



Deanery Digests are short, plain language summaries of the Department of Education's research outputs. This Deanery Digest is co-authored by Franziska Lessky (University of Oxford), Rachel Brooks (University of Oxford) and Tom Fryer (University of Manchester), and based on the following project: <https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/project/does-higher-education-politicise-todays-students>

'Students and Politics' project: Where we are, and what's next

What is this research about and why is it important?

This ESRC-funded project (2025-2028) is being carried out by a research team from the University of Oxford, Durham University and the University of Manchester. The project generates new knowledge about the extent to which higher education (HE) influences students' knowledge of politics, and their political views and behaviours. As the first in-depth investigation into whether and how HE exerts influence on students' politics, this study will enhance our understanding of contemporary political processes in England. This digest presents an interim report summarising the project's key outputs after its first year.

What did we do?

- First round of the **survey** of political attitudes with students (in the subject areas of biology, business studies, engineering and sociology), in four English HE institutions, at the beginning of their studies (n=~850).
- **Focus groups** and **individual interviews** with teaching staff, senior managers, student union presidents (from the same four HE institutions) and representatives of sector-level organisations (n=52).
- **Media analysis**, which investigated how student politics are portrayed in UK media outlets.

What did we find?

- The results of the **survey** showed various significant differences in students' initial political attitudes based on the university they attend and their subject of study. We analysed a range of political attitudes, including those related to: (a) left-right beliefs; (b) liberal-authoritarian views; and (c) populism, and found important variation across the cases in our sample. This work will also serve as a baseline to identify changes in political attitudes that occur during students' time in their undergraduate programmes.
- The **interview data** revealed that representatives of sector-level organisations were more likely than those working in higher education institutions to believe that universities should promote particular political behaviours. Staff voiced broad consensus that teachers should not seek to shape students' specific political views. Instead, emphasis was placed on developing their critical thinking skills and political literacy. Regarding the students' views, staff perceived them as mixed but mentioned differences according to fields of study. They

explained such differences by self-selection processes, specific curriculum content and the attitudes of the staff who teach them.

- The **media analysis** demonstrated that the empirical evidence newspaper articles are drawing on when discussing students' political engagement is limited and mainly anecdotal or focuses on individual cases. In addition, students' agency is portrayed very differently across various outlets. The voices of the majority of students from non-elite universities, including those from regional institutions and historically under-represented groups, remain unheard as most of the articles focus on Oxbridge. Read a blog post that provides more detail about the analysis [here](#).

What does it all mean anyway?

In this first year, we gathered various types of data that will inform the overall aim of identifying processes that may shape students' political knowledge, views and behaviour during higher education - attentive to any differences by academic discipline, institution attended, and the social characteristics of students. An enhanced understanding of contemporary political divides in England will be of interest and relevance to scholars and practitioners in the fields of education and sociology.

The following activities are planned next:

- **Hybrid webinar hosted by the Centre for Global and Higher Education (CGHE) on 10 November 2026** "Students and politics in the UK: A comparison of students' views and staffs' perspectives". All welcome to attend – please sign up using the link [here](#).
- Second round of survey and interviews with students in 2027.

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