of learning styles and that information was considered from multiple viewpoints.

## DELIBERATION PHASE

The learning phase was followed by two sessions dedicated to discussion and deliberation.

In session four, following a final presentation from one of the expert speakers, participants spent most of their time in small breakout groups. Discussion in that session was supported by four hypothetical funding scenarios. Linked to the key funding challenges presented to the jurors in the learning sessions, the funding scenarios set out some potential avenues to reduce costs and/or introduce additional funding for higher education in Scotland. These were developed by Ipsos and CEF and were not intended to be exhaustive or mutually exclusive, nor were they designed as detailed options with exact costings. Rather, they acted as a way of sparking discussion and helping to understand participants' perspectives on potential changes and trade-offs, and their reasoning.

The participants also considered three hypothetical spending scenarios. These looked at potential ways for higher education funding to be distributed within the landscape to support exploration of participants' priorities for public spending. Participants were encouraged to consider the pros and cons of different scenarios, drawing on the evidence they had heard from expert witnesses, and to think about their own experiences in addition to the experiences of others.

In session five, participants were supported to move towards developing their conclusions. As an output the jurors were asked to develop a set of 'principles' for higher education funding which could be shared with any incoming Scottish Government to inform decisions about funding reform and priorities for public spending. To develop a set of principles participants revisited the key challenges facing Scotland's higher education system, considered possible solutions and explored what they might mean in practice. These discussions helped to identify what issues were most pressing for participants, what approaches they felt could work, and what areas they were still uncertain about.

## CONCLUSION-FORMING PHASE

Prior to the sixth and final workshop, the research team drew together a draft of the jury's principles, based on their deliberations over the previous workshops. During the final session, the participants were asked to review, discuss and refine these principles. This included the opportunity to change, remove or add wording to help better capture their views. This process – of presenting draft principles which the jury could refine together – helped to ensure transparency and ownership of the conclusions and was a chance to test their acceptability before being finalised.

As a diverse group, it was recognised that the jury's views would not be unanimous, and that, as a result, not all principles would be supported by everyone. To document this, the full set of edited principles were put to a vote at the end of the final session, with all participants sharing the extent to which they supported or opposed each one. This process helped to identify principles that were classed as firm conclusions (i.e. those that the majority of participants supported), those that had mixed levels of support, and those that were not supported (because at least half of the group either opposed them or were undecided).

## How have insights from the jury been analysed?

Analysis was ongoing throughout the jury as facilitators listened to participants' views and deliberations and distilled and reflected their findings back to them for consideration and confirmation. After each workshop, the research team met to capture the discussions taking place within each breakout group and compile emergent findings to share with the jury. This process of iterative analysis was necessary to develop the content of later sessions, which built on earlier discussions held by participants, and was used particularly, when developing the draft set of principles discussed with the jury during the final session.

The discussions within breakout groups and during workshops were also recorded, and once the jury had concluded, were transcribed to allow for in-depth thematic analysis. Analysis was carried out on both transcribed discussions and online community posts, allowing interpretation and conclusions to be clearly linked to the data. The findings of this analysis have been used to develop a series of papers, each examining a different theme arising from the jury's deliberations.

Each paper relies on qualitative analysis, which is a rigorous approach for understanding the range of views held by the public and exploring how public priorities develop in response to deliberation on relevant information.

## What are the limitations?

The findings from the citizens' jury provide in-depth insights into how this group of participants responded to the topic, the conclusions they formed, and the reasoning and values underpinning their conclusions. While the group was designed to be broadly reflective of the Scottish population, their views cannot be interpreted as being statistically representative of the wider public.

It should also be highlighted that much of the jury's deliberations were in response to the evidence and information they were provided through the videos, expert witnesses and Q&A responses. While every effort was made to ensure that the information provided was balanced, accurate and evidence based, there was naturally a limit to the amount of information that could be presented.

## How will the findings be shared?

During March and April 2026, CEF will publish four thematic papers sharing insights from the citizens' jury. These papers will bring together the diverse, and sometimes contradictory, perspectives of the jurors to provide a deeper understanding of public perceptions of, and priorities for, higher education funding, including views on:

- The purpose and value of higher education
- Equity and access to higher education
- Higher education pathways
- Scotland's universities

Following this, the findings will be brought together into a detailed full report of the findings of the citizens' jury. The full report will build on these thematic papers and will include the final set of 'principles' agreed by the jurors. It will also set out the jury's reflections on the process and any lessons for future citizens' juries or other forms of deliberative engagement on this topic.

# APPENDICES

TABLE 1: PROFILE OF THE JURY

Characteristic	Target number of participants based on population (based on over-recruiting to 22)	Numbers in the final citizens' jury (based on 19 participating)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	11	8
Female	11	10
Non-binary or other	0	1
<b>Age</b>		
18-24	4	3
25-34	5	5
35-54	8	7
55+	5	4
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Asian or Asian British	3	3
Black or African or Caribbean or Black British		
Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups		
Other ethnic group		
White Scottish/White British/White Other	19	16
<b>Disability</b>		
Yes, limited	4	2
Yes, not limited	2	2
No	16	15
<b>Education</b>		
No qualifications	1.5	0
Lower school qualifications (O Grade, Standard Grade or equivalent)	4	2
Upper school qualifications (Higher, A level or equivalent)	4	5

FE and sub-degree HE (HNC/HND or equivalent)	5	4
Degree level or above (Degree, Professional Qualification)	7.5	8
<b>Working status</b>		
Full time	10	7
Part time	3	2
Not working	3	6
Student	3	2
Retired	3	2
<b>Location</b>		
Central Scotland	3	2
Glasgow	3	4
Highlands and Islands	2.5	2
Lothian	3	3
Mid Scotland and Fife	2.5	3
North East Scotland	3	2
South Scotland	2.5	2
West Scotland	2.5	1

TABLE 2: OVERVIEW OF JURY SESSIONS

Session	Objective	Session description
<p>Session One</p> <p>Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> Oct 2025, 18:00 – 21:00</p>	<p>Introduce participants to the process and aims of the citizens' jury.</p> <p>Introduction to the higher education landscape in Scotland.</p>	<p>Participants were introduced to the structure of the workshops and their role in the citizens' jury.</p> <p>Participants learned about the evolution of higher education in Scotland and how it is delivered today and the higher education pathways.</p> <p><b>Presentations:</b> The evolution of Scotland's higher education landscape (Dr Hannah Garrow, The Carnegie Trust / Carnegie Education Fund (standing in for Dr Catriona MacDonald, University of Glasgow))</p> <p>Higher education pathways and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (Donnie Wood, SCQF Partnership)</p> <p><b>Learning videos:</b> Video 1: Intro to higher education in Scotland Video 2: Who is involved in higher education delivery in Scotland Video 3: Apprenticeships in Scotland Video 4: How has the higher education funding landscape evolved in Scotland?</p>
<p>Session Two</p> <p>Saturday 1st Nov 2025, 10:00 – 13:00</p>	<p>Introduction to higher education funding.</p>	<p>Participants learned about how universities, colleges, and apprenticeships are funded and shared initial views on the current funding models.</p> <p>Participants also learned about funding for students and fair access to higher education.</p> <p><b>Presentations:</b> Higher education funding: Trends and comparisons (Kate Ogden, Institute of Fiscal Studies) Higher education funding and widening access (Professor John McKendrick, Scotland's Fair Access Commissioner)</p> <p><b>Learning videos:</b> Video 5: How is higher education in universities funded in Scotland? Video 6: How is higher education in colleges and apprenticeships funded in Scotland? Video 7: Student living cost support</p>

<p>Session Three</p> <p>Thursday 13th Nov 2025, 18:00 – 21:00</p>	<p>Introduction to funding challenges from the perspective of universities, colleges, and students.</p>	<p>Participants learned and shared their views on current funding challenges. Participants began discussing potential solutions and priorities for the future.</p> <p><b>Presentations:</b> The University perspective (Lesley Jackson, Universities Scotland) The College perspective (Audrey Cumberland, Principal of Edinburgh College) The student perspective (Sean Cameron, The Carnegie Trust / Carnegie Education Fund)</p> <p><b>Learning videos</b> Video 8: Key funding challenges and possible solutions</p>
<p>Session Four</p> <p>Wednesday 19th Nov 2025, 18:00 – 21:00</p>	<p>Explore potential scenarios for raising and allocating funding.</p>	<p>Participants learned about funding challenges from employers' perspective.</p> <p>Participants deliberated possible funding approaches to prepare to develop principles for prioritising higher education funding.</p> <p><b>Presentations:</b> The Employers' perspective (Marek Zemanick, The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development)</p>
<p>Session Five</p> <p>Thursday 27th Nov 2025, 18:00 – 21:00</p>	<p>Deliberation and forming emerging principles</p>	<p>Participants discussed each challenge to explore views and trade-offs of potential solutions. At the end of discussions participants highlighted their priorities for each challenge.</p>
<p>Session Six</p> <p>Saturday 6th Dec 2025, 10:00 – 13:00</p>	<p>Reach final conclusions, framed as priorities for the future of higher education funding in Scotland.</p>	<p>Participants reviewed and refined the draft priorities. At the end of the session, participants voted on whether they support or oppose each principle.</p>

# Standards and accreditations

This research was carried out in line with Ipsos' standards and accreditations:



## ISO 20252

This is the international specific standard for market, opinion and social research, including insights and data analytics. Ipsos UK was the first company in the world to gain this accreditation.



## Market Research Society (MRS) Company Partnership

By being an MRS Company Partner, Ipsos UK endorse and support the core MRS brand values of professionalism, research excellence and business effectiveness, and commit to comply with the MRS Code of Conduct throughout the organisation & we were the first company to sign our organisation up to the requirements & self-regulation of the MRS Code; more than 350 companies have followed our lead.



## ISO 9001

International general company standard with a focus on continual improvement through quality management systems. In 1994 we became one of the early adopters of the ISO 9001 business standard.



## ISO 27001

International standard for information security designed to ensure the selection of adequate and proportionate security controls. Ipsos UK was the first research company in the UK to be awarded this in August 2008.



## The UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the UK Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA)

Ipsos UK is required to comply with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the UK Data Protection Act (DPA). These cover the processing of personal data and the protection of privacy.



## HMG Cyber Essentials

Cyber Essentials defines a set of controls which, when properly implemented, provide organisations with basic protection from the most prevalent forms of threat coming from the internet. This is a government-backed, key deliverable of the UK's National Cyber Security Programme. Ipsos UK was assessed and validated for certification in 2016.



## Fair Data

Ipsos UK is signed up as a "Fair Data" company by agreeing to adhere to twelve core principles. The principles support and complement other standards such as ISOs, and the requirements of data protection legislation.