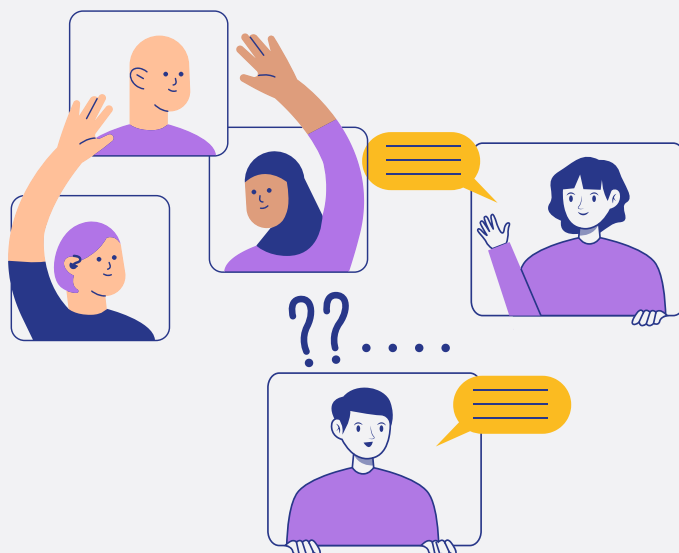


HOW SHOULD SCOTLAND FUND HIGHER EDUCATION IN UNIVERSITIES?

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



About the authors



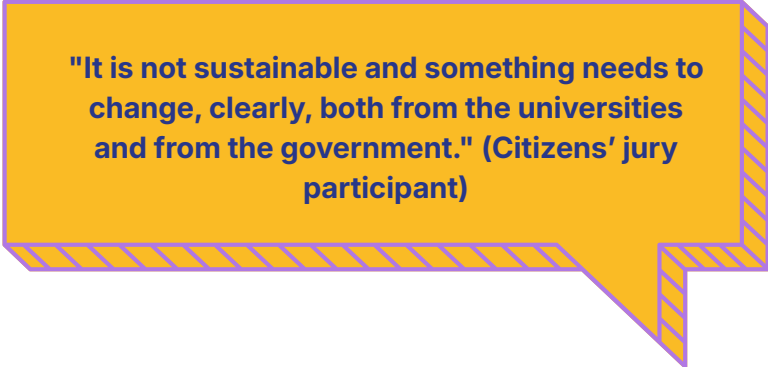
Carnegie Education Fund is an independent charitable trust that aims to support participation in and improvement of Scotland's higher education system through grants and research. It was established in 1901 as the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland (SC015600).



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 were concerned about the financial pressures facing universities and the sustainability of the current funding model.** However, in the face of finite public resources and pressures elsewhere in the system which they viewed as higher priority, they felt that the focus should be on reforming the university delivery model to reduce costs, rather than increasing public investment in universities.
- **Jurors recognised that the way many students learn is changing.** They were supportive of reforms that would reduce the length of degree programmes or move more learning online. They stressed that any changes to university delivery must be done in a way that would not compromise equity and access or impact on the quality of learning and teaching.



"It is not sustainable and something needs to change, clearly, both from the universities and from the government." (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 fourth and last in a series of thematic papers presenting the findings of the citizens' jury. It focusses specifically on participants' views on the **funding of universities** as the primary setting in which most learners access and experience higher education in Scotland. It describes jurors' early views on universities and university funding, how their perspectives evolved during the process, the key themes that arose and how this fed into and shaped their conclusions.

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 universities?

With 19 higher education institutions serving over a quarter of a million learners each year, universities are a major part of Scotland's higher education system and together account for a significant share of public investment. A series of pressures - declining public funding, falling international student numbers, rapid technological change, demographic shifts, and evolving labour market needs - have prompted increasing calls for reform to the university funding model to protect institutional sustainability and maintain the quality and reach of provision.

Debate often centres on the affordability and long-term viability of Scotland's 'free tuition' policy for undergraduates. As set out in an earlier findings paper on equity and access, participants in the citizens' jury saw free higher education as a cornerstone of a 'fair' system but, with public funding under pressure and social mobility slowing, they recognised the limitations of the current policy approach.

While they could see the value of broader academic learning, they indicated that, in current circumstances, they would prefer to see funding prioritised towards strengthening higher education pathways that they associated with clearer routes to secure employment as the best means to ensure opportunity is seeded widely and to secure positive societal outcomes. These perspectives shaped how jurors understood the place of universities in the system and the conclusions they drew about funding for higher education in universities.

What were the jury's early views?

During the first session, jurors learned about how higher education is delivered in Scotland through universities, colleges and apprenticeship providers. They heard about the different institutions, the types of provision available, and how the landscape had evolved over the last century. What they learned tested their understanding of universities, what they deliver and for whom, and left them keen to learn more about how higher education is funded in universities and the challenges facing them.

Jurors were broadly familiar with universities as places for degree-level study. From an early stage they described them as "academic" learning institutions, which they contrasted with other higher education pathways which were seen as offering more "practical" skills. Jurors described what they saw as the "traditional university route" of someone entering university to get a degree straight after school and were surprised to hear about the range of students enrolled in universities and the proportion of new undergraduates coming to university through other pathways e.g. college.

They were also interested to learn about the broad range of learning opportunities universities provide beyond traditional degrees. Many were unaware, for example, that universities deliver apprenticeships and that graduate apprenticeships allow learners to earn degree-level qualifications while in paid employment. As set out in the earlier findings paper on higher education pathways, this raised early questions for them about the differences between types of institutions. Although many jurors understood that the ability to gain degree level (SCQF level 9 and above) qualifications was one of the main differences between universities and colleges, some remained uncertain about whether universities also offered HNC and HND qualifications, or if degrees could be acquired elsewhere.

They were surprised to hear that there are now as many as 19 universities in Scotland and had little awareness of specialist learning institutions such as the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Glasgow School of Art and Scotland's Rural College. They noted that, over time, several colleges had turned into universities, questioning why that might be the case and wondering whether this suggested that being a university was considered "better" than being a college.

"I was surprised that quite a few colleges have now turned into universities. I don't know why they were colleges and then suddenly they've gained status as a university. What changes that?" (Participant)

Participants observed that the growth in the sector had also led to a corresponding rise in higher education participation in universities over the last few decades. This expansion was seen largely as a positive thing, as jurors felt it had opened opportunities for more people to study. However, some suggested that universities may have expanded too much, with jurors querying whether this increase may have pushed too many people towards university at the expense of other routes.

“With the huge increase in the number of people going to university now, does it leave a gap that would have traditionally been filled by people going into more vocational type jobs? Are we seeing a skill shortage because more people are being forced down the university route [instead of] trades and vocational jobs?” (Participant)

With access in mind, they remarked that Scotland’s universities were quite concentrated in the Central Belt. There was a perception that going to university often meant leaving home to study, and that universities therefore might feel “out of reach” for people living in more rural communities. In this context, jurors were positive about the University of the Highlands and Islands’ model of dispersed delivery through localised campuses and online learning, which they thought opened more opportunities for access in rural areas in Scotland.

"I thought it was interesting that the Highlands and Islands have the network of universities, because I know the Highlands and the Islands have got a big issue where the younger people have to leave for opportunities... I think that's really cool that they are trying to keep their communities alive." (Participant)

At the same time, jurors acknowledged that the student experience seemed to have changed in recent years, with many university students now needing to juggle their studies with part time working to cover costs of living and more people staying at home. They speculated that the way universities deliver courses had also changed since the pandemic, with universities offering more opportunities for remote learning which made them more accessible.

“Just since COVID I think a lot of the universities and colleges have adapted... there is more opportunity now more than ever to do degrees and [other types of] higher education online.” (Participant)

When it came to funding, some participants began the jury process already aware that universities were facing financial challenges, having heard about it in media reports or through their first-hand experiences as students.

“Yeah, we had strikes in our first couple weeks of Uni due to funding cuts and staff shortages. So it was fairly present for our start to Uni this year.” (Participant)

They were concerned to learn that the numbers of international students had recently declined sharply, recognising that this would have financial implications for institutions and worrying about the impact on university provision and Scottish students. Many jurors noted that the proportion of international students at Scottish universities was lower than they had expected.

“The decline in international students is a surprise. That would be a concern because international students pay their tuition...so effectively they are funding the university themselves. So less of them means less money for the universities to be able to run high quality courses.” (Participant)

There was some recognition that these challenges might impact universities differently. For example, there was a perception that some of Scotland's older universities might have a more solid or dependable financial standing than some of the "younger" universities, because of having existed for so long with the potential to build up more assets.

"These ancient universities will have massive legacies and investment funds built up over centuries...whereas I think if you're a recent university, you probably won't have that and there won't be much for them to fall back on."
(Participant)

Although the focus of the information the jury received was on higher education provision, some participants were also aware that, alongside learning and teaching, universities operated as centres of research and innovation.

"Universities are sort of like academic institutions as well, so they're doing like research and sponsoring independent study, you know, they're not just employing lecturers to teach, but lecturers who are undertaking some kind of innovations in their field, I suppose." (Participant)

In general, jurors' noted the importance of universities in supporting personal development, employment opportunity, social mobility, independence, and a "coming of age" for young people but their knowledge of the scale and breadth of the university sector in Scotland was limited. They were unclear, in these early discussions, of the full the extent of universities' activities or the differences between institutions. This uncertainty continued as they learned more and began to reflect further on the role of universities and what that means for funding models across the sector.

How did their views evolve as they learned more?

As jurors progressed through the learning and deliberative process, both the complexity of the university landscape and the issues facing universities became more apparent. Participants' concerns centred on **the sustainability of the public funding model and the return on investment from public funding** in terms of graduate employment and social mobility.

Having learned more about the ways higher education in universities is currently funded, jurors were very concerned about the public funding gap facing universities. They were frustrated to learn that public funding per Scottish undergraduate student had fallen in real terms, meaning that universities had over £3,000 less to invest in each student than they did ten years ago. The scale of this funding gap was worrying for jurors. They felt that this was unjust and that public funding should, at least, keep up with inflation.

"With the devaluation of currency, increasing population, I think the funding should be tied to inflation or other economic parameters... I think this system is really underfunded." (Participant)

Linked to this, and building on their earlier acknowledgement of the potential implications of declining international student numbers, jurors became even more concerned about the associated reduction in university revenue. While some jurors were already aware of this trend, others were surprised about the scale of the likely financial impact if numbers were to continue to fall. Jurors asked about what universities and the government were doing to attract more international students but, overall, they acknowledged that this was an unrealistic and unpredictable solution due to wider economic and geo-political factors.

“The solution isn't more international students to get more money, because there's all sorts of things that can go on in the world that can change [the number of international students coming].” (Participant)

Despite concerns about the university funding model, jurors also expressed reservations about the value for money from the public investment in universities. They were concerned, though not completely surprised, to hear about university graduates struggling to find employment – many jurors shared anecdotes of people they knew who were facing this challenge and stressed that something needed to be done to address it.

“I've got people in my family who've gone to uni, some have gone into trades, and I'd have to say that the ones who've gone into trades are finding it an awful lot easier to get work.” (Participant)

Given their views on higher education's value as a way of helping people advance or progress in society, understanding that university students might not be able to secure those outcomes, despite high levels of public investment, was particularly troubling for the jury.

As set out in the earlier findings paper on pathways, these concerns about graduate outcomes and alignment to the skills that Scotland needs, led them to ultimately conclude that public funding should be directed, at least in the short-term, towards delivering more work-based and vocational learning opportunities. Although they recognised that universities offered some vocational routes, they felt that college pathways could offer a more direct training route to work.

“I mean, obviously universities have a really important role and I think... you know, it's essential for some jobs, but for other jobs, the colleges, can really offer them a good product for people as well. And especially when that's combined with on-the-job learning.” (Participant)

In part, this was based on their understanding that university provision also includes more broad, academic degrees, the value of which, in the current climate, they began to question. They discussed, for example, how some degrees, particularly those in the arts and humanities (e.g. classics, philosophy and art) weren't sufficiently “careers-based”.

Although they continued to recognise the value of academic learning and wanted to protect the idea of university as a formative experience for young people, they suggested that, in current circumstances, students might be better encouraged to pursue learning more aligned to the jobs market and that public funding could help achieve this if it were directed towards those routes.

**“There's quite a lot of people I know who have went to university and studied pretty useless degrees... and they've come out and not been able to use their degrees, they've went into minimum paid work and worked their way up the sort of career ladder...a friend, you know, he did graphic design ...but he struggled to get a job and went and worked in a call centre in the end.”
(Participant)**

Some jurors questioned whether narrowing funding in this regard would limit opportunities for students who would be too early to know what they wanted to study. Others suggested that offering places on courses where there weren't sufficient employment opportunities was problematic in raising the expectations of students, only for them to be disappointed when they graduate.

“I don't know if we can prioritise funding towards just thinking time, right?...if there is a limited pool of funding, and there is, I don't think we can justify saying okay, just because it's a good developmental step, we're going to keep funding academic degrees that aren't going to help people get jobs.”

The jury also discussed university spending and the extent to which public funding was being used in the most effective way. They learned that the cost of teaching a student at university is higher than the cost of teaching a student at college which led them to question whether universities were spending efficiently on teaching and learning. They speculated that universities might be spending more than colleges on salaries and facilities and, if so, whether this was justified, suggesting it pointed to the relative esteem in which the different institutions are seen.

They also asked if public funding was being used to subsidise other areas of university expenditure, specifically research, and they sought reassurance that funding for teaching was being ringfenced for that purpose. While they acknowledged that research was important, they saw it as a lower priority for public spending than ensuring students could access funded places.

“I'm not saying it's [research is] not useful, I'm just saying that isn't what [public] money's for. I don't think taxpayers would be happy to hear, 'oh, your son or daughter can't go to university for free anymore, but we're giving millions of pounds to universities to do all this research'.” (Participant)

These concerns about university spending, raised by the jury were largely left unresolved during the deliberative process. The evidence they heard didn't enable them to develop a deeper understanding of how the unit cost of teaching for different subjects at university is decided or how that related to the actual cost of delivery. Nor did it help them get to grips with why there were differences in the cost of university and college delivery for students studying at the same SCQF level.

How did they think university higher education should be funded?

As noted in the earlier findings paper on equity and access, jurors were clear that higher education should continue to be taxpayer funded and free at the point of access for all students in Scotland, regardless of age, mode of study or family income. They understood the limitations of this in terms of the availability of public funding and the 'cap' it places on student numbers and were broadly accepting of this. Their discussions largely focused on undergraduate education, and while they identified potential inequalities from the current funding model for postgraduate access, they did not explore this in depth.

They were concerned about underfunding of the current free tuition policy, noting the impact on the sustainability of institutions and were frustrated that public funding in universities had declined in real terms over the last decade. However, they acknowledged that public resources were finite and, having already identified what they considered to be more pressing priorities for public investment, while some jurors would ideally have supported more public funding for universities, others felt that this was unrealistic given the sector's wider financial challenges.

Jurors also found it difficult to engage with scenarios for raising new investment in higher education in Scotland. They were clear that introducing fees, even for graduates, should be a 'last resort' and acknowledged that there was no simple, single solution to generating additional funds for higher education provision.

"We don't know enough about the taxation. I know I don't want it coming from other public sector budgets that are already struggling... I think they need to look at what they've already got within the budget... it's such a tricky area... it's just too complicated, I think, for us to even branch into." (Participant)

Based on what they had learned about universities' potential to generate income, some suggested that universities might need to do more to raise additional income to help address the funding gap. Others, drawing on their concerns about value for money, felt that universities would inevitably need to find more efficient ways of working, since all public services were facing similar financial pressures.

"The only real way we're going to get out of it is if we start working smarter and not harder, because we cannot magic the money up from somewhere else. We just need to get the money that we've got working harder for us...it's about getting smarter with what we've got." (Participant)

In discussing different scenarios for saving and spending, jurors were essentially faced with a choice between increasing the public funding that universities receive per student place, or universities reducing or contracting the provision available to learners. Although participants struggled with the idea of reducing what was offered - because they didn't want to limit opportunity or close off available routes - they generally accepted that, without additional public investment, the current delivery model would need to change.

“I think the second option [changing the ways universities deliver higher education] is far more realistic [than increasing public investment] because it's actually doable and sustainable. The first part [increasing public funding], not so much, because how do you generate that money?” (Participant)

The acceptability of university contraction was dependent on how this would work in practice, with certain approaches seen as more appealing than others (as discussed in detail below). But overall, jurors felt that reforming the university model was worth exploring as a means of reducing costs, and that it was probably a more achievable goal than seeking additional public investment for universities. Jurors acknowledged the implications that changes to the delivery model might have for staff at universities, noting the potential job losses that might result. This was a concern, but was seen as an unfortunate but perhaps inevitable consequence that may need to be accepted in order to find savings.

“Everything you do is going to have some sort of negative effect somewhere, it's whether people can agree with that or live with it or just get made to live with it.” (Participant)

Throughout their deliberations, they discussed various ways in which reform to university delivery might happen – for example, reducing the length of degrees, the number of courses available, the number of government-funded places or through more significant changes to the shape and structure of institutions. Their views on these options ultimately fed into their principles, but they often reached into areas that went beyond the scope of the jury's considerations or the extent of their understanding owing to the complexity and limited transparency of university funding. As such, jurors were often left with unanswered questions about the practical implications of potential reforms.

How did views on universities inform the jury's principles?

Jurors' views on the challenges facing universities, and possible solutions, fed into their conclusions. In the final workshop, jurors reflected on their earlier discussions to develop a set of principles to inform debate and decision making about the future of higher education funding in Scotland. The full set of principles are detailed in the main citizens' jury report, but here we highlight the principle with most relevance to universities.

The jury concluded that:

For universities, the priority should be on reforming the higher education delivery model so that it is financially sustainable. The focus should be on reducing the costs of delivery rather than on additional public investment. This could be achieved by:

- a. Reducing the length of some full-time degrees, from four to three years.**
- b. Delivering more learning online.**
- c. Reducing the number of courses offered at universities*

This jury started with only the first two sentences of the principle, which on their own were only marginally supported (10 supported, 3 opposed, 6 were undecided). There were a high number of undecided jurors who explained that the level of support for reforming universities' delivery model would be dependent on how it would be delivered in practice.

"I think it depends how it's implemented... it could be good, but it could be terrible...For example, if the universities were going to reduce the amount of courses they offer, I actually think that could be a good thing... but if they just cut down the places and teach those courses badly, that would obviously be another disaster. So, I think we need to know more details." (Participant)

As such, the jury agreed to expand the principle by adding a series of possible actions. Participants were not all aligned and so they were asked to vote on each of the potential ways in which delivery might be changed, with only those attracting majority support being included in the final principle.

Jurors were generally supportive of the principle when **"reducing the length of some degree courses, from four to three years"** was included (13 supported, 4 opposed, 2 were undecided). There was a sense that reducing course length to three years could work in practice, since degrees are already shorter in other parts of the UK. It was felt that reducing the time students spend at university would reduce the level of debt they accumulate and allow them to enter the workforce sooner and begin earning money. They felt that a shorter degree length would also help realise the wider societal benefits of education, for example graduates contributing to the economy as taxpayers, sooner.

"I think the students would benefit because they're able to go out and work, you know, instead of being stuck studying for longer. And then obviously the economy would benefit as well because then they're going into work, paying taxes." (Participant)

If such a reduction was to be put in place, it was felt that this could be restricted to certain degrees. For example, they discussed a hypothetical scenario in which a reduction in degree length would be applied to SHAPE (social sciences, humanities and the arts for people and economy) courses, while STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and vocational degrees would remain at four. Jurors saw the merit in this idea, as it would allow for some savings to be made while still acknowledging that some degrees might require a longer period.

"Reducing it for targeted courses would probably be the better, like [reducing] the ones that are already covered in three years elsewhere in the UK and could stand to go to three years. But the courses that need more [time] for practical experience, or more fieldwork, should stay at four." (Participant)

While they were generally supportive, jurors also noted the risks associated with reducing course length, including the potential reduction in income from fee-paying students from other parts of the UK. There was also some concern that squeezing degrees into fewer years could compromise quality. Support for degree lengths being reduced was therefore contingent on quality being maintained.

**"I would agree with this approach, as long as it doesn't mean people are missing out...so just reduce the duration but keep the quality of course."
(Participant)**

Jurors noted that the four-year degree in Scotland relates to how school education is delivered and that changing this might have implications for high school provision. In this context, another perceived drawback of reducing degree length was that it might restrict university access if it led to entry requirements being raised i.e. to require entrants to already have qualifications at SCQF Level 7 such as Advanced Highers that may not be available in all schools. Jurors therefore wanted to ensure, as with all changes, that they not impact on equitable access.

They were also supportive of reducing costs by **"delivering more learning online"** (16 supported, 1 opposed, 2 undecided). Jurors felt that this was a "straightforward" way of reducing costs, since universities had proven that they could deliver learning online during COVID-19. While some concerns had been raised in earlier sessions about online teaching potentially worsening the student experience, on balance the benefits of this approach were seen to outweigh this risk. As well as reducing the cost of university facilities, jurors also felt that delivering more learning online could reduce accommodation and transport costs for students, helping to ease cost-of-living pressures.

"We saw in Covid that it could work. And for [people on lower incomes], they wouldn't have to pay to travel. All they would have to do is get a computer, get a laptop and that could be provided through grants." (Participant)

Finally, they marginally supported the principle of **"reducing the number of courses offered at universities"** (11 supported, 5 opposed, 3 were undecided). It was felt that this would be acceptable if it prioritised those courses that were most directly careers-based and which were able to produce the graduates who could secure employment in the labour market.

"You could shrink them down and reduce the number of the courses a university has, [removing those] that are not essential. And if that solves the problem, then yeah, I think that is a better option [than raising additional public investment]" (Participant)

However, some jurors were concerned about this approach. Echoing the tension outlined in the earlier findings paper on purpose and value, some jurors stressed that degrees in subjects with less obvious routes into employment were still valuable and important to protect. Jurors also expressed concern that offering fewer courses might have unintended consequences by making universities less attractive to international students, therefore exacerbating the issue of declining income.

"I don't like the idea of reducing the number of courses. That just reduces how attractive a Uni is, and that would lower the income from foreign students." (Participant)

Jurors voted to reject two other suggested additions they had discussed to the principle. Despite their views on the need for efficiencies and their desire to see a rebalancing of funding in the system, the jury was reluctant to explicitly suggest that reform could be achieved by **“reducing the number of government-funded full-time traditional degree places at university”** (5 supported, 9 opposed, 5 undecided). This was strongly linked to their support for free higher education and their determination not to limit opportunity.

“I’m a great believer in meritocracy. If people have met the admission standard, they should get the opportunity”. (Participant)

This was one of the most prominent tensions that the jury grappled with – a desire for universal access to all forms of higher education in the face of limited public resources. Although in some of their principles they took a pragmatic approach to identifying priorities, they struggled with the idea that this might be at the expense of another aspect of delivery.

They were also concerned that explicitly calling for reduced places at university might lead to less investment in higher education overall with resulting impact on students including those from disadvantaged groups. In the case of all potential reforms, the jury wanted reassurance that any money saved would still be allocated towards enabling students to access higher education. Overall, jurors suggested it was difficult to consider this as a possible solution in abstract terms, saying that this would depend on the criteria used for setting caps on funded places, and how decisions were made.

Jurors also rejected adding **“merging institutions to reduce costs and create efficiencies, while protecting access especially in rural areas”** to the principle (8 supported, 3 opposed, 8 undecided). Although many participants could see the potential financial benefits of institutions sharing services or resources, many felt that they didn’t know enough about how mergers might look in practice. Some were also concerned, even with the caveat about access, about the potential closure of institutions and impacts on access. For example, there was a perception that any form of merging institutions would lead to reduction or even closure of some campuses which would increase geographical disparities.

“I wasn’t a great fan of merging institutions because I feel like it is a slippery slope...You’re making it harder for people to access, if the closest university is now further away.” (Participant)

“We’ve got to be careful with mergers because limiting geographically where people can study certain courses seems like a fairly huge problem. If the only university that offers [for example] STEM subjects is at Glasgow, and if you’re from the Northwest, you would have to leave home [to study].” (Participant)

Conclusion

Universities were recognised by the jury as a vital part of the higher education sector, with the potential to provide both individual and wider societal benefits. Jurors were concerned to learn that public funding for universities had not kept pace with inflation and that the current funding model had become increasingly precarious, particularly because of its reliance on international student income at a time when those numbers were falling. They recognised the risks this posed for the sustainability of universities and for the quality and extent of the provision available to students. At the same time, they were clear that higher education should remain taxpayer funded and free at the point of access and were reluctant to see opportunities reduced by limiting the offer available to learners.

Their views on university funding were shaped by their wider belief in higher education as a route to opportunity and secure work. In the context of finite public resources and competing pressures elsewhere in the system, and with some doubts about the value being achieved from existing public investment in universities, jurors ultimately felt that universities would need to adapt how they deliver higher education and make better use of the funding they already receive, rather than rely on increased public investment. This created a tension between their desire to protect opportunity and the financial realities facing the sector.

In considering options for change, jurors emphasised that maintaining the quality of learning and teaching must remain the priority, and that any reforms should avoid creating new barriers for learners. At the same time, the complexity and lack of clarity of current university funding and delivery models meant that jurors did not always feel able to fully understand the costs of provision or how financial decisions were made. This left them with unanswered questions about what specific reforms might involve, even as they accepted that some form of change would be necessary.

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, the **findings paper on equity and access**, published on 6 May 2026, and the **findings paper on pathways**, published on 18th May. 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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