

# **UK higher education**

## Public perceptions vs reality

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Faculty of Social Science and Public Policy

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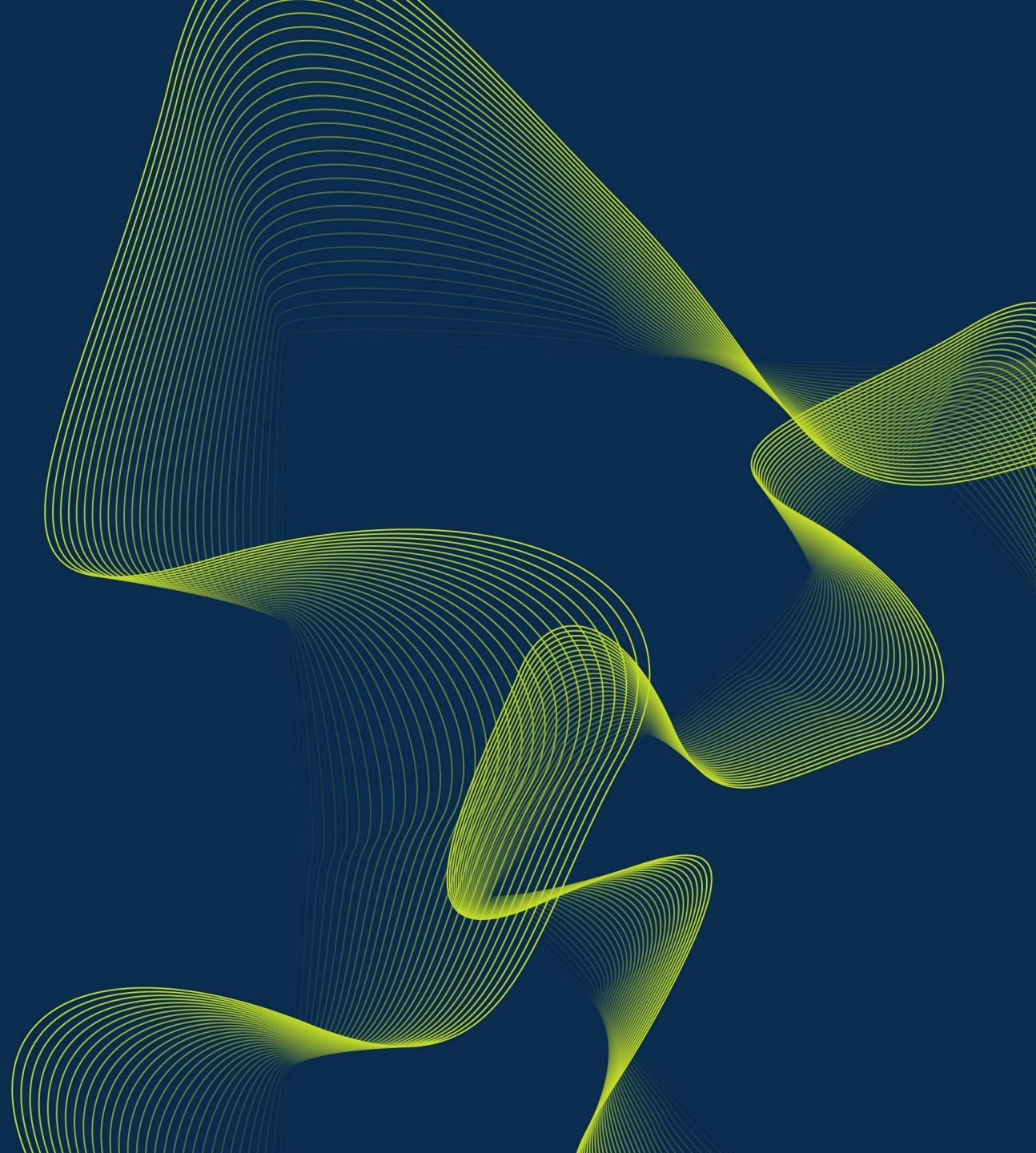
## About this study

This report examines the public's understanding and views of UK higher education, revealing significant gaps between perception and reality across key aspects of the sector. Through a major survey of over 2,000 people, we explore a range of issues including the scale and economic impact of higher education; understanding of fees, debt and earnings; the role of international students; university finances and sector risks; perceptions of graduate experiences and more.

Fieldwork for this report was conducted via Focaldata's in-house platform, with API integration to an online panel network. We surveyed a nationally representative sample of 2,082 adults aged 18+ across the UK, with data weighted by age, gender, region, ethnicity and education status. Fieldwork took place between 25 and 30 June 2025.

The report highlights where public perceptions align with or diverge from official data, revealing significant knowledge gaps about one of the UK's biggest exporters and historically most successful sectors, at a time when it is facing unprecedented challenges.

# Summary



# **Graduates are far more positive about their experience at university than people think, and feel far less burdened by the debt than many assume**

## **The public hugely overestimate how many graduates regret going to university**

- The public guess that 40% of graduates wouldn't go to university if they could choose again. The actual proportion who say this is only 8%.
- They also guess that 49% of graduates say their university debt has negatively impacted their lives. In fact, only 16% say this, rising slightly to 22% for graduates who started since 2012, under the current fee system.

## **The public have a more favourable view of universities than people imagine**

- The public guess that five in 10 people think a university education isn't worth the time and money it usually takes – but only three in 10 really hold this view.
- They also guess that only 57% see universities' research as essential for medical, technological and social innovations, when it's actually 74%.

# The public significantly underestimate higher education's contribution to the UK economy

## Few are aware that some universities generate revenues far greater than those of well-known businesses, including major football clubs

- The University of Manchester has an income which is close to equalling that of both Manchester United FC and Manchester City FC *combined*. But when asked to rank these and other organisations by income, the public put the university bottom.
- Only 6% correctly rank the University of Oxford top, despite its income of £2.9bn being more than £1bn higher than the second on the list, Greggs bakery chain.

## People rank higher education as the smallest exporter out of five key sectors, when it is in fact the biggest

- The public are more likely to think aircraft manufacturing and telecommunication services contribute more in exports – but higher education brings in a greater amount of money than both these sectors put together.

## The public underestimate just how many people work in higher education

- The public think Tesco employs more people than the higher education sector – but in reality the sector employs more than Tesco and its competitor Sainsbury's combined.

# People misunderstand student fees, loans and financial returns from university. Strikingly, *young graduates* are more wrong than the wider public on some key facts

## The public are very wrong about what's happened to student fees

- The tuition fee cap is today worth around 30% less than it was in 2012 – but only 17% of the public correctly recognise fees haven't kept up with inflation, while six in 10 think fees have either increased at the same rate or even faster.
- Although people know English students take on a lot of debt, they underestimate the true level by £10,000.
- People are split on whether England or the US has the graduates with the highest average tuition debt – the right answer is England, even if the debt is typically far less burdensome.

## Many misunderstand how student debt works, particularly young graduates themselves

- 35% of people wrongly think graduates must start paying back their student loan as soon as they get *any* paid job, rising to 58% of young graduates.
- And young graduates (50%) are almost twice as likely as the public overall (27%) to wrongly believe missing payments can lead to repossessions by the Student Loans Company.

## A significant minority wrongly think graduates will earn the same or even less than non-graduates

- More than a quarter of the public think graduates will earn the same (21%) or even less (7%) than non-graduates over their lifetime. This is despite forecasts that they will earn hundreds of thousands of pounds more, even after accounting for student loan repayments and delaying work due to their studies.

# **Most are aware that higher fees paid by overseas students boost university finances – but the amount of income these students generate is even greater than people think**

## **Most people recognise that international students financially support UK universities ...**

- 72% of the public correctly say that the higher fees UK universities receive from overseas students help support the finances of UK universities.

## **... but they underestimate the proportion of tuition fee income that comes from overseas students**

- These students generate around 45% of UK higher education providers' tuition fee income. But the public somewhat underestimate this, with their median guess being 32%.

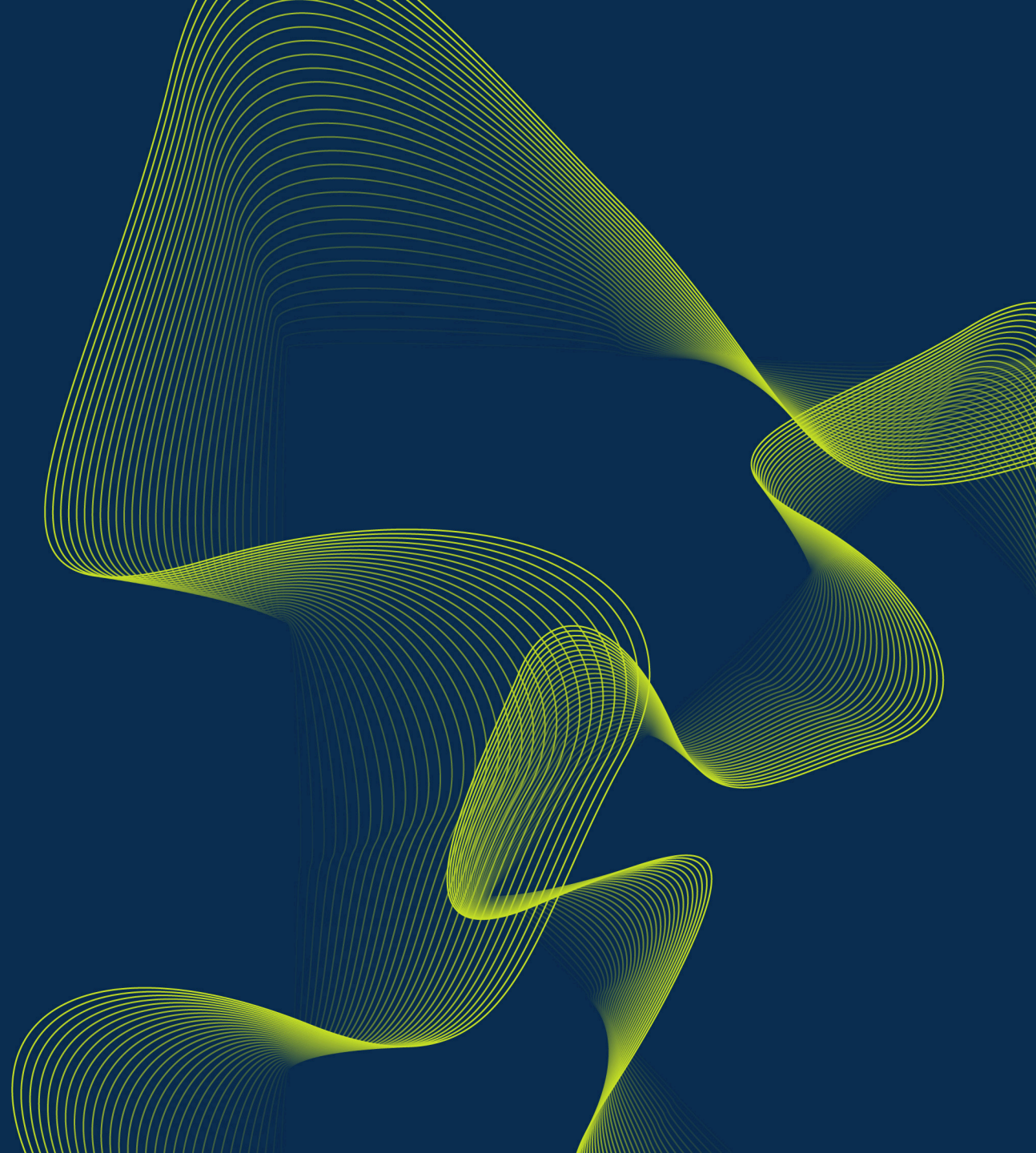
## **People guess that more international students remain in the UK than leave after their studies – but in fact it's the opposite**

- The public are most likely to guess that international students remain in the UK for work, three years after arriving – but in reality, a greater share have either left or are still studying by this point.

# 1. Scale of the sector

UK higher education is a big sector. It employs more people than Tesco and Sainsbury's combined, is one of the UK's biggest exports, and many universities have incomes that exceed those of England's biggest football clubs – in some cases up to around four times higher.

But the public are not aware of this. Even though the average guess about how many people go to university is about right, the public think of them as smaller entities than they really are, meaning they underestimate the sector's economic role, including as a leading export sector.



# Only 6% correctly rank the University of Oxford as having the highest revenue out of a list of organisations including Manchester United and Manchester City

Which one of the following do you think had the **highest revenue** in 2022/23? Revenue is the total amount of income generated by the organisation

	■ First choice	■ Second choice*	Actual rank	2022/3 revenue (£m)
Manchester United Football Club	29%	22%	6	£649
Manchester City Football Club	24%	23%	5	£718
Greggs bakery chain	15%	12%	2	£1,810
The Daily Mail and General Trust	9%	13%	4	£997
University of Oxford	6%	8%	1	£2,925
MoneySupermarket.com	4%	5%	7	£432
University of Manchester	2%	4%	3	£1,345
Don't know	14%			

Correct answer

53% incorrectly guess that either Manchester City or Manchester United Football Club rank top of this list in terms of annual income. In fact, both rank towards the bottom.

Only 6% correctly choose the University of Oxford, and only 14% put it in their top two, despite its income of £2.9bn being more than £1bn higher than the second on this list, Greggs bakery chain.

While people overestimate football clubs' revenue, they also hugely underestimate those of universities, with the University of Manchester least likely to be ranked top, while actually coming third and having a revenue double the size of Manchester United's.

\*To give respondents a greater a chance of making an accurate guess, on some questions they were asked to make additional choice.  
Base: 2,082 respondents age 18+, surveyed 25–30 June 2025

# And Manchester University is the second most common guess for *lowest* revenue – despite having an income nearly equal to that of Manchester United and Manchester City combined

Which one of the following do you think had the **lowest** revenue in 2022/23? Revenue is the total amount of income generated by the organisation

		Actual rank	2022/3 revenue (£m)
MoneySupermarket.com	21%	7	£432
University of Manchester	18%	3	£1,345
Greggs bakery chain	15%	2	£1,810
The Daily Mail and General Trust	13%	4	£997
University of Oxford	10%	1	£2,925
Manchester United Football Club	5%	6	£649
Manchester City Football Club	5%	5	£718
Don't know	13%		

Correct answer

# By educating overseas students, higher education generates more than double the exports for the UK economy than any other sector on this list. But only 14% rank it top

Which one of the following sectors do you think contributed **most** to UK exports in 2023? That is, which bring the most money into the UK from selling their services to people and businesses based overseas?

		Actual rank	Exports (£bn)
Aircraft manufacturing	32%	2	£11.8
Telecommunication services	22%	4	£8.8
Higher education	14%	1	£24.6
Accountancy services	10%	5	£3.9
Legal services	9%	3	£9.5
Don't know	13%		

Correct answer

Higher education generates significant exports via fees charged to overseas students, amounting to £24.6bn in 2023 and making it one of the UK's largest export sectors.

Only 14% of people correctly rank it top from a list of five sectors, despite none of the other sectors generating even half as much in exports.

Those aged 18 to 24 (22%) are more than twice as likely to select the correct answer than those aged 65+ (9%).

# In fact, when the public are asked which sector contributes the *least* to UK exports, higher education is the most common answer – despite it being the sector that brings in the most

Which one of the following sectors do you think contributed **least** to UK exports in 2023? That is, which bring the most money into the UK from selling their services to people and businesses based overseas?

		Actual rank	Contribution (£bn)
Higher education	23%	1	£24.6
Legal services	20%	3	£9.5
Accountancy services	18%	5	£3.9
Aircraft manufacturing	14%	2	£11.8
Telecommunication services	12%	4	£8.8
Don't know	13%		

Correct answer

# The public have a fairly good sense of how many people are employed in different sectors – but they still underestimate how many work in higher education...

Which one do you think had the **highest** number of employees in the UK in 2022/23?

	1st choice	2nd choice	3rd choice	Actual rank	Employees (thousand)
The NHS	62%	11%	7%	1	1,800
Tesco	11%	24%	18%	3	330
Higher education sector	4%	19%	12%	2	510
The car manufacturing industry	6%	13%	12%	4	198
Sainsbury's	3%	9%	19%	5	148
The aerospace sector	3%	7%	8%	6	108
The steel industry	3%	4%	7%	8	37
The civil nuclear industry	4%	6%	12%	7	77
Don't know	6%				

Correct answer

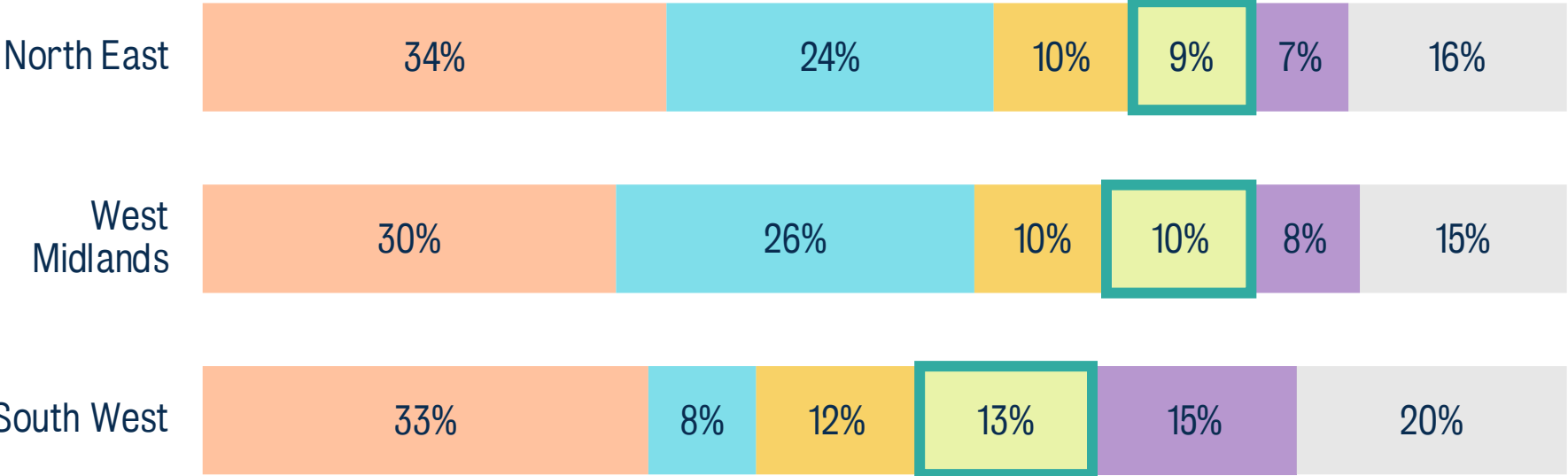
35% of people rank higher education as one of the top three biggest employers in the UK from this list of key sectors, while only 23% correctly put it in the top two.

Notably, the public think Tesco employs more people than the higher education sector – but in reality the sector employs more than Tesco and its competitor Sainsbury's combined.

# ...especially in regions associated with vehicle manufacturing

Which one of these sectors do you think employed the most people in each of the following regions of the UK in 2023?

- Cleaning activities, including cleaning of offices, streets, factories, trains and buses, as well as specialised cleaning and waste disposal
- Manufacture of aircraft and spacecraft and related machinery
- Accounting, bookkeeping, auditing activities and tax consulting
- Manufacture of motor vehicles
- Higher education
- Don't know



Correct answer

The public are least likely to guess that higher education is the largest employer in the North East and West Midlands – the two regions where vehicle manufacturing is thought to employ the most people.

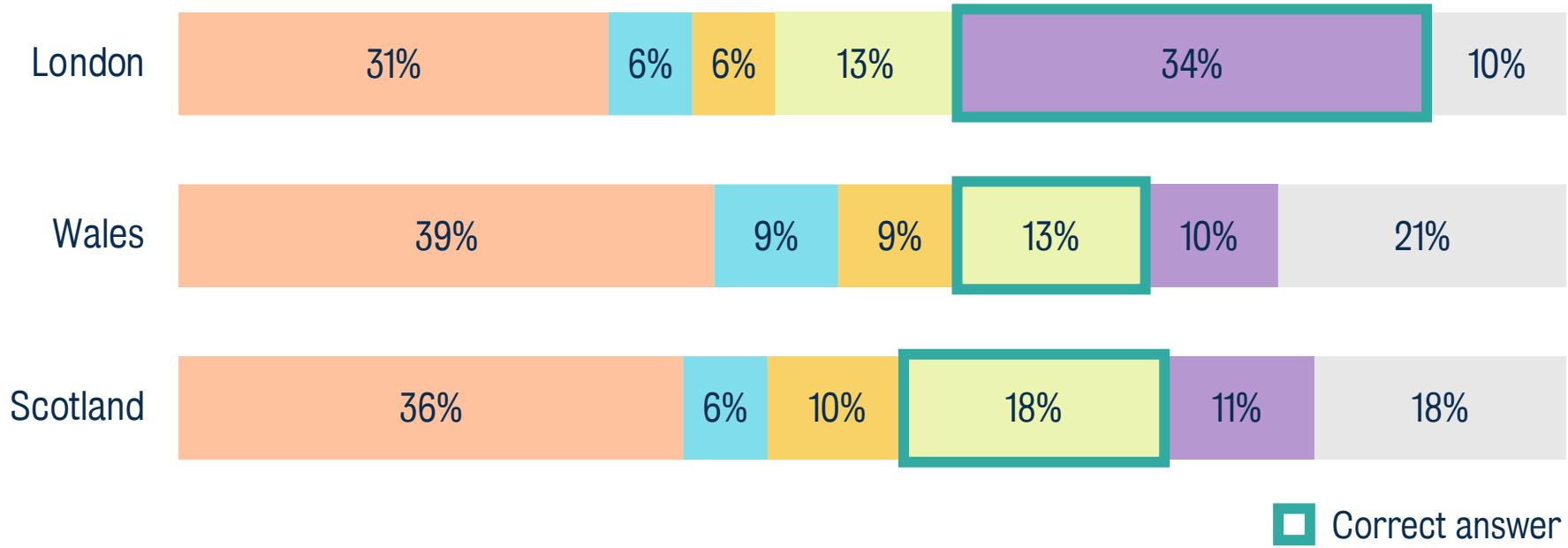
In fact, higher education (23,000 people) employs nearly eight times as many as motor vehicle manufacturing (3,000 people) in the North East.

Higher education also employs the most people in the West Midlands and the South West.

# The public only correctly guess the sector that employs the most people in London, where accounting and related professions come top

Which one of these sectors do you think employed the most people in each of the following regions of the UK in 2023?

- Cleaning activities, including cleaning of offices, streets, factories, trains and buses, as well as specialised cleaning and waste disposal
- Manufacture of aircraft and spacecraft and related machinery
- Accounting, bookkeeping, auditing activities and tax consulting
- Manufacture of motor vehicles
- Higher education
- Don't know



London is the only region for which the UK public correctly identify the biggest employer – accounting and related work, which employs 127,000. This compares with 102,000 employed in cleaning and 97,000 in higher education.

Higher education is the biggest employer as a proportion of the total workforce in Scotland (55,000 people). 18% of the UK public get this right – the greatest share who select higher education as the top employer for any region included. But despite this, twice as many people still select cleaning (36%), which employs far fewer people (36,000) in Scotland.

# The public correctly guess how many 30-year-olds have a degree – around four in 10. People with a negative view of universities tend to guess lower

## Split sample A

What percentage of people in England who turned 30 in 2022/23 do you think have started\* or achieved an **undergraduate degree**?

Median guess

40%

Correct answer

38%

## Split sample B

What percentage of people in England who turned 30 in 2022/23 do you think have started\* or achieved a **higher education qualification**?

40%

46%

When asked to guess what percentage of 30-year-olds in England have a degree-level education, the public are very accurate, guessing 40% compared to the correct answer of 38%.

People are slightly less accurate when the question asks how many have *any* higher education qualification. The average guess is the same – 40%. But the correct answer in this case is 46%, as it includes a wider range of qualifications than just a degree.

People who say they have a negative view of universities are less accurate, giving lower guesses of 30% for an undergraduate and 33% for any higher education qualification.

\*People are counted as starting their course after they have been enrolled for at least 6 months.

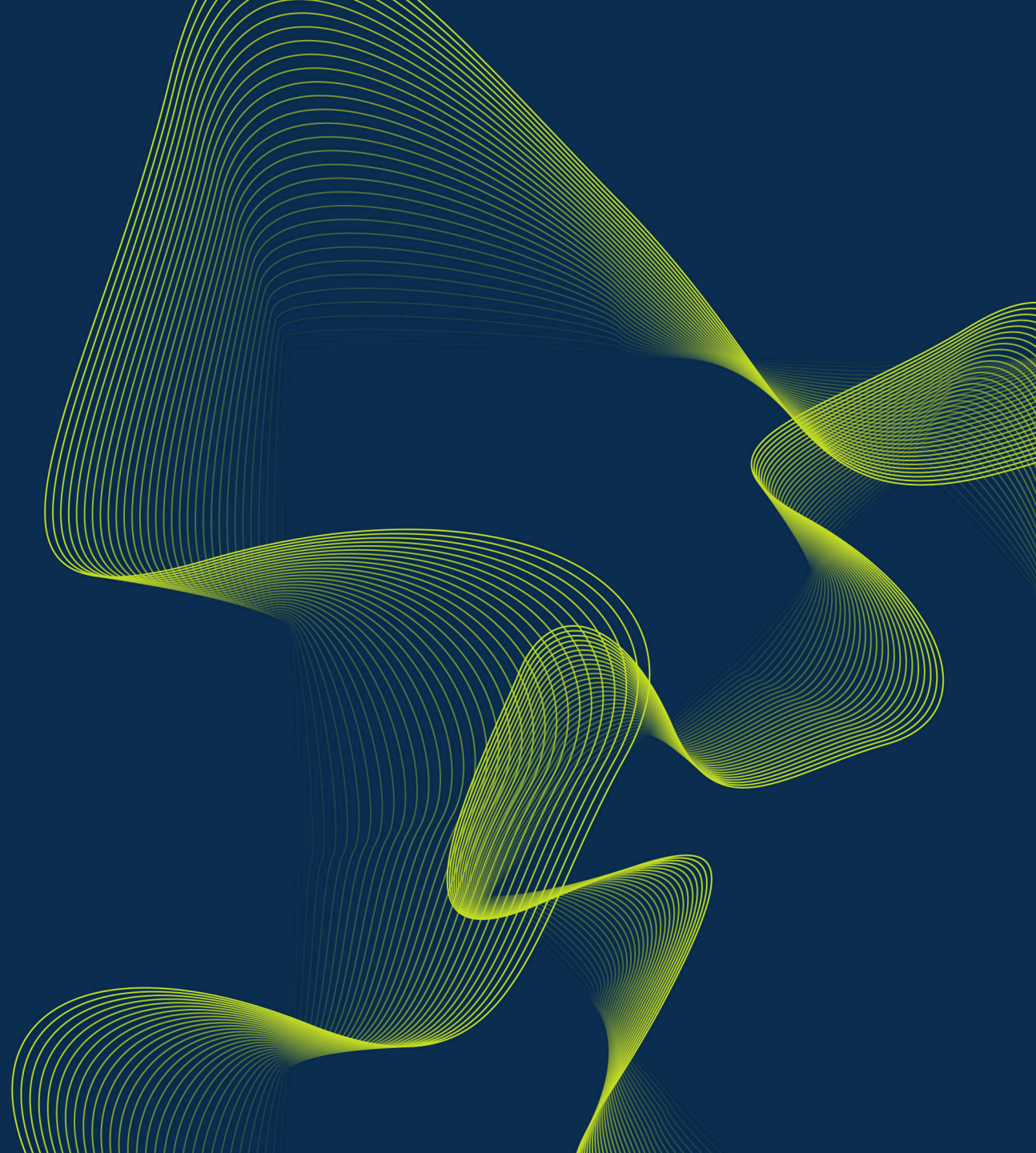
## 2. Student fees, debt and financial returns

The public are very wrong about what's happened to student fees, with only a small minority recognising they have gone up by less than inflation.

Most know that students take on a lot of debt, although they underestimate how much by around £10,000.

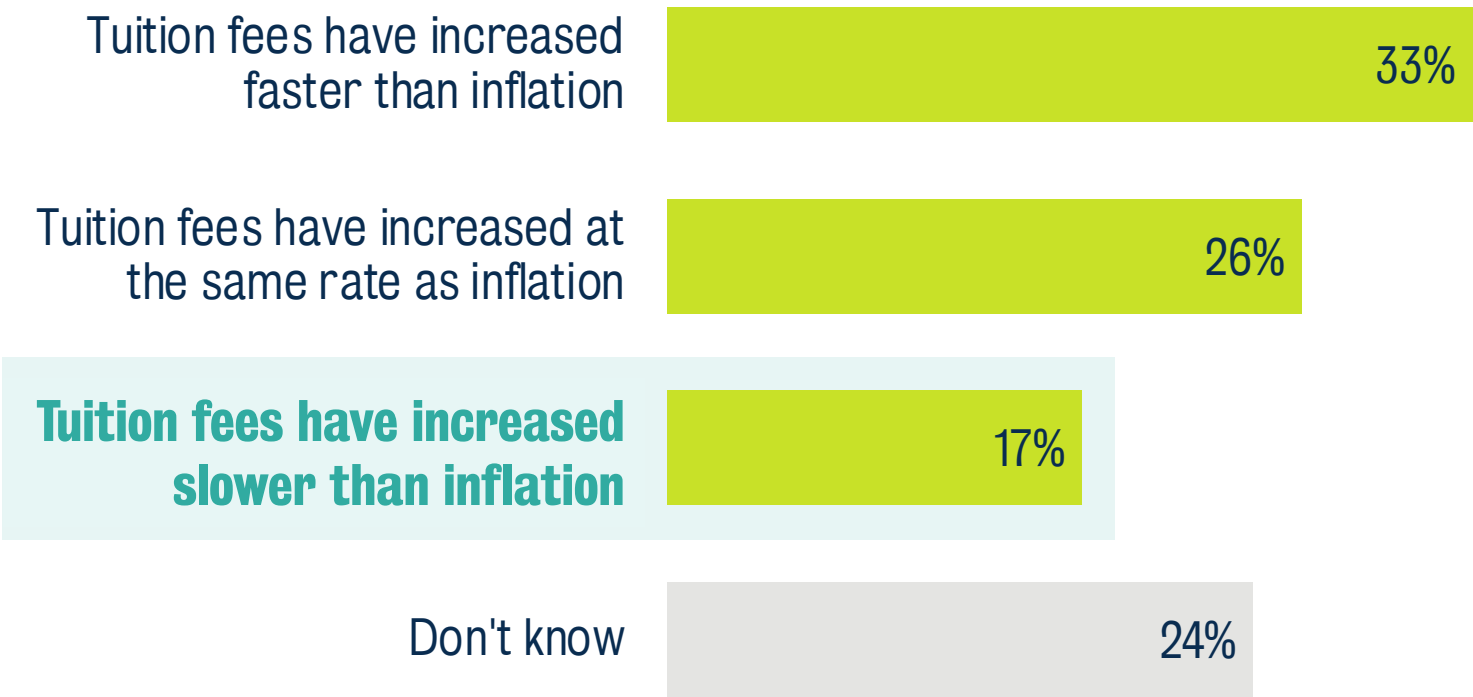
There is widespread misunderstanding about tuition fees and how student debt works – with young graduates actually more likely to be wrong than the general public.

The public also tend to significantly underestimate the expected financial benefits of going to university.



# Only 17% of the public are aware tuition fees have increased slower than inflation since 2012

Since 2012, the UK government has set a cap on the amount that English universities can charge in tuition fees for domestic students. How do you think this fee cap has changed compared to inflation?



Correct answer

In 2012, the tuition fee cap in England increased from £3,375 to £9,000. But since then, it has only increased by a further £250.

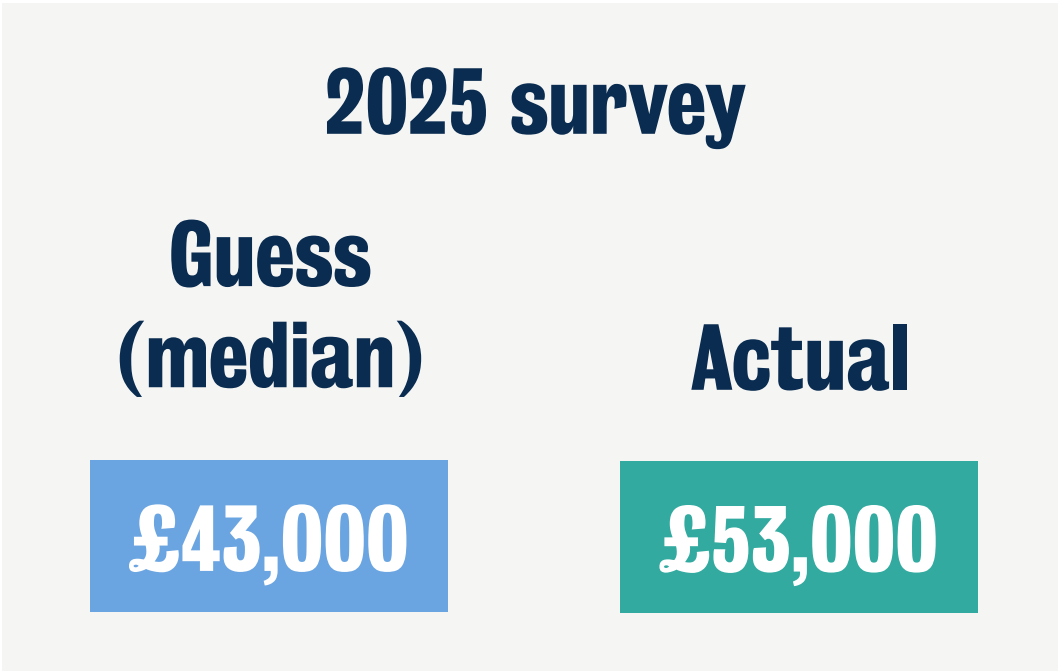
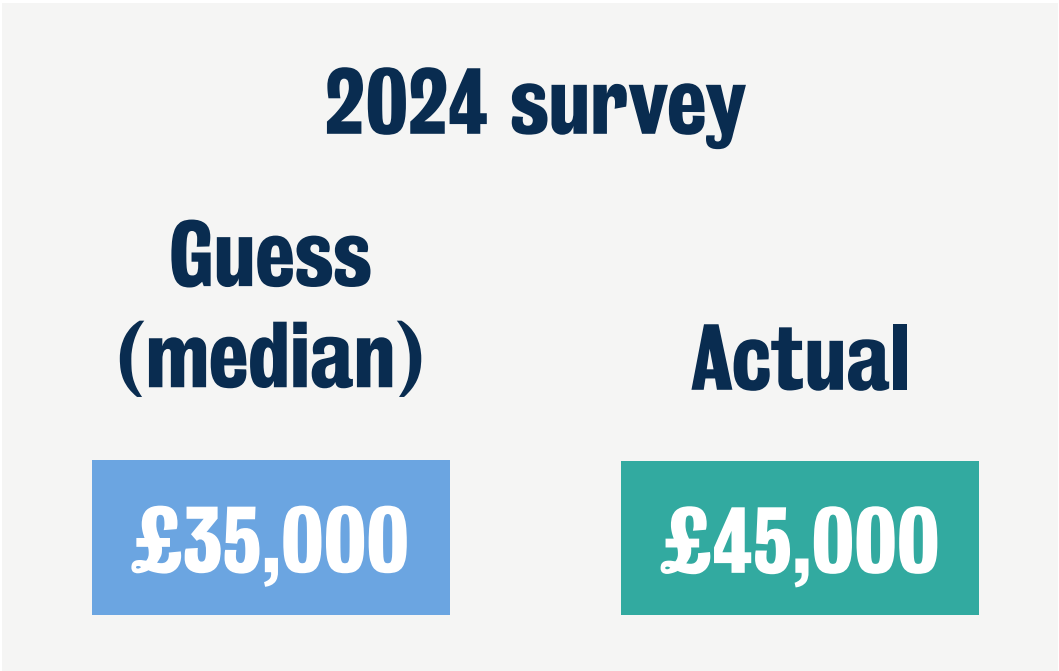
If fees had risen in line with inflation since 2012, they would have increased by more than 10 times this amount by the 2024/25 academic year – by around £3,000.

However, only 17% of the public correctly identify that tuition fees have risen slower than inflation, with the biggest share – 33% – believing they have in fact risen *faster* than inflation.

While student debt levels have increased significantly since 2012, this is due to living cost loans, and not due to fees.

# The public know that English students take on a lot of debt, but underestimate just how much by £10,000 – just as they did when asked in 2024

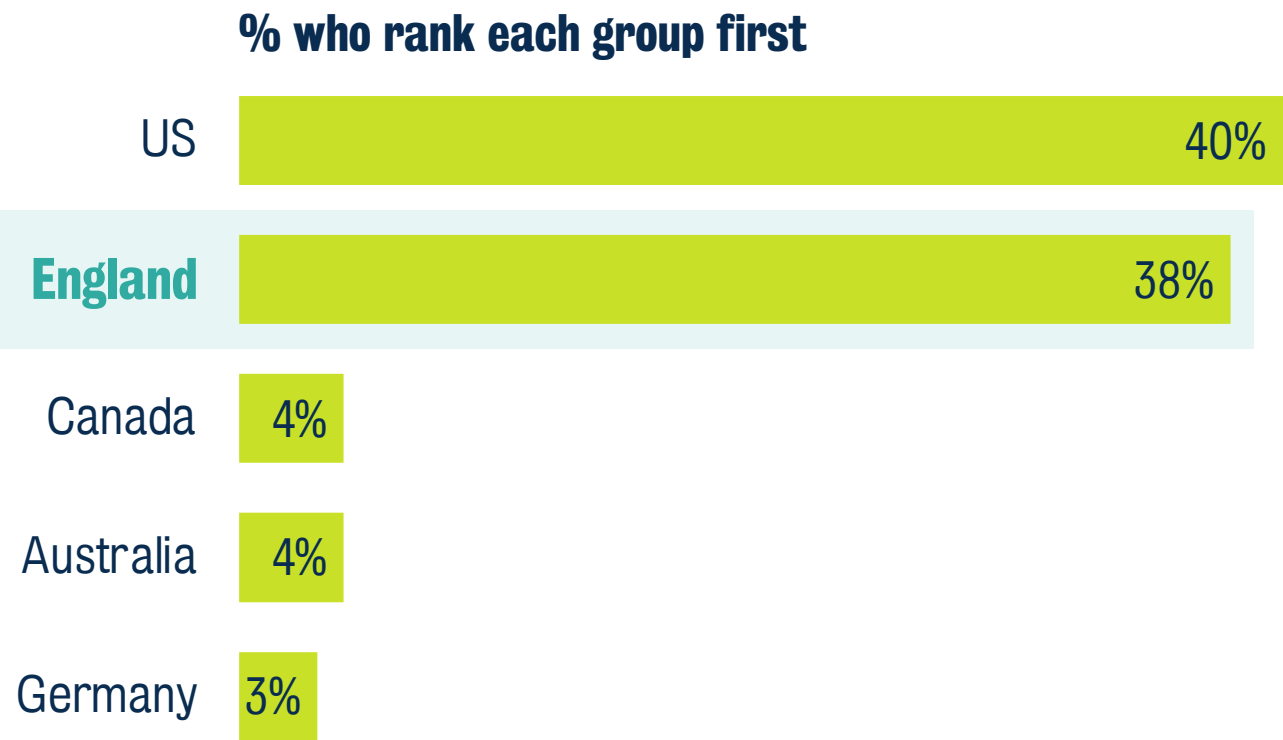
Which of the following do you think is closest to the total amount of debt, including fees and living costs, that an English undergraduate student, graduating from an English university in 2024 would have accrued over the course of their degree?



Note the 2025 and 2024 surveys are not exact comparisons as the response options provided were not identical.

# People are split on whether England or the US has the graduates with the highest average tuition debt – the right answer is England, even if the debt is typically far less burdensome

We'd now like you to think about the costs of going to university. Please rank the following countries from highest to lowest average student debt from university tuition fees. Put the country where students graduate with the most tuition fee debt first, and the country where students have the least tuition fee debt last.



Correct answer

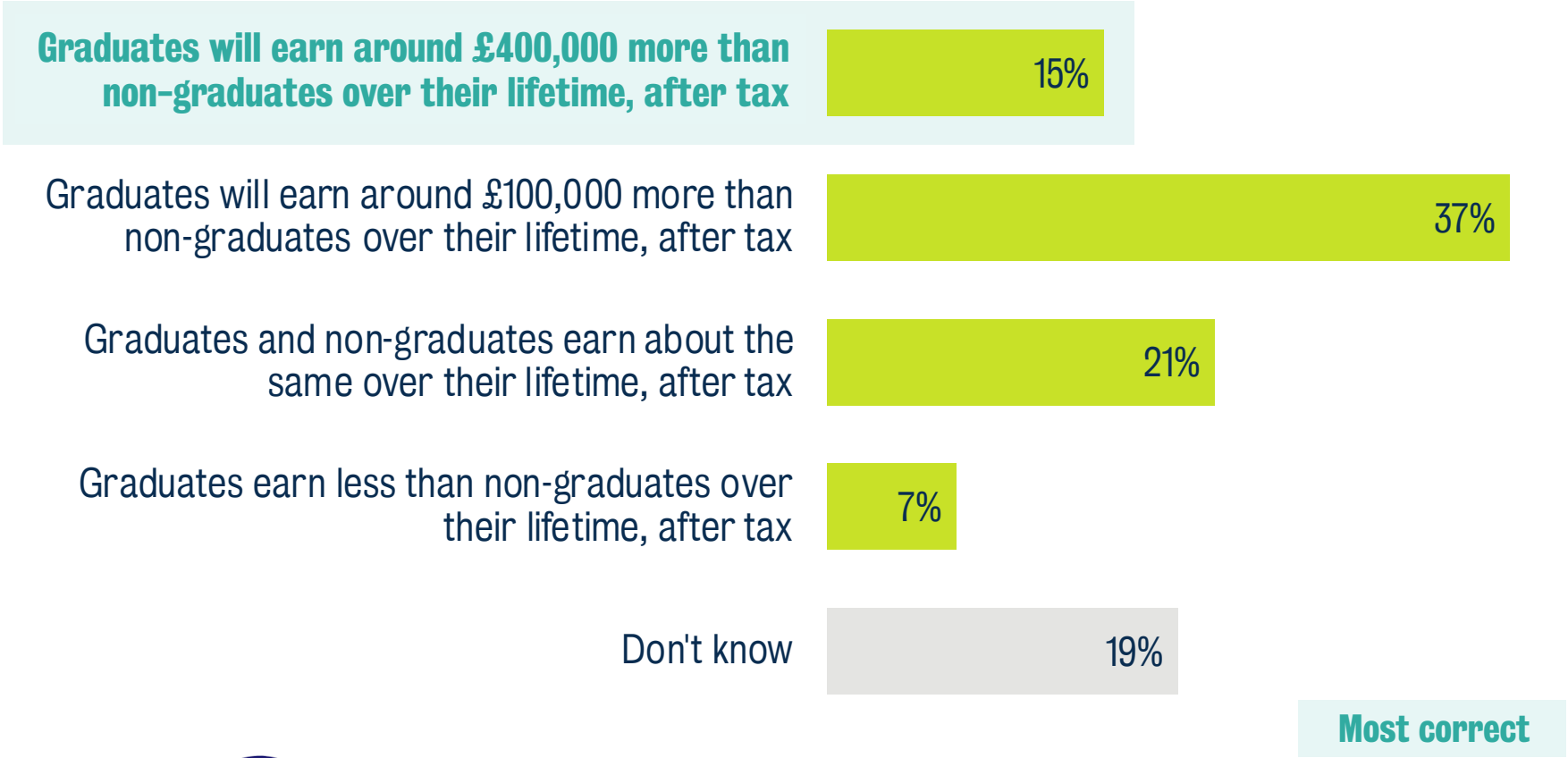
The majority of bachelor's students graduating in 2023 in England had tuition debt of £27,750. In the US, average debt was nearly £6,000 less – £22,000 (\$29,300).

In fact, the US average is even less than this figure suggests, for two reasons. First, it refers to debt for tuition and living costs *combined*.

Second, it refers only to students who borrow – which in the US is only around 50%. The percentage of borrowers is low partly because student aid means that many pay fees which are much reduced from the advertised level, but also because the harsher terms of borrowing mean students often avoid loans if they can.

# A quarter wrongly believe that graduates earn the same or even less than non-graduates over their lifetimes

After taking into account the fact that university students will start their careers later than non-graduates, and that graduates will have to repay their student loan, which of the following do you think is true for people in England?



People who graduate from university are expected to earn on average around £200,00 to £400,000 more than non-graduates over their lifetimes, in “discounted present value”\*.

From the options provided, just 15% of the public choose £400,000 – the only option in the above forecast range. By contrast, more than double (37%) choose £100,000, despite this being below the forecast range.

Strikingly, more than a quarter of people think graduates will earn either the same (21%) or even less (7%) than non-graduates.

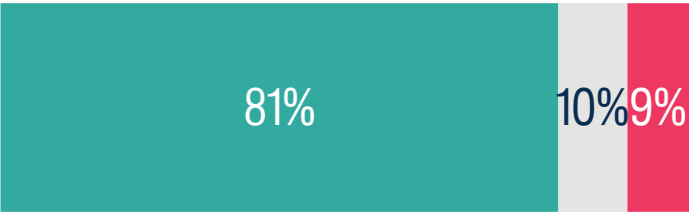
\*This is based on forecasting by the Institute for Fiscal Studies. “Discounted present value” means counting earnings later in life less than those earned earlier on, so the figures can be interpreted as equivalent to cash at the point of entering university. The range is influenced mainly by the discount rate applied. See ‘Sources’ section below for more information.

# Most people are aware of the earnings threshold for repaying student loans – although it partly depends on how the question is asked

For students who graduate from English universities, please indicate whether you think each statement is true or false

■ True ■ Don't know ■ False

Graduates only start paying back their student loan once they earn above a certain amount



Correct answer

True

Graduates must start paying back their student loan as soon as they get any paid job



False

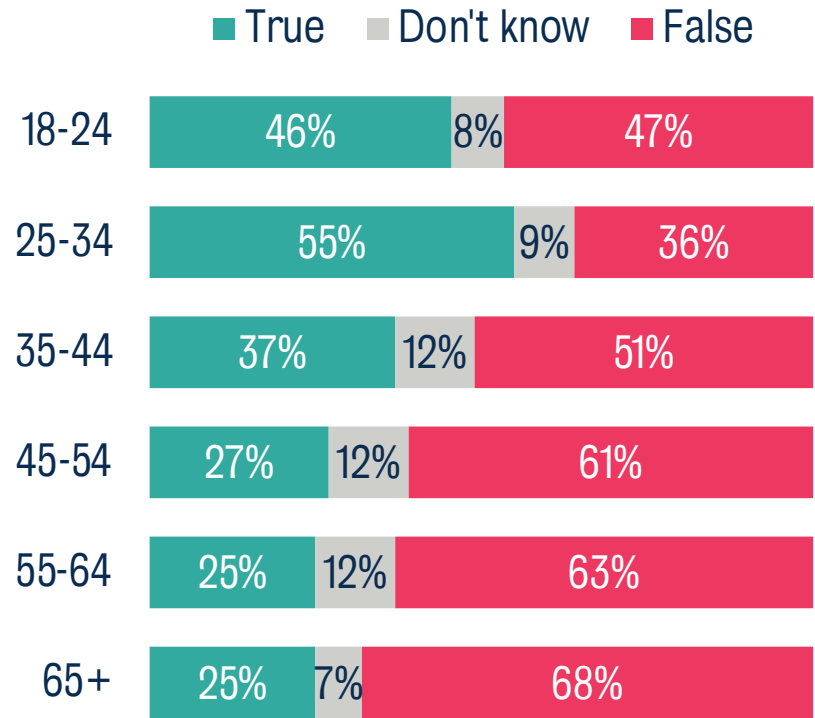
Eight in 10 people correctly say it's true that graduates only start paying back their student loan once they earn above a certain amount.

But when we asked about this in a different way, fewer get it right.

Only 55% correctly select “false” when asked if graduates must start paying back their student loan as soon as they get *any* paid job, suggesting there is still some confusion about how the system works.

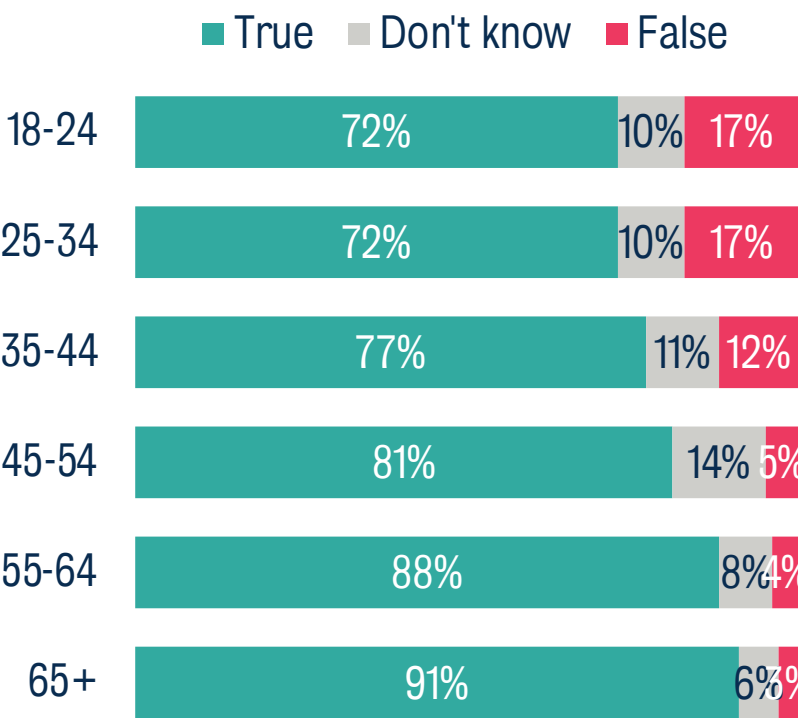
# It is young people who are most wrong about when graduates have to start paying back their student loans

Graduates must start paying back their student loan **as soon as they get any paid job**



Correct answer: **False**

Graduates only start paying back their student loan **once they earn above a certain amount**



Correct answer: **True**

Only a minority of young people aged 18 to 34 correctly recognise that graduates don't have to start paying back their student loan as soon as they get any paid job.

By contrast, majorities in all older age groups correctly identify that this is not the case.

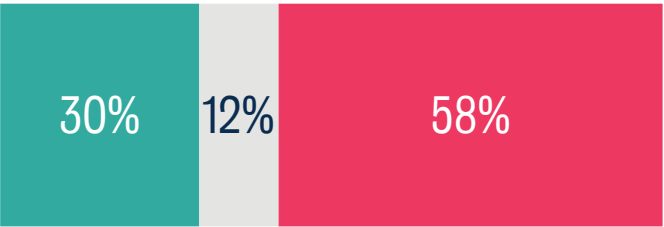
And while most people across all age groups rightly say it's true that graduates only pay back their loan over earning a certain income threshold, it is the youngest age groups that again get it wrong most often.

# Most people don't know what proportion of graduates are expected to fully repay their loans, with 30% incorrectly thinking all will

For students who graduate from English universities, please indicate whether you think each statement is true or false

■ True ■ Don't know ■ False

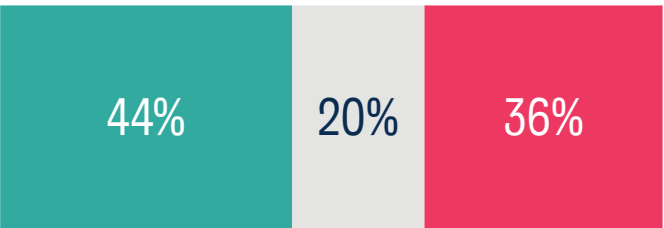
All graduates will end up paying back their whole student loan over their working lives



Correct answer

False

Around 65% of university students who started their degrees in 2023 will eventually pay back their whole student loan over their working lives



True

58% of the public correctly say it's false that all graduates will end up paying back their whole student loan. However, 30% think wrongly think they will.

And when provided with the true statement – that around 65% of graduates are expected to eventually repay their loans in full (according to government forecasts) – less than half (44%) recognise this is correct.

# Many have misunderstandings about student debt, believing it can appear on credit scores and lead to repossession of assets...

For students who graduate from English universities, please indicate whether you think each statement is true or false

■ True ■ Don't know ■ False

Mortgage lenders consider student loan repayments when assessing how much graduates can afford to borrow



Correct answer

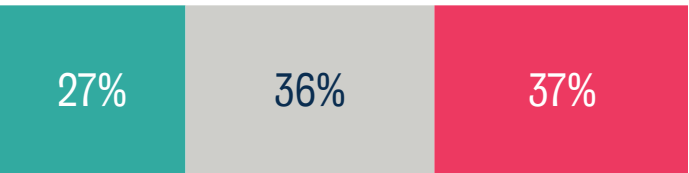
True

Student loans count as regular debt that appears on credit reports and affects credit scores



False

If graduates fall behind on their student loan repayments, they can have their possessions repossessed by the Student Loans Company



False

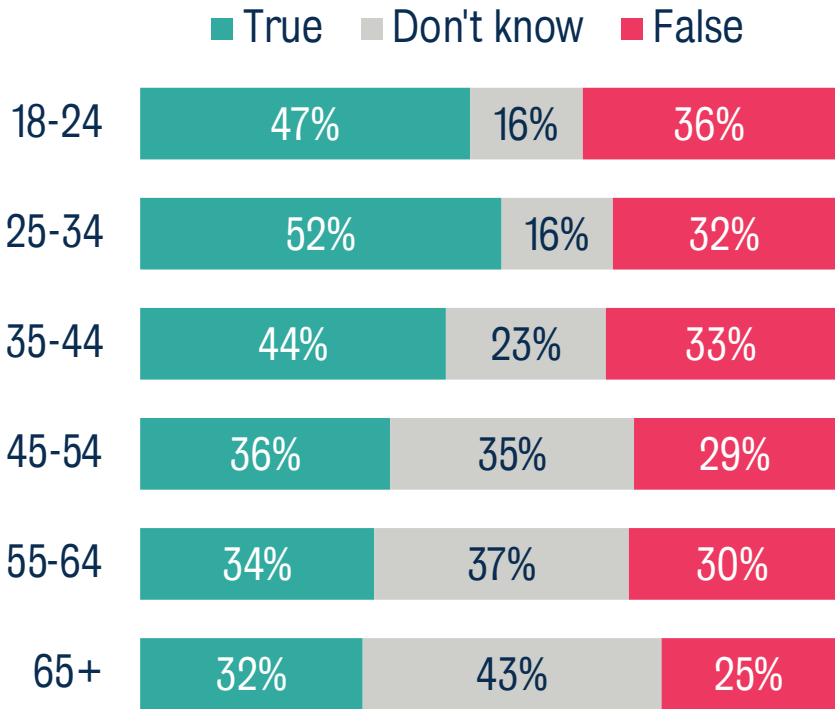
Mortgage lenders consider financial commitments when deciding how much people can afford to borrow. This includes student loan repayment commitments. However, only half (51%) identify this statement as true.

And more people wrongly think it is true (40%) than think it is false (30%) that student loans appear on credit reports and affect credit scores.

Lastly, only 37% correctly identify as false the statement that graduates can face repossession if they fall behind on their repayments.

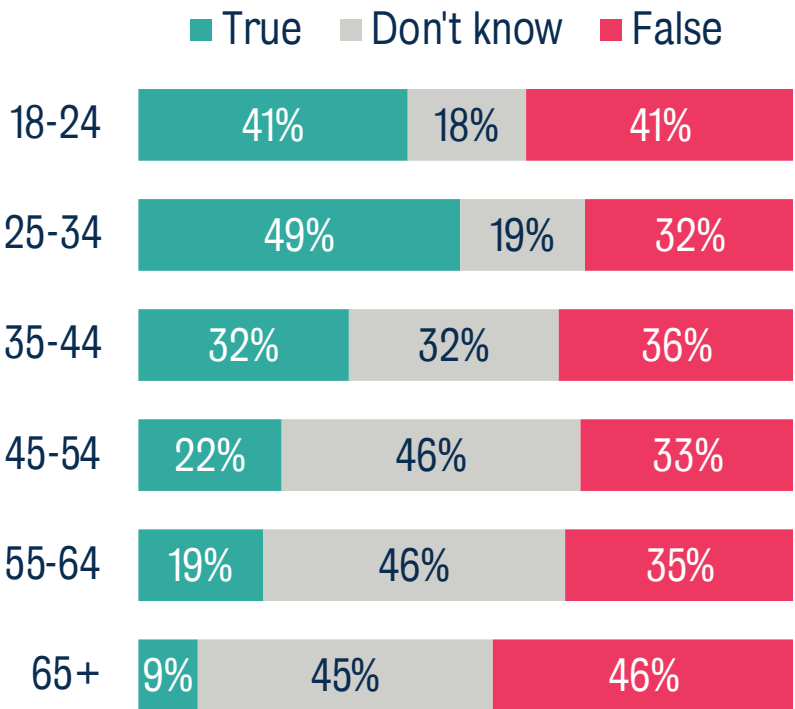
# ...with young people again more wrong about how student loans actually work

Student loans count as regular debt that appears on credit reports and affects your credit score



Correct answer: **False**

If graduates fall behind on their student loan repayments, they can have their possessions repossessed by the Student Loans Company



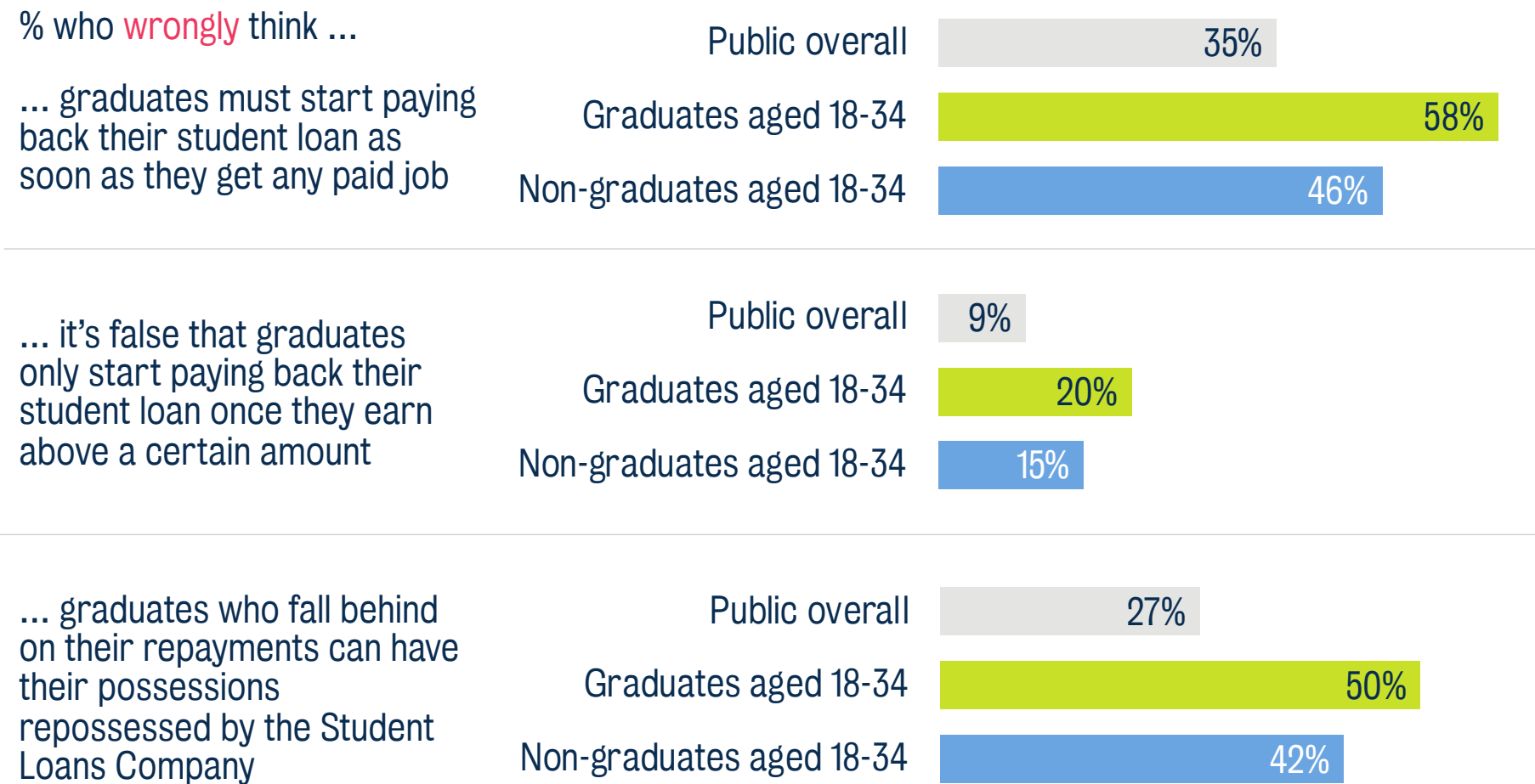
Correct answer: **False**

Both of these statements are false: student loans don't appear on credit reports, nor can the Student Loans Company repossess graduates' possessions due to missed repayments – although it can take legal action.

No age group is very knowledgeable about either of these facts, but it is young people who are most likely to be mistaken about them.

Between four and five in 10 people aged 18 to 34 wrongly think both of these statements are true.

# Even more concerningly, it is young *graduates*, rather than non-graduates, who are most likely to be wrong on key facts about student loan repayments



The majority (58%) of young graduates aged 18-34 incorrectly think you have to start paying back your student loan as soon as you get *any* paid job – 12 points higher than the share of their non-graduate counterparts who believe this.

Among this age group, graduates are also slightly more likely than non-graduates to be wrong about there being an income threshold past which loan repayments begin.

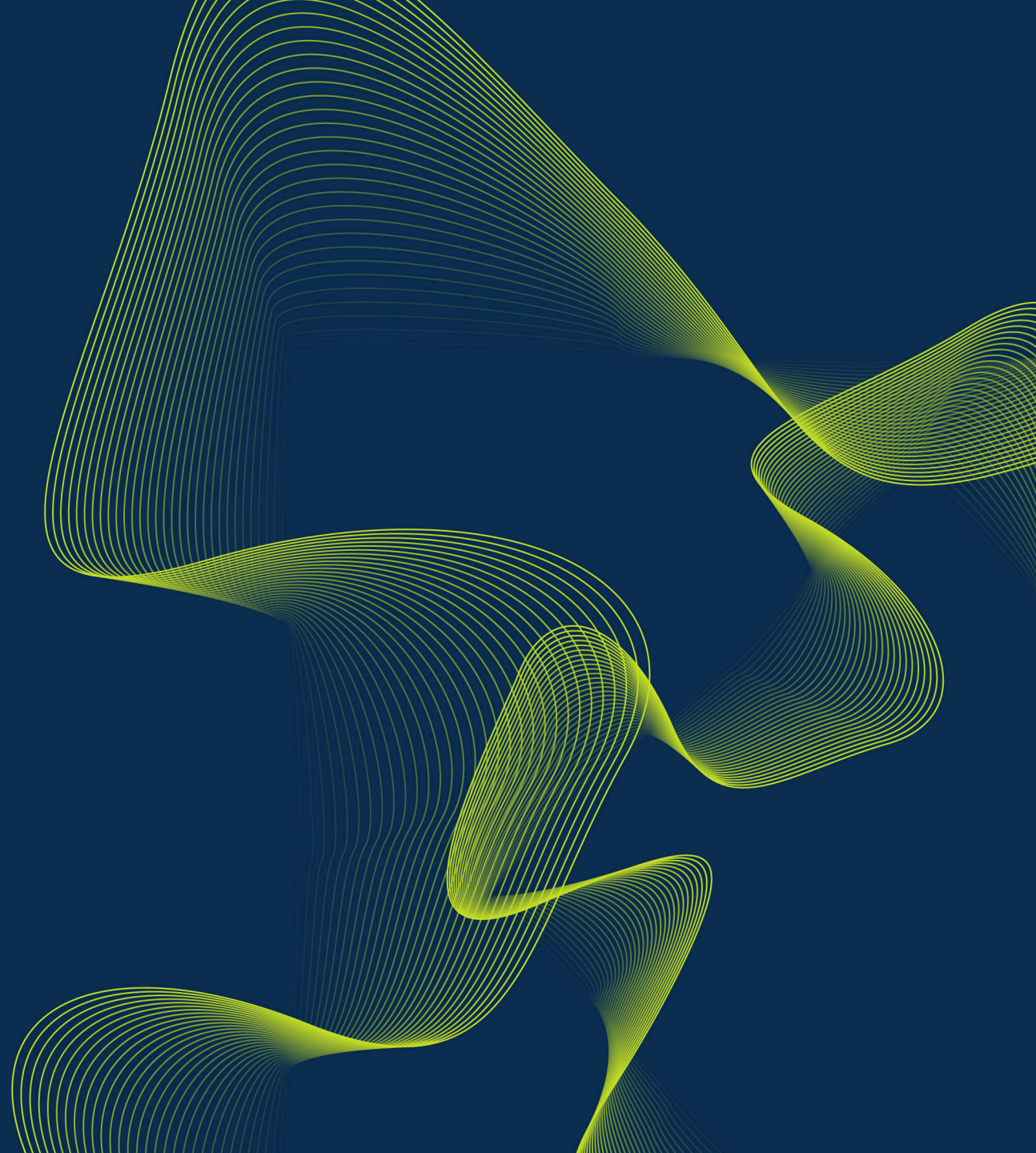
Similarly, a greater share of graduates than non-graduates incorrectly believe the Student Loans Company can repossess assests.

### 3. International students

People significantly overestimate the proportion of immigrants who are asylum seekers, while underestimating how many enter on study visas and work visas.

And while most people recognise that international students financially support UK universities, they underestimate just how much tuition fee income these students bring in.

The public also think that international students are more likely to remain in the UK than to leave after their studies. In fact, the opposite is true.



# People significantly overestimate the proportion of immigrants who are asylum seekers, while underestimating how many enter on study visas and work visas

Please put the following types of immigrant into rank order by how large a proportion of the total number of immigrants to the UK you think they made up in the year ending June 2024

	% who rank each group as largest	Actual proportion and rank
Asylum seekers and refugees (includes humanitarian)	38%	14% (3)
Workers and their dependents	20%	40% (1)
Students and their dependents	17%	36% (2)
Immigrants joining family members	16%	7% (4)
Don't know	9%	
Correct answer		

The public are most likely to say asylum seekers make up the largest proportion of immigrants to the UK. In fact, they make up only 14% of all immigrants – less than half the proportion who immigrate for work (40%) and study purposes (36%).

While Reform voters are most likely to wrongly choose asylum seekers (51%), this is also the most common guess among Labour and Conservative voters.

% who rank asylum seekers and refugees first

Labour: 29%

Conservative: 43%

Reform: 51%

# The public are most likely to guess that international students have remained in the UK for work, three years after arriving – but in reality, a greater share either leave or are still studying

Thinking about international students who entered the UK in the year ending June 2020 and what they were doing three years later in June 2023, can you put the following into rank order from most to least common? Please rank what you think the largest group was doing first and the smallest group last

	% who rank each group first	Actual proportion and rank
Remained in the UK to work or seek work	30%	27% (3)
Were still studying	18%	34% (2)
Had left the UK	18%	35% (1)
Remained in the UK to seek asylum or for other humanitarian reasons	13%	0.5% (5)
Remained in the UK on some other basis	12%	3% (4)

35% of international students leave the UK three years after arriving – the most common outcome, closely followed by the 34% who are still studying on their course.

18% of the public guess each of these outcomes is most likely.

A far greater share (30%) believe international students most commonly remain in the UK for work – which is actually the third most likely outcome.

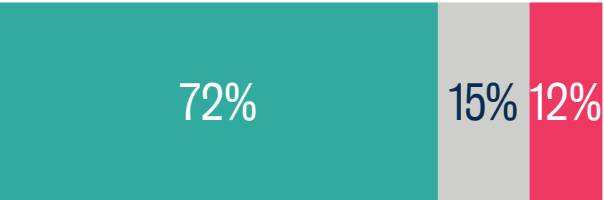
Notably, 13% of the public hugely overestimate the proportion of international students who stay in the UK to seek asylum, believing it is the most common outcome when in fact it applies to just 0.5% of students.

# Seven in 10 correctly say overseas students support university finances, and half think these students don't take places away from Britons – which is right (most of the time)

For students who graduate from English universities, please indicate whether you think each statement is true or false

■ True ■ Don't know ■ False

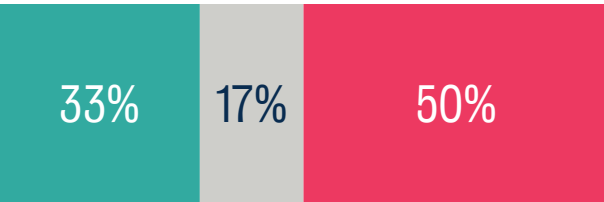
The higher fees UK universities receive from overseas students help support the finances of UK universities



Correct answer

True

Overseas students in UK universities take places away from British students



False  
(normally)

Most people correctly recognise that fees from overseas students support universities' finances.

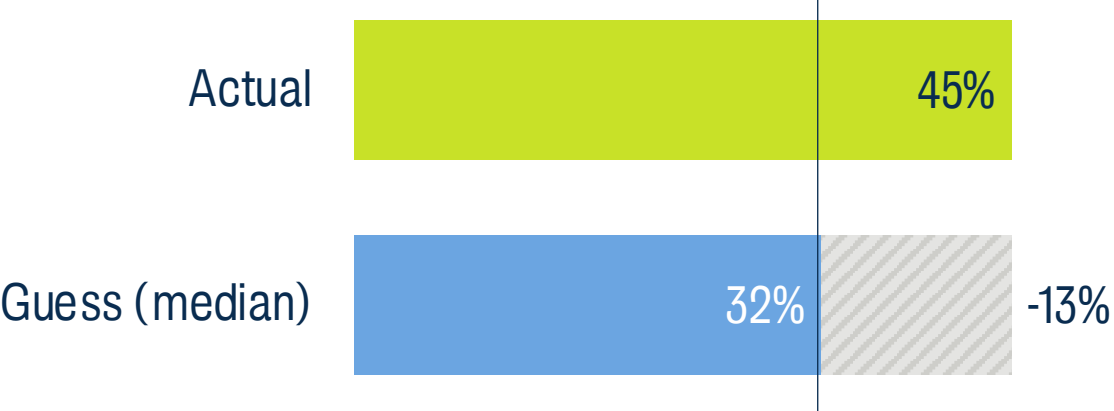
But the question of whether overseas students take places away from British students is more complex. In general, overseas students do not *normally* take places away from British students. Indeed, recruiting overseas students can provide the funding to support a larger number of British students, whose fees often don't cover the full costs of teaching them.

However, there are cases in which the statement can be true. In some competitive courses with limited spaces, accepting overseas students can mean rejecting British students, who will then have to choose another course.

# People underestimate the proportion of tuition fee income that comes from overseas students

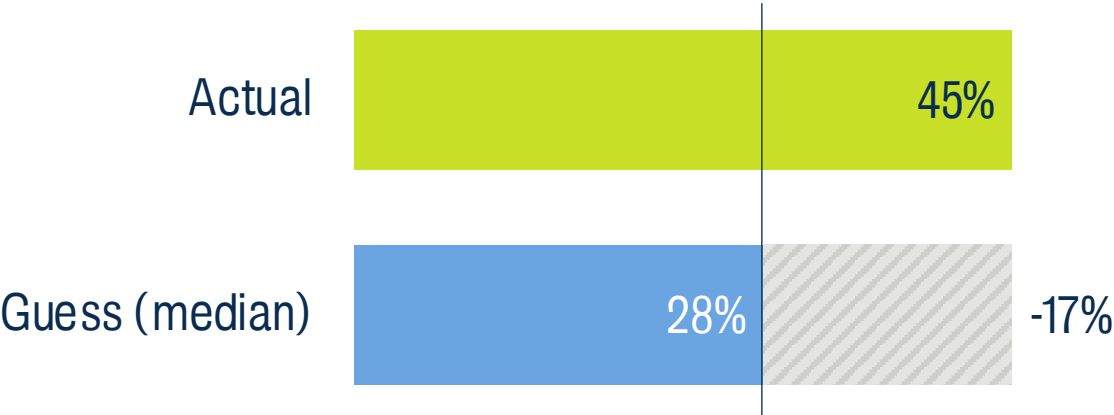
## Split sample A

What percentage of UK universities' total tuition fee income do you think came from overseas students in 2022/23?



## Split sample B

Currently, overseas students make up around 25% of students at UK universities, compared with 75% who are domestic students. Given this, what percentage of UK universities' total tuition fee income do you think came from overseas students in 2022/23?



Overseas students generate around 45% of UK higher education providers' tuition fee income. On average, people somewhat underestimate this, guessing 32%.

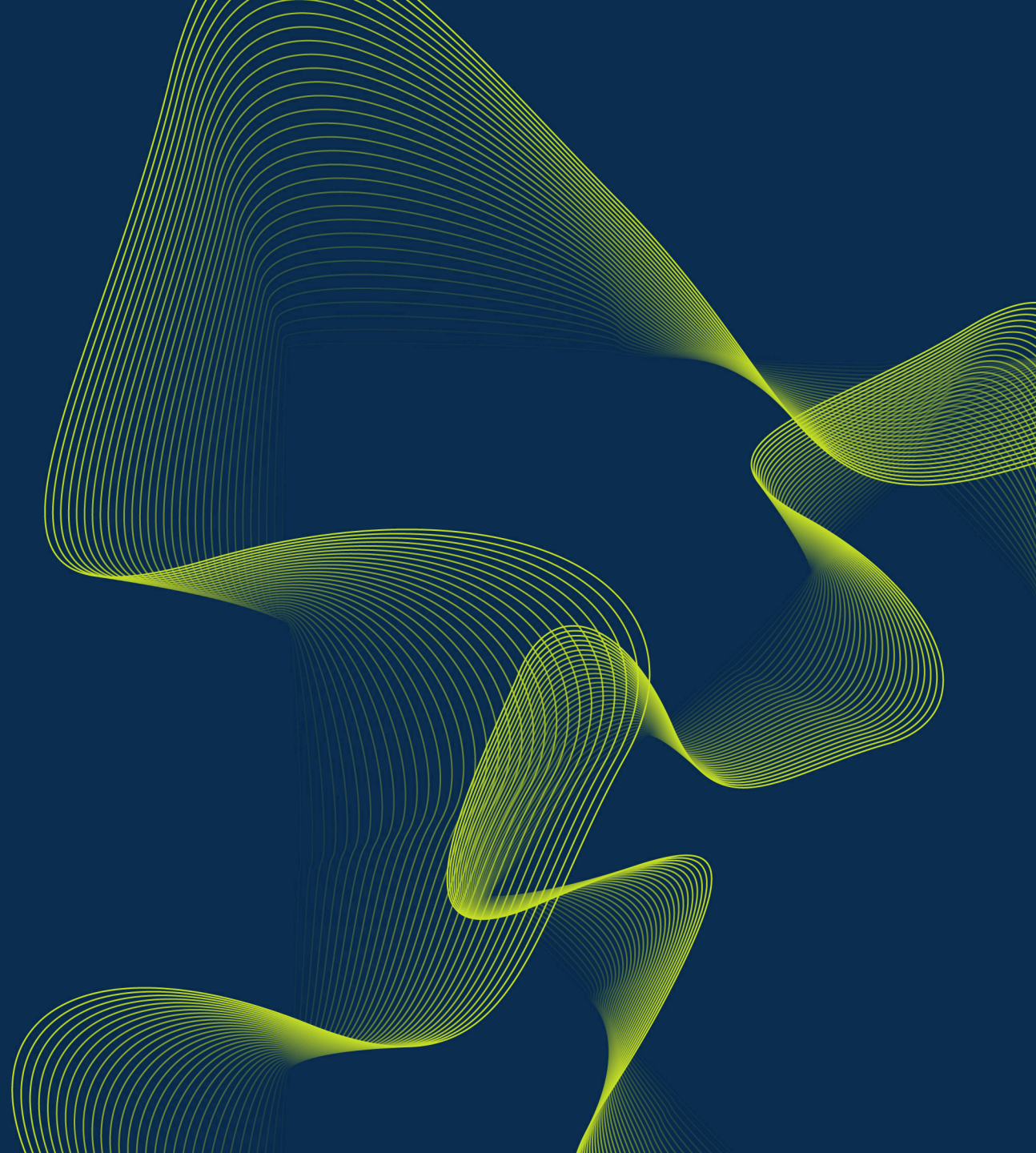
People's guess barely changes if they are first told that overseas students account for around a quarter of the student body. Those given this information guess such students are responsible for 28% of tuition income.

## 4. Risk to the sector and finances

Most of the public know that educating overseas students brings in more money to universities than it costs to provide that education. But they are mostly unaware that universities' other core activities are typically conducted at a loss.

People get very close to correctly guessing the percentage of higher education providers that ran a deficit in 2023-24.

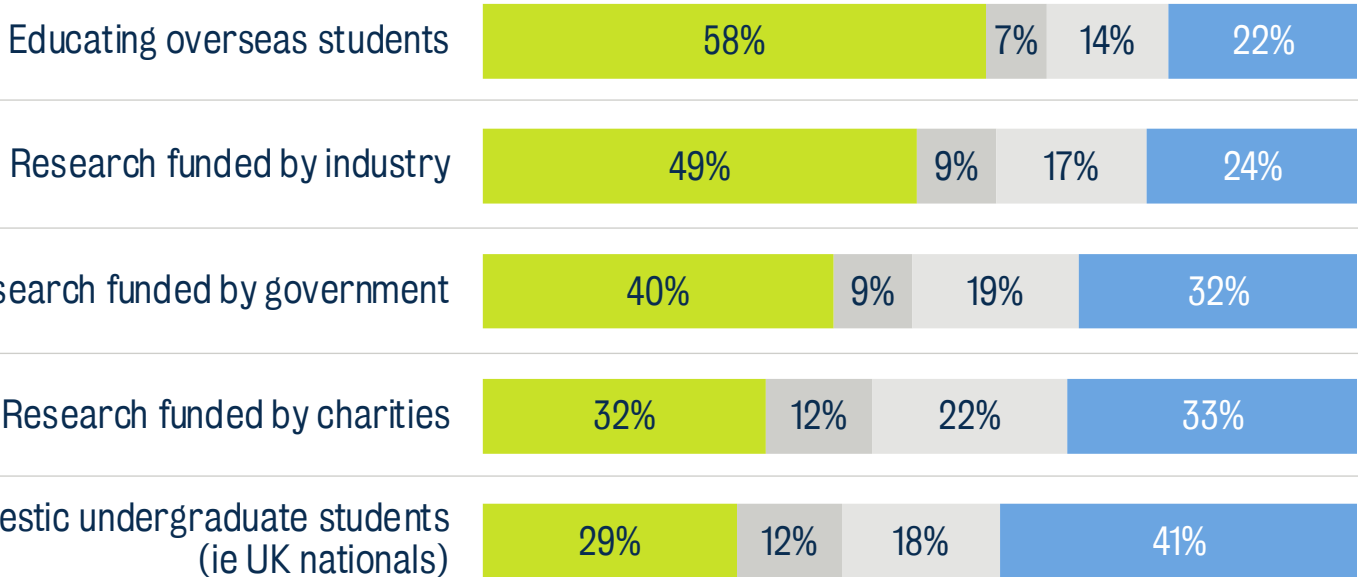
And on average, the public predict three to four UK higher education providers will go bankrupt in the next two to three years.



# The public are mostly unaware that many core activities carried out by universities are conducted at a loss

Some activities at universities in England cost more to provide than the universities receive in funding for that activity, while others bring in more funding for universities than they cost to provide. Which of the following activities do you think usually bring in more funding than they cost to deliver and which cost more to provide than the university receives in funding?

■ Brings in more funding to universities than it costs to provide   ■ Neither   ■ Don't know   ■ Costs more to provide than universities receive in funding



Brings in more?

Yes

No

No

No

No

According to official data for the year 2023-24, the funding universities receive for teaching domestic students only covers around 90% of the costs. Funding for *research* covers even less – around 70 to 75% for government- and industry-funded research, and only 56% for charity-funded research.

But only a minority – ranging between 24% in relation to industry-funded research and to 41% in relation to educating domestic students – know that these are loss-making activities for universities.

However, most people (58%) do know that educating overseas students brings in more funding to universities than it costs to provide.

# On average, people think that 45% of higher education providers ran a deficit in 2023-24 – very close to the actual 41%

England has 270 higher education providers (universities and some colleges). What percentage do you think reported a deficit for the year 2023-24 – that is, where their income was lower than their spending?

Actual

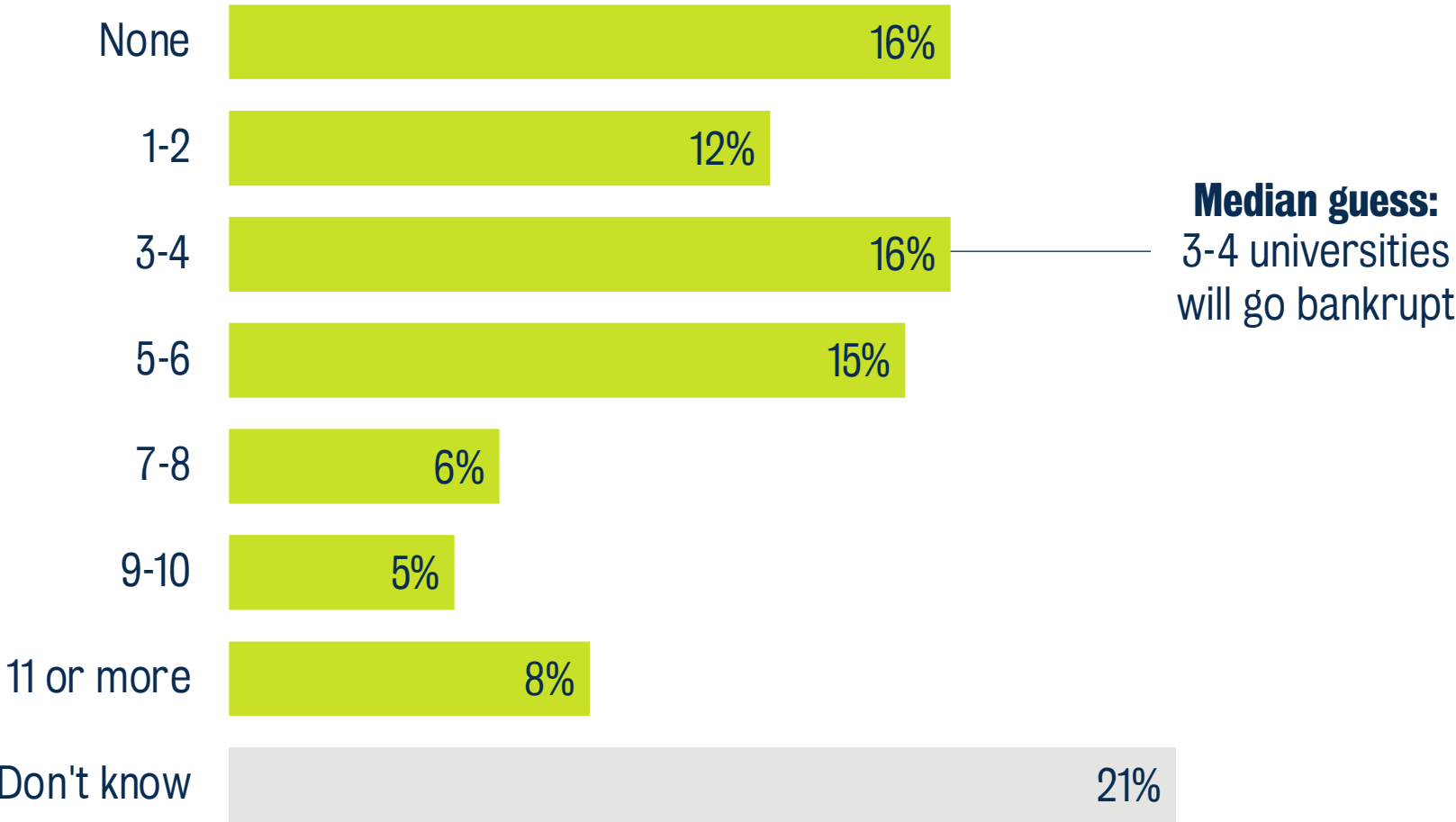


Guess (median)



# And the median guess is that three or four universities will go bankrupt over the next two to three years

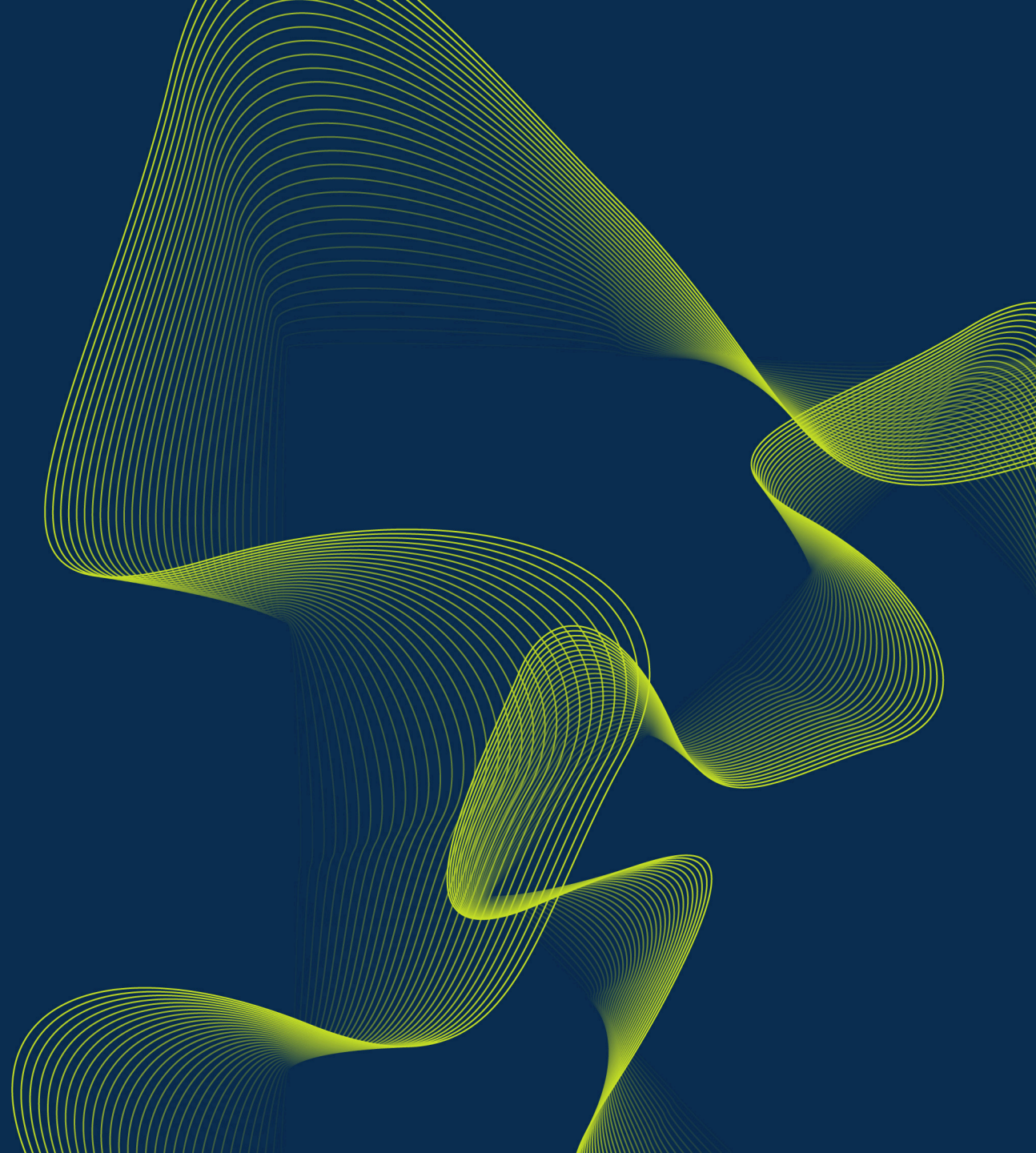
Thinking ahead to the next 2 to 3 years, from what you've heard, how many, if any, universities in the UK do you think will go bankrupt?



## 5. Awareness of how universities are perceived – including by graduates

People tend to overestimate how negative others are about universities, including wrongly guessing that a large proportion of graduates regret attending and feel that the debt has negatively impacted their lives. In reality, only a small minority of graduates express these negative views.

However, the public slightly overestimate parents' preference for university. Parents are actually somewhat more likely to say they would want their child to study for an apprenticeship than for a university degree, which is the other way around to what the public guess.



# People greatly overestimate graduates' levels of regret about going to university and the negative impact of debt on their lives

What percentage of graduates in the UK do you think say ...

	<b>Too low</b>	<b>% point diff. between median guess &amp; actual</b>	<b>Too high</b>	<b>Guess (median)</b>	<b>Actual</b>
... they'd choose NOT to go to university if they had the choice again?		+32%		40%	8%
... they'd still go to university but choose a different degree if they had the choice again?		+4%		43%	39%
... the debt they ran up in going to university has negatively impacted their lives?		+33%		49%	16%

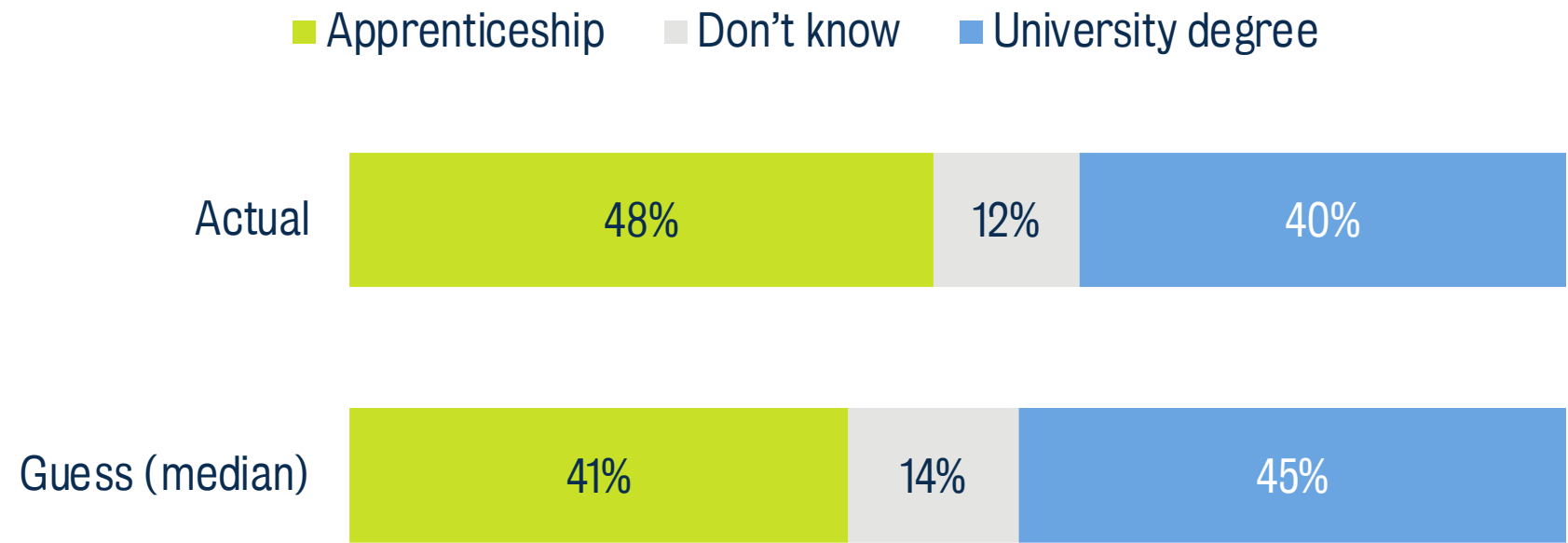
People significantly overestimate how negative graduates are about their university experience.

People guess that four in 10 graduates wouldn't go to university if they could choose again – more than four times the actual number who say this, which is fewer than one in 10, as measured in a nationally representative survey in 2024.

Similarly, people guess that 49% of graduates say student debt has negatively impacted their lives. This is around triple the actual proportion of 16%. Although the percentage who say this among graduates who started university after 2012, when the current fees system started, is slightly higher, at 22%.

# Slightly more parents would prefer for their child to study for a university degree than an apprenticeship. The public tend to guess it would be the other way around

Thinking of parents of children aged between 11 and 17, do you think more would prefer their child to study for a university degree or to do an apprenticeship at age 18, if they had to choose between the two?



In 2024, 48% of parents of children aged 11-17 said they wanted their children to go on to an apprenticeship – slightly more than the 40% who wanted their children to study for a university degree.

The public tend to guess that it would be the other way around. 41% correctly guess that more parents would prefer that their child does an apprenticeship. But slightly more (45%) thought that parents would prefer university.

## % who guess apprenticeship

- Labour: 33%
- Conservative: 46%
- Reform: 54%

# People underestimate how much the public values research, and overestimate how many think university just isn't worth it

What percentage of the UK public do you think agree ...

Too low	% point diff. between median guess & actual	Too high	Guess (median)	Actual
---------	--	----------	-------------------	--------

... that the research happening at universities is essential for medical, technological and social innovations?



... that a university education just isn't worth the amount of time and money it usually takes?



In 2024, 74% of the public agreed that research at universities is essential for medical, technological and social innovations, suggesting widespread support for what universities are doing. Similarly, 31% thought university just isn't worth the time and money it takes.

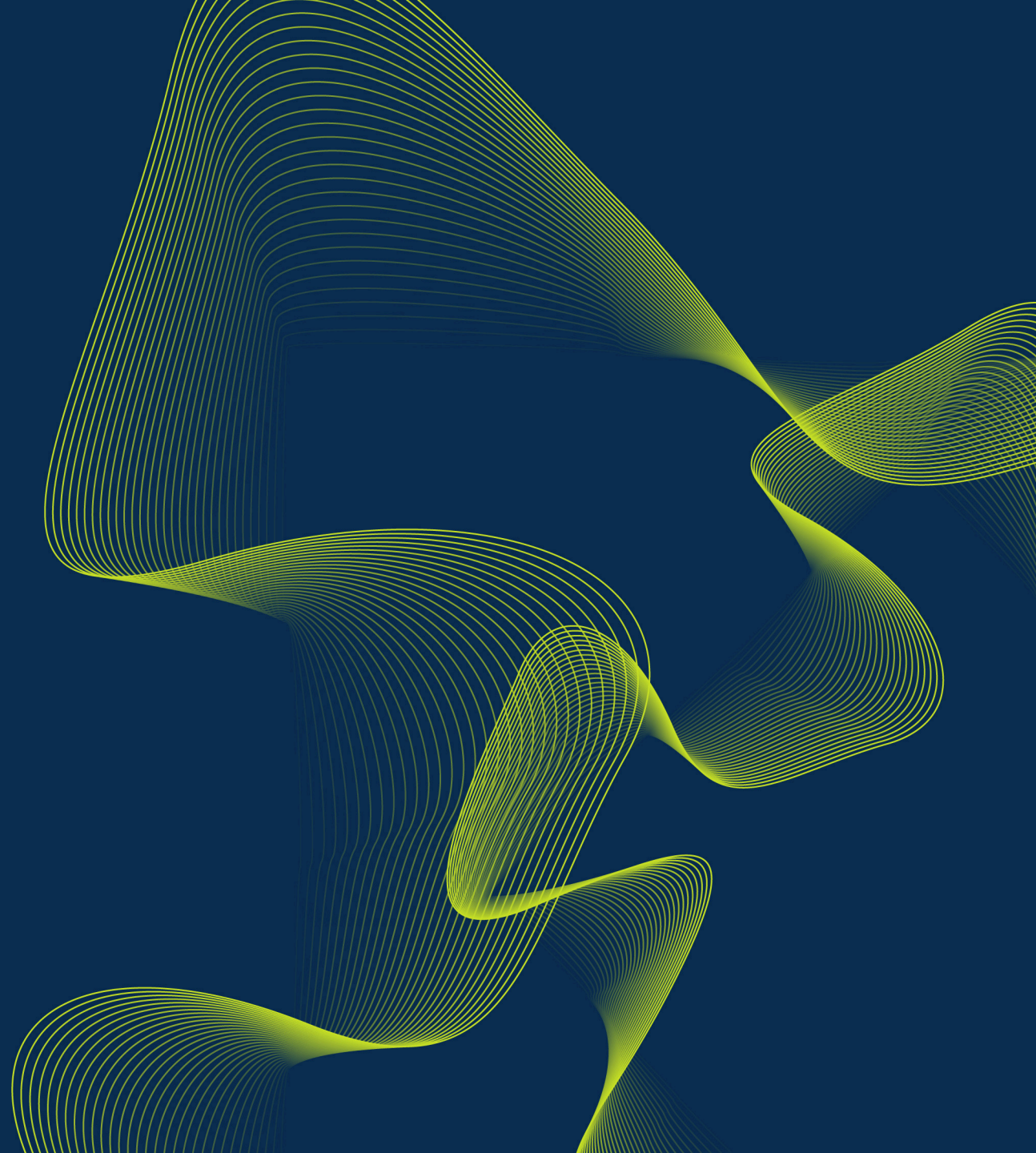
When asked to guess what these percentages would be, the public say 60% and 49% respectively.

This means they underestimate the positive opinion and overestimate the negative.

## 6. Attitudes towards universities

People are overall positive about universities – and this latest data suggests we may be slightly more positive about them even compared with one year ago.

Nearly seven in 10 think UK universities are world-class, and we slightly overestimate how many of our universities rank in the top 100 globally.



# People believe that the UK has a large number of world-class universities – in fact, Brits slightly overestimate how many rank in the top 100 globally

The Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2025 ranks more than 2,000 universities from 115 countries and territories. How many of the top 100 universities in the world do you think are based in the UK?



## Guesses at number in global top 100

People who feel positive about universities: 20  
People who feel negative about universities: 11

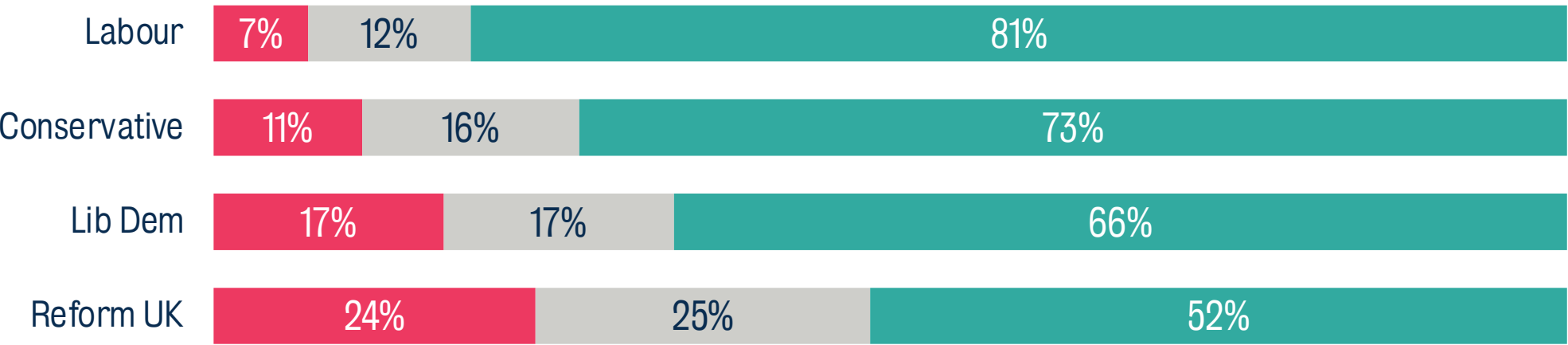
# People are far more positive than negative about universities. This is true across the political spectrum, although Reform UK voters are less positive than others.

Overall, how positive or negative do you feel about UK universities? 0 = very negative, 10 = very positive

■ Negative (0-4) ■ Neutral (5) ■ Positive (6-10)

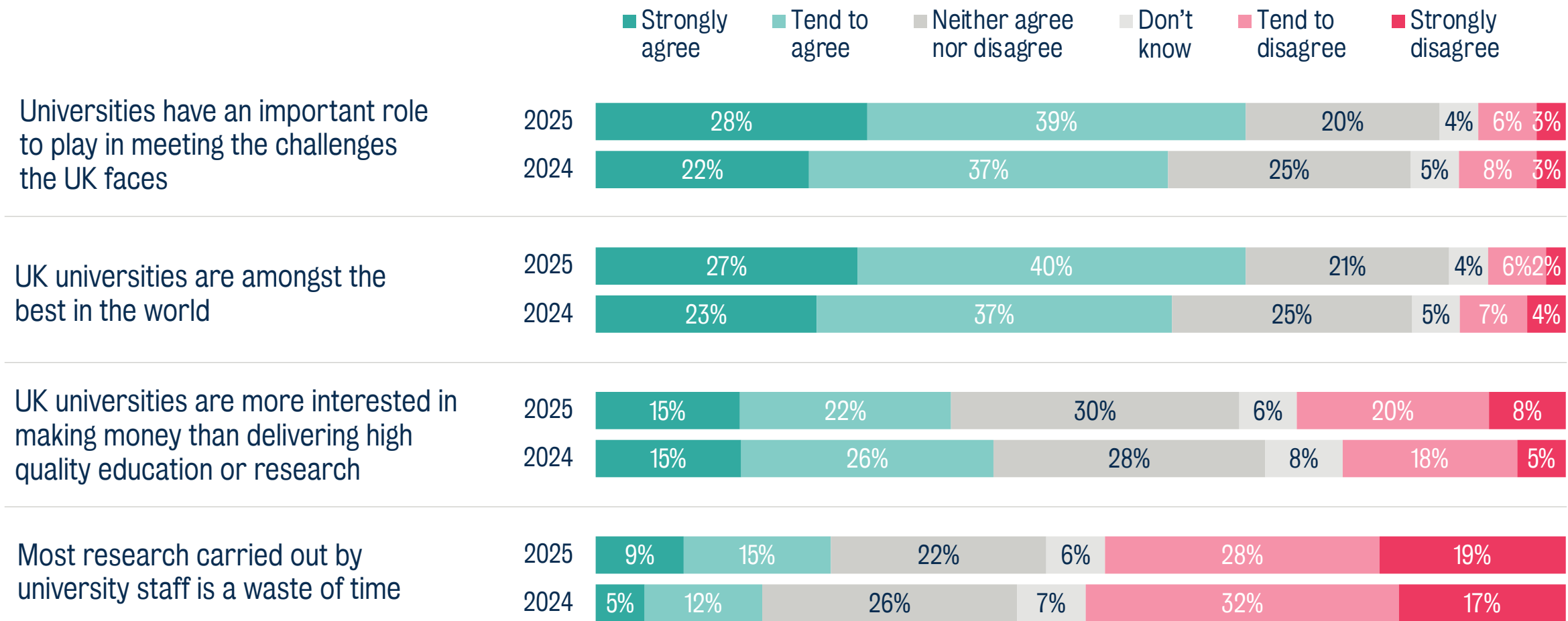


## 2025 results by 2024 general election vote



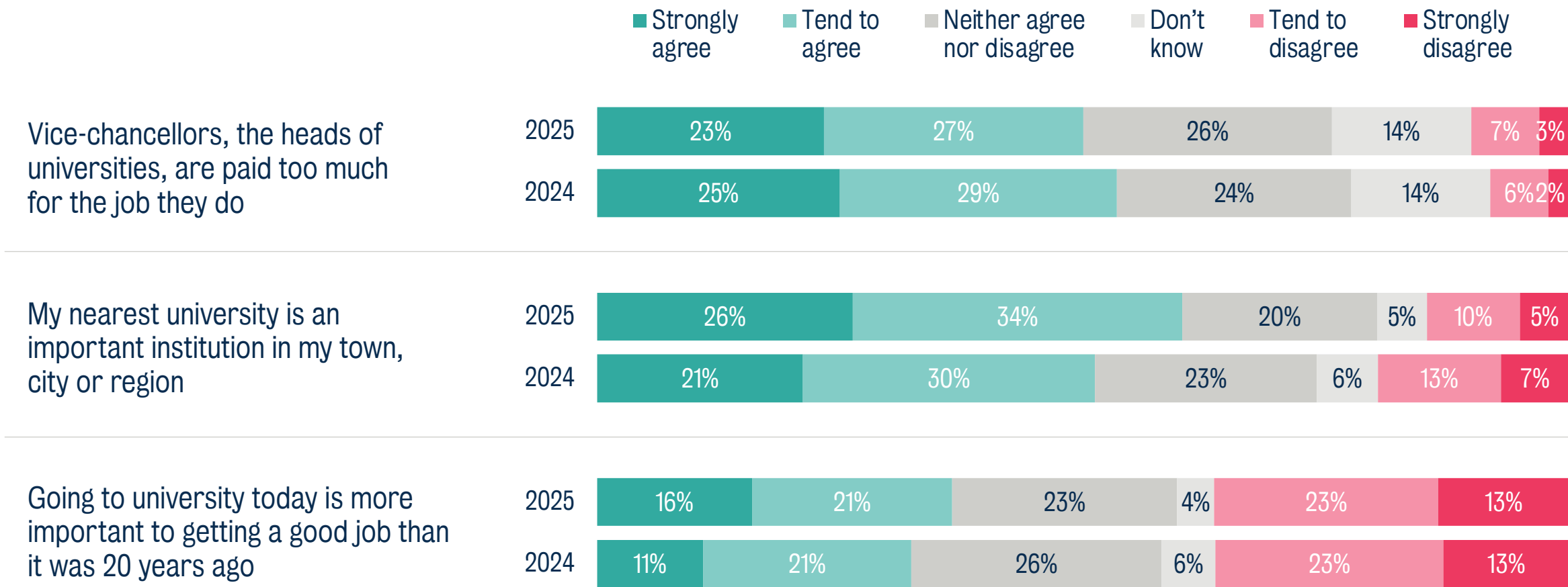
# People are, if anything, slightly more positive today than a year ago about the specifics of how universities perform, including the belief that they are among the best in the world

To what extent do you agree or disagree about each of the following statements about UK universities?

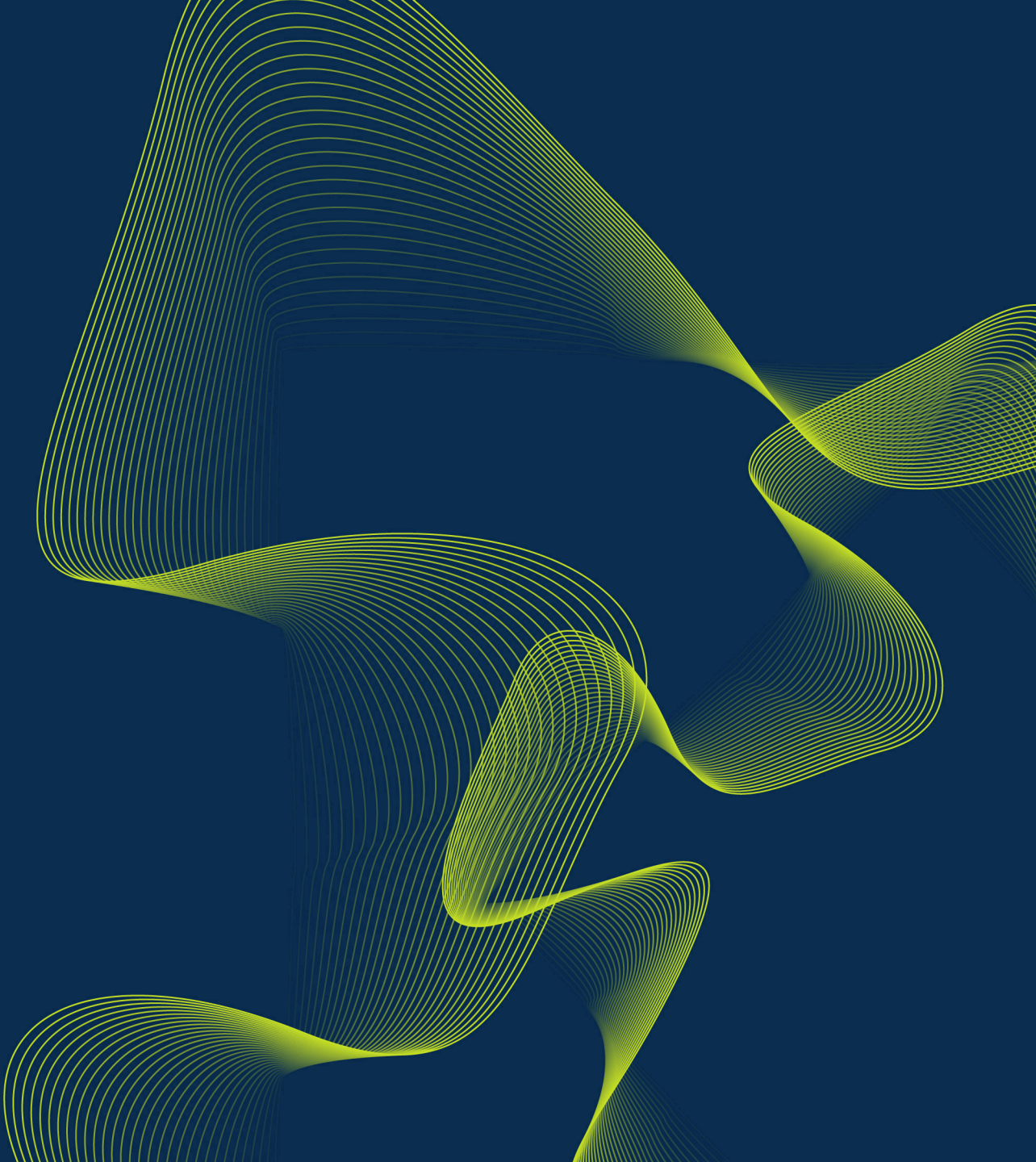


# And more now agree their nearest university is an important institution locally

To what extent do you agree or disagree about each of the following statements about UK universities?



# Sources



# Sources

## PP. 9–10. Revenue by organisation

1. University of Oxford and University of Manchester: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) – [source](#). 2. Greggs bakery chain – [source](#). 3. Daily Mail and General Trust – [source](#). 4. Manchester City FC and Manchester United FC: Deloitte Football Money League 2024 – [source](#). 5. MoneySupermarket.com – [source](#)

## PP. 11–12. Exports by sector

1. Aircraft Manufacturing – Gov.UK Goods Exports [source](#). 2. All other sectors from The Pink Book Chapter 3 – [source](#). (Legal services calculated by summing Law Society [FJGE], Commercial bar association [FJCP], and Legal services [FJGD]).

## P. 13. Number of employees by sector

1. NHS: NHS England workforce statistics – [source](#); Scotland health workforce statistics [source](#); NHS Wales workforce statistics [source](#); Health NI [source](#)). 2. Higher education sector – Business Register and Employment Survey (BRES), Office for National Statistics (ONS) – [source](#). (Figure excludes ‘Post-secondary non-tertiary education’ SIC 2007 code: 85410 ). 3. Tesco ‘About Us’ – [source](#). 4. The car manufacturing industry – [source](#). 5. Sainsbury’s ‘About us’ – [source](#). 6. The aerospace sector – [source](#). 7. The civil nuclear industry – [source](#). 8. The steel industry – [source](#).

**P. 14–15. Number of employees by sector and by region.** BRES, ONS – [source](#)

**P. 16. Higher education participation statistics, 2022/23.** Department for Education – [source](#)

**P. 19 English student debt on graduation.** Student Loans in England – [source](#)

## P. 20. Average tuition debt by country

1. United States: The College Board. [source](#). 2. Statistics Canada – [source](#)  
3. Australia: Ministers of the Education Portfolio – [source](#)

**P. 21. Lifetime income forecasts.** Institute for Fiscal Studies – [source](#).

The lower range provided of £200,000 is based on the Green Book discount rate of 3.5% recommended by Treasury. The higher range of £400,000 is based on the lower discount rate of 0.7% - the rate the Treasury use to value the student loan book. Both values are the approximate mid-point between the estimates for men and women.

**PP. 22–25. Student loans.** House of Commons Library – [source](#)

**P. 29. Immigration to the UK.** ONS Long-term immigration statistics Year Ending June 2024 (Provisional) – Fig.3 [source](#)

**P. 30. International student visas.** The Migration Observatory. [source](#)

**P. 32. Proportion of tuition income from overseas students.** HESA – [source](#)

**P. 33. Cost of UK universities’ activities.** Office for Students (OfS) – [source](#)

**P. 35. Higher education providers running a deficit.** OfS – [source](#)

**P. 38–40 & 43–45. Perceptions of universities.** The Policy Institute – [source](#)

**P. 42. Times Higher Education World University Rankings** – [source](#)

**P. 43–45. Perceptions of universities.** The Policy Institute – [source](#)

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