

Policy Note 68 | January 2026

Are students still ‘woke’?

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Introduction

We posed around two dozen identical questions on free speech issues to full-time undergraduate students in spring 2016, again in spring 2022 and for a third time in late 2025.

Much has changed over the period in question.

- ▶ When the first wave occurred, the UK had not yet voted to leave the EU and Donald Trump had not yet been elected as US President for the first time; the undergraduate respondents covered by the first wave were born in the twentieth century, and they were more likely to be a ‘millennial’ (people born in 1996 or earlier) than a member of ‘Gen Z’ (people born after 1997).
- ▶ The second wave was conducted soon after the pandemic, meaning the respondents’ education and transition to adulthood had typically been severely disrupted by the global health crisis.
- ▶ The third wave took place, in contrast, after Donald Trump’s re-election, after the induction of the first Labour Government at Westminster for 14 years and at a time when some commentators had declared the ‘woke’ era to be over.

As the questions were the same across the three waves and the same pollsters were used each time, the results are generally directly comparable. However, some minor updates were made – for example, in 2022 we added a new question on England’s proposed ‘free speech champion’, which was modified in 2025 to recognise the role now exists. Across the three waves, we tweaked the list of political groups provided as possible responses, most notably for the question on whether any of them should be banned from speaking on campus – for instance, replacing UKIP with Reform UK in 2025.

The results, and therefore our conclusions, were notably different between the first two waves, from 2016 to 2022. For example, the first survey found considerable uncertainty among students, with the most popular response to many questions being the most neutral one, alongside considerable support for restricting speech.

The HEPI Report summarising the results of the first wave, *Keeping Schtum!*, concluded:

It is not always clear whether the results reflect confusion or muddled-thinking, or whether they simply reflect a complex picture on a complex set of issues. But it seems as if, for some students, censorship is actually seen as a way of protecting freedom of speech. Overall, the answers to the questions suggest the pendulum may have swung too far away from favouring free speech.

Six years later, in 2022, the results were a lot clearer and the HEPI Policy Note's conclusions were a lot more definite:

This time, we are less tentative: it is clear that most students wish to see greater restrictions imposed on their peers than have tended to characterise higher education in the past. In other words, the pendulum has continued to swing further in the same direction. In some areas, there is not much room left for it to move further that way.

The third wave was conducted in part because of the burgeoning idea that the period of 'woke' had recently come to an end, especially as a result of the re-election of Donald Trump as US President in late 2024. New books published in 2025 included *The End of Woke* by Andrew Doyle and *Woke Is Dead* by Piers Morgan. Similarly, Professor Eric Kaufmann has focused his commentary on 'What Comes After Woke'.

Such commentators tend to portray the previous decade or more as an aberration.

- ▶ Piers Morgan, for instance, writes, 'As abruptly as the Blair-and-Britpop nineties ended with the terror-and-twitter noughties, we can now look back on the period 2015-2025 as *The Wokies*.'
- ▶ Similarly, Andrew Doyle argues, 'In decades to come, this period of history will seem incomprehensible, and perhaps future generations will struggle to make sense of it.'

Doyle also, however, says: 'the staunchest defenders of wokeness will adhere to these precious beliefs like barnacles to the keel of a sinking ship.'¹ Morgan similarly argues: 'Woke was born in our universities and they will be the place where the last rites take the longest to be read.'² So the third wave of HEPI's free speech survey was conducted at the end of 2025 to judge how far, if at all, the so-called 'end-of-woke' can be seen in the changing views of young full-time students. The results suggest the pendulum analogy is no longer so useful, as in some respects students appear to have become slightly more liberal on free speech issues than their predecessors were in 2022 whereas, in other respects, the tendency to favour restrictions has grown.

Methodology

HEPI polled 1,006 full-time undergraduate students between 16 and 22 March 2016 and a further 1,019 between 13 and 19 May 2022 through YouthSight. The reports and full data from these two surveys remain available and free to access on the HEPI website.

A third wave of the survey took place between 14 and 29 November 2025, when Savanta polled 1,012 students online using internal Savanta panels. (Savanta bought YouthSight in 2021 and stopped using the YouthSight name in late 2022.) Data were unweighted but quotas were set for gender, university group and year of study to ensure an overall representative sample. The margin of error is +/- 3.08%. Respondents received an average financial incentive worth £0.90p.

The first wave took place in the 2015/16 academic year, the second wave took place in the 2021/22 academic year and the third wave took place in the 2025/26 academic year. As the overwhelming majority of undergraduate courses are three years in duration, each wave focused on a different cohort of students.

¹ Andrew Doyle, *The End of Woke: How the Culture War Went Too Far and What to Expect from the Counter-Revolution*, 2025, p.451 and p.453

² Piers Morgan, *Woke Is Dead: How Common Sense Triumphed in an Age of Total Madness*, 2025, p.50 and p.255

The order in which the results are reported is different to the order in which the questions were asked. The full survey results are free to view in a spreadsheet on the HEPI website. In the discussion of the results below, separate positive results and separate negative results are sometimes added together, as 'net positive' and 'net negative', with the full breakdowns shown in the charts. Where this occurs, a net sum may vary slightly from the individual results on the relevant chart due to the polling company's rounding methodology.

Two questions not discussed below suggest that half of respondents voted in the 2024 General Election – many of them would have been too young to do so. Half (51%) of those who did vote opted for Labour, with smaller numbers voting Green (11%), Conservative (10%), Reform UK (9%) and Liberal Democrat (8%).

Where respondents were asked to plot their views on a scale, the 2025 wave moved from a partially numeric system ('1 – Completely agree', then '2', '3' and '4', ending with '5 – Completely disagree') to one using words only ('Completely agree', 'Agree', 'Neither agree nor disagree', 'Disagree' and 'Completely disagree'). For these questions a 'Don't know' option was also generally added in 2025. These changes reflect advice from the polling company.

Summary

HEPI polled just over 1,000 full-time undergraduate students on a range of free speech issues at the end of 2025 via Savanta, a market research company with a history of polling young people and students. The questions were identical in nearly every respect to those posed by HEPI through YouthSight (which was taken over by Savanta) in 2016 and 2022, enabling a comparison of how views have changed over the past decade.

Between 2016 and 2022, students as a group became significantly less supportive of free expression. The new results suggest that, despite a spate of recent commentary suggesting 'woke is dead', the current cohort of students do not appear to be notably more liberal on free speech questions than their counterparts earlier in the 2020s. While in some respects the latest results do suggest students are a little less supportive of restricting free speech than they were in 2022, this is not the case in all instances and, in some important respects, today's students appear to be even more in favour of restricting some forms of expression than their recent predecessors.

The full picture is therefore nuanced and, in places, arguably contradictory.

- ▶ As in the past, the vast majority (90%) of students feel personally able to express their views without obstacle – 45% feel 'completely' able to do so and a further 45% feel 'somewhat' able to do so. In addition, a high proportion (83%) of students feel they are protected against 'discrimination or emotional harm' – 33% feel 'completely' protected and 50% feel 'somewhat' protected.
- ▶ A number of other responses suggest students feel there are growing limitations to free expression on campus – around half of students (47%) think 'universities are becoming less tolerant of a wide range of viewpoints', which is higher than in both 2022 (38%) and 2016 (24%). Over half (52%) think student societies are typically over-sensitive, which is also higher than in 2016 (43%) and 2022 (42%).

- ▶ The answers to a number of questions imply today's students have similar views on some issues to those held by students a few years ago: 39% of students believe 'students' unions should ban all speakers that cause offence to some students', which is exactly the same proportion as in 2022 (but over double the 16% figure from 2016), while 37% of students agree that 'if you debate an issue like sexism or racism, you make it acceptable', which is similar to the 35% result in 2022 (and much higher than the 17% result from 2016).
- ▶ A large majority (69%) of students say 'universities should never limit free speech', at least in theory, which is up from 60% in 2016 and 61% in 2022. Half (49%) say universities should never cancel events, which is materially higher than in both 2016 (29%) and 2022 (34%). More students (61%) than in the past believe 'Academics should be free to research and teach whatever they want', up from 45% in 2016 and 51% in 2022.
- ▶ Yet many results suggest today's students are even more sympathetic towards – and more certain about – specific policies that may impact on other people's freedoms: support for 'safe-space policies' has grown to 79%, up from 62% in 2022 and 48% in 2016. When asked about university libraries, just a quarter (25%) of students agree 'All resources should be included for the purpose of academic study, regardless of content', down from one-third (34%) in 2022 and nearly one-half (47%) in 2016. Support for trigger warnings, already close to universal in 2022, has grown slightly (to 88% of students, up from 86% in 2022 and 67% in 2016).
- ▶ Perhaps the single most striking finding from the new survey relates to political organisations. Over one-third of students (35%) believe the political party that led the opinion polls for most of 2025, Reform UK, should be banned from speaking at events in higher education institutions. This finding, which arguably flies in the face of democratic norms, is higher than the previous results for any other political group – for example, in 2022 the top result was 26% for banning the English Defence League from speaking on campus and, in 2016, 31% of respondents wanted the British National Party (BNP) to be banned.
- ▶ Most students (71%) support the approach of the current and previous Governments towards free speech in higher education, whereby institutions have to 'promote' free speech and are monitored and regulated by a 'free speech champion' at the Office for Students. This means most respondents support more oversight than existed in the past, perhaps as a way to balance the competing demands of those who want to see further restrictions and those who want fewer restrictions or to iron out inconsistencies in approach between most students' theoretical support for free speech and their simultaneous support for tighter restrictions on their fellow students.

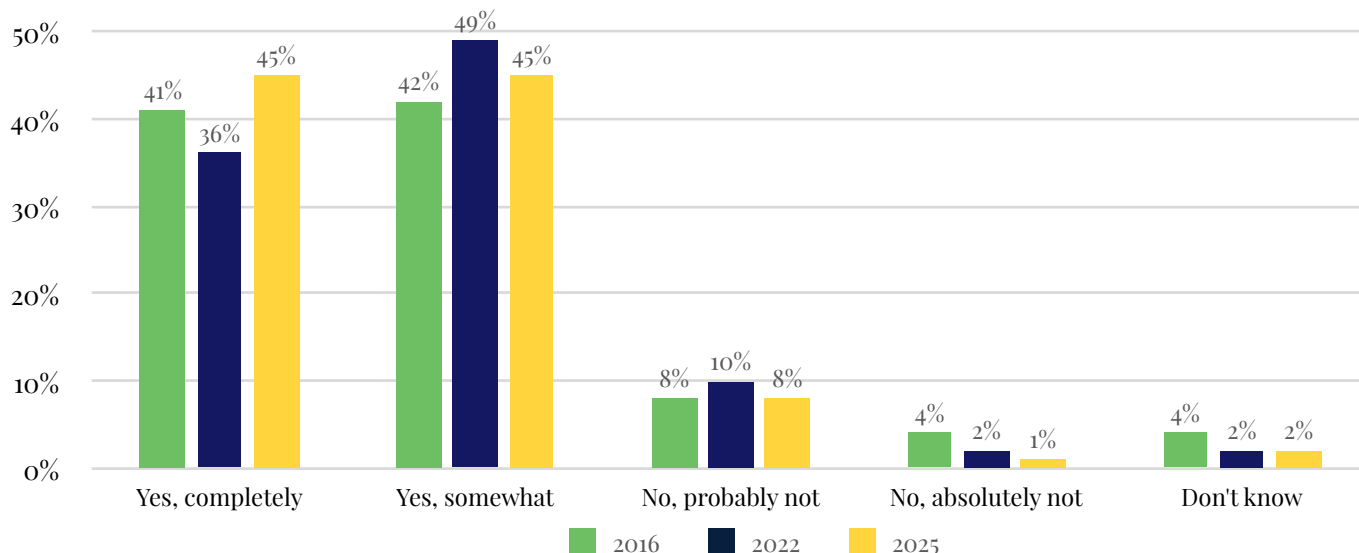
Overall, If it were ever right to use the loaded term 'woke' to describe contemporary students, then it seems clear the so-called 'end of woke' has not yet reached university campuses. However, in places the results suggest students' views are contradictory or even confused, so labelling them with any such term may be unfair.

It is worth recalling that the respondents are typically young and likely to be looking for guidance, that opinion polls are restricted to short (sometimes binary) questions and answers and that free speech issues are inherently complicated – even the firmest advocates of free speech often favour limits, for example to protect national security, limit discrimination and restrict incitement to violence.

Universities and free speech

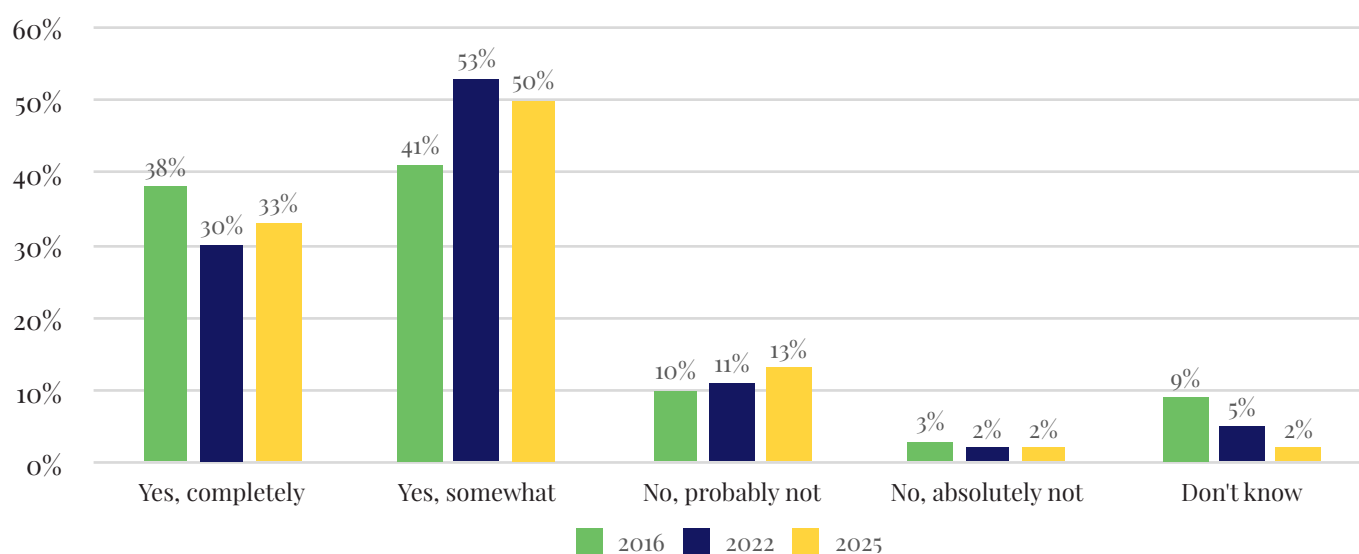
- Nearly all students (90%) say they feel able to state their 'opinions and political views openly and without any restriction', with the results split evenly between 'Yes, completely' (45%) and 'Yes, somewhat' (45%). The total is marginally higher than in both 2016 (83%) and 2022 (86%).

At your university, do you currently feel you are free to express your opinions and political views openly and without any restriction?



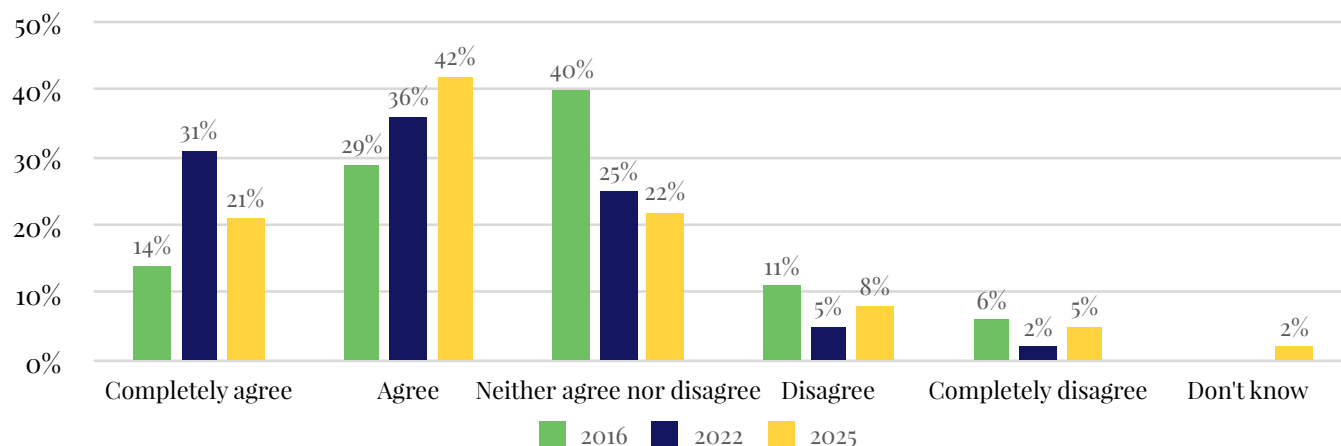
- Very few students feel they are insufficiently protected from 'discrimination and emotional harm', with just 13% saying 'No, probably not' and only 2% saying 'No absolutely not'. The proportion of students who feel they do have such protection was 79% in 2016 and 83% in 2022. It remains at 83% today.

And currently at your university, do you feel you have satisfactory protection to stop you from experiencing any discrimination or emotional harm?



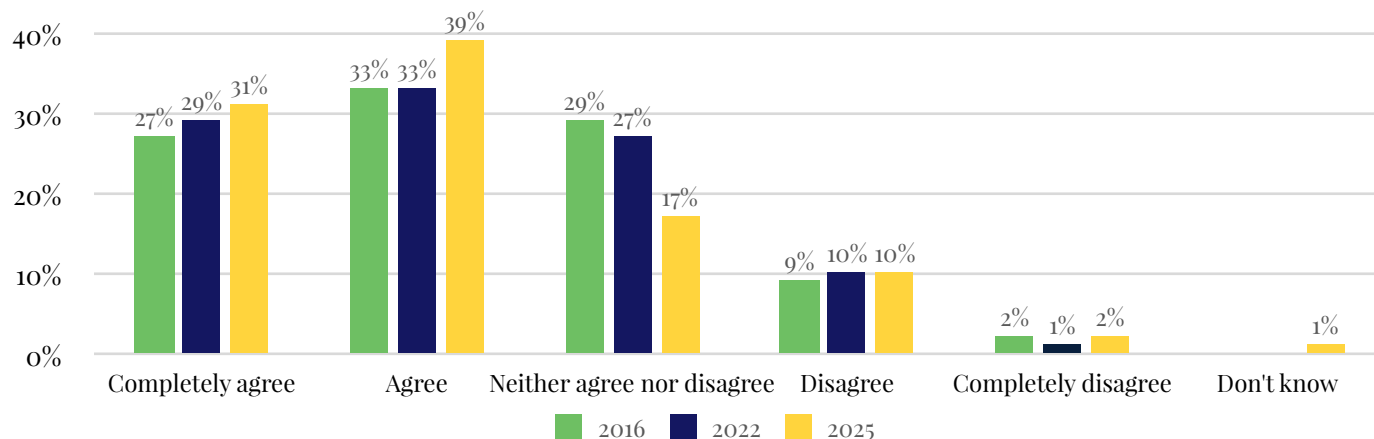
- There has been a rise in the proportion of students who believe 'Protection from discrimination and ensuring the dignity of minorities can be more important than unlimited freedom of expression' – the proportion agreeing with this statement has increased from 43% in 2016 to 63% in 2025 (down slightly on the 67% result from 2022).

Protection from discrimination and ensuring the dignity of minorities can be more important than unlimited freedom of expression



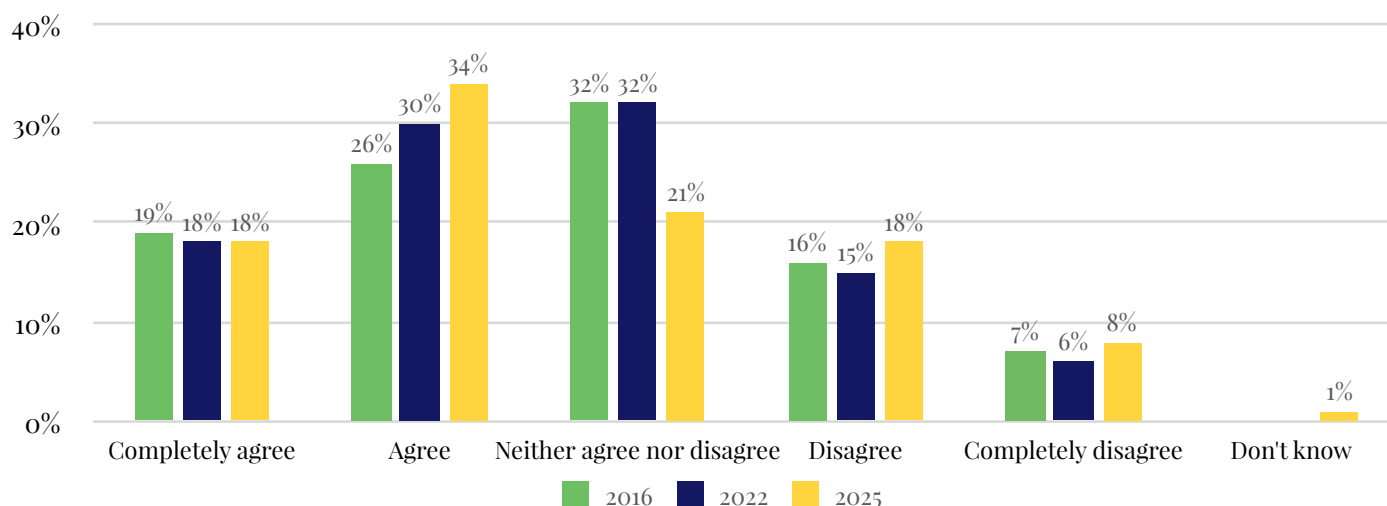
- Perhaps surprisingly, given the results above, the percentage of students who think 'universities should never limit free speech' has grown from 60% in 2016 to 61% in 2022 and is 69% now. (Figures may not sum due to rounding.)

Universities should never limit free speech



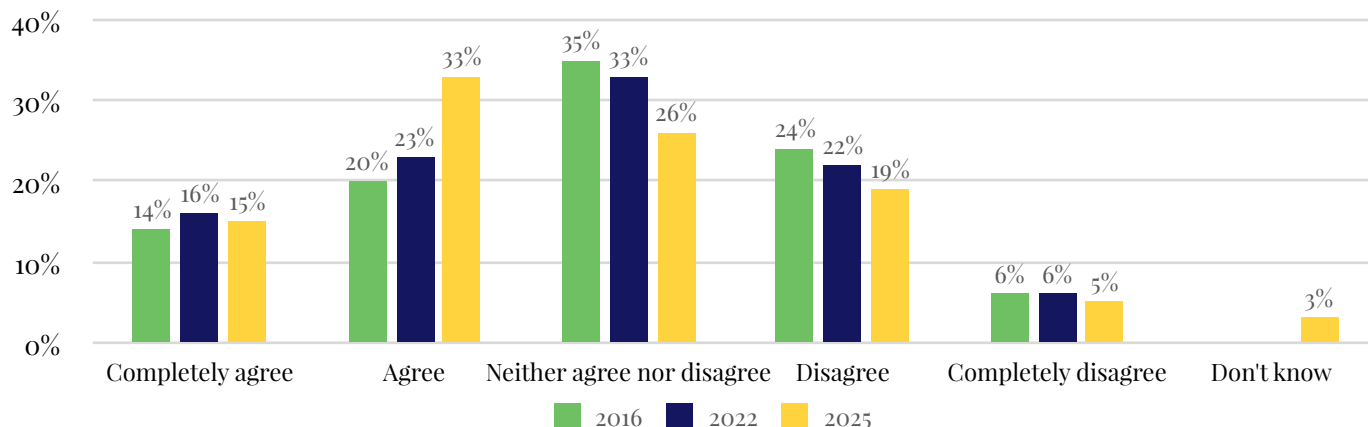
- The proportion of students who agree with the statement 'Education should not be comfortable, universities are places of debate and challenging ideas' has also grown somewhat – from 45% in 2016 to 48% in 2022 and to just over half (52%) in 2025.

Education should not be comfortable, universities are places of debate and challenging ideas



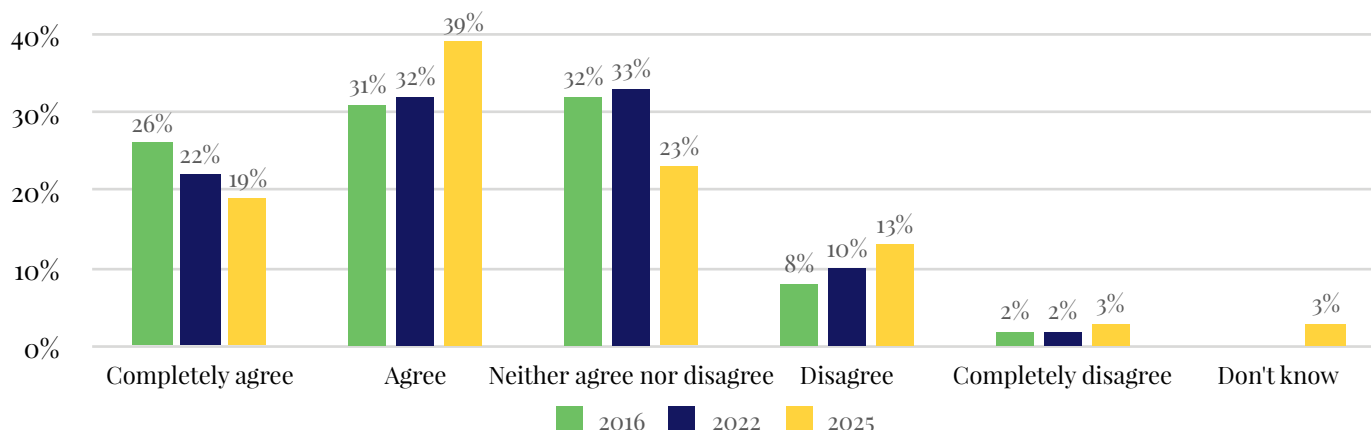
- More students think it is unreasonable to censor universities' own publications even if they offend some students than previously: in 2016, only one-third (35%) of students thought such censorship was unreasonable, but this rose to 39% in 2022 and is now 48%.

University publications should not be censored in any way, even if they may be considered offensive to certain groups of students



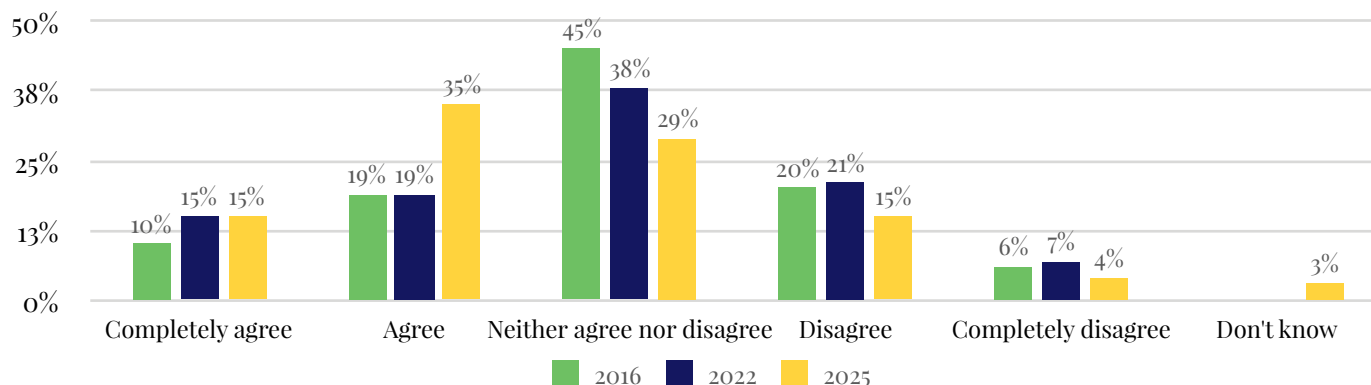
- The proportion of students who express support for the idea that 'the best way to fight prejudice is to debate it' has not changed much overall (57% in 2016, 54% in 2022 and 58% now), but the agreement is nonetheless a little shallower: fewer 'Completely agree' (19%) and more 'Agree' (39%) than in the past.

The best way to fight prejudice is to debate it rather than to ban it



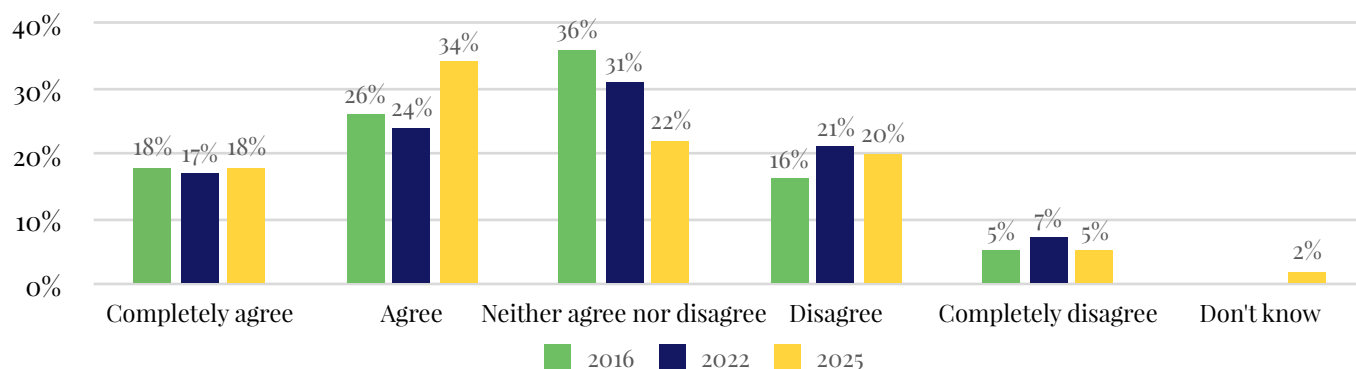
- Half of students (49%) think 'a university should never back down from an event', which is significantly higher than in 2016 (29%) or 2022 (34%). Students are firmer in their views on this issue than in the past, as the most popular option in 2016 and 2022 was the middle option whereas it is now 'Agree'.

Even if some people might protest, a university should never back down from an event



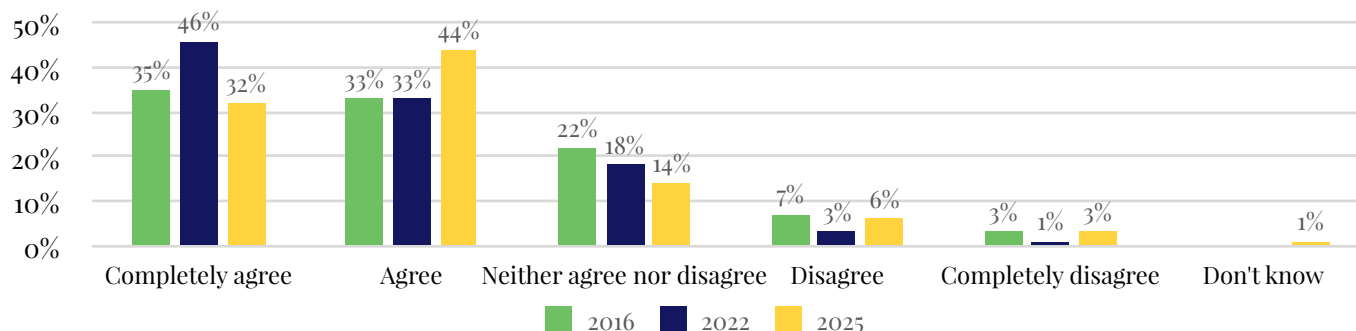
- Students tend to think student societies are 'overly sensitive', with just over half (52%) expressing some agreement with the idea, compared to 43% in 2016 and 42% in 2022.

I think that a lot of student societies today are overly sensitive



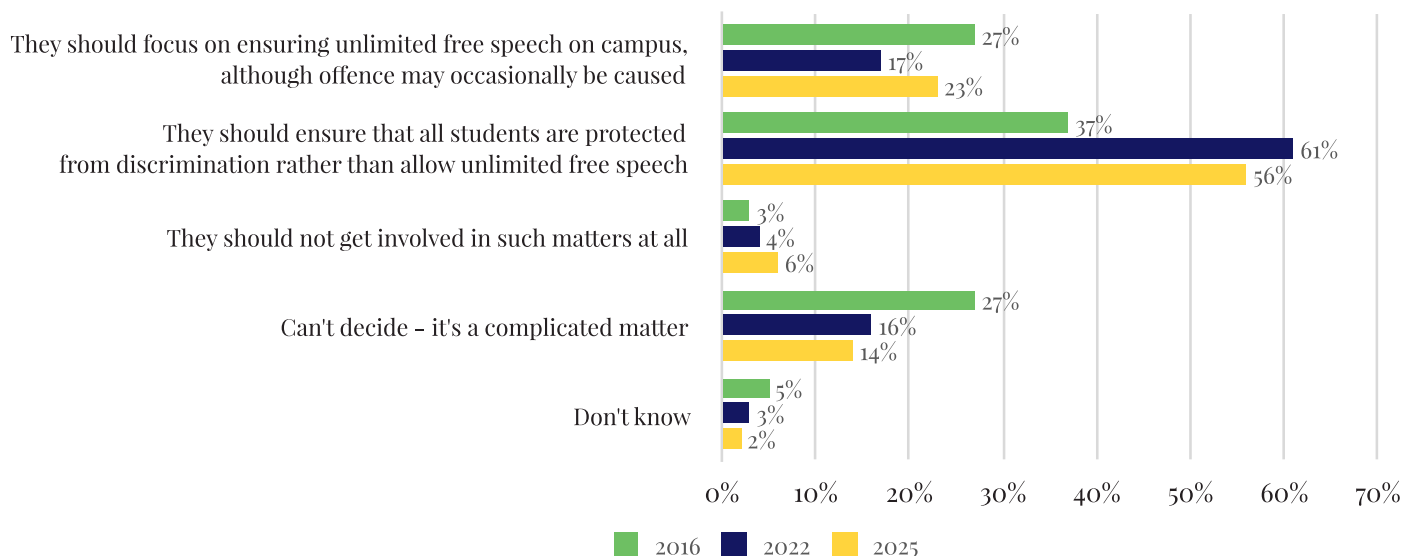
- Over three-quarters of students (76%) believe 'Students that feel threatened should always have their demands for safety respected' – this is broadly the same as in 2022 (79%) but remains higher than in 2016 (68%). Just one-in-12 students (8%) disagrees, but this is double the proportion in 2022 (4%) and only slightly below the number for 2016 (10%). The nature of any threat was not specified, so it was left up to respondents to determine whether to define it as major or minor and physical or verbal.

Students that feel threatened should always have their demands for safety respected



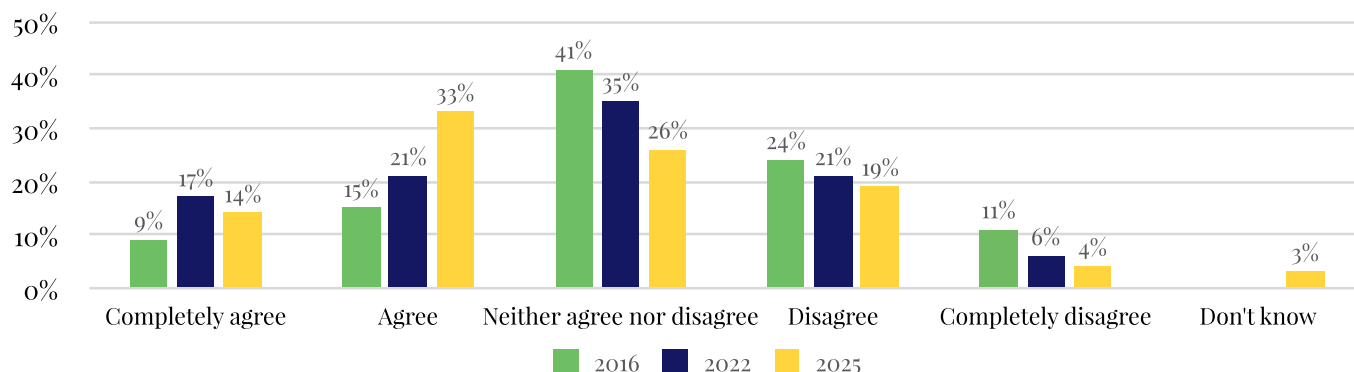
- Over half of students (56%) say 'when in doubt' their own university 'should ensure all students are protected from discrimination rather than allow unlimited free speech', compared to 61% in 2022 and 37% in 2016.

When in doubt, which approach should your university favour as an overall policy?



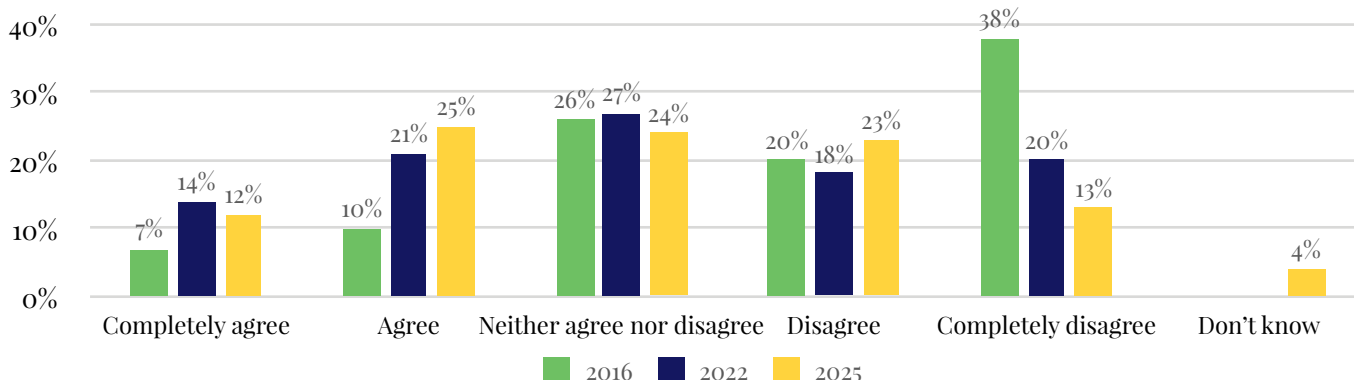
- Nearly half (47%) of students believe 'universities are becoming less tolerant of a wide range of viewpoints', up from 38% in 2022 and 24% in 2016. This view is more common among male students (54%) than female students (42%) but the gap is smaller than in 2022 (51%:28%).

Universities are becoming less tolerant of a wide range of viewpoints



- The proportion of students who agree that 'if you debate an issue like sexism or racism, you make it acceptable' has increased marginally (37%) since 2022 (35%); it remains almost double the level in 2016 (17%).

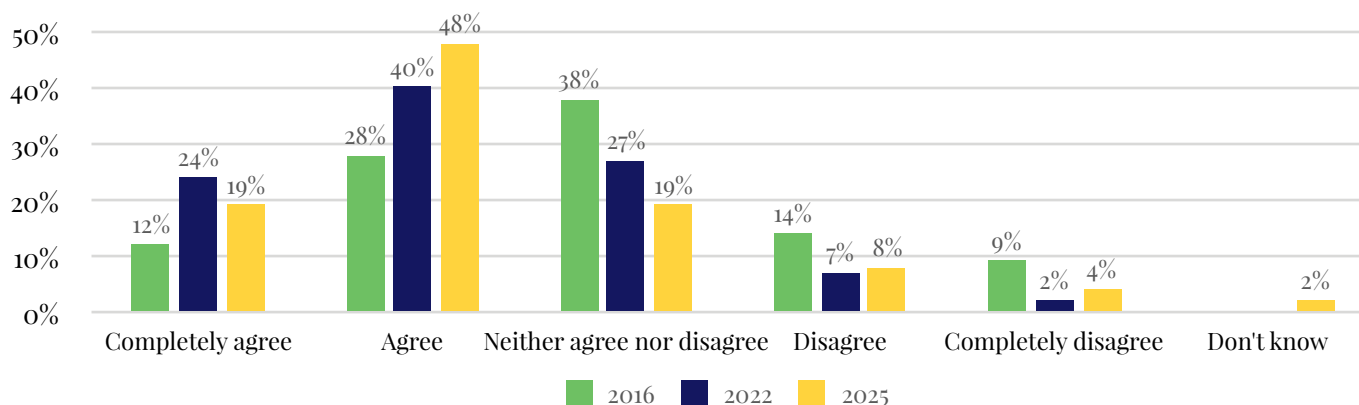
If you debate an issue like sexism or racism, you make it acceptable



Events

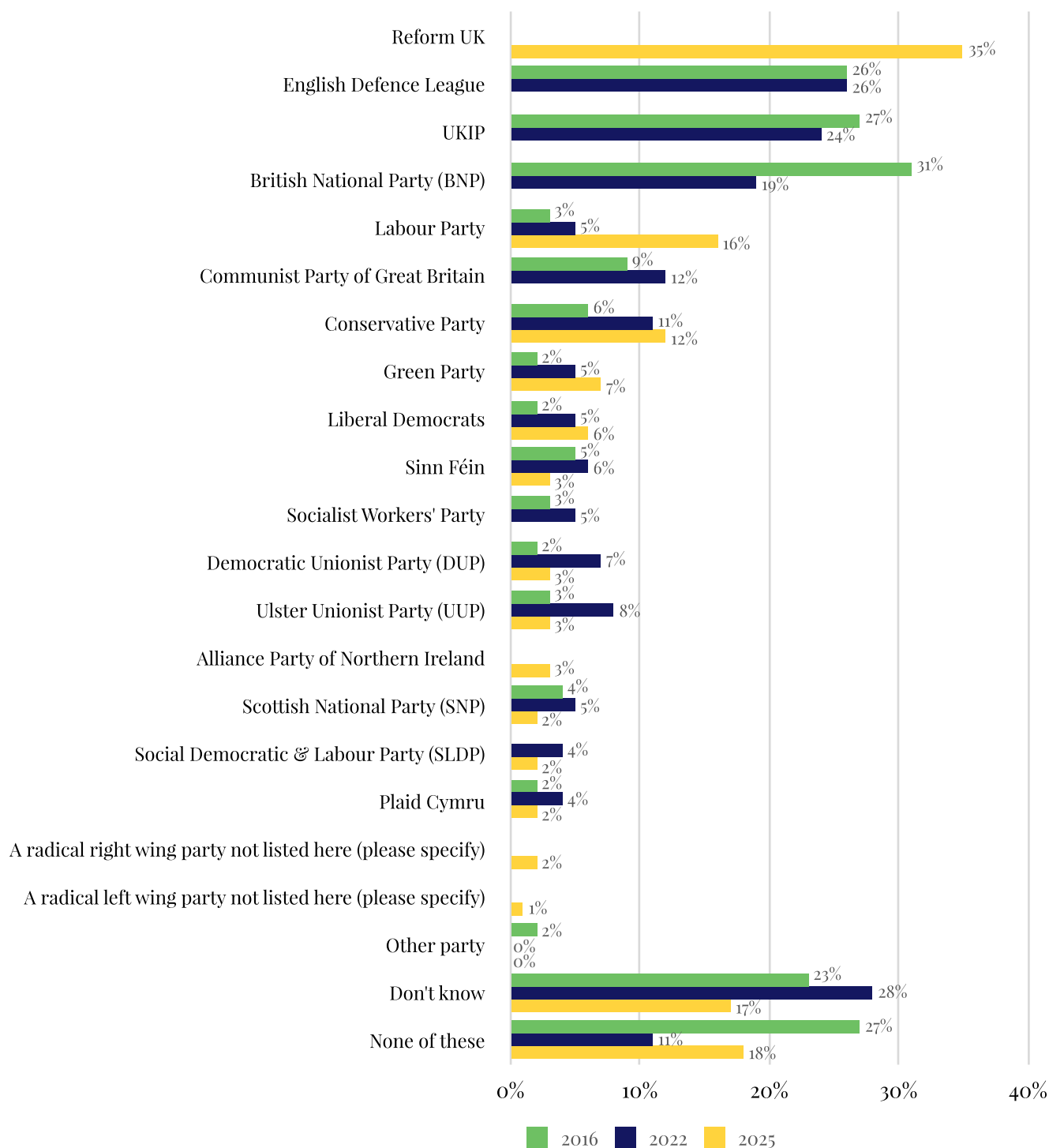
- A slightly higher proportion of students (67%) think universities should 'consult special interest groups (e.g. religious groups or gender societies) about on-campus events' than in 2022 (64%), and the total remains significantly higher than in 2016 (39%).

Universities should consult special interest groups (e.g. religious societies or gender societies) about on-campus events



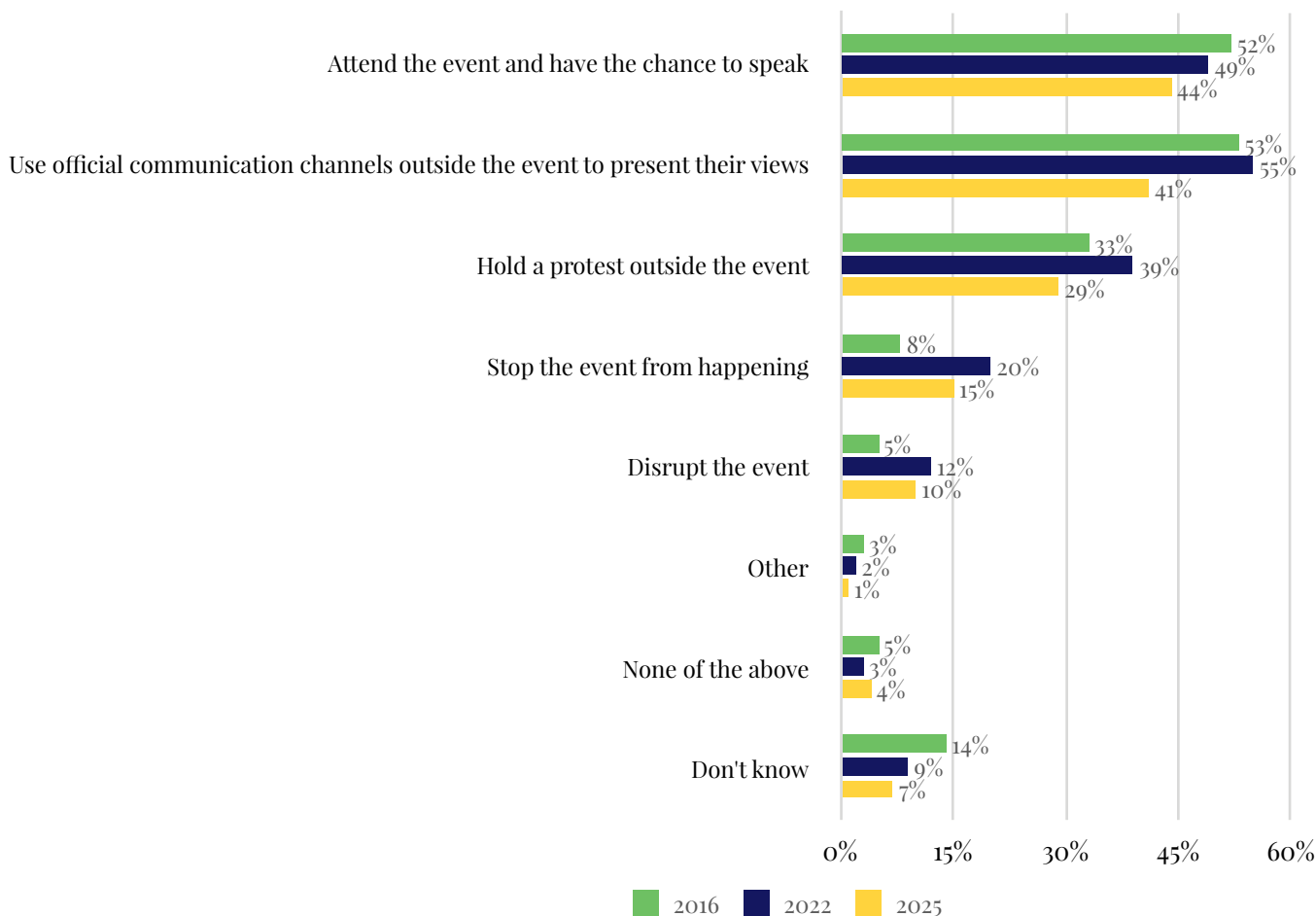
Over one-third of students (35%) think Reform UK 'should be banned from speaking at events held at higher education institutions' (compared to the top result of 26% for the English Defence League in 2022 and the top result of 31% for the British National Party [BNP] in 2016). Fewer current students want to ban other political groups from speaking on campus but the numbers are still notable, with one-in-six (16%) students wanting to ban the Labour Party, up from 5% in 2022 and 3% in 2016, and one-in-eight (12%) wanting to ban the Conservative Party, up from 11% in 2022 and 6% in 2016. Just one-in-33 students want to bar Sinn Féin. One-in-six students (18%) say 'none' of the long list of political groups provided should be banned from speaking – this is up from 13% in 2022 but still down on the 27% result from 2016 (although the list of political groups was somewhat different in the two earlier waves).

Which political parties, if any, do you think should be banned from speaking at events held at higher education institutions?



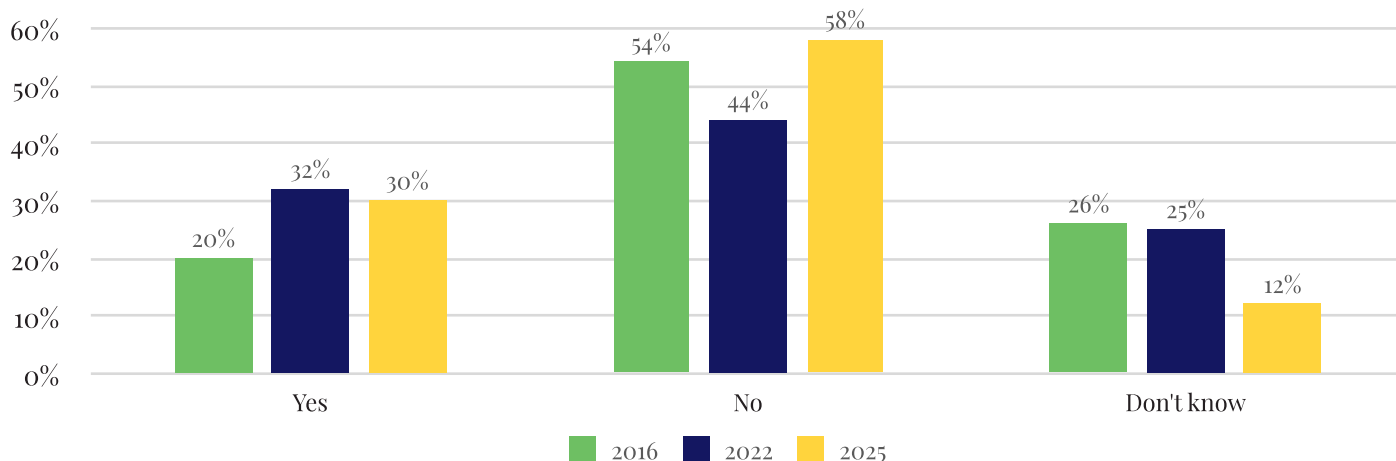
- When asked what rights students and staff should have to respond to an event they dislike, 29% of students say they should be able to 'hold a protest outside' (39% in 2022 and 33% in 2016), 15% say they should be able to 'stop the event from happening' (20% in 2022 and 8% in 2016) and 10% say they should be able to 'disrupt the event' (12% in 2022 and 5% in 2016).

If some students or staff are unhappy with a particular event at their university that is taking place within the law, which of the below actions should they have the right to carry out?



- A majority of students (58%) feel 'gender segregation' should not be acceptable at 'official university events', with a particularly noticeable decline in the proportion who say they 'Don't know' what they think about the issue.

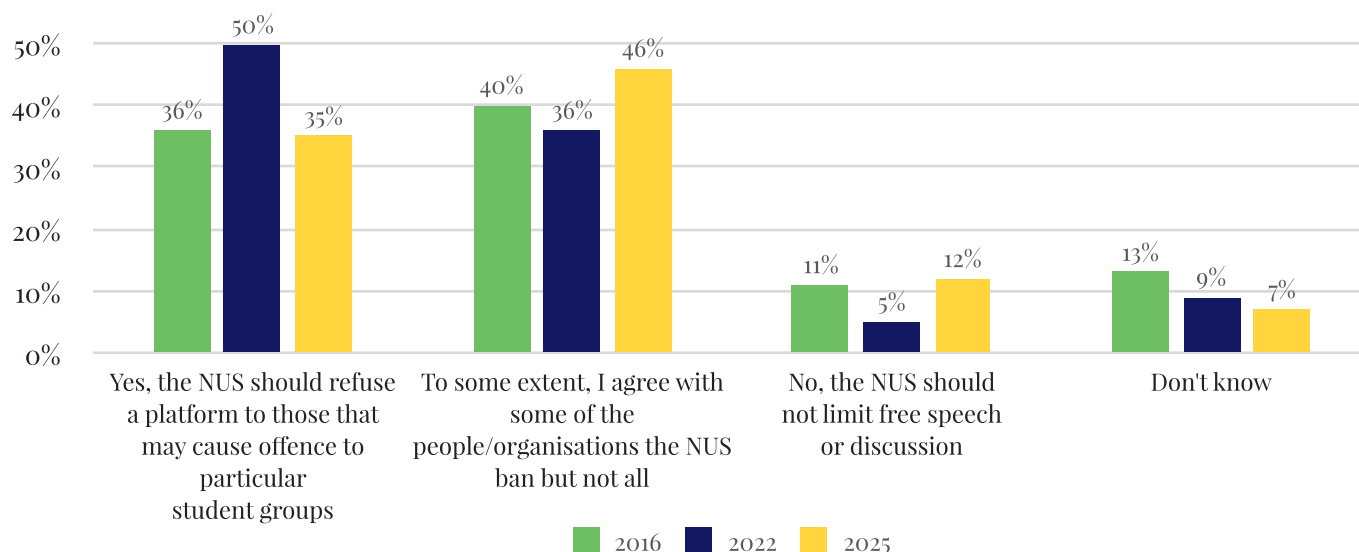
Gender segregation means having men and women sit apart. In your opinion, should gender segregation be allowed at official university events where it is a key part of the culture or religion of the student group involved?



Students' unions

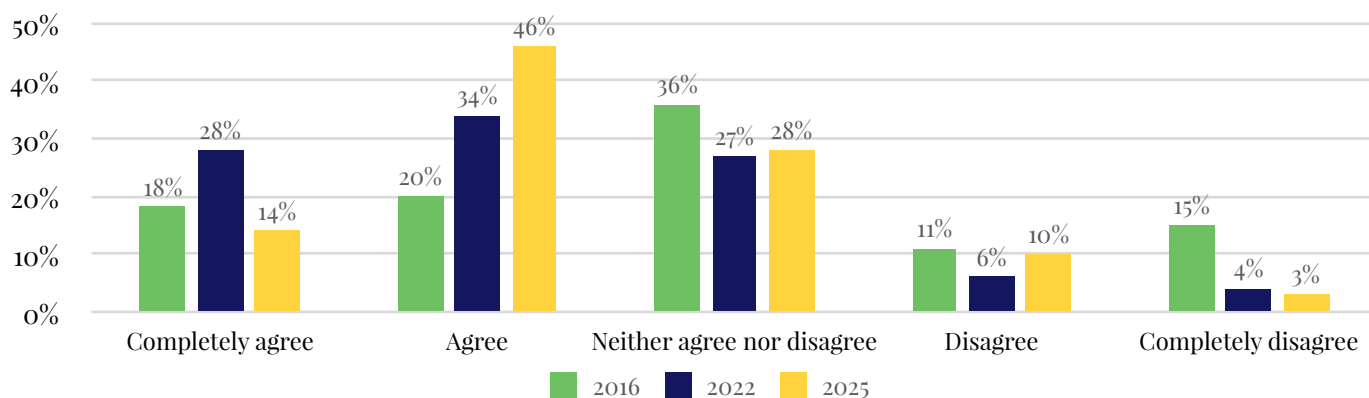
- 81% of students support the No-Platform policy of the National Union of Students (down from 85% in 2022 but still up on the 76% total in 2016); 12% say 'the NUS should not limit free speech or discussion' (up from the 5% in 2022 and slightly up on the 11% in 2016).

Do you agree with the NUS's 'no-platform' policies?



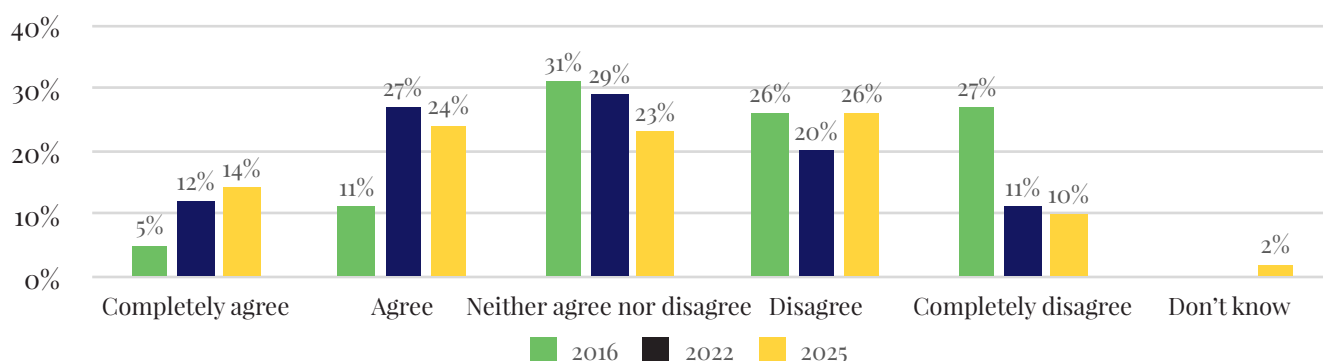
- 60% of students support students' unions refusing to sell tabloid newspapers on grounds of sexism (compared with 62% in 2022 and 38% in 2016), while 13% disagree.

Some student unions refuse to sell certain tabloid newspapers in their shops on the grounds that they display sexist views. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this policy?



- 39% of students believe 'students' unions should ban all speakers that cause offence to some students' (the same as in 2022 but more than double the 16% figure from 2016).

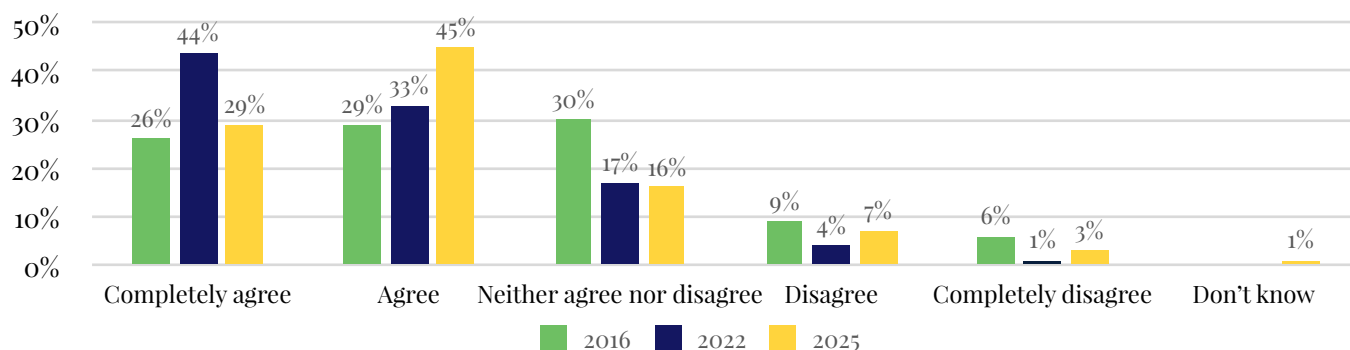
Students' unions should ban all speakers that may cause offence to some students



Staffing and academic resources

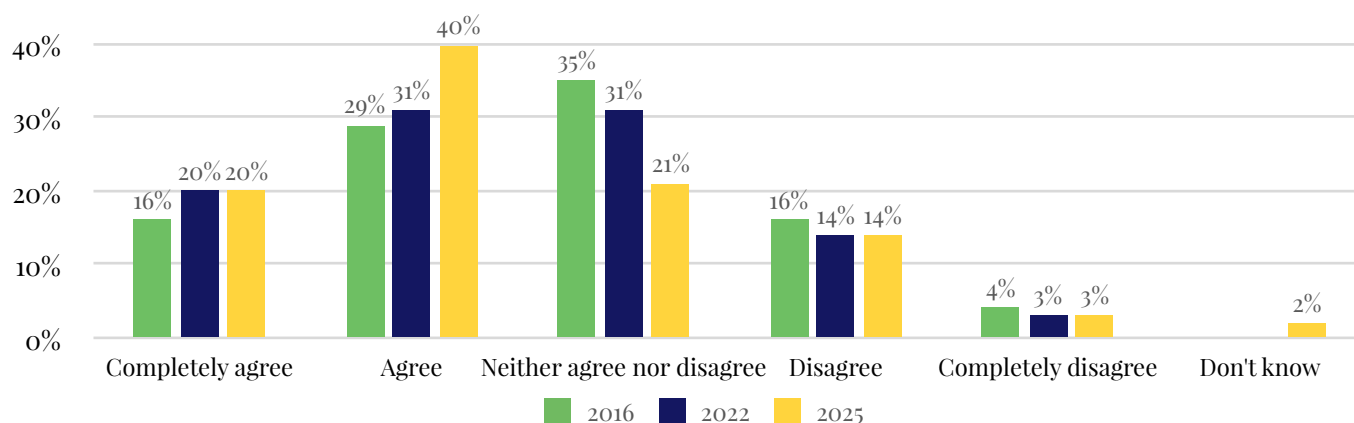
- 74% of students say there should be 'mandatory training for all university staff' on understanding 'other cultures' (down from 77% in 2022 but up from 55% in 2016). Female students are more likely to support this (79%) than male students (68%).

Training that teaches the ability to understand other cultures should be mandatory for all university staff



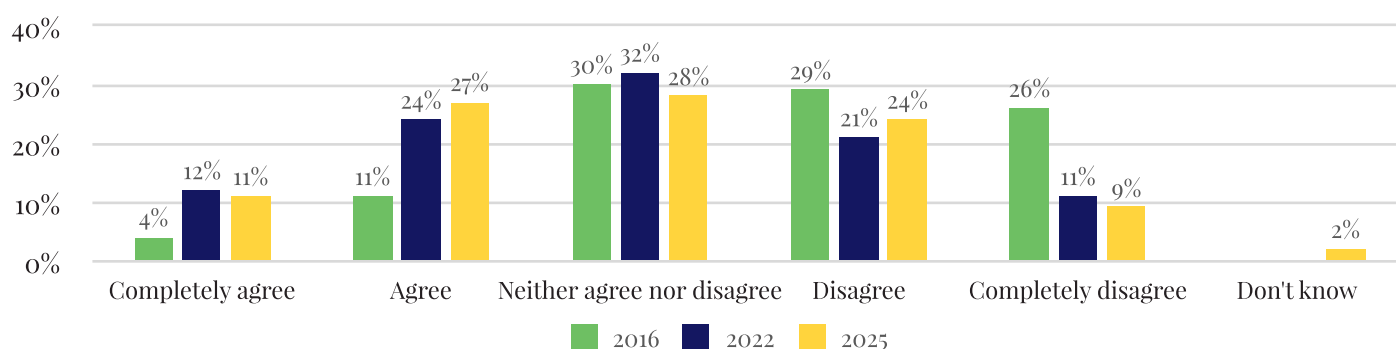
- Academic freedom is generally regarded as a hallmark of western universities, especially in the UK where institutional autonomy is perhaps especially deeply embedded. So it is perhaps unsurprising that a majority (61%) of students believe 'Academics should be free to research and teach whatever they want', which is higher than in the past but still leaves around one-in-six (17%) students expressing disagreement.

Academics should be free to research and teach whatever they want



- Conversely, nearly one-in-four students (38%) think academics who offend students with the material they teach 'should be fired'. This is significantly higher than in 2016, when the total was just 15%, but slightly lower than in 2022 (45%) and the proportion of students who 'Completely agree' has halved since 2022, from 21% to 11%.

If academics teach material that heavily offends some students, they should be fired



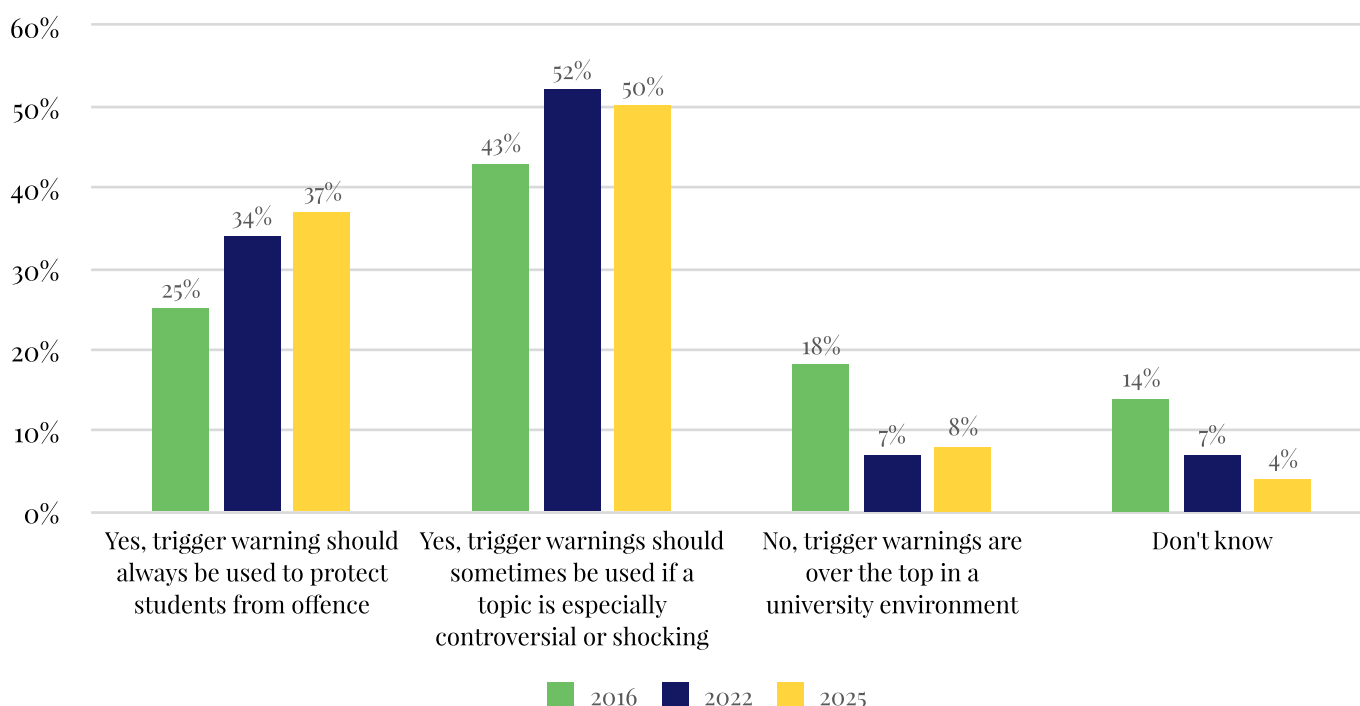
When asked about university libraries, one-quarter (25%) say ‘all resources should be included for the purpose of academic study, regardless of content’ – down from one-third (34%) in 2022 and almost one-half (47%) in 2016. When provided with a list of possible items that could be banned, support for a ban is higher in 2025 than in 2016. In every case support is higher in 2025 than in 2022 as well, except for materials denying the Holocaust or supporting fascism, where support for a ban remains at 27%.

<i>University libraries sometimes stock controversial resources (e.g. books) for the purposes of academic study. In your opinion, should any of the following resources be banned from university libraries even if they can be used for academic study?</i>	2016	2022	2025
Resources of sexual images that are illegal in the UK	24%	32%	35%
Resources regarded as defending racism of any sort	9%	23%	29%
Resources that deny the Holocaust or support fascism	13%	27%	27%
Resources regarded as defending sexism of any sort	7%	18%	24%
Resources that could be regarded as offensive to those with a religious faith	6%	17%	21%
Resources arguing against democracy	2%	10%	13%
Resources that support communism	2%	8%	13%
All resources should be included for the purpose of academic study, regardless of content	47%	34%	25%
Don't know	20%	12%	8%

Trigger warnings, removing memorials and safe spaces

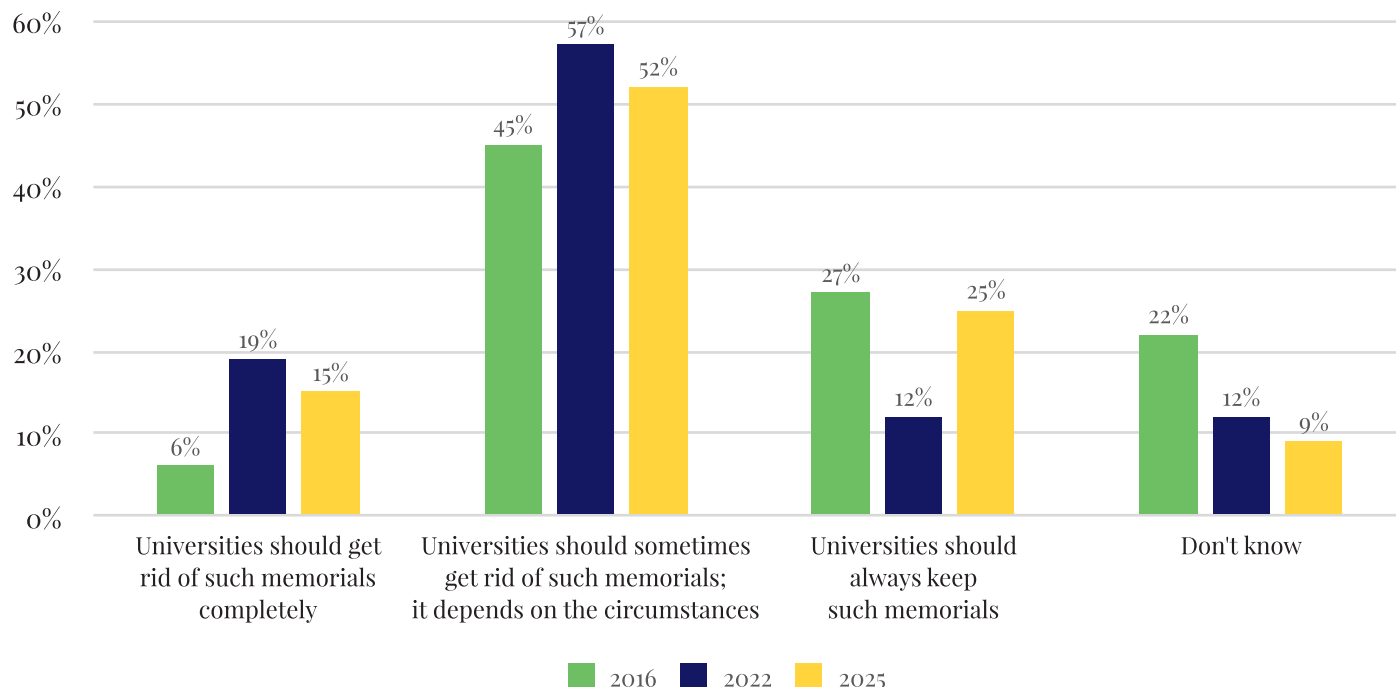
88% of students support trigger warnings (up slightly from 86% in 2022 and 67% in 2016).

It has been suggested that lecturers should use ‘trigger warnings’ to warn students in advance so that those who wish to leave can do so. Do you agree with this idea?



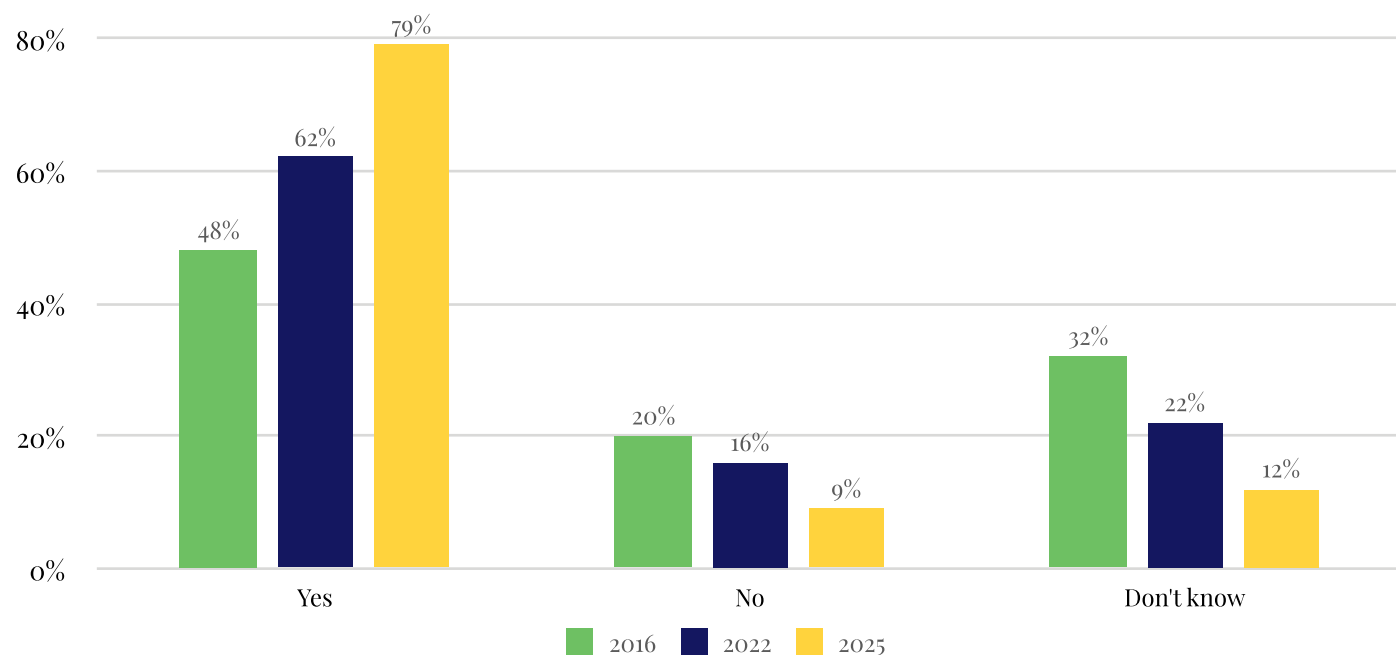
Two-thirds (67%) of students think universities should 'get rid of' memorials of potentially controversial figures, either 'completely' or 'sometimes', down from three-quarters (76%) in 2022 but still higher than in 2016 (51%), which was a time when the 'Rhodes must fall' campaign was in full flow.

Many universities accepted gifts in the past from people whose views are regarded as outdated today, and still have memorials for those donors. ... From your point of view, what should universities do today regarding such memorials?



79% of students support safe-space policies (up from 62% in 2022 and 48% in 2016), and respondents seem to be more certain in their views, as the proportion opting for 'Don't know' has fallen from 32% in 2016 to 22% in 2022 and now stands at just 12%.

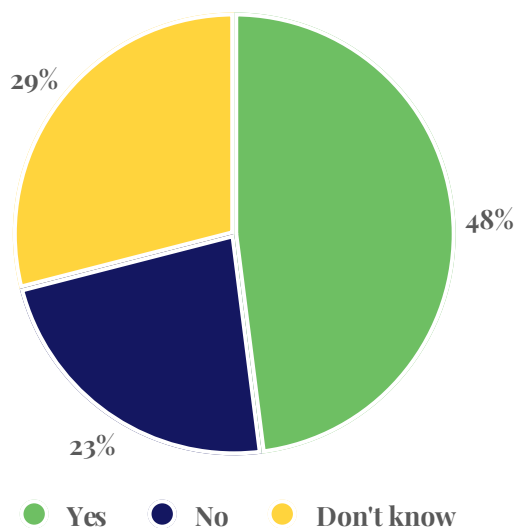
Do you think universities should adopt 'safe spaces' policies?



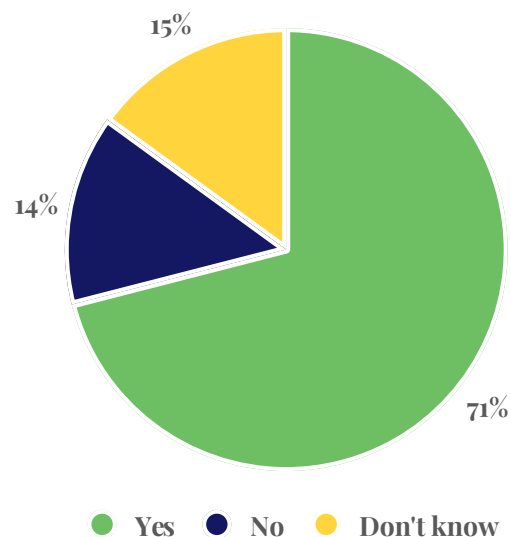
Government

- 】 In 2022, around one-half of students (48%) supported the (previous) Government’s proposal to establish a ‘free speech champion’ for universities in England; in 2025, nearly three-quarters (71%) of respondents answered positively when asked: ‘The law has been tightened in recent years to ensure universities “promote” free speech and there is now a “free speech champion” to deal with complaints in the Office for Students. Do you think this is a good approach to protecting free speech in universities?’

2022 The Government are keen to strengthen the law to protect free speech in universities, including appointing a ‘free speech champion’ to deal with complaints. Do you think this sounds like a good idea?



2025 The law has been tightened in recent years to ensure universities ‘promote’ free speech and there is now a ‘free speech champion’ to deal with complaints in the Office for Students. Do you think this is a good approach to protecting free speech?



Conclusion

The purpose of the survey is to discover the views of current students on a topical issue, with a secondary objective of discovering if the so-called ‘end of woke’ has yet reached students. The results need careful interpretation and contextualisation, in part because of the inherent complexities in the topics covered, in part because quantitative results can only reveal so much and in part because some of the responses point in different directions. The full results are available for anyone to see on the HEPI website and we urge people to come to their own conclusions about them and what they should mean for policy and regulation. We particularly urge university managers and governors, students’ unions and regulators to engage with the results because the framework governing free speech in (English) universities has changed in recent years. Higher education institutions have ‘a duty to take reasonably practicable steps to secure freedom of speech within the law’ as well as ‘a duty to promote the importance of freedom of speech in higher education.’³ So it is particularly important to understand what students think about these issues.

³ Arif Ahmed, ‘Update on Freedom of Speech Act’, Office for Students’ blog, 27 February 2025 <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/blog/update-on-freedom-of-speech-act/>