



Department
for Education

Attitudes to education: the British Social Attitudes Survey 2017

Research brief

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NatCen Social Research



Social Science in Government

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Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE) has commissioned questions on NatCen's British Social Attitudes survey (BSA) on a number of occasions since its inception in 1983. In 2017, as part of a joint contract with the Government Equalities Office (GEO), DfE commissioned a set of questions measuring public attitudes in relation to the following topics: the education system, schools and higher education. A list of the questions referred to within this report is provided at Annex 1. This briefing paper presents headline analysis of the results to these questions.

Carried out annually since 1983,¹ BSA is an authoritative source of data on the views of the British public. It uses a random probability sampling methodology to yield a representative sample of adults aged 18+ living in private households in Britain.² The majority of questions are asked by an interviewer face-to-face in the form of a Computer Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI), while a smaller number are answered by respondents in a self-completion booklet. Questions commissioned by DfE were included across both sections of the survey.

Data collection was carried out between July and November 2017 in England, Wales and Scotland, with a response rate of 45%.³ The achieved sample for the face-to-face questionnaire was 3,011, and the achieved sample for the self-completion booklet was 2,474.⁴ The data have been weighted to account for unequal selection probabilities and non-response bias, and calibrated to match the population profile on the basis of age, sex and region. For the purposes of this report, only responses from respondents in England are included in the analysis, reflecting the geographic extent of DfE's responsibilities. All differences described in the text (between different groups of people or survey waves) are statistically significant at the 95% level or above, unless otherwise stated.

¹ Apart from in 1988 and 1992 when its core funding was used to fund the British Election Study series.

² For more technical details of the survey methodology see: <http://bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-35/technical-details.aspx>

³ This is the lower limit of the response rate, which is calculated as a range from a lower limit where all unknown eligibility cases (e.g. address inaccessible, or unknown whether address is residential) are assumed to be eligible and therefore included in the unproductive outcomes, to an upper limit where all these cases are assumed to be ineligible and therefore excluded for the response calculation. The upper limit of the response rate for BSA 2017 was 46%.

⁴ The total sample size for British Social Attitudes 2017 was 3,988 for the face-to-face questionnaire and 3,258 for the self-completion booklet. Respondents were randomly allocated one of four versions of the questionnaire and self-completion booklet, labelled A to D. Questions commissioned by DfE were included in versions A, B and D (3,001 face-to-face respondents, 2,474 self-completion booklets returned).

Executive summary

NatCen's annual British Social Attitudes survey (BSA) is an authoritative source of data on the views of the British public. It uses a random probability sampling methodology to yield a representative sample of adults aged 18+ living in private households in England, Wales and Scotland.

The Department for Education (DfE) has commissioned questions on NatCen's British Social Attitudes survey (BSA) on a number of occasions since its inception in 1983. In 2017, the Department commissioned a set of questions measuring public attitudes in relation to the education system, schools, higher education, transphobia, marriage and homosexuality, gender division of labour, occupational segregation, self-image, and harassment. Key findings from the DfE-funded questions on the 2017 wave of the survey are summarised below.

General views on the education system in England

- Educational spending on secondary school children was regarded as the highest priority (by 29% of respondents).
- Half of respondents (50%) said that practical skills and training provided more opportunities and choices in life than good academic skills, although 34% also thought that it is a mixture of the types of learning and/or depends on the context.

General views on schools in England

- Respondents were more positive about the GCSEs and A Levels preparing young people for further studies than they were for work.
- Over 4 in 5 (82%) thought that the A levels effectively prepared people for further studies in contrast to just over a third (67%) who reported the same for GCSEs.
- Young people aged 18-24 years were less likely (36%) than older people (58%) aged 65-74 to think that A levels prepared them well for work.
- When asked about legitimate reasons for children aged 8 and 15 to miss school, the most common answer was to attend a family funeral (89% for children aged 15, 63% for children aged 8). However, other responses varied depending on the child's age.

Higher education in England

- Three-quarters (75%) of respondents said it is important to attend higher education, and 61% believed that a university education opens up better career opportunities for people whose parents did not attend university.

- Almost half 44% believed that there are enough opportunities for young people to go on to higher education while 43% said that these opportunities should be increased. Younger people were also more likely to think these opportunities should be increased (49% of 18-24 year olds in contrast to 29% of those aged 75 and above).
- A large majority of respondents (84%) said their children were fairly or very likely to get into higher education. However, those with income and those from higher socioeconomic groups were more likely to express this view.
- Although majority of the respondents (75%) believed that going on to higher education is important, more than half (56%) of people did not think a university education is affordable for all young people regardless of their family background.

Tuition fees in England

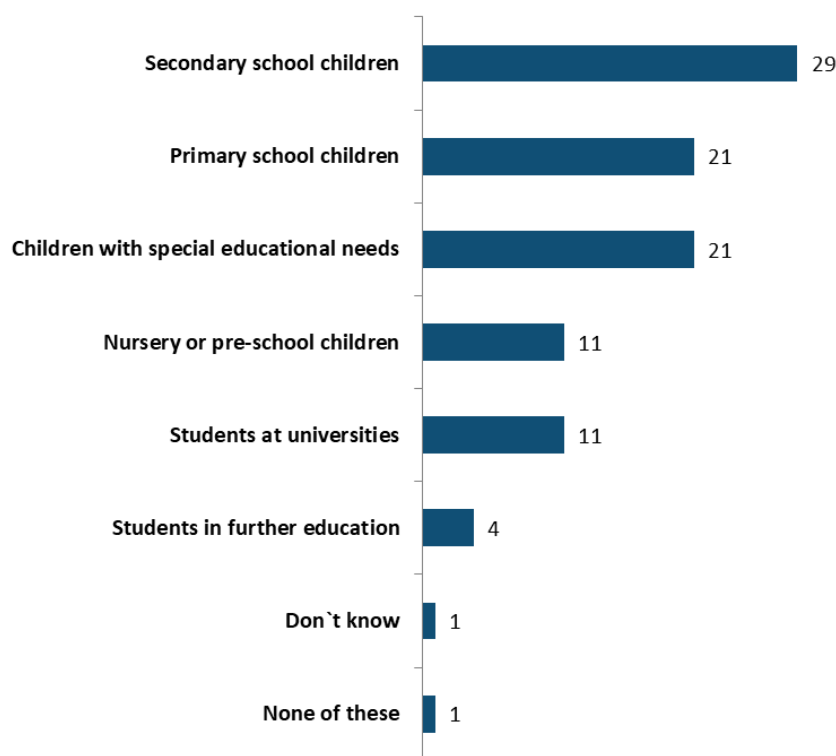
- Almost two third (64%) of respondents said some students or families should pay toward the costs of their tuition depending on circumstances and a quarter (26%) said no student should pay towards the cost of their tuition.
- More than half (61%) of respondents said that tuition fees for all universities and colleges should be the same. However, responses were divided when asked about tuition fees for subjects. Half of the respondents (50%) said that tuition fees should be the same for all subjects while 47% believed that it should depend on the subject.
- More than half of respondents (52%) said that universities and colleges have the responsibility to protect free speech on campus. Younger people were more likely to express this view (64% of 18-24 year olds) than older people (49% of those aged 75 and above).

1. General views on the education system in England

Priorities for education spending

Respondents were asked what their two highest priorities would be for extra government spending on education. Respondents were most likely to say that secondary school children would be their highest priority, with 29% saying this. This was followed by primary school children (21%), and children with special educational needs (21%) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Highest priorities for extra government spending on education



Unweighted base: all respondents in England (2,613)

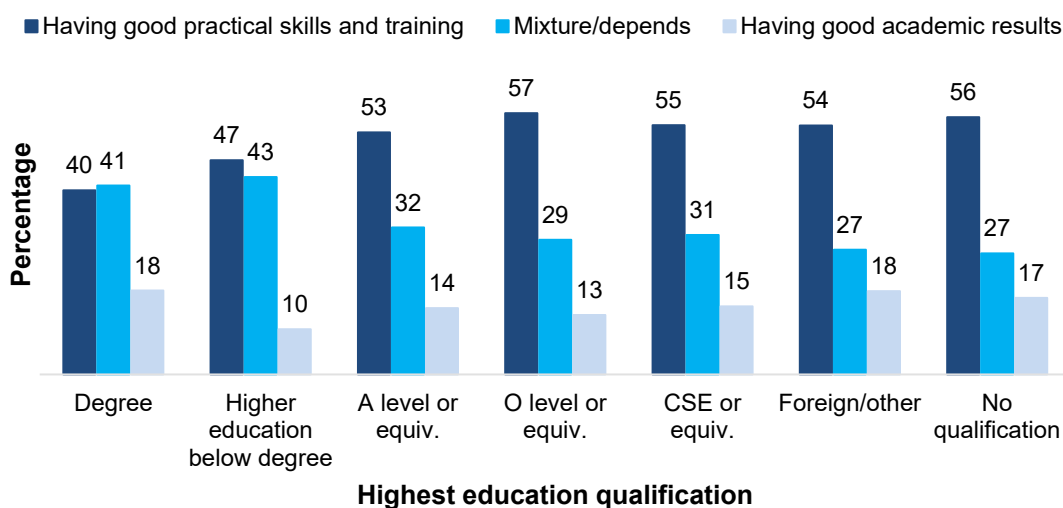
There were some differences in priorities for extra spending on education by socioeconomic characteristics. Degree holders (34%) and those in the highest-income households (35%) gave highest priority to extra spending on secondary school children, which those with no qualifications (30%) and those in the lowest-income households (29%) were the most likely to identify spending on children with special educational needs as their highest priority.

Vocational vs academic learning

Respondents were asked whether they thought vocational or academic learning provided more life opportunities and choices in the long run. Half of respondents (50%) said that having good practical skills and training provided more opportunities and choices in life than good academic results, while only 13% thought having good academic results was more important. Around a third (34%) said it was important to have a mixture of the two types of learning, or that it depended on the context.

Attitudes were strongly patterned by socioeconomic characteristics. People with lower educational qualifications and incomes were more likely to value practical skills over good academic results. Meanwhile those with higher qualifications and incomes considered a mixture of academic results and practical skills as being important in providing life opportunities and choices (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Preference for practical skills or academic results, by respondent's highest educational qualification



Unweighted base: all respondents in England (2,617)

There was also a significant association between socioeconomic status and valuing practical skills and training. Respondents who were small employers or self-employed (60%) and those in lower supervisory and technical occupations (57%) were the most likely to favour practical skills. People in managerial (40%) and intermediate occupations (35%) were the most likely to favour a mixture of good academic results and practical training.

Figure 3: Attitudes towards vocational vs academic learning 2002-2017



Unweighted base: all respondents in England (2017: 2,617)

In 2002, when the question was first asked, differences in attitudes towards vocational and academic learning were far less marked than in 2017. While views on the various types of learning have remained broadly stable from 2014, the perceived importance of good academic results has declined over time. The proportion of people saying that it provides the most opportunities in life in 2017 (15%) has halved since 2012 (30%).

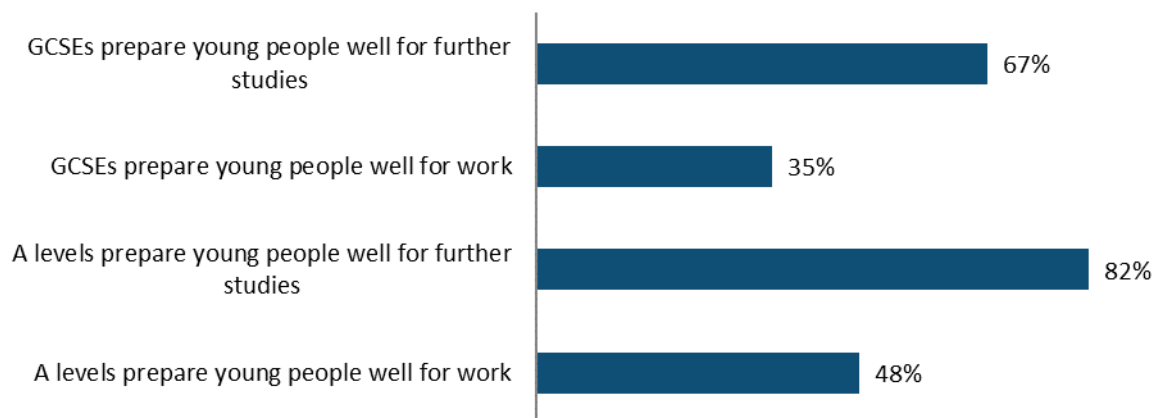
2. General views on schools in England

Confidence in school qualifications

The government has recently reformed GCSEs and A levels. The first reformed GCSEs were sat in maths, English literature and English language in 2017, and the remaining new GCSEs continue to be rolled out, and the last tranche will be available for first teaching from September 2018. At AS and A Level, the first reformed exams were sat in 2016 and 2017 respectively. The remaining new AS Levels and A Levels continue to be rolled out, and the last tranche of A Levels will be available for first teaching from September 2018.

Respondents were more positive about GCSEs and A Levels preparing young people well⁵ for further studies than they were for work (Figure 4). However, people were more confident that A Levels were equipping young people for further study (82%) than GCSEs (67%). Respondents were least confident in GCSEs preparing students for work.

Figure 4: Proportion reporting that secondary school qualifications prepare young people well for further studies and work



Unweighted base: all respondents in England (2,617)

Since these questions were first asked the year before (2016), there does not appear to have been any statistically significant change in responses over time.

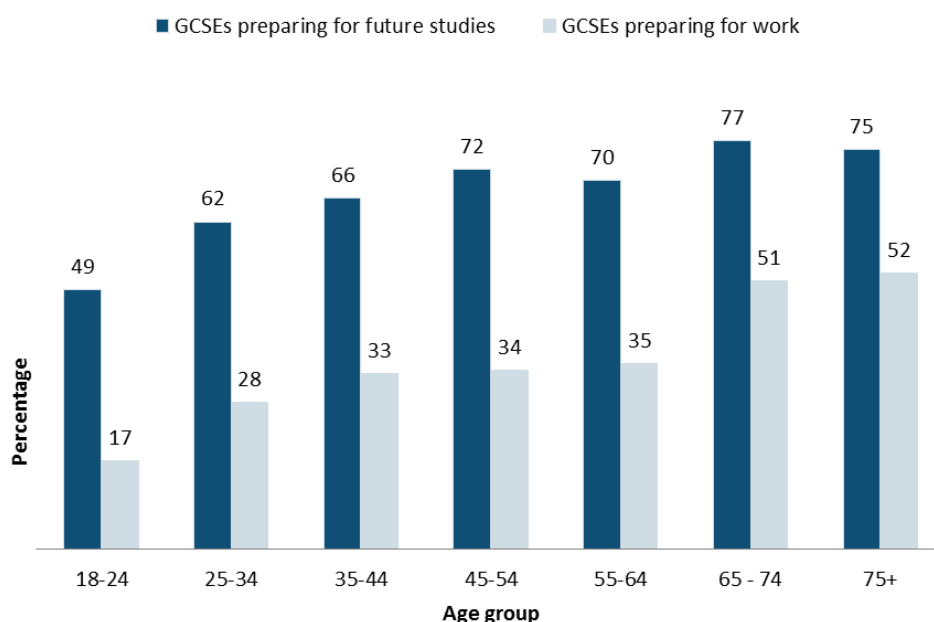
⁵ 'Quite well' or 'Very well'.

Age and confidence in school qualifications

Young people aged 18-24 years were evenly divided on the issue of how well GCSEs prepared young people for further studies – 49% suggested they prepared them well opposed to 50% who felt it did not prepare them well⁶. A further 1% said ‘don’t know’.

Overall, there was a general trend for younger people to be less likely to think that GCSEs were good preparation for further studies and work. Older people were significantly more likely to think that GCSEs prepared young people well both for work and further studies.

Figure 5: Age differences in the proportion of people who think that GCSEs prepare young people well for work or future studies



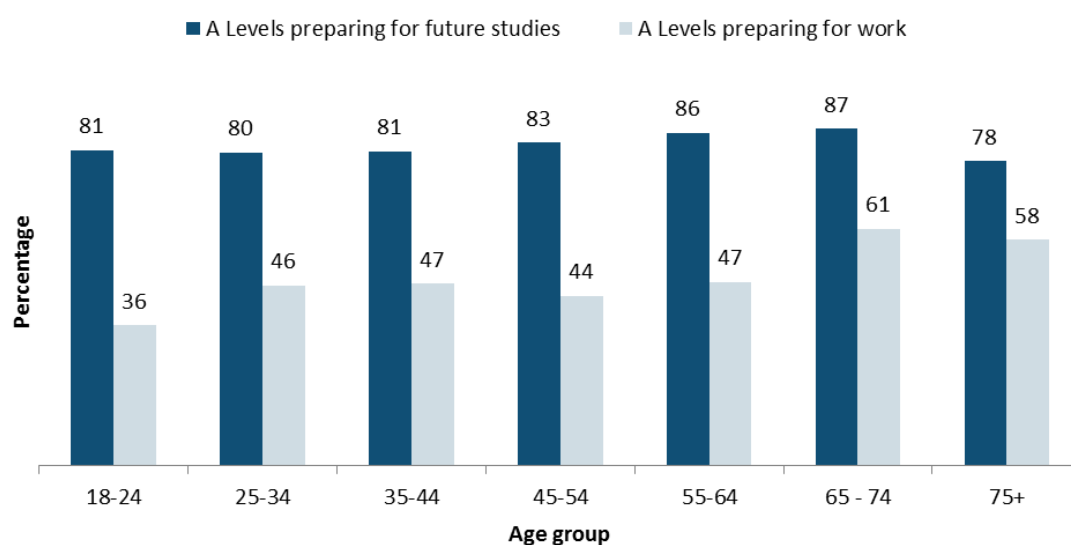
Unweighted base: all respondents in England (2,617)

As well as demographic differences there were differences by income levels, socio-economic status and levels of education. Those in the lowest income group (42%), those in semi-routine/routine occupations (41%) and those with no qualifications (53%) were the most likely to express confidence in the GCSEs preparing people for work.

Young people aged 18-24 years were the least likely (36%) to think that A levels prepared people well for work. However, this age effect was not present in terms of preparing young people well for future studies, although overall confidence was considerably higher than it was for work.

⁶ ‘Not very well’ or ‘Not at all well’.

Figure 6: Age differences in the proportion of people who think that A levels prepare young people well for work or future studies



Unweighted base: all respondents in England (2,617)

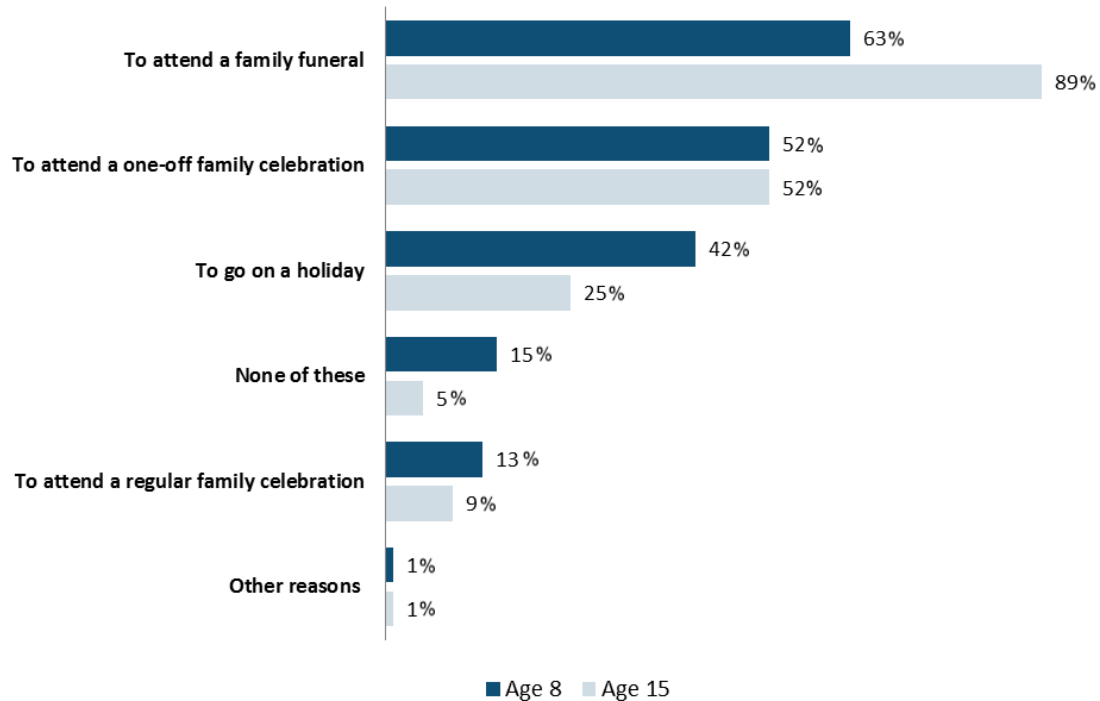
As was also the case for GCSEs, there was a negative relationship between income levels, socioeconomic status, and levels of education, and confidence in A levels preparing young people for work. People with no qualifications (57%), with the lowest income (52%), or in semi-routine/routine occupations (57%) were most likely to think that the A levels effectively prepare young people for work; conversely those with A levels (41%) or a degree (43%) or those with the highest income (43%) were the least likely.

In terms of preparing for future studies, the opposite relationship exists – those with higher qualifications (e.g. 84% with a degree) and who have the highest income (88%) were more likely to think that the A levels equipped young people for further studies.

Attendance

Respondents were asked what would be a legitimate reason for a child aged 8 and 15 to miss school. Although the most common option was ‘to attend a family funeral’, responses varied depending on the child’s age.

Figure 7: Occasions where it is acceptable for children aged 8 and 15 to miss school



Unweighted base: all respondents in England (2,617)

Children aged 15

The most common answer was to attend a family funeral (89%), followed by to attend a one-off family celebration (52%). Only a quarter of respondents (25%) mentioned to go on a holiday and less than one in ten (9%) mentioned to attend a regular family celebration.

Children aged 8

Responses for children aged 8 differed slightly. Attending a family funeral was the most commonplace at 63%, although this proportion is considerably lower than that for children aged 15 (89%). This was followed by attendance at a one-off family celebration (52%), and to go on a holiday (42%). The percentage of respondents who chose going on a family holiday for children aged 8 is also considerably higher than that for children aged 15 (25%).

3. Higher education in England

Access to higher education

While a majority of respondents considered opportunities and choices in life more likely to come from practical skills and training or a mix of good academic results and vocational learning, rather than academic results alone, three quarters (75%) of respondents considered it important⁷ that young people go on to higher education. However, this proportion has decreased since 2012, when 80% said it was important. Conversely, 14% in 2017 said it was not important⁸ compared to 7% in 2012.

When asked if a university education opens up better career opportunities for people whose parents did not attend university, 61% of respondents agreed⁹ with this statement. This proportion does not appear to have changed significantly since the question was first asked in 2014 (62%).

Opportunities to go on to higher education

Responses were mixed with regards to opportunities for young people to go on to higher education. Fewer than half of the respondents (44%) believed that the level of opportunity was about right, while 43% said that opportunities should be increased.¹⁰ About one in ten (11%) thought that opportunities should be reduced.¹¹

Younger people were more likely to think that opportunities should be increased. Just under half (49%) of 18-24 year olds and 54% of 35-44 year olds believed that there should be more opportunities for young people to go on to higher education, in contrast to 29% of those aged 75 and above.

Access to higher education for their own children

After seeking respondent views on opportunities for young people in general to access higher education, respondents with children aged 5 to 16 year old were asked how likely it was that any of their own children would go on to higher education.

A large majority of respondents (84%) said their children were fairly or very likely to go on to higher education, a proportion that has increased since 2004

⁷ 'Fairly important' or 'Very important'.

⁸ 'Not very important' or 'Not at all important'.

⁹ 'Agree' or 'Agree strongly'.

¹⁰ 'Increased a little' or 'Increased a lot'.

¹¹ 'Reduced a little' or 'Reduced a lot'.

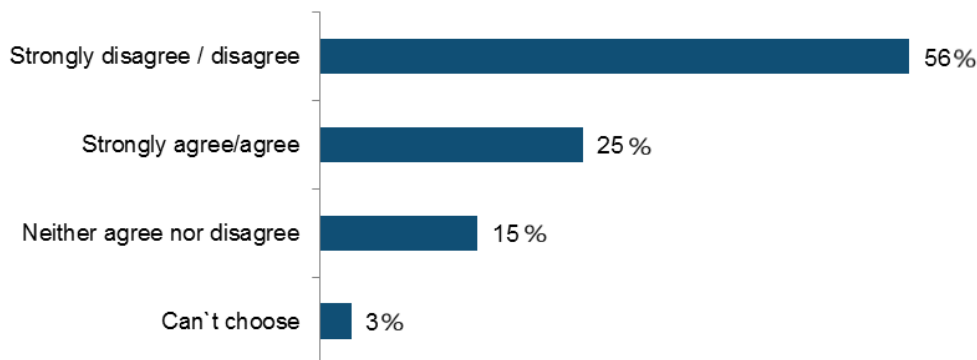
when 74% of respondents, but remained relatively steady since 2012 (87%). In 2017, 15% did not think it was likely that any of their children would go on to university.¹²

These attitudes varied according to certain socioeconomic characteristics. Those with degrees and those in the highest income households were the most likely to think that their children would attend university (93% and 91%), compared for example, to those with no qualifications (77%) and those in the lowest income households (76%).

Affordability of university

While a majority of the respondents believed that going on to higher education was important, over half (56%) of respondents disagreed that a university education was affordable for all young people. One quarter of respondents (25%) agreed that it was affordable for all regardless of family background (see Figure 8). This was a significant reduction since the question was first asked in 2014, when 35% of respondents agreed that university was affordable for all.

Figure 8: Is a university education affordable for all young people regardless of their family background?



Unweighted base: all respondents in England (2,617)

There was a negative relationship between socioeconomic characteristics and perceived affordability of university. Those with no qualification (35%) and from the lowest income households (30%) were more likely to think that higher education was affordable to all, compared to degree holders (21%) and people from the highest income households (22%).

Tuition fees

Should all students and their families pay for their tuition?

¹² 'Not very likely' or 'Not at all likely'.

Almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents said some students or families should pay toward the costs of their tuition depending on their circumstances, while a quarter (25%) said no students or families should pay towards the cost of their tuition. Only 10% said all students or their families should pay.

Should there be a difference in fees between different universities and colleges?

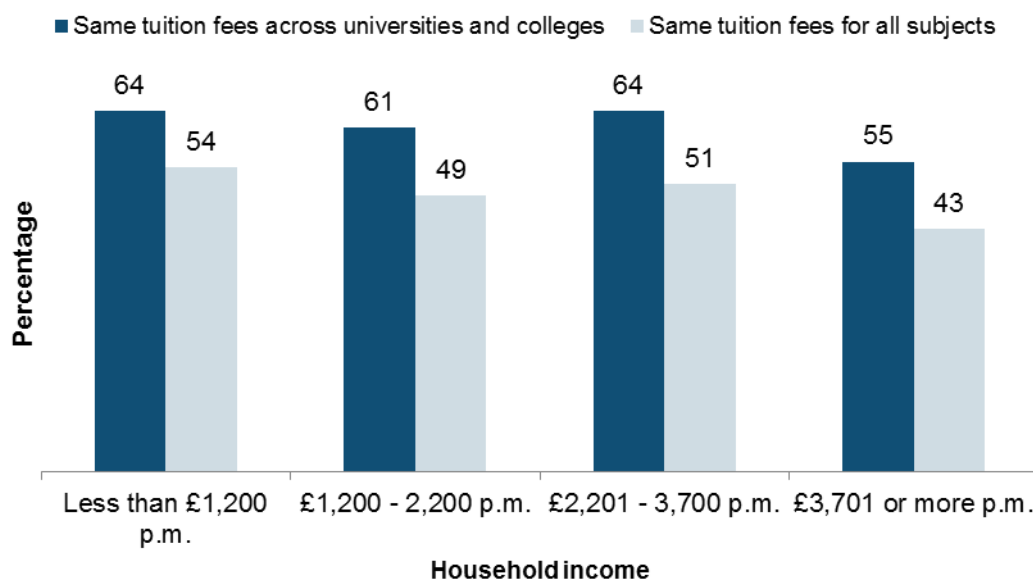
Around three-fifths (61%) of respondents said that tuition fees for all universities and colleges should be the same, while 37% said fees should differ depending on the university or college that students attend.

Should there be differences in terms of fees depending on the subject studied?

Responses were divided roughly equally, as half of the respondents (50%) said that tuition fees should be the same for all subjects while 47% believed that it should differ depending on the subject.

There were socioeconomic differences in attitudes towards tuition fees, with the highest income respondents being more likely to support differential tuition fees by institution and by subject (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Relationship between household income and views on tuition fees



Unweighted base: all respondents in England (2,617)

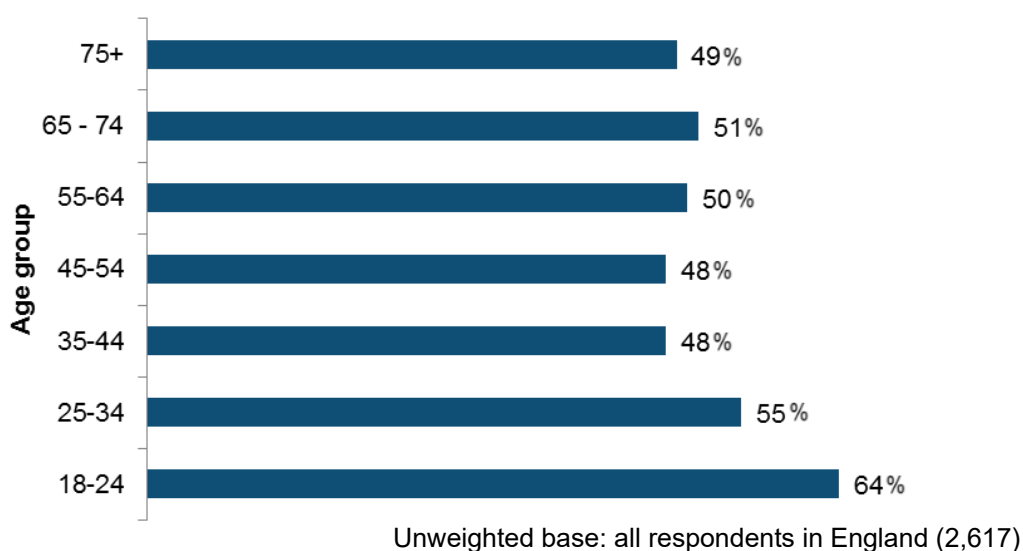
Women (54%) were also more likely to believe tuition fees should be the same for all subjects (compared to 47% of men), as were those with no qualifications (59%), compared to 44% of degree holders.

Extremism

The Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015 sets out the *Prevent Duty* which states that higher education bodies must have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism. One of the specific provisions of this duty is to “have systems in place for assessing and mitigating risks around external speakers and events on campus, while maintaining the existing duty to promote freedom of speech”.¹³

This section looks at how respondents think universities and colleges should manage free speech and the expression of extremist views. More than half of respondents (52%) said that universities and colleges have the responsibility to protect free speech on campus; even it means extremist views being aired. Conversely, 42% believed that protecting students from hearing extremist views should prevail, while 5% of respondents did not believe in either of these options.

Figure 10: Universities and colleges have the responsibility to protect free speech on campus



Younger people were significantly more likely to favour free speech on campus than older people. Over three-fifths of 18-24 year olds (64%) said that it is the responsibility of universities and colleges to protect free speech on campus in comparison to 49% of 75+ year olds. Similar trends were observed across educational qualifications, as 59% of degree holders prioritised protecting free speech, in comparison to 44% of respondents with no qualification.

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance>

Annex 1 – Question wording

CAPI questions

Education - general

VERSION A, B, D: ASK ALL

[BStart]

Now for some questions about education.

1 Press 1 and <Enter> to continue.

8 (Don't know)

9 (Refusal)

[EdSpnd1c]

CARD E1

Which of the groups on this card, if any, would be your highest priority for extra government spending on education?

1 Nursery or pre-school children

2 Primary school children

3 Secondary school children

4 Children with special educational needs

5 Students at universities

6 Students in further education

7 (None of these)

8 (Don't know)

9 (Refusal)

[EdSpnd2c]

CARD E1 AGAIN

And which is your next highest priority?

1 Nursery or pre-school children

2 Primary school children

3 Secondary school children

4 Children with special educational needs

5 Students at universities

6 Students in further education

7 (None of these)

8 (Don't know)

9 (Refusal)

[VocVAcad]

In the long-run, which do you think gives people more opportunities and choice in life...READ OUT...

1 ...having good practical skills and training,

2 or, having good academic results?

3 (Mixture/depends)

8 (Don't know)

9 (Refusal)

Schools

VERSION A, B, D: ASK ALL

[ATTD15]

CARD E2

Some people think that children should attend school every day unless they are unwell. Others think that there are occasions where it's acceptable for the child to miss school. Thinking about a child aged 15, for which, if any, of the occasions listed on this card do you think it is acceptable for them to miss school?

CODE ALL THAT APPLY

Multicoded (Maximum of 8 codes)

- 1 To go on a holiday [ATTD151]
- 2 To attend a family funeral [ATTD152]
- 3 To attend a one-off family celebration (e.g. a wedding, a golden wedding anniversary) [ATTD153]
- 4 To attend a regular family celebration (e.g. a birthday) [ATTD154]
- 5 None of these [ATTD155]
- 6 (Other reasons (PLEASE WRITE IN)) [ATTD156]
- 7 (SPONTANEOUS: I don't think it is appropriate for the child to go to a funeral) [ATTD157]
- 8 (SPONTANEOUS: it depends on the circumstances) [ATTD158]
- 98 (Don't know)
- 99 (Refusal)

[ATTD8]

CARD E2 AGAIN

(Some people think that children should attend school every day unless they are unwell. Others think that there are occasions where it's acceptable for the child to miss school)

... And now thinking about a child aged 8, for which, if any, of the occasions listed on this card do you think it is acceptable for them to miss school?

CODE ALL THAT APPLY

Multicoded (Maximum of 8 codes)

- 1 To go on a holiday [ATTD81]
- 2 To attend a family funeral [ATTD82]
- 3 To attend a one-off family celebration (e.g. a wedding, a golden wedding anniversary) [ATTD83]
- 4 To attend a regular family celebration (e.g. a birthday) [ATTD84]
- 5 None of these [ATTD85]
- 6 (Other reasons (PLEASE WRITE IN)) [ATTD86]
- 7 (SPONTANEOUS: I don't think it is appropriate for the child to go to a funeral) [ATTD87]
- 8 (SPONTANEOUS: it depends on the circumstances) [ATTD88]
- 98 (Don't know)
- 99 (Refusal)

[GCSEFur]

CARD E3

Please choose one answer from the card to say how well you think (GCSEs/Standard grades) effectively prepare young people for further study?

- 1 Very well
- 2 Quite well
- 3 Not very well
- 4 Not at all well
- 8 (Don't know)

9 (Refusal)

[GCSEWrk]
CARD E3 AGAIN
And how well do you think (GCSEs/Standard grades) effectively prepare young people for work?

- 1 Very well
- 2 Quite well
- 3 Not very well
- 4 Not at all well
- 8 (Don't know)
- 9 (Refusal)

[ALevFur]
CARD E3 AGAIN
Please choose one answer from the card to say how well you think (A-levels/Highers) effectively prepare young people for further study?

- 1 Very well
- 2 Quite well
- 3 Not very well
- 4 Not at all well
- 8 (Don't know)
- 9 (Refusal)

[ALevWrk]
CARD E3 AGAIN
And how well do you think (A-levels/Highers) effectively prepare young people for work?

- 1 Very well
- 2 Quite well
- 3 Not very well
- 4 Not at all well
- 8 (Don't know)
- 9 (Refusal)

Higher education

VERSION A, B, D: ASK ALL

[BStart]
Thank you. Now I'd like to ask you some questions about higher education.
1 Press 1 and <Enter> to continue.
8 (Don't know)
9 (Refusal)

[OwnCh]
Computed : Number in HH grid with Rel3=Child and Age = 5-16
Range: 0 ... 97
98 (Don't know)
99 (Refusal)

[HEdOpp]
CARD E4
Do you feel that opportunities for young people in Britain to go on to higher education - to a university or college - should be increased or reduced, or are they at about the right level now?

- IF INCREASED OR REDUCED: a lot or a little?
- 1 Increased a lot
 - 2 Increased a little
 - 3 About right
 - 4 Reduced a little
 - 5 Reduced a lot
 - 8 (Don't know)
 - 9 (Refusal)

VERSION A, B, D: IF RESPONDENT HAS CHILDREN AGED BETWEEN 5 AND 16 YEARS

[ChLikUn2]

CARD E5

Taking your answers from this card, how likely do you think it is that any of your children who are still at school will go to university?

- 1 Very likely
- 2 Fairly likely
- 3 Not very likely
- 4 Not at all likely
- 5 (No child(ren) at school)
- 8 (Don't know)
- 9 (Refusal)

VERSION A, B, D: ASK ALL

[HEFee]

CARD E6

I'm now going to ask you what you think about university or college students or their families paying towards the costs of their tuition, either while they are studying or after they have finished. Which of the views on this card comes closest to what you think about that?

- 1 All students or their families should pay towards the costs of their tuition
- 2 Some students or their families should pay towards the costs of their tuition, depending on their circumstances
- 3 No students or their families should pay towards the costs of their tuition
- 8 (Don't know)
- 9 (Refusal)

[FeesUni]

Which of the following statements comes closest to your own view ... READ OUT...

- 1 ...tuition fees for all universities and colleges should be the same,
- 2 or, tuition fees should be different depending on the university or college students go to?
- 8 (Don't know)
- 9 (Refusal)

[FeesSub]

And which of these two statements comes closest to your own view ... READ OUT...

- 1 ...tuition fees for all subjects studied should be the same,
- 2 or, tuition fees should be different depending on the subject students study at university or college?
- 8 (Don't know)
- 9 (Refusal)

[Himp]

CARD E7

And how important do you think it is for a young person to go on to higher education - to a university or college?

INTERVIEWER: IF ASKED: Include colleges of higher education but exclude further education colleges and sixth form colleges

1 Very important

2 Fairly important

3 Not very important

4 Not at all important

5 SPONTANEOUS: It depends on the young person

6 SPONTANEOUS: It depends on the career that the young person wants

7 SPONTANEOUS: It depends how the young person will fund their higher education

8 SPONTANEOUS: It depends what the young person's motivations are

98 (Don't know)

99 (Refusal)

[PREVENT]

INTERVIEWER READ OUT:

The next question asks for your views about extremism ...

1 Press 1 and <Enter> to continue.

8 (Don't know)

9 (Refusal)

[PREVFR]

CARD E8

Some people think that universities and colleges should protect free speech for staff, students and visiting speakers, even if it allows extremist views to be heard. Others think they should protect their students from hearing extremist views, even if that means restricting free speech.

Which of the statements on this card comes closest to your view?

INTERVIEWER: IF ASKED: This includes institutions for post-16 students, such as higher and further education colleges, and sixth form colleges, but not primary or secondary schools.

1 Universities and colleges have a responsibility to protect free speech on campus, even if it means extremist views may be heard

2 Universities and colleges have a responsibility to protect their students from hearing extremist views, even if that means restricting free speech

3 (SPONTANEOUS: Neither of these)

8 (Don't know)

9 (Refusal)

Self-completion questions

Higher education

Thinking now about where you live, please say how much you agree or disagree with the following statements...

	Agree strongly	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Disagree strongly	Can't choose
<i>PLEASE TICK ONE BOX ON EACH LINE</i>						
a. A university education is affordable for all young people regardless of their family background.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. A university qualification opens up better career opportunities for people whose parents did not go to university.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	1	2	3	4	5	8



Department
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