

Polling Brief – University Deregulation

In July 2015 The Australia Institute conducted a national opinion poll of 1408 people through Research Now. Respondents were selected to produce a representative sample based on gender, age and state.

The survey asked about the government's higher education policy and about opinions on Australia's universities. The poll focused on opinions of universities and funding arrangements.

Key results

There was strong opposition to the Abbott Government's proposed university funding policies.

- On the 20% funding cuts
 - 49% of people strongly oppose it, with an additional 21% somewhat opposing it.
- On deregulation.
 - 44% strongly oppose it and 23% somewhat oppose it.
- Would deregulation improve the student experience?
 - Only 17% said deregulation yes.
 - 40% said it would make no difference.
 - 42% said it would make educational experience worse.
- Who should more pay for university?
 - 63% say governments should pay more
 - 23% say students should pay more.
- Who should pay less?
 - 40% say students should pay less.
 - 8% say universities should pay less.
- There were majority positive opinions on university performance including:
 - R & D (74% said our unis performed well),
 - preparing students for high skilled jobs (71%) and
 - promoting critical thinking (62%).
 - Equity of access for all Australians was slightly lower, but still substantial (53%).
 - Universities scored lowest on leadership in public debates (42%, compared to 43% poorly)

Analysis

These results show that the previous minister and vice chancellors failed comprehensively to make a case for their deregulation proposal.

The plans for university funding became deeply unpopular and stayed that way. These polling results show that while the government wanted to cut funding and increase student debt, there is far greater public support for increasing government funding and little support for increasing student debt.

The lack of support for the government's plans may be related to disbelief that it would lead to better education for students. Only 1 in 6 thought deregulation would improve the educational experience at universities, and 2 in 5 said it would make things worse.

Universities failed to explain how they would spend their increased revenue. In effect, they tried to sell a new product by talking about its price, instead of how good it would be for students. It should not be surprising the sales pitch was not successful.

In reality, it was likely that increased student debt under a deregulated system would end up funding more research, not better education. Over the past decade, universities have already been spending increasing amounts of student-derived revenue on research, up from 30% in 2002 to 39% in 2012.¹

Despite this, overall, people have very positive opinions of universities in Australia. The only criteria on which they rated more poorly was standing up for the public interest in public debates. Universities now have an opportunity to take a stronger position on the role of the public interest in university funding.

The government's decision to roll back its decision on university funding is an opportunity for everyone – the government and the vice chancellors who supported the plan – to go back to the question: what are our universities for? What do we want them to provide for society? And what policies do we need for that to happen?

Polling Breakdown

What are your overall perceptions of universities in Australia?

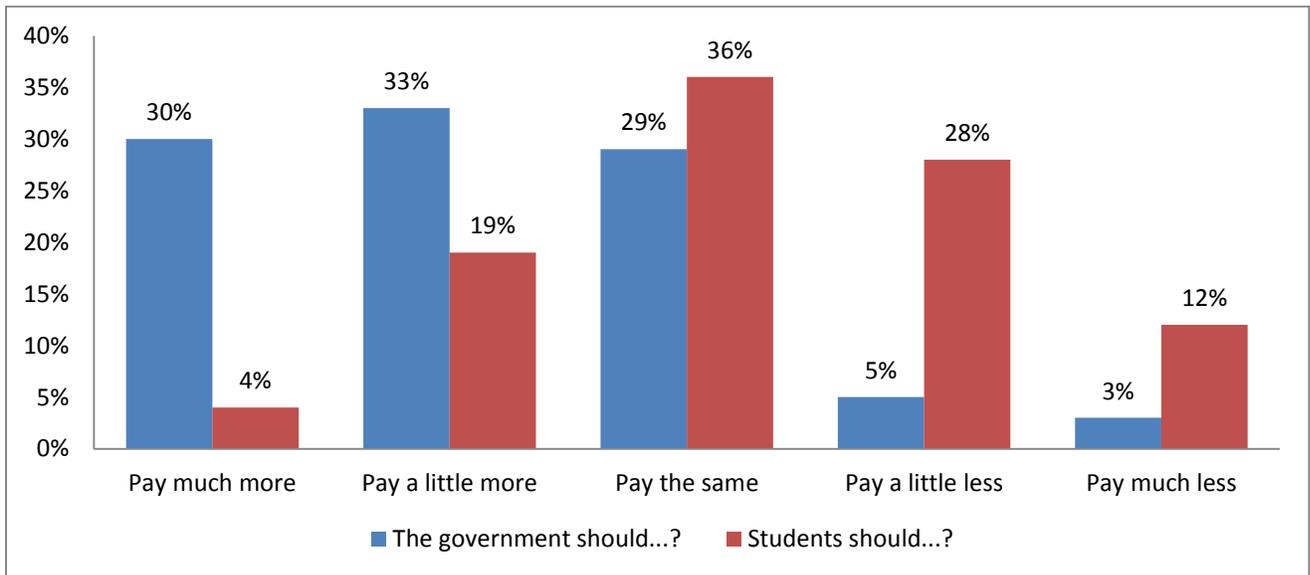
	Strongly positive	Somewh at positive	Neutral	Somewh at negative	Strongly negative	Don't know
TAI 2015 poll	19%	49%	25%	6%	1%	
Universities Australia 2013	20%	58%	18%	3%	1%	1%

The results show strong favourable opinions of Universities overall.

¹ <http://www.tai.org.au/content/not-%E2%80%98how-high%E2%80%99-%E2%80%98-what%E2%80%99>

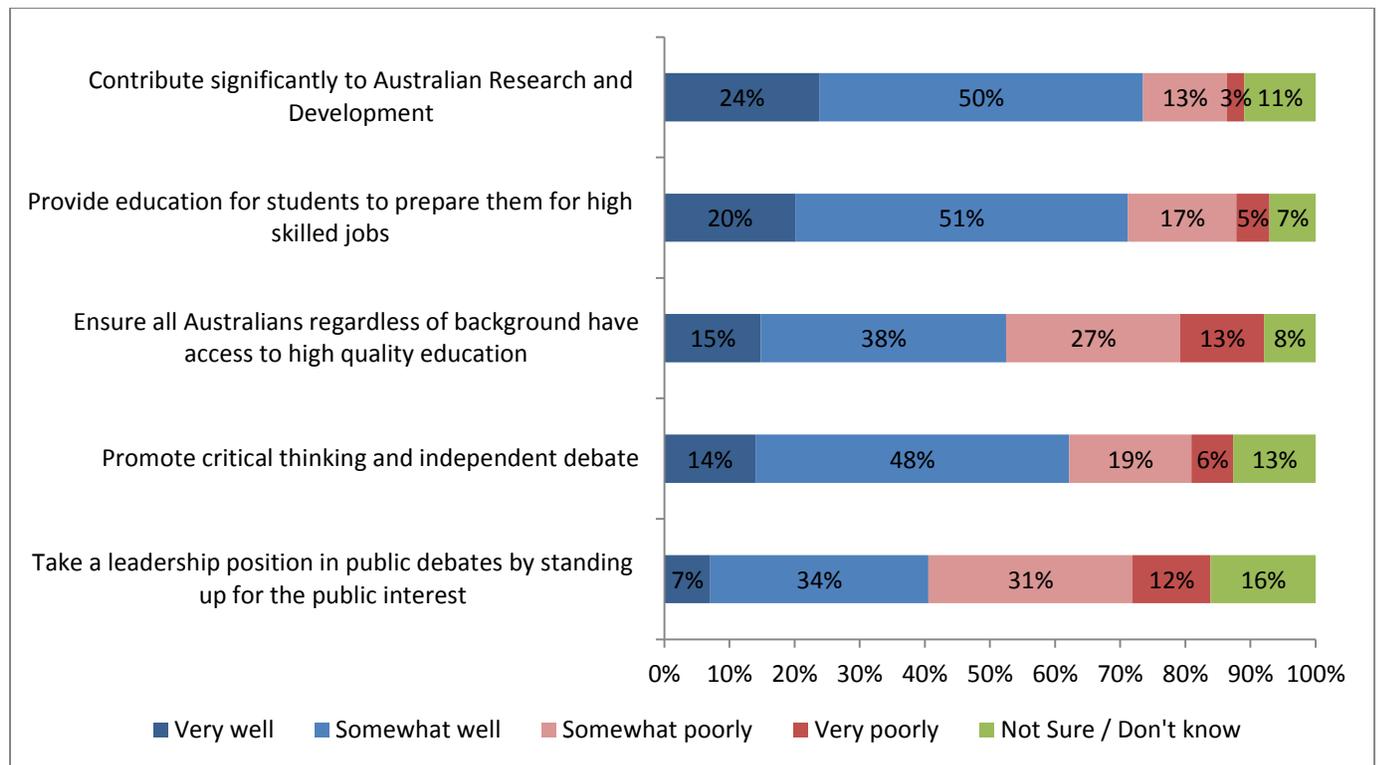
This question was taken from a February 2013 Universities Australia poll.² The recent poll shows a small decrease in favourable attitudes relative to the 2013 poll.

Universities are funded in part by government grants and in part by student fees, which are often funded through government loans that people repay throughout their careers. In your view, how should the contributions of each change?



² <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/news/commissioned-studies/Public-Perceptions-of-Australia-s-Universities>

How well do you think Australian universities do the following?



Do you support or oppose the following measures proposed by the government?

	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose	Don't know
Cut public funding for university courses by 20%	7%	17%	21%	49%	6%
Deregulation of university fees - meaning universities determine level of fees to charge	8%	18%	23%	44%	7%

Similar results for both of these questions suggests many people see this as a package deal.

If universities are allowed to raise more revenue by charging students higher fees, do you think student educational experience will be...?

Much better	Somewhat better	Neither better or worse	Somewhat worse	Much Worse
5%	12%	40%	26%	16%