



UNIVERSITIES
AUSTRALIA

DISCOVER LEARN LEAD

Public Perceptions of Australia's Universities

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Introduction

During 2012 Universities Australia reached out to the public and stakeholders to elicit their views and understanding of universities to assist in formulating its first ever policy statement.

This included conducting a series of university community forums, engaging directly with decision makers and interested groups such as business. It involved qualitative and quantitative research, including focus groups and a survey of 1000 members of the Australian public and 300 business employers.

The data was weighted to be representative of the Australian population and the whole business community.

The research was intended to assist Universities Australia to better understand the

levels of knowledge about the role Australia's universities play in Australian life.

What we have learnt is that while universities are held in high regard and are strongly valued for their contribution to the economy and society, there is a desire to know more.

It is also clear that Australians feel there is a need for the university sector to more actively participate in debates about issues important to our national interest.

Universities Australia is committed to strengthening its ability to play a central role in contributing to economic prosperity and the social well-being of its citizens.

General perceptions of Australian universities

"People think highly of universities ... there is a feeling of pride and belief they contribute a great deal to society."

Overall, universities are well regarded by the Australian public and business community. When asked about their overall perceptions of universities, around three quarters of the general public and businesses responded positively (Figure 1). Only around 3-5 per cent of those surveyed responded that they have a negative perception of universities.

The research shows the aspiration to attend university is a strong feature of our society. (Figure 2). When asked if they would encourage their child or young people they knew to attend university, 88 per cent agreed with almost half of the respondents strongly agreeing. This demonstrates public understanding that university participation can lead to better outcomes for the individual.

Figure 1 - Overall Perceptions of Universities

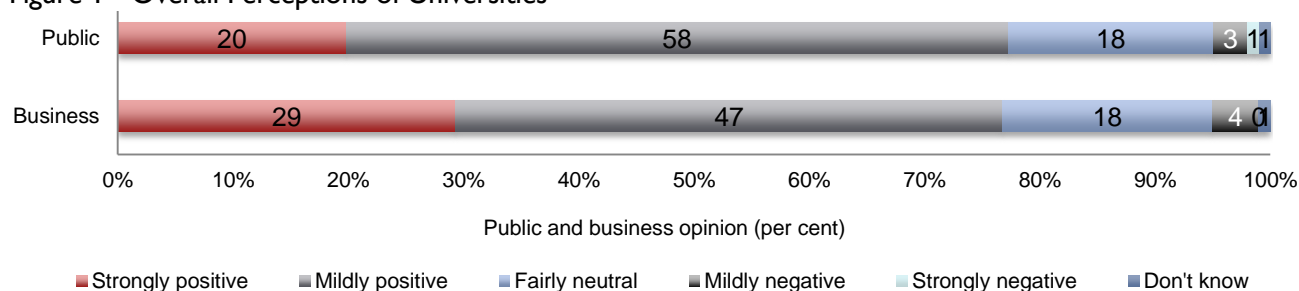
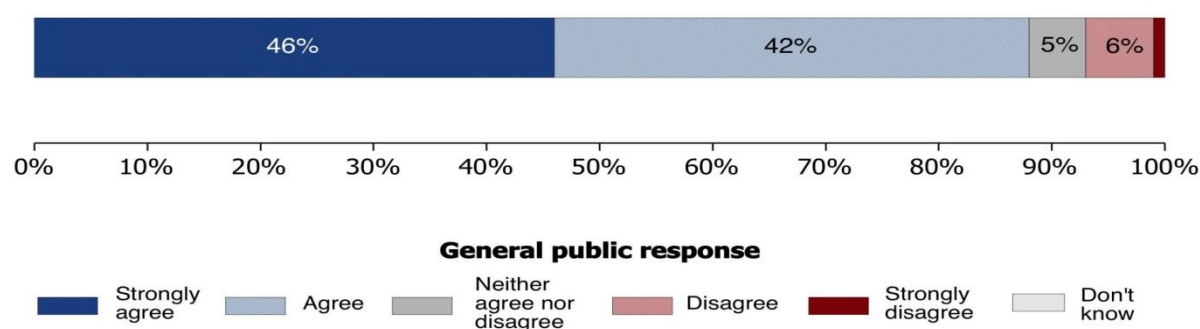


Figure 2 - I would encourage my child, or young people I know, to attend university



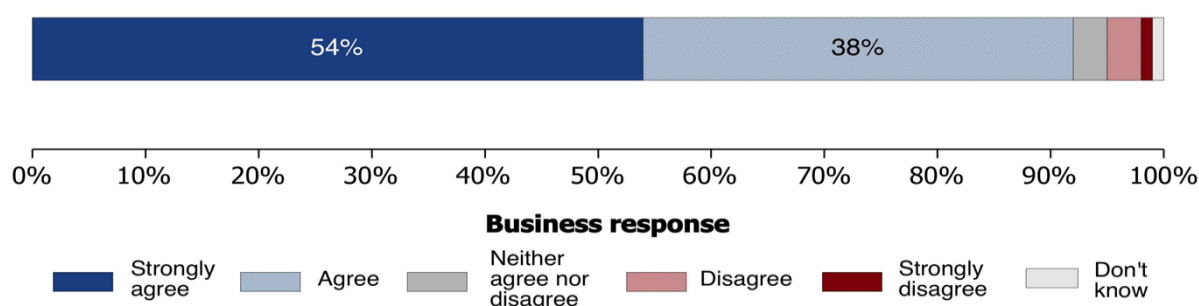
Personal or familial aspiration seems to be an important factor in an overall positive perception of universities, and appears to give rise to a general awareness of the importance of increasing participation in university education more generally. Indeed, more than 80 per cent of the general public and 75 per

cent of business said that increasing the proportion of young Australians completing university will be an important goal for the nation over the next 10-15 years. Of this, 40 per cent of the public and 38 per cent of business agreed strongly.

Knowledge about the sector

More than 90 per cent of people said that a well-funded university system is critical to Australia's economy and national growth.

Figure 3 - A well-funded university system is critical to Australia's economy and growth



While the level of understanding about the contribution universities make to Australian life is low, the overwhelming majority of responses were positive (91 per cent said that a well-funded university system is critical to Australia's economy and national growth).

Despite this, more than half the public and business said that university funding was too low (59 and 56 per cent respectively). Additionally, 90 per cent of business said that a well-funded university system is critical to Australia's economy and growth (Figure 3).

The role and purpose of universities

“There needs to be a balance, certainly, between the role of universities as institutions of higher learning and research, and big players in developing employment skills. There has to be a conversation about this balance, and business and the [higher education] sector need to sit down and have it.”

Perhaps not surprisingly most people including business indicated that the primary role of universities should be to educate students for skilled or professional jobs (Figure 4 – Public Response). The business community was more likely to view universities as job training facilities, with 73 per cent of respondents indicating that educating for skilled or professional jobs was a university’s most important role, and 18 per cent suggesting it is to meet the needs of the Australian economy.

Of some concern is the low level of understanding of the role that universities play

in contributing to research and development.

There is a strong view that universities should collaborate and engage more strongly with business ‘in areas of research and innovation, skills development and labour market demand, and around areas of mutual self-interest, such as research policy, the future of manufacturing and education policy’.

Focus groups also tended to identify the sector’s role in meeting workforce demands and training students for specific vocations as the most significant objective for universities.

Figure 4 - The main purpose of universities - general public



University Research

There is a strong view that universities should collaborate and engage more strongly with business in areas of research and innovation, skills development and labour market demand....'

While detailed understanding of university research is low, 90 per cent of people surveyed agreed that research is 'an essential part of what a university does' and 86 per cent believe that 'conducting research to advance knowledge for its own sake is important'.

Close to half of Australians surveyed had heard about university research over the past 12 months, but their understanding of the nature of university research was quite low. Most, (around 70 per cent), were interested in hearing more about the research being conducted at Australian universities (Figure 5). As noted by one stakeholder, *"there is little understanding about ... what universities do in the research space. Most people can relate to teaching at universities, but can't get their head around the research bit"*.

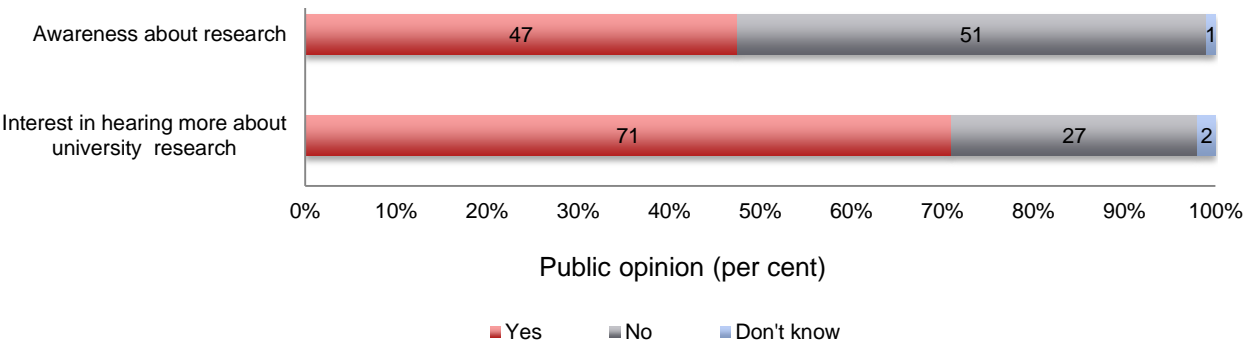
Of those who had heard about research being conducted in Australian universities, awareness

was dominated by medical and scientific research (59 and 34 per cent respectively). Very few people had heard about research being conducted in other fields, such as psychological and behavioural research (6 per cent), environmental and sustainability research (6 per cent) or educational research (2 per cent).

While appreciating the value of pure research, there is a general view that universities should focus much of their research on producing practical outcomes.

Research by Australian universities was viewed positively, albeit as a secondary function of the university behind teaching and learning. The view was medical discoveries were a source of national pride. It was noted, however, that the 'commercial benefits of Australian research were often realised overseas'.

Figure 5 - Knowledge about university research



Perceptions of international students

People appreciate the social, cultural and economic benefits of international students.

Perceptions about the international student sector were overwhelmingly positive with 75 per cent of the general public having a positive perception of full fee paying international students attending the nation's universities. Of this, 25 per cent were strongly positive and 47 per cent positive. Australian businesses also had a positive perception with 27 per cent indicating they were strongly positive and 42 per cent positive (Figure 6).

Additionally, 80 per cent of business and 72 per cent of the public felt that international students should be encouraged to stay in Australia at the completion of their studies, particularly if sponsored by an employer.

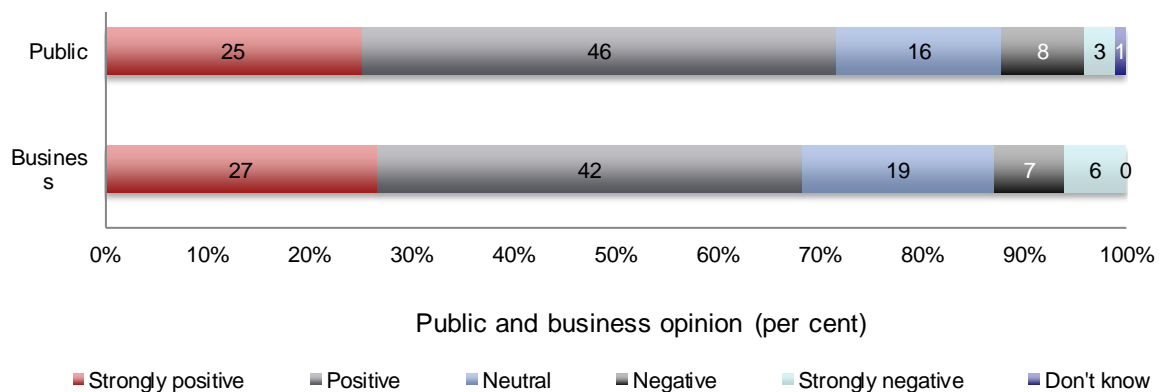
People appreciate the social, cultural and economic benefits of international students.

Stakeholders also noted the geo-political links and value generated from having an international education market and felt that it is helpful in building cross-cultural links and soft-diplomacy with other countries.

However some stakeholder respondents have voiced concerns that the university system is perceived to be too heavily reliant on income from international student enrolments. There is also a view that additional support, for instance with English language learning and better facilities such as affordable student housing, may be required.

Participants were generally comfortable about the proportion of internationally students, at roughly 20 per cent.

Figure 6 - Universities as providers of international education



Where to next?

While the public may not yet have a detailed knowledge of the sector, people are interested in better understanding the role of universities. More than half the public (57 per cent) were interested in receiving more information about universities.

Most people (more than 90 per cent) agree that universities make an important contribution to Australian society. However less than half of these people strongly agree with this statement (Figure 7).

Clearly the work undertaken by Universities Australia demonstrates that the challenge for the sector is to strengthen its engagement with the Australian community to more clearly articulate the contribution universities make to Australians' well-being and to assert the role of the sector in public life.

Figure 7 - Universities make an important contribution to modern Australian society

