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higher education

# Still worth it?

## Attitudes to university education among graduates, parents and the public

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# Graduates are generally very positive about their university experience – despite significant debt and some doubts that it boosted their job prospects

This is in part because most say their student debt hasn't negatively impacted their lives, and also because they value their degree for much more than just its career impact



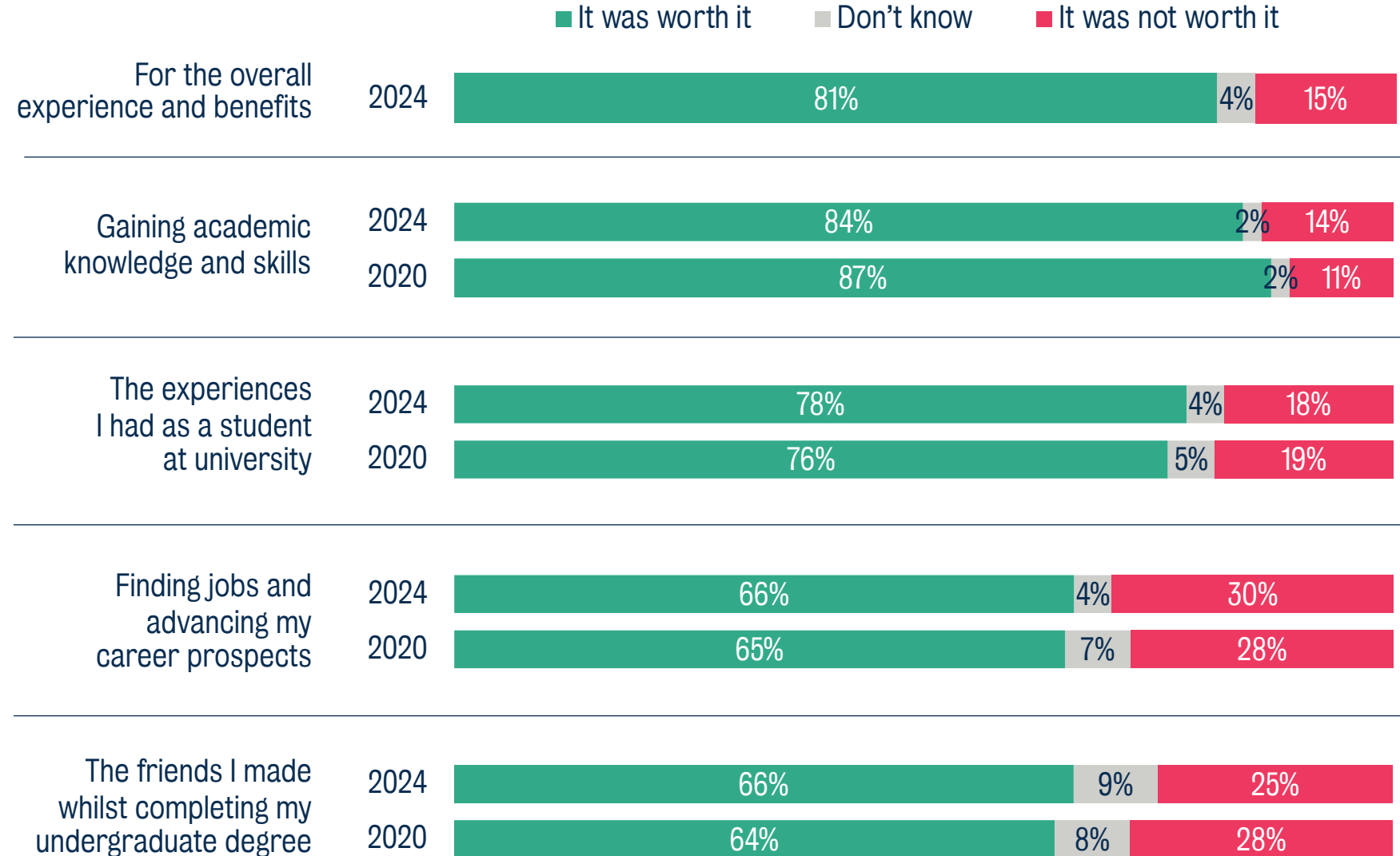
# Eight in 10 graduates say their degree was worth it overall – but three in 10 say not for career prospects

Around eight in 10 graduates say their degree was worth it for the academic knowledge and skills they gained, the experiences they had as a student, and the overall experience and benefits.

Two-thirds also say their degree was worth it for making friends and for finding jobs and advancing career prospects – but nearly a third feel their career prospects weren't enhanced by going to university.

There has been virtually no change in these views since 2020.

Do you think your undergraduate degree was worth doing for the following reasons:





# Graduates who started university after £9,000 fees were introduced are three times as likely to say they have significant debt – but only a fifth of this group say student debt has negatively impacted their life

Around three in five graduates who started university in or after 2012, when £9,000 fees were introduced in England, say they still have a significant amount of debt from studying, compared with one in five who started before 2012.

There is almost no difference between the two groups when asked about whether university debt has had a real impact on their lives, with majorities of each saying it has.

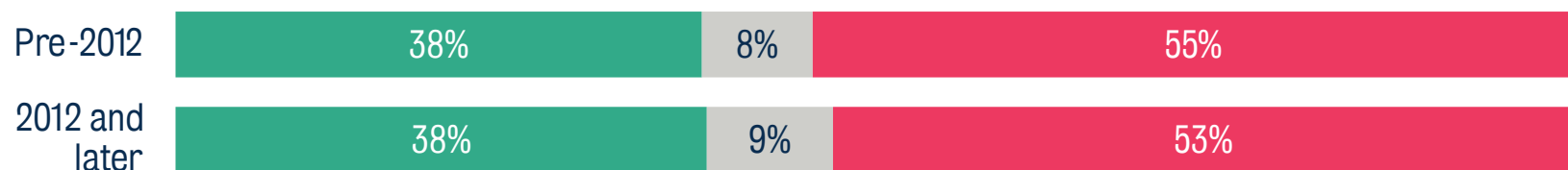
But there is a difference when it comes to views on whether it has had a *negative* impact: just 12% of pre-2012 students feel this is the case for them, compared with 22% of those who started later – though the majority (69%) of this group still say this doesn't apply to them.

Thinking about the amount of money you paid, if any, on fees and living expenses at university for your undergraduate degree, do each of the following apply to you, or not?

## I still have a significant amount of debt from studying at university



## The debt I ran up in going to university has had no real impact on my life



## The debt I ran up in going to university has negatively impacted my life

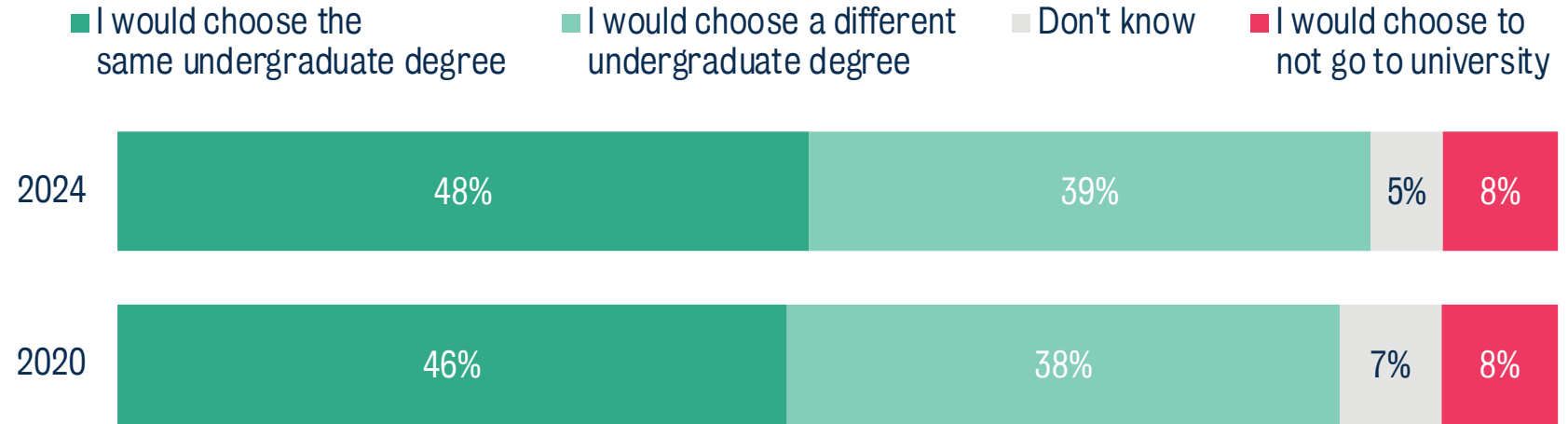


# Nine in 10 graduates would go to university if given the choice again, and around half would do the same degree

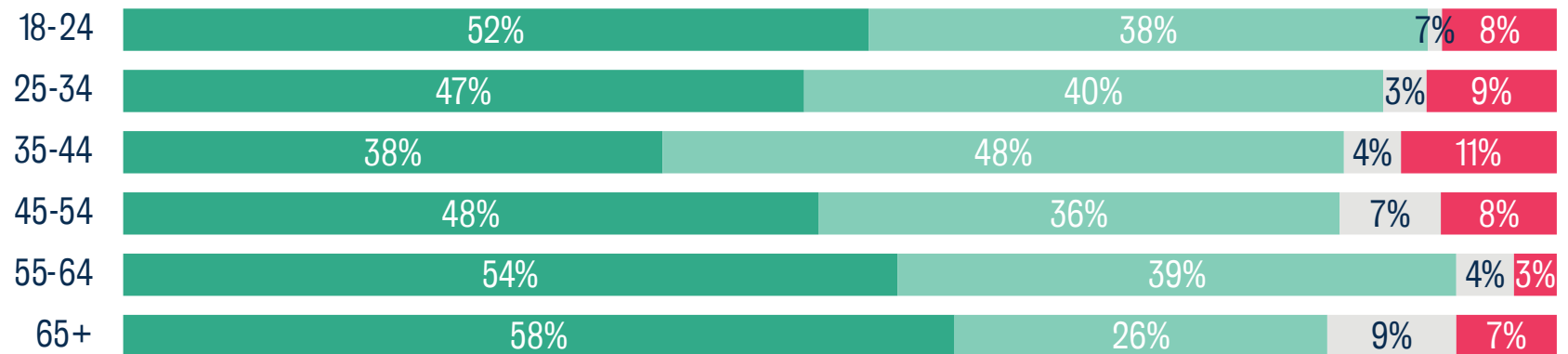
87% of graduates say they would choose to do an undergraduate degree again if they could – similar to attitudes in 2020 (84%). This includes around half who say they'd choose the same degree and four in 10 who would prefer to study a different subject. Just 8% say they would choose to not go to university.

Graduates currently aged 35 to 44, who mainly started university between the late 1990s and late 2000s, are the least likely to say they would choose the same degree and most likely to say they would choose a different degree.

Imagine you could choose your first undergraduate degree again... Which ONE, if any, of the following options would you be most likely to choose?



## 2024 respondents by age group

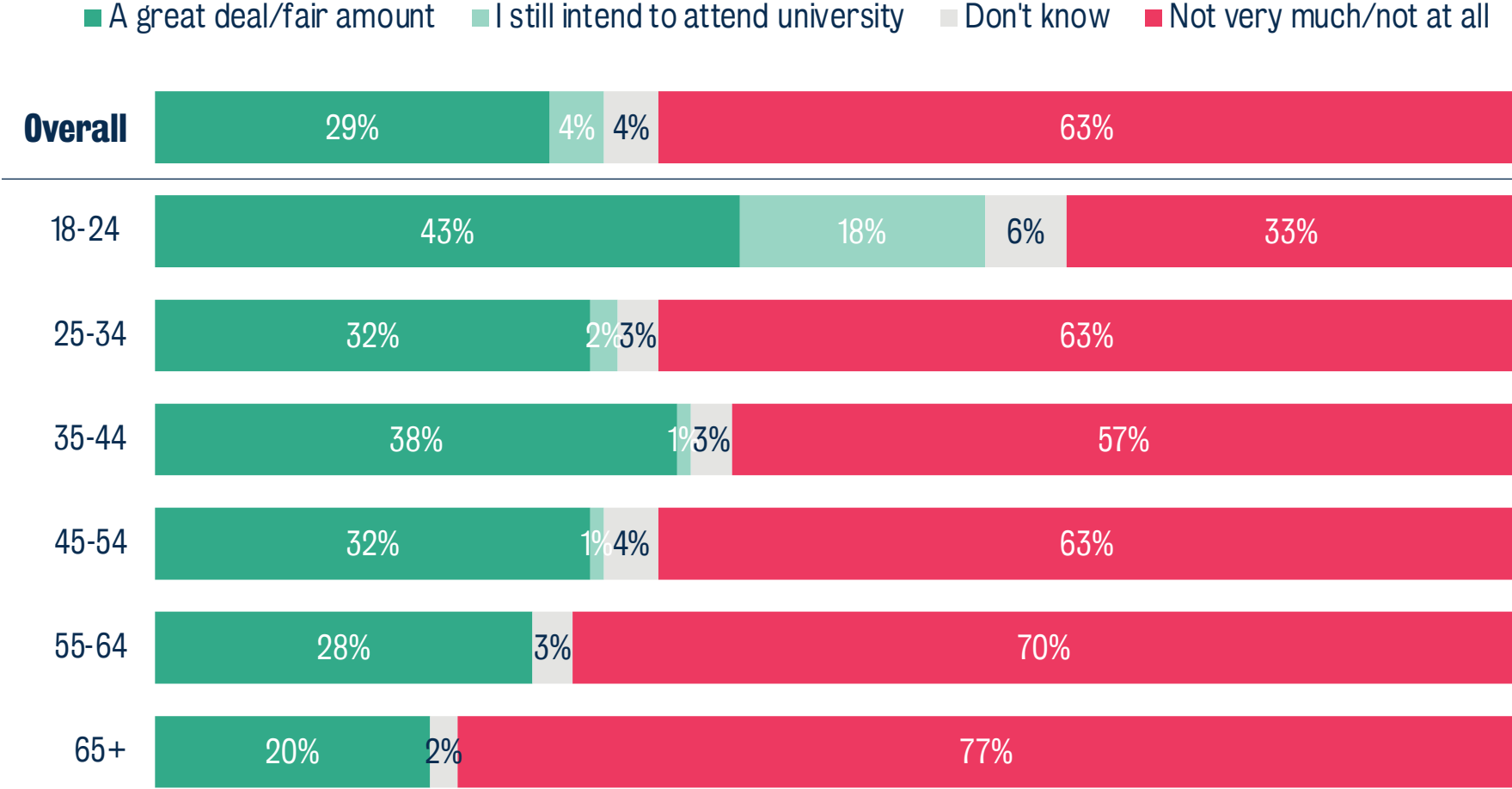


# Three in 10 people without undergraduate degrees wish they'd attended university, rising to four in 10 among 18- to 24-year-olds

29% of people without degrees wish they attended university, while 63% do not.

18-to 24-year-olds are most likely to wish they'd gone, and one in five say they still intend to. But majorities of all other age groups don't regret not going.

To what extent, if at all, do you wish you had attended university?



**Parents are split on whether university is overrated and good value for money – but only one in five say they *don't* think it's important their children attend**

The majority of parents do also acknowledge that a university education should be valued for its own sake and not just for getting a job





# Parents today are just as likely as 10 years ago to say it's important their child attends university – despite a third feeling university education is over-rated and not as good value for money as 10 years ago

Around half of parents of children aged 11 to 17 say it is important their child goes to university – virtually the same as 10 years ago.

Today's parents are also twice as likely to say degrees are still good value for money compared to a decade ago, though responses in 2014 would likely have been impacted by the 2012 tripling of fees in England to £9,000. But despite this shift, the public are still more inclined to see degrees as not being good value for money.

The persistent importance of university to parents is notable given the slight increase in those who say university education is over-rated over the last 10 years.

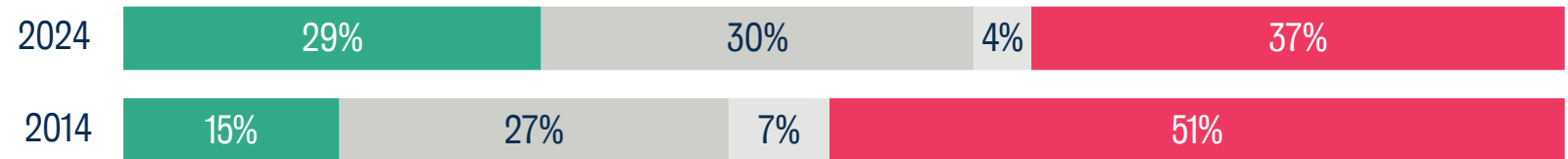
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

## It is important to me that my child goes to university

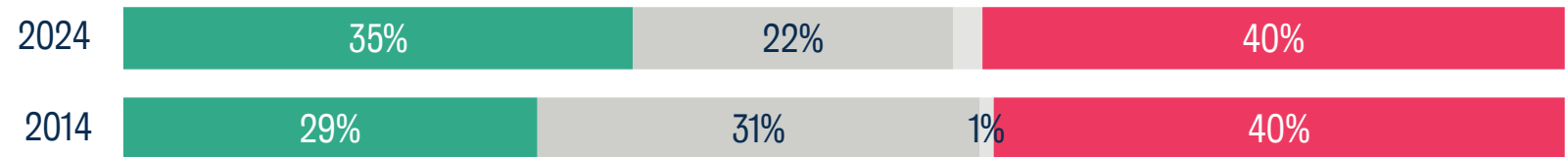
■ Strongly agree/agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Don't know ■ Strongly disagree/disagree



## Degrees are still good value for money compared to 10 years ago



## University education is over-rated





# Parents tend to see degrees as not necessary for a good job – but they also think there’s more to university than just careers

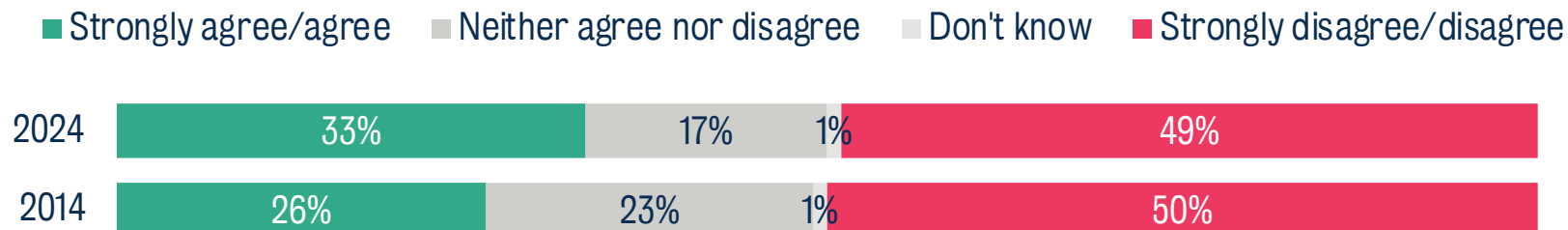
Among parents of children aged 11 to 17, 33% say you can’t get a decent job these days if you don’t have a degree – up from 26% a decade ago. Yet a greater proportion – half – still disagree with this view.

But when the statement is softened from “can’t” to “it’s harder” to get a decent job, the public are more evenly split.

And the majority of parents do still acknowledge that a degree isn’t just a means to an end, with seven in 10 agreeing university education should be valued for its own sake and not just for getting a job.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

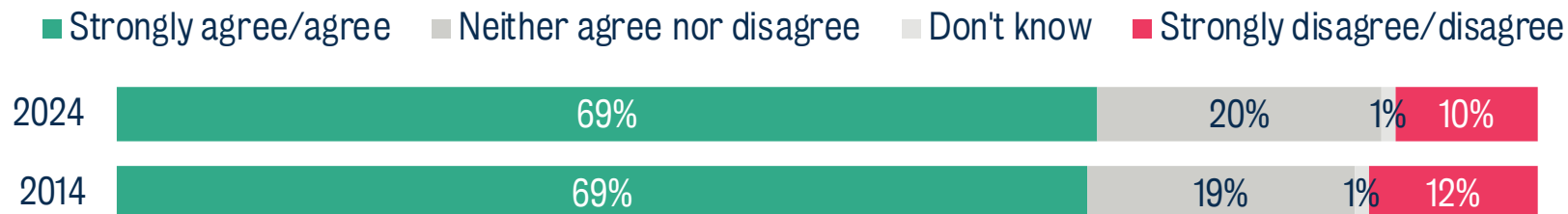
## If you don’t have a degree these days you **can’t** get a decent job



## If you don’t have a degree these days **it’s harder** to get a decent job



## University education should be valued for its own sake, not just for getting a job



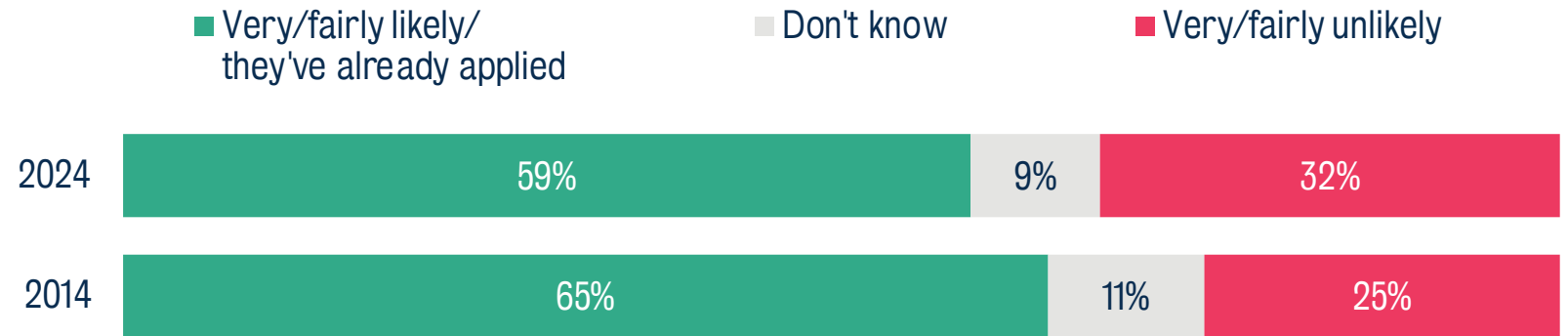
2024 base (split sample): 193 and 183 parents of children aged 11-17 in the UK, surveyed 1-9 May. 2024 base (third question): 544 parents of children aged 11-17, surveyed 6-10 June  
 2014 base: 1,113 adults in England and Wales with children aged 11-17, 31 January-6 February (source)

# Six in 10 parents think their child will apply to university, but only four in 10 prefer this over an apprenticeship

Six in 10 parents of children aged 11 to 17 say it's likely their child will apply to university or that they've already applied – down slightly on 2014.

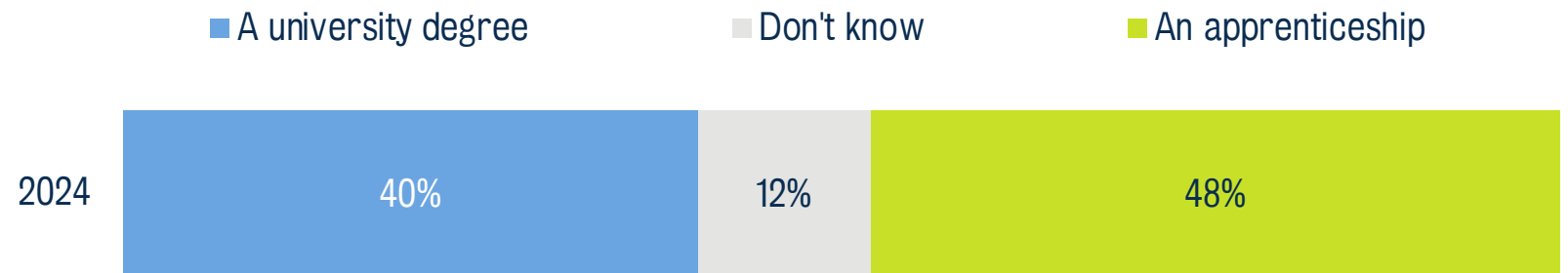
But opinion is relatively split on whether they would prefer their child to study for a university degree (40%) or an apprenticeship (48%).

You mentioned that you have at least one child. If you have more than one child, please think about the child whose birthday is next when answering the following question... How likely or unlikely do you think it is that they will apply to go to university, regardless of whether they actually go or not?



2024 base: 376 parents of children aged 11-17 in the UK, surveyed 1-9 May 2024  
2014 base: 1,113 parents of children aged 11-17 in England and Wales, 31 January-6 February ([source](#))

If you had to choose which would you prefer for your own child at the age of 18, would you prefer for them to study for a university degree or an apprenticeship?





# There is widespread agreement on the value of and need for more vocational qualifications

People think vocational qualifications are as likely or more likely than university degrees to lead to positive life and career outcomes

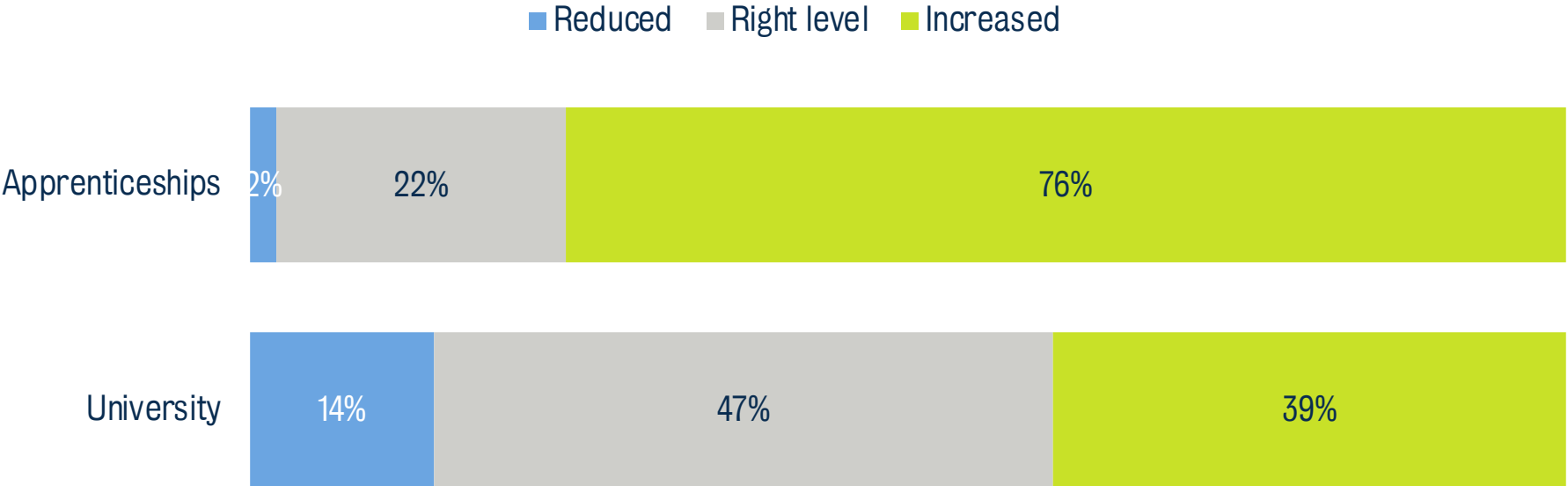


# Nearly twice as many people want greater opportunities for apprenticeships than greater opportunities to go to university

Four in 10 say opportunities for young people to go to university should be increased, but almost double that – three-quarters – think opportunities for apprenticeships should be increased.

However, this does not necessarily mean that people think opportunities for university should be reduced, with only 14% expressing this view.

Do you feel that opportunities for young people in Britain to go on to a university/into apprenticeships should be increased or reduced, or are they at about the right level now?





# When comparing university degrees with vocational qualifications on a range of outcomes, the public are most likely to say there is no difference – except on adjusting to work life and the demands of the job market

The public are around five times as likely to say vocational education, rather than a university degree, is better for helping people adjust to work life. They are also twice as likely to say it is better for dealing with the changing demands of the job market, and for being happy, although the majority think there is no difference when it comes to being happy.

They're also most likely to see no difference on getting a good job, building career networks, and being financially stable in later life.

Generally speaking, do you think that going to university or studying for a vocational qualification (e.g. a technical or practical qualification specific to a trade, including apprenticeship) is more likely to lead to each of the following, or is there no difference?

**Being able to adjust to work life**    ■ University degrees   ■ There is no difference   ■ Don't know   ■ Vocational education



**Being able to adapt to the changing demands of the job market over a career**



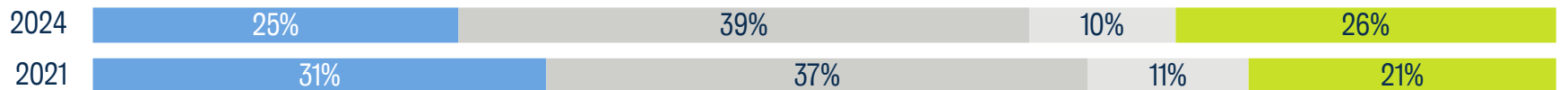
**Getting a good job**



**Building relationships and networks that help you in your career**



**Being financially stable in later life**



**Being happy**



# Despite a mixed picture on whether university is worth the time and money or gives people a better start in life, the public increasingly think the proportion attending is about right

Nearly half think graduates will end up better off from going to university in the long term – though fewer believe graduates will be *a lot* better off





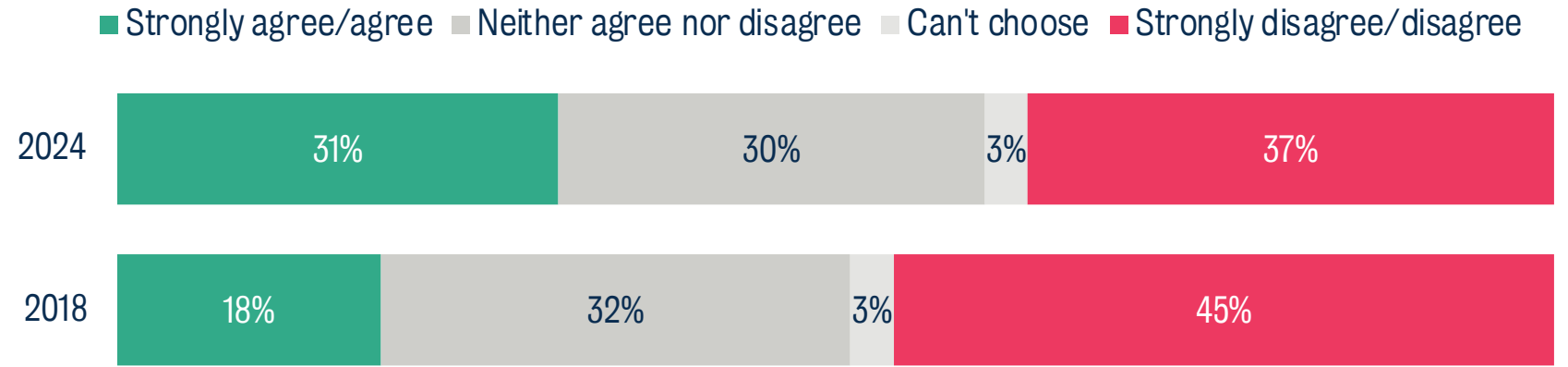
# Three in 10 think a university education just isn't worth the time and money – up from two in 10 in 2018

Compared with 2018, the public are now more sceptical that a university education is worth the time and money it usually takes. But despite this shift, people overall are still more likely to disagree with this view than agree with it.

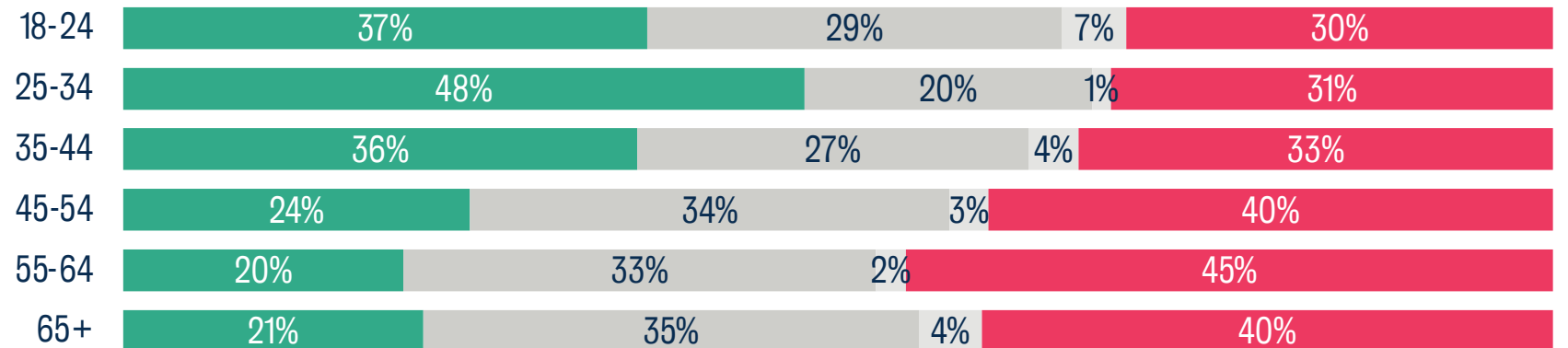
However, this is not the case for all age groups: 25- to 34-year-olds are particularly negative, with around half saying a university education just isn't worth it.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

## A university education just isn't worth the amount of time and money it usually takes



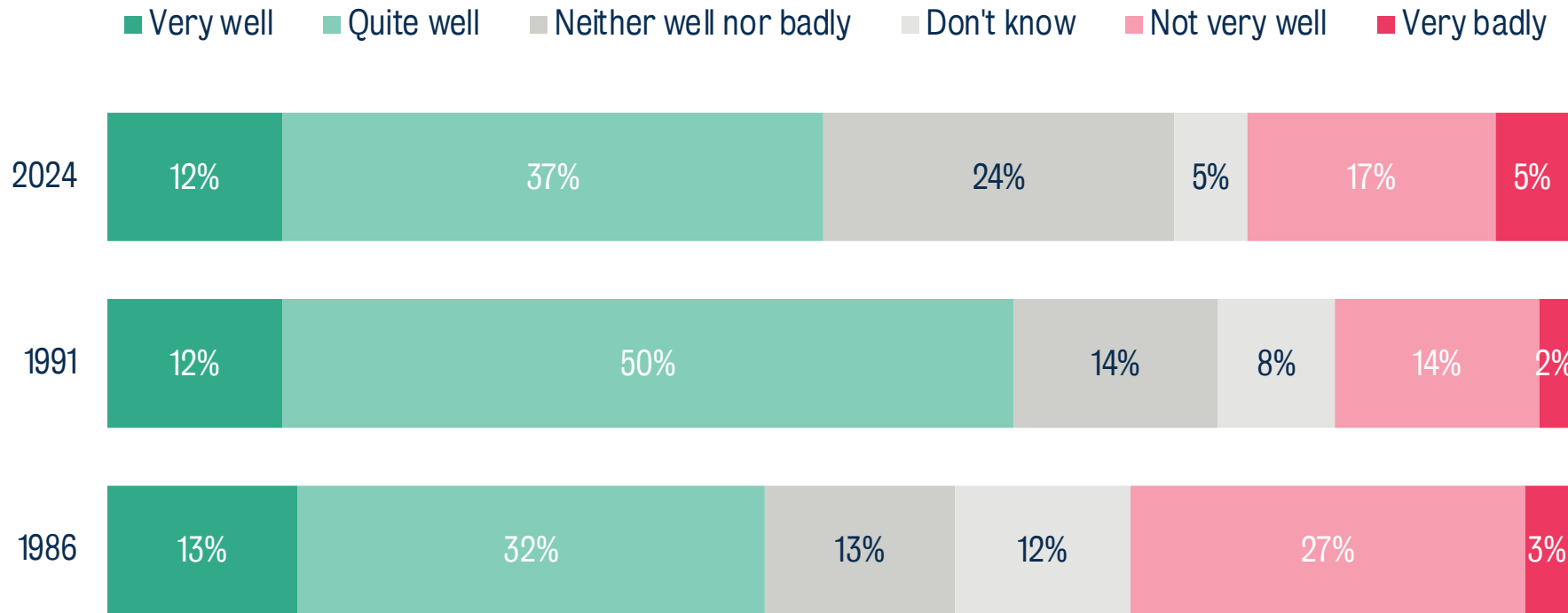
### 2024 respondents by age group



# Half the public think university education fits students for life and work, though this was higher in the 1990s

In 1991, 62% thought the education universities provide fits students for life. This has since declined to half in 2024, though is still slightly higher than the same figure in 1986, when it was 45%.

Thinking just about the universities in this country, how well do you think the education they provide fits students for life and work?

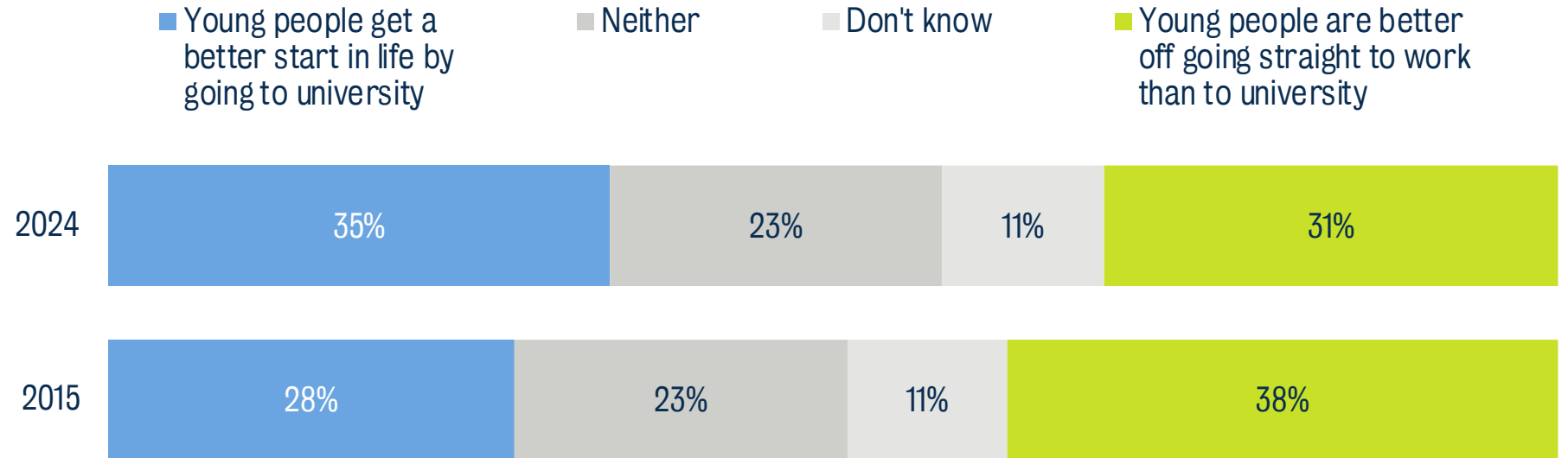




# The public are relatively divided on whether university or work gives people a better start in life

In 2015, more people felt young people were better off going straight into work than going to university. This has since reversed, with the public now slightly more likely to choose the latter than the former – though opinion is still largely divided.

Thinking about education in Britain, which of the following statements comes closest to your view?



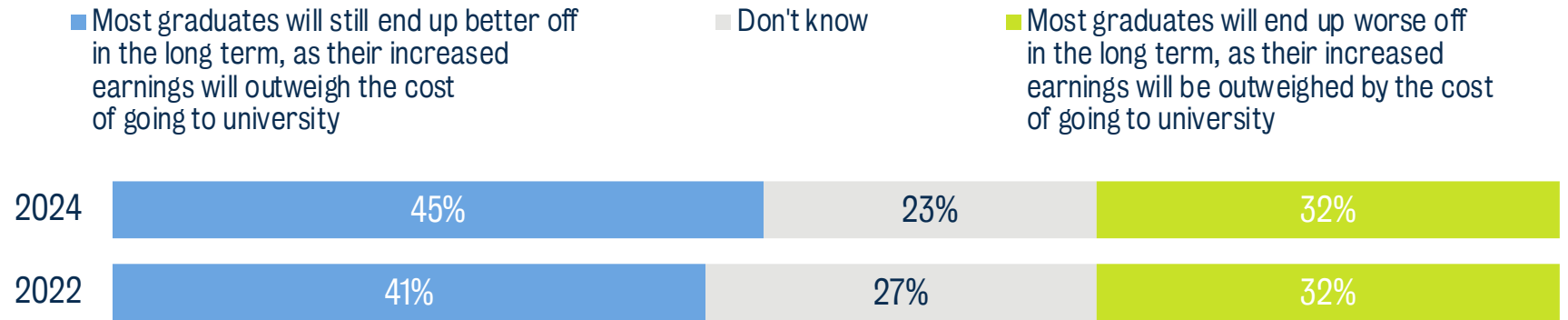
# Nearly half think graduates will end up better off from going to university in the long term – though fewer believe graduates will be *a lot* better off

45% of the public think that, for most English graduates, increased earnings will outweigh university costs, compared with 32% who think the opposite – virtually the same as in 2022.

But a lower share – 36% – think people who go to university will be *a lot* better off than those who don't.

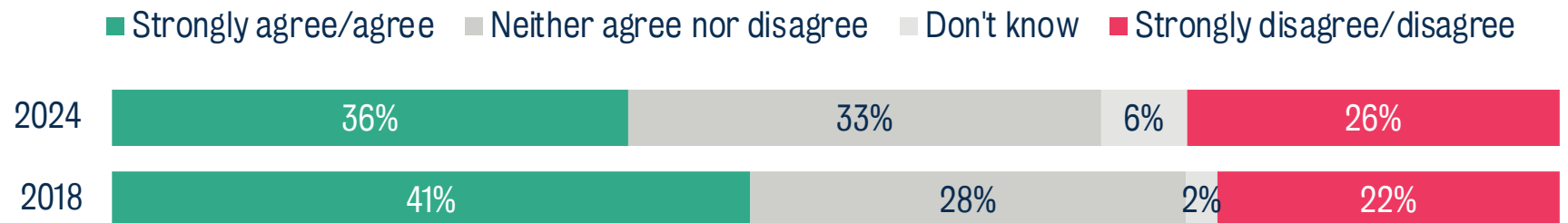
While this is slightly down from the 41% felt this way in 2018, it is still greater than the 26% who disagree in 2024.

With tuition fees of £9,250, a three-year university course will leave the average student at an English university with debt of £27,750, plus living costs during their time at university. However, graduates can normally expect higher salaries over the rest of their working lives. Thinking about the cost of university and graduates' earnings, which of the following best reflects your view?



To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

## In the long run, people who go to university end up being a lot better off financially than those who don't

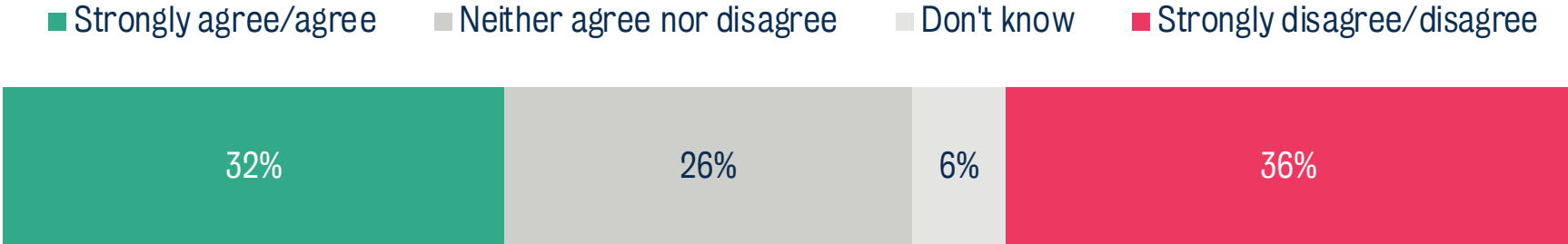


# Opinion is split on whether going to university is more important to getting a job than it was 20 years ago

Around a third of the public agree with this view, while a similar proportion disagree.

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

## Going to university today is more important to getting a good job than it was 20 years ago



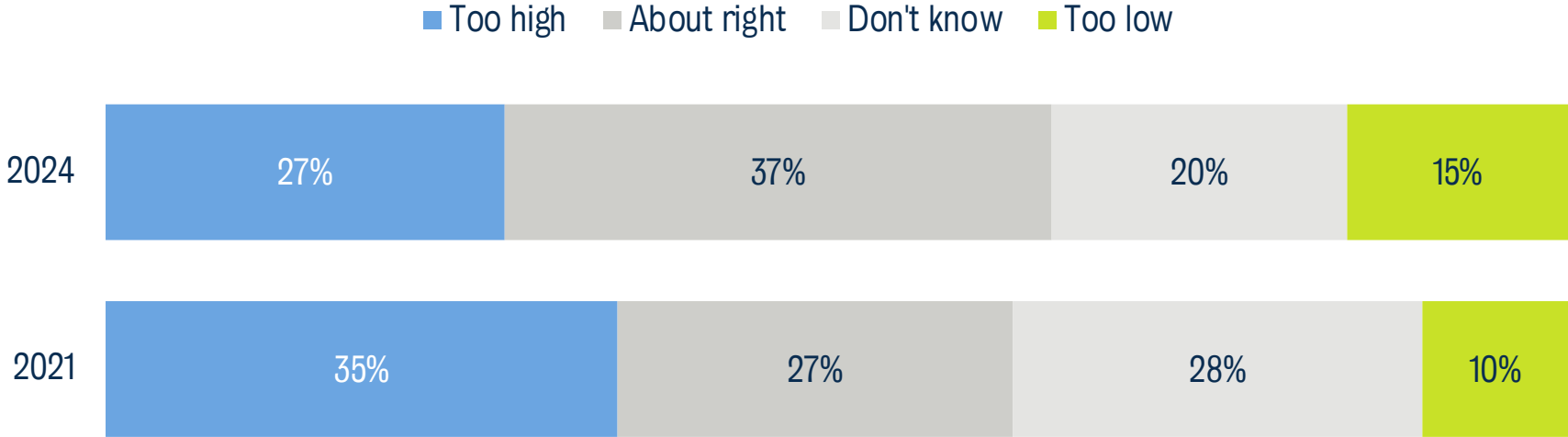


# People increasingly think the proportion going to university is about right

Three years ago, the most common view was that there were too many young people going to university – but now, the public are most likely to feel the level is about right. This is the view expressed by 37%, up from 27% in 2021.

At the same time, there has been a slight increase in those who think the proportion going to university is too low, although this remains a minority view.

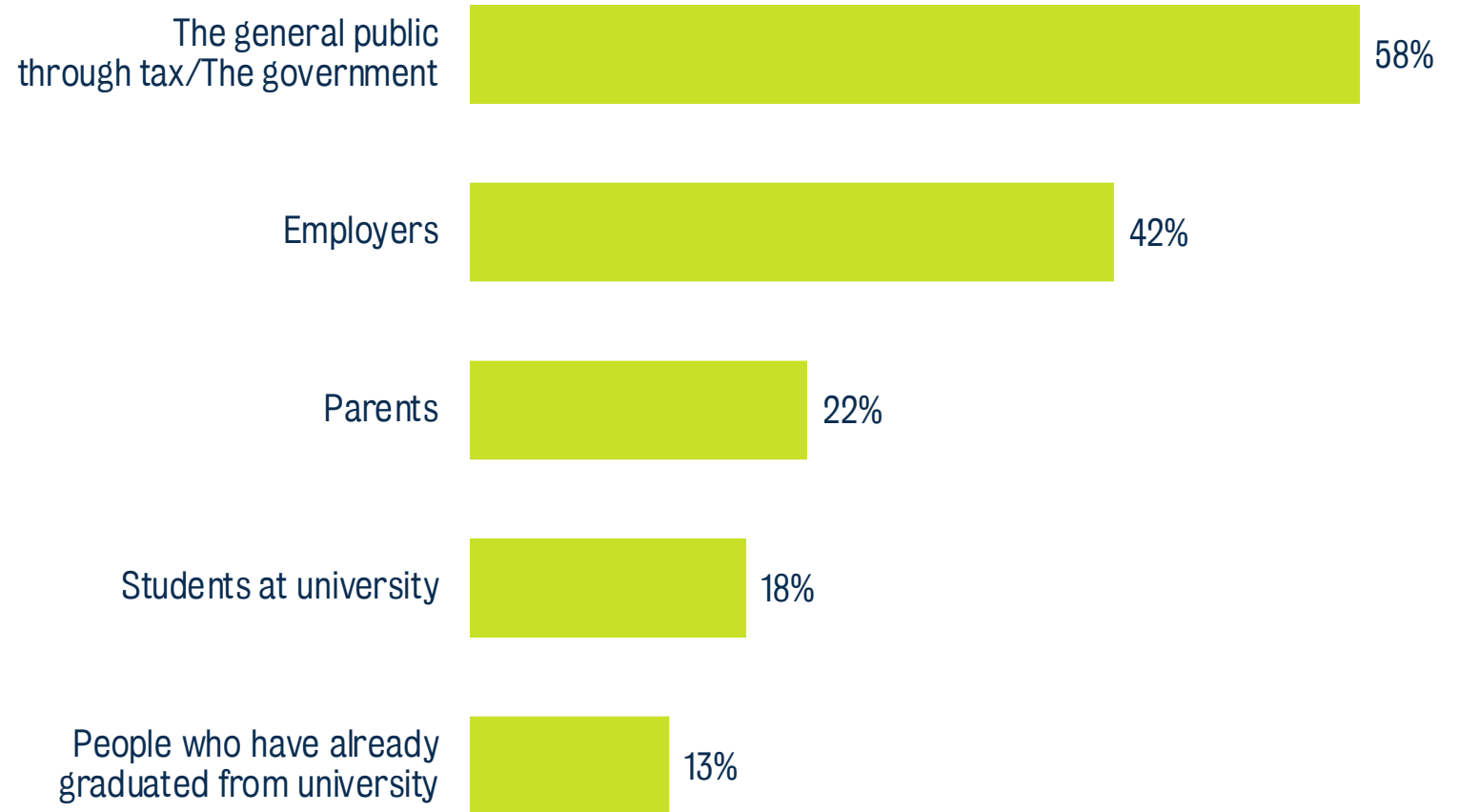
Do you think the proportion of young people going to university is too high, too low or about right?



# A majority of those who want to see greater numbers of young people attending university say this should be funded through tax – but a large proportion also see a role for employers

Among those in favour of increasing student numbers, three in five feel the general public through tax/the government should help pay – but a considerable proportion, two in five, also think employers should contribute.

Which, if any, of the people/bodies on this list do you think should help pay to increase the number of UK university students in Great Britain?\*



# Seven in 10 of the public believe students should be allowed to study without building up debt

And they slightly underestimate just how large the average student debt of English undergraduates is



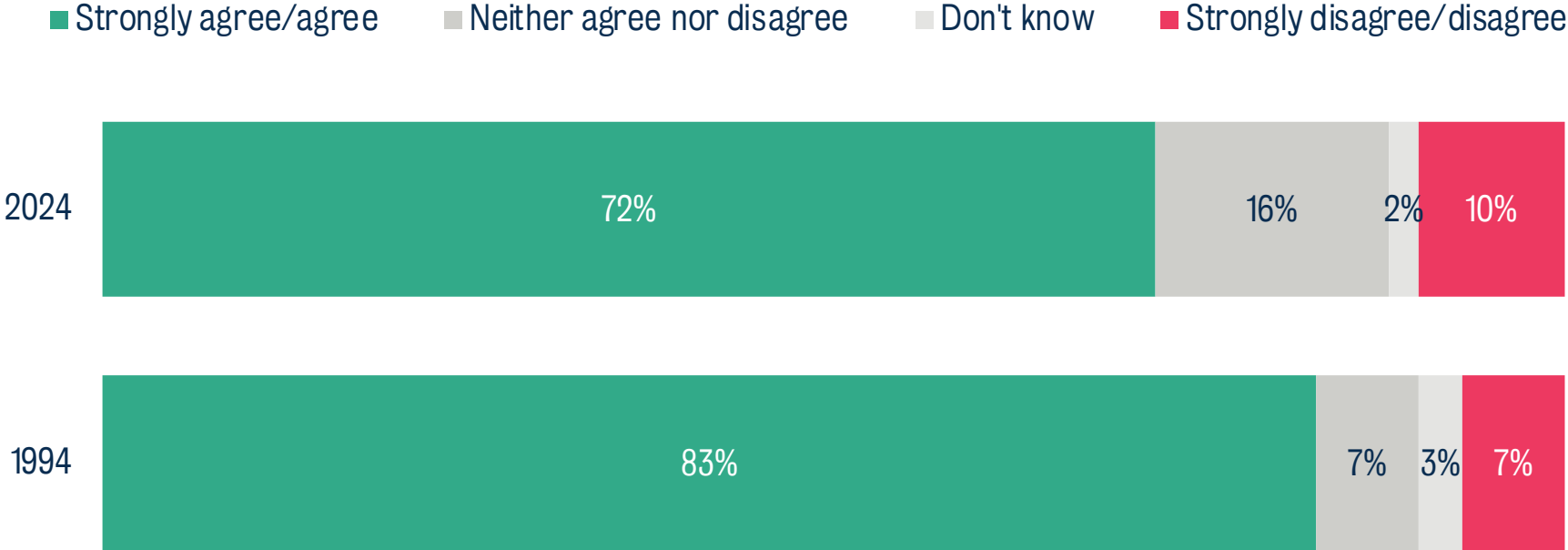


# Most think students should not have to incur debts while studying, although fewer think this now than in 1994

72% agree that students should be allowed to study without building up debts. While this is down from 83% when the same question was asked 30 years ago, it is a strikingly persistent opinion given high debt has become the norm for students in England in that time.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

## Students should be allowed to study without building up debts



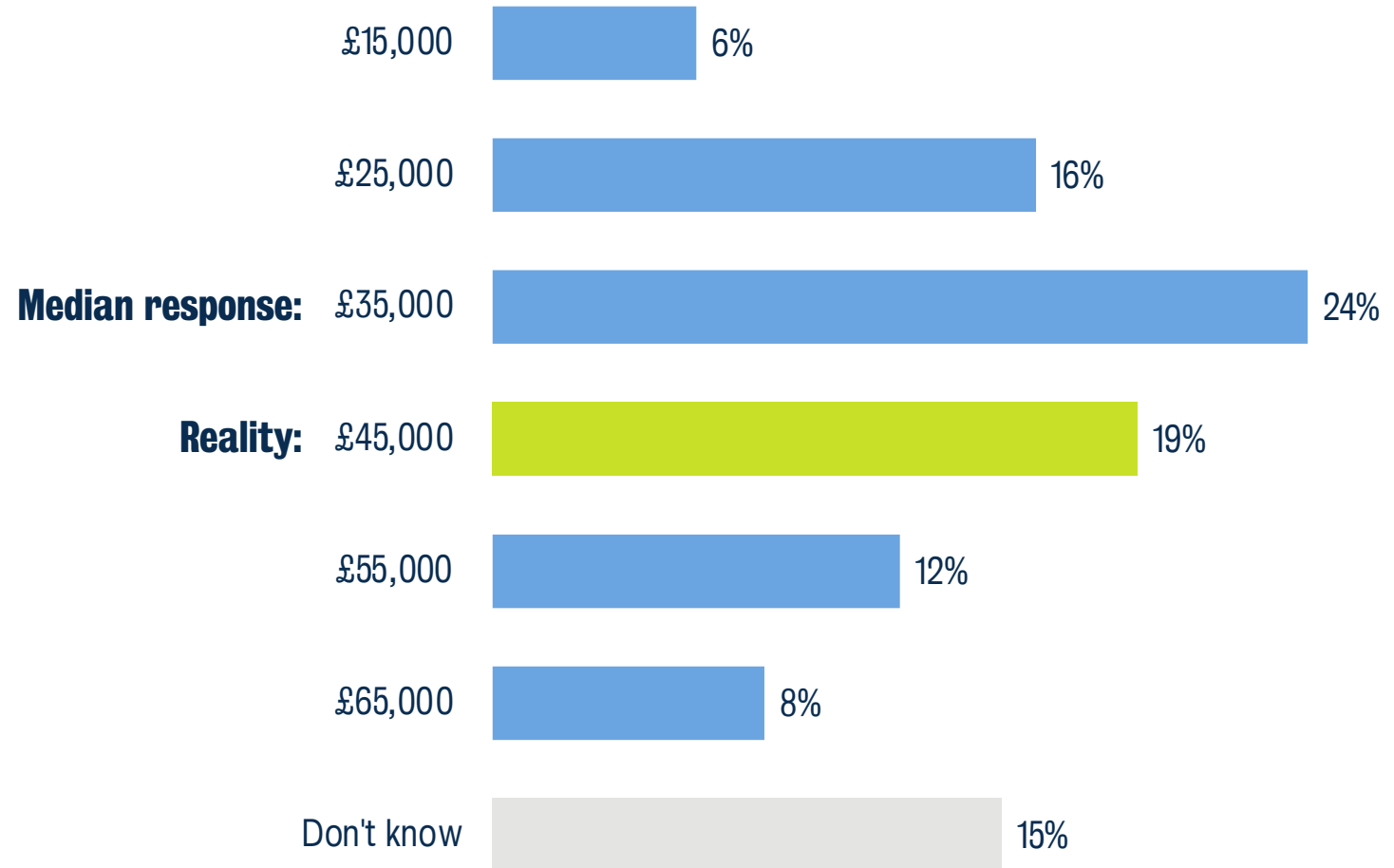
**Agree**  
Labour: 81%  
Conservative: 60%

# People know that students accrue tens of thousands in debt, although slightly underestimate the total amount

An English student graduating from an English university in 2023 started their repayment period with an average debt of £45,000. 19% of people choose this option, compared with 24% who think the amount of debt accrued would be £35,000.

People are also more likely to underestimate rather than overestimate the actual figure of £45,000. For example, twice as many people thought it was £25,000 than thought it was £65,000 – but most of the public correctly recognise the figure is in the tens of thousands of pounds.

Which of the following do you think is closest to the total amount of debt, including fees and living costs, that an English student, graduating from an English university in 2023, would have accrued over the course of their undergraduate degree?



# Opinion is split on whether there should be different tuition fees for different courses

But the public are more supportive when given greater context about the higher delivery costs and varying earnings expectations of some courses





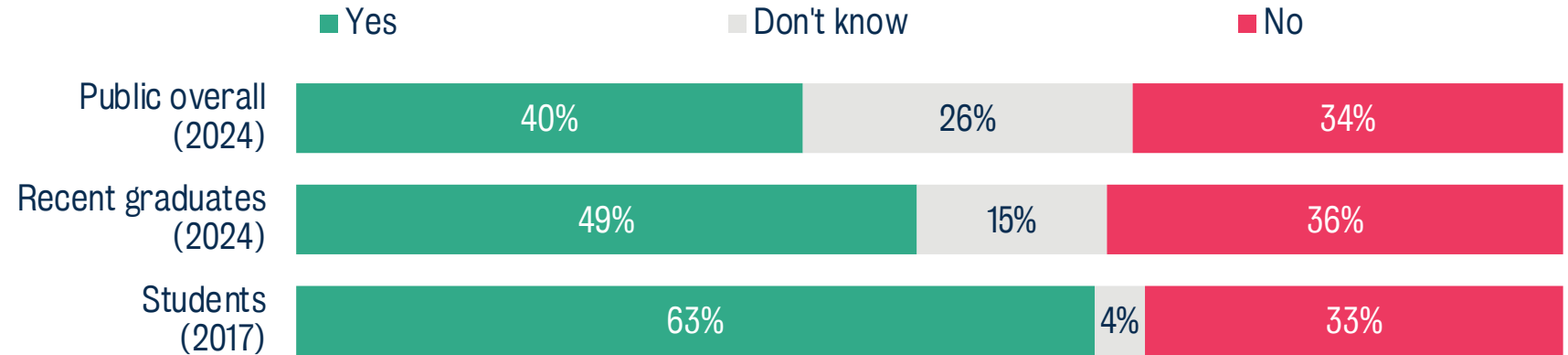
# Opinion is relatively split on the idea of differential fees – but it becomes the most popular option when people are given more context about the varying costs and outcomes of different university courses

We split our sample into two groups. One was asked simply whether undergraduate courses should all have the same fees. 40% of this group said yes (rising to 49% of recent graduates who had started a degree since 2012), compared with 34% who said no.

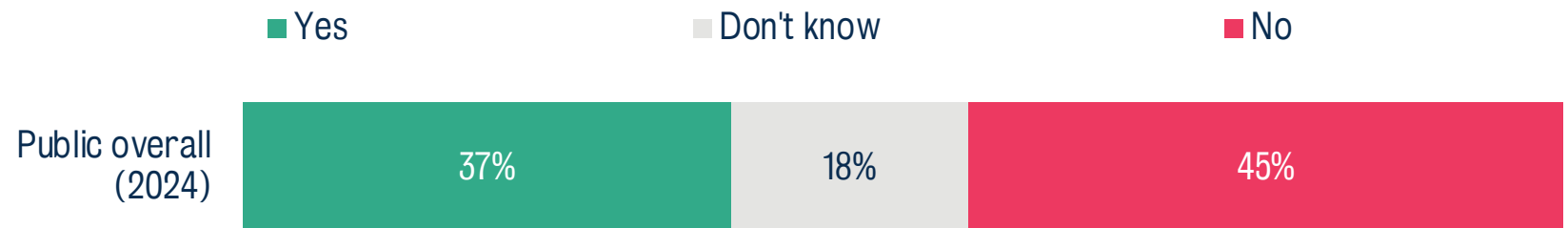
The second group were given background information, such as how some courses cost more to deliver, or have higher earnings expectations. In this group, the balance of opinion was reversed, with 45% against all courses having the same fees and 37% in favour.

As shown from a 2017 survey, university students themselves tend to be much more in favour of all courses costing the same.

Do you think all full-time undergraduate courses at UK universities should have the same tuition fees?



Currently in the UK, most UK university students are charged the same tuition fees for their course, regardless of how much that course costs to deliver, the average earnings of graduates from that course or the prestige of the university they study at. Some courses cost much more to deliver than others, graduates from some subjects earn much more on average than others and some universities are ranked as higher in quality of teaching and research than others. Do you think all full-time undergraduate courses at UK universities should have the same tuition fees?

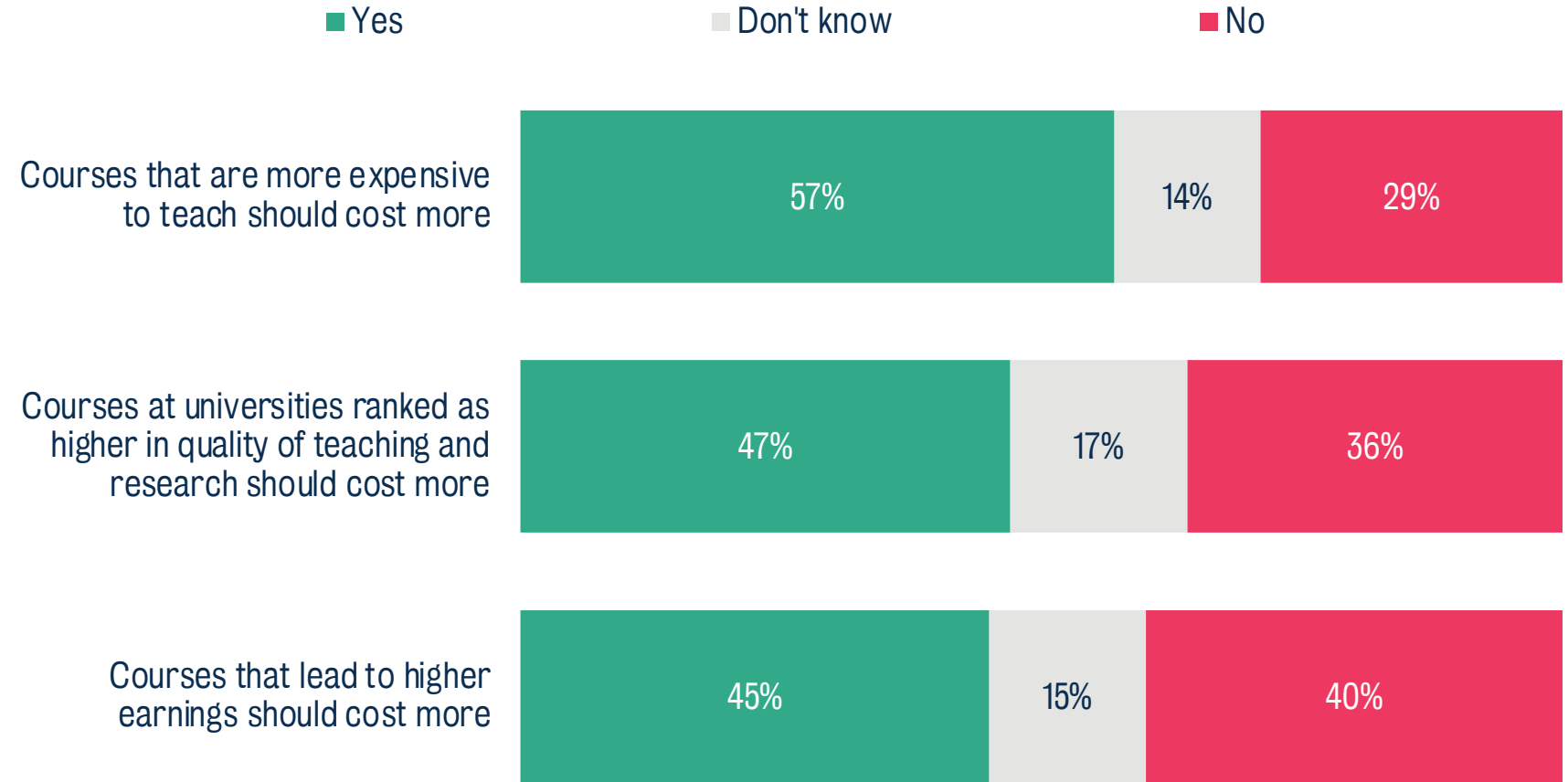


# The cost of course delivery is the most popular basis for differential fees

Around six in 10 people say if different fees for different courses were ever introduced, courses that are more expensive to teach should cost more, while around half think higher costs should be determined by the quality of teaching and research or their future earnings potential.

Course expense was also the preferred basis for differentiating fees when a similar question was asked to students by the [Higher Education Policy Institute](#) in 2017.

If different fees for different courses were ever introduced, what would be your preference?



# People are mostly unaware of how universities have to use tuition fees to subsidise their research activity

Universities don't get paid the full cost of research they conduct when it's funded by government and many other funders. To balance the books, universities therefore need to draw on income from other sources, particularly education.

29% of the public correctly identify this is the case – only slightly more than the 22% who believe the opposite, that research subsidises teaching.

But the most common response is “don't know”, indicating the public are largely unaware of this central feature of how universities operate.

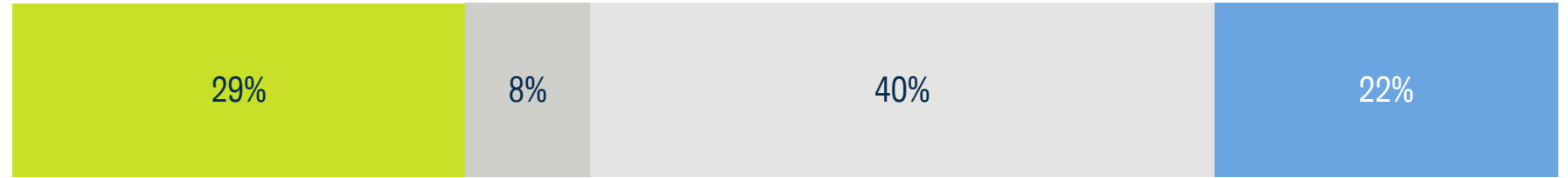
Which of the following, if either, is true?

■ Universities use the funding they receive from teaching students to subsidise the research they carry out

■ Neither of these

■ Don't know

■ Universities use the funding they receive from their research to subsidise the teaching they carry out





**When people are asked directly why they have positive or negative views of universities, they focus on direct benefits to students, including the quality of education and whether they are value for money, or not.**

**But statistical analysis shows attitudes are most significantly shaped by whether the public see universities as globally renowned and contributing to national and local priorities – and that they're not just in it for the money.**



# People with positive views of universities cite the benefits to students, their quality and reputation. Those with negative views mention cost, poor quality and management, and that alternatives make university unnecessary

We asked people to explain some of their opinions using free-text responses. Those who are positive about universities mainly cite their benefits to students, followed by the quality of universities' provision and their reputation. 10% cite their societal or economic benefit.

The most common reasons for negative feelings are the expense, poor quality and/or management, a belief that university is not necessary and/or there are better alternatives, and that they are too politicised, particularly too left wing or "woke".

The view that university is not necessary was also the main reason given by those who thought opportunities for going to university should be reduced, or that the proportion going is too high.

Reasons given for opinions about universities. Why do you...

Ranking	...have relatively <b>positive</b> feelings about UK universities?	...have relatively <b>negative</b> feelings about UK universities?	...think opportunities for going to university should be reduced, or think that too many are going?
<b>1</b>	They benefit students and their future (40%)	They're too expensive (31%)	University is not necessary – there are better alternatives (38%)
<b>2</b>	They provide a good quality education and/or experience (35%)	Poor quality and/or management (eg "too business-like") (27%)	There are too many going these days (27%)
<b>3</b>	They have a good reputation (29%)	They are not necessary – there are better alternatives (26%)	A university education is not valuable or relevant to life and work (23%)
<b>4</b>	They are good for the economy and/or society (10%)	Students and/or universities are too politicised (e.g. left wing, "woke") (18%)	The standards and work ethic of students are too low (17%)



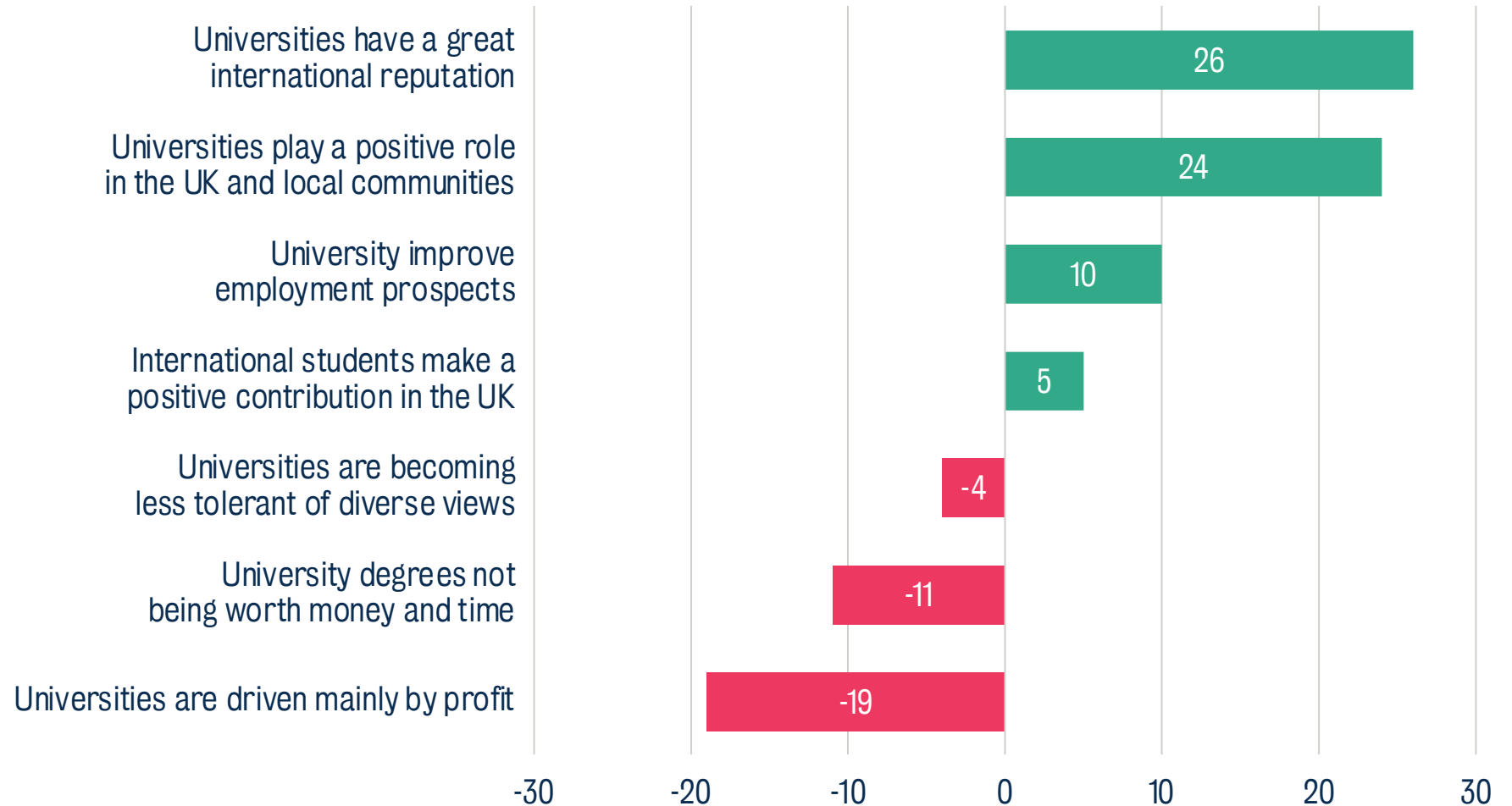
# Statistical analysis shows how important “big picture” aspects are to the perceived value of universities, where the most important drivers of positive attitudes are international excellence and impact on the country and communities, and the key negative driver is being in it for profit

Statistical modelling shows the key drivers of positive attitudes towards universities are the perceptions that they are internationally renowned and benefit both the country as a whole and local areas. Their role in helping students find jobs is less of a factor, which fits with wider public scepticism about their ability to equip people for the world of work.

The main driver of negative attitudes is seeing universities as just in it for the money and selling degrees that don't deliver good value for money.

But the concern that universities are becoming less tolerant of different views or the recognition that international students make a positive contribution have only a marginal effect on overall attitudes – they are clearly a side issue to the core activity and purpose of universities.

Opinions that underpin overall positive and negative attitudes towards universities





# THE POLICY INSTITUTE

## Survey details

Fieldwork was conducted via Focaldata's in-house platform, with API integration to an online panel network. Data collection took place over two fieldwork periods: 1–9 May (2,683 respondents) and 6–10 June (1,049 respondents, plus a booster sample of 369 parents of children aged 11 to 17 who feature in certain specific questions). Respondents were from a nationally representative group of those aged 16+ in the UK, with data weighted by age, gender, region, ethnicity and education status.

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