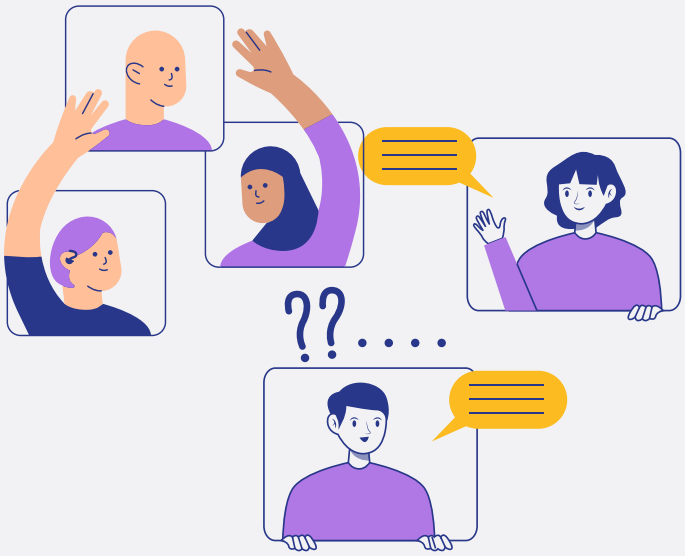
WHAT IS THE PURPOSE AND VALUE OF HIGHER EDUCATION?

Findings from a Citizens' Jury on higher education funding in Scotland.



About the authors

CARNEGIE EDUCATION FUND

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).

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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.

Key findings:

- **Jurors' views on the purpose and value of higher education narrowed through deliberation**, shifting from a broad sense of personal and societal value to a sharper focus on employability and skills. Responding to evidence about sector pressures and graduate outcomes, many felt that helping people into secure work was now the clearest way higher education could fulfil its traditional role as an engine of mobility.

- **Despite this stronger focus on work, jurors continued to recognise higher education's wider purpose**, including personal development, intellectual growth, and the transition to adulthood. This created a tension between what they felt higher education ought to offer and what current conditions might make possible.

"[Higher education] is investment in the future. Youngsters of today are the workers of tomorrow and they should be getting all the skills that they need to be effective for the country's future." (Citizens' jury participant)

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.

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 a research question. They are designed to facilitate informed discussions on often controversial, value-laden issues that may have important social implications. 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 subject for a jury. The jury was designed and facilitated by Ipsos on behalf of CEF.

This is the first in a series of thematic papers setting out key findings from the citizens' jury. It focuses on participants' views on the **purpose and value** of higher education in Scotland including how their perspectives evolved during the process and how their views fed into and shaped their conclusions. Participants used a range of terms interchangeably to discuss what they thought higher education is for, including "purpose", "value," and the "role" of higher education.

What did the citizens' jury do?

The citizens' jury aimed to explore the public's views on the future of higher education funding in Scotland. In doing so, it sought to answer an 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 jury was recruited from across Scotland and was designed to be broadly reflective of the Scottish population. Participants met online across six, three-hour sessions held between late October and early December of 2025. Between sessions they joined an online community - a private website on which they could review materials, continue conversations, and share additional insights.

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. This was followed by two sessions dedicated to their discussion and deliberation, in which jurors were supported to move towards developing their conclusions. Their conclusions were further discussed, refined and confirmed in the sixth and final session. The jury's conclusions consisted of 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.

These principles are not intended as technical recommendations and should not be read as such. They are the value-based judgements of a group of informed citizens which can help policy and decision-makers better understand the public's values, priorities and perceptions.

Full details of why CEF convened the jury, and how it was designed and run are set out in a methodology paper that was published on 17th March 2026.

Why purpose and value?

The citizens' jury took place at a critical juncture for higher education in Scotland, where several converging challenges have underlined the need for system-level reform. Alongside declining real-terms public funding and rising costs, the sector is also responding to demographic change, rapid technological developments, the transition to a net-zero economy, and increasing expectations around skills and regional contribution. Although there is broad recognition that change is required, there are multiple views on how the system should evolve. Different understandings of what higher education is for lead to different expectations of the funding model and, with limited public resources available, these differences create tension about how competing priorities should be managed.

Within this context, questions about purpose and value are not theoretical. They determine what outcomes the system is expected to deliver and how trade-offs are assessed when resources are constrained. In Scotland, higher education has traditionally been linked to a broad civic purpose and a strong understanding of public good, reflected in commitments to fair access, regional provision, and free tuition. But recent polling suggests that public understandings of value may be narrowing, with greater emphasis on instrumental outcomes such as employment and individual financial return. This shift likely reflects wider socio-economic pressures and it shapes how people assess the role of higher education and the acceptability of different funding approaches.

It can be argued that if funding models are not aligned with the underlying values and purposes that people hold, they risk producing outcomes that are inconsistent with public expectations or that generate unintended consequences for learners, institutions, or regions. To make informed choices about the future funding of higher education, policymakers will need to consider what, and who, the system is for, and which aspects of its role are most important to protect or develop.

What were the jury's early views?

A key aim at the outset of the jury was to capture participants' first impressions of higher education – its purpose, its value, and their sense of the strengths and challenges of the current system. These early discussions served two functions: they eased participants into the topic and into conversation with one another, and they provided a baseline against which later perspectives could be compared as jurors learned more about the system and engaged with expert witnesses and with each other.

Because no prior knowledge of higher education or its funding was required, participants' initial reflections drew largely on their own backgrounds, experiences, and assumptions. To support these early conversations, jurors were also given introductory information about the Scottish higher education landscape, including short videos outlining the shape of the sector and two live presentations on the evolution of the system and the range of pathways available.

At this early stage, perceptions of higher education were broadly positive and wide ranging. Jurors were still very early in their learning process and had not yet been fully introduced to some of the challenges facing the system or grappled with the trade-offs required for future funding decisions. This is reflected in the breadth of views shared.

Jurors highlighted a range of individual benefits associated with higher education. When asked what came to mind, jurors spoke spontaneously about higher education as a route to personal development, social mobility, and improved life chances - particularly through increased opportunities and earning potential. Some had experienced these benefits directly; others had seen them in family members or friends.

> **"I suppose I've always thought about it as an opportunity. A kind of social mobility, you know, to try and better yourself. It certainly was for me." (Participant)**

Within this framing, fairness and accessibility emerged quickly as important values. Jurors expressed the view that everyone should have the opportunity to pursue higher education as a means of improving their life chances. Discussions of access focused largely on financial inclusion, though some participants also highlighted the importance of education for groups whose opportunities have historically been constrained, such as helping women to progress in their careers and earn more.

> **"In my opinion, higher education allows you to probably earn more money. And that's particularly important, in my view for women...because the nature of society has changed. If you have children...you should be able to [support them] yourself, and [earning more] would keep a lot more people out of poverty." (Participant)**

Alongside these individual benefits, jurors also recognised the wider social and economic value of higher education. They described it as a mechanism for upskilling the population, supporting people into employment, and helping to address workforce shortages, particularly in public services such as the NHS.

> **"[Higher education] helps fill the gaps in professions that we desperately need more people... GPs, doctors, nurses, any sort of industries that we're lacking the skilled workforce for." (Participant)**

Although employment and skills were prominent, jurors also emphasised less tangible forms of value. Higher education was seen as a space for broadening horizons, developing critical thinking, and learning to question the world - capacities they viewed as increasingly important in an age of misinformation. These soft skills were understood as valuable not only for individuals but for society as a whole.

> **"I think the value of [higher education] is that you are opening your mind, broadening your perspectives, having things challenged and kind of learning more about the world around you." (Participant)**

Some participants also highlighted higher education as a period of personal growth, a chance to pursue interests, and a safe environment for young people to "come of age" and transition into adulthood. Others linked this personal development to wider civic contribution, describing higher education as creating confident, informed citizens able to contribute to community life.

> **"I think it's important to allow the younger people to shine and share what they've learned and improve the system itself once they're done with their education. A constant wheel of improvement." (Participant)**

In this sense the jury also saw higher education as creating positive outcomes through an "uplifted society" creating citizens with increased confidence who could contribute to local democracy, and who feel valued.

Notably, jurors' early views focused more on the purpose of education than on the wider role of institutions and they tended to perceive the student as a young person progressing directly from school. Their early reflections created a broad picture of higher education's purpose and value - one that would evolve as jurors engaged more deeply with the financial and structural challenges facing the system.

How did their views evolve as they learned more?

As jurors progressed through the learning and deliberative process, their views on purpose and value became more focused. Two dominant themes emerged: higher education as a route to work and higher education as a route to personal enrichment.

Over the first four sessions, jurors heard from a range of expert speakers, including academics and sector representatives. These presentations introduced the financial pressures facing the sector, the risks to institutional sustainability, and the labour-market challenges shaping graduate outcomes. Jurors were also provided with additional learning materials in between sessions, including a range of relevant reports and papers.

As they absorbed this information, their views on purpose and value became more focussed. The early perceptions of opportunity and personal growth remained important, but jurors increasingly interpreted these ideas through the lens of employment, skills, and economic contribution.

Specifically, a stronger emphasis on higher education as a pathway to work emerged. Jurors stressed that higher education should help fill skills gaps, support public services and ensure that the time and money invested by students – and by taxpayers – resulted in meaningful employment outcomes. This was framed as both a social and an economic necessity.

> **"Nothing's truly free. It's paid for by somebody who is the taxpayer... so there needs to be either that societal benefit or that return in some other way to justify the cost." (Participant)**

Once jurors learned more about graduate outcomes, fair access, social mobility and labour market pressures, they increasingly saw secure employment as the most realistic and reliable expression of opportunity in the current context. In their view, aligning higher education with skills needs was a way of protecting opportunity, not narrowing it.

> **"We've got this situation where even if you're given this best opportunity to improve yourself with higher education, with how changeable the market and economy are right now, and the cost-of-living crisis, are you going to work yourself to the bone for not even that great of an opportunity?" (Participant)**

This more instrumental framing influenced jurors' thinking about which pathways public funding should support. While they had initially praised choice and the intrinsic value of learning, they became more cautious about publicly funding courses that did not appear to lead directly to employment or address national skills needs.

> **"If there's limited resources, is it right for people to [receive funding] to study whatever they want? You know, if it's something really obscure that doesn't lead to a job that benefits the country? I do think if you have a limited resource, you know, it's up to the government to use that wisely. You need to use those funds in the best way you can to benefit the future working population and what the country needs." (Participant)**

The same logic shaped views on who should be eligible to access publicly funded higher education. Jurors distinguished between people returning to education to upskill or reskill in response to labour market changes - seen as legitimate and necessary - and those perceived as studying "for the sake of it" or collecting degrees without a clear employment purpose.

> **"As the world shifts and changes and we get new stuff like AI, allowing the opportunity for these now fully developed adults to then go back into higher education and upskill themselves even further [is important] to keep up with the world." (Participant)**

Some participants felt that a cultural shift was needed away from the assumption that university is a rite of passage or the default route to a successful career. They argued that this perception no longer reflected labour market realities and contributed to people entering higher education without a clear sense of purpose.

Despite the stronger focus on work, jurors continued to recognise the broader value of higher education as a space for personal development, intellectual growth, and the transition to adulthood. However, faced with constrained resources, the jury also queried whether these broader outcomes, were realistic priorities for public investment at present.

> **"I suppose it boils down to whether you believe higher education should be about academic pursuit and meeting different people, learning different things, broadening perspectives and stuff like that. Or whether you believe it should be about a way to increase how much money you make. I'm personally more in the former camp, but I can also see why people say the other thing." (Participant)**

For some jurors, the tension between these two perspectives was difficult to resolve. While they valued higher education's role in broadening minds and supporting personal growth, they felt that, in a constrained funding environment, these benefits were less of a priority. As a result, jurors tended to accept that trade-offs might be required between the ideal purpose of higher education and what might need to be prioritised in the current context.

How did views on purpose and value inform the jury's principles?

The views jurors developed about the purpose and value of higher education fed into all their concluding principles, which were discussed, refined, and voted on in the final workshop. While the full set of principles will be presented in the main jury report and will be discussed in subsequent findings papers, the following overarching principle was directly relevant to this theme.

Specifically, the jury concluded that:

> **Public funding for higher education should be prioritised towards ensuring Scotland has the skills that it needs to support the economy and our public services, and to address skills gaps and shortages. In the short term, more funding is needed for vocational and technical courses, rather than academic degrees that are less directly careers-based, until shortages are addressed. Decisions about which academic degrees are deprioritised should be made carefully.**

There was near unanimous support (17 supported, 2 opposed) for this principle which jurors saw as a response to what they considered one of the system's most pressing challenges: that higher education is not currently producing graduates with skills aligned to Scotland's workforce needs. Support for this principle was grounded in the belief that public funding is finite and that difficult decisions will be required about where investment should be directed. For some, this meant setting aside their earlier, more expansive views about what higher education could ideally achieve.

> **"There is a limited pool of money. We cannot have unlimited degree places and unlimited college courses and unlimited apprenticeships. And right now, academic degrees aren't having the outcomes for young people... I think we have to be realistic and say, you know, what do we need?" (Participant)**

This principle brought into focus the central tension in the jury's discussions: how to prioritise qualifications and pathways that meet immediate skills needs without losing the broader educational and developmental benefits that many jurors still valued.

Jurors' debate revealed three competing priorities: meeting urgent workforce shortages, recognising the long-term value of broad transferable skills, and preserving space for young people to explore their interests before committing to a career. The clause in the principle - **"academic degrees that are less directly careers-based"** - was therefore contentious. Some jurors argued that while many degrees do not lead directly into a specific job, they still provide valuable transferable skills that are important for the labour market. They also recognised that people may have multiple careers over their lifetime, making adaptability increasingly important.

Others emphasised that higher education can help young people understand their strengths and interests, and that expecting them to know this in advance was unrealistic.

> **"I think that quite a lot of young people are not entirely sure where they're headed. And doing a sort of academic degree often gives them thinking time to focus on where their skills actually are." (Participant)**

Yet the extent to which this "thinking time" should be publicly funded was challenged, when faced with limited resources. This was linked back to a perception, expressed earlier in the jury, that some people enter university without having a sense of purpose and career direction, which has led to an "over saturation" of people with degrees. This debate reflected the core tension running through the jury's discussions: the balance between higher education as a route to work and as a space for personal development.

To reconcile these views, the jury agreed to add the phrases **"and to address skills gaps and shortages"**, and **"until shortages are addressed"** to the principle. This reflected both the priority they placed on public investment addressing labour market needs, and their understanding that those needs change over time, and that funding priorities should be able to shift accordingly.

> **"This is a very good principle. It should be prioritised, but it should be only prioritised until the gaps are filled and then money could be directed back into education more generally rather than kind of specific [areas]." (Participant)**

They also proposed an amendment to the principle, prompted by a view that many academic degrees, such as business management, though not directly career-oriented, were still important for public funding to support. Consequently, they added the wording: **"Decisions about which academic degrees are deprioritised should be made carefully."**

In this way, in the principle the jury sought to capture both their pragmatic response to current financial constraints and their reluctance to narrow the purpose of higher education more than necessary. While jurors continued to value the broader benefits of study - including personal development and the soft skills that help people navigate work and society - many felt these were not realistic priorities for public funding at present. The compromise wording reflected their attempt to balance these wider benefits with the immediate need to address skills shortages.

Conclusion

The citizens' jury process showed clearly how views evolve through learning and deliberation. Jurors' early reflections on the purpose and value of higher education were wide-ranging, combining a belief in higher education as a route to personal development and societal uplift with a more instrumental view of its role in meeting Scotland's skills and workforce needs.

As they learned more about the financial pressures facing the sector, jurors increasingly prioritised the view that higher education should, first and foremost, produce graduates with skills aligned to Scotland's labour market needs. They felt this would deliver the greatest value for individuals - by supporting progression and mobility - and for society, through economic development, productivity, and a stronger tax base to sustain future investment.

This lens shaped their thinking on key questions such as who should benefit from higher education and how funding should be balanced across different pathways - themes that will be explored in subsequent papers. Ultimately, jurors concluded that, while they wanted higher education to remain a space for personal development and self-discovery, especially for young people, a constrained financial environment required public funding to be directed towards more tangible outcomes.

Yet many found this difficult to reconcile with their ideals. Even at the end of the process, a number of jurors held on to the belief that higher education should remain more than a pipeline into work. The tension between what higher education *ought* to offer and what can be prioritised within current constraints remained unresolved and this tension ultimately shaped the principles they agreed.

This thematic paper **does not tell the whole story of the citizens' jury**. To understand the full breadth of the jury's deliberations, and the approach used, it should be read together with the **methodology paper**, published on 17 March 2026, and the **other three findings papers** which will be published in the coming weeks. A **full Ipsos report** on the jury will bring all the content together to provide a detailed account of the background to the citizens' jury, the approach used, all the jury's findings, and lessons for future deliberative engagement approaches.

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