

ANUpoll

THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Public Opinion Towards Higher Education

Results from the ANU Poll

REPORT 2

September 2008

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Executive Summary

Access to Higher Education

There is strong public support for the view that ability rather than cost should determine who receives a university education. More than nine out of every 10 respondents interviewed in the survey took this view. A university education is also viewed as a virtual necessity in today's world.

However, despite the commitment to equal and fair university access, a majority believes that access has actually become more difficult compared to the situation 10 years ago. Access is seen as having become especially difficult for students from poorer families and for those from remote and regional areas. By contrast, access to university is seen to have become easier for those who can pay.

Universities & the Labour Market

A university education is regarded as important in the labour market. A majority of the public believes that employers would prefer to hire a graduate, even if a non-graduate could do the job equally well. However, despite the belief that a university education is important in the labour market, it is not viewed as essential for job success; eight out of 10 believe that there are other ways to succeed, a finding which may reflect Australia's strong egalitarian culture.

Life skills are seen as a more important part of the university experience than acquiring vocational skills. Presentational skills are seen as most important for universities to instil in students; civic responsibility is viewed as least important.

University Funding

There is a general concern within public opinion about the reduced level of government funding for universities. The public believes that the decline in public funding for universities has gone too far, and that there should be a greater government commitment. Public support for more government funding for universities remains even when the alternative option is tax cuts.

Most people believe that a university education, while expensive, is worth the cost. Almost three quarters of the public believe that students have to borrow too much to pay for their education.

University Performance

Despite problems of funding, universities are seen as doing a good job, and are rated far ahead of public schools and just behind private schools. The public is aware of the need for universities to complement government funding, and nearly half see universities as operating as a business. However, a majority still see universities as teaching the important things that students need to know.

Key Trends: Most Important Problems & Political Mood

The public is focusing on two areas, the economy and the environment, as the two major problems facing the country. In an open-ended question, more than half of the public mentions one of these two areas as the most important problem. Almost two in every three respondents are satisfied with the way the country is heading, however that represents a decline of eight percentage points over the figure recorded in the first ANU Poll in March.



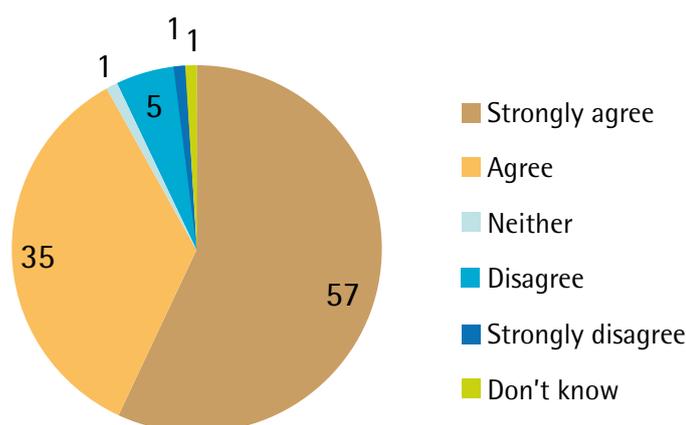
Access to Higher Education

Key points

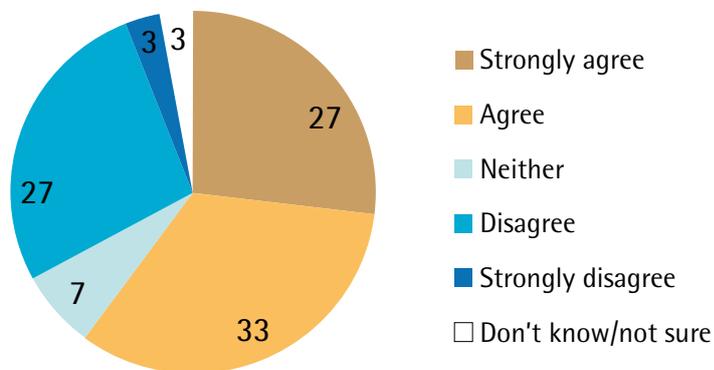
- Access to higher education for qualified students is regarded as a right by the vast majority of the public.
- A majority of the public believes that university is more important now than it was 10 years ago.
- Access to higher education is seen as more difficult now compared to 10 years ago for those with less ability to pay.

Gaining access to a university education is regarded as a right by the vast majority of the public. More than nine out of every 10 survey respondents interviewed in the ANU Poll see ability rather than cost as being the appropriate criteria for university entry. A total of 92 per cent of the respondents believe that cost should not inhibit students who are 'qualified and motivated' from going to university. And 57 per cent of those interviewed strongly agreed with the statement; just 6 per cent disagreed. There is, then, a strong public commitment to equal and fair access to higher education.

A majority of the public also believe that university education is more important today than it was 10 years ago. Six out of every 10 respondents take this view, almost half of them expressing the view strongly. Just three in 10 respondents disagree with the statement, and only a small minority are strongly in disagreement. There is therefore a strong view within the public that acquiring a university education is becoming a much more important necessity in today's world.

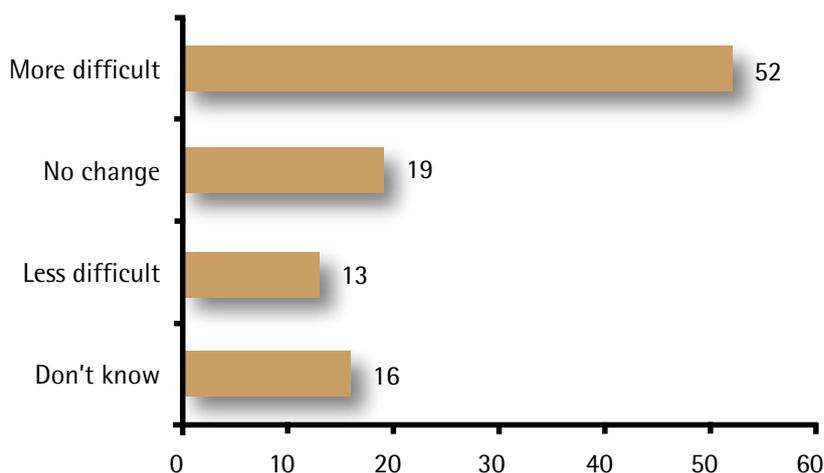


'Please tell me whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with each of the following...
We should not allow cost to keep students who are qualified and motivated from going to university.'



'Getting a university education is more important today than it was 10 years ago.'

However, despite the strong public commitment to equal and fair access to higher education and the importance ascribed to acquiring it, there are strains. The university sector has expanded considerably over the past 10 years, and a majority believe that the supply of university places has not kept pace with the increased demand. A total of 52 per cent of the survey respondents thought that obtaining a university education had become more difficult compared to the situation 10 years ago, and just 13 per cent believed that it had become less difficult, with about one in five seeing no change.

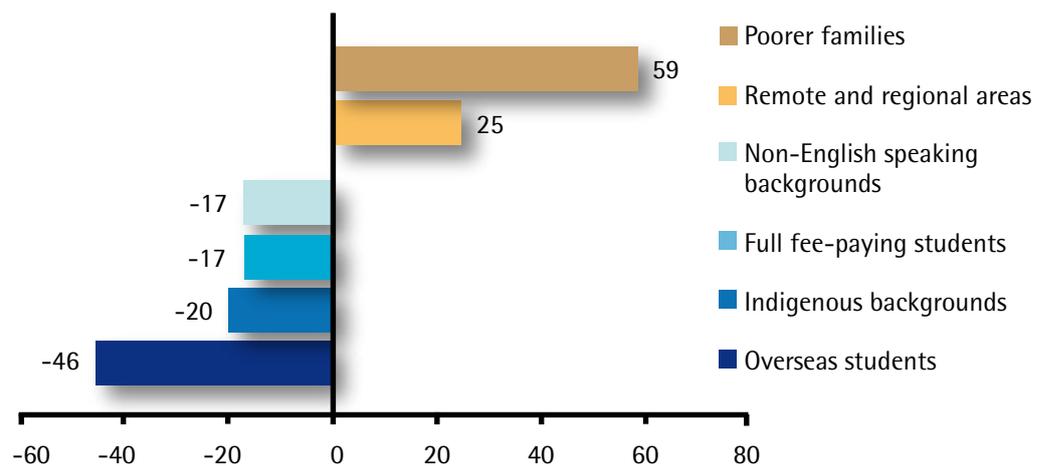


Would you say getting a university education has become more difficult, less difficult, or no different than it was 10 years ago?

Which groups do the public feel are most advantaged or disadvantaged in gaining access to higher education compared to 10 years ago? By subtracting the proportion who feel it is less difficult from the proportion who feel it is more difficult we can derive an index of perceived difficulty, with a negative figure indicating less difficulty, a positive figure more difficulty.

The results show that the public sees students from poor families as experiencing the most difficulty compared to 10 years ago. A total of 70 per cent thought it had become more difficult for students from poor families to obtain a university education, while just 11 per cent thought it had become less difficult.

Among the other groups of students, the public sees access as having become more difficult for students from remote and regional areas, though less so than those from poorer families. However, for students from overseas, those who are full fee-paying, and those from Indigenous or non-English speaking backgrounds, the public sees access as having become easier. Access is seen to have become much easier for overseas students; 56 per cent of the respondents considered access to have become less difficult, while just 10 per cent saw it as having become more difficult. The implication is that the public feels that access to higher education has become easier for those who can pay, and more difficult for those with fewer resources.



Figures are the per cent saying access to higher education is more difficult minus the proportion who see it as less difficult.

'Thinking of the following groups of people, compared to 10 years ago, do you think it has become more difficulty, less difficult or about the same to get a university education? ...Students from poorer families. ...Students from remote and regional areas. ...Students from non-English speaking backgrounds. ...Students from indigenous backgrounds. ...Full fee-paying students. ...Overseas students.'

International Comparisons

In the United States, 88 per cent believe that cost should not get in the way of a college education, very similar to the Australian figure of 92 per cent.

Source John Immerwahr and Jean Johnson, *Squeeze Play: How Parents and the Public Look at Higher Education Today*. San Jose, CA: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2007.

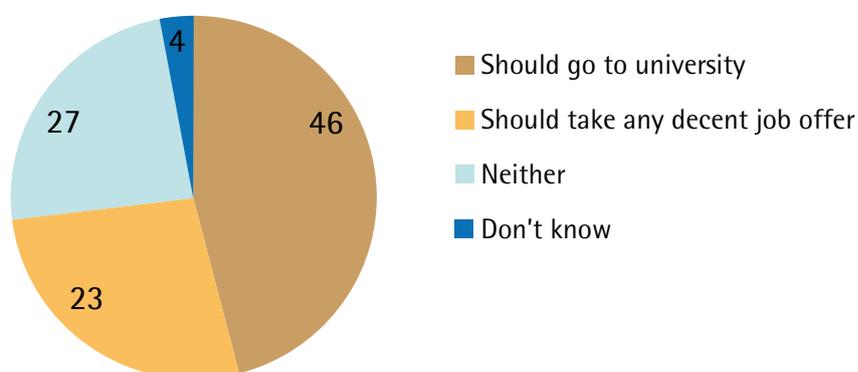
Universities & the Labour Market

Key points

- Almost half of the public believes that high school students should go onto university rather than take a job.
- A majority of the public sees employers as preferring a graduate over a non-graduate, even if a non-graduate could do the job.
- A large majority believe that a university is not essential for job success in today's world.
- Life skills, such as maturity and the ability to get along with people, are seen as more important than vocational skills for universities to instil in students.

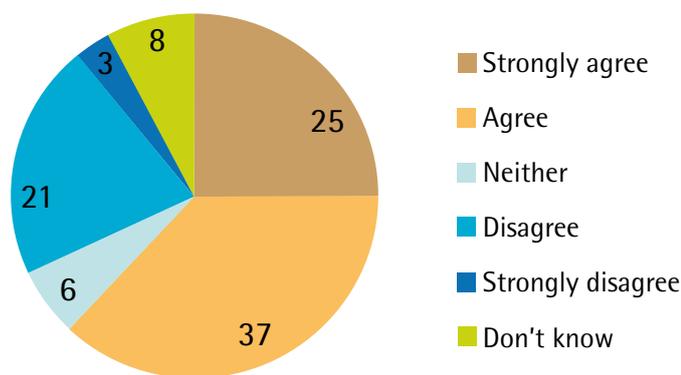
An education is generally viewed as enhancing a person's job prospects. But how far does the public believe that a university education improves a person's opportunities in the labour market compared to a high school education? Almost half of the survey respondents—46 per cent—said that a high school student should go onto university rather than take a job. By contrast, just 27 per cent believed that a high school student should take any decent job offer, though it is notable that almost as many had no view either way.

Not surprisingly, those most in favour of high school students going onto university are those who already have a degree (54 per cent, compared to 42 per cent for those without a university degree). Those in the highest income decile are almost twice as likely to favour going onto university compared to those in the lowest income decile (64 per cent as against 34 per cent), as are those who have higher education themselves, and the young (54 per cent among those aged 18 to 24 years, compared to 35 per cent among those aged 65 years or more). Those most familiar with a university education are therefore those who likely to see its value in the labour market.



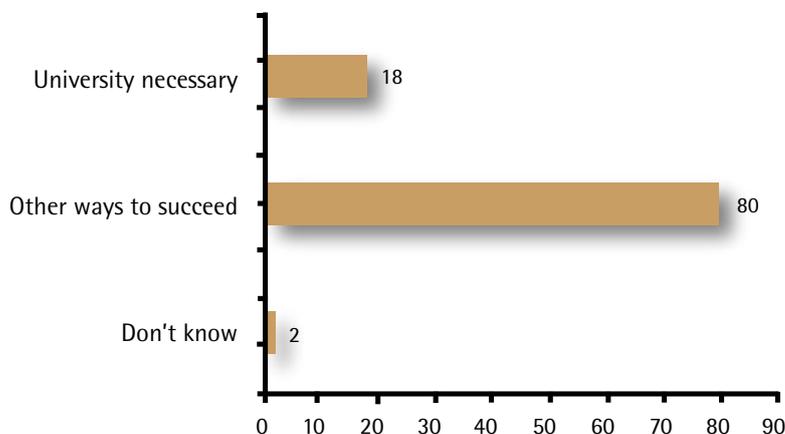
'Which of the following comes closest to your view? Students completing high school should go to university because in the long run they'll have better job prospects, or students completing high school should take any decent job offer they get.'

In terms of how the public believes employers view a university degree, a majority of the public agrees that many employers hire graduates when those without a degree could do the job just as well. A total of 62 per cent take this view, 25 per cent of them strongly agreeing with the statement. Just 24 per cent disagree with the statement, and just 3 per cent disagree strongly. There is, then, a strong view among the public that a university degree is seen as highly valued by potential employers.



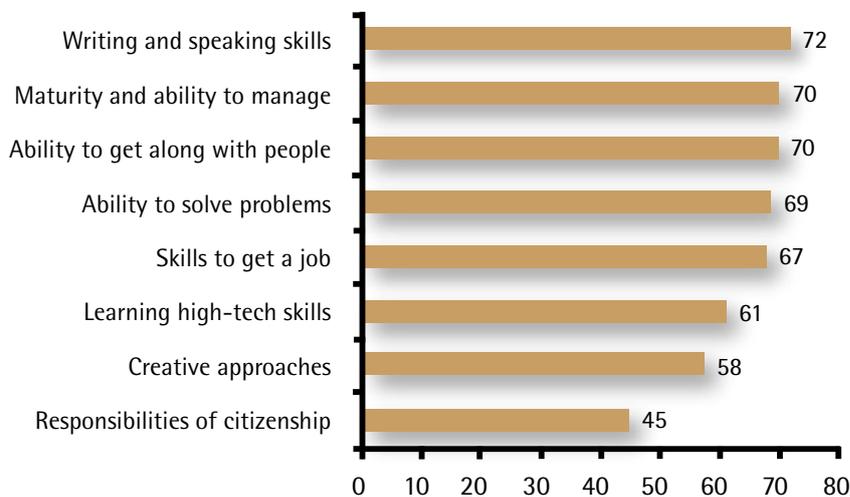
'Do you agree or disagree that a lot of employers hire university graduates for jobs that could be done as well or better by people without a university degree?'

While the public views a university education as important in the labour market, most also see it as not the only route to success. Only 18 per cent of the respondents believed that a university education was necessary for job success, compared to 80 per cent who felt that there were other ways to succeed. The fact that there is not a greater stress on the necessity of a university education for success at work (as is found, for example, in the United States) perhaps reflects Australia's strong egalitarian culture and the notion that anyone can succeed with sufficient motivation.



'Which of the following is closer to your view? A university education is necessary for a person to be successful in today's work world, or there are many ways to succeed in today's work world without a university education.'

Along with the skills necessary for young people to get a good job, the public also believes that universities should help students to become more mature, to manage and to get along with people. The public ranks presentational skills - writing and speaking - first, with 72 per cent seeing these skills as very important. 'A sense of maturity and ability to manage on their own' is ranked second, and is mentioned as very important by 70 per cent, as is 'an ability to get along with people different from themselves', also mentioned by 70 per cent. At the other end of the scale, the responsibilities of citizenship and creative approaches to problem solving are seen as least important qualities for universities to instil in students.



'I am going to read out a list of skills and knowledge that students may gain from a university education. Please tell me how important you think each of these is. ...A sense of maturity and ability to manage on their own. ...The skills they need to get a job when they graduate. ...An ability to get along with people different from themselves. ...Learning high-tech skills, such as using computers and the internet. ...An ability to solve problems and think analytically. ...First-rate writing and speaking skills. ...An awareness of the responsibilities of citizenship, such as voting and volunteering. ...Creative approaches to solving problems.'

International Comparisons

In the United States, 87 per cent believe students completing high school should go onto university because it will improve their job prospects; this is considerably more than the 46 per cent that the same question elicited in Australia.

In the same US survey, 67 per cent believe that employers hire graduates for jobs that could be done as well as someone without a degree, very similar to the Australian figure of 62 per cent. Compared to Australia, many more Americans (50 per cent, compared to 18 per cent here) see university as necessary for job success.

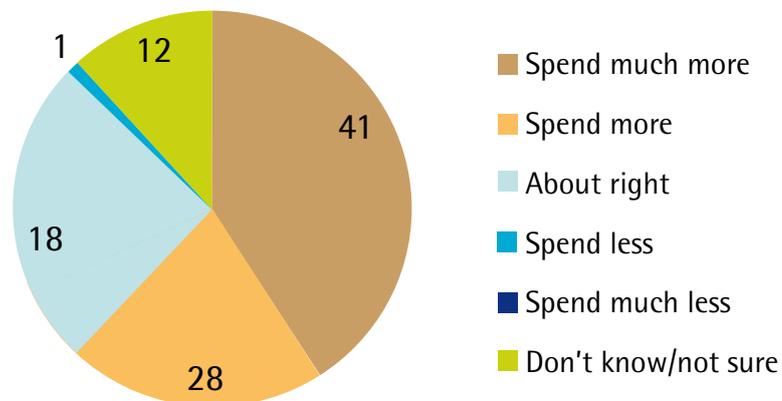
Source John Immerwahr and Jean Johnson, *Squeeze Play: How Parents and the Public Look at Higher Education Today*. San Jose, CA: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2007.

University Funding

Key points

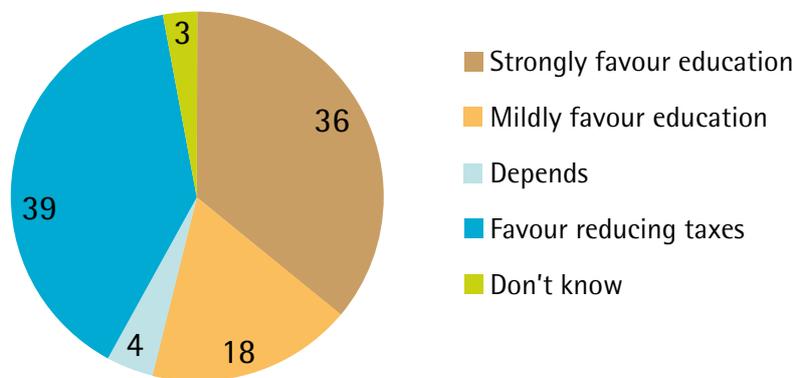
- There is widespread support for more government funding for universities.
- A majority of the public remains in support of more funding for universities even at the cost of tax cuts.
- A majority of the public believe that students have to borrow too much for their education.

The rapid expansion of university education from the 1960s onwards has raised major issues about how the system can be adequately funded to cope with the extra demand. The Higher Education Contributions Scheme (HECS) was introduced in 1989, by which students paid part of the cost of their education in the form of a deferred loan; the scheme has been revised several times, although the basic principle that students should contribute to the cost of their education has remained.



'Do you think that the government should spend more or spend less on university education, or do you think the current level of funding is about right?'

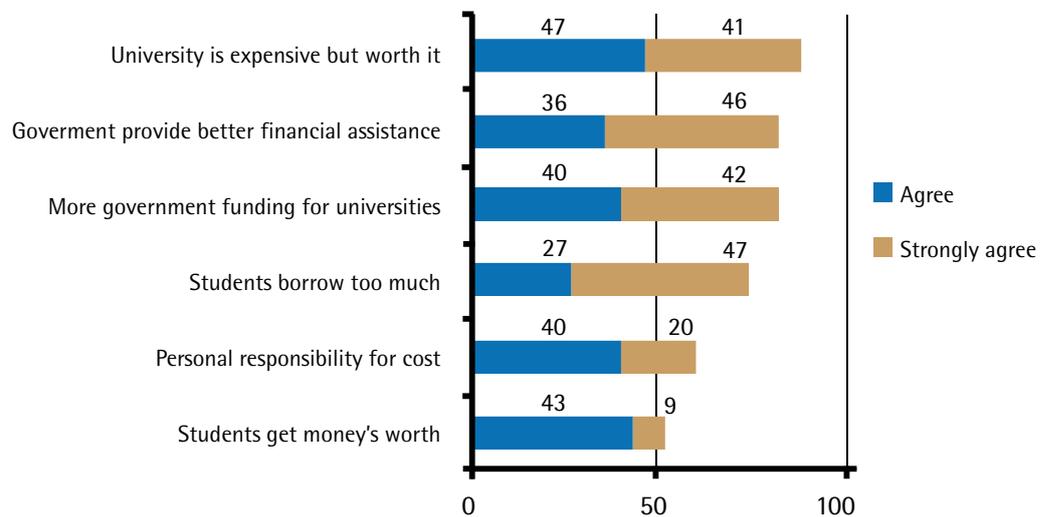
In line with the importance that the public places on education, more than two in every three respondents believe that more money should be spent on education, with the largest group of respondents - 41 per cent - seeing 'much more' spending as being required. Just 1 per cent of the respondents thought that less money should be spent on education. To put this in perspective, the 2007 Australian Election Study (AES) survey found that 47 per cent wanted to see more spending on defence, with a further 41 per cent seeing the current level of spending as being about right. University education is viewed by the public as representing a much greater priority for government expenditure than defence.



If the government had to choose between spending more on universities or reducing taxes, which would you prefer?

Asking survey respondents to commit government funding without specifying what trade-offs may be involved will obviously inflate the proportions in favour of more spending. To take this into account, the survey also asked the respondents to choose between two options, more spending on education or reduced taxes. In this scenario, a majority - 54 per cent - still favoured more spending on university education, while 39 per cent favoured reduced taxes.

Once again, to put this result in perspective, a similar question in the 2007 AES about more spending on social services or reduced taxes produced 47 per cent favouring more spending and 34 per cent favouring reduced taxes. More government funding for university education would therefore appear to be a higher priority for the public than more funding for social services.



Please tell me whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with each of the following. ...Even though it's expensive, university today is worth it. ...University students are getting their money's worth. ...Students have to borrow too much money through HECS [the Higher Education Contribution Scheme] to pay for university fees. ... Students appreciate the value of a university education only when they have some personal responsibility for paying the costs. ...The Government should provide more funding for universities. ...The Government should provide better financial assistance to students.

In order to measure the public's views about other aspects of university funding, the survey asked the respondents their views on six statements reflecting different aspects of university funding. Almost nine out of 10 respondents agreed that while a university education was expensive, it was worth the cost. The vast majority also agreed that the government should do more in terms of funding, both for universities and for students. Almost three quarters of the respondents also took the view that students had to borrow too much through HECS to pay for their university fees. At the other end of the scale, a narrow majority thought that students received value for what they paid.

International Comparisons

In the United States, 67 per cent thought that although it was expensive, a college education was worth the cost (compared to 88 per cent who took a similar view in Australia). Similarly, 57 per cent believed that students were receiving their money's worth, compared to 52 per cent in Australia.

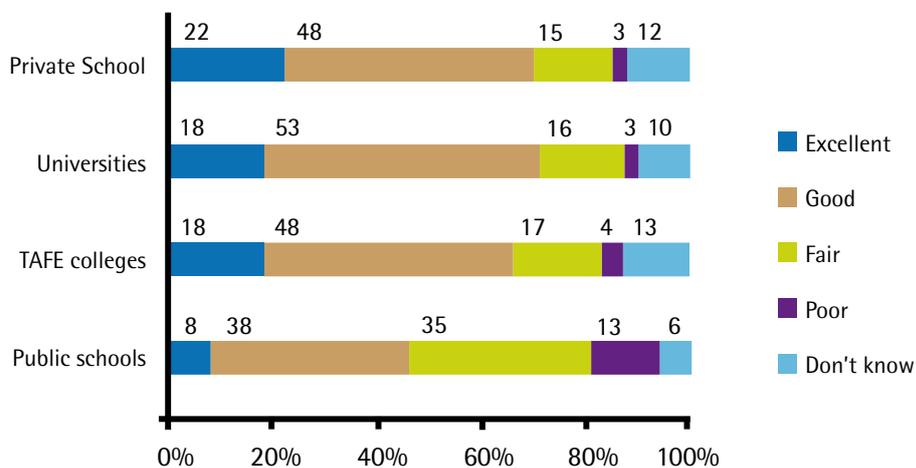
Source John Immerwahr and Jean Johnson, *Squeeze Play: How Parents and the Public Look at Higher Education Today*. San Jose, CA: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2007.

University Performance

Key points

- Universities are seen as performing well by the public and are ranked second only to private schools.
- Almost half of the public sees universities as being concerned with running a business.
- Just over a half of the public sees universities as teaching the appropriate things.

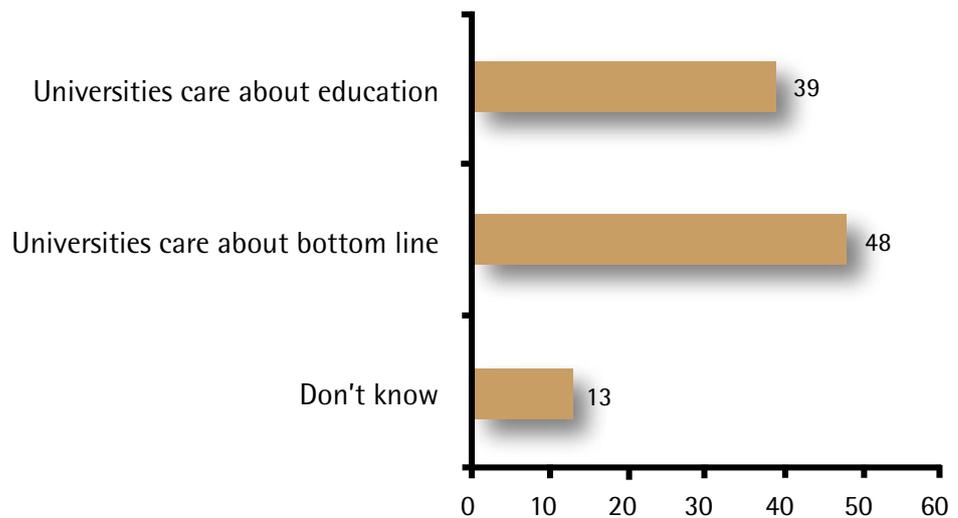
In addition to issues surrounding access to and the cost of a university education, the public has clear views about the performance of universities—as well as views about the performance of other parts of the education sector. Most highly rated in terms of performance are private schools; 22 per cent of the respondents rated them as 'excellent', and a further 48 per cent saw them as 'good'. Universities are ranked second, with 18 per cent of the respondents seeing their performance as excellent and 53 per cent as good. At the other end of the scale, public schools are ranked fourth, with most respondents either rating their performance as good or fair. TAFE colleges are ranked third, only just behind universities.



Overall, are the public schools, private schools, the TAFE colleges and universities in your state doing an excellent, good, fair or poor job?

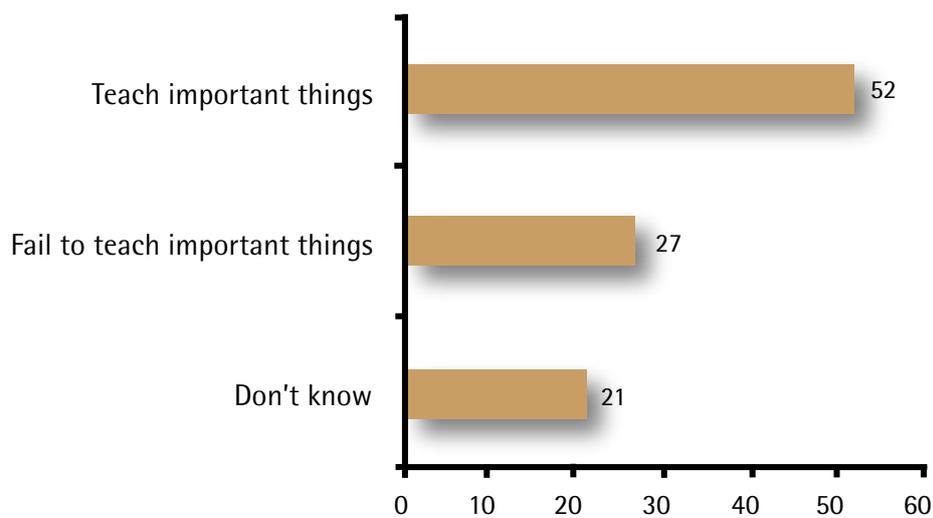
The rapid expansion of universities has not been matched by a similar increase in public funds, so universities have been forced to look outside of the public sector for additional funds. That has inevitably raised concerns about the extent to which universities have become preoccupied with raising funds, rather than with their core mission of educating students. This is reflected in 48 per cent of the public viewing universities as being mainly concerned with operating as a business. Somewhat fewer, 39 per cent, see universities as being mainly concerned with providing students with a good educational experience.

Those who see universities as primarily concerned with education tend to be those who are younger and parents of children who are of university age. Interestingly, the survey respondents who reported having a HECS debt or have a higher education are not significantly different in their views on this issue than the rest of the population, suggesting that contributing to the cost of a person's own education does not cause them to take a different view of universities than the rest of the population.



Do you believe that universities today mainly care about education and making sure students have a good educational experience, or are universities today like most businesses and mainly care about the bottom line?

In terms of what universities teach students, just over half of the respondents believe that universities are teaching the important things, and just 27 per cent believe that they are failing in this duty. Once again, it is the young, and especially those who possess a university education, who are most likely to take a positive view.



In general, would you say that universities are teaching students the important things they need to know, or would you say that they are failing to teach students the important things they need to know?

International Comparisons

The public in the United States sees the performance of universities very similarly to the Australian public, with 43 per cent saying that colleges mainly care about education, compared to 39 per cent in Australia who hold that view. However, more Americans - 66 per cent - see their universities as teaching the important things than do Australians (52 per cent).

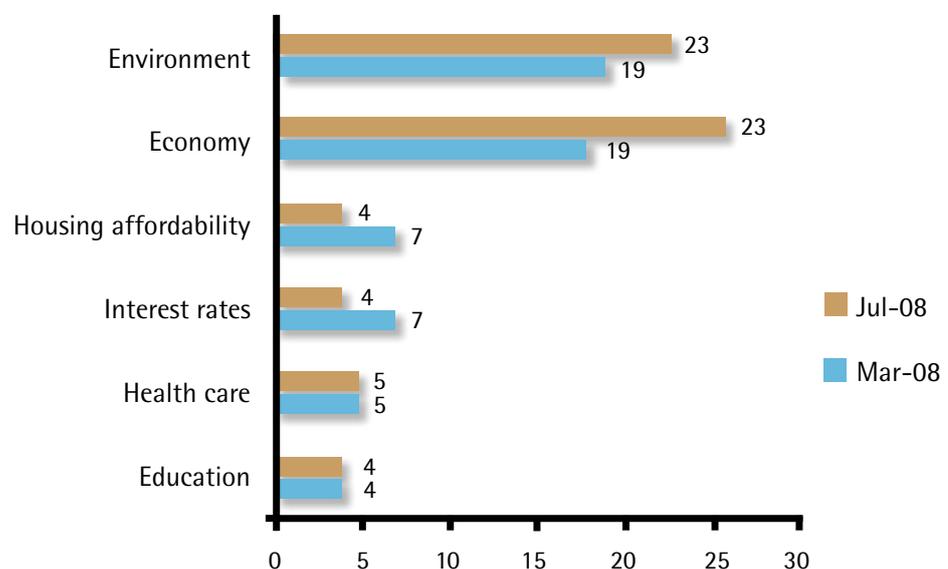
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Key Trends: Most Important Problems & Political Mood

Key points

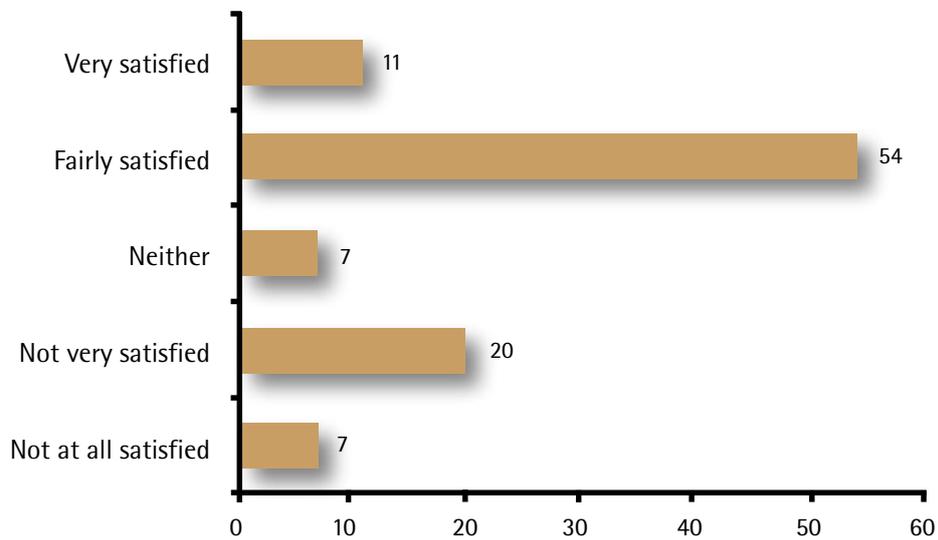
- The economy and the environment are seen as the two dominant problems facing the country.
- The majority of Australians are satisfied with the way the country is heading, although there has been a decline in satisfaction since March 2008.

The economy and the environment are seen as the two dominant problems facing the country, with the economy slightly ahead. At the time of the first ANU poll in March 2008, the environment was ranked first, followed by the economy. Housing affordability and interest rates have receded somewhat for voters, while health and education are consistently mentioned as problems by five and four per cent of the population, respectively. This poll confirms the view that the public is focusing its attention on the economy and the environment as the two major problems facing Australia.



What do you think is the most important problem facing Australia today?

Around two in every three respondents are satisfied with the way the country is heading, with just over one in four saying that they are not satisfied. Subtracting the proportions of unsatisfied respondents (27 per cent) from the satisfied respondents (65 per cent) produces an index of +38, which is substantially down from the figure of +53 recorded in the first ANU Poll in March.



All things considered, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way the country is heading?

About the Survey

The ANU Poll is conducted for The Australian National University by the Social Research Centre, Melbourne. The survey is a national random sample of the adult population aged 18 years and over conducted by telephone. In the July 2008 ANU Poll, 1,200 people were interviewed between 20 June and 6 July 2008, with a response rate of 34 per cent. The results have been weighted to represent the national population. The survey's margin of error is ± 3 per cent. Full details of the survey can be found at www.anu.edu.au/anupoll