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# The value of universities to UK society

UUK Political affairs conference 2022

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## Reflecting on the social value of universities at the Universities UK Political Affairs Conference

There's no doubt that universities have faced a challenging time over the last couple of years. Both universities and us as individuals have had to adapt quickly – and while it feels like things are largely returning to a familiar life again, some things will remain permanently changed.

It is therefore an important moment to look at the value universities bring to society, and perceptions of how universities help to develop and shape their local communities. We conducted research amongst MPs and the general public for Universities UK to share at this year's political affairs conference

When asked about what the general public perceive to be the top priorities for universities, the most emphasis is placed on providing graduates with the skills the economy needs.

This is considered a priority across all age groups, but this especially increases with age. While building skills for the economy is also important to younger people, they narrowly prioritise providing value for money to students and graduates.

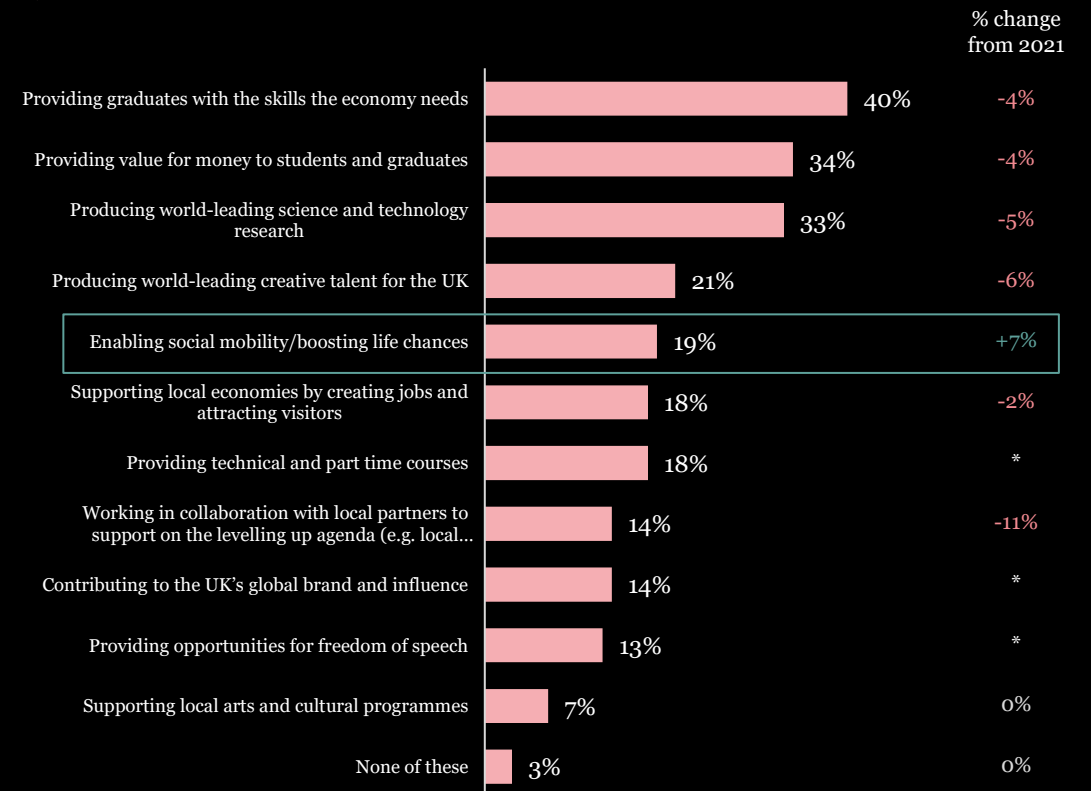
While older people are more likely to place priority on the skills and economic value that universities bring to the UK, younger people are more likely to place an emphasis on **enabling social mobility, working** in collaboration with local partners to support on the levelling up agenda, and **supporting** local arts and cultural programmes.

The biggest change since asking this question last year is the much greater **prioritisation** that universities enable social mobility or boost life chances. This is especially important to those in Scotland and Wales.

## When asked about what the general public perceive to be the top priorities for universities, the most emphasis is placed on providing graduates with the skills the economy needs



Q. In your opinion, which of the following should be the top three priority areas for UK universities?



Base: (All respondents: 2,177)

\* Not asked in 2021

## Contributions to science are most widely recognised, but the public are less aware of how universities boost life chances.

The public are most aware of the production of world-leading science and technology research, with almost half saying that universities are performing well in this area. This is likely to be connected to the significant university contribution to the response to the Covid pandemic – and while this still tops the list of university performance in the public’s eyes, we can see that it has dropped 8 % points since this was asked last year when university contributions to science and technology would have been receiving more frequent media coverage.

The public considers universities to be doing well at delivering technical and part-time courses, and although this is lower in the list of public priorities, it is a valuable tool in enabling access to a wider range of students – and thereby boosting life chances. Over a third of the public also consider universities to be performing well in enabling

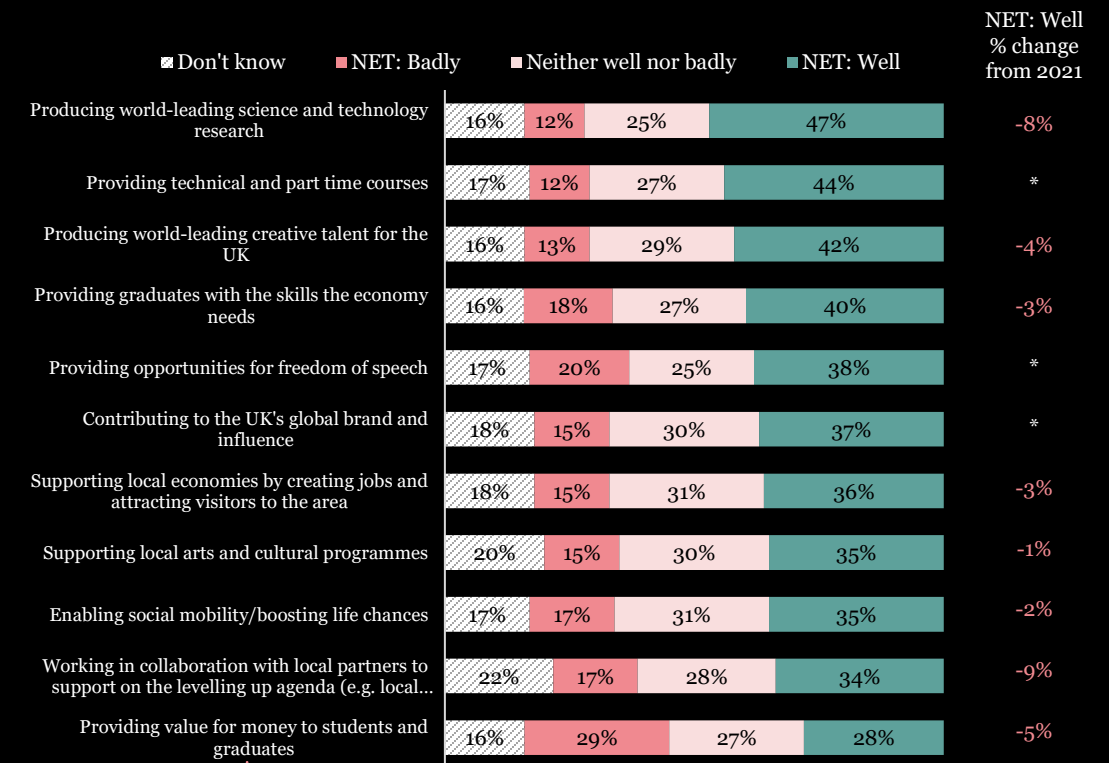
social mobility and boosting life chances – and it is encouraging to see that this is especially high amongst younger people. A similar proportion also believe universities are performing well in working with local partners to support the levelling up agenda – although there has been a drop in public perceptions of **universities’ performance in this** since we asked this last year.

While the public feels that offering value for money to students and graduates is the second priority for universities, people are less likely to say that universities are performing well on this. This is due to a third who say that universities are not doing well on this point, and this is being driven largely by older respondents, especially amongst those aged 55 and older.

## The public largely consider universities to be performing well against what they deem to be top priorities



Q. To what extent do you believe that UK universities are performing well or badly in each of the following areas?



Older people are most likely to feel that universities perform badly in providing value for money: 18-34 (25%); 35-54 (26%); 55+ (35%)

## However, the life chances provided by universities are better recognised within people’s local areas.

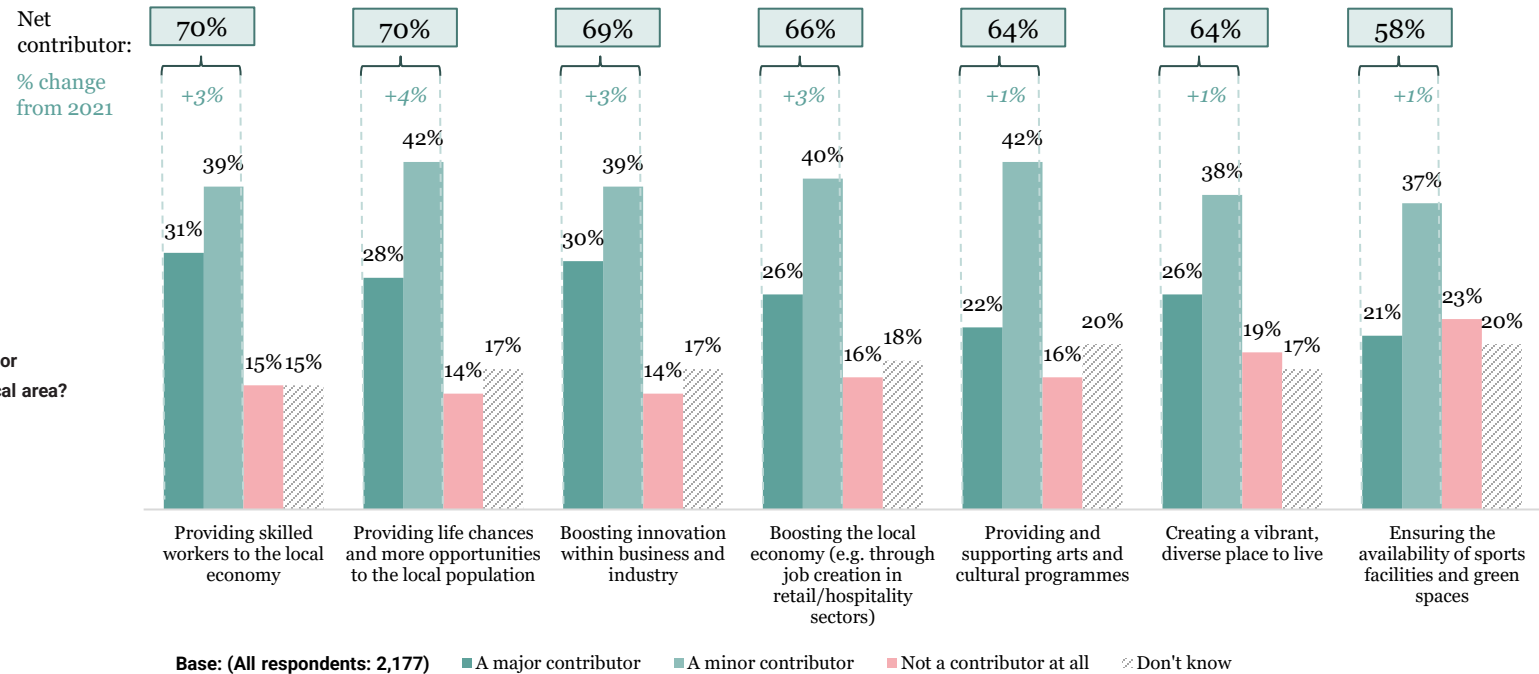
The public express positive views about the contribution of universities to their local areas: around two-thirds of the public recognise the local contribution of universities in the areas we surveyed them on. Recognition is highest in providing skilled workers to the local economy, providing life chances and opportunities to the local population, and boosting innovation within business and industry. Those aged 25-44, and likely to be in their early career, are most likely

to agree that universities provide skilled workers to the local economy, as are those based in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, as well as London the North-East and West Midlands. Those aged 25-44 are also most likely to feel that universities provide life chances to the local population. Those in London are significantly more likely to say this – as are Labour voters, although these groups are highly correlated. Around two-thirds also **recognise** the contribution of their local universities through the provision and support of arts and cultural programmes, creating a vibrant and diverse place to live, and the provision of sports facilities and green spaces. It is encouraging to see that the public register greater awareness of the contribution of universities to their local area across all metrics

since last year, and in particular in providing life chances to the local population. It is also notable that the public appears to feel more informed about and engaged with the contribution of universities to their local area, compared with how confident they are about the contribution at a national level. While around half of respondents give a “don’t know” or neutral response to the perceived performance of universities in general, this drops to about a third when asking people about their local area. This emphasises the potential of universities to positively represent the sector in their local area – and that it can be harder to drive the same sense of connection and perceived value of the sector at a UK level.



Q. To what extent do you see universities as major or minor contributors, if at all, to the following activities in your local area?





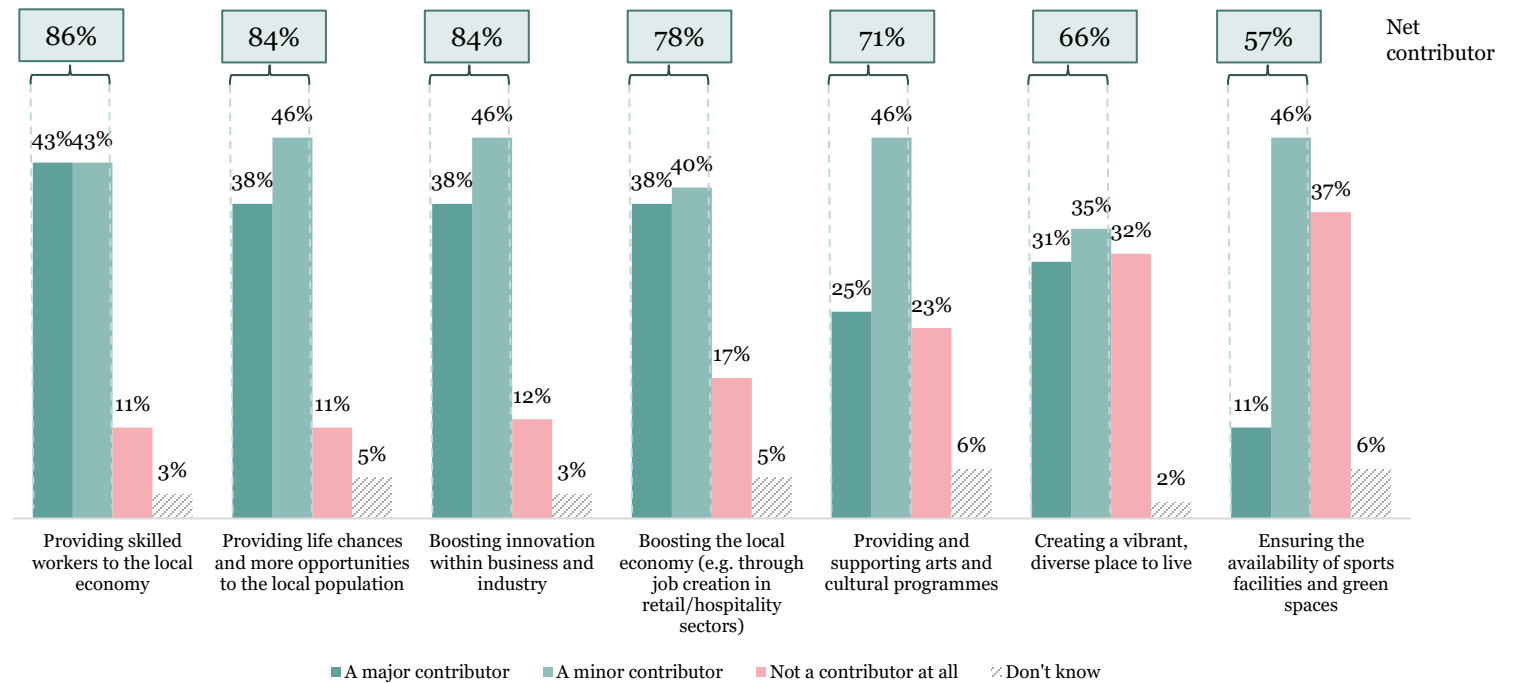
## MPs recognise the contributions of universities in their local area – especially in developing skills and providing life chances.

When asked the same question to MPs about the contributions of universities to their constituencies, we see a similar pattern to the general public in the order of contributions made within the different areas asked. However, MPs are more emphatic – they are far more likely to say that universities make a major contribution, rather than just a Minor contribution. MPs are also less likely to say that they don't know – a positive sign that MPs feel aware and engaged with the contributions being made by universities within their constituencies.

MPs record a slightly lower recognition of university contributions in creating a vibrant, diverse place to live – although this will reflect the natural variation in the proportion of students who are local versus from further afield, including international students. MPs are also slightly less likely to **recognise** the contribution of facilities and green spaces, although again, we can attribute a lot of this to variation in the particular facilities and layout of different universities.



Q. To what extent do you see universities as major or minor contributors, if at all, to the following activities in your local area?



Base: (All MPs: 65)

## So how can universities continue to build positive relationships with the general public?

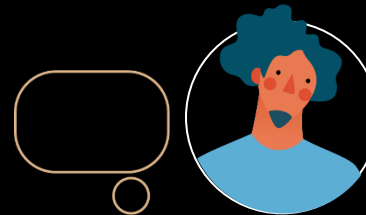
The general public spontaneously cite the benefit of universities to their local economies and adding to the culture and vibrancy of the area.



“ This creates more jobs and young people come to my place, it makes life more dynamic, vibrant and interesting”



“ It is a major employer in the city, it educates people locally, it is large and provides opportunities for many people. It sponsors and supports”



“ It brings jobs, diversity and prosperity to the local area, and has very ethical policies in force”



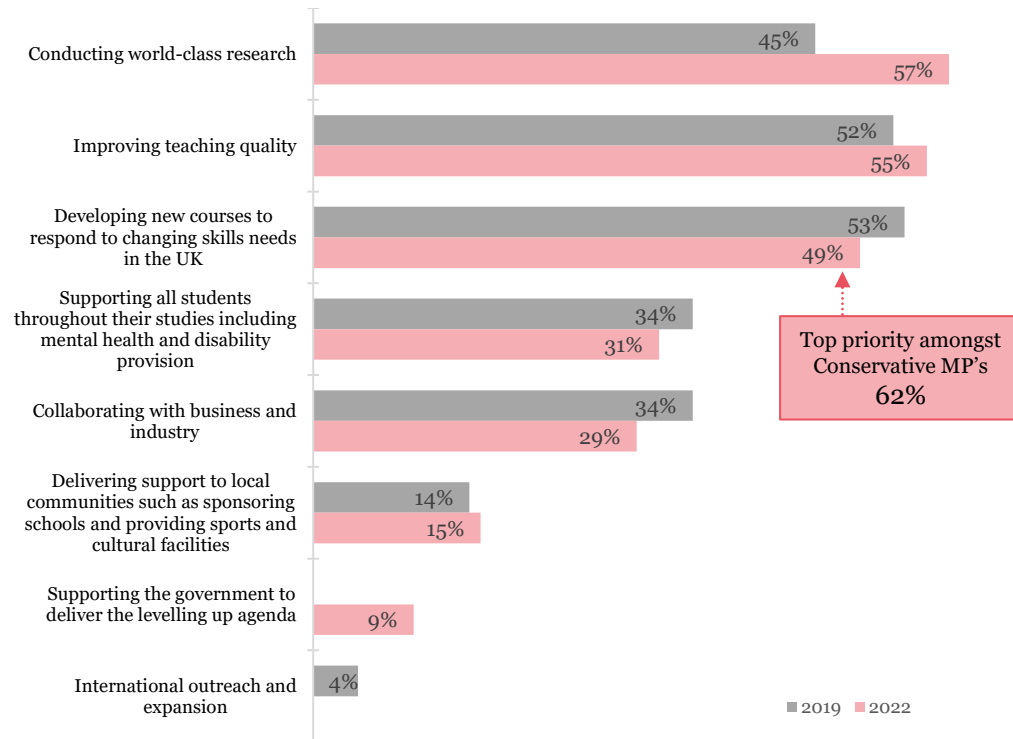
“ They drive the economy forward by having students, local and abroad, using the local businesses”

## MPs place most priority on spending on world class research, quality of teaching, and changing skills needs

Chart 5: When asked what universities should prioritise when spending funding, MPs are most likely to focus on conducting world-class research, improving teaching quality, and developing new courses to respond to changing skills needs in the UK.



**Q. Where do you think universities should prioritise spending funding gained through tuition fees and government grants?**

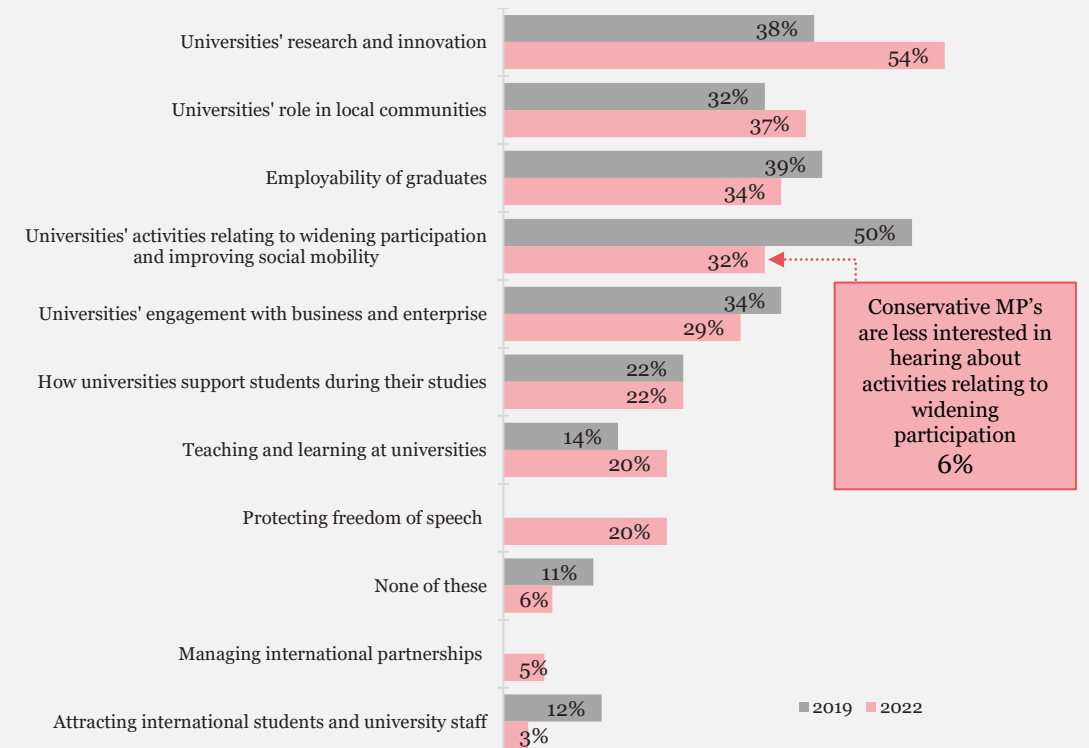


## MPs are most interested in hearing about research and innovation, and how universities impact the local community

Chart 6: We have seen these as top priorities and points of public engagement throughout, and so MPs show a good awareness of what the public value most about universities in the UK, and in their local areas.



**Q. Thinking about higher education, which, if any, of the following areas would you be most interested in hearing about in communications from UK universities?**



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