

# INSIGHTS NOTE 01: WHAT DO REFORM VOTERS THINK ABOUT HIGHER EDUCATION?

*Public First Higher Education Team*

*November 2025*

---

---

# KEY FINDINGS

1. Reform voters convey a deep dissatisfaction with the state of the UK
2. Higher education is not a priority for this group of voters, and they do not view the sector in the way it wants to be seen.
3. They do not think that a degree is good value for money for students
4. They are unconvinced about the wider economic benefits of the higher education sector
5. They believe the system incentivises behaviour that doesn't feel fair
6. They welcome international students as a source of income for institutions, but are concerned about perceived abuses in the system
7. The culture wars are an emotive topic, and one which undermines wider public trust.

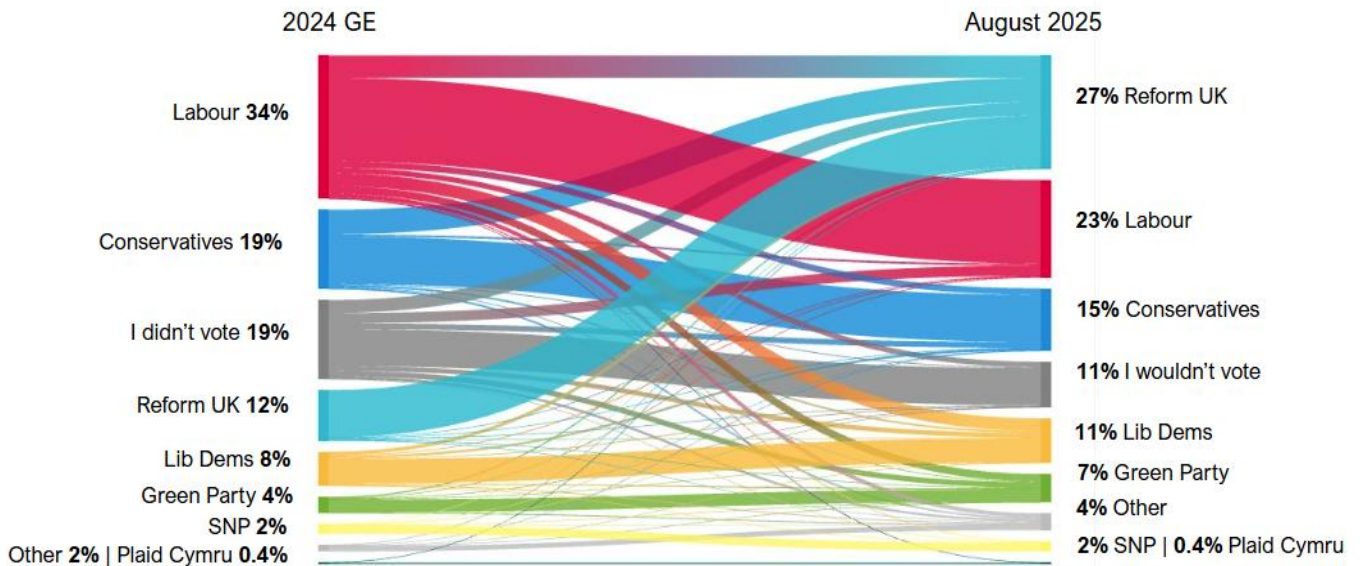
# Introduction

When Tony Blair memorably made education his priority in 1999, a better educated population was seen relatively uncontroversially to be good for the economy and for society (as well as for individuals). Since then, the number of people accessing higher education in Britain has [grown substantially](#), but this increase has coincided with several economic downturns, dwindling numbers of [graduate-level jobs](#) outside of big cities, [increasing costs](#) of a university experience to students and to parents, and widespread rhetoric around the perceived diminishing [value](#) of many university degrees.

This new era for education policy is reflected in the policy priorities that shape our politics - no more so than for Reform. In the words of Reform UK's Head of Policy Zia Yusuf at the 2025 Reform Party Conference, Reform is 'not a party built on views about education'. Instead, they coalesce primarily around a desire to reduce net migration. As a result, the nascent party is yet to flesh out a comprehensive policy platform for the higher education sector, outside a [few isolated policy commitments](#), such as scrapping interest on student loans, capping numbers of undergraduate places and cutting funding to universities that undermine free speech.

Each of these policy commitments is aimed very specifically at the group of highly volatile voters who have been voting for 'change', in the broadest sense, over the last decade. By and large, this group voted 'Leave' on the promise of change in 2016, Johnson in 2019 to 'get Brexit done', Starmer in 2024 on a manifesto literally entitled 'Change', and now support Reform UK - an anti-establishment party campaigning to disrupt the status quo in British politics. These voters often live in areas formerly referred to as the [Red Wall](#), which became the towns targeted by [Levelling-Up](#), and which some now call '[Left-Behind](#)'. They tangibly and acutely feel the effects of the UK's low productivity and low growth economy: the cost of living crisis, declining local high streets and economies, long NHS waiting lists, oversubscribed schools, lack of affordable housing and good jobs in their local area. [Theresa May](#) described them as the '*just about managing*' in 2016, and they have been the deciding force in [referendums and elections](#), as well as the target of many policy decisions, of the last decade.

While a majority of those who voted Labour in 2024 still say that they would do so again, by far the largest group of voting intention 'defectors' are those flocking to Reform. But disgruntled Labour voters are not the only ones now supporting Nigel Farage's party. The current Reform-voting coalition is 23% 2024 Conservative voters, and 8% those who didn't vote in 2024 altogether.



As a result, appealing to this volatile group is a priority for all three of these parties. As they seek to firm up their voter base for the next election, all will be thinking about the policies that their current *and* potential voters would like to see. Voter opinion is therefore one of the most important drivers of policy, and the opinion of current and prospective Reform voters is particularly influential.

In recent months, each party has made higher education policy commitments that reflect the perceived scepticism of this voter group. One of the headlines from the Prime Minister's speech at the 2025 Labour party conference was his announcement that Labour would '[scrap](#)' the '50% of young people should go to university' target; the Conservatives have pledged to cut [100,000 university places](#); Reform UK has suggested [caps on student numbers](#). If the HE sector wants to know what Reform (or Labour, or the Conservatives) might commit to in their manifesto and in government, they must understand the opinions and motivations of those who currently intend to vote Reform.

At Public First, we specialise in researching the views, opinions and attitudes of exactly these voters: and we have spent the last decade researching to better understand their lives. In this Insight Note, we wanted to help the higher education sector better understand the views these voters hold in relation to higher education. To that end, we spoke to two focus groups of Reform voters in university towns. We specifically spoke to voters who might have day to day interactions with a local university as empirical evidence suggests that universities are (or should be) benefiting these areas, and we wanted to test whether this was recognised. This is not a full and robust study of Reform voter views; but the opinions expressed in these groups are consistent with other public opinion research we have conducted, and we believe the comments we have gathered here provide a stark illustration of the way these voters feel about higher education.

### Methodology

For this research, Public First recruited and conducted two focus groups in October 2025.

One group was made up of adults who lived in Nottinghamshire, voted for the Labour Party in the 2024 election, but would vote Reform UK if there were an election tomorrow. These are the 'Lab to Ref switchers'. The other group was made up of adults who lived in Kent, voted Reform UK in 2024 and would still vote for them if there were an election tomorrow. These are the 'Ref in 24 and Ref now' voters. Both groups contained a range of ages, genders, social grades, parents and those without children, and a mixture of education levels, from GCSE up to undergraduate.

These insights were gleaned from only two focus groups and in towns with a university in them; to build up a comprehensive picture of how Reform voters in these places, or indeed Reform voters across the country feel about higher education, more research would be required. This note is intended as a snapshot, rather than the full picture.

# The wider context



*“I just think there's a lot more bigger problems that need to be solved and talked about rather than, like education.”*

*Male, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 50s, has children, secondary educated*

In general, Reform voters conveyed a deep dissatisfaction with the state of the UK. To them, the country has been on a downward spiral, and now finds itself in dire economic straits, with public services pushed beyond their limits, and the government paralysed, struggling to make decisions that might improve people's everyday lives.

*“It's a real frustration for me... if you don't grow the economy, you don't have money to put into public services. So we're relying on the Chancellor putting more taxes onto individuals and businesses. So you just have this, it's been termed the 'doom loop', and I just see more of it.”*

*Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 50, grown up children, secondary educated*

*“They (politicians) take far too long. They should accelerate like we're in Covid! Make decisions quickly, like we're in a war. Instead of taking four years to make a decision, just do it, make it happen. And that's something we could take from those crazy nut jobs in the US.”*

*Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 60s, has grown up children, secondary educated*

*“I feel we're stagnant. I don't know if we're in recession, but I feel we're stagnant.”*

*Female, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 50s, grown up children, secondary educated*

From a local perspective, participants told us that rising costs mean high streets are emptying out, the urgent need for housing stock is creating concerns about additional pressure on local education and health services, and road works are a significant inconvenience. Across the groups, there was an acute sense that the local area has been declining in recent years and continues to get worse. For many, this sense of decline is personal as well as practical. Residents who have lived in the same area all their lives expressed sadness and frustration at watching familiar places deteriorate, and a pervasive general feeling that “everything is worse than it used to be.”

*"I think the economy of the area is about to absolutely die. My company employs 500 people locally; we won't get a pay rise or bonuses this year because of the national insurance (rise) that's been brought in."*

***Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 40s, has children, degree educated***

*"The high street's kind of dwindled, I think due to the internet, and a lot of shops are closing."*

***Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 50s, no children, degree educated***

*"It's not fun walking to work anymore. Everywhere seems to be dying down or turning into charity shops or Turkish barbers, it's all going downhill quite massively around here (in Red Hill)."*

***Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 40s, has children, degree educated***

*"In Long Eaton, there's lots of empty shops, lots of road works. That's about it."*

***Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 50s, has children, secondary educated***

*"The local shops and the high street shops are shutting down. I think we're doing okay, but the same as everywhere, really, it's not what it used to be."*

***Female, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 40s, has children, secondary educated***

*"We've got 300 (houses) being built up the road on an already very busy road... and we've got two or three comprehensives that are already at breaking point. I don't know where all these extra people are going to go to school, and I think the economy in the local area is just dying completely"*

***Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 40s, has children, degree educated***

*"Ramsgate seems to be doing okay. But again, a lot of the high street, the shops are closing, businesses are struggling. I think some of the pubs are struggling with costs increasing."*

***Female, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 40s, has children, secondary educated***

*"I think there's a lot of new houses showing up, but without the infrastructure behind it. So the school's over populated, the doctors are over populated."*

***Male, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 30s, no children, secondary educated***

This downward trajectory was felt particularly strongly in Nottinghamshire, where some voters feel unsafe, homelessness is on the rise, and local infrastructure is poor. Town centres were now described at best as unpleasant places to visit, and at worst unsafe ones. There was a sense of frustration and unease across participants in the group.

*“Going into Nottingham city is horrendous. You’d have to pay me to go in.”*

***Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 40s, has children, degree educated***

*“Long Eaton is dying a death. I was born and bred here, so I’ve seen it go downhill quite quickly. There’s not a lot here. We’ve got two supermarkets, bad road infrastructure, it’s dying.”*

***Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 50s, has children, secondary educated***

*“(Areas like) Carlton and going into town probably feels less safe because of people on drugs and other things.”*

***Male, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 30s, no children, secondary educated***

*“The people that I work with, that work in a city (bank) branch, are having to deal with removing homeless people and things out of their doorsteps being threatened by them all day long. I know people who’ve got body cameras on now, to go to work. We all work in building societies and banks and everywhere just seems to have gone absolutely plummeting recently.”*

***Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 40s, has children, degree educated***

*“There’s a real problem with homeless people not having anywhere to go. I don’t know what’s happened, why there’s suddenly been an influx of that, but there’s so many if you walk in the main street of Nottingham... it’s quite scary and I don’t know what’s happened with regards to having places for them to stay anymore.”*

***Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 40s, has children, degree educated***

While the overall mood in Kent was still one of decline, some voters did still like the local area, and were more likely to praise the amenities and infrastructure of their villages and towns. Many acknowledged the same national pressures, including rising costs, struggling high streets and stretched public services, but they were more likely to speak positively about their immediate surroundings.

*“Like all towns, there are bits that go down and bits that go up. But above all, I think it's a very, very nice place.”*

**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 40s, has children, degree educated**

*“I have noticed quite a few restaurants, coffee, brunch places, opening up over the last couple of years in Chislehurst.”*

**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 50, grown up children, secondary educated**

*“Ramsgate seems to be doing okay. But again, a lot of the high street, the shops are closing, businesses are struggling. I think some of the pubs are struggling with costs increasing.”*

**Female, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 40s, has children, secondary educated**

Amid these local concerns, higher education is not a priority for Reform voters. In their view, any government has a lot of other problems to fix first, which are much more acutely felt in their day-to-day lives - principally the decline of local areas, and the challenges of rising living costs.

But this is not indifference borne of general satisfaction. When we probed their views on higher education, the groups revealed a significant scepticism that universities are good for students, for local and national economies, or for wider society. Put a different way, they were not convinced that universities were the answer to many of the problems they faced. In our view therefore, the current model of higher education in England faces significant challenge if Reform chooses to listen to its voters and make policy on this basis.

If politicians in Westminster are listening to current Reform UK voters when it comes to higher education policy, they would find that:

1. Reform voters do not think that a degree is good value for money for students
2. They're unconvinced about the wider economic benefits of the HE sector
3. The system incentivises behaviour that doesn't feel fair
4. They welcome international students as a source of income for institutions but are concerned about perceived abuses in the system.
5. The culture wars are an emotive topic, and one which undermines wider public trust.

We explore each of these findings in more detail in this report.

# 01: Reform voters do not think that a degree is good value for money for students



*“People go in and get in thousands of pounds of debt, not even guaranteed a job. I’m just not sure I agree with it.”*  
**Female, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 40s, has children, secondary educated**

At a time where the cost of living is high, voters need to see return on the spend that they choose to make. Above all, Reform voters doubted whether a degree represents good value for money for students. Participants were very cognisant of the cost of studying at university, and in particular had concerns about the debt that tuition and maintenance loans place upon the vast majority of students.

*“I think they do pay far too much”*  
**Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 30s, has children, secondary educated**

*“The whole thing seems ridiculously expensive, and the money, sixty-six grand that they don't pay back for years and years and years.”*  
**Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 50s, has children, secondary educated**

*“(By encouraging her son to go to university) I've just landed him with all that debt, and he may not end up with a job. Yeah, it's very scary.”*  
**Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 40s, has children, degree educated**

For students studying ‘vocational’ degree subjects, such as Medicine or Law, that lead to a specific job, or those intent on pursuing graduate careers such as teaching, student debt is an inconvenient necessity. Reform voters we spoke to supported these vocational pathways, because they benefit both the students and the country. But the list of subjects which counted as “worth” the overall cost was extremely narrow.



*“Ultimately, there are jobs that you cannot do without having a degree. So you know, there'll always be a place for students, because they need to go to university and get that qualification, and for things like medicine, rightly so.”*

***Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 30s, has children, secondary educated***

*“You're probably better off just doing jobs and working your way up into what you want to do, rather than getting any debt, unless it's for a specific area of work, like doctors or something that needs a degree.”*

***Male, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 30s, no children, secondary educated***

For the most part, participants thought that most other degrees left saddled students with hefty and what they perceived to be unnecessary debt, without improving their job prospects upon graduation. It was felt that degrees did not adequately prepare students for the realities of the labour market.

*“Most of them do a three or four year course, and they are technically adults (by the time they graduate), but they still haven't been exposed to the big, wide world, and they are basically thrust out there with this degree, thinking ‘I'm going to get this amazingly paid job, and then I'll get a house’, and it doesn't work that way.”*

***Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 30s, has children, secondary educated***

*“I feel so sorry for these children that are going to uni, getting into thousands of pounds of debt and then begging for jobs and not getting jobs.”*

***Female, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 40s, has children, secondary educated***

*“I didn't go to uni personally, but I've got a lot of friends that did, and they weren't helped to get jobs. Once they got their degree, it was very much. Well, yeah, you've got your degree, off you go then. And they don't know how to do that because they're not set up to do that.”*

***Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 30s, has children, secondary educated***

To some, the only value of these degrees was for getting through a graduate recruiter's 'first sift' of CVs when choosing candidates to interview; students merely need to be able to tick the box to say they have a degree to 'get into the room'.

*"I know that when they were recruiting (for her son's job), there's a pile of CVs, and all the people who didn't have degrees went straight in the bin, as I understood it. So he needed (a degree) to get on the employment ladder."*

***Female, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 50s, grown up children, secondary educated***

*"There's a problem with the system in the sense that I don't think that it's necessarily educating people to get degrees for the right reason."*

***Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 30s, has children, secondary educated***

Many didn't think the graduates use the skills they learned in their degree in the workplace, or learn the skills they need in the workplace during their degree. Instead, they can learn everything they need to know on the job. When pressed, some suggested that analytical skills learned in a degree could be useful in a workplace. However, they felt these could also be taught and learned in other ways - not least via on-the-job training that pays while one learns, not the other way around. As a result, Reform voters feel a degree is unnecessary for developing the skills to do a real job, and an insufficient gauge of aptitude for those skills.

*"Some degrees are actually pretty useless. There's a huge amount of student debt."*

***Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 60s, no children, degree educated***

*"I don't know what the percentage is of them (graduates) that actually go into anything to do with the degree that they got, but I know a hell of a lot of them don't"*

***Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 30s, has children, secondary educated***

*"I think too many employers are asking for degrees... You're not going to get a good job because of your degree. You'll get it some other way."*

***Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 40s, has children, degree educated***

*"It shows that you can apply yourself, you can work hard. You can interact with other people, easily, ask questions, reach a conclusion"*

***Female, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 50s, grown up children, secondary educated***

## 02: They are unconvinced about the wider economic benefits of the higher education sector



*“(The university) probably benefits the city centre more than anywhere else, because that’ll be where they (the students) stick to. But the areas outside of the city centre, I can’t see what benefit they have.”*

***Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 40s, has children, degree educated***

In the recent past, voters have been persuaded that going to university makes economic sense for graduates: this is evident in the [high percentage of parents](#) who would encourage their children to go to university. The perceived benefits of high-earning graduates to the wider UK economy were broadly accepted too, with government and think tanks consistently reinforcing the “[human capital](#)” argument which broadly held sway from the 1990s, declining through the late 2010s and early 2020s.

In our groups, news stories about graduates unable to find work, a struggling economy, rising prices, high unemployment and falling productivity had fundamentally broken this link, and disrupted the perception that having a country with more graduates axiomatically means having a stronger economy.

*“The objective that 50% of people should go to university, turned out to be actually wrong and misguided. It seems to have been based on an assumption that the better educated the workforce, the more the economy would grow. And that actually hasn’t happened.”*

***Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 60s, no children, degree educated***

*“We’ve got all these young adults that have got these amazing degrees that could be positively contributing to the economy and all of that. But how?”*

***Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 30s, has children, secondary educated***

*“There isn’t enough information out there (to indicate) if they (universities) are contributing positively. That information must be somewhere.”*

***Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 30s, has children, secondary educated***

Combined with a distinct lack of skilled ‘tradespeople’, such as plumbers, electricians and builders, and Reform voters cannot see that universities are giving the country what it needs for its labour force. For these voters, it is difficult to see increasing the UK’s numbers of students even further as the solution to the current decline. Continuously increasing graduate numbers seems to have benefited neither the economy writ large nor local areas facing serious skills shortages.

Further, they see the increasing capability of artificial intelligence as another reason why the country needs fewer - not more - graduates. They are not sympathetic to the possible role of graduates in building, operating and maintaining AI infrastructure, or utilising AI in the workplace.

*“If we had fewer people going to university, what would we do? We need builders. We need plumbers, we need electricians, we need people in AI, all of these areas, that’s where we should be looking to do apprenticeship schemes, and really fast track it.”*

**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 50, grown up children, secondary educated**

*“I’m struggling to find the point of a degree, because it used to mean you were intelligent, you can retain information and things like that. AI has done so much for this. Now it can pretty much do most things”*

**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 40s, has children, degree educated**

*“With all the AI that’s there now, going to uni, being really intelligent doesn’t necessarily mean anything now, does it? Because you’ve got the AI there.”*

**Female, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 40s, has children, secondary educated**

These focus groups were deliberately held in university towns- areas which ought to feel the benefits of HE, and bring some greater familiarity with what a university is and does. And indeed, one of universities’ most commonly deployed arguments as to their benefits is the impact they have locally. But in spite of this, when it came to the local economy, participants felt that the economic benefits that a university brings are very isolated to town centres. Students spend money in coffee shops and bars near campus, pay rent in the city or town centre, and rarely venture to the outskirts of the area. The economic spillover effects of a university appear quite limited. There was no mention or recognition of universities, major local employers or a bolstering force to regional economies in any way beyond bringing students into the area and hosting the occasional corporate away day.

*I actually went with work to a conference at Notts Uni a couple of weeks ago...there was two different conferences on that day which brought 400 people into the city who were staying overnight as well... I stayed over at the hotel, I’d had drinks in the bar. I’d use taxis in and out of the centre. It’s not just students. They are a business at the end of the day.”*

**Male, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 30s, no children, secondary educated**

## 03: They think that the system incentivises behaviour that doesn't feel right



*"It's an absolutely ridiculous business model, and no one seems to care."  
Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 60s, has grown up children, studied up to secondary*

In our focus groups there was a distinct lack of faith that the sector is currently acting in the best interests of their students or the wider public. Even where universities act in exactly the way that they are encouraged to act by regulation, and in that sense are acting perfectly legitimately, there was a sense that some behaviours simply don't *feel* like the right way for them to behave. There were several examples of this tension across different areas of activity in both groups.

Some of these have been explored in previous findings; for example, the belief that as a society we have exaggerated the role of degrees which are now a "tick box" exercise; or a way of hiding unemployment rather than being based on actual economic need.

*"I think Tony Blair introduced this concept, really, of everyone going to university. And the reason he did it was because the economy was knackered then, and I think it's a way of probably hiding it was a way of hiding unemployment."  
Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 40s, has children, degree educated*

Or to give another example: while being more supportive of international students than we might expect (something we cover more in Finding 4), some disliked the idea that universities are incentivised to, as they see it, prioritise applications from overseas students over those from UK students.

*"I've been told that when it comes to evaluating applications for certain courses between overseas students and British students, the overseas students are given priority because they pay more, and that's actually understandable in terms of the business model, but morally, is it right? I don't think it is."  
Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 60s, no children, degree educated*



Others raised issues with the student loan system, and whether it was fair that the system acted - as designed - to be a long term payment that accrued significant interest.

*“There seems to be something not right about a young person coming out of university with sixty-, seventy-thousand pounds worth of debt hanging around their neck. I know they need it to be able to go to university, but there's something that seems to be wrong with a system that they don't get any kind of help in. They've got this massive debt before they've even started out in life. I don't really think that that is a very positive way (to start in life)”*

**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 50s, no children, degree educated**

*“How on earth we got a situation where we privatised the damn thing and allowed corporates to charge them six, seven, eight, nine, ten percent when the government could have funded it for two or three percent... now we've got corporates selling and reselling the debt, and God knows how much it costs over the lifetime of the debt, they must be paying eight, nine percent.*

**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 60s, has grown up children, studied up to secondary**

*“We don't really do debt in this family. If we can't afford it, we don't get it. Having that sat on top of your conscience whilst trying to find a job is a lot, especially for children.”*

**Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 40s, has children, degree educated**

Alongside concerns regarding the economic spillover effects being isolated to just town centres, there was a sense that local people are shouldering other local burdens, such as the council tax bill, on behalf of exempt students. One participant raised the unbalanced level of pay between institutional leaders and staff. All this combined left participants feeling that while the sector is functioning in the way it was designed it, it is not doing right by its students, its staff or by the wider local community. The concluding view was that these voters did not trust that the sector was acting, or being incentivised to act, in the “correct” way.

*“(For) the areas outside of the city centre, I can't see what benefit they have.”*

**Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 40s, has children, degree educated**

*“They (students) don't pay council tax, so the council is having to provide services for them... but they're not paying council tax, so they're actually taking out of the system, so everyone else is probably having to pay more.”*

**Male, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 50s, has children, secondary educated**

*“Lecturers are badly paid. The people at the top of the university administration, the pro VCs, are getting far more than they're worth, simply because universities are generating so much revenue.”*

**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 60s, no children, degree educated**

## 04: They welcome international students as a source of income for institutions but are concerned about perceived abuses in the system.



*“We should be talking about immigration, that's the biggest problem we've got in this country. Forget everything else. Just forget everything else... sort that out and everything else can follow*

*Male, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 50s, has children, studied up to A Level*

Reform voters remain very concerned about immigration figures overall, often linking it as the core issue which drive local and national decline. But those we spoke to also demonstrated a relatively good understanding of the value of international students to universities and the UK and were broadly supportive of international student recruitment - though with some important caveats around the scope and purpose of international recruitment.

In polling we did to supplement our focus groups (below) we found that 63% of Reform-voting respondents would be in favour of limiting international student numbers. This suggests that even where they recognise the value of international students, a strong desire to cut net migration overrides that for the majority of Reform voters.

But nonetheless, we believe there is an important foundation of support for international student recruitment amongst this voter segment that the university sector could capitalise on: ultimately, cutting international student numbers is likely not Reform supporters' *preferred* option for cutting migration. There is significant

scope for additional research to really dig into these perceptions and test potential messaging in fuller detail - but we present our initial findings here.

## (Cautious) support for international students

With the caveat that we only conducted focus groups with voters in university towns - who may see a more direct benefit than voters without a university near them - for those we spoke to, the ability of universities to attract international students to come and study in the UK was a major positive. Participants were sympathetic to the idea that universities are businesses that need to make money; to that end, international students represent a viable way of making profit. The students come to the UK for a short period of time, the UK delivers a service to them, the students make an economic contribution and then leave again.

*"I think we can have lots of foreign students. We should have because it's a great business. It produces fantastic income."*

**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 60s, has grown up children, studied up to secondary**

*"I agree with the others when they say 'universities are businesses. Overseas students are coming here to buy a product. Universities need overseas students to sustain the business model'"*

**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 60s, no children, degree educated**

*"Chinese students, for example, when I used to work in the bank, they do bring a lot of money over. They are sent with a hell of a lot of money"*

**Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 30s, has children, secondary educated**

In many cases, those we spoke to saw this increased income for universities as the reason why so many domestic students are able to do a degree at all - without international students subsidising domestic student fees, universities would be unable to admit as many UK students. In other words, having more international students means that doors can stay open for UK students, and therefore at least some of our Reform voters are in favour of maintaining or even increasing international student numbers.

*"(If) universities can't stay open because they haven't got any foreign students, then that is a detriment to UK students."*

**Female, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 50s, grown up children, secondary educated**

*"As I understood it, foreign students were their (universities') lifeblood, like they needed the money."*

**Female, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 50s, grown up children, secondary educated**

*"I agree with [participant name]. In terms of universities, they are a business. Many of them rely on the foreign student student quotas to exist."*

**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 50, grown up children, secondary educated**

Overall, participants in our groups viewed migration for education as different to other forms of immigration. In their eyes, international students are not "immigrants" in the traditional sense, but paying customers in a transaction that benefits both sides. Some participants even said that they'd like to see international students in areas of skills shortage mandated to stay in the UK for a period of time after graduation, to make a further contribution before leaving.

*"If they (international students) are benefiting from our education, they should have to work for three years in the NHS before they're sort of allowed to go back and, you know, contribute to our tax system so that there's something for us."*

**Female, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 30s, has children, secondary educated**

*"I think it would be ludicrous to try to cut immigration numbers by cutting the number of overseas students. I think it would be absolutely nuts."*

**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 60s, no children, degree educated**

*"I don't think you should be cutting the students, the immigration students, coming in wanting to learn"*

**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 50s, no children, degree educated**

*"They are coming here to buy a product from us, they're buying a product. They're using an expertise that we have."*

**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 60s, has grown up children, studied up to secondary**

*"I'm fine with people coming from overseas. I mean, like, if they want to come to our universities and learn, and there's nothing wrong with that."*

**Male, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 50s, has children, secondary educated**

There were two key areas where universities' public "licence" to recruit international students was called into question by those we spoke to. The first was recruitment which was outside the scope of students simply coming to study - either by being allowed to bring dependents with them, or "disappearing" after entering the country on a graduate visa

*"I don't mind if they come in, but it's when they want to bring the whole family. 60 of their relatives, and 20 of their friends. Do you know what I mean? That shouldn't be allowed. You have got to draw a line somewhere. If you're coming to learn, then you come to learn. You don't bring your family, your dog, your cat and your goldfish."*

**Male, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 40s, has children, secondary educated**

*"I didn't realise until a couple of weeks ago, (access to the UK via a student visa) is an intro for lots of students to enter the UK and then disappear into the UK."*

**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 60s, has grown up children, studied up to secondary**

*"I didn't realise that the volume of immigrants that come into the country through education far exceeds the nonsense about boat people. And once they get in they disappear into the economy or they apply and get residency because they're there."*

**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 60s, has grown up children, studied up to secondary**

*"I think maybe if they're coming in and not really wanting to do the whole course, and just as a way of getting into the country, then maybe monitoring, heavier monitoring, is needed in the sense to make sure they fulfil why they've come to the country."*

**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 50s, no children, degree educated**

Second was concerns about the possibility of international students crowding out domestic students, and being prioritised in admissions processes because of the higher fees that they pay, but most didn't make this link spontaneously.

*"I would add that it (admitting international students) shouldn't be to the detriment of young British students."*

**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 50, grown up children, secondary educated**

*"If they're taking the places of, say, British students, maybe have some sort of a system where if there's any spaces, then universities can fill them with overseas students."*

**Male, Lab to Ref switcher, Nottinghamshire, 30s, no children, secondary educated**

*"I think we can have lots of foreign students... the tension is, does that mean we have 100 Chinese students in Imperial College who all have AAA grades, and only 5 other (UK) students? The theme of this thing is that the ideas are right. We just seem to have got the balance wrong. But there's nothing wrong with international students who are paying good money."*

**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 60s, has grown up children, studied up to secondary**

## International students vs. reducing net migration

Reform is a broad church: with much of its support existing in more rural areas, and those without universities. We wanted to sense-check how the broadly positive sentiment towards international students that we saw in our focus groups played out against what voters also told us was their number one issue: immigration. To do this, we wanted to trade off the idea that limiting international students would reduce net migration - but would also mean an economic hit for the university sector.

**Polling Question:**

*One proposal to reduce net migration is to limit the number of international students coming to study in the UK. However, some say this would reduce university income, affect their ability to operate, and in the worst of cases, cause some universities to close.*

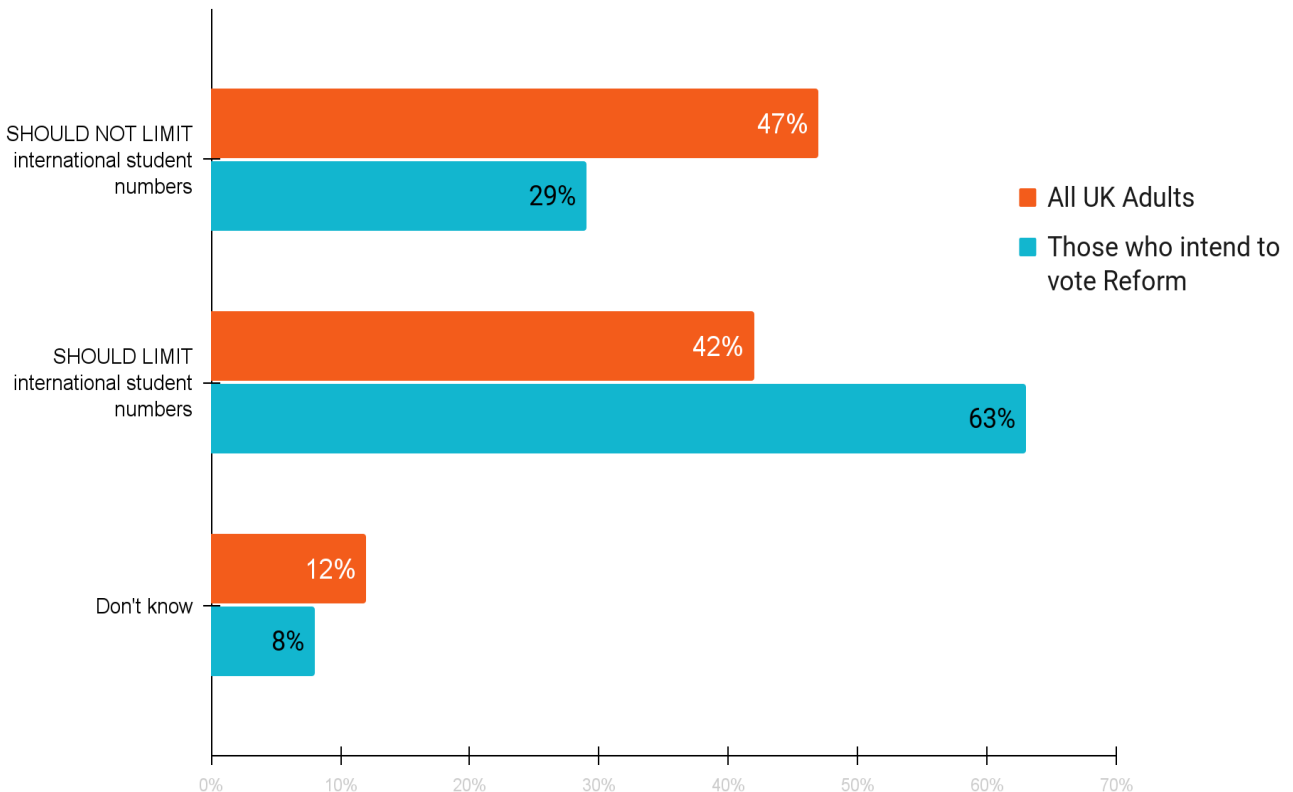
*Which of the following comes closest to your view?*

*The UK government...*

- 1) *SHOULD LIMIT international student numbers*
- 2) *SHOULD NOT LIMIT international student numbers*
- 3) *Don't know*

While the general population was essentially split down the middle, with a slight majority (47%) believing that international student numbers should not be limited, the majority of Reform voters (63%) thought the UK government should limit international student numbers.

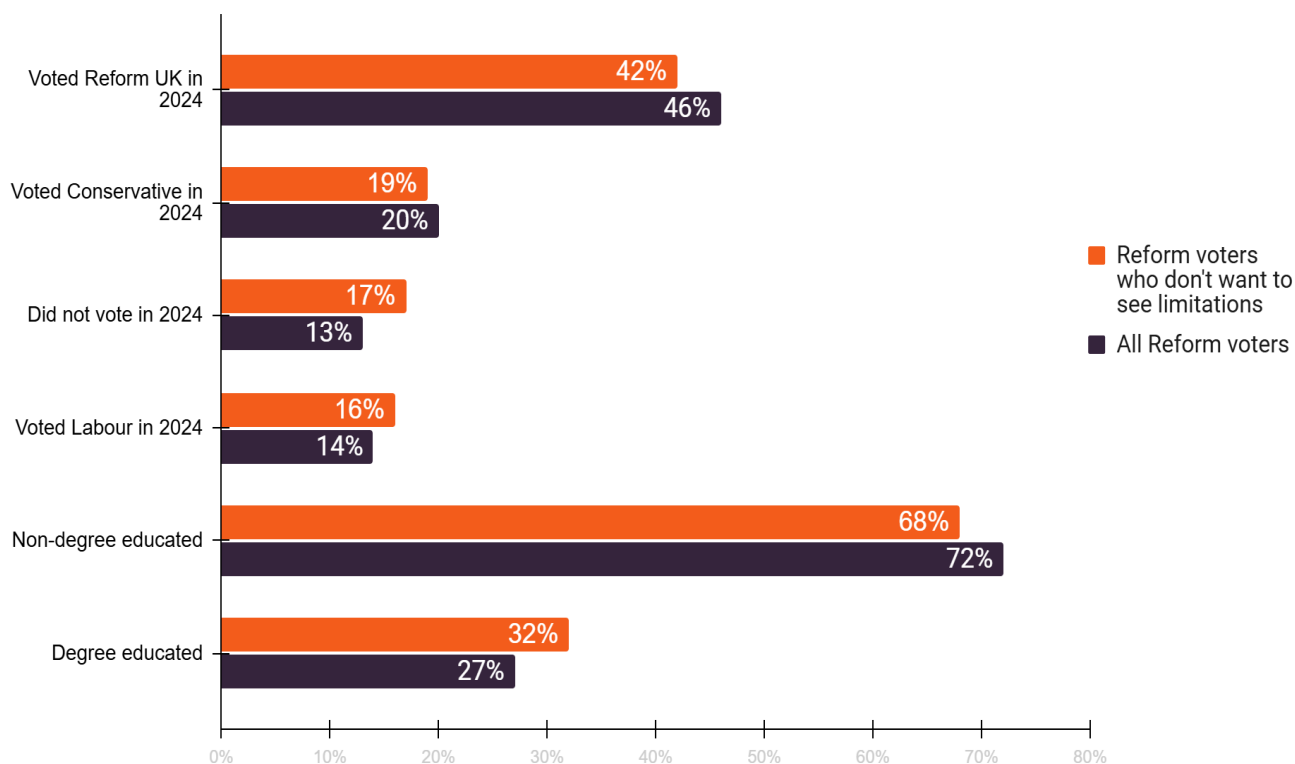
**The proportion of those who think the UK government...**



Nonetheless, international students did attract some support from Reform voters: one in three (29%) agreed that numbers should not be limited. Even among Reform voters who said that 'Levels of legal immigration' was one of the top three issues facing the country right now, 15% did not want to see international student numbers reduced.

When we look more closely at this group, we find that their 2024 voting profile is similar to that of all Reform UK voters (it's not purely Labour to Reform switchers, for example, who think that student numbers shouldn't be limited, and the 'Ref in 24 and Ref now' group are all pro-limitations). Although we might also anticipate that those who went to university themselves would be more likely to take a pro-university, anti-limiting-student-numbers stance, only 32% of this group are degree educated - a similar proportion to Reform voters as a whole.

### Who are the people who intend to vote Reform, who also don't want to see limitations on international student numbers?



For those that did want to see international student numbers cut, it may well be that this is driven less by opposition to international students per se, than by an overriding desire to cut net migration. All in all, there is a non-trivial contingent of Reform UK voters who do not support caps on international student numbers, and it may even be the case that reducing international student numbers is not the *preferred* method of cutting net migration for the majority. More research is needed to clarify this.



## 05: The culture wars was an emotive topic and undermines wider public trust in higher education institutions.



*“I think that students are known for being quite radical and protests and standing up... they're young and they're vibrant and they're very opinionated. I do think now that, yes, it has gone a little bit woke.”*  
**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 50s, no children, degree educated**

Reform UK explicitly frame much of their politics in the context of the ‘culture wars’. The Party has criticised ‘[unpatriotic](#)’ teaching of British history in schools, pledged to ban ‘[transgender ideology](#)’ in classrooms and to scrap [Diversity, Equity and Inclusions](#) rules from public life. Specifically on universities, the Party’s 2024 manifesto promised ‘heavy financial penalties’ for institutions that undermine free speech and ‘[foster cancel culture](#)’, while Zia Yusuf described universities as ‘indoctrination camps for left-wing ideology’ at the 2025 Party Conference.

As a result, one might expect Reform’s voters to also make the direct link between ‘woke ideology’ and the culture that exists on university campuses, but this was not the case. In the group that we conducted in Nottinghamshire with Labour to Reform switchers, on-campus radicalisation, student protests, the percolation of extreme left-wing or ‘woke’ views didn’t come up at all. In the Kent group, made up of those who voted Reform in 2024 and would again now, voters agreed after prompting that they had seen increased radicalisation of young people, probably as a result of social media and (in some cases) campus activity, but didn’t spontaneously make the link between the discussion about universities and the discussion about the actions of some students.

*“I do think they're getting it (their ideas) from, probably social media. I don't think it can really be from anywhere else”*  
**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 40s, has children, degree educated**



In the recent past, this was not as much of a concern for most voters. Most wouldn't take as much notice of campus debates on whether free speech was being stifled, or be aware of the latest subject of student protests. But this is changing.

*"Certainly in the last few years, the idea of preventing certain speakers from addressing meetings or conferences on campus, it's just unheard of in my time and I think it's absolutely wrong, it's morally wrong, it's politically wrong. Some people just love to be offended. And I think it's a real problem."*

**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 60s, no children, degree educated**

*"It is definitely much worse, in my opinion, than it's ever been."*

**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 50, grown up children, secondary educated**

*"I think students were always, you know, (joined) communist societies and things like that. I really do think people joined those slightly as a joke in the day. They didn't really believe it. They all knew they'd grow out of it... but I think now it's quite serious."*

**Male, Ref in 24 and Ref now, Kent, 40s, has children, degree educated**

While few voters spontaneously link universities with "culture war" controversies, they react strongly when the topic is raised, describing it as a sign of moral decline and excessive political correctness. This emotional reaction suggests that, even if the culture wars are not front of mind, they are shaping how people feel about universities as institutions. For now, cases of the culture wars spreading onto campus do not dominate voters' overall perceptions of universities. However, this is one of the few areas of HE policy where Reform has chosen to make a stand; in part because of the strength of feeling in this area.

Reform's political focus on these issues may therefore deepen existing scepticism and mistrust toward higher education, even among those who do not follow campus debates closely. There remains, however, a clear gap between how Westminster actors frame the culture wars and how most Reform voters themselves experience or discuss them.

---

# Conclusion

## The Reform voting public does not view the HE sector in the way that the sector wants to be seen.

Higher education institutions' public narratives are often focused on civic impact in their towns: boosting local economic growth, creating local jobs and training the local workforce for graduate roles in the local area.

Reform voters reject these claims. In our groups, universities were viewed neither as economic or civic actors, nor as doing a particularly good job at their perceived primary purpose: educating students so that they can access higher level graduate jobs.

Participants were concerned with the financial burden that HE places on students while they pursue degrees that fail to provide them with the skills they need for the jobs that are available to them. Despite the campaigning, civic engagement and impact that universities have engaged in for many years, Reform voters have only a dim awareness of universities' wider economic and civic impact.

Although this note really only scratches the surface of Reform voters' views, the findings here are consistent with other work we have done examining public opinion of universities. There is scope for significant additional research to drill into the views of this very influential voter group, especially in relation to international students and immigration.

Turning the tide of public opinion towards higher education isn't just about universities telling their story better; it is about showing Reform voters how they can serve them in the present. The sector's strategy needs to address the issues within the sector that Reform voters care about, namely affordability and value for students. Amid widespread disaffection with universities, institutions must go beyond *telling* voters what the impact of an institution on young people and the local economy can be moving instead towards *showing* them this impact - and how it will make their lives better. When Reform voters can tangibly feel the benefits that their local university brings to students', and their own, lives, then they will be able to get behind the sector. And when they do that, Westminster will be listening.

