

# Priorities for higher education funding in Scotland: findings from a citizens' jury

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# Executive summary

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 purpose and value 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 citizens' jury was designed and facilitated by Ipsos on behalf of CEF.

## Aims

The citizens' jury aimed to explore the public's views on the future of higher education funding in Scotland. The research had two overarching aims:

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

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

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

## Methodology

The jury of 19 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 they were introduced to the higher education landscape in Scotland and some of the challenges it faces. They were shown videos explaining key topics and heard presentations, delivered live by expert speakers, designed to provide more detailed information and perspectives on chosen topics. The learning phase was followed by two sessions dedicated to the jury's discussion and deliberation, before a final conclusion-forming session.

## Key findings

As they progressed through the citizens' jury, participants learned, deliberated, and reached informed views on how higher education funding in Scotland should be prioritised. In doing so, participants also explored several related themes including: the purpose and value of higher education, equity of access and opportunity, higher education pathways, and the role of Scotland's universities. Key findings on those themes, and how they developed over the deliberative process, are summarised below.

- **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.
- **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.
- **Jurors acknowledged the value of all higher education pathways but gradually began to question the balance of funding between them.** As they learned about current funding models, financial challenges, and graduate outcomes, jurors' initial views on the importance of vocational and work-based learning were strengthened. They felt that current funding

arrangements appeared to place greater emphasis on traditional degree pathways, and that this imbalance should be considered in future decisions about investment.

- **Jurors felt strongly that additional investment in Scotland's colleges was needed to unlock outcomes in current circumstances** but struggled to identify where this funding should come from. They were wary of diverting resources away from traditional university pathways, recognising that any shift in funding would have consequences for learners. This left them grappling with how the current funding environment creates difficult trade-offs between what they felt needed to be prioritised now and their desire not to limit future opportunity.
- **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.

## The jury's principles

As an output the jurors were asked to develop a set of principles for higher education funding which could be shared with any incoming Scottish Government to inform decisions about funding reform and priorities for public spending.

Prior to the final workshop, the research team drew together a draft of the jury's principles, based on analysis of their deliberations over the previous workshops. During the final session, the participants were asked to review, discuss and refine these principles to ensure they best captured their views. As a diverse group, it was recognised that the jury's views would not be unanimous, and that, as a result, not all principles would be supported by everyone. To document this, the full set of edited principles were put to a vote at the end of the final session, with all participants sharing the extent to which they supported or opposed each one.

As a result, the jury ended with a set of firm principles that were broadly supported (i.e. by at least 13 out of 19, or over two thirds of, jurors) and two softer principles that had marginal support (i.e. from just over half of jurors). Principles that were supported by fewer than half of jurors were ultimately rejected.

The jury's principles are shown below. The firm principles are shown in **bold**. The two softer principles – which are both additional points/clarifications added to overarching principles – are shown in *italics*.

- 1. 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 what academic degrees are deprioritised should be made carefully.**
- 2. 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.*
- 3. 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.**
- 4. More public investment is urgently needed in higher education in Scotland's colleges to help deliver technical skills and widen access. This should come from reprioritisation of the Scottish Government budget and/or taxation.**
- 5. 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 degree courses, from 4 to 3 years.**
  - b. delivering more learning online.**
  - c. reducing the number of courses offered at universities.*
- 6. 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.**
- 7. More should be done to incentivise employer and industry investment in higher education.**

These principles provide a clear output from the citizens' jury, reflective of the policy context in place at the time. They are not intended as technical recommendations and should not be read as such. They are 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.

# 1 Introduction

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

This report presents the background to and the detailed findings from the citizens' jury.

## 1.1 Background

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

Although demand for higher education has continued to grow, government investment in universities and colleges has declined in real terms over the last decade<sup>1</sup>. Together with rising costs, this has put increasing pressure on institutional delivery models leading to urgent calls for reform to funding approaches to avoid institutional failure and maintain the quality and reach of provision<sup>2</sup>. At the centre of arguments about funding reform are questions about the long-term affordability of the Scottish Government's policy of 'free tuition' which promises funding for all full time, first-time undergraduates. The commitment ensures education remains free at the point of access and minimises student debt compared to other UK nations, but critics argue that it is no longer adequately resourced and that its operation is undermining its good intentions<sup>3</sup>.

For students accessing higher education, despite free tuition, rising living costs and constrained maintenance support mean that the affordability of study is reshaping the realities of participation<sup>4</sup>. For many learners, but particularly those from under resourced backgrounds, financial stress has become a defining feature of the student experience. Consequently, more students are choosing to live at home and must work alongside their studies with implications for retention, wellbeing and the accessibility of different pathways<sup>5</sup>. This has led to calls for changes to delivery and funding models to better reflect the needs of the diverse, modern student.

At the same time, overlaying this, a broader debate about the purpose and outcomes of higher education has been taking place. Scotland's economy is changing – the transition to net zero, the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/scottish-budget-higher-education-spending>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/202627budget/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.enlighten.scot/article/its-time-to-rethink-Scotlands-free-higher-education-system/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/literature-review-student-finance-wellbeing-study-scotland-2023-24/pages/6/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/more-school-leavers-living-at-home-for-university-and-college-study>

growth of advanced manufacturing and digital industries, and persistent shortages in key public-service professions have sharpened questions about whether its higher education system is delivering the skills the country needs, now and for the future<sup>6</sup>. Policymakers are grappling with difficult choices about whether – and how – to prioritise particular subjects, pathways, modes or types of provision. These are choices which carry implications, not only for institutions, but for learners, employers and communities across Scotland.

## 1.2 Why engage the public now?

The issues above have all been discussed frequently in political, government<sup>7</sup> and higher education<sup>8</sup> circles, and there appears to be broad agreement that funding reform is needed. The Scottish Government originally committed as part of its post-school reform programme to 'lead the development of a new funding model for all types of provision<sup>9</sup> but, more recently, has announced work to develop a 'Framework for the Sustainability and Success of Scotland's Universities.<sup>10</sup> However, there are differing views on the shape that reform should take, and discussions and deliberations are dominated by government officials, sector experts and university and business leaders.

Despite their role in funding higher education provision through taxes and as key beneficiaries of the system, there has, as yet, been no effort to engage the public or wider civic voices in discussions about its future. It is this gap that the citizens' jury has sought to fill. Previous survey research<sup>11</sup>, conducted in December 2024 by Ipsos, on behalf of CEF (as the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland) demonstrated the strength, breadth and complexity of public opinion on higher education access and funding. The citizens' jury provided the opportunity to dive deeper into these perspectives, to offer unique insights into the aspects of higher education funding that are most important to the public and to demonstrate how they would approach potential trade-offs or difficult choices that may need to be made when deciding on future funding approaches.

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

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/fit-future-developing-post-school-learning-system-fuel-economic-transformation/documents/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/research-prepared-for-parliament/research-briefings/2026/2/24/sb-2612>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/publications/202627budget/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/post-school-education-research-skills-purpose-principles/documents/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/future-framework/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://carnegie-trust.org/public-perceptions-of-higher-education-funding/>

### 1.3 Aim and remit of the citizens' jury

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

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

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

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

The higher education landscape is complex, and it was a requirement of the research that there were clear parameters to the enquiry to provide adequate detail to encourage meaningful deliberation from the public while avoiding confusion. As such, for the purposes of the research higher education was defined as the provision of formal education at level SCQF 7<sup>12</sup> and above, outside of schools. This includes university degrees as well as some college and apprenticeship provision.

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

### 1.4 How to read this report

This report presents a detailed account of the citizens' jury process and findings. It starts with a description of the citizens' jury methodology, including what information was shared with participants and how their sessions together were structured. It then presents findings

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<sup>12</sup> Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, Level 7 <https://scqf.org.uk/interactive-framework/level-7/>

thematically, structured around the topics that emerged as central considerations in the jury's deliberations:

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

The jury's final principles are then explored in detail, including how they arrived at the principles and the reasoning behind their views in support or opposition to these.

The findings from the citizens' jury provide in-depth insights into how this group of participants responded to the topic, the conclusions they formed, and the reasoning and values underpinning their conclusions. The report refers to verbatim assertions by participants and their understanding of the issues. These are not intended as authoritative statements of facts, but they tell us something valuable about how key issues have been perceived and understood by members of the public.

While the group was designed to be broadly reflective of the Scottish population, their views cannot be interpreted as being statistically representative of the wider public. It should also be highlighted that the jury's deliberations were in response to the evidence and information they were provided through the videos, expert witnesses and Q&A responses (see [Appendix A](#) for an outline of each session). While every effort was made to ensure that the information provided was balanced, accurate and evidence based, there was naturally a limit to the amount of information that could be presented.

The principles that are outlined in this report provide a clear output from the citizens' jury, reflective of the policy context at the time. They are not intended as technical recommendations and should not be read as such. They are 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.

## 2 Methodology

This chapter provides a detailed description of the citizens' jury approach. Further detail related to the methodology (including what the participants did in each session) is provided in the [appendices](#).

### 2.1 What is a citizens' jury?

A citizens' jury brings together a small group of individuals, acting as a representative 'mini-public', to hear evidence, deliberate, and reach a conclusion on the research question. Originally developed by the Jefferson Centre (now the Centre for New Democratic Processes)<sup>13</sup> in the 1970s, citizens' juries are designed to facilitate informed discussions on often controversial, value-laden issues that may have important social implications.

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

As a complex topic with multiple converging challenges, a wide range of potential solutions, and different considerations and trade-offs, higher education funding was considered an ideal topic for a citizens' jury. A citizens' jury can help to explore and uncover the nuances of the Scottish public's views and provide a vehicle to share these with policy and decision-makers

### 2.2 Who took part in the jury?

Sampling and recruitment of the citizens' jury participants (or 'jurors') were conducted using a civic lottery method called sortition. This was carried out by the Sortition Foundation<sup>14</sup>, an organisation specialising in representative random sampling. The Sortition Foundation sent out 6,600 invitation letters to addresses across Scotland randomly selected from the Royal Mail Postcode Address File. Deprived areas were over-sampled to account for the lower response rates typically seen in these areas. Invitations were open for three weeks, collecting a total of 182 responses.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://cndp.us/about-us/how-we-work/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.sortitionfoundation.org/>

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

**Table 2.1: Profile of the citizens' jury**

Characteristic	Target number based on population (over-recruiting to 22)	Number in the final citizens' jury (of 19 participating)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	11	8
Female	11	10
Non-binary or other	0	1
<b>Age</b>		
18-24	4	3
25-34	5	5
35-54	8	7
55+	5	4
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Asian or Asian British	3	3
Black or African or Caribbean or Black British		
Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups		
Other ethnic group		
White Scottish/White British/White Other	19	16
<b>Disability</b>		
Yes, limited	4	2
Yes, not limited	2	2
No	16	15
<b>Education</b>		
No qualifications	1.5	0
Lower school qualifications (O Grade, Standard Grade or equivalent)	4	2
Upper school qualifications (Higher, A level or equivalent)	4	5
FE and sub-degree HE (HNC/HND or equivalent)	5	4
Degree level or above (Degree, Professional Qualification)	7.5	8
<b>Working status</b>		
Full time	10	7
Part time	3	2
Not working	3	6
Student	3	2
Retired	3	2
<b>Location</b>		
Central Scotland	3	2
Glasgow	3	4
Highlands and Islands	2.5	2
Lothian	3	3
Mid Scotland and Fife	2.5	3
North East Scotland	3	2
South Scotland	2.5	2
West Scotland	2.5	1

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

### 2.3 What did the jury do?

The citizens' jury was grounded in recognised industry best practice and followed key principles of deliberative engagement<sup>15</sup>.

Participants met online across six three-hour sessions held between late October and early December of 2025 (See Figure 2.1). Sessions were held online to enable participation from people who would not have been able to attend in-person sessions due to additional barriers related to travel, time, or other practicalities. In addition to the six workshops, participants also joined an online community, a private website functioning as a dedicated social network for participants to continue conversations, maintain engagement, and gather additional insights in between workshops. The online community also served as a space to compile materials from each workshop to allow participants to review the content in their own time.

**Figure 2.1: Citizens' jury workshop structure**



<sup>15</sup> [Deliberative Engagement Best Practice Guide | Ipsos](#)

(See [Appendix A](#) for a summary of the content of each workshop.)

## Learning phase

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

During each of the learning sessions, short videos summarising key topics were played. The videos were developed by CEF with input from sector representatives and experts and reviewed by the Ipsos research team. The aim of the videos was to provide short, accessible and engaging introductions to topics that would provide a baseline to help inform the jury's deliberations. They were intended to provide high-level information that did not require much debate, to give participants a sense of the shape of the sector and its challenges (e.g. "who delivers higher education in Scotland?" and "how is higher education in Scotland funded?").

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

After the videos and presentations, participants had a chance to discuss the information with one another in small breakout groups and reflect on what they had learned. In the breakout groups, participants agreed on any questions to ask the expert speakers which were then answered by the experts either during the session, or afterwards via a Question and Answer (Q&A) document that was shared with participants in the online community. The range of information materials, in the form of videos, presentations, group discussion, and the online community ensured learning was adapted to a variety of learning styles and that information was considered from multiple viewpoints

## Deliberation phase

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

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

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

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

## Conclusion-forming phase

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

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

## 2.4 Analysis approach

This report presents findings based on qualitative analysis, which is a rigorous approach for understanding the range of views held by the public and exploring how public priorities develop in response to deliberation on relevant information.

Analysis was ongoing throughout the jury as facilitators listened to participants' views and deliberations and distilled and reflected their findings back to them for consideration and confirmation. After each workshop, the research team met to capture the discussions taking place

within each breakout group and compile emergent findings to share with the jury. This process of iterative analysis was necessary to develop the content of later sessions, which built on earlier discussions held by participants, and was used particularly when developing the draft set of principles discussed with the jury during the final session.

The discussions within breakout groups and during workshops were also recorded, and once the jury had concluded, were transcribed to allow for in-depth thematic analysis. Analysis was carried out on both transcribed discussions and online community posts, allowing interpretation and conclusions to be clearly linked to the data.

## 3 The jury's starting point

A key aim at the outset of the jury was to capture participants' familiarity with and first impressions of higher education. 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.

This chapter summarises the jury's opening discussions, which covered their first impressions of higher education and how it is funded and their expectations from the citizens' jury process. Early views on specific aspects of higher education - including its value and purpose, equity and access, pathways, and universities - are explored in more detail in the subsequent chapters.

### 3.1 First impressions

In their first session together, when asked what came to mind when thinking of higher education in Scotland, the jury's unprompted responses were largely positive. They saw higher education as providing opportunity and the chance to progress in life. Some participants said they had personally benefitted from higher education, while others had seen positive impacts on others including family members. Universities, colleges and apprenticeships were all seen as playing their own roles and participants felt that it was important for people to have a choice of different routes through higher education.

"I think about higher education in terms of apprenticeships, university, college courses, and just finding that opportunity that's right for everybody." (Participant)

In these early discussions, free education was highlighted as a central facet of the current system and one of its strengths. Jurors felt that free university education afforded more individuals the opportunity to pursue higher education without being excluded by costs. In this respect, they felt the university funding system in Scotland compared favourably to that in England.

"My personal experience hasn't been in higher education...but I now work with people to help them get into education, and I think [free education] in Scotland is really beneficial." (Participant)

Early questions were raised about how financially sustainable the higher education sector was, with some participants having heard media reports of universities struggling financially. Reference was also made to student loans and the cost of living for university students living away from home, with some early concern raised about higher education being increasingly expensive. Jurors were keen to find out more about these issues and to discuss potential ways forward.

## 3.2 Expectations from the process

When asked what they expected from the citizens' jury process, participants were keen to learn more about higher education in Scotland. They wanted to understand more about how the funding system worked, to discuss any challenges that were facing the sector, and to help explore what possible solutions or ways forward might be. Some jurors suggested that the current funding model may not be sustainable and were keen to understand if that was the case and how that might be addressed.

"The system that is there, may not work forever. So I'd like to understand more about what system we have now, to what extent it does or doesn't work, and what could happen in future." (Participant)

Overall, participants were somewhat unsure of what to expect from the citizens' jury but were curious to learn. Some shared that they felt a sense of responsibility in their role as jurors, with the expectation that their views might help to inform decisions that would benefit wider society.

"The reason I joined (the jury) was to learn more about it and to have an input. Because I think we need to invest more in young people. It is quite a privileged thing to be part of actually." (Participant)

## 3.3 Information provided to jurors

Following these opening discussions, jurors were given introductory information about the Scottish higher education landscape, including short videos covering:

- Introduction to higher education in Scotland
- Who is involved in higher education delivery in Scotland
- Apprenticeships in Scotland
- How higher education in Scotland is funded.

In the first session they also heard two live presentations on the evolution of the system and the range of pathways available. These videos and presentations were designed to provide foundational information to support jurors with the subsequent stages of their learning and deliberation.

Over the next three sessions, jurors then heard from a range of expert speakers, including academics and sector representatives. These presentations introduced topics such as the financial pressures facing the sector, the risks to institutional sustainability, and the labour market challenges shaping graduate outcomes. Presentations included a range of perspectives, including those of universities, colleges, students and employers. Jurors were also provided with additional learning materials in between sessions, including a range of relevant reports and papers. Full details of the information they received are outlined in [Appendix A](#).

## 4 Purpose and value of higher education

This chapter focuses on participants' views on the purpose and value of higher education in Scotland including how their perspectives evolved during the process. 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.

### 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.

### 4.1 What were the jury's early views on purpose and value?

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.

## 4.2 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 change – 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.

Ultimately, jurors concluded that while they wanted higher education to remain a space for personal development and self-discovery, especially for young people, in a constrained financial environment public funding should first be directed towards more tangible outcomes. As they learned about the challenges facing the higher education sector, jurors increasingly focused on the need to protect opportunity, as it related to employment and financial security. 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 (see Chapter 8).

## 5 Equity and access

This chapter discusses participants' views on equity of access and opportunity in higher education in Scotland. Participants used a range of overlapping terms when discussing equity, including 'fairness', 'equality', 'accessibility' and 'inclusion'.

### 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.

### 5.1 What were the jury's early views on equity and access?

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 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)

## 5.2 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 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)

### 5.3 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." (Participant)

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 are explored further in Chapters 6 and 7.

- **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.

Ultimately, jurors concluded that there is no simple or singular solution to the current financial challenges facing higher education in Scotland. 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. How these views on equity, fairness and accessibility informed the jury's principles is explored in Chapter 8.

## 6 Higher education pathways

This chapter focuses on participants' views on the different pathways through which people progress into and through higher education, and how they considered funding should be prioritised across them.

### Key findings:

- **Jurors acknowledged the value of all higher education pathways but gradually began to question the balance of funding between them.** As they learned about current funding models, financial challenges, and graduate outcomes, jurors' initial views on the importance of vocational and work-based learning were strengthened. They felt that current funding arrangements appeared to place greater emphasis on traditional degree pathways, and that this imbalance should be considered in future decisions about investment.
- **Jurors felt strongly that additional investment in Scotland's colleges was needed to unlock outcomes in current circumstances** but struggled to identify where this funding should come from. They were wary of diverting resources away from traditional university pathways, recognising that any shift in funding would have consequences for learners. This left them grappling with how the current funding environment creates difficult trade-offs between what they felt needed to be prioritised now and their desire not to limit future opportunity.

### 6.1 What were the jury's early views on pathways?

In their first session, jurors learned about how higher education is delivered in Scotland through universities, colleges and apprenticeship providers. They were introduced to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and the different levels of qualifications available through academic and vocational learning at secondary schools, colleges, universities and through apprenticeships.

When asked for their initial views, jurors said they were surprised by the range of qualifications and pathways available. They welcomed the diversity of choice and felt that flexibility between routes was important, noting that some young people may be unsure about their future career path and others may want to change direction or retrain later in life. Pathways were also seen as offering opportunities for those who had not met their goals at school to continue their education and progress to university.

"I like the flexibility [the pathway] brings, especially for young people. It might not always be 100% clear what they want to do, what field they want to work in." (Participant)

During these early, unprompted discussions, it became clear that although the jurors valued all higher education pathways, they observed that university education is often held in higher regard by schools than college qualifications or apprenticeships. They felt that this may lead to a perception among students that attending university is the most valuable, and therefore the expected, pathway into higher education after high school.

"There's quite a push for kids to go to university, you know. I think it is seen as the goal and we need to move away from seeing university as a better place for people to go than perhaps going to college or into a trade." (Participant)

The jurors themselves felt strongly that vocational training and work-based learning – delivered through colleges, apprenticeships and some university programmes – are as important as academic study, and in some cases more valuable because they could provide learners with skills and expertise more directly linked to employment.

"From where I'm sitting, apprenticeships have to be the way forward. If most people have a graduate degree, you're useless [...] Because, [if you] go to interviews and [say], 'I've got five, six years' [experience] studying' they'll say, 'Well, we don't care. What work experience do you have? What work have you done in the industry?'" (Participant)

With their early focus on equity, access and opportunity, jurors highlighted the importance of higher education in colleges. They recognised their role in supporting learners with different learning styles or additional support needs and in offering opportunities to those who may face geographical, cost or travel barriers to accessing university, such as those living outside the central belt.

They also acknowledged college pathways' part in helping those who may not have obtained the qualifications required for direct entry to university, although they were surprised to learn that so many college students progress to university each year. They noted the strong links colleges have to their communities.

"Colleges are part of the community. I'm not saying universities aren't, but colleges are more part of the community [in rural areas]. And I think people with neurodivergent needs and accessibility needs and things like that are more likely to go to college than university because of the additional support they can get... But I just think it's a smaller stepping stone to reach for people with certain issues." (Participant)

Jurors also linked college higher education pathways to Scotland's future workforce needs, noting their role in the reskilling and upskilling of Scotland's workforce in sectors with changing technical demands.

"[Some] employees actually need to regularly get upskilled, you know, because their skills or learning [are] out of date. And, you know, it actually makes me realise how important colleges are." (Participant)

Apprenticeships, many of which are delivered through colleges, were similarly viewed as a valuable pathway for offering targeted, practical training and a direct route into employment.

"So many of your [high school graduates] are going through university and [not gaining any] work experience [...] So everybody's coming out with a degree, expecting to get a kind of middle management job, and we've probably got loads of those in Scotland. But maybe we'll need more folk who can make things." (Participant)

Jurors were surprised to learn about the range of apprenticeship programmes now available. While they were generally familiar with modern apprenticeships in traditional trades, many did not realise that apprenticeships also exist in areas such as sport, accountancy and engineering, or that graduate apprenticeships allow learners to earn degree-level qualifications while in paid employment.

"When I was younger, there were always apprentice joiners and apprentice plumbers, not apprenticeships in sports or other [subjects] [...] It's opened my eyes a bit now that I've heard that information." (Participant)

However, they were also surprised to learn that apprenticeships account for less than 10% of higher education participation in Scotland. Some felt this was possibly a reflection on how apprenticeships were perceived compared to other pathways, and lingering stigma around non-academic routes. Others queried whether it might relate to a lack of demand from employers.

"When I was growing up apprenticeships had a lot of stigma around them. It was the kind of thing where it was like [if] you're not academic enough to go to university you just go to an apprenticeship [...] I've always seen apprenticeships as a good thing and I'm shocked that only 10% of [people in higher education] are doing apprenticeships." (Participant)

Jurors were most familiar with traditional university degree pathways. In these early discussions, they said they saw universities as places where students could develop critical thinking, gain independence and improve their employment prospects. Some jurors were already aware of the financial pressures facing universities as a result of media coverage and had heard about, or experienced, the rising costs for students, particularly those living away from home. They were generally concerned about these financial pressures and their implications.

They were surprised to learn about the significant rise in higher education participation, particularly in universities, in recent decades and were concerned about the recent decline in international student numbers in Scotland, and what this might mean for Scottish students.

“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)

Jurors also noted that several colleges had turned into universities and questioned why that might be the case, and whether this contributed to perceptions of universities as “better” or of a higher status than colleges. This early observation later developed into a wider discussion about funding priorities as they learned more about different pathways.

## 6.2 How did their views evolve as they learned more?

As jurors progressed through the learning and deliberative process, they continued to develop and refine their views in relation to the role of different higher education pathways in a fair and sustainable funding system.

Jurors learned about the ways that universities, colleges and apprenticeships are currently funded, and some of the key challenges facing the sector. This included concerns about the financial sustainability of institutions, high student living costs and debt, equity and graduate outcomes and shifting economic and labour market needs.

Hearing about the challenges, jurors felt this reaffirmed their initial views on the importance of vocational qualifications and apprenticeships. These pathways were perceived as effective routes to securing better employment outcomes for individuals, and as such to deliver on higher education's purpose of creating opportunity and allowing people to progress into work. As a result, they began to speculate that more funding may be required for work-based and apprenticeship pathways.

“Universities are getting quite a lot of funding, quite a lot of spaces. Maybe opening up [more] choices to people where you can work and earn some money and still [...] be working towards a higher qualification is a good option for a lot of people. So I think maybe that balance [of funding] needs to be looked at.” (Participant)

Linked to this, jurors said they were concerned and even “shocked” to learn about the extent of the financial challenges currently facing colleges in Scotland. For example, they heard that current funding shortfalls could threaten long-term sustainability and lead to reduced numbers of student places, campus closures, and job losses. Jurors also learned that colleges receive around £2,500 less per student than universities in government funding and that, as with universities, this funding

has decreased over recent years. Reflecting their views on the importance of colleges in delivering vocational learning and apprenticeship programmes, there was a view among jurors that these pathways should be held in higher regard and receive more funding than they currently do.

“Clearly there needs to be more [funding] to support to colleges, particularly when they play such an important role in communities and in higher education.” (Participant)

With this in mind, jurors expressed views that the current balance of funding appeared to favour universities and that this was unfair towards other pathways. Some jurors went even further to say that public funding of universities should be less of a priority, suggesting that Scotland has an “over saturation of university graduates” alongside skills shortages which could best be filled by vocational education. In this context, there were views that apprenticeships and the retraining and upskilling opportunities offered by colleges were currently better aligned with the demands of Scotland’s economy and more valuable than academic degrees that are “less directly careers-based”.

“I don't think the balance is quite right because you clearly have too many graduates, who are not getting jobs, while at the same time there are not enough apprenticeships [in craft trades].” (Participant)

Participants’ interpretation of “careers-based” education tended to centre around jobs that they felt needed quite specific, practical, and “hands on” skills. This included healthcare, dentistry, engineering, accounting and tradespeople like electricians and builders. These were contrasted against other more “academic” types of learning, such as arts (e.g. drama, art, design) and humanities (e.g. classics) degrees. When faced with the challenge of how to prioritise funding, some jurors felt that the former were a more justifiable use of public funding as they could see a clearer route for learners to employment and to roles that society needs.

“I know someone who got a degree in colour and now works for a government department. You know, I'm not sure what you would do with a degree in colour, but if there was a funded place for someone to do engineering over colour, I would say fund the engineering because that's the skills we need.” (Participant)

Building on this, the presentations also raised questions for jurors about the differences in the status of universities and colleges and what this means for funding. This was one of the questions jurors directly asked of the experts in one of the sessions. They learned that, as part of the public sector, colleges do not have as much flexibility in how to raise their own income and are more reliant on government funding.

In contrast, universities can generate income through international and postgraduate student tuition fees, research and commercial activities such as consultancy. Reacting to this, the need

for additional funding or support was thought to be particularly important for colleges, since they are more reliant on government investment than universities, which have their own income-generating potential.

“One thing that stood out for me [from the presentations] was universities have got the capacity to bring in income, whereas colleges do not [...] And if [colleges] don't have the capacity to earn, then they should be given, I don't want to say more money, but at least [the capacity] to start earning money, to help support themselves.”  
(Participant)

Some jurors went further to question whether all universities were investing public funds effectively. Reflecting on information they had heard in the presentations, they asked why the cost of teaching a university student was so much higher than the equivalent cost of teaching a college student. Linked to their views on the perceived status of universities, they also questioned whether universities were spending more than colleges on salaries and facilities and, if so, whether this was justified.

“It would be interesting to see what funding is used for within universities, because I imagine some of it is prestige. You know, working for a prestigious university, you probably get paid a higher salary than a college lecturer just because of the name and the university's heraldry. And then...a lot of these universities are ancient and you know, they expand them, they have to maintain old listed buildings. How much money goes to that?” (Participant)

Overall, the evidence the jurors heard reinforced their initial views that pathways which combined learning with practical skills development are critical in delivering higher education's purpose of realising opportunity. As they learned more about the financial pressures facing the sector, they became increasingly concerned about the relative position of colleges and apprenticeships within the current funding system.

This led many to question whether the existing balance of investment reflects the pathways that are most closely aligned with Scotland's skills needs, and whether a fairer distribution of funding would place greater emphasis on work-based and college-based provision. These reflections provided a clear starting point for the jury's discussions about how funding should be prioritised across the higher education system.

### 6.3 What were the jury's views on funding priorities?

To further explore jurors' views on how higher education funding could be prioritised, they were asked to consider the merits of three hypothetical scenarios:

1. Increasing college funding to put them on a more sustainable footing;
2. Raising the cost per student that universities receive; and
3. Enhancing the number of apprenticeship places delivered by both colleges and universities.

These scenarios followed an earlier discussion about how additional investment for higher education might be raised and were intended, not as realistic or costed proposals, but as a way of sparking debate and exploring how jurors would choose to prioritise the allocation of any new funding if it became available. Their purpose was to surface the principles jurors felt should guide funding decisions, rather than to test preferences for specific policy choices. As such, they were designed to prompt reflection on priorities and trade-offs.

Across these discussions, jurors viewed strengthened investment in college qualifications and apprenticeship programmes more favourably than additional funding for universities, reflecting their broader perspectives on the need for greater parity between pathways and their concerns about graduate outcomes.

They were particularly concerned about the need for increased government investment in higher education in colleges because of the vital role they felt colleges played in providing fair access, vocational learning and employment opportunity. Having heard that colleges receive less government funding per student than universities do, jurors felt that additional funding for colleges would help to redress that imbalance.

“I'd like to see more funding go towards colleges and apprenticeships because I did a college course and I learned a lot from that... and people can do jobs just as well after doing a college course as a uni course. But [colleges] are underfunded compared to universities...it should be equal.” (Participant)

Jurors believed that improved funding could enable colleges to offer more places, improve facilities and protect campuses. Without additional investment, they worried about campus closures, reduced student places and knock-on effects on workplace skills shortages and on the number of students progressing to university through college routes. They also highlighted the wider community role of colleges, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds or with additional support needs.

“Colleges are core parts of communities, especially in more [deprived] areas. They're a jumping off platform for high school students as well. I think it's very important to remember that colleges aren't just used [to access university], they're also used for HNCs, HNDs [and] they're also used for life skills, like numeracy, literacy, that sort of stuff as well. So reducing that funding takes away [the] resources to teach those areas.” (Participant)

Jurors were also keen to see funding additional apprenticeship places delivered by both colleges and universities. Increasing the number of funded places was seen as an effective way to address some of the challenges facing Scotland's economy. By offering a "clear pathway" into employment, more apprenticeships could help address issues like graduate underemployment and workforce skill shortages. They also allow students to earn while learning, helping to alleviate the debt burden for students from low-income households.

"Apprenticeships are usually [carried out] with workplaces that have gaps that they need filled and [they're] delivering it through universities and vocational skills colleges. So it's probably the best of both worlds. It fills the labour gap and uses facilities that are already in place for courses that deliver exactly what the [country] needs." (Participant)

The jury also suggested that more government funding for apprenticeship and work-based learning routes might present an opportunity to increase investment from employers and businesses. It was thought that this may not impose such a significant financial burden on businesses and could ultimately benefit them by producing a pool of graduates equipped with the relevant skills needed to meet the demands of Scotland's businesses and economy.

"Why couldn't businesses do more? Why couldn't they fully fund places if they want [jobs] to be filled and if they want specific [skills] So, yeah, why not? [...] The money's got to come from somewhere. And if it's better that it doesn't come from the taxpayer when it could come from businesses with something to gain." (Participant)

Jurors did acknowledge that not providing any additional funding for students attending university could exacerbate the financial challenges facing them and that, in the context of no new investment being available, prioritising funding towards colleges and apprenticeships to "rebalance" the existing funding, could mean that resources were diverted from universities. They were concerned about the implications of this particularly for the current free tuition policy and fair access and, as throughout the process, they struggled with how to reconcile the limited resources available with what they ideally felt should be available for higher education students in Scotland. Throughout these discussions, jurors were clear that rebalancing funding would need to be handled carefully to avoid undermining the sustainability of any pathway.

However, the views given by the jury also reflected what they had heard about the different status of colleges and universities and their perception that universities had greater capacity to generate income from non-government sources.

“I think from what we learned, [universities have] got quite a lot of means to get more funding, whether it's overseas students or grants and, and things like that, compared to colleges. So, in my head, colleges are more of a priority than universities. You know, maybe [universities] could figure [it] out themselves rather than needing more funding from the public purse?” (Participant)

As noted in Chapter 5, the jurors discussed how, without increased government investment, approaches that would reform university delivery models might bring costs more in line with the funding available.

Ultimately, the jury suggested that a nuanced approach is required to higher education funding that ensures equitable support for all educational pathways in the long term, while addressing the immediate workforce needs of the country's economy in the short term. The unresolved tensions, particularly around the future role and funding of universities, are explored further in the next chapter and how their views on pathways informed their principles is explored in Chapter 8.

## 7 Scotland's universities

This chapter 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.

### 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.

### 7.1 What were the jury's early views on universities?

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 previous chapter, 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.

“It's probably the decline of international students...that surprised me. I thought that it would be increasing, I didn't think that there would be that decrease there.” (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 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.

## 7.2 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 Chapter 6 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.

### **7.3 How did they think higher education in universities should be funded?**

As noted in Chapter 5 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 (outlined in the next chapter), 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.

## 8 The jury's principles

### 8.1 How principles were developed

As an output, the jurors were asked to develop a set of principles for higher education funding which could be shared with any incoming Scottish Government to inform decisions about funding reform and priorities for public spending.

Prior to the final workshop, the research team drew together a draft of the jury's principles, based on analysis of their deliberations over the previous workshops. During the final session, the participants were asked to review, discuss and refine these principles to ensure they best captured their views. As a diverse group, it was recognised that the jury's views would not be unanimous, and that, as a result, not all principles would be supported by everyone. To document this, the full set of edited principles were put to a vote at the end of the final session, with all participants sharing the extent to which they supported or opposed each on.

Like any deliberative process, the jury worked within practical boundaries. Participants engaged seriously with the material, but the time available naturally limited the number and breadth of issues they could examine in depth. Within those parameters, however, the jury produced a set of principles that are informed, grounded, and reflective of a diverse group working through complex questions together.

The jury ended with a set of **firm principles** that were broadly supported (i.e. by at least 13 out of 19, or over two thirds of, jurors) and two *softer principles* that had marginal support (i.e. from just over half of jurors). Principles that were supported by fewer than half of jurors were ultimately rejected. The jury's principles, and the extent to which they ultimately supported or opposed them, are discussed below.

### 8.2 The jury's principles

#### Principle 1

**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 acknowledges the importance the jurors placed on vocational learning and training pathways which they saw as offering a more direct route into employment than traditional academic courses, employment being the chief way of ensuring higher education delivered on its purpose to deliver mobility and opportunity for all.

"From the discussions it's felt like a lot of courses aren't directly going to contribute [to the skills gap in Scotland]...People are just going to come out with a degree and aren't going to go into a job. So it'd be nice to see more focused learning and a more focused path[way] for people to go straight into a job." (Participant)

Jurors saw this principle 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.

## Principle 2

**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 statement (10 jurors supported, 7 opposed and 2 were undecided) and the jurors 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.

### Principle 3

**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.

### Principle 4

**More public investment is urgently needed in higher education in Scotland's colleges to help deliver technical skills and widen access. This should come from reprioritisation of the Scottish Government budget and taxation.**

Jurors were unanimous in their support for this principle (19 supported, none opposed) which directly addressed their views on the perceived importance of college education pathways in contributing to key higher education outcomes – employment, access and mobility – as well as the precarity of the current college finances.

"It's a pretty urgent [principle], I think, because colleges can't raise their own funds in the same way that universities can. And unless the government wants to turn around and change that, [colleges] do urgently need that public investment because they've got less options open to them." (Participant)

Given the financial challenges facing the system and the likelihood of decreasing public finances, jurors were encouraged when including principles calling for more investment, to also consider the source of that potential funding. Despite strong views that there was a need for more public investment in Scotland's colleges, in practice the jury found it challenging to identify potential sources for this funding. It was acknowledged that government and local authority budgets are already stretched, and colleges have little or no capacity to resolve these issues independently. There were concerns that reallocating funds from other struggling public services, such as the NHS or the police, could have knock-on negative consequences on these services.

"We're in a kind of catch 22 because [...] I don't want it coming from other public sector budgets that are already struggling, but that's how that statement reads." (Participant)

In the end, the jurors agreed to add **“This should come from reprioritisation of the Scottish Government budget and taxation”** to the principle. This was not as widely supported as the first part of the principle (15 supported, 1 opposed, 3 were undecided) with some jurors expressing reservations about the cost implications of increased general taxation on households and noting that it would be difficult to guarantee that the income raised from taxation would be directed towards higher education. There was some support for specific taxes on wealthy individuals and businesses and on “anti-social activities” such as gambling. When it came to reallocated funds from within the Scottish Government budget, the jury were unable to suggest any specific areas but held on to the idea that there would be inefficiencies in current budgeting.

“Is money being wasted on management bureaucracy, things that could be done ten times more efficiently? You know, streamlining [expenditure] would be a good thing.” (Participant)

## Principle 5

**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 degree courses, from 4 to 3 years.**
- b. delivering more learning online.**
- c. reducing the number of courses offered at universities.*

The 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 did 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 Chapter 4 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 ultimately voted to reject two other possible additions they had discussed to the principle (see section 8.3 below).

## Principle 6

**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 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)

## Principle 7

**More should be done to incentivise employer investment in higher education.**

Although the jury didn't discuss in detail how this might be achieved, they agreed unanimously that if the system were to be rebalanced to deliver more pathways directly focused on employment outcomes, as they were recommending, then employers should be in a position to contribute to that cost. This would benefit the student and the employer and take the pressure off struggling institutions. While they were not specific about how employer investment should work in practice, jurors felt that incentivising, rather than enforcing, businesses to contribute would be the fairest approach as it would take into account businesses' different financial circumstances.

"It is only incentivising, not forcing, any employer to contribute...if its something that a business can do. Bigger businesses could see a massive benefit [from investing]. And at least for the smaller businesses, they don't feel like they have to [contribute]." (Participant)

## 8.3 Principles that were ultimately rejected

### Suggested additions to Principle 5

The jury rejected two possible sub-clauses of Principle 5 on reforming how universities deliver higher education. 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)

### Additional principle

Despite some support, the jurors also narrowly decided against the following principle (8 supported, 9 opposed, 2 were undecided):

**If changes above are not enough to secure the sustainability of institutions and 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 earnings 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 earnings 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.

## 9 Reflections on the process and lessons

Beyond the conclusions reached by jurors, this citizens' jury process also provided the opportunity to reflect on and learn from this style of deliberative public engagement. This chapter summarises jurors' own reflections on taking part in the citizens' jury, when asked at the end of the final workshop, and what these reflections tell us about lessons for future deliberative research.

### 9.1 Participants' learning journey

Jurors generally began the process without knowing a great deal about the higher education sector or how it was funded. While they were aware of some aspects of this – particularly the Scottish Government's 'free tuition' policy – they were unclear about the different higher education pathways, how these were funded, and the challenges facing the system. Reflecting on the process in the final sessions, overall jurors felt they had learned a lot, and that they had been exposed to new and sometimes surprising information.

"It's been a big eye opener for me. I've learned a lot of things that I didn't really know." (Participant)

Participants felt they had learned more because of the information shared during and in between sessions (e.g. in the form of presentations from expert speakers and explainer videos played during the sessions) and noted that they had heard from a range of different perspectives. While they generally found the presentations informative and engaging, participants also noted that the volume of information delivered in each session was at times challenging to keep up with.

"I think we got a good broad range of perspectives from employers and universities, colleges and then someone on behalf of students. Yeah, I think that was really nice. I've certainly found it very interesting."  
(Participant)

"It has been mentally challenging for me to keep up with all the data, all the information." (Participant)

Jurors also said that they had learned from each other's varied opinions and felt that, as a group, they brought diverse perspectives. Hearing the views of those from different parts of Scotland, or from different backgrounds to their own, had helped participants to consider the issues from different points of view during the deliberations.

"I think the group's been really representative of different ages, people who are at university who have been at different times, people who have been at university or different forms of education a long time ago, and geographically. I think it's been good." (Participant)

"I'd say I found it really interesting and it's been quite good to hear, like, other people's perspectives as well... coming from the Central Belt, I think it was quite interesting to hear perspectives from people who live further north and in much more rural areas, which I probably, to be honest, haven't thought about." (Participant)

Some jurors shared that their views on some of the issues changed in response to hearing other jurors' perspectives, though they did not specify which issues these were.

"I've listened to everybody's views, and it has sometimes, you know, changed my opinion from thinking that [something] might be a way forward to something that doesn't work, for reasons somebody else has given." (Participant)

### Lessons for future engagement

Reflecting on this feedback from participants, and in keeping with broader principles of good participatory engagement, the following stand out as important aspects of the learning journey:

- **Providing a clear remit upfront** about what participants are being asked to achieve by the end of the process. In this case, it was explained from the beginning that the jury was working towards a set of principles for consideration when decisions are made about higher education funding in Scotland. It was also made clear that those principles were one part of a wider and ongoing debate around the future of the sector. Being clear about this end goal from the beginning was important in helping participants to navigate the process and to approach new and very detailed information.
- **Ensuring a range and balance of different perspectives** and presenting evidence and information in varied ways (i.e. not solely relying on one style of content presentation). As some jurors said they found the volume of information challenging, for future processes it worth considering the use of shorter and even more varied forms of information could have helped support more accessible learning.
- **Supporting participants through thoughtful facilitation.** At times, it was evident that jurors felt overwhelmed by the complexity of the challenges facing the higher education sector. In these instances, facilitators reminded participants that they were not expected to solve these complex issues – rather, to reflect on the information that had been presented and to discuss what they felt the most important priorities for the future were.

## 9.2 Style and format of sessions

Due to the volume of information that had to be provided to jurors during the learning stage, the first few sessions involved the sharing of a lot of new information. It was challenging to condense the level of detail and complexity into the short (no more than 5-minute) videos used in the initial sessions, but these were well-received by participants, who often said they had learned new information, and they provided a good platform for discussion. Across both the videos and the presentations, participants largely engaged well with the information they were provided with, asked questions, challenged, and referred back to what they had learned. However, as noted above, at times they did find the level of information in presentations or the detailed responses to their questions, challenging to take in, and at times it was difficult to retain the information shared in the presentations for the purpose of sharing views in break-out discussions.

The online workshops each lasted around three hours, with two 10-minute breaks. Jurors fed back that the sessions felt too long, and that it was challenging to maintain concentration for that length of time on screen, particularly during evening sessions taking place at the end of a workday. Some jurors felt that the discussion-based workshops (sessions 4-6) later in the process felt a bit more manageable, compared with the earlier workshops (sessions 1-3) that were focused more on learning. Jurors suggested that a higher number of slightly shorter sessions, e.g. two hours each, could improve the experience, though they recognised the potential challenges in terms of people committing to taking part in additional workshops.

"Three hours is quite hefty. In the last hour you do find yourself, your concentration flagging a wee bit." (Participant)

"I think maybe more sessions, like two hours long rather than three [would be better]. Because I think it's quite a lot, just because of the volume of information." (Participant)

One juror shared that they felt nervous about participating at the beginning of the process, but that they became more comfortable and found it easier to contribute as time went on. This serves as a reminder of the importance in taking the time to create a comfortable environment in which participants feel able to share their views. Generally, jurors appreciated the opportunity to take part and have their voices heard.

"I was quite sad that its' going to be the last one. I've thoroughly enjoyed it... it has been an education. It is a difficult subject. I feel glad, quite lucky that I've took part." (Participant)

"There's been a couple of us from up north as well to kind of speak up for the Highlands and Islands and Aberdeen, [it has been good] to be able to share those perspective as well." (Participant)

## Lessons for future engagement

Reflecting on the feedback from participants, lessons on the style and format of future deliberative engagement processes include:

- **Consider whether workshop length in an online setting can be kept under three hours**, to minimise burden and make sure that deliberation time is being used effectively. This would need careful consideration as it may result in additional sessions being required, which itself may pose a barrier to participation.
- **Consider ways of providing information in advance where the topics and setting allows.** Jurors were naturally limited in the extent to which they could recall the detail of presentations and videos. The online community was a useful platform for sharing materials in between workshops, including the presentation slides and information videos that had been used in the workshops, and was a useful way of allowing jurors to consolidate the information and process it in their own time. In future, it may be useful to consider making copies of the presentations available to participants in advance of the sessions so that they have something to directly refer to.

### 9.3 Expectations on outcomes

When asked about what they hoped for next from this process, participants hoped that their principles would be listened to and considered when decisions about higher education funding are made. Though they recognised that the issues they had discussed were complex, there was still hope that positive change to the funding of the higher education sector could be made.

“I think for me, that decisions going forward are kind of made with, I guess, the principles in mind, for fair access and all the rest.”  
(Participant)

“My hopes would be that, I guess, effectively, a workable solution is found.” (Participant)

However, there was also some concern that the findings would be used in a way that suited a certain political agenda.

“My concern, I suppose, is that, you know, often these things legislatively are in the hands of people who are politically motivated...rather than [motivated by] the greater good, as it were.”  
(Participant)

## Lessons for future engagement

Participants' reflections highlight the importance of feedback and the reporting of impacts, which are often highlighted<sup>1617</sup> as aspects of deliberative engagement and other participatory processes. In this citizens' jury, the principles were formed, refined and voted on openly with the jurors. Outputs from the process in the form of thematic findings papers have been published and the detailed findings in this report will be made available to jurors to ensure transparency in the process.

As a longer-term consideration, providing evidence of how, when, where and by whom the findings from the citizens' jury have been used to inform policy decisions, or have contributed to policy debate and discussions, will help to demonstrate the legitimacy of the process.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/knowledge-base/what-are-principles-effective-deliberative-public-engagement>

<sup>17</sup> <https://sciencewise.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Sciencewise-Quality-in-Public-Dialogue-August-2018.pdf>

# Our standards and accreditations

Ipsos' standards and accreditations provide our clients with the peace of mind that they can always depend on us to deliver reliable, sustainable findings. Our focus on quality and continuous improvement means we have embedded a "right first time" approach throughout our organisation.



## ISO 20252

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



## Market Research Society (MRS) Company Partnership

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



## ISO 9001

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



## ISO 27001

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



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

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



## HMG Cyber Essentials

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



## Fair Data

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

# For more information

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## About Ipsos Public Affairs

Ipsos Public Affairs works closely with national governments, local public services and the not-for-profit sector. Its c.275 research staff focus on public service and policy issues. Each has expertise in a particular part of the public sector, ensuring we have a detailed understanding of specific sectors and policy challenges. Combined with our methods and communications expertise, this helps ensure that our research makes a difference for decision makers and communities.

## About Carnegie Education Fund

Carnegie Education Fund is an independent charitable trust that was founded in 1901 as the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland (SC015600). It champions and drives equity of opportunity and outcome in Scotland's higher education system through grants for individuals facing financial barriers and research projects and partnerships which fill gaps in knowledge and highlight new perspectives on equity and success in higher education in Scotland.