

Policy Note 72 | June 2026

A breed apart? What do young undergraduates think of controversial and divisive issues?

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Between 5 and 13 May 2026, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) asked 1,018 undergraduate students aged 18 to 21 for their views on a range of topical issues, via the polling company Savanta.

Quotas were applied to keep the sample balanced and the results were weighted according to gender and year of study (based on data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency or HESA). The margin of error is +/- 3.1%.

HEPI has regularly conducted opinion polls among students to discover their political preferences and their views on topical issues, including free speech and student finance.¹ This project builds on such work by uncovering young full-time home students' views on a range of prominent, controversial and divisive issues, including abortion limits, the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on the jobs market, diversity quotas, nuclear disarmament, reparations for the slave trade, the most appropriate changing rooms for transmen and transwomen and a wealth tax.

The student polling results outlined below supplement the findings of other polls conducted among the adult population, enabling comparisons to be made. While different polls use different questions and are undertaken at different times by different polling companies, meaning any comparisons need to be treated with care, we can nonetheless paint a picture that shows both what students think but also how their views as a cohort compare or contrast with the views of the whole adult population.

The overall results of the project split three main ways.

On some issues, students' views are broadly in line with those for the population as a whole. For example:

- ▶ while 70% of young undergraduates believe AI will mean fewer jobs in future, other polling suggests 66% of UK adults think 'AI will increase unemployment';
- ▶ while 47% of students think capital punishment should be reintroduced for some serious crimes, other polling suggests 50% of the population believe the same; and
- ▶ while 50% of students think Israel's response to the 7 October attacks was 'indefensible', a comparable 45% of the public say they were 'not justified'.

On some other issues, the balance in students' views leans in the same direction as the balance of opinion among the population as a whole but seemingly to a greater degree. For example:

- over half of students (56%) support employers having diversity quotas while one-in-three (30%) do not – among adults overall, there is also somewhat more support than opposition (43% for and 22% against);
- two-thirds of students (67%) think the current rules on abortion time limits are 'about right' – this is also the most popular option among the population as a whole but not to anything like the same degree (49%);
- three-quarters of students (75%) think man-made climate change has not been exaggerated by the scientific community – among all adults, under two-thirds (62%) think the same.

Compared to the public at large, a higher proportion of students support transmen and transwomen having the right to use the changing facilities of their gender identity rather than those for their sex at birth. Even among students, however this only has minority support: while around one-in-three students support it (compared to around one-in-five adults overall), half of students oppose it.

Intriguingly, and bearing in mind that comparing different polls is a very inexact science fraught with challenges, students are a little less favourable towards a wealth tax than the population as a whole. Polling by Oxfam suggests the public back a wealth tax by 78% to 17%, whereas young home undergraduate students back the idea by a smaller margin of 60% to 26%. Similarly, while a majority of students support measures to allow assisted dying (60%), the level of support is not as clear cut as among adults overall (79%).

In a limited number of areas, students' views are notably different to those for the adult population as a whole:

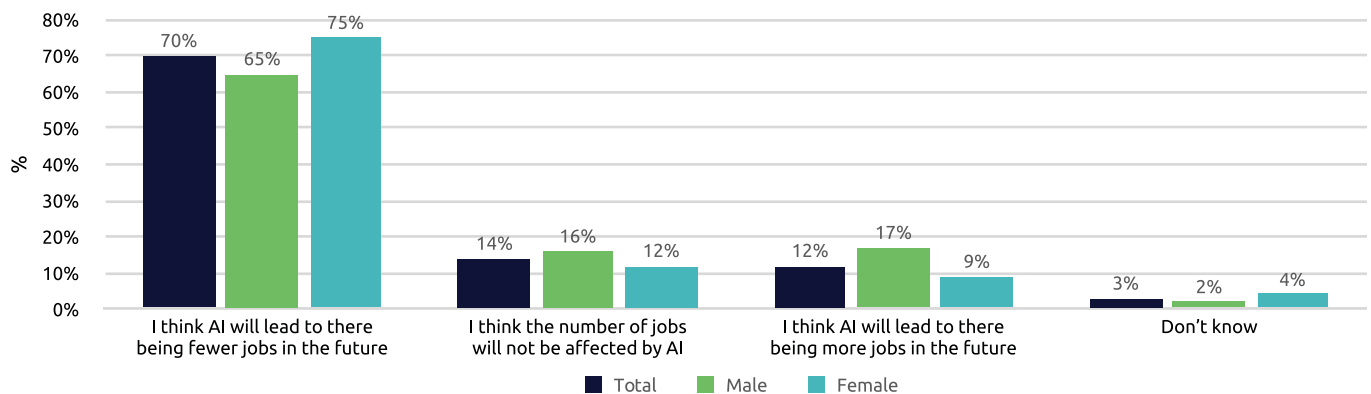
- half of students (47%) favour reparations for the slave trade and 36% oppose them, but only one-quarter (24%) of the public back them while 60% oppose them;
- over one-quarter (28%) of students think Hamas's attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023 were 'defensible', but other (earlier) polling found only 4% of the general public thought they were 'justified'; and
- almost three-quarters of students (72%) favour unilateral nuclear disarmament but only 11% of the public do so, with most adults (65%) preferring multi-lateral disarmament instead.

Taken together, these results puncture the idea that students are 'woke snowflakes'. As a group, they are much more like the rest of the population than intentionally-overblown caricatures, such as Mille Tant from *Viz* magazine, imply. Sometimes, students seem to be more 'progressive' than others, as on unilateral nuclear disarmament, but sometimes they are a little less progressive than the population as a whole, as on a wealth tax.

Any comparison of the views of students and the views of the adult population as a whole must be tempered by a number of caveats, especially when – as in this case – the polls being compared were undertaken at different times with different wording by different polling companies. But it is still a useful exercise because understanding the balance of opinion among students is more important than ever, given the concept of a 'culture war' that has taken root and when England's Office for Students and the higher education institutions it regulates are grappling with new rules on the protection, regulation and promotion of free speech.

Artificial Intelligence

Q1. Some people think the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) will mean there are fewer jobs available in future; other people say technology will create many new opportunities. What do you think?



The overwhelming majority (70%) of young undergraduates, including three-quarters of female students (75%) and two-thirds of male students (65%), believe AI will mean fewer jobs in future. Nearly all of the rest are fairly evenly split between thinking the number of jobs will not be affected (14%) or thinking AI will increase the number of jobs (12%).

Polling by Public First undertaken in 2024 found a comparable 66% of UK adults thought 'AI will increase unemployment'.²

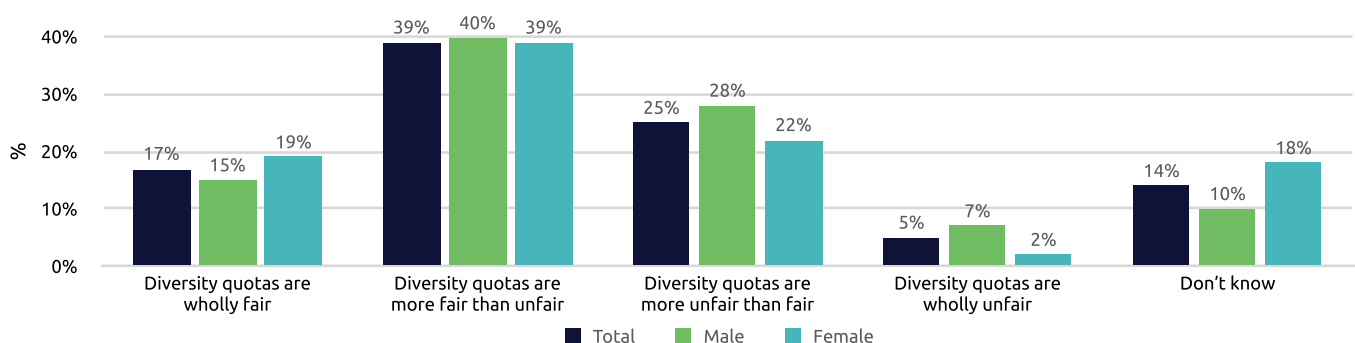
Other polling of the whole adult population conducted in mid-2025 by Survation for the Trades Union Congress (TUC) found a somewhat more balanced picture than HEPI's new results, but the two polls are not wholly out-of-kilter with each other – especially when it comes to twentysomething and thirtysomething workers:

over half (51%) of the public are concerned about the impact of AI and new technologies on their job. ...

And it is a particular worry for young workers early in their career, rising to 62% of workers aged 25-34.³

Diversity quotas

Q2. Some people believe employers should have diversity quotas, which are targets for hiring and promoting people from underrepresented groups (such as people with certain ethnicities or disabled individuals), as a way to ensure fairer representation. Others feel that these sorts of initiatives have gone too far. Which of the following comes closest to your view?

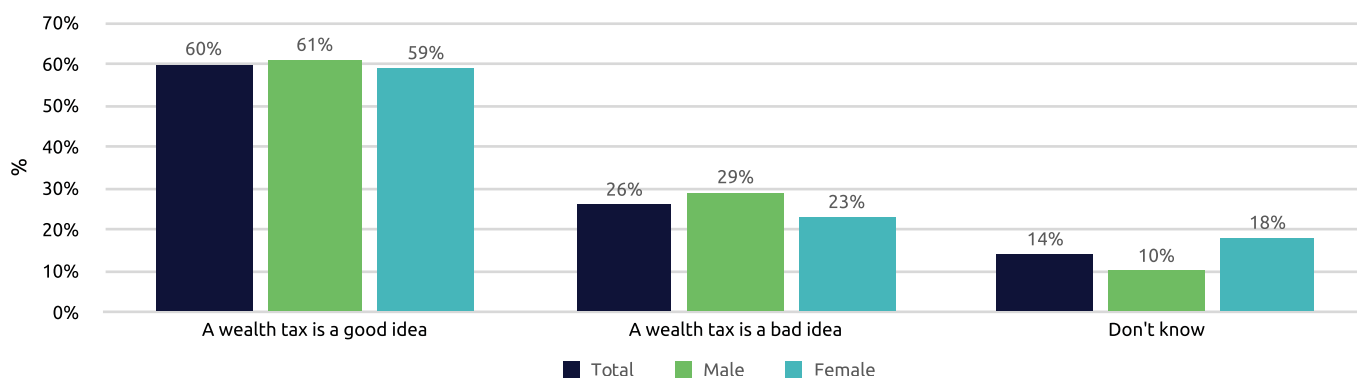


Many students support diversity quotas run by employers, with over one-half (56%) saying they are either 'wholly fair' (17%) or 'more fair than unfair' (39%). Nonetheless, a substantial minority (25%) think they are 'more unfair than fair' and a small proportion (5%) say they are 'wholly unfair'.

As with the results on AI, these findings do not seem to be significantly out of whack with those for the population as a whole, though students are a little more favourable towards quotas. For example, other polling undertaken among people aged 16 to 75 by IPSOS in 2025, released under the headline 'widespread support for key workplace DEI initiatives', suggests 43% of the public support 'targets' for recruiting and promoting underrepresented people. (While 'targets' are not necessarily the same thing as 'quotas', both words were used interchangeably in HEPI's question.) The IPSOS poll also showed 'around twice as many people support as oppose workplaces in the UK' adopting such targets (with close to one-third not holding strong views either way).⁴

Wealth tax

Q3. Some people favour the introduction of 'a wealth tax', which would be a tax on the total value of people's assets over a certain amount set by the government. Others think such a tax could be unfair and counter-productive, for example by encouraging people to leave the country. What is your view?



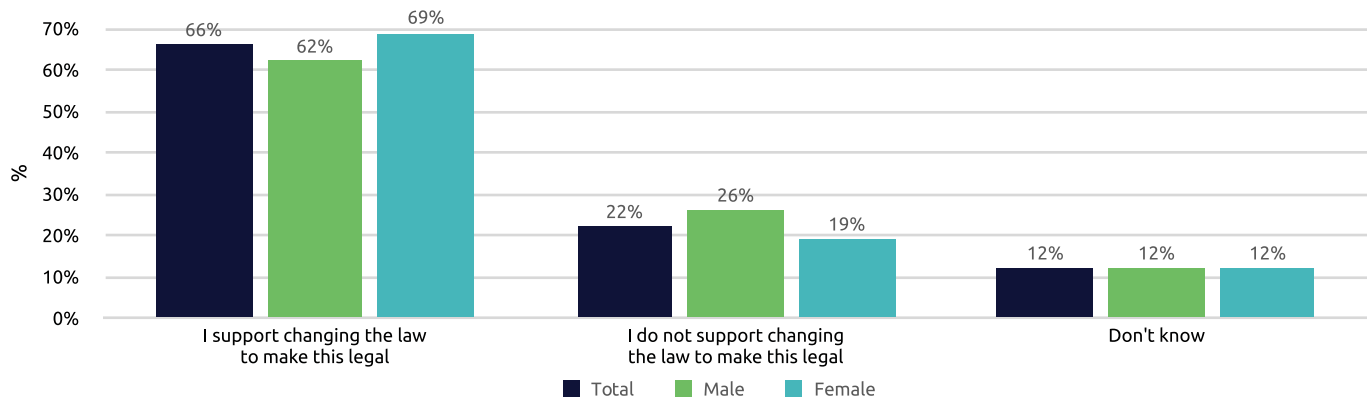
A wealth tax is favoured by the majority of undergraduates (60%), with very little difference between male and female students; only one-quarter of students (26%) oppose the idea.

When broken down by voting intention, under half of students planning on voting Conservative or Reform UK back a wealth tax while a majority of those planning to vote for every other listed political party (Labour, Liberal Democrats, SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Greens) favour the idea.⁵ The results by voting intention are not shown here, as they include much uncertainty (given the small number of students in some voting intention categories), but anyone wanting to know more can see the full spreadsheet of results on the HEPI website.

While students' views are, again, quite in line with those of the general public, who also favour a wealth tax by large margins, the support level among students is lower than among the population as a whole. Polling by YouGov for Oxfam issued in 2025 suggested 78% of the adult population back a wealth tax compared to just 17% who do not.⁶ Any difference with the student results may be due to different wording in the questions or the different timings of the polls or heightened fears about possible adverse consequences for the wider economy. Also, given that disadvantaged families are under-represented in higher education and that graduates earn more on average than others, it is at least plausible that a higher percentage of undergraduates fear a future wealth tax could directly affect them personally.

Assisted dying

Q4. It has been proposed that terminally ill adults with six months or less to live should be legally able to request medical assistance to end their lives, but with safeguards against coercion. Which of the following comes closest to your view?



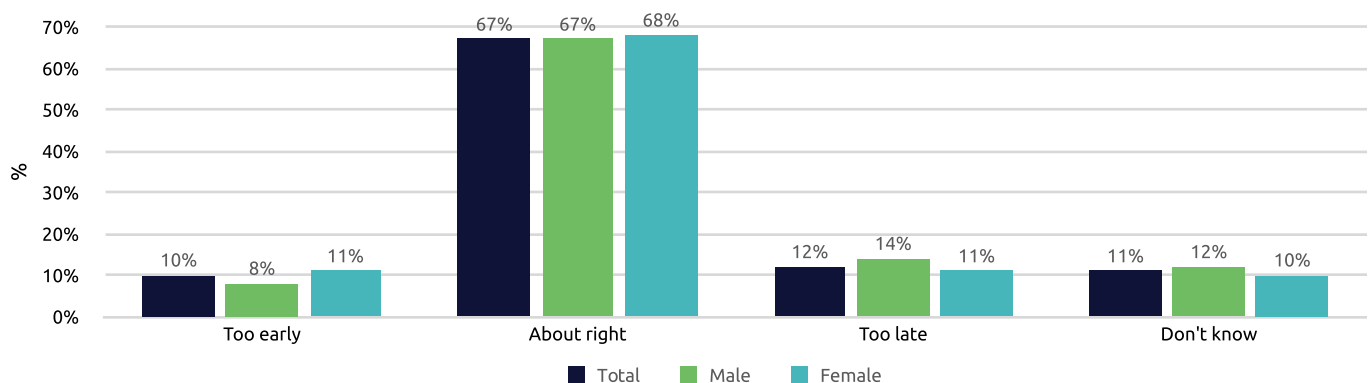
Parliament has recently debated the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, meaning there has been a particular focus on whether or not to give terminally ill people the right to choose when to end their own lives. Two-thirds of students (66%) support the idea, with around one-in-five (22%) opposing it.

On this, as on previous issues, the balance of opinion among students leans in the same direction as for the whole population. For example, results from the *British Social Attitudes Survey* (2024 data) show:

Nearly half (47%) of the British public think doctors should definitely be allowed to end the life of a terminally ill person if they request it, while a third (32%) think doctors should probably be allowed to do so – summing to a total of 79% in favour. Meanwhile, less than 2 in 10 (17%) think doctors should not be allowed to end the life of people in this scenario – 9% definitely and 8% probably.⁷

Abortion

Q5. In practice, an abortion is available within the first 24 weeks of pregnancy, it is also available in cases where the baby is likely to be severely disabled or where there is severe risk to the health or life of the mother after the 24-week limit. Do you think the 24-week time limit for most abortions is too early, too late or about right?



Most students (67%) think the current rules that allow abortions to occur within the first 24 weeks of pregnancy and afterwards only in specific circumstances are 'about right'. Any differences between female and male students are within the margin for error for the poll so are not statistically significant.

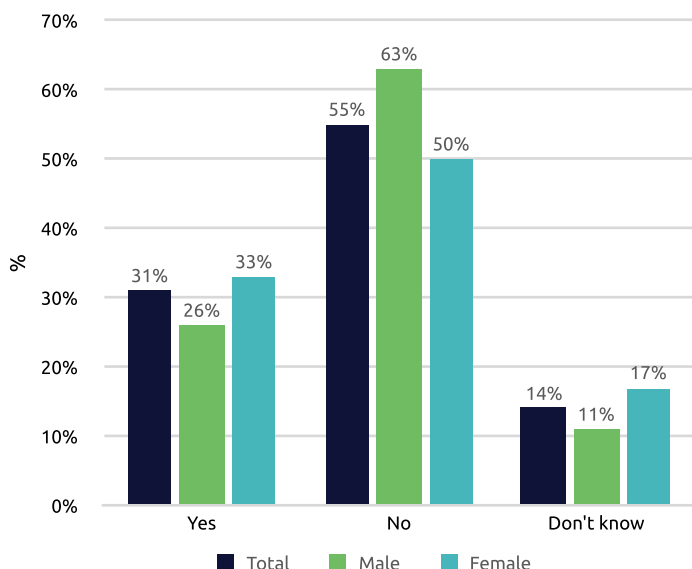
This means students are notably (even) more favourable about the current rules than the population as a whole. According to a YouGov poll from 2023:

Britons tend to think the 24 week status quo is about right (49%). However, a quarter (25%) think it is too late, and the limit should be brought forward. This view is more common among women, and particularly older women ...

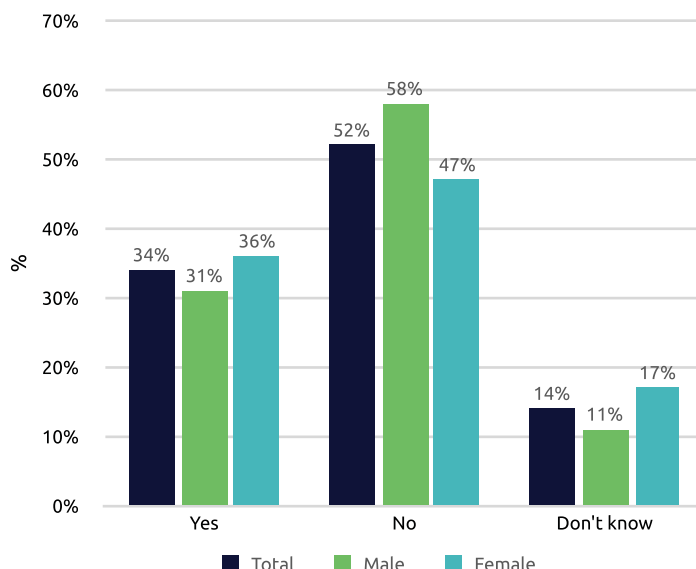
A further 6% of Britons think the 24 week limit is too early, and should be pushed back.⁸

Transwomen and transmen

Q6. Do you think that biological males who identify as women should be allowed to use women's changing rooms?



Q7. Do you think that biological females who identify as men should be allowed to use men's changing rooms?



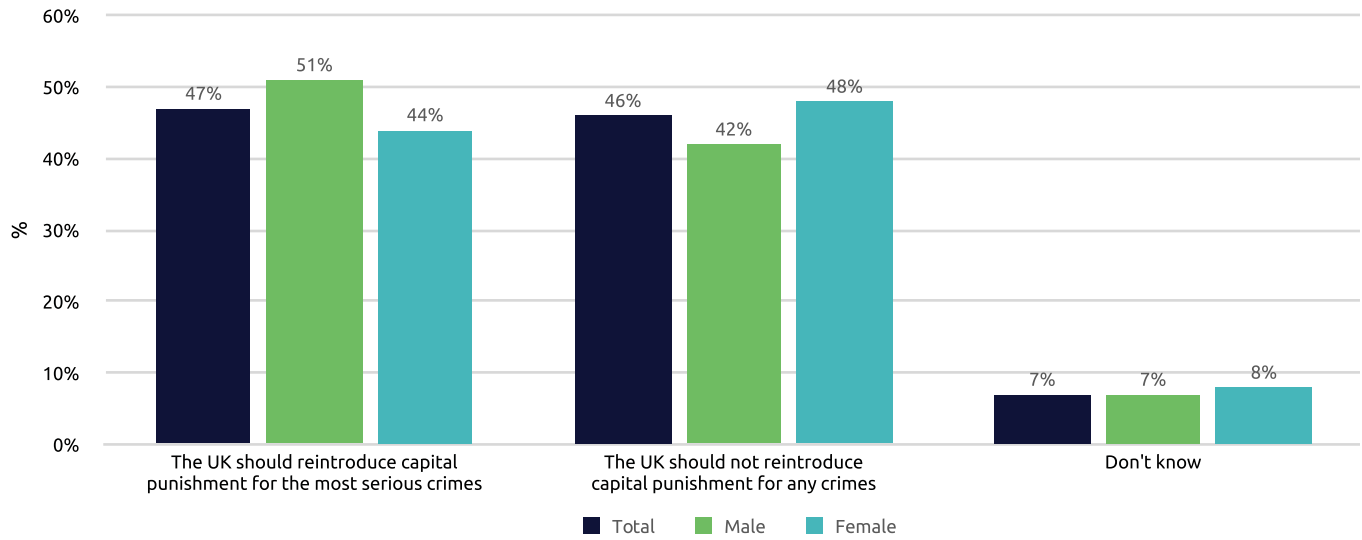
When asked for their views on the changing-room facilities that transwomen and transmen should be expected to use, roughly one-third of students say people should use the changing room assigned to their gender identity while one-half disagree (presumably assuming they should use the facility assigned to their sex at birth or a gender-neutral space). Although we asked about transwomen and transmen separately, the results were similar for these two groups.

In contrast, a 2026 JL Partners poll for Sex Matters found just one-in-five (19%) adults think people 'should be allowed to use whichever facilities they prefer'. In the same poll, over one-third of respondents said people 'should use the facilities of their sex at birth' (36%) and another third said 'they should not use facilities of the opposite sex but there should be an alternative' (34%).⁹

These results suggest students may be a little more favourable than the public overall towards those who wish to use the changing facility for their gender rather than the one for their sex at birth – but it is notable that both a majority of students and a majority of the whole adult population pick other options.

Capital punishment

Q8. The death penalty, known as capital punishment, is currently outlawed in the UK. Which of the following comes closest to your view?

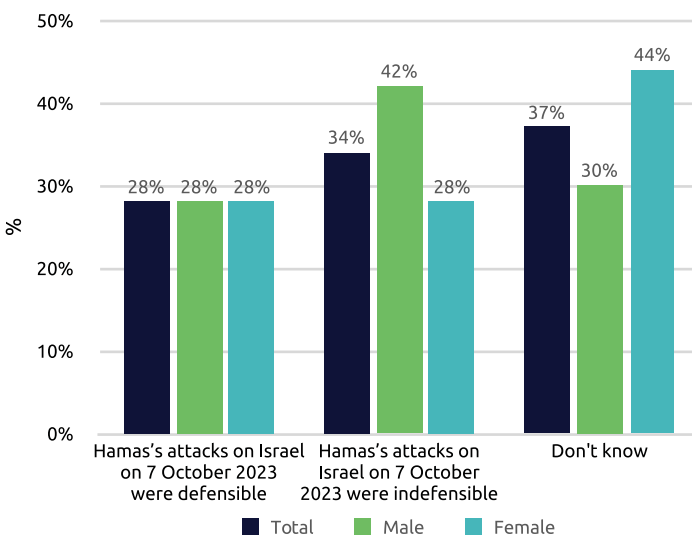


Students are very evenly split on the return of capital punishment. Nearly half (47%), including just over half of male students (51%), think capital punishment should be reintroduced ‘for the most serious crimes’ and a similar number (46%) oppose the reintroduction of capital punishment ‘for any crimes’.

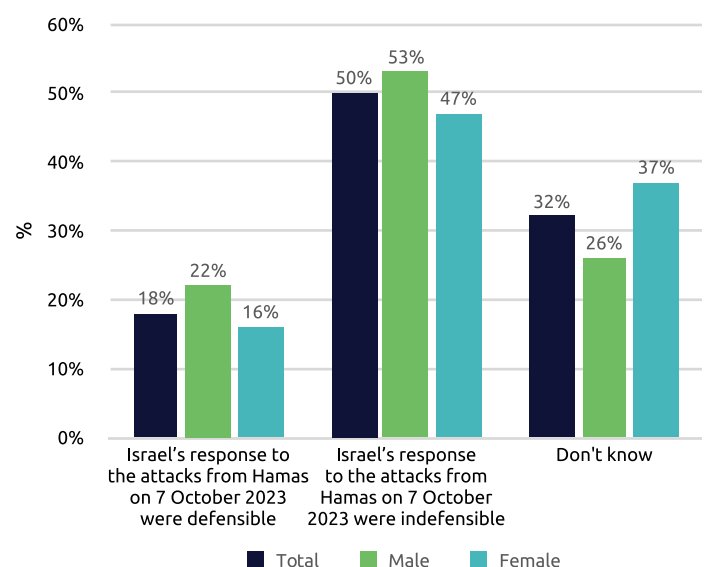
This is close to results for the population as a whole. According to 2025 polling by YouGov, half (50%) of the population support the reintroduction of capital punishment and 45% oppose it.

7 October 2023

Q9. On 7 October 2023, Hamas, who are an armed Palestinian group, launched a series of attacks on Israel in which many people were killed. Which of the following statements is closest to your view?



Q10. In response, there was a military offensive by Israel in Gaza in which many Palestinians were killed. Which of the following statements is closest to your view?



When asked about the attacks by Hamas perpetrated in Israel on 7 October 2023 during which 1,195 people were killed, students were split. A little over one-quarter (28%) believe them to have been 'defensible' but more – just over one-third (34%) – say they were 'indefensible'. Unlike the other responses in the survey, the top result was 'Don't know' at 37%, perhaps suggesting a lack of knowledge about what occurred or else real uncertainty. Since 2021, the UK Government has regarded Hamas as a proscribed terrorist organisation.

These results are corroborated by earlier polling among students conducted by Stand With Us UK in the months after the attacks. This found 29% of students thought the 7 October attacks were an 'understandable act of resistance' and 36% thought they were 'a terrorist attack conducted by Hamas against innocent people'.¹⁰

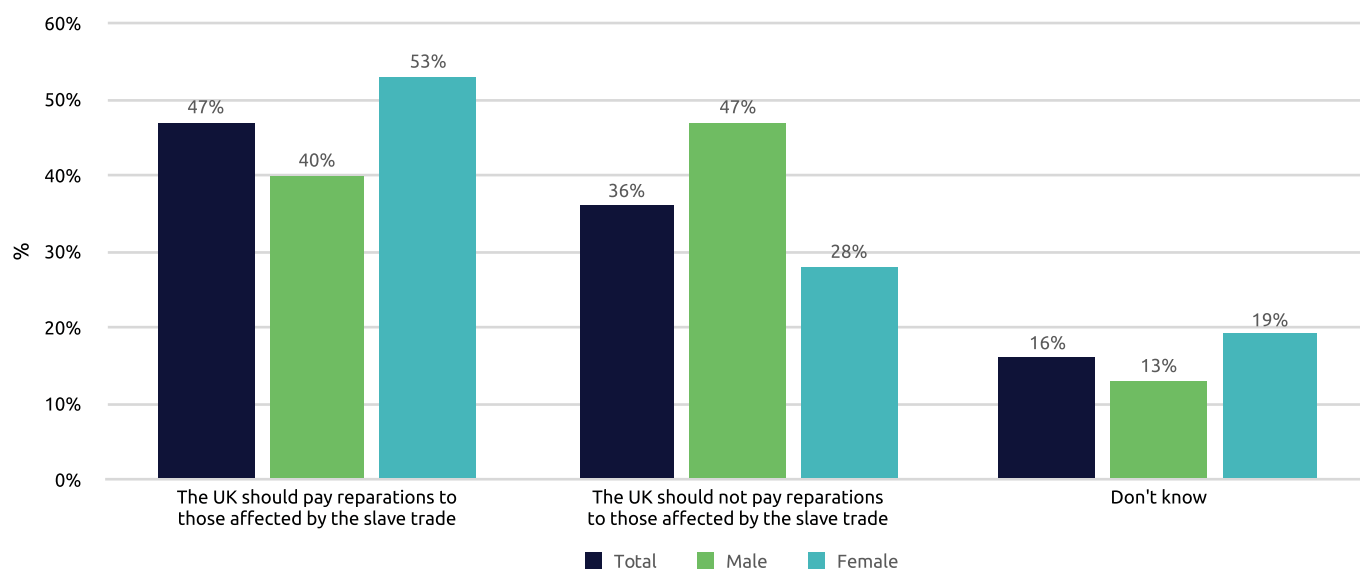
However, the new results are strikingly different to YouGov polling from 2024 for the adult population as a whole, which showed just 4% thought the Hamas attacks were 'justified' while three-quarters (75%) thought they were 'not justified'.¹¹ Although 'justified' might be regarded as qualitatively different to 'defensible' and although there was a two-year gap between the YouGov and HEPI / Savanta polls, it nonetheless seems highly likely that a larger proportion of students than adults as a whole regard Hamas's attacks on 7 October 2023 as justifiable.

When asked about Israel's response to the attacks, there is less balance among students: there is a lower level of sympathy and more opposition to Israel's response than to Hamas's attacks. Only one-in-six (18%) students say Israel's response was 'defensible' and one-half (50%) say it was 'indefensible'. Again, there was a relatively high proportion of respondents (32%) saying 'Don't know'.

These results on Israel's response to the 7 October attacks are more comparable to those for the general population, with YouGov's 2024 polling finding 24% of the British public thought Israel's attacks were 'justified' while 45% thought they were 'not justified'.¹²

Reparations for the slave trade

Q11. Some people have suggested that countries which were once heavily involved in the slave trade, including the UK, should pay money (known as 'reparations') to places and the ancestors of those most affected. Others say that reparations are impractical and that current generations are not directly to blame. Which of the following comes closest to your view?



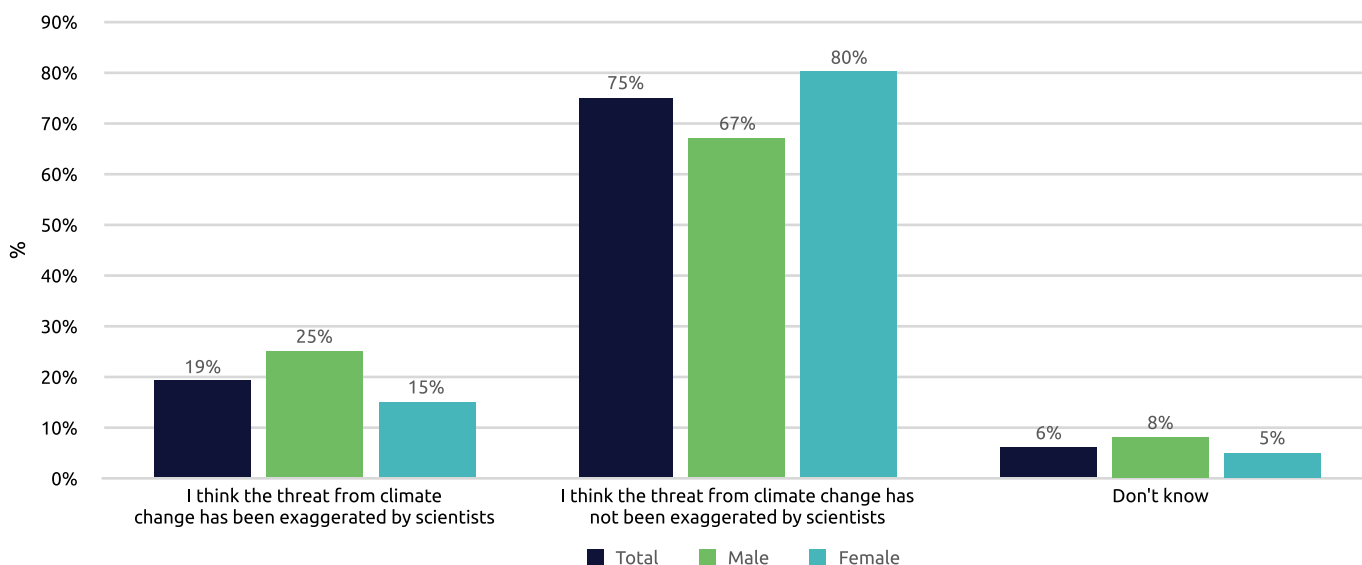
Students are split on whether reparations for the slave trade are a good or bad idea, with 47% favouring reparations and 36% opposing them. However, the results are strikingly different for men and women. A majority of female students (53%) favour reparations, but only four-in-ten (40%) male students do. Indeed, more male students (47%) oppose reparations than support them, whereas just over one-quarter of female students (28%) oppose them.

This is one of the areas in the poll where the views of students are some distance from those of the population as a whole: in 2026, YouGov found around six-in-ten British adults opposed the idea of reparations either ‘strongly’ (44%) or ‘somewhat’ (16%) and just one-quarter backed them, either ‘strongly’ (10%) or ‘somewhat’ (14%).¹³

Views on reparations differ markedly according to the ethnicity of respondents. YouGov found Black adults were nearly four times more likely to support reparations than White adults (71% versus 19%). The new HEPI / Savanta student polling also reveals large differences by ethnic background, but these are not as great as for the adult population as a whole: around three-quarters of Black students (74%) support reparations, which is around twice as high as for White students (39%). So the higher level of support for reparations among students is not simply due to the ethnic diversity of the student body.

Climate change

Q12. Most scientists believe man-made climate change is putting some countries and communities at risk – for example, as a result of more extreme weather and rises in sea levels. Which of the following comes closest to your view?



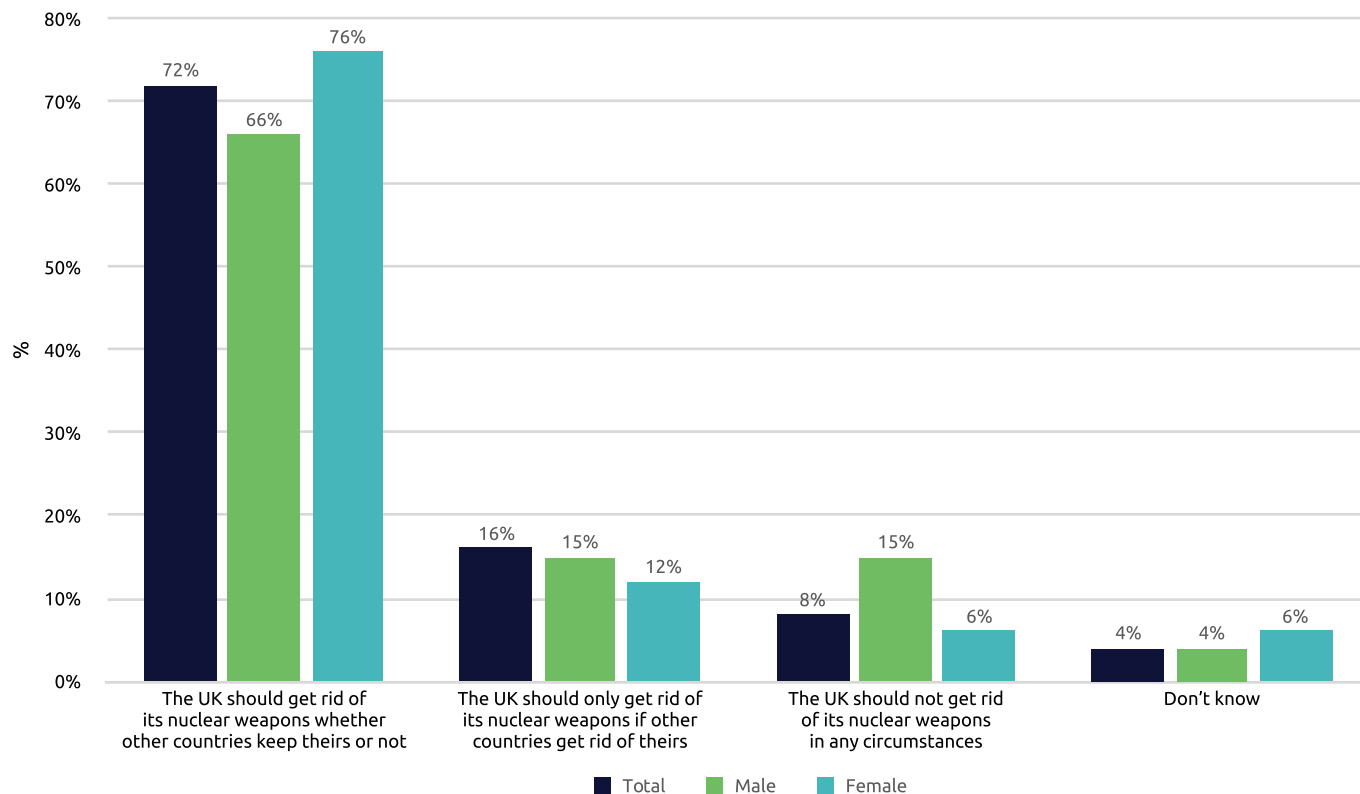
Three-quarters (75%) of students do not believe the threat of man-made ‘climate change has been exaggerated by scientists’, while around one-in-five think it has (19%). The views differ somewhat by voting intention, with only 9% of students who support the Greens thinking the climate change threat has been exaggerated but 24% of Labour-supporting students saying the same. Higher proportions of Conservative (26%) and Reform UK (39%) supporters believe the threat has been exaggerated, but there are so few students expressing support for either of these parties that the results are not reliable.

Students’ collective views on climate change are broadly in line with what we know about the views of the general public, 62% of whom (according to a 2025 YouGov poll) think concerns about

climate change 'have not been exaggerated'.¹⁴ So this appears to be another area where students' views are not so different from those of the general public, which may come as a surprise to those who have bought the caricature of 'woke' students.

Nuclear disarmament

Q13. Which of the following statements is closest to your view?



Most students (72%) favour so-called 'unilateral disarmament', meaning the UK would stop having nuclear weapons even if other countries kept theirs. Another 16% favour multi-lateral disarmament whereby countries get rid of their nuclear weapons concurrently, with only a small minority of students (8%) thinking there are no circumstances in which the UK should rid itself of its nuclear weapons.

These results appear to be out-of-kilter with those for the British population as a whole. A YouGov poll from 2024 suggests British adults favour multilateral disarmament in much larger numbers than unilateral disarmament:

Asked whether all countries with nuclear weapons should get rid of them, 11% support the idea of this being done unilaterally (i.e. regardless of whether other countries with nuclear weapons do this), while two-thirds (65%) say this should be done on the condition of all nuclear powers doing the same.

One in seven Britons (14%) think that countries which possess nuclear weapons should not get rid of them.¹⁵

As the YouGov poll does not show much differentiation by the age of respondents, it is possible that the wording of their question and the wording of the new HEPI / Savanta polling were so different from one another that the results should not be directly compared: for example, the

former polling did not explicitly name the UK, focussing instead on ‘countries that have nuclear weapons’. On the other hand, as a 2021 piece by the (then) Chair of Parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee reminds us:

*Over many years, numerous opinion polls yielded strikingly consistent results: about one-quarter of the population favour British unilateral nuclear disarmament, whilst just over two-thirds wish us to keep the deterrent as long as other countries possess nuclear weapons.*¹⁶

Conclusion

The goal of this project was to supplement what we have learnt from earlier HEPI polling of students – on issues like voting intentions, attitudes to free speech and student finance – with new student polling on a range of controversial issues to enable comparisons with other polling of the adult public as a whole.

At the start of the project, the expectation (of the author at least) was that, on a range of issues, students’ views could be markedly different from those of the adult population as a whole, probably veering closer towards the stances typically associated with the so-called ‘progressive left’. While this is true in some areas – including attitudes towards Hamas’s actions, whether reparations should be paid for the slave trade and unilateral nuclear disarmament – and even though the Green Party is currently the most popular political party among students, it is not true for the majority of topics we asked about.

Instead, the results show a more nuanced picture. On some issues, students are a little more progressive than adults overall; on others, they seem if anything to be a little less so. Often, the differences are in scale rather than representing a radically different balance of opinion. Indeed, on some high-profile issues – such as the impact of AI on the labour market, the reintroduction of capital punishment and Israel’s response to the 7 October attacks – the poll comprehensively punctures the idea that students are a class apart.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/are-students-still-woke/>
- 2 <https://ai.publicfirst.co.uk/#:~:text=Some%20see%20AI%20as%20a,%2C%20privacy%2C%20and%20even%20democracy>
- 3 <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-08/buildingaproworkerAIinnovationstrategy.pdf>
- 4 <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/ipsos-poll-finds-widespread-support-key-workplace-dei-initiatives-men-are-more-likely-women-say-dei>
- 5 Respondents’ voting intentions included: Green – 35%, Would not vote – 24%, Labour – 12%, Reform UK – 8%, Liberal Democrats – 7%, Conservative – 6% and Undecided – 5%.
- 6 https://ygo-assets-websites-editorial-emea.yougov.net/documents/Oxfam_GB_Results_250318_W.pdf
- 7 <https://natcen.ac.uk/public-support-legal-change-towards-assisted-dying>
- 8 <https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/47568-where-does-the-british-public-stand-on-abortion-in-2023>
- 9 <https://www.sex-matters-news.org/p/new-poll-shows-most-people-prefer>
- 10 <https://standwithus.com/news/standwithus-uk-poll-finds-almost-one-third-of-uk-students-believe-that-october-7th-attacks-were-an/>
- 11 https://ygo-assets-websites-editorial-emea.yougov.net/documents/YouGov_-_Israel_Palestine_13_Feb_2024.pdf
- 12 <https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/48675-british-attitudes-to-the-israel-gaza-conflict-february-2024-update>
- 13 <https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/54409-do-britons-support-reparations-for-the-slave-trade-in-principle>
- 14 <https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/52033-earth-day-2025-where-do-britons-stand-on-climate-change>
- 15 <https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/49521-part-five-the-nuclear-dilemma-britons-on-weapons-of-mass-destruction>
- 16 <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/maximum-stockpiles-and-minimum-deterrence>