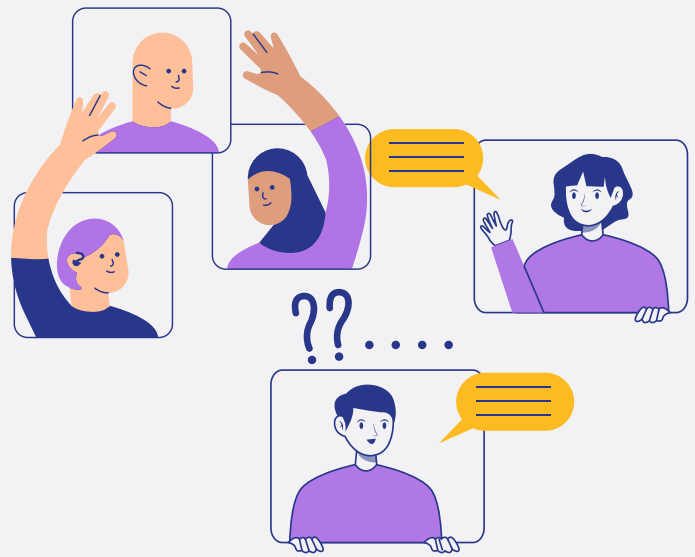


WHAT IS A FAIR SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING?



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

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.

Key findings:

- **Jurors' views on the fairness of funding approaches evolved through deliberation.** Their focus on equity remained strong throughout, reflecting their belief that higher education should widen opportunity. They continued to see free higher education as a cornerstone of fairness, but as they learned more, they identified pressures and inequities in the funding system that the current free-tuition policy could not resolve.
- **Jurors recognised that, given the challenges facing the system, sustaining opportunity for all will require difficult choices.** However, they struggled to engage decisively with those trade-offs and to reconcile their vision of an accessible, publicly funded system with the pressures they were presented with. They concluded that there is no simple or singular solution, but that equity and access must remain at the heart of any future funding model.

"For me fairness and equal opportunities are really important, and I think it's important to think about how to make [higher education] as open as possible to as many people as possible from different places and backgrounds." (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 second in a series of thematic papers setting out key findings from the citizens' jury. It focuses on participants' views on **equity of access and opportunity** in higher education in Scotland, how their perspectives evolved during the process, the key themes that arose and how this fed into and shaped their conclusions. Participants used a range of overlapping terms when discussing equity, including 'fairness', 'equality', 'accessibility' and 'inclusion'.

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 equity and access?

As detailed in the first findings paper, a key aim of the citizens' jury was to explore participants' perspectives on the purpose and value of higher education in Scotland as an essential foundation for understanding their views on funding and priorities for public spending. While their perspectives evolved over the course of the process, a consistent feature of the jury's thinking was that higher education should be a route to opportunity: supporting skills development, enabling upward social mobility through enhanced employment prospects, and allowing individuals to 'progress in life'.

This emphasis on opportunity, mobility and progress became central to how jurors defined the value of higher education. And, because they recognised that these benefits only hold meaning if people from all backgrounds can realistically access, participate in, and complete their studies, issues of accessibility and equality of opportunity emerged as early priority themes in their deliberations. The following findings should be read in that context.

These concerns can also be situated within a long Scottish tradition of treating higher education as a shared national asset reflected in Scotland's commitment to free tuition for Scottish undergraduates and its national focus on 'fair access'. These aspects of the current system formed an important backdrop to the jury's discussions about equity and the choices involved in funding the system.

What were the jury's early views?

In their first session, participants were introduced to the higher education landscape in Scotland through short videos and two live presentations from expert speakers. These covered the shape of the sector, its evolution, and the different pathways learners can take.

After this introduction, participants were asked to reflect on the strengths and challenges of the current system. At this early stage, as with their perspectives on purpose and value, their views were largely shaped by their personal experiences and strong external narratives. These perceptions were generally positive, particularly around the perceived accessibility of the current system, which they immediately linked to funding and to Scotland's 'free tuition' policy.

**"It makes what would otherwise probably be unreachable much more achievable for many people [...] So I think we're very lucky to have that."
(Participant)**

From the outset, access and opportunity were therefore framed primarily in financial terms. Jurors entered the process with a strong sense of pride in Scotland's policy approach, which they felt opened opportunities that might otherwise not be available. Several contrasted this with the cost of higher education in England, which they viewed as a significant barrier.

**"I think it's really good compared to other places, even compared to England where the price of higher education is very unaffordable for most. Here in Scotland, higher education is accessible for more people."
(Participant)**

On this basis, jurors expressed strong views that higher education should remain free and accessible to everyone, regardless of background and that free higher education was seen as a way of ensuring that opportunity is not limited to those from more privileged circumstances. They saw this as a defining element of a 'fair' system.

"I think for me a fair system is one where people that want to go get a higher education can do and where they don't feel kind of limited by their background, whether their family or themselves have or don't have enough money." (Participant)

Jurors felt it was important that the system is not elitist; that everyone should have an equal opportunity of pursuing their chosen course of study or career. They felt that opportunities should be based on merit, without barriers as a result of household income or where you live or have gone to school in Scotland.

**"I don't want to go back to a two tier society where the only people who can access education are the rich [...] And for me it isn't even about funding. It's a societal thing - what kind of society do we want to live in? It should be one where anyone who wants to access [higher] education should be able to."
(Participant)**

Although early discussions focused mainly on financial access, jurors also recognised that accessibility involves more than cost. They highlighted the importance of ensuring that disabled learners and those in rural areas can participate fully. However, at this stage, financial barriers remained the dominant lens through which they understood access.

"I believe there are a lot of barriers for disabled people going to college and higher education for sure...Everyone should be able to live up to their own potential... so I'd be interested to find out [how those barriers can be addressed]" (Participant)

How did their views evolve as they learned more?

As jurors progressed through the learning and deliberative process, they developed, challenged and refined their views on fairness and equity in relation to access to higher education.

Initially, as jurors learned about how universities, colleges, and apprenticeships are funded in Scotland, the support available for student living costs, comparisons with other UK funding models, and patterns of participation and equity, their early views were largely reinforced. They continued to see free higher education as the fundamental strength of the current system, particularly for students from lower-income households who might otherwise struggle to afford higher education.

"I think it's an amazing thing that Scotland offers it. And I think many Scottish people are very proud to have the free tuition policy." (Participant)

Some jurors' views on free higher education were strongly shaped by their own experiences and the benefits that they had derived from it.

"Because it was free, my generation in my family was the first who went to university... we all went off and became vets and doctors and computer scientists and engineers and [we're] all in gainful employment on the back of free education. Now if that's not a good advert for free education, I don't know what it is." (Participant)

Learning about the differences between Scotland and the rest of the UK strengthened this perception. Jurors continue to compare the Scottish model favourably with the English one because of its free tuition policy and more generous living-cost support, which they felt made higher education more accessible and reduced the burden of student debt.

"In Scotland there is more [funding] going to students than in England, where there kind of isn't really any public money going to students, regardless of background. So there is a sort of disparity that's grown between [parts of] the UK." (Participant)

However, as jurors learned more about how the system operates in practice, their views also became more nuanced, and they began to identify pressures and inequities in the Scottish funding system that free tuition alone could not resolve.

For example, Jurors were concerned that **rising living costs**, combined with support that has not kept pace with inflation, disproportionately affected students from low-income households. While some level of student debt was seen as inevitable, they felt cost should not prevent students from accessing or completing higher education. They worried that financial pressures, combined with uncertainty about graduate employment and outcomes, could deter people from lower income households from applying to higher education or force students to drop out.

"I don't think there's enough incentive, especially from those from lower socio-demographic areas. It's like they're wanting people to take out these giant loans to go to university but then at the end of the university, after they've struggled through, there's no job for them and then they're stuck with a degree and all of this loan." (Participant)

Levels of student debt remained a concern over the course of the jury. They were seen not only as an existing barrier to access, but as something that would likely get worse as a result of funding pressures and rising living costs.

"For me the issue is around who's actually going to go to university. Because if the funding gets reduced in some way, then it's going to affect people who are financially not as well off...It's probably going to be worse if you're going to increase the amount of debt that people need to take on." (Participant)

Jurors also felt that inadequate living-cost support could restrict where students study. Higher rents in cities such as Edinburgh, Glasgow and St Andrews were seen as a barrier that could make these institutions increasingly exclusive.

"I think with [student] loans, in a lot of areas, Glasgow and Edinburgh, they don't meet your rental costs. So, it does very much become a factor in where you can go to university." (Participant)

As jurors learned more about how living-cost support is structured in Scotland, they also reacted strongly to what was described as a **"cliff edge" in the living cost support system** by which a very small change in a household's income could lead to a large drop in entitlement. Jurors felt this created an arbitrary disadvantage for some families and did not reflect the real cost pressures facing students.

"The cliff edge is grim... one point and that's your kid lost a grand a half of funding. That's harsh." (Participant)

Some jurors felt the Welsh model which is means tested and provides the same overall support to all students but offers more generous grants to those from low-income households, was more equitable.

The jurors were also concerned about the role that **paid work** plays in shaping students' ability to participate fully in higher education. They felt that students from lower-income households are more likely to need to work – and to work longer hours – simply to meet basic living costs. This, they argued, creates an uneven experience that free tuition alone could not resolve.

Jurors noted that the need to work reduces the time available for study, rest, and social participation, and can affect academic performance and wellbeing. They felt this placed additional pressure on students who may already be balancing other responsibilities, such as caring roles, and that these pressures accumulate in ways that are not always visible in headline funding policies.

"It's about supporting a student as a whole and everything they're doing. Because if you're from the disadvantaged background, you're carrying a whole lot more than what your neighbours are who are from more affluent backgrounds." (Participant)

Some jurors also linked this to **wider concerns about retention**. They reflected on evidence showing higher dropout rates among students from more deprived areas and felt that financial strain, including the need to work long hours, was likely to be a contributing factor. This reinforced their view that fair access requires more than entry: it requires support that enables students to stay and succeed.

Jurors suggested that addressing these pressures would require a more holistic approach to student support. Ideas included improving living-cost support, regulating student accommodation costs, and ensuring that students with caring responsibilities or limited family support receive additional help. They felt that without such measures, students from lower-income households would continue to face barriers that others do not, even within a system that provides free tuition.

Jurors also identified the **lack of grants for postgraduate tuition** as a barrier. They felt this made postgraduate study less accessible to students from low-income families and concentrated advanced qualifications - and the career opportunities they enable - among more privileged groups.

"For some of the bigger universities, it's £5,000 [for a postgraduate course], so there's entire career paths that are shut off to you. And I don't think saying, "Oh, well, you can take out a loan", fixes that necessarily." (Participant)

Finally, jurors also highlighted **non-financial, social and cultural barriers** faced by people from low-income backgrounds or more deprived areas, including limited encouragement from family or schools.

Having identified areas where they believed the system should be strengthened, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, often through increased investment, jurors struggled to reconcile this with what they had learned about the financial challenges facing the system. Participants were struck by the severity of the financial issues facing institutions and the potential threats for access and opportunity that this presented. The lack of an obvious or easy solution meant that a central tension emerged: **how to reconcile their vision of a fair and accessible publicly funded higher education system with the current financial challenges.**

On the one hand, protecting free higher education remained a strongly held belief among the jury, with free education for all considered “the gold standard”. On the other, jurors also increasingly recognised that future funding decisions in Scotland must be realistic and affordable, with some reluctant acknowledgement that the current approach may not be sustainable.

"I love the idea of free higher education for all. We all love that idea. But then we love the idea of free health care and free everything, you know, but there's not an unlimited amount of cash." (Participant)

What were the jury's views on potential solutions to this tension?

In attempting to work through the tension that emerged, the jury was asked to reflect on some hypothetical funding scenarios that could help deliver additional investment into the system to enhance equity and address financial sustainability challenges. Their strong views on equity and accessibility also shaped how they responded to these - their responses to the different scenarios are set out below.

Introducing fees for all or some students

In general, jurors were not in favour of any approach that would introduce additional upfront costs for all students. There was recognition that charging fees would lead to students relying on more loans and most jurors were strongly against burdening students with additional debt. They considered this would be particularly unfair for those from low-income households and would be a counterintuitive approach to fair access.

"I think throwing fees at people that are already being priced out of university is not going to make it fairer for those people." (Participant)

Jurors discussed whether certain groups of students could be charged fees. They were against charging fees to students studying part-time since they felt this could disadvantage students who may be working because they could not afford to study full-time and who may be trying to improve their financial circumstances through study.

"I feel like that's less fair because you're taking away from people who are taking time out of their job to try and do better." (Participant)

They were more conflicted on how fair it would be to charge fees to students from high-earning households. While some were strongly against charging any students tuition fees, other participants recognised that a change in approach may be required to ensure higher education funding remained sustainable in the long term. For some, it was acknowledged that, if high earning households were able to shoulder some of the financial burden, this could help maintain equity and support for disadvantaged students by ensuring public funding was concentrated on those less able to afford tuition fees.

"I think the fairest way, in terms of access to education, you need to [make] allowances for people coming from disadvantaged backgrounds."

However, when discussing how such an approach would work in practice, jurors felt the risks outweighed the potential benefits. They noted how high an income threshold might be required as even households earning £70,000 a year may still struggle financially. They were cautious about the concept of 'means-testing' which they felt might make incorrect assumptions about household capacity to pay which would depend on individual circumstances. In this context, jurors noted a more nuanced approach to means-testing would be needed that considers different household circumstances and ability to make contributions, and which avoids the aforementioned 'cliff edge' in the current Scottish living costs support model.

They also worried that such an approach might leave some students from high-income households without support, if their parents were unwilling to contribute.

"There's no guarantee that high-income households will contribute anything towards their kid's education and that might just alienate people from well off backgrounds [...] There's no guarantee that those people would be able to fund a course on their own [...] I think there'd need to be a more nuanced way to look at the criteria." (Participant)

Reflecting their emerging views on the importance of higher education as a route to work, some jurors suggested that fees could be introduced based on the course of study rather than the individual's circumstances. Some jurors suggested that if public funding were constrained, it might be best prioritised towards courses where there is the greatest skills need in Scotland with fees for courses that have lower employment outcomes. They felt that this could help to ensure that graduates' skills were aligned with Scotland's workforce needs and improve graduate outcomes.

"Maybe there's an option where everybody gets funded for the courses that are needed to [fill] skills gaps, and [those studying courses] that are less needed - if they are doing a course that's maybe more just for fun, in some ways - maybe that could be an area where people could self-fund." (Participant)

Introducing a tax or fee for some or all graduates

In general, jurors were more receptive to charging graduates than students, as they felt that education being free at the point of access was a fundamental aspect of a fair system. However, views were mixed and many were still strongly opposed to this approach, saying it would be unfair to increase the financial burden on graduates and that this could ultimately deter individuals, especially those from low-income backgrounds, from pursuing higher education.

"Free education should mean free. The idea of strangling a graduate for all these years after is just absolutely abhorrent. Nobody should have that. A graduate should leave university without having to pay anything for the tuition." (Participant)

While there was a view amongst the jurors that 'the more you earn, the more you should repay', it was noted that many graduates are already repaying student living cost loans from their salaries and graduates with higher-paying jobs would also already be paying higher taxes. Therefore, they felt it would be unfair to saddle this group with additional financial burdens.

"I feel like that's probably just going to scare people away from taking courses because they wouldn't want to repay a graduate payment as well as their student loans." (Participant)

However, some jurors felt that asking high-earning graduates to make contributions was preferable to any approach which charged fees for students from high earning households, due to their concerns about barriers at the point of access based on household income.

"Maybe there's a way to charge students something, like [when] they graduate and they get a degree, to sort of claw back some of the money [...] I think it's difficult when you start charging or looking [the income] of parents because it's been said there's all different situations and perceptions of who's wealthy or not." (Participant)

If not fees, then what?

Given their views on the introduction of fees and graduate charges, jurors were asked if there was another way to protect free tuition while securing the sustainability of the system including addressing rising costs for students, issues with loan debt and institutional sustainability challenges. They found identifying solutions challenging and no single solution attracted significant support across the jury. When encouraged to think of possible ways forward, the following were considered the most favourable.

- **Increasing general taxation** – jurors felt that public funding could be raised through taxation. There was a suggestion that taxes might be introduced on 'anti-social behaviours', such as gambling. However, there was also a recognition that there was no way of ensuring that additional tax revenues would be prioritised towards higher education, given the wider pressures facing public services in Scotland.
- **Reducing the costs of delivering higher education** – In general, given their views on options for raising additional funds, the jurors tended to favour approaches which would reform delivery models to bring costs more in line with the funding that is available. These aspects will be discussed, in more detail in the forthcoming findings papers on pathways and universities.
- **Charging a fee or taxing high earning graduates** – although this was still a contentious solution due to jurors' views on burdening graduates with additional debt or taxes, it was considered to be fairer and more equitable than charging upfront fees as it would only apply to graduates who had secured benefits from higher education, at least in terms of higher wages.

- **Employers contributing towards higher education costs** – there were some calls for employers to contribute towards costs of higher education (over and above the existing apprenticeship levy) if they would ultimately benefit from learners strengthening their own workforce. The practicalities of this were challenged though, with some jurors saying that this would be difficult to achieve without incentivising employers in some way.

How did views on equity and access inform the jury's principles?

The final workshop brought together the themes and discussions from the previous sessions to produce a set of principles to inform debate and decisions about the future funding of higher education, including priorities for public spending. A number of the jury's concluding principles reflected their earlier discussions on equity, fairness and accessibility. The full set of principles are detailed in the main citizens' jury report, but those most relevant to this theme are highlighted below.

First, the jury concluded that:

Funding models must ensure all higher education pathways are accessible to those from all backgrounds, including ensuring those from disadvantaged backgrounds have fair access and are supported into higher education.

There was unanimous agreement among jurors that this should be one of their concluding principles. For them, it captured core values of fairness and inclusion and reflected their belief that for higher education to deliver its purpose of supporting opportunity and social mobility, it should be genuinely accessible to everyone who can benefit from it. Jurors emphasised that this included students from financially disadvantaged households, carers, disabled learners, those with additional support needs, and people living in remote or rural areas. Ensuring that these groups could participate on equal terms was seen as fundamental to a future funding system.

They also concluded that:

Support for student living costs should continue to be means-tested and use a sliding scale rather than banded approach which creates a 'cliff edge' for households. The focus should be on avoiding increased levels of student debt through loans, especially for those from financially disadvantaged households.

Although many jurors expressed views that that the current student finance arrangements for living costs were not necessarily adequate, they recognised that principles promoting additional investment, in the current circumstances, would not be particularly realistic. There was broad support for this principle (13 supported, 3 opposed, 6 were undecided) which reflected their views that student living support should not disproportionately affect those from low-income households by increasing the financial burden associated with pursuing higher education.

The outstanding concerns raised by some jurors were around the inclusion of the term 'means tested' – for some jurors they felt 'means testing' was unfair and that funding approaches should better take account of the range of different circumstances, not just household income.

"It's actually quite unfair where we have that cliff edge at the moment, and I think that that's really difficult to avoid in these situations. Also, it could depend on family size and everything, like where people have more than one child or people don't have parental support or they're funding themselves. So I think there's so much comes into than [income]." (Participant)

Finally, in relation to free tuition, they also concluded:

Higher education should be free at the point of access for all students living in Scotland, regardless of their age, mode of study, or family income.
However, the current free tuition model is not sustainable so needs to be reviewed

There was near unanimous support for the first part of this principle (18 supported, 1 opposed). Although aware of the financial challenges in the system, there were firm views among some jurors that removing free higher education was a 'red line' that simply should not be crossed - views which for them remained largely unchanged across the six sessions. These jurors felt that alternative solutions needed to be found to ensure free higher education was affordable and sustainable since removing it would be a backwards step which would disadvantage future generations and make higher education in Scotland accessible only to students from more privileged backgrounds.

"We don't want to go back to a society where people are held back because of their economic situation. I wouldn't want to have added pressures on families to try and provide an education for their children later in life. I think that's a complete red line for me, that we have free education in Scotland." (Participant)

"We need free education [for] everyone, and especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds because without that you're losing a whole scope of people and get to the point where it's only the rich that will be able to afford it." (Participant)

Despite this strong commitment to the principle or ideal of free higher education, there was also a recognition that, given everything they had heard, the current free tuition policy may not be sustainable, and it may be necessary to introduce fees for some groups to secure opportunities for others. By not making any changes, some speculated that this could lead to the closure of universities or colleges, further reductions in university places for Scottish students, or universities having to accept greater numbers of UK and overseas students at the expense of Scottish students.

“It [could] make it more difficult for Scottish students to get into university. So that's a bit of a problem, because the universities want people who are paying and [students from outside of Scotland] are obviously paying a lot more than what they're receiving for tuition fees from the Scottish government.” (Participant)

In this context, jurors were asked if they wanted to add **“However, the current free tuition model is not sustainable so needs to be reviewed”** to this principle, to reflect their acknowledgement that free tuition, as currently delivered, may not be sustainable. While the majority, including those most committed to free higher education, acknowledged the current model needed to change, some strongly felt that this statement should not be part of a principle. They argued that the jury's principles should be seen as a set of ideals rather than 'recommendations', and there were concerns that including the additional statement could give the Scottish Government cause to remove free tuition in future.

“Putting in these caveats gives the message to the government that it's actually all right to start charging people for this somewhere along the line. And I don't agree with that at all.” (Participant)

In the end there was only marginal support for the addition of the the statement (10 jurors supported, 7 opposed and 2 were undecided) and the juror's didn't manage to satisfactorily resolve the key tension between their desire for free higher education which reflected their values, and the financial challenges resulting from the current funding approach.

Similarly, despite some support, the jurors also narrowly decided against (8 supported, 9 opposed, 2 were undecided) including a principle that concluded: **“if ... additional public funding cannot be found, then 'graduates' should be asked to contribute after they have completed their studies and progressed into a good job rather than students to keep education free at the point of access.”**

When debating the benefits and drawback of introducing graduate payments, some jurors said that their support or opposition would depend on the specifics (i.e. whether it would apply to all graduates or only to some, what the earning threshold for repayment would be, and how much the repayments would cost).

However, ultimately the jury felt that this would not be a fair or effective way of addressing funding issues. Jurors argued that it would be inherently unfair to increase the financial burden and level of debt placed on graduates, and that this could deter individuals from low-income backgrounds from pursuing university education.

“People shouldn't have to pay for [the education] they've just had. When they're in a paid job, they shouldn't have to, like, take their money out their pocket and pay. I just totally disagree with that 100%.” (Participant)

Some felt charging a fee to higher earning graduates, which they viewed as being akin to an additional income tax, could lead to graduates deliberately seeking jobs that did not take them over the earning threshold to be eligible for the payment.

They also considered it would be unfair if this fee was only applied to university graduates and not to those from other higher education pathways, favouring approaches that treated all higher education journeys equally.

Reflecting these concerns, this principle was considered a “last resort” option, only to be considered if other options had been exhausted. Even with that sentiment reflected in the wording of the principle, on balance the jury was still reluctant to support introducing graduate payments and this was narrowly voted out of the jury’s final conclusions.

Conclusion

This paper highlights one of the most challenging issues the citizens’ jury grappled with: how to protect the opportunities that higher education funding creates while confronting the financial pressures facing the system. From the outset, jurors saw higher education as a route to progress – a way for people to improve their circumstances, secure better work, and contribute to Scotland’s wider social and economic life. Equity and access were therefore not abstract principles for them, but essential conditions for ensuring that higher education continues to deliver the opportunities they valued most.

As they learned more about current funding models and the financial challenges facing the sector, jurors became increasingly concerned about the risks these pressures pose to future access and fairness. Free higher education was understood as one important expression of Scotland’s commitment to opportunity, but jurors also recognised that it sits within a wider set of funding choices that ultimately determine who can benefit. They identified limitations in the current model – particularly where they felt support for students was insufficient – and acknowledged that sustaining opportunity for all may require difficult decisions and trade-offs. At the same time, they struggled to decisively engage with those choices, reflecting the complexity of the issues at stake.

Ultimately, jurors concluded that there is no simple or singular solution. They recognised that policymakers face complex decisions within finite budgets, and that further discussion and reflection will be needed to balance equity with financial sustainability. Throughout their deliberations, however, one message remained consistent: **equity and access must remain at the heart of any future funding model**, because without them the purpose and value of higher education – as a route to opportunity and mobility – cannot be realised.

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, the **findings paper on purpose and value**, published on 30 April 2026, and the **other two 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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