



NEXT  
GENERATION  
UK



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The views expressed are those of the authors and contributors and do not necessarily represent those of the British Council.





## > ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Demos is an independent cross-party think tank, specialising in undertaking research and developing evidence-based policy solutions in a range of areas, from education and youth policy, health and social care, through to populism and extremism. In our methods and principles, Demos is devoted to ensuring that all citizens have the capabilities and opportunities to lead powerful and meaningful lives.

## > ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We would also like to express our gratitude to our Next Generation UK Advisory Board, who have steered the project and provided such a wealth of insight throughout. Furthermore, our thanks go to all of the young adults who participated in our research, whether through the focus groups across the UK, or through our polling and social media analysis.

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Any errors and omissions remain our own.

Ian Wybron  
Simone Vibert  
Josh Smith

Demos, May 2017



# FOREWORD

There are currently seven billion people in the world, of which 1.8 billion are young people. Many of us are feeling deflated and daunted with the current political shifts, both here and internationally. We've come of age in a world that's shifting in quite fundamental ways. Yet many of us are hopeful for ourselves as individuals, as the next generation.

Many of us are hopeful for the UK's place in the world in the future. We can create change when given opportunities, or are empowered to build our own. We ask to be trusted to succeed and encouraged to do so. We have creativity, energy, originality, talents, and knowledge of new technology. We have determination, passion and hunger for change and the willingness to get involved.

Our Advisory Board considered that as always, though perhaps now more than ever, today's young people continue to examine their sense of self, and their identity. They wonder what it is to be British, or hold British values and contribute to British culture. Is the UK a world leader of what's good, and setting an example to the rest of the world? Uncertainty causes a sense of detachment from issues, a lack of security and most importantly, the need for more discussion. We are concerned about the dangers of closed views, and biased media which doesn't present neutral perspectives.

Every generation and group of people experiences challenges. Challenges are an everyday part of people's lives; some can be tackled easily and some cannot. Our Advisory Board shared mixed feelings of concerns and hopes for the future. Some of us are really hopeful that across the world young people are exposed to diversity from a young age, and have more diverse networks than their predecessors. But we also feel that young people are concerned about

inequality continuing to rise, and that there is a sense that a rising intolerance (whether based on religion, ethnicity, sexuality, disability or gender) coupled with lack of economic opportunity could foster resentment, resulting in a less cohesive society.

Young people are leading innovation, using newly available data and technology to help improve quality of life locally in their communities and to develop their own enterprises, and their voices. It is inspirational how young people can lead and support in times of change and there are campaigns, run by our age group, which are already having an impact among hundreds of small-scale campaigns also finding success.

We are the most connected we've ever been, and today's young people are most accustomed to harnessing our networks for change. However, while young people are used to building worlds online and participating in special interest forums and networks, we need to be persuaded and encouraged that our contributions are valuable and can effect change in traditional institutions and spheres of discussion. We also now live in a world full of social networking, networking which is constant and ever present. It is a world of information, but less communication, and young people need to feel that they have points of support in the real world who will listen to them if they are struggling.

Education came up time and time again in our Advisory Board discussions. Education is pivotal to career success, but many young people do not know about all of the opportunities the system has to offer them, from free education up to the age of 19, to work-based apprenticeships that continue to degree level that allow young people up to the age of 30 to 'earn as they learn', so education about what opportunities the system provides for young people is key. We're a generation already in flux, and the next generation need to be prepared educationally for a job market and economy that's rapidly changing.

We are concerned as the world gets smaller that we will continue to have opportunities to travel, to live and to work abroad, whatever the future holds. Yet young people today have different kinds of opportunities that may not have existed 50 years ago. As part of the Advisory Board for this study, we felt that some of the biggest challenges for young people in the UK are shared with those of many young people across the world, and we share some of these and the opportunities for hope, explored further in this report, below. While we cannot take away all issues that young people face, we can certainly try and tackle the barriers and challenges, enabling young people to be successful and optimistic in their futures.

**Samuel Larkin-Buckland (Essex)**  
**and Nina Ballantyne (Glasgow),**  
 Next Generation UK Advisory Board

I am pleased to introduce this new publication in the Next Generation research series. This work adds to the voices of other young voices from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Tanzania and Ukraine, and will be joined over the coming months by reports from Colombia, Turkey and South Africa.

The purpose of this research series is to listen to young people of a particular country, highlight their concerns and aspirations, and use the data gathered to better inform policy and practice.

The British Council's objective is to create more opportunities for young people around the world to engage with each other – and through this engagement unleash their creativity.

Next Generation aims to understand how young people are affected by and are responding to current social, political and economic changes, whether that is national elections in Pakistan, a historic peace process in Colombia, demographic challenges in Tanzania, or the UK's decision to leave the European Union.

The majority of young people in the United Kingdom were in favour of remaining in the EU; but it is also the case that a large proportion of them did not vote in the referendum.

While there is some disengagement or disillusionment with conventional political processes, as evident from the research, it is also clear that young people care deeply about their world and are harnessing their networks through collaboration and new technology. They feel passionately about issues such as climate change, the refugee crisis, equality and freedom.

This UK research shows that young people feel that it is vital to engage with political institutions. The challenge we face is how to enable better engagement of young people with democratic institutions and processes.

As the most digitally-connected generation, it is unsurprising that the majority of young people have an international perspective, and see no contradiction between their British and global identities.

Young people in the UK worry about their country's position in the world and what that means for their future. Many do not have opportunities for international engagement, and those who do see their chances threatened by the UK's departure from the EU.

We at the British Council are committed to working with policymakers and young people to ensure those opportunities for international exposure are not curtailed but enhanced.

Young people, unsurprisingly, have an acute interest in the future. It is therefore imperative that we listen to them, respond to the challenges they identify, harness their energy and creativity, and empower them to shape that future.

**The Rt Hon. the Baroness  
Usha Prashar CBE, PC,  
Deputy Chair, British Council**



# > EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UK's decision to leave the EU has left many young people feeling uncertain about the future and with questions about how the UK's place in the world may be recast. While some perceive an opportunity to carve out a new future, others are anxious that Brexit will diminish the UK's influence on the global stage.

With the backdrop of this momentous national decision, the British Council commissioned Demos to undertake independent research for Next Generation UK, part of a global research programme intended to explore youth attitudes and aspirations, and provide a platform for youth voice and influence at a time of change.

As part of its mission to build connections and trust between the UK and the rest of the world, the British Council aimed for the Next Generation UK research to allow for honest dialogue about the challenges facing young people in the UK, as well as exploring ways in which the agency of young people in the UK as local and global citizens could be enhanced.

This study has used a variety of methods to explore the attitudes and aspirations of young adults living in the UK. These include a nationally representative survey of 2,000 18–30 year olds conducted by Ipsos Mori; focus groups with 80 young adults in locations across the UK; innovative analysis of young adults' use of social media; and a policy roundtable with key stakeholders focused on youth engagement. In addition to this, two workshops were held with a Next Generation UK Advisory Board – 15 young adults who have steered the project for its duration and helped develop recommendations.

The report is organised according to three key research themes around which we have explored youth attitudes and aspirations: the UK's place in the world, political and social engagement, and opportunities in education and work.

## Research findings

Below we provide an overview of findings related to the three key themes of our research.

### The UK's place in the world

Young adults in the UK were left frustrated in their ambitions for the UK to remain a member of the EU. While just 50 per cent of their number turned out to vote, 69 per cent voted in favour of Remain compared to 31 per cent Leave. With the reverse true of people aged over 65, the EU Referendum revealed a rupture between the generations.

Our research under this theme found anger and emotion felt by many young adults in the UK, which continues to linger. According to our survey, six in ten of all young adults would vote to remain a member of the EU if another referendum were held tomorrow. Many young adults have been left feeling pessimistic about the UK's future place in the world, expecting that a range of negative outcomes lie ahead. For example, survey respondents were twice as likely to say that the decision will pull people living in the UK further apart (41 per cent versus 19 per cent). Four in ten young adults think the UK will have less influence in the world, compared to one in five who think the opposite. While there are certainly those who see leaving the EU as a great opportunity, many participants in our focus groups were worried about impacts on their lives, prospects, and future plans, including constraining opportunities to work and study in other

countries. Furthermore there was some concern that internationally the UK will be seen as a country looking inwards at a time when global co-operation has never been more important.

Adding weight to existing evidence, our research suggests that a key factor in explaining these attitudes is in the international outlook of a more networked generation, who, in a digital and connected age, generally feel less defined by borders compared to their elders. Our survey found that two-thirds (67 per cent) of young adults say they have an international outlook. While many do not have tangible examples of substantial international engagement – identified as a challenge by our research – a substantial majority feel an international outlook is important for achieving their personal goals. Many hold the ambition to engage more, including working abroad (56 per cent). Seeking new cultural experiences, and enhancing employability at home and abroad, were mentioned in focus groups as motivations for more sustained international experience – echoing wider research. Our survey also found the majority of young adults in the UK are positive about the effects of globalisation on the UK (57 per cent) and on their own lives.

But this is not always the case. While many young adults have benefited from international engagement, our research also identified a substantial minority who had not and who feel very differently about the networked world. Divisions appear primarily drawn along socio-economic and educational lines. Young



adults with lower social grade,<sup>1</sup> lower educational attainment, and parents without degrees were less likely to be positive about globalisation and have an international outlook. The same is true for those from the North and Midlands compared to London and the South. Those with more limited international travel experience were also less likely to have positive internationalist attitudes. Studies have suggested financial support may be important for widening these opportunities, while not being proficient in languages was mentioned in our focus groups as another key barrier to greater international engagement.

Our research explored the place of 'Britishness' and national identity in all this, and found it to be complicated. Our survey findings suggest no trade-off between being internationalist in outlook and having a strong sense of national identity (despite national identity appearing more strongly in Leave areas). In fact, the majority of young adults responding to our survey reported having a very strong sense of British identity (51 per cent), with eight in ten feeling at least some sense of Britishness. Our research found a range of sources of pride in being British – chief among them the NHS (cited by 55 per cent of young adults as a source of pride), followed by history (32 per cent) and culture and arts (23 per cent). Yet speaking to young adults across the UK in our focus groups they made clear

what a complex set of feelings young adults have towards national identity – with a sense of shame in some aspects of history and culture also emerging. Thus, while young adults' sense of national identity might be a platform for social renewal in divided times, it is unlikely to be a straightforward one.

Pressing under this theme for the young people we worked with – including our Advisory Board members – was how to preserve the benefits of international engagement in uncertain times, while opening up greater opportunities to peers who may have been 'left behind' by globalisation. We return to this in the recommendations.

### Political and social engagement

Conventional wisdom holds that the decision to leave the EU was in part a reflection of widespread discontent with the political establishment. While the majority of young adults voted differently, a considerable amount of research shows the very low level of youth engagement in politics. Our research under this theme explored the attitudes of young adults to politics and the potential for renewing democratic engagement.

Adding to existing data showing the gap in turnout between younger and older generations during recent elections and referendums, our survey of young adults found that the majority indeed have very low engagement in the formal political process. While a small majority have

voted in an election (56 per cent), just 7 per cent said they had joined a political party. One in six have contacted an MP, and one in ten their local councillor. Not dissimilar to international engagement, it tends to be young adults of higher social grade and level of education who do so the most.

Our research suggests a range of potential explanations for low engagement. First and foremost, young people by and large do not trust political institutions. We found this to be true at all levels of the political establishment, and across the regions of the UK. Asked to give a trust score out of 10 (with 0 equal to no trust and 10 equal to completely trust), the average young adult scored local councils 4.7, the UK parliament 4.1, and UK government 3.9.

While some young adults were ready to rally behind the political establishment, generally political parties and politicians came in for substantial criticism in our focus groups – with many young adults feeling that they are not listened to by what they perceive to be an often self-serving elite. Strikingly, in our survey just 37 per cent of young adults believe that British politics today reflects the issues that matter to young people, with more than half (54 per cent) thinking it does not. Our research found, too, that the majority of political actions are considered by most young adults ineffective in bringing about change – with many, it seems, leaning towards more tangible expressions of community action.

1. Social grade is a commonly-used classification system based on occupation, which enables members of a household to be classified according to the occupation of the chief income earner. As is usual practice, our analysis is based on four social grade classifications: AB, C1, C2, and DE. See: Ipsos MORI, Social Grade: A Classification Tool (2009) [https://www.ipsos-mori.com/DownloadPublication/1285\\_MediaCT\\_thoughtpiece\\_Social\\_Grade\\_July09\\_V3\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.ipsos-mori.com/DownloadPublication/1285_MediaCT_thoughtpiece_Social_Grade_July09_V3_WEB.pdf)

Despite all this, most young adults do feel that it's important to be engaged in traditional Westminster politics (73 per cent surveyed said this), and speak clearly about the issues that matter to them. Housing, and lack of jobs were felt to be the biggest challenges for young people in our research; while the NHS was singled out as the biggest national issue, felt to be under threat and in need of more radical solutions by politicians. Many young adults were also concerned about the implications of Brexit for the government's seriousness in tackling vital international issues such as terrorism, poverty and climate change.

Also discussed in the course of our research was the rise in digital politics, and challenges faced in an era of misinformation and 'fake news'. This was felt to be particularly important given that lack of knowledge of political matters had been identified as a key barrier to political engagement. Our research highlights the increasing role of social media as both sources of news and also forums for political discussions and activism – but representing perhaps as many threats as opportunities. More than a third of those we surveyed (35 per cent) felt it was difficult to tell the difference between truth and lies on social media; while a similar proportion said that social media had made them feel more negatively about politics.

A range of suggestions were put forward for re-engaging young adults under this theme. Voting on more matters at a local and national level were most commonly cited in the survey as factors most likely to increase engagement (51 per cent and 47 per cent). Political education and improving the interactions between younger people and politicians at all levels were the focus of our Advisory Board.

### Opportunities in education and work

The third theme of our research looked at the more immediate economic circumstances of young adults – in particular, attitudes and experiences in education and work. This was felt to be a priority area for young adults themselves, and furthermore highly linked to the other two themes.

We found this area to be characterised by division and uncertainty. Young adults across the UK are almost split down the middle on the extent to which the education system is adequately preparing young people for work, and generally life as an adult. Unsurprisingly, those with higher education and better paying and stable jobs were most likely to think that it was. Our focus groups across the UK found common frustrations with an education system built around examinations and academic routes, at the expense of greater vocational options and the teaching of key life skills.

While some young adults have landed on their feet, lack of jobs, employer attitudes, barriers to suitable work experience, and access to higher education are cited by many young adults as continued problems; with around half of those we surveyed (49 per cent) feeling they live in a socially mobile society. Our qualitative research also highlighted concerns about the quality of work available to young people in today's economy, in line with trends in the underemployment of graduates and a growing 'gig' economy.

Though there was appetite for measures to improve the education system, and help young people navigate the demands of a labour market made all the more uncertain by Brexit, our research ended on a positive note. The majority of young people we engaged with through the course of this research remained optimistic and ambitious about their futures in life and work, though more anxious about the direction of the country as a whole.

### Recommendations

Based on the research findings, Demos held a recommendations workshop with the Next Generation UK Advisory Board for this project. Many ideas were deliberated, many of which appear in the main text. The following were subject to most agreement. Note that these reflect the recommendations of the Advisory Board, not Demos or the British Council.

#### *To enhance international engagement:*

**Recommendation one: The government should provide clear assurances during the Brexit negotiation period on protecting and securing opportunities for young adults travelling, working, and studying abroad.**

Board members echoed widespread concern over the impact of Brexit on opportunities to travel, work and study in Europe. The continued financial viability of doing so, future rights and protections within EU countries, and visa requirements, have all become uncertain – and young adults deserve clarity about how these valuable development opportunities will be preserved.

**Recommendation two: Employers, careers advisers, education providers, and civil society organisations should commit to a culture of lifelong international engagement, widening the scope of international work and study partnerships.**

The benefits of studying, working, or volunteering abroad are valuable throughout the life course. Board members emphasised 'lifelong exchanges' including partnerships between schools and between employers at home and abroad. They also stressed the importance of tailoring opportunities to attract people from a full range of backgrounds and motivations.

*To re-engage young adults in politics:*

**Recommendation three:** Departments with responsibility for education in England and in the devolved administrations should review the delivery of politics and citizenship education nationally with a view to ensuring all students have good quality provision.

With patchy provision of politics and citizenship education in schools across the UK, the Board felt that departments responsible for education should be exploring best practice in engaging pupils, looking in particular at how a 'practical' political and citizenship education can be embedded into curricula. This includes harnessing the potential for social action, campaigning, and meaningful interactions with decision makers.

**Recommendation four:** Local councillors and other elected officials should increase visibility and engagement, ensuring they are 'going to where young people are' through face-to-face meetings and new online forums.

Responding to evidence of the disconnect between young adults and decision makers at a variety of levels, Board members suggested increasing the frequency of meetings between young people and elected officials in different venues (including schools), and improving information channels (including online forums), as means to help rebuild connections. 'Starting local' and breaking down barriers with councillors was felt to be a priority.

**Recommendation five:** Local government should review processes for local citizen engagement, to increase opportunities for young people to vote on decisions affecting their local areas.

The Board agreed on the importance of increasing voting on local decisions, echoing our survey findings on its significance for increasing the political engagement of young adults. Given provisions do exist in statute for local referendums, part of the challenge will likely be providing greater clarity and information about what are often diffuse and complex rules and regulations.

*To support young adults in education and work:*

**Recommendation six:** The government should review how the changing labour market may be increasing the vulnerabilities of young adults to exploitation, championing ethical routes into work and positive career pathways for young adults.

Young people entering the labour market have a diverse range of experiences and different attitudes towards what constitutes a 'good' route in or fair treatment by employers in the modern economy. The Board agreed that it would be helpful for government to lead a conversation about 'ethical' career pathways for young people and ensuring all young adults are set up for success.

**Recommendation seven:** Professionals working in the education system should ensure that building the resilience of young people – social, emotional, and financial – is embedded at all levels.

The Board felt the need for a rebalancing of the education system, away from a narrow focus on examinations and academic routes, and towards embedding wider life skills in the school curriculum as well as in colleges, universities, and other educational establishments. Chief amongst the skills highlighted was resilience, so that young people develop robustness to the challenges of modern life and work.

# > INTRODUCTION

The UK's decision to leave the EU on 23 June 2016 revealed a starkly divided society, and a level of discontent with the political status quo beyond what many knew existed.

In its wake follows a period of great uncertainty – not only because the exact terms of the country's departure have yet to be decided, but also the searching questions the EU Referendum poses about how the UK's place in the world is to be recast, and how best to go about bringing together its divided population.

Social scientists will continue to pore over data to establish the drivers of the Leave vote for some time to come. But there is agreement that one of the starkest ruptures of all exposed by the EU Referendum is between the generations: with the older population turning out in great numbers to vote Leave, and younger voters frustrated in their ambition to remain.

If Brexit represents an opportunity for social renewal, then young people must be involved properly in what happens next. Culturally, this will not be an easy task. More often than not, youth are not taken seriously in decisions that matter, and have often been maligned by politicians and the media – whether being associated with moral decay and delinquency, or more recently the sensitivity and entitlement of so-called 'Generation Snowflake'.<sup>2</sup> This misses the tremendous amount young people have to offer – not only as voters, but as society's future leaders and influencers, at home and abroad.

## Next Generation UK

Next Generation UK is part of a global research programme run by the British Council. Next Generation research is initiated in countries that are experiencing a period of significant change, with the purpose of ensuring that young people's voices are heard and their interests properly represented in decisions that will have lasting implications for their lives. Previous projects have taken place in Pakistan, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Tanzania, Ukraine, and elsewhere. Other current projects are underway in Colombia, Turkey, and South Africa. In keeping with the British Council's mission, it is hoped that there will be a great deal of learning across borders in tackling some of the common challenges experienced by young people.

From October 2016 to May 2017, Demos was commissioned by the British Council to undertake independent research for the project Next Generation UK. Against the backdrop of the EU Referendum, the project was designed to give a platform to boost the contribution of young people: exploring their attitudes and aspirations, establishing their most pressing priorities for change, and seeking to amplify youth voice and influence on key decision makers locally and nationally. Alongside aiming to enhance young people's opportunities to be active citizens and community leaders at home, Next Generation UK also aims to increase their stake abroad in the international community, helping

to fulfil the British Council's broader objective of building trust between the UK and the rest of the world.

Our focus in the project has been on young adults aged 18–30 across each of the regions and devolved nations of the UK – a diverse group, including people in education, those seeking to enter work for the first time, as well as young adults who are developing a career, starting a family, and buying property.

## Capturing youth voice, attitudes and aspirations

The scope of the Next Generation UK project outlined above is of course broad. Early in the project three key themes for the research were identified, which structure this report:

1. *The UK's place in the world* – young adults' attitudes towards other countries, experiences of other cultures, and sense of national identity/internationalism.
2. *Political and social engagement* – whether youth voices are being properly heard by leaders and opinion-formers on the issues that are most important to them.
3. *Opportunities in education and work* – looking at the experiences of young adults from different backgrounds, as well as perceived barriers to success.

In developing the methodology for the research, an overarching concern was to reflect the full diversity of views and aspirations of young adults across the

2. Nicholson, R 'Poor little snowflake – the defining insult of 2016', *The Guardian*, 28 November 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/nov/28/snowflake-insult-disdain-young-people>

UK. For research participants involved in the below, we sought to achieve a balance in terms of demographic factors, including age, region, and education/employment status, along with capturing different political outlooks and priorities.

Demos' methodology consisted of the following:

- *A detailed review of existing research.* Findings were synthesised from domestic and international comparative literature on the attitudes and aspirations of young people in the UK.
- *A nationally representative survey of young adults.* Demos worked with polling partners Ipsos MORI to survey 2,000 18–30 year olds across the UK. The survey included questions relevant to each of the key themes outlined above. (Note that due to the small sample sizes in Wales and Northern Ireland, where these disaggregated results are reported they are done so only indicatively).<sup>3</sup>
- *Eight focus groups with young adults across the UK.* With ten research participants in each group, the total sample size was 80. The focus groups were held in the following locations: London, Glasgow, Cardiff, Belfast, Leeds, Norwich, Coventry and Exeter. These locations were chosen to cover each of the devolved nations and achieve a geographical spread

across a number of different regions in England. Each group was recruited to achieve a mix of backgrounds among focus group participants. Topic guides were designed to explore participants' attitudes and experiences around the three key research themes.

- *Social media analysis.* Demos asked respondents to the survey above for their Twitter handles in order to measure engagement with a range of political and social issues on this platform. Approximately 200 young adults provided handles.
- *A Westminster policy roundtable.* Demos convened a roundtable with a range of experts and key stakeholders with an interest in this research to discuss our emerging findings, and feed in to our conclusions and recommendations.
- *A Next Generation UK Advisory Board.* The Board comprised 15 young adults aged 18–30 from a diverse range of backgrounds. As distinct from the focus groups, the Board had a steering function for the project. It was convened twice: at the start of the project to help establish priority research questions and themes; and at the end of the project, to generate policy recommendations based on the findings.

## This report

This report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 1 presents our findings on youth attitudes to the UK's place in the world. It begins with an outline of youth reaction to Brexit, explores the cosmopolitanism and networked identities of many young adults, looks at those who may be said to have been 'left behind' by globalisation, and examines British identity in uncertain times.
- Chapter 2 looks at political and social engagement. This chapter explores the reasons behind low levels of trust and participation in traditional politics among young adults, but also the appetite for greater engagement and young adults' ideas to help achieve it.
- Chapter 3 explores opportunities in education and work. It looks at the divisions between young adults in terms of how successfully they feel prepared for the world of work, but also the sense of optimism for the future.
- Chapter 4 draws out our key conclusions and, based on the priorities of our Next Generation UK Advisory Board, outlines a series of policy recommendations in light of our findings.
- Finally, the details of the social media analysis conducted for this project are included in an Appendix.

3. The Ipsos MORI polling was conducted online among a representative quota sample of 1,994 adults aged 18–30 across the UK, with fieldwork conducted between 25 January 2017 and 7 February 2017. Quota controls were set on age, gender and region, and data has been weighted to the known population profile according to age, gender, region, working status and social grade. Ipsos MORI was responsible for the fieldwork and data collection only and not responsible for the analysis, reporting or interpretation of the survey results. Note that unweighted sample sizes in each region were as follows: North (n=465), Midlands (n=465), South (n=402), London (n=383), Wales (n=81), Scotland (n=162), Northern Ireland (n=36). Small sample sizes are identified below 100.









# CHAPTER 1: THE UK'S PLACE IN THE WORLD

With Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty triggered in April 2017, so began the two-year process of the UK leaving the EU. Politicians now face an acute pressure to deliver a deal that promotes British interests at home and abroad.

While lacking in the details, Prime Minister Theresa May has been clear on the bigger vision: for a 'United Kingdom to emerge from this period of change stronger, fairer, more united and more outward-looking than ever before'.<sup>4</sup> With European attitudes looking to be hardening,<sup>5</sup> and with the continued call for a second independence referendum for Scotland,<sup>6</sup> achieving this vision will be extremely challenging.

This chapter explores what young adults want to see from the UK's changing relationship with Europe and the rest of the world. It begins with an examination of attitudes towards the EU Referendum amongst this group, as we approach the one-year anniversary of the vote. These perspectives are then set in the context of broader trends in how young adults view their place in an increasingly globalised world, before exploring the place of British identity and its potential as a platform for social renewal.

## Youth attitudes towards Brexit

The results of the EU Referendum showed that young adults were broadly in favour of remaining part of the EU, and frustrated by the result. According to polling by Ipsos Mori, of all 18–30 year olds who voted in the EU Referendum, 69 per cent were in favour of Remain and 31 per cent voted Leave.<sup>7</sup> This is in stark contrast to the results for the general population, which saw 52 per cent vote Leave and 48 per cent Remain.<sup>8</sup>

Evidence is accumulating about the divisions exposed by the EU Referendum, but it is now accepted wisdom that it revealed a generational split, alongside divisions by education level, class and social capital, and geography among others.<sup>9</sup> While 18–24 year olds were the age group most likely to vote Remain and the least likely to vote Leave, for people aged 65 or over the reverse was true: nearly two-thirds voted Leave and just 36 per cent voted Remain.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, there was not only a split in attitudes towards the EU, but in voter turnout. Ipsos polling has found that turnout amongst 18–30 year olds was just 50 per cent, compared to 90 per cent for people aged 65 or over, and 72 per cent nationally.<sup>11</sup>

Although turnout amongst 18–30 year olds was low, their reactions to the result were often emotionally charged. According to a survey conducted for the London School of Economics, almost half of voters aged 18 to 24 cried or felt like crying when they heard that the UK had voted to leave the EU.<sup>12</sup> In addition to sadness, younger voters reported feeling hostile to people who voted differently to them: 67 per cent of 18–39 year olds said they felt angry at them, 72 per cent frustrated and 61 per cent disgusted.<sup>13</sup> Some commentators have defended these reactions, pointing out that young adults must live with the consequences of the decision to leave the EU for much longer than those who voted for it. However, other critics have been less sympathetic, arguing that if young adults felt so strongly about the EU then they should have turned out to vote to defend the UK's membership.<sup>14</sup> Analysis by the *Financial Times* suggests an unprecedented 73 per cent of under-35s would have had to turn out to change the result, holding all else constant.<sup>15</sup>

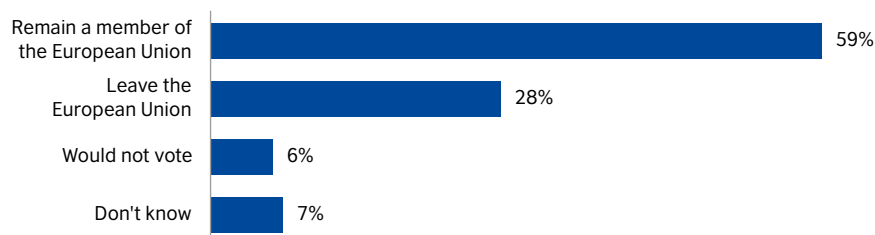
Our own survey of 2,000 18–30 year olds sought to explore any changes in attitudes since the EU Referendum. The survey asked how respondents would



vote if another referendum were held tomorrow, for example. We found that there appears to have been no significant shift in attitudes: six in ten of all young adults (i.e. not just those who voted) said they would support Remain.

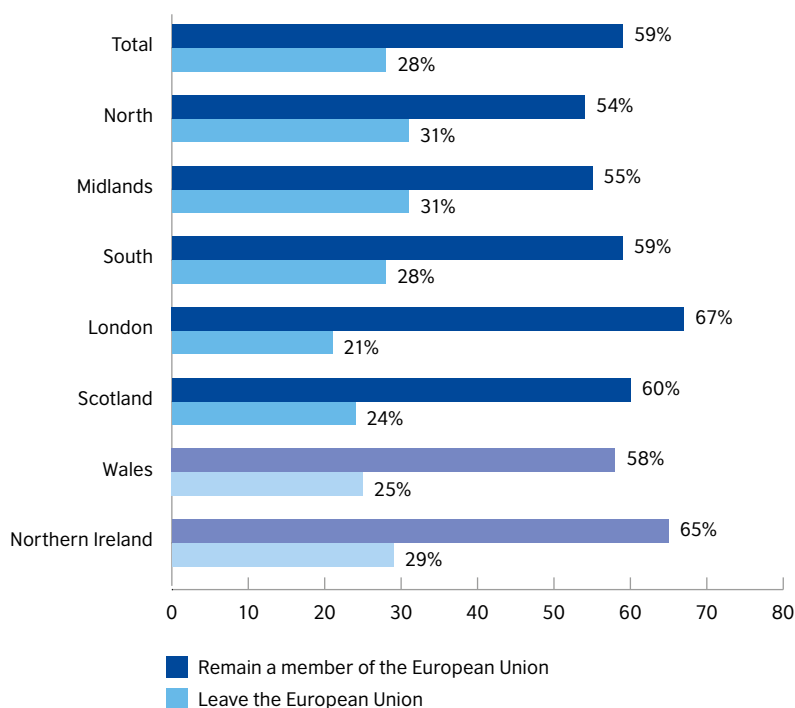
Furthermore, a majority of young adults would vote Remain in each UK region if another referendum was held. In line with the EU Referendum results at the general population level, the highest proportions of young adults who would vote to Remain are in the areas that voted so in the referendum: London, Scotland, and Northern Ireland (though survey results for the latter are indicative).

**Figure 1:** 'If another referendum was held tomorrow on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union, how would you vote on the question "Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?"'



Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017.

4. Barber, T 'Theresa May's blueprint for Brexit: full speech transcript', *Financial Times*, 17 January 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/589da76c-dcb3-11e6-9d7c-be108f1c1dce>
5. British Council, *As others see us: Perceptions of the UK from young people across G20 countries* (2016), [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/as\\_others\\_see\\_us\\_2016\\_0.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/as_others_see_us_2016_0.pdf)
6. Broomfield, M 'Nicola Sturgeon's speech in full: SNP leader calls for second Scottish independence referendum', *Independent*, 13 March 2017, [www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/nicola-sturgeon-scottish-independence-speech-in-full-second-referendum-snp-leader-first-minister-a7627166.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/nicola-sturgeon-scottish-independence-speech-in-full-second-referendum-snp-leader-first-minister-a7627166.html)
7. Figures provided to Demos to supplement main polling for the Next Generation research. Base=978 GB adults aged 18–30, Ipsos MORI Post-Referendum aggregate (weighted to the actual result and turnout at regional level).
8. BBC, 'EU Referendum Results', [www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu\\_referendum/results](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu_referendum/results)
9. Gaston, S *Nothing to Fear, But Fear Itself*, Demos (2017) <https://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Nothing-to-Fear-but-Fear-Itself-final.pdf>; see also: The British Election Study, 'Brexit Britain: British Election Study Insights from the post-EU Referendum wave of the BES internet panel', 6 October 2016, [www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-resources/brexit-britain-british-election-study-insights-from-the-post-eu-referendum-wave-of-the-bes-internet-panel/#.WOoup9LyvIU](http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-resources/brexit-britain-british-election-study-insights-from-the-post-eu-referendum-wave-of-the-bes-internet-panel/#.WOoup9LyvIU); Goodwin, MJ and Heath, O 'The 2016 Referendum, Brexit and the Left Behind: An Aggregate-level Analysis of the Result', *The Political Quarterly* 87/3: 323–332, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-923X.12285>
10. Moore, P 'How Britain Voted', YouGov, 27 June 2016, <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2016/06/27/how-britain-voted/>
11. Helm, T 'EU referendum: youth turnout almost twice as high as first thought', *The Guardian*, 10 July 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jul/09/young-people-referendum-turnout-brexit-twice-as-high>
12. Helm, T 'Poll reveals young remain voters reduced to tears by Brexit result', *The Guardian*, 2 July 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jul/02/brexit-referendum-voters-survey>
13. *Ibid.*
14. Burn-Murdoch, J 'Brexit: everything you wanted to know about turnout by age at the EU referendum', *Financial Times*, 1 July 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/2994afe4-43b0-3763-a80c-92351473496f>
15. *Ibid.*

**Figure 2:** Voting intention if another EU Referendum were held: comparison across the UK

Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017. Note Wales and Northern Ireland sample sizes too low for analysis (n<100), included here for at-a-glance comparison.

Perhaps unsurprisingly in this context, our survey also found a lingering pessimism, with many young adults believing that leaving the EU will have a range of negative effects. These include:

- Contrary to Prime Minister Theresa May's vision, Brexit will continue to be socially divisive over the longer term. Participants in our survey were more than twice as likely to say that Brexit will pull people living in the UK apart than they were to say that it would bring them together (41 per cent versus 19 per cent, with the remainder saying it will make no difference, or uncertain).

- Brexit will mean the UK has less influence in the world. Again, around four in ten young adults (41 per cent) thought leaving the EU would result in the UK having less influence, while less than one in five (17 per cent) thought it would give the country more influence, with the remainder saying about the same, or uncertain.

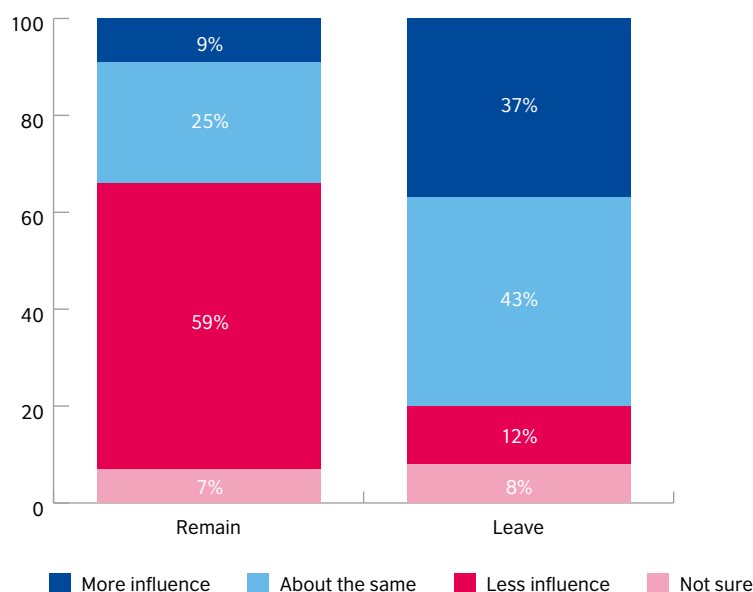
Asked whether, in general terms, things in the UK are heading in the right direction, just less than three in ten young adults (28 per cent) thought this, with almost half (47 per cent) saying that the UK is on the wrong track. While these results of course show that young adults

are broadly concerned by the impact of Brexit, they also reveal a great deal of uncertainty amongst this age group – with high proportions of respondents to each question being uncertain (26 per cent in the latter example).

Of course, a significant minority of young adults supported Leave, and said they would vote that way again. This group in our survey were markedly more likely to think that leaving the EU would bring people together in the UK, and that the UK's international standing would be enhanced, as Figure 3 shows.



**Figure 3:** 'In 2017, do you think the United Kingdom will have more, less or about the same amount of influence in the world as it had in 2016?': Remain versus Leave supporters



Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017.

Our focus groups with 80 young adults across the UK contained mixed opinions on Brexit and its likely impact on the UK's place in the world. We spoke to both very strong Leave and Remain supporters, to those who were still unsure, as well as those who had changed their mind since the vote. Overall, however, the focus groups reflected the national polling, with the majority of participants supportive of remaining in the EU, and unhappy with the result of the EU Referendum and its aftermath.

A number of participants talked about the generational divide revealed by the

vote. This was particularly important for some of the youngest participants who had not been old enough to vote at the time of the EU Referendum – with one participant describing how he and his friends had felt 'cheated' by this. A common feeling in most of the groups was that it was unjust for older voters to have held such sway in a decision with such wide-ranging implications:

**> I don't believe that the older generation should decide the future of this country. (Male, Exeter)**

A number of people who had supported Remain were concerned by the direct impact of the decision to leave on their own lives, prospects and plans – particularly international opportunities in the future. Reduced funding for year abroad schemes and the potential restrictions on working abroad were common concerns. This echoes previous research by the LSE, which found a very high proportion (77 per cent) of people aged 18–39 would miss the right to work or study abroad if these opportunities were taken away.<sup>16</sup>

However, a number of Remain supporters were also keen to stress the concerning implications for how the UK will be seen abroad, and the country's ability to tackle transnational issues that impacted them less directly. One participant asked, 'How can we fight these issues that we have today, like climate change, terrorism; how can we fight these global issues individually?' (Male, Exeter).

There were typically one or two participants in each of our focus groups who provided radically different perspectives – having voted Leave, or who had since taken the view that the UK was right to leave the EU. Many of these participants focused on the need for a change in the UK's political and economic outlook. For example, some stressed how Brexit could be used as an opportunity to focus on regional imbalances in the UK. Indeed, some made the case for change in radical terms, arguing that the country needed to experience the shock of Brexit in order to 'start again... to break away, try something new' (Male, Leeds).

16. Helm, T 'Poll reveals young remain voters reduced to tears by Brexit result'. *Op cit*.

One participant perceived a contradiction in being open to change as a result of diversity and immigration, but not being open to the change that would come from leaving the EU:

**> *In a society where change is very much part of the fabric of what makes up our society, people aren't really embracing the change all of a sudden. (Male, London)***

Strikingly, there was a lot of criticism about how the campaigns had been conducted, particularly what was perceived as anti-immigrant rhetoric. There was a feeling amongst some that the EU Referendum had been hijacked by people opposing immigration, and that this was not a relevant issue – in line with evidence showing that for young people the important issues were economic.<sup>17</sup> Participants also criticised the continuation of anti-immigrant discourse following the vote, pointing out a rise in racial-based hate crime:

**> *I just hate all of the just horrible stuff that's happened since Brexit... you would hear stuff on the news about people posting letters written in Polish through Polish people's letterboxes calling them vermin and telling them to go home... It's horrible, and I feel it's just given a green card for these people. (Female, Glasgow)***

A number of participants, both Leave and Remain supporters, criticised the scapegoating of Leave voters as stupid or racist following the vote. One Leave supporter said that he felt 'insulted' by politicians who were presenting him and other Leave supporters as 'some sort of evil devil' (Male, Coventry), while a Remain supporter hypothesised, 'for people who are just getting by day by day, just earning enough money for a living, Brexit was seen as something whereby it can't get much worse' (Male, Exeter).

As well as supporters on both sides of the Leave/Remain divide, our focus groups also reflected a lack of engagement by some. The most frequently cited reason for this was not feeling informed enough to make a decision – a feeling which, when compounded by the gap between intense pro-Remain and pro-Leave rhetoric, caused many young adults to switch off from the debate.

**> *I'm not gonna lie right, I'm not clued up about politics much at all. So as a person who doesn't know, the whole thing left me completely baffled. That's why I'm so borderline, because half my friends are telling me that Brexit is great, half of them telling me that Brexit is the worst thing in the world. (Male, London)***

## Looking beyond borders

While counting a significant proportion of Leave voters in their number, our research shows that the large majority of young adults continue to be opposed to leaving the EU, and harbour worries about the effects it will have on their lives and the UK's place in the world. This general trend was quite expected, and we were interested in exploring a particular hypothesis in our research: that the generational divide exposed by the EU Referendum could, at least to some extent, be explained by a younger section of society being more open to the world, at home with globalisation, and less defined by borders, than older generations.

This hypothesis has fairly good grounding in the wider literature on the cosmopolitanism of youth. Living in a world that is becoming increasingly fast-paced and interconnected, and with the unfolding digital revolution, for young adults – as one author puts it – 'knowledge is the primary currency, connectivity the primary asset, and physical geography is at best a secondary concern'.<sup>18</sup> Social media, online news platforms, online businesses and more make the world seem a much smaller place to their users, who are generally less defined by what makes them different from the rest of the world, and more by what makes them similar. Young adults, we are told, are more concerned with global issues, and less aligned with traditional notions of sovereignty or concerned about migration as are their older counterparts.<sup>19</sup>

17. Sloam, J 'The generation gap: How young voters view the UK's referendum', LSE Comment, 7 April 2016, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2016/04/07/the-generation-gap-how-young-voters-view-the-uks-referendum/>

18. Runciman, D 'Brexit: A win for 'proper' people?', *Prospect*, 20 June 2016, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/a-win-for-proper-people-brexit-eu-referendum-david-runciman>

19. MacFarland, C and Owen, K A *Generation apart: were younger people left behind by the EU referendum?*, Covi (2016) <http://covi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/A-Generation-Apart-Were-younger-people-left-behind-by-the-EU-referendum.pdf>; see also: Sorrell, M 'Young people will be the losers if Britain opts for isolation', *Financial Times*, 21 June 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/3163a954-3799-11e6-a780-b48ed7b6126f>

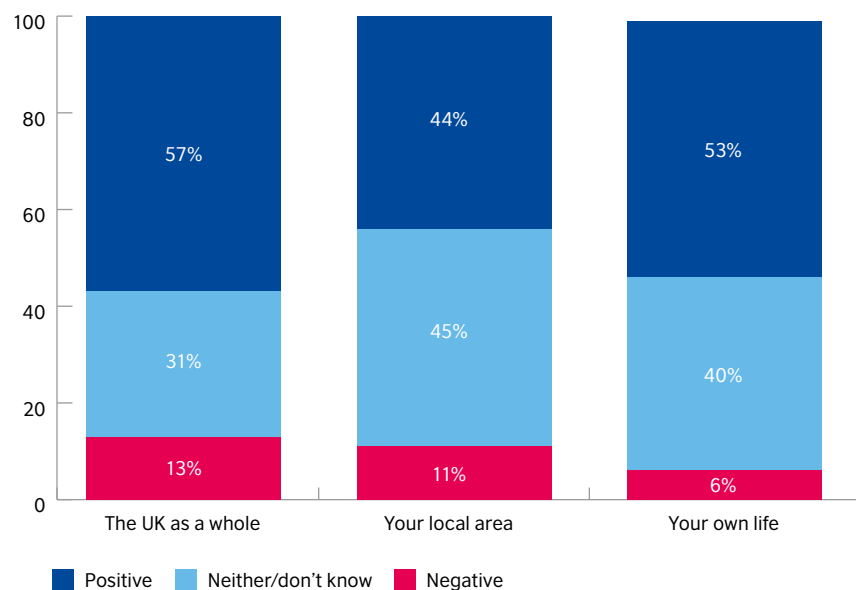
Our survey and focus groups asked a series of questions to probe this aspect of identity and attitudes. In keeping with the literature, our survey found that a substantial majority of young adults – two thirds (67 per cent) – said that they have an ‘international outlook’, with an almost identical proportion (68 per cent) thinking that having such an outlook is important in order to achieve their personal goals in modern society. Of note, there was a 25 percentage point difference between Leave and Remain voters on both of these measures – with Leave voters less likely to have such an outlook.

Several of our focus group participants also spoke of having an international outlook, and in particular how attitudes towards globalisation did indeed set them apart from previous generations. The following quote is indicative:

**> I think it's globalisation that's made us so separate from generations above because obviously they didn't have being able to travel really far away for cheap or talk to people in other countries really quickly. We can find out about other cultures really accessibly. (Female, Norwich)**

Our survey delved further into this question about how young adults felt about the forces of globalisation – asking whether respondents felt that the increasingly networked world has had a positive or negative effect at a number of different levels: on the UK as a whole, their local area, and their lives personally. Figure 4 summarises the results.

**Figure 4:** Young adults' perceptions of globalisation as it affects the UK, local area, and own life

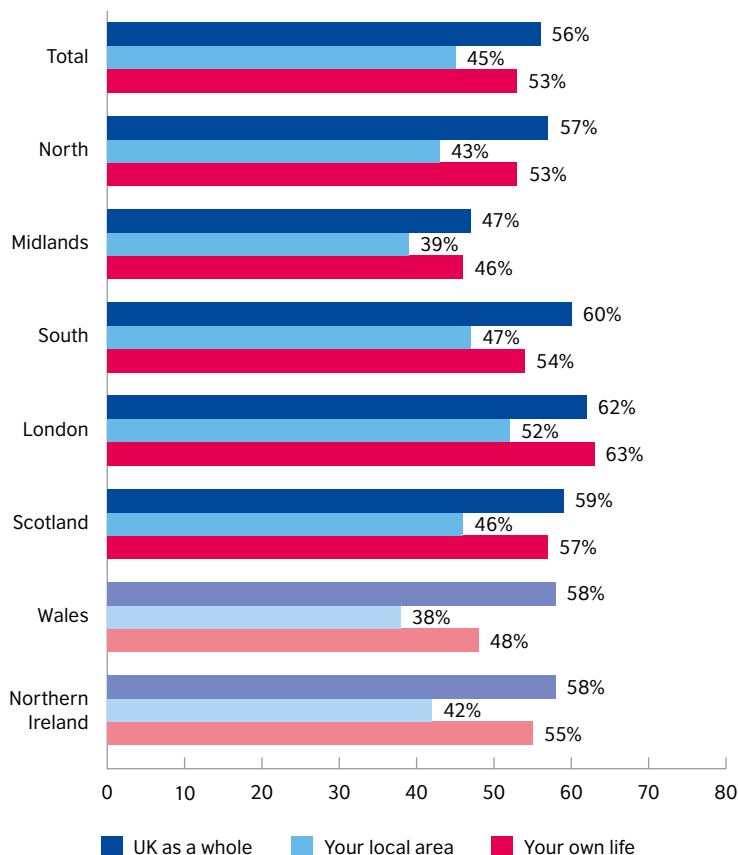


Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017. Due to rounding, percentages may not add up to 100.

The graph shows how high proportions of young adults report a positive attitude about the effects of globalisation – in particular regarding the UK and their own lives – with only small proportions feeling negatively. Interestingly there is the greatest amount of agnosticism when it comes to local areas.

Looking at the data in more detail reveals much discrepancy amongst groups of young adults. For example, the following figure shows differences by region of the UK in the proportions of young adults with positive attitudes towards globalisation at each of these three levels of interest. Broadly, lower proportions of young adults in the Midlands and North are positive about globalisation compared to the South, London, and Scotland.

**Figure 5:** Proportion of young adults with positive attitudes towards globalisation with respect to the UK, local areas, and own lives: comparison across the UK



Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017. Note Wales and Northern Ireland sample sizes too low for analysis (n<100), included here for at-a-glance comparison.

There were other at-a-glance differences in attitudes towards globalisation by socio-economic factors such as social grade and education level (with higher proportions of more privileged young adults being more positive). Taking our analysis further using logistic regression analysis, and focusing on attitudes towards globalisation as it has affected the UK as a whole, we found the following statistically significant associations when controlling for a range of key demographic variables:

- Young adults with degrees were 12 per cent more likely to be positive about globalisation.
- Young adults with a parent with a degree were 10 per cent more likely to be positive.
- Increasing age was associated with being less positive about globalisation, even within this age group (with one year decreasing likelihood by just over 1 per cent).

The importance of education is in line with other studies, which have shown that those with a university education are more likely to see globalisation as a force for good, even if they had not personally benefited from it.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, social grade was not a statistically significant predictor of attitudes towards globalisation in our analysis. But, adding international travel into the model, we did find that young adults who had travelled more to other countries were more likely to be positive about globalisation, when controlling for other factors including education level. Travel experience varied widely in the sample, with the average young adult travelling abroad three times in the last year.

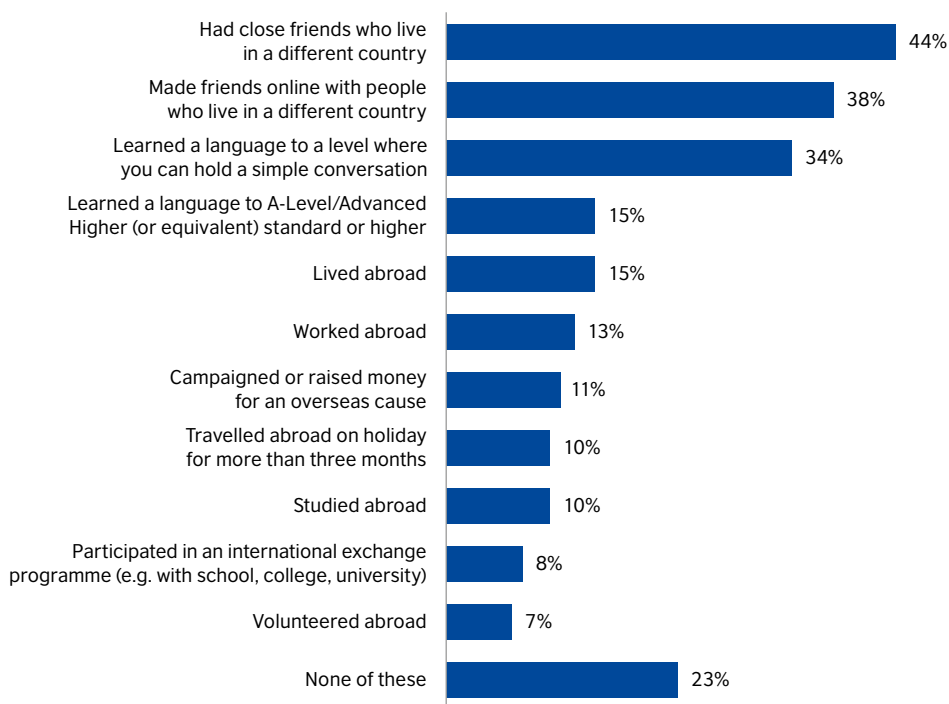
Although our research generally supports the idea that many young adults have cosmopolitan attitudes, it also reveals that there is a fairly well-defined group of young adults who really do not share the attitudes of their peers. One in five young adults polled thought that having an international outlook was not important for them to achieve their goals, and 12 per cent thought that globalisation was having a negative effect on the UK. In line with the above analysis, young adults from lower social grades, who have not experienced higher education, and whose parents have little experience of education, are more likely to be members of this 'left behind' group.

Another clear theme to emerge from our research is that while the majority of young adults report feeling an international outlook is important, and travel on holiday is common, many young adults have little substantial experience of international engagement, such as living abroad, studying a

20. Hainmueller, J and Hiscox, MJ 'Learning to love globalization: the effects of education on individual attitudes towards international trade', *International Organization* 60/2: 469–98, <http://scholar.harvard.edu/hiscox/publications/learning-love-globalization-effects-education-individual-attitudes-towards>; see also: Gaston, S *Nothing to Fear, But Fear Itself*. Op Cit.





**Figure 6:** Types of international engagement: 'Which of the following, if any, have you ever done?'

Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017.

language or making friends with people living in different countries. Indeed, almost a quarter had not engaged in any of the ways we suggested in our survey, shown in Figure 6.

It is telling that there was significant overlap between the people most likely to be negative about globalisation and the people with no experience of international engagement. As such, the story is much the same with education level, parental education level, and lower social grade, all making it more likely that a young adult falls into the 'none of these' group in the figure above, who

have not engaged internationally. This is in line with other research by the LSE, which found that having a degree, speaking a foreign language, and having international experience within the family have a significant and positive impact on taking part in international experiences.<sup>21</sup>

Not being proficient in languages was mentioned in focus groups as a key barrier to greater international engagement. Wider evidence suggests that the perceived cost attached to studying and working abroad can be another barrier, suggesting financial support may be important for widening

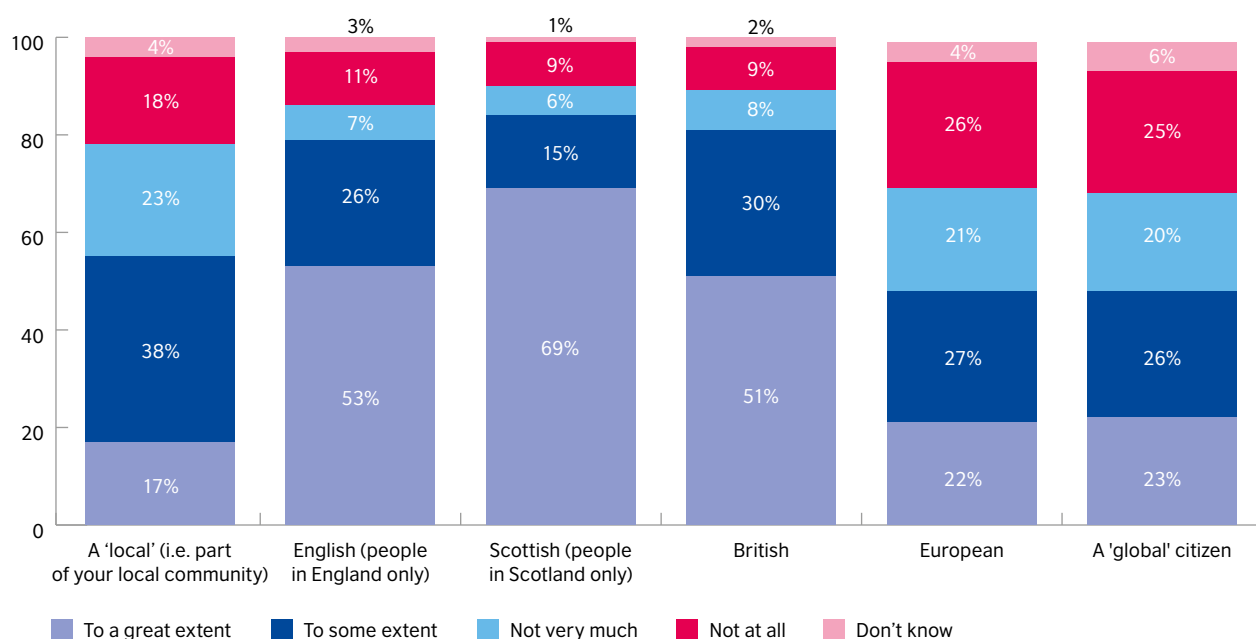
opportunities.<sup>22</sup> A 2011 Eurobarometer study found that of 15–35 year olds in the UK who had never stayed abroad for education, training, working, or volunteering, almost four in ten (38 per cent) cited lack of money as one of the most important reasons for not doing so.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, seeking new cultural experiences, and enhancing employability at home and abroad, are cited as key motivations for more sustained international experience, though the emphasis varies between the studies available.<sup>24</sup> We return to these themes in Chapter 3.

21. British Council, *Research and analysis on the benefits of international opportunities* (2014), [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research\\_and\\_analysis\\_on\\_the\\_benefits\\_of\\_international\\_opportunities\\_cfe\\_research\\_and\\_lse\\_enterprise\\_report\\_0.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research_and_analysis_on_the_benefits_of_international_opportunities_cfe_research_and_lse_enterprise_report_0.pdf)

22. British Council, *Broadening Horizons: The value of the overseas experience* (2015) [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/6.3\\_broadening-horizons-2015.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/6.3_broadening-horizons-2015.pdf)

23. Eurobarometer, *Youth on the move* (2011) [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/flash/fl\\_319b\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_319b_en.pdf)

24. See previous notes, and West, A, Dimitropoulos, A, Hind, A and Wilkes, J 'Reasons for studying abroad: A survey of EU students studying in the UK', Paper presented at the European Conference on Educational Research (2000) [www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00001602.htm](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00001602.htm); also: ICEF Monitor, 'New survey reinforces career goals a primary motivation for study abroad' (2016) <http://monitor.icef.com/2016/06/new-survey-reinforces-career-goals-primary-motivation-study-abroad/>

**Figure 7:** 'In terms of your identity, how strongly, if at all, do you feel you are...'

Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017. Note that sample sizes were too small for 'Welsh' and 'Northern Irish' analysis (n<100).

### The place of British identity in a networked world

In a globalised world in which young adults do not generally feel so defined by borders (putting aside the important group-based differences above), it would be easy to assume that national identity matters less to young adults today than previous generations.

Research undertaken over the past decade provides some evidence in favour of this view. Comparing data from the 2013 and 2003 British Social Attitudes surveys, researchers at the National Centre for Social Research have argued that there are less patriotic attitudes among the younger generation, and young graduates in

particular, which help explain the declining proportion of the public saying they are very proud to be British, falling from 43 per cent in 2003 to 35 per cent in 2013 (noting, though, that a large majority are still at least somewhat proud).<sup>25</sup> In a study by Oxford University academics, age was also found to be the main driver of feelings of attachment and belonging to Britain, agreeing that the decline in pride and attachment is 'generational in character'.<sup>26</sup> That study drew the distinction between levels of pride – higher in Britain than the European average – and attachment/belonging, which is lower than average. A further study undertaken by Ipsos MORI has also concluded that for young people a sense of nationality is not a

priority in how identity is conceived: 'Britishness is relatively less important and does not feature on the list of personal traits which helps define personal identity. This is because young people see British identity as a legal construct used only in official circumstances'.<sup>27</sup>

Our research reveals a complex picture on the place of British identity in a networked world. We asked questions in our survey of young adults to get a sense of how much they thought of themselves as being British, but also other place-based identities: local area, nation, Europe, and being part of the 'global' community. The results are summarised in the figures below.

25. Young, P 'A matter of pride', NatCen, 14 April 2014, [www.natcen.ac.uk/blog/a-matter-of-pride](http://www.natcen.ac.uk/blog/a-matter-of-pride)

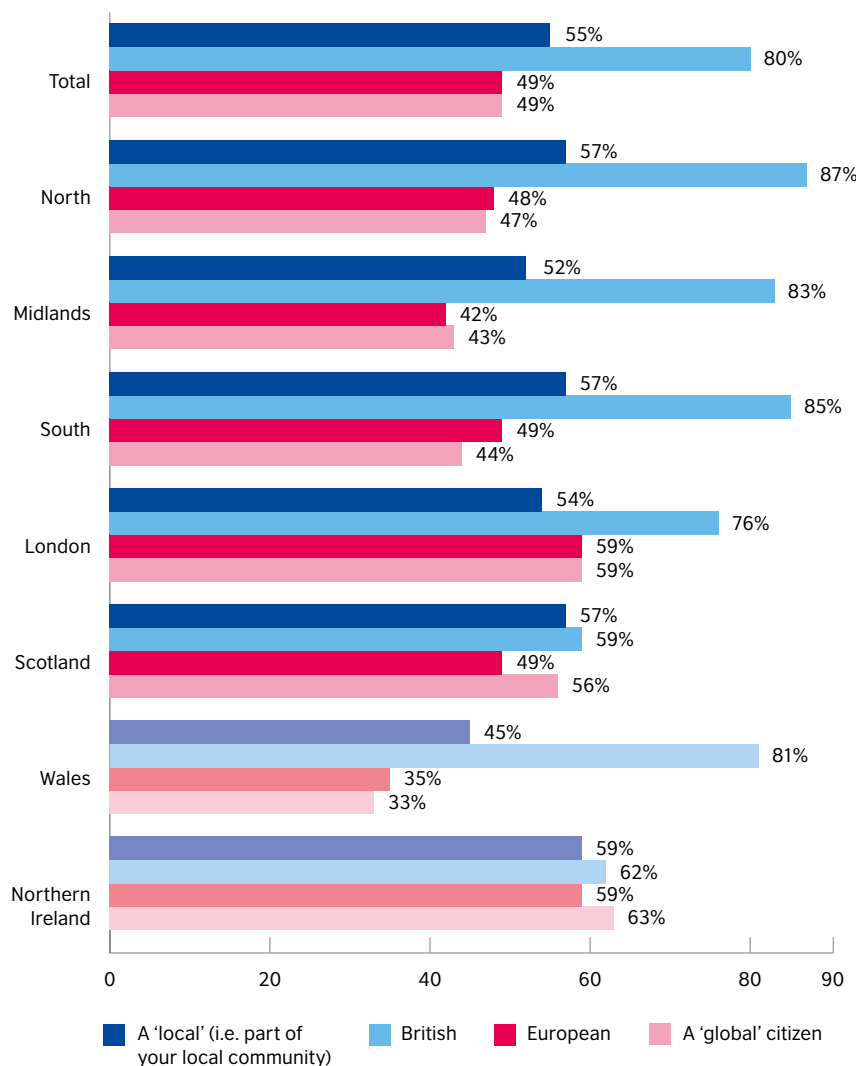
26. Heath, A and Roberts, J 'British Identity: its sources and possible implications for civic attitudes and behaviour' (2006) <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.justice.gov.uk/docs/british-identity.pdf>

27. Ipsos MORI, 'Young people and British identity' (2005) <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Archive/Polls/young-people-and-british-identity.pdf>

According to our survey, over half of young adults (51 per cent) feel 'British' to a great extent, while eight in ten feel at least some sense of British identity. The figures above suggest that the majority of young adults do attach some importance to place in terms of their identity, though interestingly perhaps with less emphasis at the European or global level than might have been imagined (difficulties with survey question interpretation aside, and the impact of the result of the EU Referendum). Also striking is the strength of feeling in Scotland with respect to Scottish identity, pertinent in light of the Scottish Independence Referendum (and potential for a second) – though illustrating strong identity and calls for independence do not necessarily go together (while a majority of 25–30 year olds voted for independence in Scotland, a majority of 16–24 year olds voted against).<sup>28</sup> The strength of Scottish identity fits with existing research suggesting that devolved nation identities are more important to Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish young adults.<sup>29</sup>

The relative strength of British identity compared to local identity may in part be a reflection of the internal mobility of today's young adults. Our survey found that the majority of young adults are mobile within the UK, travelling on average 11 times in the last year to another part of the country. However, wider research has suggested that local identity is important for young people, and the rising importance many young adults place on civic involvement in communities rather than political engagement (see next chapter) would add some further weight to this.<sup>30</sup>

**Figure 8:** Identification with different place-based identities: comparison across the UK



Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017. Note Wales and Northern Ireland sample sizes too low for analysis (n<100), included here for at-a-glance comparison.

28. Fraser, D 'Study examines referendum demographics', BBC News, 18 September 2015, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-34283948](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-34283948)

29. Ipsos MORI, 'Young people and British identity' Op cit.

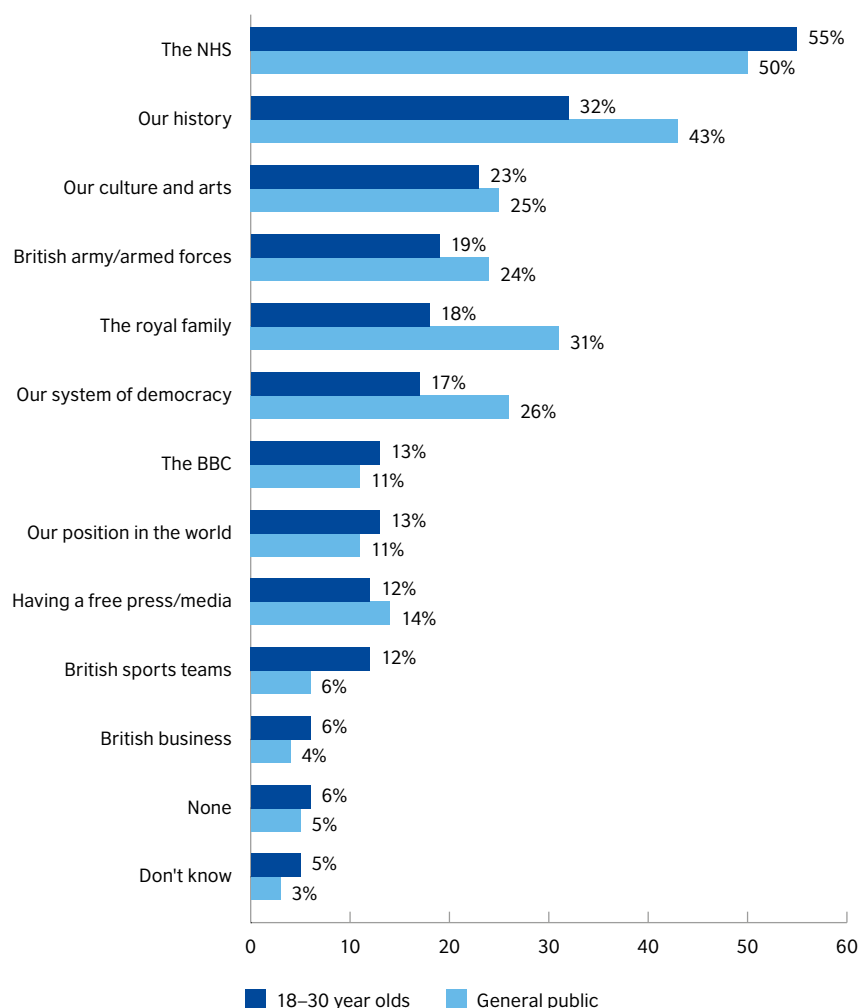
30. Habib, S 'Teaching and learning Britishness: encountering and negotiating discourses of identities and belongings through critical pedagogy', PhD Thesis (2016) <http://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.700443>; see also: Fenton, F 'Indifference towards national identity: what young adults think about being English and British', *Nations and Nationalism* 13/2: 321–339, <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.619.8375&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

The figure above shows some differences between young adults living in different regions of the UK in the strength of identification with different place-based identities (bars indicate identification either to a 'great' or 'some' extent). Noticeable in particular is the lower proportion identifying with being British in London and Scotland (areas that voted Remain), and the higher proportions identifying with being European and a 'global' citizen in those regions compared to the other regions of the UK (though European identity in Scotland might be lower than expected given some of the post-referendum rhetoric).

In light of the government's ambition to unify the UK at a time of discord, we were particularly interested in focusing on the sense of British identity and understanding some of its drivers alongside these geographical discrepancies. Although the relationship between different demographic factors and British identity is complex, looking at the data in detail some factors appear to make it more likely that a young adult will have a stronger sense of national identity. For example, young adults from white British ethnic backgrounds were more likely to report feeling British than other young adults. Contrary to assumptions, those of higher social grade were more likely than lower social grade to report feeling British; and also contrary to what might be expected, it does not appear that those of lower social grade are any more likely to replace this with a sense of local identity.

Our survey also asked what, if anything, makes young adults proud to feel British, using examples that have also been polled by Ipsos Mori in the general population. The results are summarised in Figure 9.

**Figure 9:** 'Which two or three of the following, if any, would you say makes you most proud to be British?'



Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017. General public polling was 16–75 year olds in Great Britain only, conducted by Ipsos Mori online in July 2016.

Our survey found that the most frequently cited source of pride by young adults was the NHS, which more than half of respondents said made them proud. This is in line with the polling of the general population, which also saw the NHS as the chief source of national pride, at 50 per cent.<sup>31</sup> History,

and culture and arts, were the next most popular choices, though cited by less than a third of respondents – with actually quite small proportions citing other factors as reasons to be proud. While broadly similar, there were also some noticeable differences between the 18–30 year olds we polled and the

31. Ipsos MORI, 'Post-Brexit pride in Britain' (2016) [https://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/SRI\\_PA\\_Post\\_Brexit\\_pride\\_in\\_Britain\\_Aug16\\_toplevel\\_PUBLIC.pdf](https://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/SRI_PA_Post_Brexit_pride_in_Britain_Aug16_toplevel_PUBLIC.pdf)

general population, with young adults less supportive of the Royal Family (by 13 percentage points), less proud of our history (by 11 percentage points) and the UK's system of democracy (by nine percentage points). Drawing on a 2013 British Council study of the perceptions of the UK on the part of young people in G20 countries, roughly the same proportion of young adults internationally (30 per cent) thought that people in the UK should be proud of their history, though more in the international study identified pride in arts and culture (by eight percentage points).<sup>32</sup>

While there appears from our quantitative research at least a common platform of national identity for the vast majority of young adults living in the UK, our qualitative research across the UK provided some conflicting evidence. In contrast to the survey, few participants in our focus groups identified with being British. Instead participants were much more likely to emphasise their local identity – several of our participants said that they were from their town and city, 'born and bred', and found Britishness a more distant concept. This was true also of participants in the devolved nations where we expected national identity to be stronger, with participants emphasising their local identity above being Welsh ('though from Cardiff, you know'), Scottish, or Northern Irish.

We received both positive and negative responses when participants were asked what they associated with Britishness. In line with some of our quantitative findings, young adults giving positive answers tended to focus on the strength of the UK's public institutions, as well as its influence in the world. However, positive answers tended to be more muted than the negative ones, recognising less desirable aspects of the UK while emphasising its relative strength and quality of life compared to other countries.

The following quote is illustrative:

**> *I think there's a lot of people – a bit like yourself – who whinge about it but then don't realise how good they've got it in this country, in terms of for example welfare and the NHS. If you rank Britain with other countries I think it would rank very highly. (Male, Leeds)***

Negative answers tended to focus on the UK's long-term history, suggesting that while history may be a source of national pride for some (a third in our survey), it is a polarising issue amongst young adults. In their initial discussions about the project, members of our Advisory Board spoke of feeling ashamed of the UK's colonial past in particular – something which was also mentioned in our focus groups. There was also a feeling of decline on the world stage, yet a nostalgic clinging on to past strength:

**> *In the past we were sort of a superpower, this great nation and now we're very much not but we're still stuck in that attitude of being that. (Male, Norwich)***

In keeping with our findings earlier in the chapter, young adults also commonly mentioned Brexit as what first comes to mind when they think of the UK. This was viewed as a negative association by most of our participants, with the following quote illustrative:

**> *I think at the moment you can't think of Britain and not think of Brexit, so that's, unfortunately the thing that kind of gets in your mind when you think of Britain. It overtakes everything at the moment. (Female, London)***

A number of participants also stressed that the view of the UK from other countries was often negative, which shaped their own perceptions. For example, one participant described how people in Spain think that people from the UK are all 'yobbish or chavs' (Female, Cardiff). While international polling of young adults by the British Council has found 'drinking too much alcohol' and 'bad eating habits' are identified as the worst characteristics of people from the UK, it is important to note that overall the polling actually situates the UK quite favourably on many measures. For example, of the 15 largest economies globally, the UK scored as the second most attractive based on its people (specifically in terms of personal contacts, friendships and trustworthiness), behind the US.<sup>33</sup>

32. British Council, *As others see us: Perceptions of the UK from young people across G20 countries*. Op cit.

33. *Ibid.*



Although significant criticism was levelled at the UK by some members of our focus groups, and explicitly linked to a weakened sense of national identity by some, others simply felt that national identity was irrelevant in a modern, globalised world. For example:

**> I think it might be a young people thing, you see on social media all over the world, people are trying to adopt that sort of mentality, and sort of forgetting about national identity. (Male, Belfast)**

Others felt that national identity is not as important as generational identity, particularly in light of the political divisions between young and old. The following quotes are illustrative:

**> I feel like...the identity of our generation is probably one that people see as a lot more defined than the identity of the country. (Female, Norwich)**

**I identify with young people. Especially in like the political scene at the minute. I think people my age... a lot of us all voted for the same things, wanted the same outcomes. (Female, Glasgow)**

However, in contrast to the view that national identity and a cosmopolitan attitude are in tension, some of our focus group participants argued that there is something British about not having an overly patriotic sense of national identity. As one participant expressed this view, it is 'deeply un-British to wave a flag' (Male, London). British identity was sometimes contrasted with aspects of American identity, such as pledging allegiance, with many participants favouring more subtle expressions of national pride.

In summary, the relationship between the cosmopolitanism of young adults and their sense of national identity is complex. While the prevailing narrative around a decline in British identity amongst young adults speaks to some of our research, particularly the findings from our focus groups, our survey suggests that the majority of young adults are united by some sense of Britishness. Given that the majority of young adults also have an international outlook, it may be the case that young adults simply take something different from British identity than previous generations.

## Realising global opportunities

Leaving the EU raises a series of questions about the future international engagement of young adults. With restrictions likely on free movement throughout Europe, visa-free travel and the ability to study and work abroad in Europe are in the balance, with more than 15,000 students affected by any changes to the Erasmus scheme alone.<sup>34</sup>

Thinking about recommendations, our Advisory Board felt that in order to enable all young adults to achieve their potential, opportunities for young adults to engage internationally need to be protected in the Brexit negotiations. Furthermore, due attention must be paid to increasing opportunities so that those who do not typically benefit can participate in them. While substantial international engagement is not for everyone, our survey showed the majority of young adults are not engaging beyond short trips abroad, and almost a quarter (23 per cent) had not engaged in any of the ways listed in our survey.

These objectives are given weight by evidence that interacting with other countries can be beneficial in a number of respects (though research is fairly limited to the higher education context). For example, research has shown that students who undertake a year abroad during their undergraduate degree are more likely to pursue postgraduate study, secure better paid jobs and have higher incomes; and are less likely to experience unemployment.<sup>35</sup> In addition to making an individual more committed to their degree and enhancing their CV, studying abroad can have a marked

34. Saker-Clark, H 'From jobs to travel and study: how would Brexit affect young Britons?', *The Guardian*, 22 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/22/jobs-travel-study-how-brexit-would-affect-young-britons-eu-referendum>; see also: European Commission, *Erasmus+ statistics 2014* (2016) [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education\\_culture/repository/education/library/statistics/2014/united-kingdom\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/library/statistics/2014/united-kingdom_en.pdf)

35. Coleman, J 'Study/Work abroad and employability', University Council of Modern Languages (2011) [www.ucml.ac.uk/sites/default/files/shapingthefuture/102/20%20-%20jim%20coleman%20inter%20resource%20template\\_0.pdf](http://www.ucml.ac.uk/sites/default/files/shapingthefuture/102/20%20-%20jim%20coleman%20inter%20resource%20template_0.pdf); see also: European Commission, *The Erasmus Impact Study* (2014) [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education\\_culture/repository/education/library/study/2014/erasmus-impact\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/library/study/2014/erasmus-impact_en.pdf)

impact on personal development, improving independence, confidence, communication skills and other intercultural skills – with often greater benefits ensuing when the cultural difference between the home country is wider.<sup>36</sup> Young adults who study internationally often become more cosmopolitan, taking more of an interest in international affairs; they travel more and are more likely to live in another country later in life.<sup>37</sup>

However, research also shows that wealthier people are more likely to enjoy these opportunities. According to the Universities UK International Unit, undergraduates from the most affluent families are up to five times more likely to go abroad as part of their degree than less privileged students.<sup>38</sup> Lack of previous travel experience and the difficulties in navigating complex application procedures (in order to secure a study programme or funding) can present significant barriers to less wealthy young adults interested in studying abroad. In this context, our Advisory Board attached particular importance to the idea of introducing cultural exchange and knowledge early on in the education system, as well as tailoring opportunities to go abroad to different groups – with careers advisers, even Job Centre staff, broadening horizons.

Furthermore, opportunities to travel and other forms of international engagement are often limited to students in their late teens or early twenties. However, the positive impacts of international engagement on a person's motivation, career prospects, personal development and outlook may be just as beneficial to someone at the upper end of the 18–30 year age range, and beyond, and to younger adults who do not pursue higher education. While an entire year abroad may not be an option to many young adults who are not in education, evidence has shown that a shorter period abroad can be just as beneficial as a longer period – though this has been contested.<sup>39</sup>

In line with this, a further point of agreement amongst our Advisory Board was on the importance of life-long opportunities to undertake meaningful international engagement – with a role for employers in supporting these. A parallel might be drawn here with employer-supported volunteering, where evidence is clear of the benefits to the employer's bottom line of exposing employees to different cultural and professional experiences.<sup>40</sup>

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36. Go International, 'Student perspectives on going international' (2014) <https://www.go.international.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Student%20Perspectives%20Report.pdf>
37. Findlay, AM et al., 'World class? An investigation of globalisation, difference and international student mobility', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 37/1: 118–131 <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2011.00454.x/abstract>
38. Haverгал, C 'Rich students five times more likely to study abroad', *Times Higher Education*, 18 February 2016, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/rich-students-five-times-more-likely-study-abroad>
39. Haverгал, C 'Short-term overseas study as valuable as year abroad', *Times Higher Education*, 10 September 2015, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/short-term-overseas-study-valuable-year-abroad>; and British Council, *Research and analysis on the benefits of international opportunities*. *Op Cit*.
40. Birdwell, J and Wybron, I *Scouting for Skills*, Demos (2014) [https://www.demos.co.uk/files/Scouting\\_for\\_skills\\_-\\_web.pdf?1400681381](https://www.demos.co.uk/files/Scouting_for_skills_-_web.pdf?1400681381)



## CHAPTER 2: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Many commentators have understood the decision to leave the EU as a reflection of widespread discontent with the political establishment.<sup>41</sup>

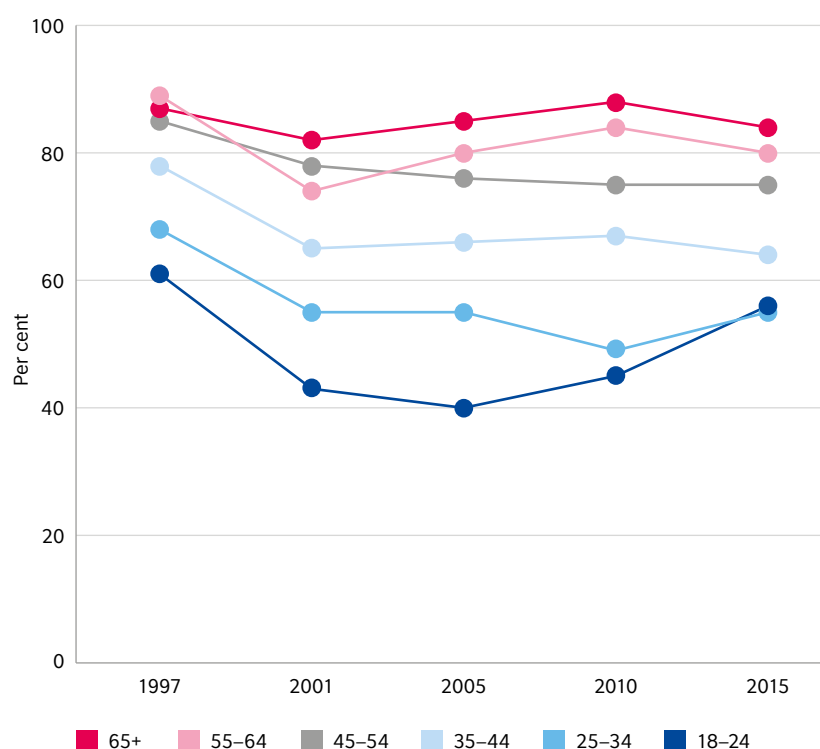
While of course it is true that the vast majority of young adults voted Remain, there was a different but stark indicator of discontent for this group shown in their low turnout. It has long been observed that young adults in the UK have low levels of participation in traditional politics. This trend is not confined to the UK but also experienced across Europe,<sup>42</sup> with worrying implications for democratic legitimacy – particularly as decreasing participation amongst young people has been shown to follow through into their later lives.<sup>43</sup> While boosting international engagement is important, therefore, it is vital too to look inwardly at the challenges for engaging young people as active citizens in their own society.

In this chapter we outline our research on the political and social engagement of young adults in the UK. Using the wider literature, and new findings from our survey and focus groups, we explore some of the underlying reasons for young adults disengaging from politics. As in other studies, we found that while the majority of young adults are turned off by traditional party politics they are often extremely passionate about social issues. We also outline our findings on the issues that matter most – locally, nationally, globally. The chapter closes by outlining young adults' views on how to increase political and social engagement.

Voting – in elections, and referendums – is usually the most common litmus test of political engagement. Over decades, young adults have had lower turnout figures in the UK than older age groups. As noted in the previous chapter, the EU Referendum vote was no exception, with

half of 18–30 year olds turning out to vote compared to nine in ten people aged over 65. In general elections, the same has been true. The following figure, based on British Election Study data, shows turnout by age for the last five general elections.<sup>44</sup>

Figure 10: Turnout in general elections by age group



Source: British Social Attitudes 33.

### Political participation

In keeping with the extensive literature on the topic, a clear message from our research is indeed the low participation in traditional politics among young adults across the UK.

While turnout remains low amongst young adults, there does appear to have been an improvement since the 2010 general election where only four in ten 18–24 year olds voted – though the generational gap remains substantial. It is also worth noting that, while cited by many as a success story for youth engagement, the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum bears the same trend. While younger voters in Scotland do appear to have turned out in comparatively high proportions – three quarters of 16–17 year olds turned out, and 69 per cent of 16–34 year olds – nonetheless, older voters still turned out in higher proportions (85 per cent of 35–54 year olds, and 92 per cent of those aged over 55) according to Electoral Commission data.<sup>45</sup> Data provided to Demos by Ipsos Mori shows, furthermore, a generational gap when people are asked about their certainty to vote in a snap general election –

13 percentage points between 18–30 year olds and the general population (53 per cent versus 66 per cent). With the announcement of a June 2017 General Election at the time of writing, additional data from an early Ipsos poll suggest the gap remains (with 44 per cent of 18–30 year olds certain to vote and 63 per cent of all aged 18 and over).<sup>46</sup>

Theories from the existing research about what explains this trend vary – from young people's lack of identification with political parties,<sup>47</sup> through to young adults having less of a 'stake' in society by virtue of settling down later,<sup>48</sup> some of which we return to below – but much of the analysis remains inconclusive. As a study by Warwick University states, an 18 year old that looks similar in almost all significant respects to a 60 year old (including attitudes to democracy and political parties) is still about 25 per cent less likely to vote.<sup>49</sup>

Our survey of 2,000 18–30 year olds across the UK asked respondents whether they had voted in the past, and also about participation in a range of other activities associated with political engagement – including joining political parties, communicating with MPs and councillors, and some more modern types of participation such as online activism. Figure 11 summarises the results.

41. Gaston, S *Nothing to Fear, But Fear Itself*. Op Cit.

42. Council of the European Union, 'Empowering young people for political participation in the democratic life in Europe', Draft discussion paper (2015) <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7854-2015-INIT/en/pdf>

43. *Ibid*.

44. Curtice, J Politics: Political attitudes and behaviour in the wake of an intense constitutional debate, *British Social Attitudes* 33 (2016) [www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39060/bsa33\\_politics.pdf](http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39060/bsa33_politics.pdf)

45. The Electoral Commission, *Scottish Independence Referendum: Report on the referendum held on 18 September 2014* (2014) [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/179812/Scottish-independence-referendum-report.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/179812/Scottish-independence-referendum-report.pdf)

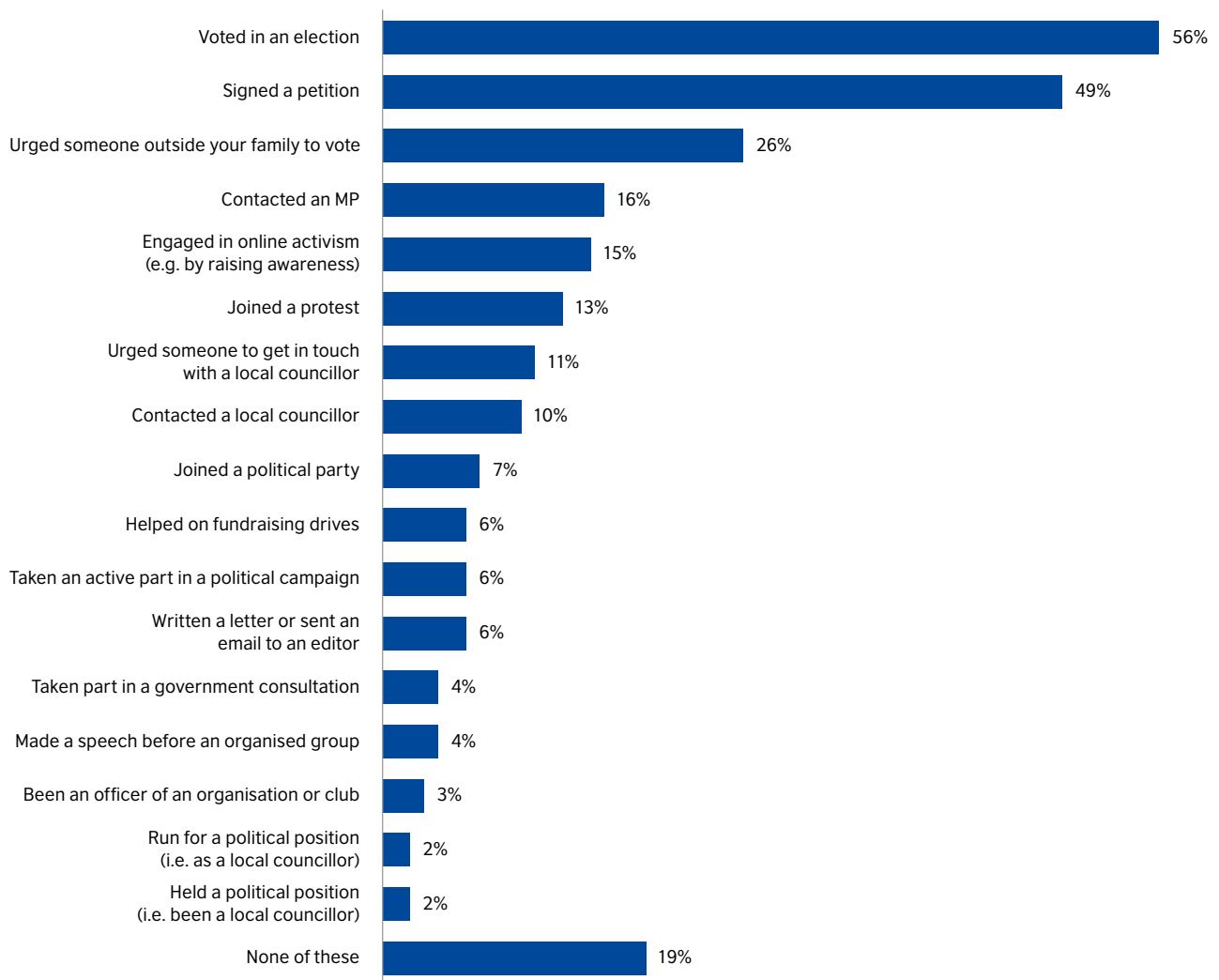
46. Data provided to Demos by Ipsos Mori, based on figures from January to March 2017. See also: Hansard Society, 'Audit of Political Engagement 13' (2016) [www.auditofpoliticalengagement.org/assets/media/reports/Audit-of-Political-Engagement-13-2016.pdf](http://www.auditofpoliticalengagement.org/assets/media/reports/Audit-of-Political-Engagement-13-2016.pdf)

47. Henn, M and Foard, N 'Young people, political participation and trust in Britain', Conference paper, (2011) [www.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/research/microsites/epop/papers/Henn\\_and\\_Foard\\_-\\_Young\\_People,\\_Political\\_Participation\\_and\\_Trust\\_in\\_Britain.pdf](http://www.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/research/microsites/epop/papers/Henn_and_Foard_-_Young_People,_Political_Participation_and_Trust_in_Britain.pdf)

48. The Economist Explains, 'Why young people don't vote', *The Economist*, 29 October 2014, [www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2014/10/economist-explains-24](http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2014/10/economist-explains-24)

49. Muthoo, A 'Why aren't young people voting?', Working paper, [www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/research/wpl/projects/voting/background/](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/research/wpl/projects/voting/background/)



**Figure 11:** 'In which of the following ways, if any, have you ever engaged in politics?'

Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017.

The low level of engagement on the vast majority of these is striking, with just less than one in five young adults not having engaged in any of the ways listed. While a small majority of young adults have voted, just 7 per cent said they have joined a political party, while one in six have contacted an MP and one in ten their local councillor.

While not like-for-like, a similar question is asked in Hansard's Audit of Political Engagement. Actually, our survey found quite high proportions of young adults undertaking several of these activities relative to the general public in Hansard (12 per cent of whom say they have contacted a councillor or an MP for example, while 6 per cent have taken part in a campaign – the latter identical to the proportion of young adults in our survey).<sup>50</sup> Differences in survey methodology will play a part here,<sup>51</sup> and being online the Demos survey likely has generous estimates. Nonetheless, perhaps when looking beyond voting the generational gap does not appear so wide – particularly so with new forms of online engagement where younger people are overtaking older counterparts. More broadly, there are obviously questions about the extent to which we should be concerned about the low baseline for many of these activities even in the general population.

Looking more closely at the breakdown of the data, we observed differences by social grade and education level – with young adults of higher social grade, with degrees, and those who have parents

with degrees, more likely to have undertaken each of the activities. The findings on social grade and education level are in line with other recent international research demonstrating the association (even causal relationship) between social inequalities and inequalities in political participation.<sup>52</sup> There also appears to be a London effect shown in our data, with those living in the capital more likely to have engaged in each of the ways listed. We also found that Conservative voters were less likely than Labour or Liberal Democrat voters to have undertaken actions such as contacting an MP or signing a petition.

### Broken trust in politics?

Evidence from the British Election Study shows declining trust in political institutions over the last decade.<sup>53</sup> Our research for this project found that young adults across the UK indeed have a low level of trust in major political institutions, which may contribute to their disengagement. Furthermore, this applies to all levels of the political establishment: local councils, the UK parliament, and UK government. In our survey, we asked respondents to rate their level of trust in these different institutions, on a scale from 0 (indicating no trust) to 10 (indicating complete trust). We found the following mean scores:

- Local council: 4.7
- UK parliament: 4.1
- UK government: 3.9
- Scottish Parliament (Scotland only): 4.7

Trust scores for the UK parliament and government are similar but lower than previous Demos research found for the general public (in August 2016 these were 4.2 and 4.1 respectively).<sup>54</sup> Looking beyond the average, substantial proportions of young adults have extremely low trust in these institutions, as indicated by a score of 2 or below: 19 per cent had extremely low trust in local councils, 28 per cent in the UK parliament, and one in three young adults (33 per cent) have extremely low trust in the UK government. Part of the low mean trust score for the UK government amongst young adults may be explained, of course, by low levels of Conservative support among this age group, with 25 per cent stating this as their political affiliation.

Our data shows that low trust among young adults is a problem across the UK, though there are some regional differences – for example noticeably higher trust in London, and lower trust in Scotland – as shown in Figure 12.

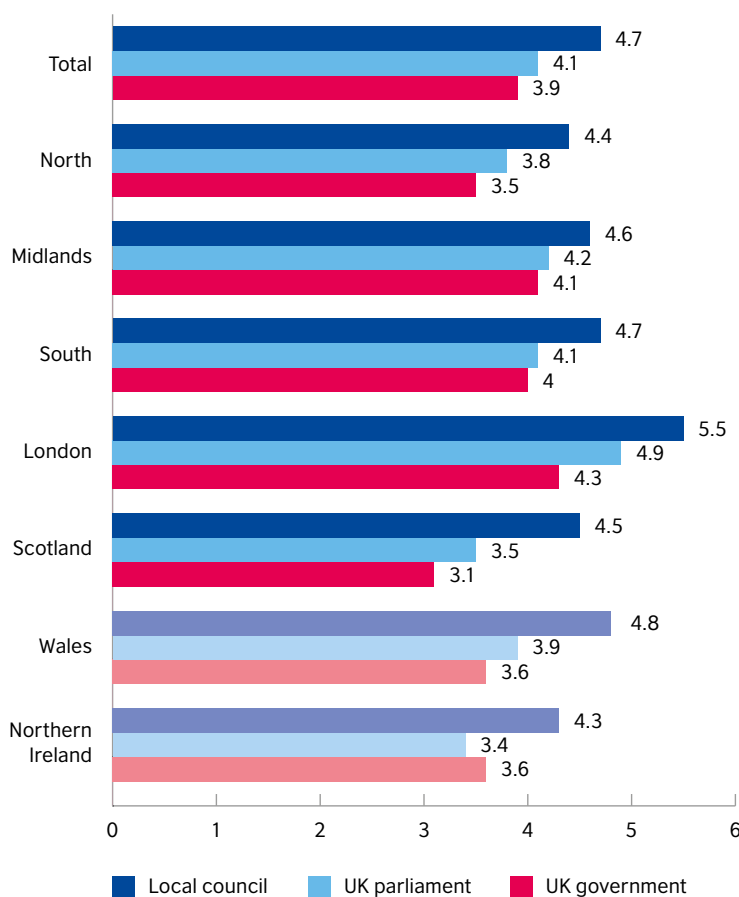
50. Hansard Society, 'Audit of Political Engagement 13'.

51. Online survey panels are known to show higher levels of political engagement.

52. Krauss, MW 'The Inequality of Politics: Social Class Rank and Political Participation', IRLE Working Paper: 120–15 (2015) <http://irle.berkeley.edu/workingpapers/120-15.pdf> See also: Hansard Society, 'Audit of Political Engagement 13'.

53. Phillips, M and Simpson, I 'Disengaged and disconnected? Trends in attitudes towards politics'.

54. Gaston, S *Nothing to Fear, But Fear Itself* (YouGov polling). See also: OECD, *How's Life? 2015: Measuring Well-being*, OECD Publishing (2015) [http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/how\\_life-2015-en](http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/how_life-2015-en)

**Figure 12:** Trust scores by political institution and region in the UK

Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017. Note Wales and Northern Ireland sample sizes too low for analysis (n<100), included here for at-a-glance comparison.

Alongside regional differences, there are other observable discrepancies between groups of young adults not dissimilar to those outlined in the previous section on participation. For example, we found those of higher social grade, with experience of higher education, or parents with degrees, and higher income appear to have more trust in political institutions than other young adults.

Using multiple regression to control for key demographics, we found that age has a small but statistically significant negative association with trust in both the UK parliament and government – with people towards the upper end of the 18–30 age range less trusting than those at the lower end. Furthermore, we found that women have less trust in both of these institutions than men; as do people living in Scotland and the North

compared to other regions. Being from London was a significant predictor of greater trust in the UK parliament, but not government.

We also sought to test whether having engaged in more ways in politics (giving people a score based on the number of types of engagement they had undertaken in the section above) was associated with trust. The analysis showed that higher engagement scores were associated with less trust in the UK government, though not parliament.

### Attitudes towards the political class

Trust, of course, is placed in people as much as the institutions for which they stand. The findings above support other evidence from Ipsos Mori showing that, across a wide range of professions including key public service providers, business and third sector leaders, and the media, politicians are the least trusted to tell the truth by young people and old people alike (though it is important to note that younger respondents were actually more likely to trust politicians to tell the truth than the average person – 25 per cent of 15–24 year olds compared to 21 per cent of all aged 15 and over).<sup>55</sup>

Our qualitative research across the UK also found that the young adults have a range of different beliefs informing their lack of trust in political institutions, often focusing criticism on the political classes behind them. Several young adults spoke about deficits of party politics, and not feeling properly represented by parliamentarians. The following quotes are illustrative:

55. Ipsos MORI, 'Veracity Index' (2015) <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/ipsos-mori-veracity-index-2015-tables.pdf>

> *I feel very unrepresented when it comes to looking at who is actually elected into government. And I feel that with our current parliamentary system, it's totally inadequate in representing me and my views. (Female, Exeter)*

> *Younger people, we don't really associate with political parties. I won't associate with a party. (Male, Leeds)*

In line with common media portrayals, several of our focus group participants perceived politicians to be members of an elite, out of touch with ordinary UK citizens. According to this view, even if they are well intentioned, politicians do not have the understanding and empathy needed to represent the interests of the UK's young adults. As one focus group participant in Norwich put it:

> *They're out of touch with what the average UK citizen thinks. (Male, Norwich)*

Other focus group participants took a harder view, arguing that not only do politicians fail to understand the concerns of ordinary citizens, they ignore them in order to serve their own interests. The following quotes are illustrative:

> *Most politicians are out to better themselves, not everybody else. (Female, Cardiff)*

> *Most of them are just Eton lads who all know each other and all help each other. (Female, Norwich)*

There was also a common perception amongst young adults in our focus groups across the UK that because many people their age do not turn out to vote, politicians feel there is less to gain in looking after young people's interests:

> *I just... the whole view of politics from the parties, they never aim towards young people, because young people don't vote, so everything's catered to the older people. So anyone outside that gets left out... that doesn't include me, so why bother. (Male, Belfast)*

This may produce a vicious cycle, as the perception that politicians and political parties do not act in their interests makes young adults even less likely to vote, while continuing to compound this lack of trust.





## Achieving change through politics

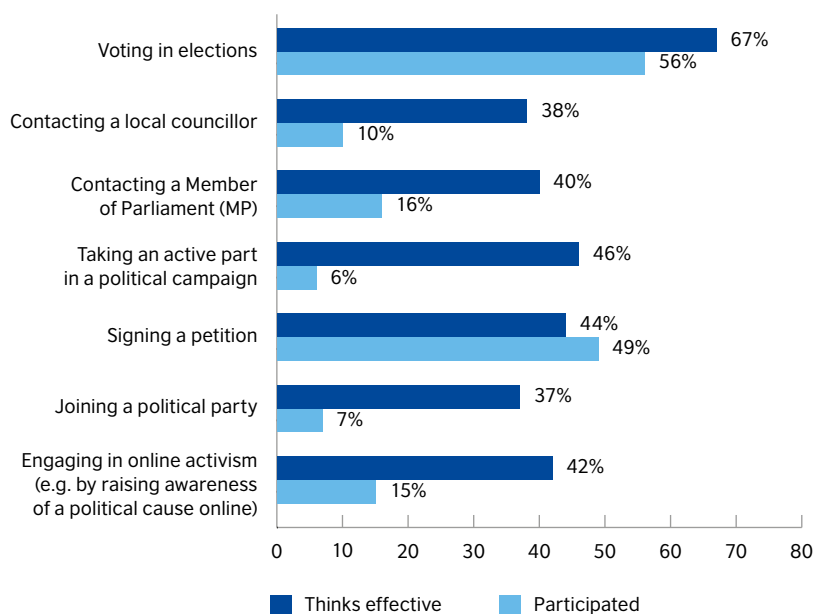
One commonly given explanation for low participation and trust is that young people perceive participation in politics to be ineffective in bringing about positive social change.<sup>56</sup> Our research for this project provided some evidence in support of this.

That change is wanted by young adults is beyond doubt, though the pace of change is perhaps more contested. We found a substantial radical streak among young adults – with as many as a quarter (24 per cent) of young adults believing that the entire way society is organised should be radically changed. A further six in ten (58 per cent) feel that society should be gradually changed by reforms, while 6 per cent are satisfied with the status quo.

Achieving this change through political actions is considered difficult – though perhaps by less of a margin than might first be imagined. Survey respondents were asked how effective a range of political activities are in having an impact on how the country is run. Below, we compare these responses with the numbers who said they participated in each activity.

The results show that voting is considered the most effective, with two thirds of young adults believing it to be a very or fairly effective way of bringing about change in how the country is run. Less than half of young adults thought that each of the other activities we listed was effective, including signing a petition (44 per cent), engaging in online activism (42 per cent), joining a political party (38 per cent), and contacting an MP or councillor (39 per cent and 38 per cent respectively). These figures were higher than anticipated, given the low participation rates explored above. Thus, there is clearly a gap even between

**Figure 13:** Perceived effectiveness of political actions compared to participation rate



Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017.

perceptions of the effectiveness of political actions and actual participation. Other research from the Hansard Audit of Political Engagement has found that 40 per cent of 18–24 year olds think getting involved in politics is effective, dropping to 34 per cent of 25–34 year olds.<sup>57</sup>

The ability of politics to effect change was a key theme of our qualitative research. The focus groups tended to be fairly evenly split between people who said they were politically engaged and those who were not. Participants who were disengaged were largely disillusioned with the political process and felt, for example, that their vote did not really make a difference. In places, these views were justified in reference to ‘safe seats’, and frustration with the first past the post voting system. The following quote is illustrative:

**> Where I'm from, regardless of who I vote in the elections, the outcome is the same. It's been the same for 25 years, regardless of who I vote. (Male, Norwich)**

The effectiveness of demonstrations was a particular subject of debate in the focus groups. Many of our participants saw demonstrations, protests, and marches as key mechanisms for expressing their political beliefs, and an effective way of bringing attention to key issues. However, the majority of these tempered their comments by saying that demonstrations are not enough in and of themselves to bring about change.

56. Farthing, R and Hudson, A ‘What would make young people get interested in politics?’, *New Statesman*, 9 April 2015, [www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/04/what-would-make-young-people-get-interested-politics](http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/04/what-would-make-young-people-get-interested-politics)

57. Hansard Society, ‘Audit of Political Engagement 13’.



A further finding of our research is that while evidence suggests that political knowledge is increasing in the UK,<sup>58</sup> some young adults we spoke to did not feel that they have the knowledge to be making the most effective use of their democratic rights ('I don't think I'm educated enough', Male, Exeter), signposting failures in the education system which we return to below.

### Community or Westminster, politics matters

Some believe that there is a sea-change in the type of engagement underway: that young people, turned off by Westminster politics, are choosing to engage in community social action instead, with change in local areas perceived to be more achievable and tangible. According to this view, it is certainly not the case that young people are less socially conscious than previous generations – quite the opposite. As one focus group participant put it, young people just 'think there's an alternative'.

Demos' previous research has lent weight to this narrative. Our *Introducing Generation Citizen* found that both teenagers across the country and their teachers felt that the younger generation were more active and socially conscious than older generations when it came to their local communities.<sup>59</sup> Data from the government's Community Life Survey shows that volunteering rates amongst young people have increased significantly from 2010 to 2016.

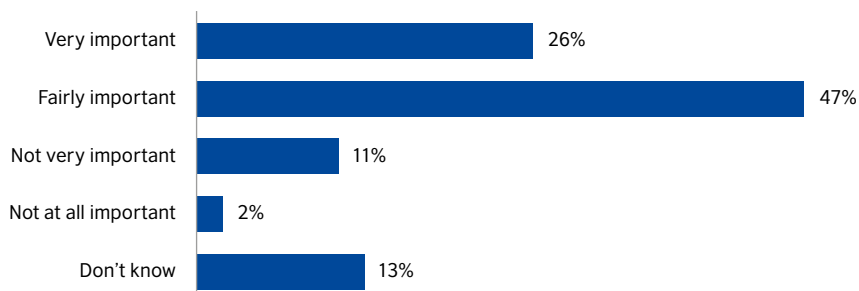
In 2010–11, 23 per cent of 16–24 year olds said they volunteered formally (through an organisation) at least once a month – a figure that has increased to 32 per cent in 2015–16.<sup>60</sup> A burgeoning youth social action sector, with organisations united in campaigns such as Step Up To Serve's #iwill, and the expansion of the National Citizen Service, have given the agenda considerable momentum – bolstered by an increasingly strong evidence base for the positive outcomes delivered for young people.<sup>61</sup>

Our survey found that one in five young adults volunteer at least once a month, and some of our focus group talked passionately about engaging in social action and campaigning for causes. The distinctions between social action and political action were often blurred, as the following quote illustrates:

> *I'm a very active feminist, I'm quite involved in the LGBTQ community and I think people don't realise how political that actually is. It's not about being proud to be gay it's about your right to exist without persecution. (Female, Leeds)*

The stand-out finding from our research, however, is that although young adults are volunteering and engaging in communities, and although there are low levels of political participation and trust, young adults still think it is important to be engaged in traditional politics. Our survey asked this quite directly, as shown in the Figure 14.

**Figure 14:** 'How important do you think it is for all young adults to be engaged with traditional Westminster politics?'



Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017.

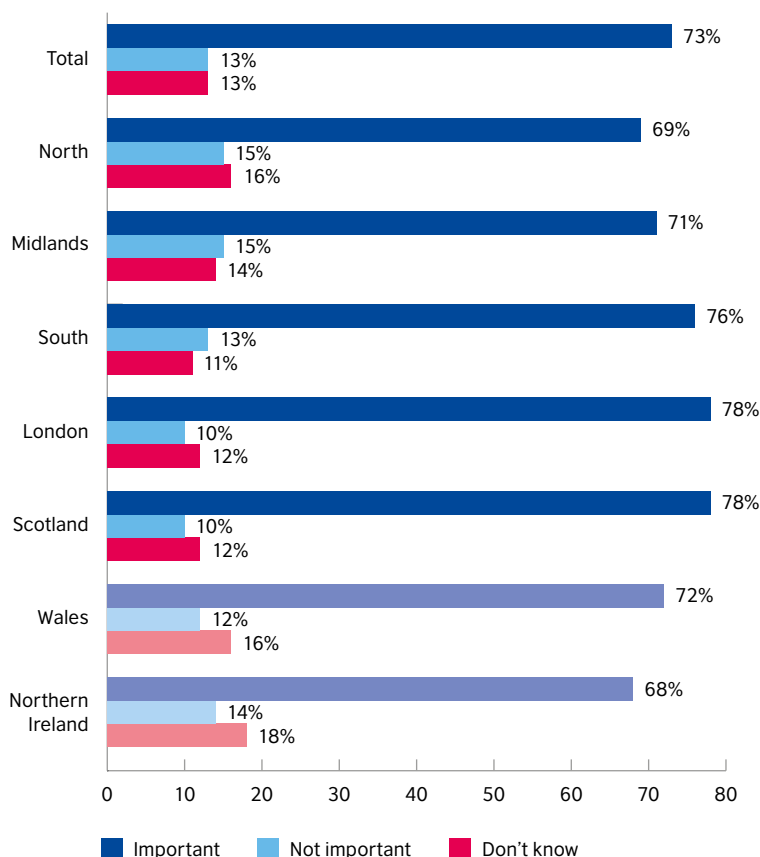
58. *Ibid.*

59. Birdwell, J and Bani, M *Introducing Generation Citizen*, Demos (2014) [https://www.demos.co.uk/files/Generation\\_Citizen\\_-\\_web.pdf?1392764120](https://www.demos.co.uk/files/Generation_Citizen_-_web.pdf?1392764120); see also: Birdwell, J, Birnie, R and Mehan, R *The state of the service nation: Youth social action in the UK*, Demos (2013) [https://www.demos.co.uk/files/Youth\\_Social\\_Action\\_in\\_the\\_UK\\_-\\_ver\\_3.pdf?1373620410](https://www.demos.co.uk/files/Youth_Social_Action_in_the_UK_-_ver_3.pdf?1373620410)

60. See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/community-life-survey#2015-to-2016-survey>

61. Birdwell, J, Scott, R and Reynolds, L *Service Nation 2020*, Demos (2015) <https://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ServiceNation2020.pdf>

**Figure 15:** Importance attached to being engaged in 'traditional Westminster politics': comparison across regions of the UK.



Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017. Note Wales and Northern Ireland sample sizes too low for analysis (n<100), included here for at-a-glance comparison.

A comparison of answers to this question by region shows that this sentiment is common across the UK – though marginally higher in London and Scotland, and lower in the Midlands and North.

This finding is in line with other research casting doubt on the idea that young adults are not interested in becoming more engaged in politics. For example, Henn and Foard argued in 2012 that

the 18 year olds they surveyed were interested in political affairs and keen to play a more active role, but that their first experience of a general election in 2010 had left them feeling frustrated.<sup>62</sup>

For one of our focus group participants, increasing engagement was vital in ensuring that weighty decisions such as the EU Referendum were undertaken more constructively in future:

**> I believe that more people should be politically engaged so that if and when a big decision that the country has to make such as Brexit comes, people can actually view it from more constructive points of view...rather than being focused on one direction, and not being able to weigh up the pros and cons.**  
(Female, Coventry)

There were, however, important distinctions in our survey data, telling a familiar story: those of higher social grade, with experience of higher education, and living in London are more likely to think it important for young adults to be engaged in politics.

### Reflecting the important issues for young adults

A strong clue in understanding young adults' low engagement and trust in politics that derives from our research is that the majority of young adults simply do not believe that their interests are being properly represented. Our survey found that over half of young adults (54 per cent) think that British politics today does not reflect the issues that matter to young people, compared to just over a third who do (37 per cent). Understanding what really matters to young people could therefore be key in engaging greater numbers.

In light of this, our survey and focus groups also sought to help establish some of the most pressing concerns for young people, looking at challenges faced by young people themselves personally, the country nationally, and in relation to the most important global issues.

62. Henn, M and Foard, N 'Young people, political participation and trust in Britain'. *Op cit*.

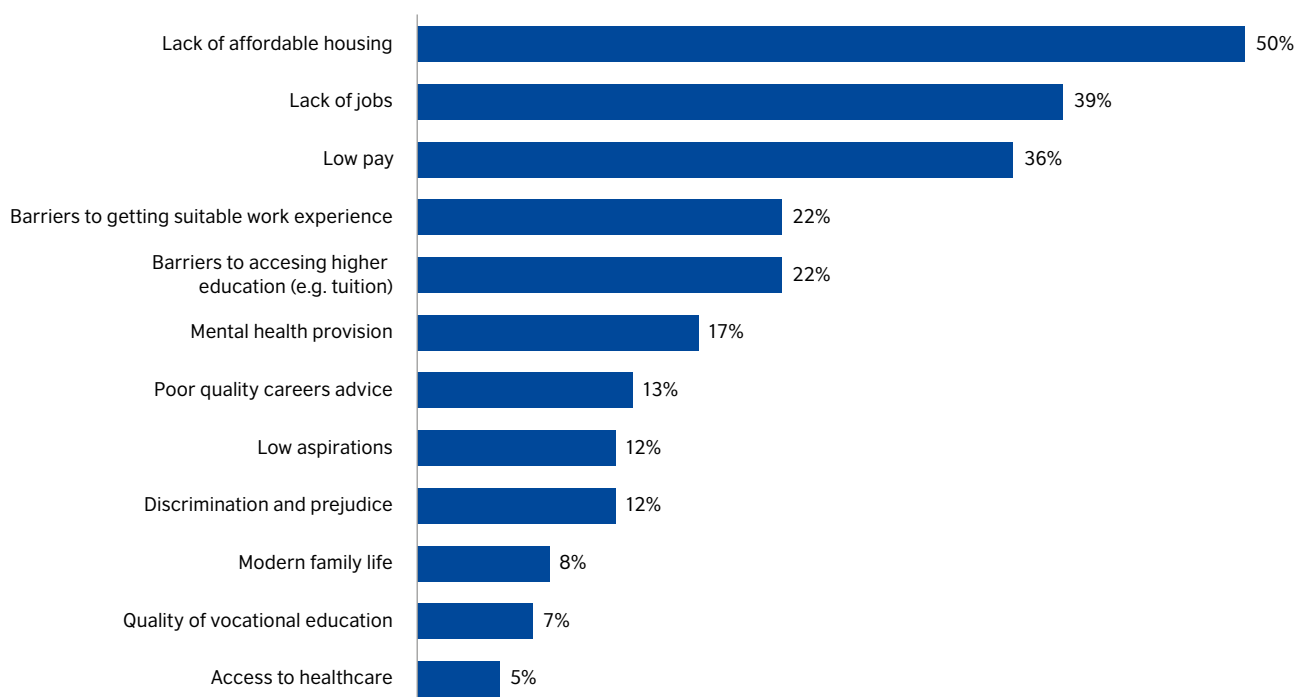
Beginning with young adults themselves, we asked survey respondents to identify up to three of the biggest challenges facing young people. We found the most frequently cited challenges captured in our survey of young adults were the lack of affordable housing (identified by 50 per cent), followed by lack of jobs (39 per cent) and low pay (36 per cent). The results are summarised in Figure 17.

**Figure 16:** 'To what extent do you think British politics today reflects the issues that matter to young people?'

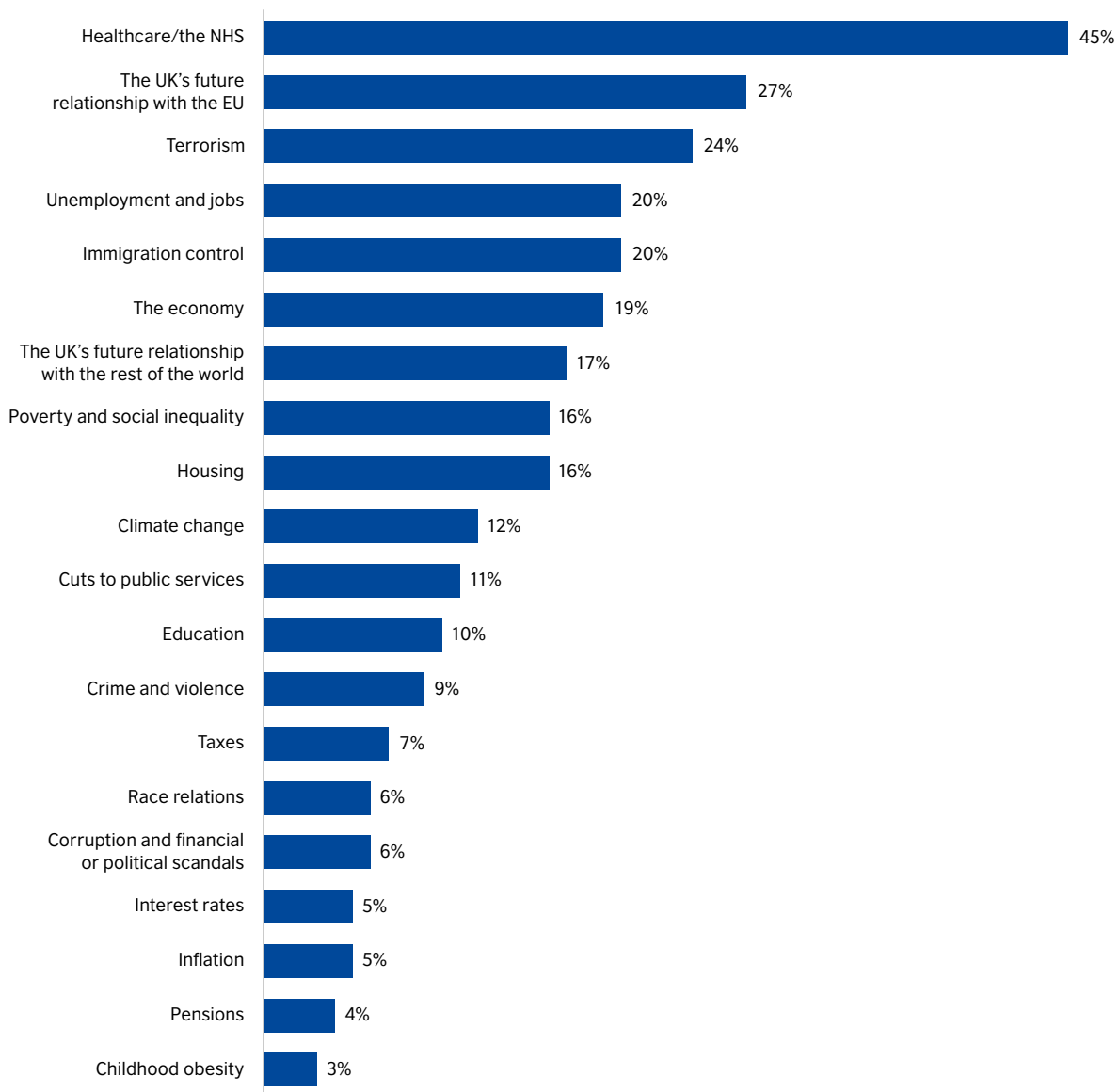


Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017.

**Figure 17:** 'What, if anything, do you think presents the biggest challenges for young people today? (Select up to three)'



Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017.

**Figure 18:** 'Which of the following issues facing the United Kingdom today, if any, concern you most? (Select up to three)'

Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017.

While we discuss jobs and education at greater length in the next chapter, housing featured frequently in our focus group discussions, and was given a lot of attention in London and Glasgow in

particular. Generational divides often emerged in these discussions as some participants contrasted the relative ease with which their parents and grandparents could buy a property

with their own struggles. The government were not seen to be helping ease the pressure, despite the policy attention housing receives in London and other cities – and in line

with evidence showing the decreasing affordability of housing.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, a number of our participants in these locations discussed their future plans to move away to somewhere where housing is more affordable, to a different part of the UK in some cases and in others to a different country. The following quotes are illustrative:

> *I saw on the news the other day that apparently... basically if you're young right now, you have about 5 per cent chance of being able to own a house in your lifetime. (Female, Glasgow)*

> *If you're young and you don't have rich parents you're not buying a house. Not for at least another ten years... it's so expensive to rent and the government don't help you anyway. (Male, Glasgow)*

> *[Housing] is literally, one of the top reasons why I intend on leaving the country... And to me, it honestly seems impossible to have my own house that I will one day own. When I could go and live abroad in another country and increase my quality of life tenfold. (Male, London)*

Of course, young adults are not only concerned by issues that affect them but by issues affecting the whole population. Actually, when asked to think about the issues they find most important, more young adults said issues affecting the UK as a whole (39 per cent) compared to both issues locally – facing cities, towns, and villages – (7 per cent) and global issues (24 per cent).

We asked young adults what they considered to be the most concerning issues on a national level, and found the top domestic policy concern by a substantial margin was healthcare and the NHS, with 45 per cent citing this as one of their top three concerns. This was followed by the UK's future relationship with the EU (27 per cent) and terrorism (24 per cent). Figure 18 summarises the survey results.

While it has been observed that policy priorities in the EU Referendum were different between younger and older voters (broadly economic policy versus sovereignty and border control),<sup>64</sup> the findings of our survey on domestic priorities are actually fairly similar to general population polling, which has also found the NHS and EU Referendum as the two most pressing.<sup>65</sup>

The central importance of the NHS was supported by our focus groups. Healthcare was identified as the most pressing domestic policy issue in five of eight focus groups (Belfast, Cardiff, Coventry, Exeter and Leeds). As discussed in the previous chapter, the NHS is a source of pride for the population as a whole, and by young adults in particular. There was substantial concern in our focus groups that this highly valued institution was under threat. Concerns raised included

funding pressures, the length of waiting lists, working conditions, and the potential impact of Brexit on staffing. In some cases concerns were raised on the basis of personal experiences of the NHS, but others spoke on the basis of knowledge gleaned through their own research and, more frequently, the media. The following quotes are illustrative:

> *The NHS is struggling for money, and nurses and doctors are overworked and underpaid. All the standoffs over their contracts and strikes, leading to people not getting the care they need. (Male, Coventry)*

> *When I log in it's three or four weeks before you can get an appointment. If that was an elderly person they could be dead. There needs to be some change in terms of that. (Male, Exeter)*

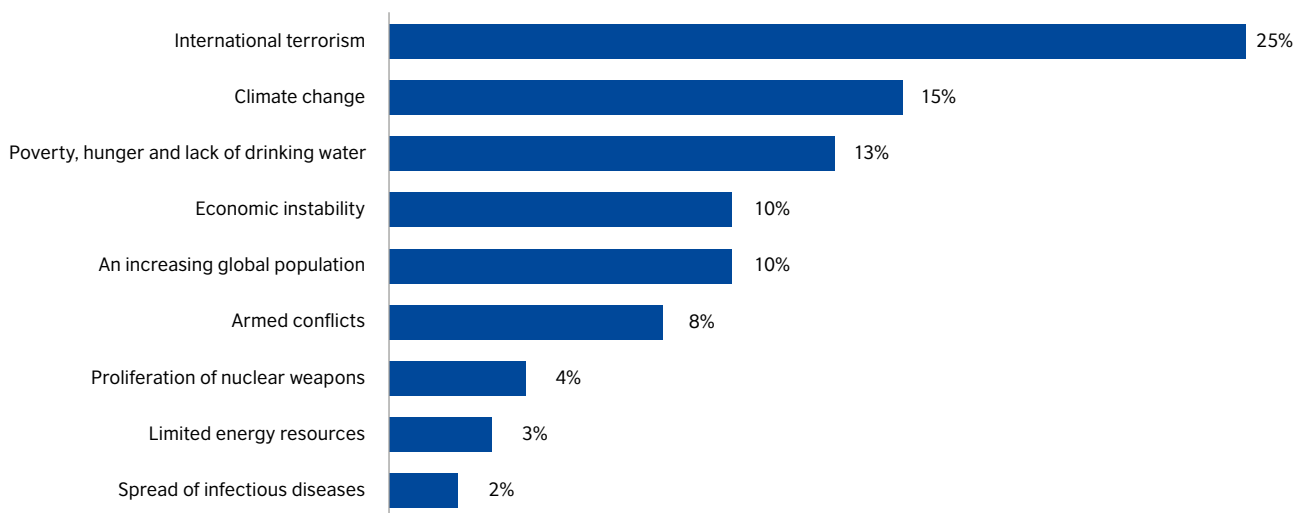
Finally, we asked our survey respondents to identify what they believed to be the most serious problem facing the international community. The results are summarised in Figure 19.

63. Clarke, S, Corlett, A and Judge, L *The Housing Headwind*, Resolution Foundation (2016) [www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2016/06/The-Housing-Headwind.pdf](http://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2016/06/The-Housing-Headwind.pdf) (accessed 27 April 2017).

64. Sloam, J 'The generation gap: How young voters view the UK's referendum'. *Op cit*.

65. Ipsos MORI, 'Concerns about the NHS and the EU/Brexit continue to rise' (2017) <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3849/Concerns-about-the-NHS-and-the-EUBrexit-continue-to-rise.aspx>



**Figure 19:** 'Which, if any, of the following do you consider to be the single most serious problem facing the world as a whole?'

Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017.

International terrorism was most commonly cited (25 per cent), followed by climate change (15 per cent) and poverty, hunger and thirst (13 per cent).

While international terrorism did not feature heavily in our focus group discussions, both climate change and poverty did. Poverty was the most commonly raised global issue in five locations: Belfast, Coventry, Glasgow, London and Norwich. Participants spoke about the injustice of poverty in the modern world, the lack of inter-governmental action to tackle it, and the global and national disparities between rich and poor. As one focus group participant put it:

**> I think it's despicable that poverty is even still a thing. (Female, London)**

Climate change was the most commonly cited global issue in Exeter and Cardiff. There was discussion about the potential

impacts of climate change at home and abroad, and the particular risks of climate change denial. The following quote is illustrative:

**> Some people don't even know it exists which is ridiculous. It's a fact. To deny that it's happening when it definitely is... (Male, Cardiff)**

Many young people highlighted that Brexit could cause the UK to turn in on itself, undermining the part it plays in helping these issues – despite the fact that issues including poverty and climate change have a real impact on the lives of UK citizens, as well as people living in other countries.

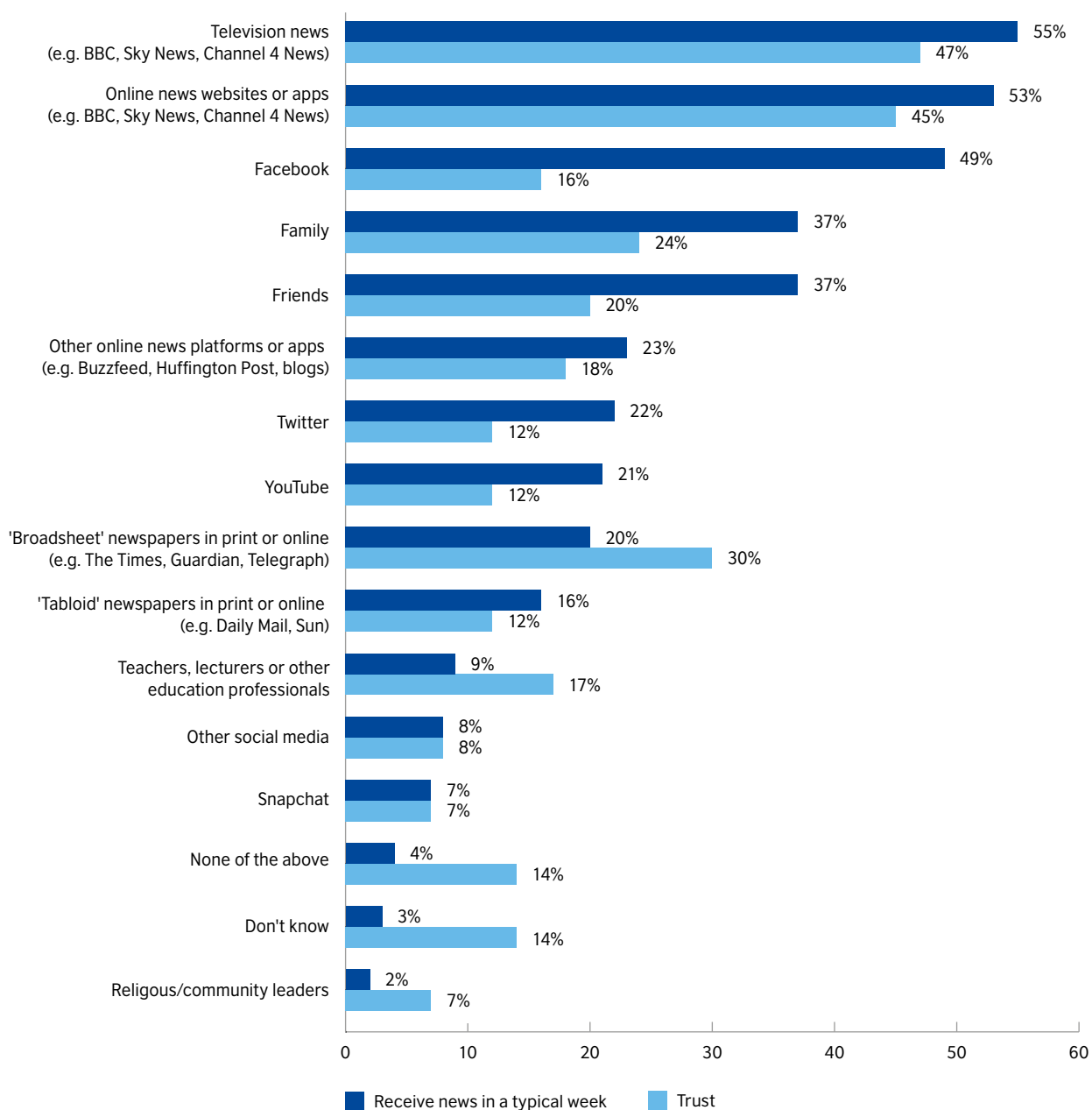
### Dealing with unwieldy information channels

Some of the young adults we spoke to in our qualitative research for this project were not engaged in politics because

they felt they had a lack of knowledge about political issues, and so were unable to make informed choices. The changing information environment has substantial implications here, not least with the rise of the 'fake news' agenda, given such prominence following the 2016 US Presidential Election,<sup>66</sup> which is putting a spotlight on the importance of identifying trustworthy sources of political information. In order to feel confident in being politically active citizens, young adults need to be able to access information about current affairs from sources they trust.

Our research shows that today's young adults receive information about political and social issues from a range of sources – some more and some less helpful. Our survey asked which sources respondents used to get information about current affairs in a typical week. We also asked respondents how far they trusted different information sources. The results are summarised in Figure 20.

66. Allcott, H and Gentzkow, M 'Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election', Working paper (2017) <https://web.stanford.edu/~gentzkow/research/fakenews.pdf>

**Figure 20:** News sources in a typical week and level of trust in those sources

Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017.

The results show that almost all young adults are consuming news from at least one source in a typical week, with television news being the single most common source (55 per cent), as well as the most trusted to provide reliable and trustworthy news (by 47 per cent). The shift to online news sources is fairly marked. In line with declining profitability for broadsheet newspapers,<sup>67</sup> while these sources are third most trusted, only one in five young adults across the UK now obtains news this way. Interestingly, family and friends are common sources of information, but there is a pronounced trust gap identified in both cases.

There is little doubt that social media is changing the news environment. Using net figures combining platforms, our survey found that social media was the most common source of news for young adults, with almost two-thirds receiving news this way (63 per cent). While social media platforms offer young users far greater opportunity to participate in political discourse and share information, social media platforms have also been shown to play a unique part in the spread of misinformation,<sup>68</sup> and may risk creating 'echo chambers' as much as creating spaces for meaningful debate.<sup>69</sup> As one of our focus group participants put it in the Brexit context:

**> *That's the trouble with social media – you only see what your friends [think]...it's like a sounding board – you say something, and people go: yeah. (Male, Exeter)***

We found the most commonly used social media platform for information about current affairs was Facebook, used by half of young adults (49 per cent), yet just 16 per cent think Facebook is a source of accurate information about current affairs (a gap of 33 percentage points).

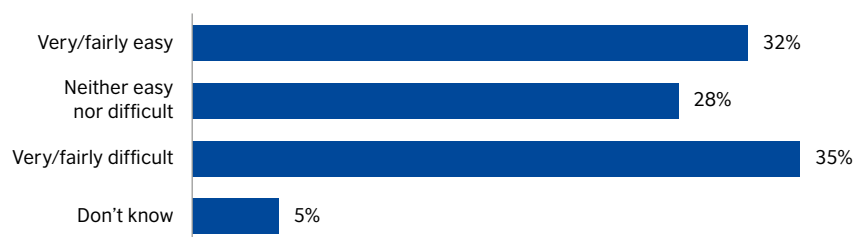
Our survey also asked respondents about how easy it is to tell the difference between truth and lies on social media. We found young adults divided, with more than a third (35 per cent) thinking it difficult, as summarised in Figure 21.

While on the majority of our survey questions we did not see marked differences between genders, women were more likely to say they think it is difficult to tell the difference between truth and lies on social media (29 per cent of men versus 42 per cent of women).

Our social media analysis for this project (see Appendix) adds to evidence that these platforms are an important place for political discourse and shaping opinion. Some have seen social media as a new opportunity to engage young people,<sup>70</sup> and the amount spent by political parties has followed suit.<sup>71</sup> Asking explicitly how social media had affected attitudes to politics either positively or negatively, we found that for the majority of young adults surveyed it makes no difference.

However, more felt these platforms had made them feel negatively rather than positively, as shown in Figure 22.

**Figure 21:** 'In general, how easy or difficult do you think it is to tell the difference between truth and lies on social media?'



Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017.

67. Turvill, W 'After a decade of decline daily broadsheet print circulations show signs of levelling off', *Press Gazette*, 21 October 2014, [www.pressgazette.co.uk/after-a-decade-of-decline-daily-broadsheet-print-circulations-show-signs-of-levelling-off/](http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/after-a-decade-of-decline-daily-broadsheet-print-circulations-show-signs-of-levelling-off/)

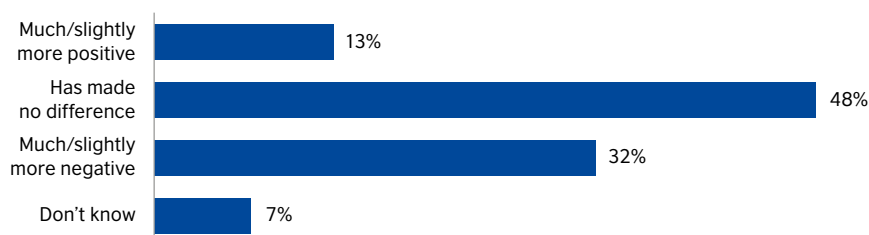
68. Allcott, H and Gentzkow, M 'Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election'. *Op cit*.

69. Krasodonski-Jones, A *Talking To Ourselves? Political Debate Online and the Echo Chamber Effect*, Demos (2016) <https://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Echo-Chambers-final-version.pdf>

70. Sainsbury, M and Benton, T 'Social networking: a way to re-engage young people with politics', National Foundation for Educational Research (2012) <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/research/projects/cels-cit/CIVTA3.pdf>; and LSE Enterprise (2013) <https://www.lse.ac.uk/businessAndConsultancy/LSEEnterprise/pdf/YouthParticipationDemocraticLife.pdf>

71. Heinze, A 'Hard Evidence: is Facebook a good use of election campaign budgets?', *The Conversation*, 6 February 2015, <http://theconversation.com/hard-evidence-is-facebook-a-good-use-of-election-campaign-budgets-37256>

**Figure 22:** ‘Has social media made you feel more or less negative about politics, or has it made no difference?’



Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017.

We heard a range of views about the role of social media in our focus groups with young adults across the UK. Some participants were positive about the power of social media to spark someone's interest in an issue when they see someone else post about it. Others praised vote choice apps, which indicate the party an individual's political views have most in common with. However, these views were met with disagreement by other young adults. One participant criticised vote choice apps for suggesting that political traditions can be picked 'like a shopping list', when in his view political participation should be about buying into a party's narrative and history. Another participant saw online petitions posted on social media as a particular danger:

**> I think social media and the way people have been signing petitions on social media is actually quite dangerous. I think people sign things ill-informed and people read one article on Facebook and think they're an expert on certain topics. (Male, Leeds)**

There was also criticism of the media in general – particularly of its role in the Brexit campaigns. Some blamed the media for creating a negative and divisive culture in the run up to the EU Referendum. Some of our participants believed that the media was driven largely by 'money and lies', and that fake news 'is just a new word for something that's been going on for years' (Male, Exeter). One participant spoke about the 'finger pointing at different cultures' that goes in the tabloid press, 'which is wrong' (Female, Coventry).

### Re-engaging the youth

Adding to existing evidence, our research findings show that political engagement amongst young adults in the UK is not in a healthy state. Compared to older counterparts, many young adults are not participating at all in politics, whether through voting or more modern digital methods, and there is a distinct lack of trust in key political institutions.

As has been suggested throughout this chapter, there are many potential reasons behind lack of trust and engagement, and it is unlikely that there will be a single solution to the problem. Many organisations are working in diverse ways across the

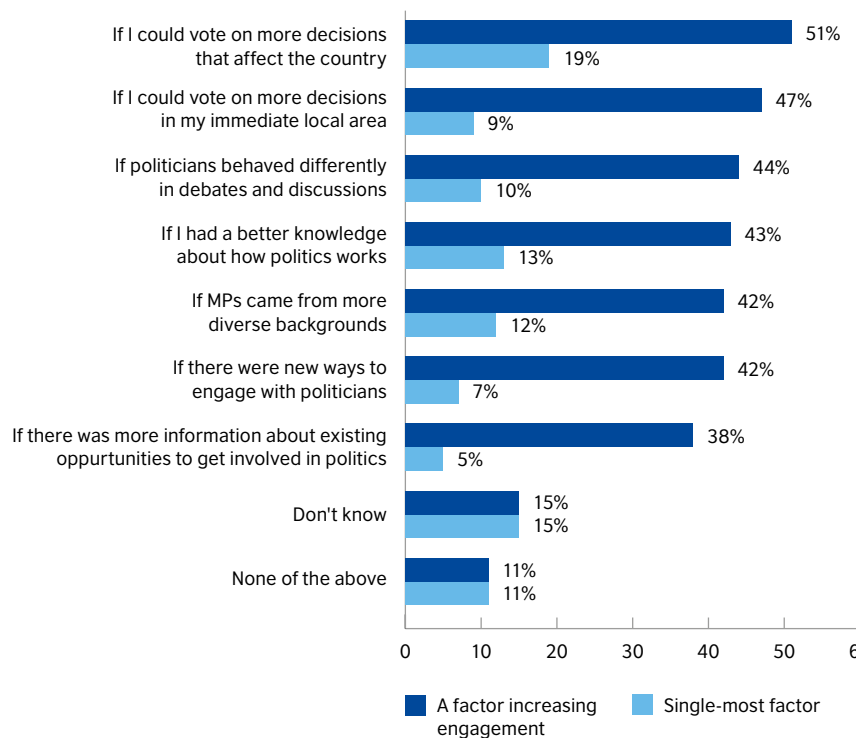
UK to increase youth engagement, whether through strategies to increase voter registration,<sup>72</sup> or building relevant skills, confidence, and knowledge amongst those communities furthest from the mainstream.<sup>73</sup>

Our survey presented young adults with a range of measures that might plausibly help boost engagement, and asked them to indicate which they thought would make the biggest difference. The results are summarised in Figure 23.

72. Bite The Ballot: <http://bitetheballot.co.uk/>

73. For example: <http://uprising.org.uk/>

**Figure 23:** ‘Which of the following, if any, would make the biggest difference in increasing your participation in politics?’



Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017. Due to rounding, percentages may not add up to 100.

Perhaps influenced by the experience of the EU and Scottish referendums, the most popular measure was enabling young adults to vote on a greater number of national decisions (cited by 51 per cent as a factor that would increase engagement) and local decisions (47 per cent). Around four in ten young adults felt that each of the options – whether improving the behaviour and diversity of politicians, through to improving information about politics – would be a factor increasing engagement. These findings are in line with other research on increasing youth

engagement. A study by Exeter University asking what political parties could do to better connect with young people found communication channels in particular to be vital – with young people surveyed stating that listening to their concerns, and visiting schools, colleges, universities were important actions politicians could take.<sup>74</sup> This has strong echoes of the policy roundtable held for this project, with much agreement among stakeholders in the room that politicians at all levels need to ‘go to where young people are’. This applies both in person and

online – though both come with their opportunities and challenges.<sup>75</sup>

The Advisory Board for the Next Generation project focused on the role of political education in increasing engagement – also a common theme in many of our focus groups. Board members agreed that schools did little to teach young people about politics, and there was scope for far more to be done. This was noted despite the fact that citizenship education is compulsory in schools – but in line with evidence showing the subject is often delivered pragmatically and lacking teachers with subject specialism.<sup>76</sup> The Advisory Board agreed, though, that the role of the school system in increasing political engagement should be about more than explicit political education. As important is supporting youth social action opportunities and activities such as debating that can help to develop political capital and the agency required to fully participate in the democratic system. A premium was attached to critical thinking in an era of ‘fake news’.

Our Advisory Board also gave particular attention to the role of local government. While Westminster can seem very far away from some communities, members of our Advisory Board felt that, perhaps through lower visibility and negative perceptions, local councillors could seem even more removed from young adults than MPs. Suggestions were made around increasing face-to-face meetings, and improving information about local councils. Furthermore there was also appetite for greater input in local decision-making processes such as through voting on community matters. At a national level, the success of the high turnout in the Scottish Independence Referendum was felt by some Board members to re-open conversations about lowering the voting age.

74. Henn, M and Foard, N ‘Young people, political participation and trust in Britain’.

75. Miller, C ‘Politics: The Digital Future’, *Demos Quarterly*, 8 (2016) [https://quarterly.demos.co.uk/article/issue-8/digital\\_democracy/](https://quarterly.demos.co.uk/article/issue-8/digital_democracy/); see also: M Sainsbury and T Benton, ‘Social networking: a way to re-engage young people with politics’.

76. Burton, D and May, S ‘Citizenship Education in Secondary Schools in England’, *Educational futures* 7/1, <http://educationstudies.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Burton-and-May.pdf>





## CHAPTER 3: OPPORTUNITIES IN EDUCATION AND WORK

The third theme of our research looked at the more immediate economic circumstances of young adults – in particular, attitudes and experiences in education and work.

These areas are rarely far from the headlines. Our education system at once appears to offer some of the best institutions in the world, but we also repeatedly hear about the education system failing young people: underperforming schools, chronic imbalance between academic and vocational routes,<sup>77</sup> falling behind on key quality measures internationally,<sup>78</sup> and young people leaving schools and universities without the skills and confidence that employers want. Furthermore, in the context of this report, young people leaving education without wider skills to engage effectively with political institutions and the rest of the world. Young people are also repeatedly told by their elders that getting a job is the hardest it has ever been; and according to prominent Remain campaigners Brexit presents severe risks to existing opportunities for the many young adults who are interested in studying and working abroad.<sup>79</sup> In this chapter we explore the experiences of young adults in these areas, and some of the solutions put forward for tackling the challenges they face.

### An education system that works for some

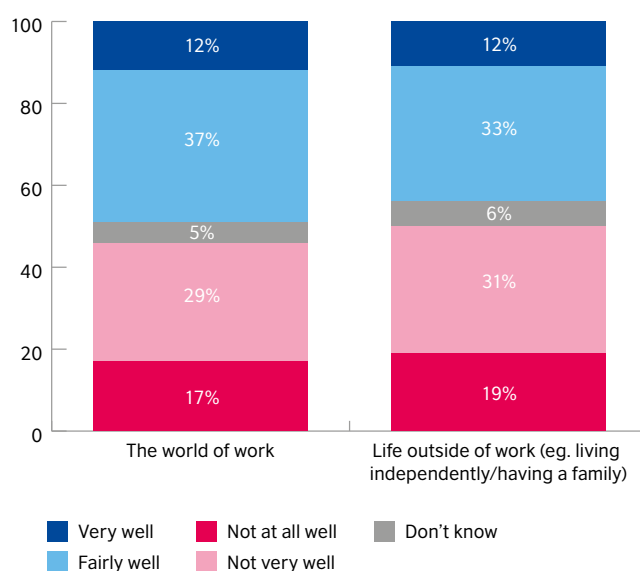
One of the clearest findings from our research for this project is that the education system – understood as schooling, through to further and higher

education – is felt to work for some, but not other young people in the UK.

Our Advisory Board emphasised the importance of judging the education system in preparing young adults for two aspects of later life: the world of work, and life outside work (including education around living independently, money management, healthy eating, mental health and others). Asking about

these two aspects in our survey, we found young adults to be split almost down the middle in how far they thought the education system had prepared them on both measures: 49 per cent thought the education system had prepared them well for work, while 46 per cent did not; and similarly, 44 per cent said they had been prepared well for wider life, while 50 per cent did not. The results are summarised below.

**Figure 24:** ‘How well or not do you feel your education has prepared you for...?’



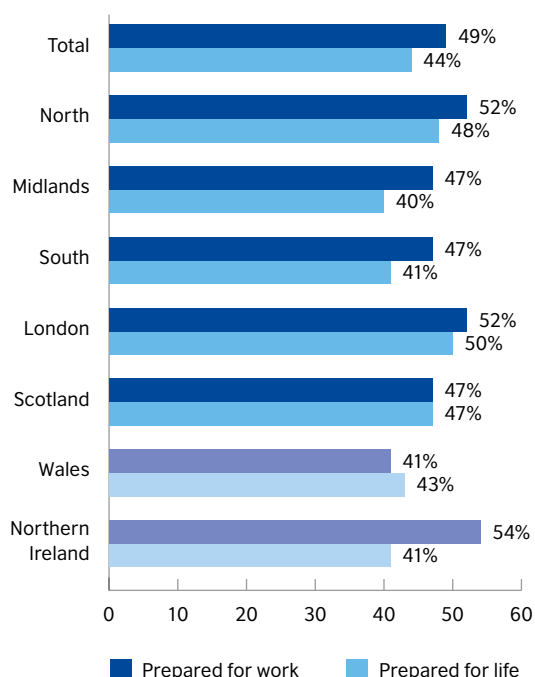
Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017. Due to rounding, percentages may not add up to 100.

77. O'Leary, D and Wybron, I *The Commission on Apprenticeships*, Demos (2015) [https://www.demos.co.uk/files/476\\_1504\\_CoA\\_WEB\\_2\\_.pdf?1425489134](https://www.demos.co.uk/files/476_1504_CoA_WEB_2_.pdf?1425489134)

78. Pells, R 'UK schools falling behind leading countries, new global rankings reveal', *The Independent*, 6 December 2016, [www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/pisa-oecd-rankings-uk-schools-falling-behind-leading-countries-global-international-singapore-a7458751.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/pisa-oecd-rankings-uk-schools-falling-behind-leading-countries-global-international-singapore-a7458751.html)

79. Morgan, N 'Leaving the EU risks a lost generation' (2016) <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nicky-morgan-leaving-the-eu-risks-a-lost-generation>

**Figure 25:** Extent of agreement that the education system has prepared young adults for life and work: comparison across the UK



Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017. Note Wales and Northern Ireland sample sizes too low for analysis (n<100), included here for at-a-glance comparison.

Comparing the survey findings across regions, it is clear that these divisions are common across the UK, as Figure 25 shows.

This narrative of division is in line with extensive literature around factors driving lower educational outcomes and labour market opportunities among certain groups of young people, driving a wedge between them and their peers. Chief among these drivers is socio-economic background, with a protracted attainment gap between the achievement of poorer peers eligible for free school

meal funding compared to their wealthier peers, for example; alongside other factors disadvantaging pupils such as having a special educational need or having English as an additional language.<sup>80</sup>

Comparing responses of groups of young adults to these survey questions, we found that, unsurprisingly, those who appear on the surface to have benefited most from their education, having experienced higher education and secured stable well-paying jobs, appear more likely to say that the

education system had prepared them well for work and later life. There were also clear at-a-glance differences in the proportions of young adults in each answer category by social grade and parental education level, with those of higher social grades and higher parental education more likely to feel better prepared. Using logistic regression to control for a range of key demographic factors, we found that some of these factors were not statistically significant. Yet we did find that young adults with degrees were 11 per cent more likely to feel their education had prepared them for work (when controlling for other factors) and furthermore, there seems a confidence amongst young men in particular, who were 7 per cent more likely than women to feel this.

Focusing on preparedness for work, as Figure 25 above shows, we did not find marked differences by region in how well people felt they had been served by the education system – a surprising finding, perhaps, given the perceived lack of opportunities and aspirations in certain communities, though the data is not at a fine-grained enough level to draw any real conclusions. Indeed, the evidence of geographical variation on many of the harder educational outcome measures is well established – including gaps in attainment and literacy.<sup>81</sup> In October 2016, the Department for Education launched its opportunity areas programme, for example, based on a body of evidence from the Social Mobility Index identifying ‘coldspots’ in which children and young people are not achieving their potential.<sup>82</sup>

Our qualitative work with young adults across the UK explored the perceived efficacy of the education system in greater depth. Although some

80. Wood, C and Scott, R *A Tale of Two Classes*, Demos (2014) [https://www.demos.co.uk/files/Two\\_classrooms\\_-\\_web.pdf?1417693373](https://www.demos.co.uk/files/Two_classrooms_-_web.pdf?1417693373); see also: Department for Education, ‘Measuring disadvantaged pupils’ attainment gaps over time (updated)’ (2014) [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/398657/SFR\\_40\\_2014\\_Measuring\\_disadvantaged\\_pupils\\_attainment\\_gaps\\_over\\_time\\_\\_updated\\_.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/398657/SFR_40_2014_Measuring_disadvantaged_pupils_attainment_gaps_over_time__updated_.pdf)

81. Wood, C and Scott, R *A Tale of Two Classes*. *Op cit* and Experian, ‘Identifying the places with greatest literacy need’ (2016) [www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0003/7673/Constituency\\_literacy\\_score\\_table\\_-\\_by\\_rank\\_-\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0003/7673/Constituency_literacy_score_table_-_by_rank_-_FINAL.pdf)

82. Department for Education, ‘Education secretary announces 6 new opportunity areas’ (2017) <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/education-secretary-announces-6-new-opportunity-areas>

participants spoke positively about their school experiences, there were even more negative responses than might have been expected from our survey findings (perhaps because people with negative experiences had more to say than those with positive experiences, who were often less impassioned). It was clear that many of those with negative experiences felt really let down by their education:

> *In my school... if you go into one of the community schools, you get your Cs, and you just keep going through life. There's no encouragement to succeed or break their expectations. They literally drilled it into you, we'll get you your Maths C and your English C, and then you can just get out of the door.*  
(Male, Cardiff)

One of the most commonly cited frustrations with the current school system was the focus on examinations, which it was felt did not help prepare people for life after school:

> *Honestly, I ended dropping out of school because I wasn't really – I didn't work in the school system, sitting in class for hours on end learning for an exam. The issue is that you learn to pass an exam, you don't learn to learn.*  
(Male, Belfast)

A number of other people also criticised the inflexibility of the curriculum in catering for students with different interests and talents.

> *You can't expect children of all varieties and mindsets to learn the exact same curriculum, or perform in the same manner, and people are going to excel at certain things, and other people are going to excel at other things. You need to sort of adapt it, not to suit everyone individually, but a bit more broad than just your set – English, Maths; this is what you'll do.*  
(Male, Exeter)

There was real appetite in our groups for enhancing vocational pathways – in line with recent policy attention, and underlying cultural assumptions that these are often second class routes in the UK where they are not in many other European countries.<sup>83</sup> Several young adults who had undertaken vocational qualifications praised their experiences, seeing the opportunity to develop their skills and get paid while still studying as extremely valuable, particularly in the context of such a competitive jobs market. But some expressed concerns that not enough young adults know about vocational pathways, that not enough opportunities are available (particularly apprenticeships – mirroring over-subscription data),<sup>84</sup> or that the entrance requirements were becoming too restrictive.

The value of university was a frequent topic of discussion, with participants generally agreeing that graduates nowadays do not have the competitive edge over non-graduates in the jobs market, primarily because a degree often did not provide requisite employability skills. One participant in Coventry said that he learned 'more in a month's work experience' before starting university than in the entirety of his four-year course. Non-graduates criticised some students for having a sense of entitlement when they leave university, which did not match their actual preparedness for work – failing to understand the value of experience. The following quote is illustrative:

> *It's frustrating that sometimes students genuinely believe that 'because I have a degree then I have a right over anybody that doesn't'. I think it is entitlement... that's not going to help you in the real world.*  
(Female, Coventry)

Other life skills were mentioned in our discussions about the education system. There was a mix of opinions on how well schools and post-compulsory education was delivering on this. While some participants had been taught how to budget, how to cook healthy meals and other life skills during their time at school, others had not. As a member of the Glasgow focus group put it in frustration:

83. O'Leary, D and Wybron, I *The Commission on Apprenticeships*. Op cit.

84. *Ibid.*



> *As for leaving and going to work, [schools] don't tell you how to manage money, about banking, about tax, what's a credit rating. Simple things preparing you for life, I mean even if you go on to further education. (Male, Glasgow)*

Furthermore, for graduates, while some felt university was as much about wider life lessons as 'the title of your degree', including opportunities to meet people from a wide variety of backgrounds, others talked about the shocks experienced when emerging the other side with the realities of getting a job, paying taxes as a self-employed person, or applying for a first-time mortgage. Members of our Advisory Board agreed about the particular importance of the education system helping to develop 'resilience' in learners, to enable young adults to be proactive and navigate more turbulent futures in the labour market. This speaks to a growing body of literature showing the relationship between 'character' skills such as resilience and self-determination and better outcomes in education and later life.<sup>85</sup>

As outlined in Chapter 1, the role of international experiences in helping to build resilience and wider life skills during a young adult's education is also

explored in wider literature – usually in the context of students at university and the added value of study abroad schemes in enhancing employability and intercultural skills. Research for a 2011 Next Generation project, which focused on undergraduate students in the UK, found just over four in ten students had an interest in studying abroad (43 per cent).<sup>86</sup> The survey also found that there is an even split between students as to whether they feel their university should become 'more international'. Of those who did feel so, students cited arranging volunteering placements overseas, and taking part of their course overseas as key steps their university could take.<sup>87</sup>

### Facing an uncertain labour market

Finding and entering employment presents a series of challenges for many young adults. In the previous chapter, we outlined our survey findings showing young adults believe that some of the biggest challenges young people face are related to work: lack of jobs (cited by 39 per cent); low pay (36 per cent) and barriers to getting suitable work experience (22 per cent). The unknown impact of Brexit on the UK's different industrial sectors, and opportunities abroad, creates an increasing environment of uncertainty.

It is important to set this in the broader context of the labour market young people face. The UK labour market has actually performed relatively strongly on

several measures following the 2008–09 recession, including unemployment, which has been falling since 2011 for both the general population and young people aged 16–24 – which at the beginning of 2017 stood at 4.7 per cent and 12.3 per cent respectively.<sup>88</sup> While the gap is substantial here, of course, compared to a large majority of other European countries the UK performance on youth labour market outcomes is fairly positive.<sup>89</sup> However, it remains the case that around half a million 16–24 year olds are unemployed in the UK.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, research has shown that there are stark regional differences in youth unemployment. Using data from 2015, EY found a seven percentage point gap in youth unemployment rates in the East of England and the North East, for example.<sup>91</sup>

The data available also shows how young adults face intense competition for both graduate and non-graduate roles. According to the Graduate Recruitment Survey 2015, for example, employers received an average of 75 applications for each graduate post;<sup>92</sup> while data from the National Apprenticeship Service shows there are around 12 applications for every apprenticeship place, and much higher in some sectors.<sup>93</sup> Yet these places are not even always being filled – employer attitudes towards the calibre of applicants is frequently a barrier.<sup>94</sup> This was not lost on some of our focus group participants: 'something I read the other

85. Birdwell, J, Scott, R and Reynolds, L *Character Nation*, Demos (2015) [https://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/476\\_1505\\_characternation\\_web.pdf](https://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/476_1505_characternation_web.pdf)

86. Ellison, G and Gammon, A *UK Next Generation: Research with UK undergraduates ages 19–21*, YouGov (2011) [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/uk\\_next\\_generation\\_2011\\_report.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/uk_next_generation_2011_report.pdf)

87. *Ibid.*

88. Office for National Statistics, 'Unemployment rate (aged 16 and over, seasonally adjusted)', 12 April 2017, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/timeseries/mgsx>; and House of Commons Library, 'Youth unemployment statistics', 12 April 2017, <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN05871>

89. EY, *Employment landscape for young people in the UK*, 2016, [www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/Employment\\_landscape\\_for\\_young\\_people\\_in\\_the\\_UK/\\$FILE/Employment%20landscape%20for%20young%20people%20in%20the%20UK%20-%20final%20report.pdf](http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/Employment_landscape_for_young_people_in_the_UK/$FILE/Employment%20landscape%20for%20young%20people%20in%20the%20UK%20-%20final%20report.pdf)

90. McGuiness, F 'Youth Unemployment Statistics', House of Commons Library, 2017, <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05871/SN05871.pdf>

91. EY, *Employment landscape for young people in the UK*. *Op cit.*

92. Kirton, H 'High proportion of graduate employers still can't fill vacancies, finds AGR', *People Management*, 27 January 2015, [www2.cipd.co.uk/pm/peoplemanagement/b/weblog/archive/2015/01/27/high-proportion-of-graduate-employers-still-can-t-fill-vacancies-finds-agr.aspx](http://www2.cipd.co.uk/pm/peoplemanagement/b/weblog/archive/2015/01/27/high-proportion-of-graduate-employers-still-can-t-fill-vacancies-finds-agr.aspx)

93. O'Leary, D and Wybron, I *The Commission on Apprenticeships*. *Op cit.*

94. Kirton, H 'High proportion of graduate employers still can't fill vacancies, finds AGR'. See also: EY, *Employment landscape for young people in the UK*. *Op cit.*



day that said an employer might spend five seconds looking at your CV... that's not gauging who you are' (Male, Leeds). Changing the negative attitudes of employers towards those leaving education was a priority for our Advisory Board. Many young adults are facing a situation where one disadvantage – feeling poorly prepared for work by the education system – is compounded by another, where employers focus on the deficits of school leavers.

Our focus groups across the UK, where we spoke to both students and people employed in a range of sectors, talked about the realities of job-seeking and routes into work. We found that young adults experience the pressure of looking for work in different ways. Unsurprisingly, for some being out of work is an extremely difficult and worrying time ('it's really depressing', 'demoralising', reflect common sentiments). In other cases, we found a sense of robust determination, and a feeling that opportunities for most people were not going to be accessed easily. Indeed, some participants framed the challenge of finding a job less around structural economic issues, and more to do with personal agency and overcoming personal barriers. The following quotes are illustrative:

**> *It taught me that resilience that I don't think I would have had if that was passed onto me on a plate. Knowing how hard I had to work for that means I'm so much more appreciative of it, and I can be 'I earned this, I worked hard to be where I am'. (Female, Coventry)***

**> *I think it's up to the individual. I've been rejected in the last two months from eight to twelve jobs that I spent hours on researching the company, everything... The first step to succeeding is failing, right? (Male, Coventry)***

A theme of our focus group in Glasgow, which had echoes in others, was that there was often a lot of choice of things to apply for, but not much 'actual opportunity', which could lead some to the dole. Frustrations with nepotism, a 'who you know' culture, and going to great lengths to 'stand out from the crowd' were also raised across the groups.

With evidence showing lack of skills and experience a key barrier to gaining employment,<sup>95</sup> our Advisory Board debated the value of some of the more controversial entry routes, particularly unpaid internships. While some spoke of unpaid internships as a valuable opportunity to gain experience, and needing to 'work your way up', others viewed it as a form of exploitation, pointing out that interns were often given endless mundane tasks which did not enable them to learn or develop their skills. Moreover, only a wealthier subset of the population could afford to work in this way for free. 'Ethical careers' was put forward as an important concept here, already championed by some employers and civil society organisations, but with a need for further clarification at the level of national conversation.

A further set of issues concern the quality of work young adults find themselves in. Many participants in our

focus groups discussed the low quality of the jobs available to them, including low pay, unsocial hours, and temporary or zero hours contracts. One participant in our Exeter focus group felt that working in this way was for him 'almost a requirement' to enter work for the first time.

The question of quality of work has received attention from researchers in a range of contexts. Firstly, the underemployment of graduates, with them often pursuing roles which do not make best use of their skills and which are frequently lower paid. In 2015 research by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) found that 59 per cent of graduates are in jobs deemed to be non-graduate roles.<sup>96</sup> The report also found that graduates taking up these roles had led to more employers requesting degrees for traditionally non-graduate roles, potentially creating new barriers for non-graduates seeking to enter the workforce. Secondly, the increase in atypical employment contracts and flexible work – with the rise of the so-called 'gig-economy' – appears to affect young people the most, bringing with it both risks and opportunities. Over half of the UK's gig economy workers are under 35.<sup>97</sup>

A number of participants in our focus groups raised the lack of career stability and clear progression routes, in contrast to previous generations, as reasons to be concerned. Our survey asked those in work about the stability of their jobs, and while the majority felt secure, we found that one in five working young adults did not (21 per cent). It is important to note, though, that our qualitative work found that where some young adults see insecurity, others see flexibility – an opportunity

95. REED in Partnership, 'Young people and unemployment: Our UK survey' (2010) [www.reedinpartnership.co.uk/media/174597/young%20people%20and%20employment%20-%20reed%20in%20partnership.pdf](http://www.reedinpartnership.co.uk/media/174597/young%20people%20and%20employment%20-%20reed%20in%20partnership.pdf)

96. CIPD, *Over-qualification and skills mismatch in the graduate labour market* (2015) [https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/over-qualification-and-skills-mismatch-graduate-labour-market\\_tcm18-10231.pdf](https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/over-qualification-and-skills-mismatch-graduate-labour-market_tcm18-10231.pdf)

97. Huws, U and Joyce, S 'Size of the UK's Gig Economy revealed for the first time', Foundation for European Progressive Studies (2016) [www.feps-europe.eu/assets/a82bcd12-fb97-43a6-9346-24242695a183/crowd-working-survey.pdf](http://www.feps-europe.eu/assets/a82bcd12-fb97-43a6-9346-24242695a183/crowd-working-survey.pdf)

to carve out a working life that works for them, working the hours they want to in the environments they thrive in, eschewing a nine to five regimen.

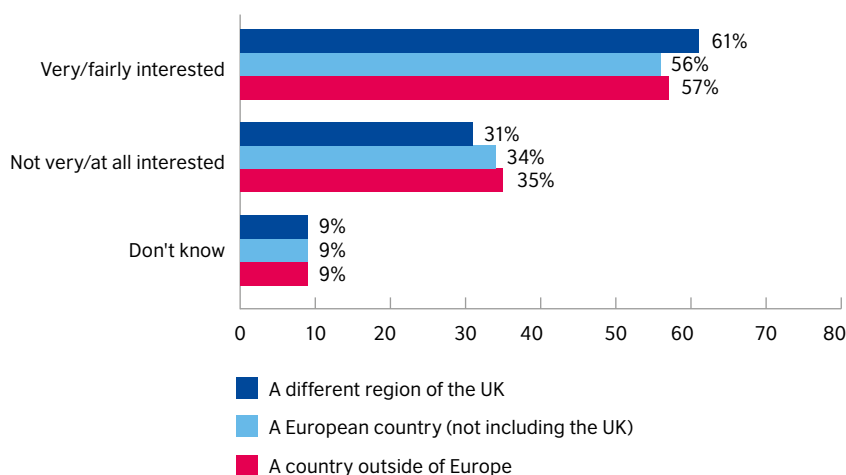
While young adults in our focus groups were clearly concerned by many elements of their working futures, there was also a striking sense of ambition. We found that a small number of participants were already running their own businesses, driven by the opportunities provided by technology, and others had ambitions to do so. Our research generally suggests that young adults perceive technology to be changing work opportunities for the better, with 54 per cent of survey respondents agreeing with this statement, and 12 per cent disagreeing – perhaps reflecting the advantages of a generation more digitally savvy than previous generations. Other research by EY and the Chartered Management Institute has found that as many as four in ten young people want to lead a company and are attracted to starting their own business;<sup>98</sup> while studies from Social Enterprise UK and the British Council also highlight the dynamic and growing opportunities for young social entrepreneurs in the UK.<sup>99</sup> Providing the supporting structures – in schools, universities, and elsewhere – for encouraging this entrepreneurial flair was also felt to be extremely important by our Advisory Board in their deliberations.

### Broadening horizons

Perhaps informed by uncertainty at home, our survey found that there is substantial appetite amongst young adults for broadening horizons and working in different places over the course of their careers: in another region of the UK, an EU country or country outside of Europe. The figure below summarises the results of the relevant survey question, showing that close to six in ten are interested in working in all three of these locations.

This is true across the regions of the UK, with a majority of young adults in each region interested in working in a different place, whether at home or abroad. While percentage point differences are small between groups, higher proportions of young adults living in London would be interested in living in another European country or a country outside of Europe.

**Figure 26:** In the future, to what extent would you be interested in working in...?

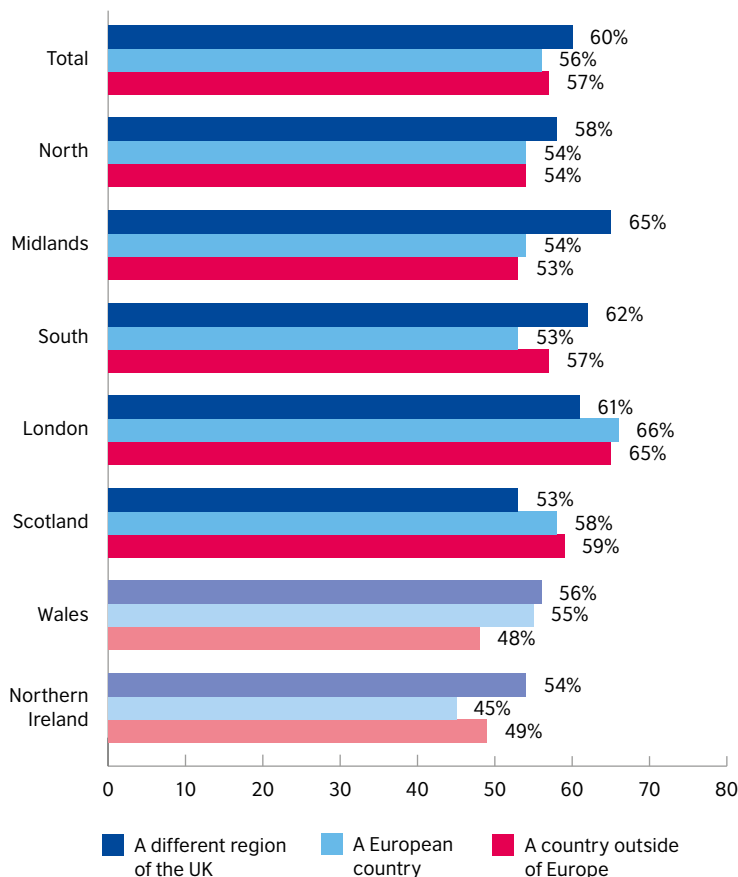


Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017.

98. EY, *An age of uncertainty: Young people's views on the challenge of getting into work in 21st century Britain*, (2016) [www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY-cmi-eyf-an-age-of-uncertainty-september-2016/\\$FILE/EY-cmi-eyf-an-age-of-uncertainty-september-2016.pdf](https://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY-cmi-eyf-an-age-of-uncertainty-september-2016/$FILE/EY-cmi-eyf-an-age-of-uncertainty-september-2016.pdf)

99. Villeneuve-Smith, F and Temple, N *State of Social Enterprise Survey 2015*, Social Enterprise UK (2015) <https://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/state-of-social-enterprise-report-2015>; see also: British Council, *Social enterprise in the UK*, (2015) [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/social\\_enterprise\\_in\\_the\\_uk\\_final\\_web\\_spreads.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/social_enterprise_in_the_uk_final_web_spreads.pdf)

**Figure 27:** Proportions of young adults interested in living in a different region of the UK, a European country, and a country outside of Europe: comparison across the UK



This appetite to spread wings was reflected to some extent in our focus groups, although those looking for work internationally tended to be in the minority. In line with findings explored in Chapter 1, there was a perception that the UK's decision to leave the EU would make it harder to move abroad for work. Speaking about the impact of Brexit, one participant said:

> *Many of my friends who are international speaking, like they speak European languages like German, French, Spanish etc. They wanted to go to companies in places like Berlin, and I do really sympathise with people that were going to use this opportunity, us being in the EU, to maximise their potential. (Male, London)*

Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017. Note Wales and Northern Ireland sample sizes too low for analysis (n<100), included here for at-a-glance comparison.

However, others speculated that opportunities for working abroad in countries outside the EU might increase as a result of Brexit. Furthermore, there is also a possibility that some young adults may see Brexit as a reason to move abroad. While none of our focus group participants identified leaving the EU as being the sole reason they would move abroad, some indicated that it might contribute to a broader feeling they have that the UK is a 'dead end place' where they do not fit. Indeed, a study completed at the beginning of 2017 found that six in ten young people polled would seek opportunities abroad within six months of 2017 – partly due to worries about the impact of triggering Article 50.<sup>100</sup> Earlier research conducted in 2011 for the Next Generation UK research programme, found a similar proportion of students (64 per cent) would be interested in working or volunteering in other countries.<sup>101</sup> Whether this translates into actual experience, however, is questionable: a gap clearly exists between appetite for this engagement and actual experience, as shown in our survey findings, including that only one in seven young adults have studied or worked abroad (see Chapter 1).

### Rewarding talent?

Stepping back from individual circumstances, our research also sought to get an impression of whether young adults feel that, broadly speaking, the UK is the type of society where skills and talents are the main drivers of professional success. Our focus groups indicated some suspicion around nepotism, and in the wider literature the UK is generally considered to have a poor social mobility record by international standards.<sup>102</sup> Our survey found this to be another divisive issue, as the following figure shows.

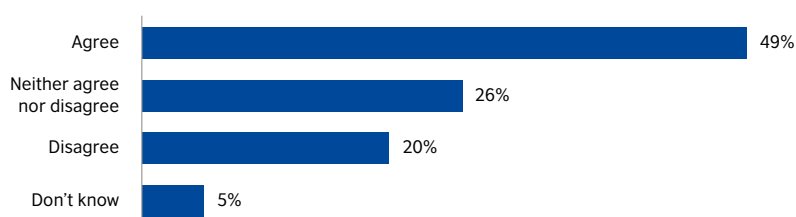
Thus, around half (49 per cent) of young adults think people's talents and abilities are the main cause of their success in the UK, though one in five (20 per cent) disagree. These proportions appear fairly consistent across different demographic groups, though those with higher income are more likely than those on lower incomes to think this is true.

### Optimism for the future

Finally, our research sought to understand what young adults think their long-term futures will look like. This included asking survey questions about how optimistic or pessimistic young adults are about their job prospects and life in general. We found that, notwithstanding the range of challenges and uncertainty faced by many young adults, they are generally quite optimistic about what their futures hold.

Once again, though, young adults are divided. Our survey found that just under half of young adults (48 per cent) were optimistic about their job prospects over the next five years, while just over a fifth (22 per cent) were pessimistic. Similarly, over half (54 per cent) of young adults are optimistic about how their lives will pan out in general, but one in five (19 per cent) are pessimistic. The rest were somewhere in the middle.

**Figure 28:** 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: people's talents and abilities are the main causes of their own professional success in the United Kingdom?'



Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017.

100. Magnet.me, 'Young people optimistic about jobs: weary about Brexit and economic instability', 8 January 2017, <https://newsroom.magnet.me/2017/01/08/young-people-optimistic-about-jobs.html>

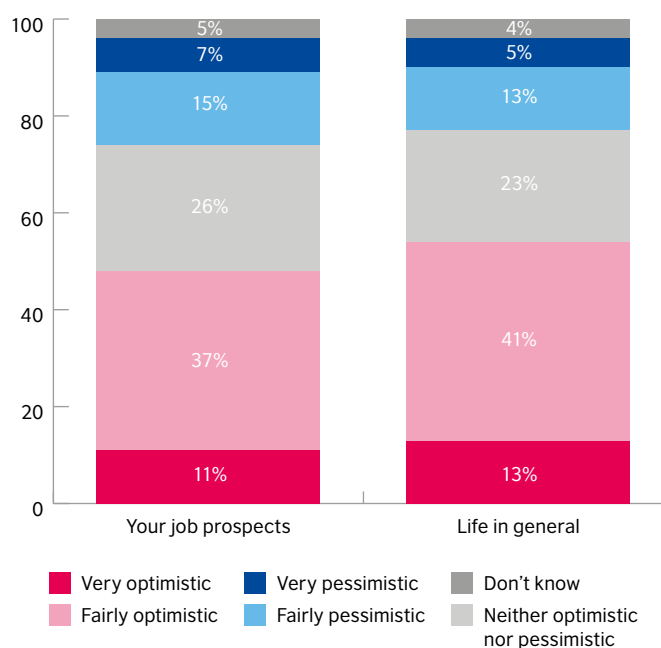
101. Ellison, G and Gammon, A *UK Next Generation: Research with UK undergraduates ages 19–21*.

102. OECD, 'A Family Affair: Intergenerational Social Mobility across OECD Countries' (2010) <https://www.oecd.org/eco/public-finance/chapter%205%20gfg%202010.pdf>

The underlying data suggests that some groups are more confident about their futures than others. In fitting with so much else in this report, those who are educated to a higher level, and whose parents were more highly educated, were more likely to be optimistic, along with people on higher incomes and of higher social grades. This fits with other research, including the government's 2014 Horizon Scanning Programme which found that young people from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to be optimistic about their future successes, and young people not in full time education, employment or training (NEET) less likely to think they would be successful.<sup>103</sup> Perhaps in line with their relatively higher level of confidence in the education system, our data also suggests men are more likely to be optimistic than women.

Other research on the optimism of young people for their futures has been mixed, suggesting this theme may be quite volatile and informed by a range of factors including recent political events.<sup>104</sup> While Deloitte's Consumer Tracker in January 2017 found the confidence of 18–34 year olds about job opportunities to be at the highest since 2011, another recent survey by recruitment agency Magnet.me found that Brexit and economic instability are making young people feel more nervous about their prospects (36 per cent and 29 per cent cited these factors as reasons to be less optimistic respectively).<sup>105</sup> While there are those left out of the optimism of their peers, for others much may change depending on what happens in light of the decision to leave the EU. As our Advisory Board felt, there is certainly no room for any complacency.

**Figure 29:** 'To what extent are you optimistic or pessimistic about each of the following over the next five years?'



Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18–30 across the UK (n=1,994). Ipsos MORI polling online and fieldwork conducted between 25 January and 7 February 2017. Due to rounding, percentages may not add up to 100.

103. Social Attitudes of Young People Community of Interest, 'Social attitudes of young people: A horizon scanning research paper' (2014) [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/389086/Horizon\\_Scanning\\_-\\_Social\\_Attitudes\\_of\\_Young\\_People\\_report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/389086/Horizon_Scanning_-_Social_Attitudes_of_Young_People_report.pdf)

104. Naidoo, F 'Youth optimistic about entrepreneurial ambitions', EY, 3 November 2015, [www.ey.com/za/en/newsroom/news-releases/news-ey-youth-optimistic-about-entrepreneurial-ambitions](http://www.ey.com/za/en/newsroom/news-releases/news-ey-youth-optimistic-about-entrepreneurial-ambitions); compare to: Young Women's Trust, '2016 Annual Survey: No Country for Young Women' (2016) [www.youngwomenstrust.org/nocountryforyoungwomen](http://www.youngwomenstrust.org/nocountryforyoungwomen)

105. Magnet.me, 'Young people optimistic about jobs: weary about Brexit and economic instability'.







# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the next two years Prime Minister Theresa May has promised that the government will secure a deal for the UK leaving the EU that works for all UK citizens.

In trying to heal some of the divisions exposed by the EU Referendum – including the rupture between the generations – the government will need to take the concerns and priorities of young people very seriously. There are promising signs of this – for example with the All Party Parliamentary Group on a Better Brexit for Young People,<sup>106</sup> and a range of civil society organisations contributing to providing young people with platforms to be heard.<sup>107</sup> But nonetheless, it remains to be seen how seriously young people's attitudes and aspirations will be taken – or whether decision makers and the media will revert to type, focusing on the deficit model that has long been the norm.

In this context, the British Council is seeking to provide a platform for young people to increase their engagement and visibility in important decisions at home and on the international stage. In exploring youth attitudes, aspirations, and engagement at a time of change, this report has outlined some priorities. First, promoting the outward-facing country that most young adults want. Second, building a positive and meaningful conception of British identity that makes sense to young people in a globalised world. Third, ensuring the benefits of globalisation are experienced by a greater number of young adults. Fourth, building on the political interest and will to engage of the majority of young adults, by 'going to where they are'. And fifth, reforming an education system so

that it provides the skills that young people need for the modern economy, and a labour market that allows people of different backgrounds to flourish.

Part of the challenge will be to focus on those who appear to have been 'left behind'. Our research has shown that young adults are of course a heterogeneous group. A common theme is that those with lower educational outcomes and from poorer backgrounds are simply not engaging internationally, politically, and in the labour market to the same levels as their wealthier and better educated peers. They demand attention.

## Recommendations

Our intention with this project was for recommendations based on the research to come from our Next Generation UK Advisory Board, rather than Demos or the British Council. Based on the research findings, Demos held a recommendations workshop with the Advisory Board. To help with generating recommendations, a series of 'problem statements' from the research were provided to Board members by Demos. These are summarised below.

### Problem statements provided to youth Advisory Board

1. Sixty-eight per cent of young people think an international outlook is important to achieve their goals. Yet international engagement is low for most, with 23 per cent reporting they have had no international experience at all. *How can institutions support young adults to engage with the rest of the world to support them in achieving their aspirations?*
2. The majority of young adults do not trust politicians, and have extremely low engagement in traditional politics. Yet 73 per cent think it is important for young adults to be engaged. *What needs to change in order for young adults to engage as active citizens?*
3. Sixty-three per cent of young adults get news from social media, yet a third think it is hard to tell the difference between truth and lies on such platforms. *How can we overcome the challenges of an age of (mis)information to engage with young adults on the issues that are important to them?*
4. Almost half of young adults (46 per cent) feel that their education has not prepared them well for the world of work, and almost a quarter feel pessimistic about their job prospects. *How can we ensure that good opportunities in education and work are available to all young adults?*

106. See: <https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmallparty/170106/better-brexit-for-young-people.htm>

107. See for example: Barker, AR 'Young people must have voice on Brexit!', Covi (2016) [www.covi.org.uk/young-people-must-voice-brexit/](http://www.covi.org.uk/young-people-must-voice-brexit/)

While many ideas were deliberated – some of which appear in the preceding chapters – the following recommendations have been developed based on the areas subject to most agreement by Advisory Board members.

*To enhance international engagement:*

**Recommendation one:**

**The government should provide clear assurances during the Brexit negotiation period on protecting and securing opportunities for young adults travelling, working, and studying abroad.**

Board members echoed widespread concern amongst young adults in our research that opportunities to travel, work and study in Europe will suffer as a result of the UK leaving the EU. The continued financial viability of doing so (already a barrier perceived by some young adults), future rights and protections within EU countries as students or workers, and visa requirements, have all become uncertain at this point in the negotiations. Our research shows both the appetite for greater opportunities among young adults and the significance of these opportunities in enhancing employability and intercultural skills.

**Recommendation two:**

**Employers, careers advisers, education providers, and civil society organisations should commit to a culture of lifelong international engagement, widening the scope of international work and study partnerships.**

The benefits of studying, working, or volunteering abroad are not just valuable for younger people still in education or at the beginning of their careers, but rather throughout their life course. 'Lifelong exchanges' was a term used by our Advisory Board, with an emphasis on international partnerships between schools and between employers at home and abroad. Also felt to be important is for stakeholders involved in brokering these lifelong exchanges to take measures to ensure opportunities are sufficiently tailored to attract people from a full range of backgrounds and motivations.

*To re-engage young adults in politics:*

**Recommendation three:**

**Departments with responsibility for education in England and in the devolved administrations should review the delivery of politics and citizenship education nationally with a view to ensuring all students have good quality provision.**

The evidence points to patchy provision of politics and citizenship education in schools across the UK, and that it is often based on knowledge-transfer rather than the development of skills and political agency. The Board felt that departments for education across the UK should be exploring best practice

in engaging school pupils in these topics, looking at how a 'practical' political and citizenship education can be embedded into curricula, including harnessing the potential for greater social action and campaigning in schools as well as meaningful interactions with decision makers.

**Recommendation four:**

**Local councillors and other elected officials should increase visibility and engagement, ensuring they are 'going to where young people are' through face-to-face meetings and new online forums.**

'Starting local' to increase political engagement is a theme of our research. There was a perception amongst the Advisory Board that local government officials can be 'intimidating' for young people, operating in ways and speaking a language that is not always understood – despite the fact that many young people want to be involved in community decisions. Much of the evidence collated in this report points to a similar disconnect between other elected officials including MPs and young adults. Increasing the frequency of meetings between young people and officials in different venues (including schools), and improving information channels (including online forums), were put forward by the Board as ways to help rebuild connections.



**Recommendation five:**  
**Local government should review processes for local citizen engagement, to increase opportunities for young people to vote on decisions affecting their local areas.**

Related to the previous recommendation, our Board was agreed on the importance of increasing voting on local decision making. Recent referendums may have rejuvenated interest in voting on more political decisions, with our survey finding the most commonly cited factor given by young adults for increasing engagement was the ability to vote on more decisions – at local and national level. While some provisions do exist in statute for local referendums and other advisory polls, part of the challenge in engaging young people will be providing greater clarity and information about what are often diffuse and complex rules and regulations.

*To support young adults in education and work:*

**Recommendation six:**  
**The government should review how the changing labour market may be increasing the vulnerabilities of young adults to exploitation, championing ethical routes into work and positive career pathways for young adults.**

Our research found that young people entering the labour market have an extremely diverse range of experiences,

and different attitudes towards what constitutes a 'good' route in or fair treatment by employers. The Board agreed that it would be helpful for government to lead a conversation about 'ethical' career pathways for young people and ensuring all young adults are set up for success.

**Recommendation seven:**  
**Professionals working in the education system should ensure that building the resilience of young people – social, emotional, and financial – is embedded at all levels.**

Research for this report has highlighted that many young adults feel they leave the education system feeling unprepared for life in and outside of work. Our Board felt the need for a rebalancing of the education system, away from a narrow focus on examinations and academic routes, and towards embedding wider life skills in the school curriculum as well as in colleges, universities, and other educational establishments. Chief amongst the skills highlighted is resilience, so that young people develop robustness to the challenges of modern life and work.



# > APPENDIX: SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYSIS

Social media represents an important public forum for young people to discuss, complain and joke about the issues that concern them.

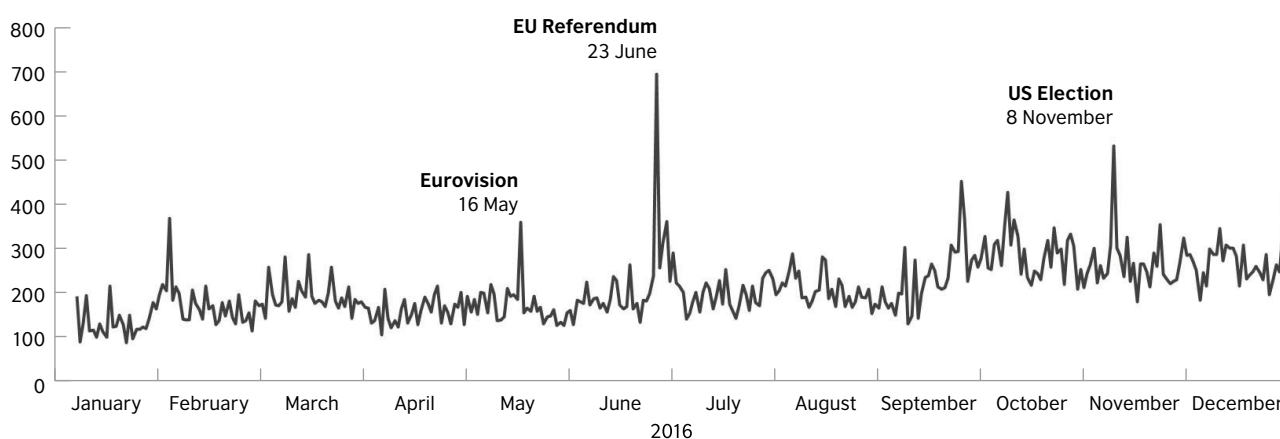
Since much of the data published on social media sites is freely and publicly available to researchers, it also represents a valuable opportunity to investigate the issues that young people are discussing in public, expressed in their own words and without the potentially altering effects introduced through responding to an official survey.

In order to better understand the issues young people were raising on social media, Demos asked respondents to our main survey whether they would be happy for us to collect and analyse any publicly available Twitter posts made during 2016. Using Twitter's public application programming interface (API), we were able to collect 77,312 tweets from 152 users. These were then analysed using innovative computational techniques to discern what respondents' posts on Twitter could tell us about three of the themes addressed in this study: the UK's place in the world, political and social engagement, and opportunities in education and work. We also conducted a detailed case study investigating views expressed on the UK's membership of the EU.

A fuller exploration of our research is included below, but some of the noteworthy findings are as follows:

- Automated analytical techniques were able to discern nuanced political conversation within our dataset, and were able to reduce a very large and noisy dataset into a series of tweets relevant to our themes.
- Many young adults within the dataset were politically engaged, with varying degrees of activity. While a small number of active users dominated the political discussion, our evidence suggests that a majority – over 70 per cent – of users tweeted about ongoing political events, whether through commentary, sharing news stories, or making jokes.
- Political discussion showed a large amount of negativity towards establishment politicians, in particular those associated with the Conservative party and/or Brexit.
- Discussions of the EU Referendum showed a strong pro-Remain sentiment. However, both sides displayed common traits of negativity towards the opposing side; reaction to topical events; relating the EU Referendum to discussion of national partisan politics; and broadcasting material rather than engaging in dialogue.
- Many users also reacted to international political events beyond the EU Referendum, in particular the refugee crisis and the election of Donald Trump.



**Figure 1:** Tweets collected over time.

Source: Next Generation UK 2017 survey, young adults aged 18-30 across the UK who agreed to participate in Twitter analysis (n=152).

### Social media analysis for Next Generation UK

Of the 2,000 respondents to the Next Generation UK survey, 198 agreed to allow Demos to collect and analyse their publicly available tweets. While a small amount of data relating to gender, region and age was requested along with users' Twitter handles, no Twitter data was linked to other information collected through the survey. Using Twitter's public API, we collected 77,312 tweets sent by 152 users during 2016 – 46 users were found not to have tweeted during 2016. A volume over time graph of tweets collected is included in Figure 1.

As Demos has found in previous studies,<sup>108</sup> Twitter is a highly reactive medium, and the 'spikes' seen in the graph above are often caused by offline events. To investigate these, researchers used the visualisation platform Qlik to build an interactive dashboard enabling us to examine characteristic tweets, hashtags and images shared within each 'spike'.

We found that real world events had indeed provoked some of the large reactions in our datasets. By far the most prominent was the reaction to the UK's decision to leave the EU. A total of 698 tweets were sent on 24 June 2016, the day following the EU Referendum. Users also reacted visibly to the election of Donald Trump in November. Not all of these spikes were driven by politics – 362 tweets were sent on the evening of the Eurovision Song Contest, broadcast on 16 May 2016.

### Approaching the dataset

Our collection process resulted in a broad dataset of comment from a diverse range of voices – the set contained tweets from every region of the UK, with every age from 18–30 represented by at least six users.

The average user sent 509 tweets over the year. However, we found that this collection contained some extremely active Twitter users. Over 50 per cent of tweets were sent by only 12 per cent of users, with the 11 most prolific users each sending an average of between five and six tweets per day during 2016.

While the size and breadth of this collection represents a valuable research opportunity, in that it represents a relatively broad cross-section of young adults in the UK, this aspect of the data also poses an analytical challenge. At over 77,000 tweets, the dataset is far too large for manual analysis. We addressed this issue by using a combination of computational approaches.

### Topic modelling

The first approach, topic modelling, involves using an algorithm to process a large body of text, and produce lists of terms of words that are commonly used together. This technique has the potential to highlight coherent conversations and topics of discussion within a large body of text, without requiring human analysts to read through and annotate a random sample by hand. Since the categories are produced automatically, without input on expected themes from the user, researchers are less likely to find 'what they expected to find' – though it should be noted that human bias may

108. See for example: Miller, C and Smith, J *Islamophobia on Twitter*, Demos (2016) <https://www.demos.co.uk/project/islamophobia-on-twitter/>



- Colours indicate different word classes, which are collections of words that frequently occur closely together but rarely with words from other classes.
- The position of the word classes on the graph shows how similar the classes are to one another; two classes that are positioned next to one another contain words which are relatively likely to appear close together, though not likely enough to be placed in the same class.
- The size of the word indicates how 'characteristic' it is of that class; large words are very likely to occur alongside other words from that class and very unlikely to occur alongside words from other classes. Any words referring to individual users or judged to contain other personal information have been removed.
- The percentage values show what proportion of the original text are labelled by Iramuteq as belonging to each class.

Figure 2 shows three distinct classes, which we have given the headings *politics*, *promotions*, and *miscellaneous*. The politics class features named politicians ('Cameron', 'Corbyn', 'Owen2016') alongside terms such as 'Brexit' and 'NHS'. The promotions class is dominated by terms such as 'RT' (retweet), 'follow', 'win', and 'competition'. The miscellaneous class features a wide range of terms drawn from various aspects of everyday life.

Conversation about these topics was unevenly distributed amongst users. The table below shows the percentage of text contributed by each individual tweeter to each class.

Figure 3: Percentage of each user's tweets belonging to each class

	Per cent tweeter's text	0 per cent	1-5 per cent	6-10 per cent	11-50 per cent	50-100 per cent
Number of users (152 total)	Politics	28	45	34	42	3
	Promotion	60	69	5	10	8
	Miscellaneous	0	0	0	18	133

This analysis suggests that many users talk about politics to some extent – 71 per cent of users sent at least one tweet labelled 'politics', and many users have substantial proportions of their tweets labelled with this class. By contrast, very few users sent high numbers of tweets labelled 'promotions'. This suggests that political topics are diffused throughout the conversations of many users, while only a few used Twitter for sharing promotional material. Of these, three users have over 80 per cent of their tweets classified as 'promotion', suggesting that they use Twitter almost entirely for this purpose.

This analysis suggests that users are discussing politics within our dataset. However, topic modelling can be a blunt tool when it comes to classification, and text labelled by Iramuteq as 'politics' may not always concern political discussion; it is likely to contain tweets about birthdays rather than political parties, for example. A closer, more accurate look at the themes using NLP and keyword analysis follows.

Sorting tweets into themes using Method52

Within our collection, we wanted to identify the activity and conversations relevant to the larger project. These were:

The UK's place in the world

This category includes discussion on the UK's exit from the EU and was designed to capture other discussion related to the UK's international politics, including immigration, trade and the country's place within the EU.

General political discussion

This category was chosen to provide a measure of respondents' general political engagement. It includes discussion concerning UK political parties, mentions of involvement with a political campaign or movement, and tweets implying that people had or were planning to vote. Since Brexit was prominently discussed in political terms, the decision was taken to include tweets that mentioned it both in this category and within 'The UK's place in the world'.

## Opportunities in education and work

This category aimed to identify young people tweeting about their experiences in education and employment, as well as capturing their views on opportunities in these areas.

In order to categorise tweets, researchers first assembled a list of keywords relevant to each theme. These were designed to cast a wide net over each topic, providing a large, potentially noisy set of tweets. Keywords used are listed in the technical notes at the end of this chapter.

Keywords can be an unreliable guide as to whether a topic is actually being discussed. For example, identifying tweets containing the word 'vote' will not allow you to distinguish between users discussing their intentions to vote in the EU Referendum from those discussing their intention to vote in the Eurovision Song Contest. To determine whether tweets containing keywords were relevant to our themes, researchers built a series of natural language processing (NLP) classifiers. This classification is conducted using a platform called Method52, developed by Demos in partnership with the University of Sussex.

In order to build a classifier, a human analyst first manually classifies a sample of tweets (all of which contain a relevant keyword) as either 'relevant' or 'irrelevant'. Based on the analyst's decisions, Method52 'learns' to make these classifications on a much larger number of tweets. A sample of Method52's decisions are then checked by the analyst, refining the programme's accuracy further. This process is discussed in detail in the technical notes below, which also contains accuracy scores for each classifier used in this study.

**Figure 4:** Tweets classified by theme

Theme	Number of tweets containing a relevant keyword	Number of tweets classified as relevant
Politics	4,233	2,095 (49%)
The UK's place in the world	1,093	910 (83%)
Education and employment	2,244	1,832 (82%)

For each theme, a classifier was trained to determine whether tweets were relevant or irrelevant to that theme. These classifiers were then used to process all tweets containing a theme-relevant keyword, assigning tweets to each of our three categories in the following volumes:

NLP classification is inherently probabilistic, and it is likely that a number of tweets within each category will have been wrongly assigned. Method52 allows researchers to measure the probable extent of this misclassification. We found that in general the classifiers trained for this study performed well, achieving accuracies between 74 per cent and 84 per cent for the 'relevant' label for each theme.

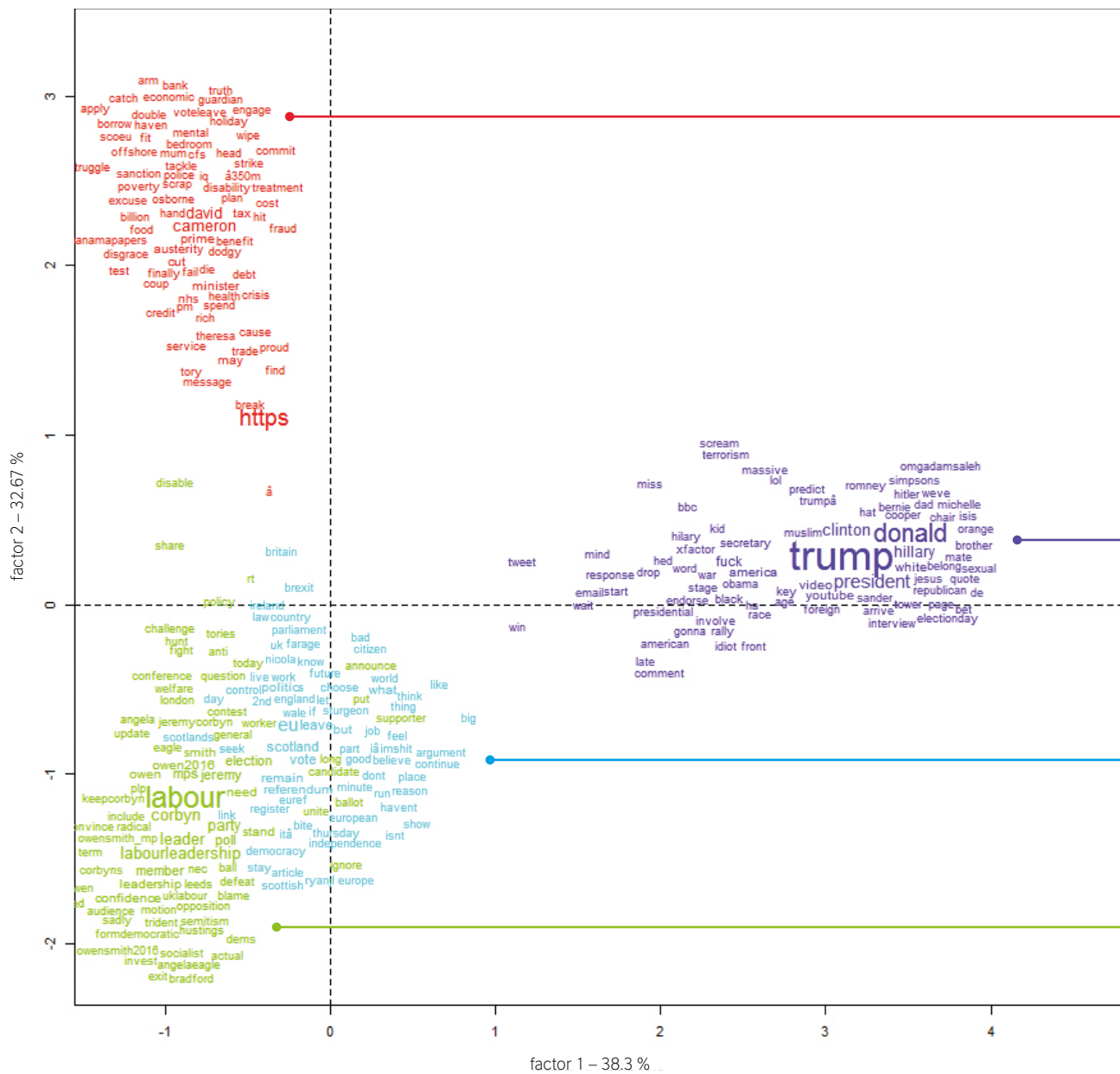
## What are people tweeting about within these themes?

The classifiers built above produced three datasets, containing tweets relevant to the UK's place in the world, politics, and education and work. We then used topic modelling to understand what was being said about each of these topics. We begin with politics as the largest dataset.

## Politics

Researchers took the 2,095 tweets classified by Method52 under 'politics', and used Iramuteq to sort the words within them into classes. Figure 5 displays the classes which Iramuteq produced. As in Figure 2, we have added callouts displaying the proportion of the text belonging to each class. In addition, we have also listed the ten 'most characteristic' words from each class, as these give an impression of exactly what is being talked about within each class. For details of how Iramuteq calculates the most characteristic words see the technical note at the end of the report. As before, the names of the classes are not part of Iramuteq's output, and have been added by researchers after considering the words within the classes.

Figure 5: Iramuteq output from tweets within 'politics' classes





**Conservatives, 32 per cent**

https\*  
Cameron  
David  
Prime  
Austerity  
Minister  
Tax  
May  
NHS  
Cut

**USA, 16 per cent**

Trump  
Donald  
President  
Clinton  
Hillary  
Fuck  
Youtube  
Video  
America  
White

**EU, 34 per cent**

EU  
Leave  
Scotland  
Vote  
Politics  
Referendum  
Remain  
But  
What  
Brexit

**Labour, 19 per cent**

Labour  
Corbyn  
Leader  
Labourleadership  
Party  
Election  
Jeremy  
MPs  
Poll  
Member

\* = this term appears as it is present in links to external sites

We checked our choice of headings by looking at the most characteristics tweets of each class. As with all quoted tweets in this paper, the following examples have been bowdlerised – wordings have been changed while preserving meaning. This measure is designed to protect the privacy of their authors by preventing the original tweeter from being identified through a web search.

*Conservatives:*

> *Prime Minister David Cameron is to quit in the wake of Brexit 'The Country requires fresh leadership'.*

*Labour:*

> *MPs table motion of no confidence in leader of the UK Labour Party Jeremy Corbyn.*

*EU:*

> *96% sure I'm voting remain in this referendum because of the xenophobia the leave campaign have manifested.*

*USA:*

> *Enough about Clinton and Trump can Mark Del Figgalo be our next president instead.*

There are three main take-away messages from Figure 5 and the list of characteristic tweets. Firstly, users discussed a range of political topics as well as events. While the two major news stories of 2016, the EU Referendum and the election of Donald Trump, feature in the dataset, they do not feature more prominently than ongoing issues of national, partisan politics.

Secondly, the overlap between the EU and Labour clusters suggests that these issues were often discussed within the

same tweets. It should be noted, however, that in other Iramuteq analyses on the same tweets, the Conservatives and Labour clusters swapped places; i.e., the EU cluster overlapped with the Conservatives, with 'Labour' appearing as an independent cluster. Overall, this indicates that the EU Referendum was often discussed alongside issues relating to both major UK political parties. By contrast, the US election was discussed largely separately from UK politics.

Thirdly, political topics were talked about in a wide variety of ways. This can be seen in the characteristic tweets above – the Labour and Conservative examples are reports of news stories, the EU example is a personal response, and the USA example is a joke referencing the television show *Zoey 101*. Looking at the tweets which fell into each class, we saw that this variety appeared within each class.

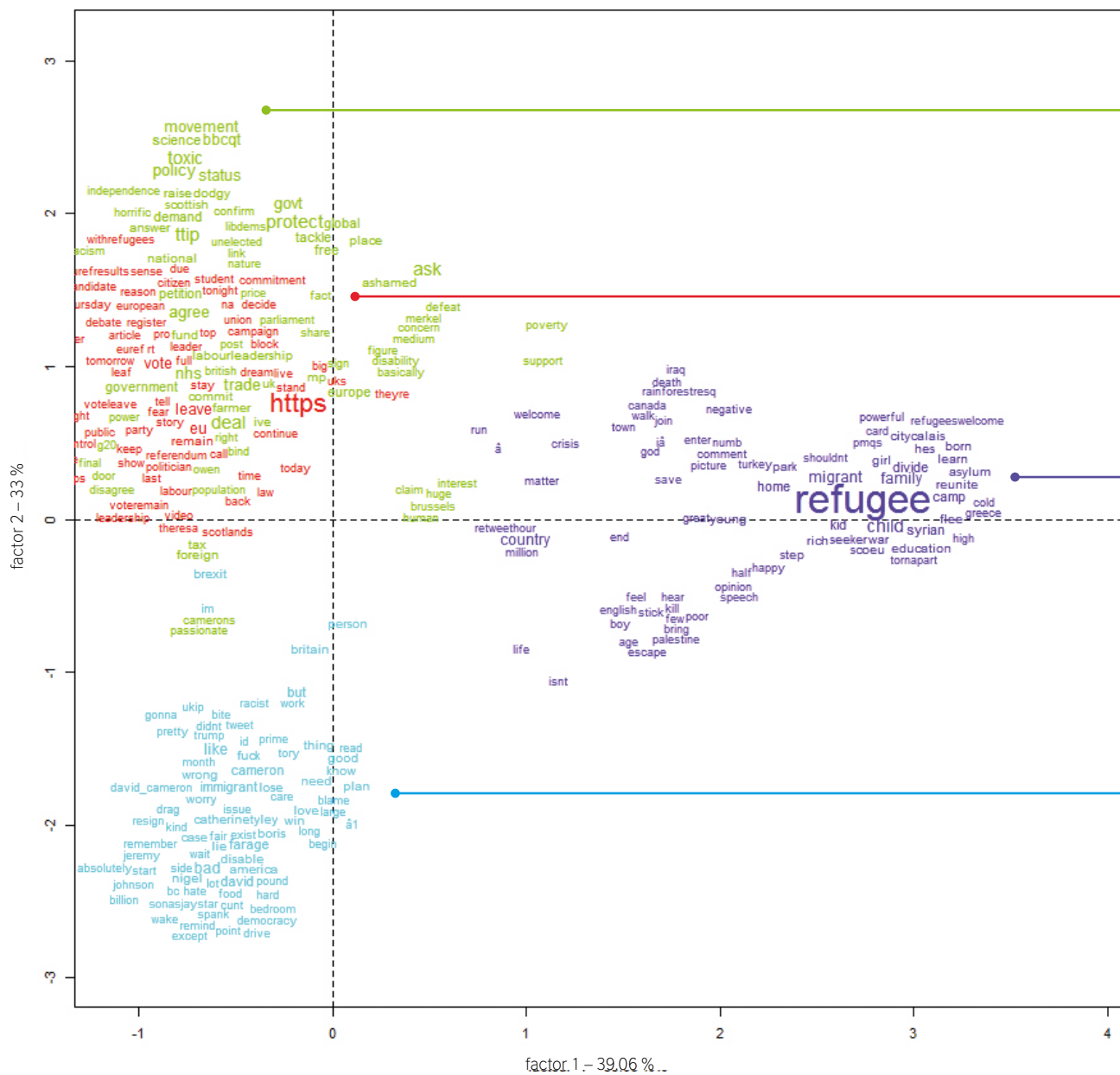
Looking at the tweets which fell into each class also allowed us to see how different types of users, with varying levels of Twitter activity, discussed politics. We found that each of the classes was dominated by particularly active users, but that this was markedly more pronounced for the party political classes. For example a single user sent 41 per cent of the tweets within the 'Labour' class, with similar results within the 'Conservative' class. However, the picture for the EU and US classes is of a larger number of people tweeting a few times about these topics.

Taken together, these findings show that users reacted to the major topical events of the EU Referendum and the US election in different ways. At one extreme, a large number of generally apolitical users paid brief attention to these topics, perhaps giving brief personal thoughts, sharing a news story, or making topical jokes. At the other extreme, strongly party-political users incorporated discussions of the EU Referendum – though less frequently the US election – into their existing partisan tweeting.

### The UK's place in the world

The 910 tweets classified as relevant to 'the UK's place in the world' produced the following Iramuteq output:

**Figure 6:** Characteristic terms within 'the UK's place in the world' classes



**Petitioning, 7 per cent**

Protect  
TTIP  
Deal  
Ask  
Toxic  
NHS  
Trade  
Agree  
Govt  
Policy

**Neutral, 43 per cent**

https  
EU  
Leave  
Vote  
Remain  
Reason  
Register  
Stay  
Article  
Referendum

**Refugee, 21 per cent**

Refugee  
Child  
Country  
Migrant  
Family  
Kid  
Syrian  
Home  
Divide  
Camp

**Anti-rightwing, 28 per cent**

Like  
Bad  
Immigrant  
Farage  
Cameron  
David  
But  
Brexit  
Lie  
Need

Choosing headings for these classes was a more difficult task than for the politics tweets. One class clearly consists of terms related to the refugee crisis. For the class labelled 'petitioning', inspection of the most characteristic tweets showed that this class largely consisted of copy-pasted phrases such as 'ask your MP to support the TTIP amendment to the Queen's speech' and 'I've asked the govt to protect the status of EU nationals'. The final two classes involved more consideration; it is worth briefly outlining our reasoning for these labels, as they played a strong role in our interpretation of the findings.

The class we have labelled 'anti-rightwing' mixes Brexit references with the names of prominent rightwing politicians who were leading figures in the EU Referendum, in addition to negative language such as 'lie' and 'bad' – expanding the list to the top 20 most characteristic words, we also see terms such as 'Nigel', 'Boris', and 'fuck'. This is a contrast to the 'neutral' class, which features more depersonalised referendum-related terms and fewer clearly polarised or emotive words. Looking at characteristic tweets corroborates this polarised/neutral distinction. For 'anti-rightwing' the most characteristic tweets consist largely of personal responses to Brexit:

> *Cameron resigns after destroying the NHS, taking poor and disabled back to the Victorian age and leading the Brexit disaster.*

> *By far the worst thing about this is that it outright means we have no say on issues we care about like EU and Trident.*

> *I could never join forces with xenophobes like Nigel Farage.*

By contrast, 'neutral' tweets referred largely to news stories, often (though not always) presented without a clear stance.

These outputs corroborate those from the 'politics' theme, in that national politics and the EU Referendum were often discussed together, while other international stories – in this case, the refugee crisis – were discussed separately. In addition, we were interested as to the appearance of a particularly polarised anti-rightwing class within this theme. As in 'politics', we found a small number of prolific users dominating this class, and tying a strong antipathy towards Brexit to their general dislike of right-wing UK politicians. For instance, David Cameron's resignation prompted much criticism of the legacy he would leave for an austerity-era UK, in particular the NHS.

However, this class was not solely composed of such active and polarised users; of respondents tweeting about the UK's place in the world, 46 (out of 68) had some of their tweeting classified as 'anti-rightwing'. Again, we found that the less politically active users threaded comments on Brexit through discussions of other topics; such as 'watching a 6 hour Escape to the Country marathon bc apparently I'm an old woman now – heated arguments about the EU Referendum in the Leeson Richards household' or '@[username redacted] voteremain if you want newcastle to be able to buy good players justsayin'. We also found that this class contained some, though few, expressions of pro-rightwing or anti-EU sentiment; for example, 'Brexit will be good for Britain and is starting to deliver', sent by a user who also shared a story from the rightwing Breitbart news site.

The fact that this variety produced, in aggregate, a class which indicated antipathy towards rightwing politicians (and their influence on the EU Referendum result) suggested that the users tended towards anti-rightwing, anti-Brexit sentiment. We built on this suggestion by returning to Method52

and producing a more detailed classification of Brexit-related tweets; this will be discussed in a separate section.

### Education and work

Finally, researchers used Iramuteq to process tweets concerning education and work. This theme was much less focused than the previous two, and researchers had difficulty in discerning clear distinctions between the classes, potentially due to the lack of distinctive terms or names, such as 'Brexit' or 'Corbyn'. Instead these discussions were dominated by terms which often occur in everyday conversation, such as 'class' and 'work'. These terms are likely to be used in varying ways across multiple contexts, and have many synonyms.

Due in part to this lack of focus, we found it difficult to automatically identify tweets mentioning opportunities in education and employment. This does not mean the topic was not discussed; during the process of training the relevancy classifier for this topic, researchers noted users commenting on the difficulty of finding work or a place at university, for example, or mentioning apprenticeship schemes to which they had been accepted. This discussion, however, was greatly outweighed by users employing similar language to complain about their work day, or their exam timetable. While it is likely that further classifiers could be trained to distinguish between these conversations, a decision was taken to focus on the two political topics above.

### What are young adults saying about Brexit?

Comment on the UK Referendum on membership of the EU provoked a noticeable spike in our collection, and featured prominently in two of the topics analysed above. In order to better understand the conversations young adults were having around Brexit, we compiled a focused list of keywords (listed below) which were highly likely to be used in reference to the EU

**Figure 7:** Themes related to Brexit

Classification	Number of tweets classified
Anti-Brexit	181 (50%)
Pro-Brexit	24 (7%)
Comments	117 (33%)
Unclear	37 (10%)

Referendum, and identified 359 tweets containing more of these terms. Since this number was relatively low, these were annotated into categories by hand, resulting in the following division of tweets:

#### Anti-Brexit

This category referred to tweets which encouraged voting Remain, or suggested negative characteristics of Brexit and/or Brexiteers. It was the most commonly applied category, accounting for 50 per cent of the set. This is in line with findings from other studies that young people were more likely to support Remain, though online activity cannot be treated as a straightforward proxy for offline distribution of opinion.

Many of these Tweets expressed unease at potential ramifications of the vote, and/or dislike of prominent politicians such as David Cameron, Theresa May, Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage. Though Cameron and May technically supported Remain, their willingness to instigate and/or go along with results of the EU Referendum attracted much criticism from Remainers.

> *UK has veto over EU decisions that affect us. If we leave, we'll be bound by rules with no say. Vote Leave and Lose Control #c4debate*

> *I'm a remainer because if Boris Johnson, Michel Gove & Nigel Farage think we should leave it's probably a better idea to stay!*

Another common theme was expressions of personal, emotional responses to the process and/or result of the EU Referendum:

> *Lay awake into early hours last night with the fear that post referendum UK is going to be TERRIBLE for freelancers.*

Alongside these serious expressions of dislike were a small number of anti-Brexit jokes. These included stereotypes of Leave supporters:

> *this is England '16 = Combo sitting on a computer tweeting "BREXIT MEANS BREXIT" every 15 minutes to the BBC News.*

> *From the Independent: 'The Mail has explained what Brexit means and its readers seem shocked'.*

More commonly, jokes consisted of humorously negative responses to ongoing political events. These included the vote itself, but also various other EU-related events and a spike following the election of Donald Trump. Many also linked Brexit to less clearly political topics, such as the X Factor and the effect on movement of international football.

> *BRITAIN: Brexit is the worst, most suicidal act a country could do. USA: Here, hold my beer.*

> *'The four horsemen of the apocalypse: Trump, Tories, Brexit and Toblerone'*

Of tweets classed as anti-Brexit, 105 included either an external link and/or a hashtag, and notably few seemed to be responding directly to other users. This suggests that Twitter was largely used by anti-Brexit respondents as a reactive, broadcasting medium prompted by topical events, rather than as a medium for dialogue.

#### Pro-Brexit

In this category are tweets that displayed a clear positive outlook towards Brexit and/or a negative attitude towards Remainers. These were considerably less numerous than the anti-Brexit tweets, accounting for less than 10 per cent of the data.

One recurring theme was an argument that perceptions of Leave supporters were unfairly negative. Sometimes the blame for this portrayal was laid on the Leave campaign:

> *the vote leave campaign is horrendous like be quiet about UK values and immigrants when there are loads of better arguments for leaving.*

However, on other occasions this was tied to criticism of Remain supporters:

> *brexit voted for by people that didn't understand what's wrong with EU? Take ur normative assumptions and f\*\*\* off mate*

> *From the Gdn: 'Ignore the prophets of doom. Brexit will be good for Britain and is starting to deliver'. [link]*

On the few occasions when users provided positive arguments for leaving, they tended to relate to questions of the EU's over-reaching power and lack of democratic accountability; there were no clear references to controlling borders or the financial cost of EU membership. Two users criticised the EU on the grounds of unfairly limiting international trade and migration:

> *freedom of movement inside the EU discriminates against those outside it*

> *This article shows how Brexit would give a great opportunity for changing how we think about multinationals for the benefit of everyone.*

There was notably little evidence of celebration on the day of the EU Referendum itself; no jokes, and only two clear expressions of emotion:

> *I really hope so!! The sooner we trigger Article 50 the better [link]*

> *I can tell you, I'll be cross if we stay in the EU #VoteLeave*

Both of these are future-oriented and defined by opposition to the EU, rather than positively reacting to the Leave victory. Given that many Pro-Brexit tweets were engaged in mitigating anti-Leave perceptions, this could be read as users not wishing to risk antagonising Remainers with jokes and/or jubilation. More clearly, it is apparent that rhetoric on both sides of the debate was heavily shaped by negative characterisation of ongoing events and/or the opposing side.

#### Unclear

These were tweets which suggested a partisan attitude, but in a direction which could not be clearly discerned – often due to only seeing a single tweet within a longer conversation. Many of these tweets tied the Leave or Remain campaigns to certain political or social attitudes, but without expressing a view on those attitudes:

> *explain again how supporting remain is just so left wing.*

> *Honestly, it takes special people to read about hurt people lying in the street and instantly think "Brexit, HAH!"*

> *there are good reasons to vote for leaving but all those I know personally aren't voting for those good reasons.*



The emergence of this category encouraged us to not categorise tweets into pro or anti-Brexit unless we could clearly determine attitudes towards Brexit. The relative scarcity of these Tweets – 37 out of 359 – illustrates the clear partisanship of much referendum-related tweeting within the dataset.

### Comments

This category referred to tweets that mentioned Brexit without expressing personal views (or only expressing neutral views such as ‘interesting’) on Brexit itself. A large proportion of these tweets (61 out of 117) involved sharing links to other media, or referenced less political aspects of everyday life:

> *‘Collins named ‘Brexit’ as word of the year. If they had any spirit, they’d just put... Brexit (noun): Brexit.*

> *If we leave EU do we get a 2016 leavers hoodie*

> *getting into debates about the EUref on tinder is my new hobby*

Finally, there were six calls to register to vote in the EU Referendum, without expressing a partisan view. This could potentially be related to other media outlets and social networking sites, most notably Facebook, encouraging young people to vote. However, it should be noted that none of the users explicitly referenced either these campaigns or the notion that young people are seen as politically disengaged.

### Conclusions

Within the context of the broader Next Generation report, analysis of Twitter was able to corroborate and develop on findings from focus groups and surveys. We were also able to develop suggestions relating to the analysis of political discussion on social media,

particularly around the combination of automatic topic modelling and researcher-directed keyword analysis.

Through topic modelling we were able to establish that political discourse is a clear and distinctive topic of conversation, which was participated in by many respondents. It was also able to supply us with the topics and language which respondents used to discuss politics, with the unsupervised nature of Iramuteq suggesting that these findings were not simply products of our own interest in political discussion. However, researcher-directed classification was necessary to pick apart the details of these political discussions – in particular, to establish the sentiments and polarisations within political discourse.

There are limitations to this combined approach. Both topic modelling and researcher-directed classification are reliant on distinctive words. This was of use in isolating political discourse, which involved many particular names and topic-specific terms, but made examination of discussions about education and employment, which tended to employ far more generic language, fairly difficult. There are also risks to relying solely on computer-aided text analysis methods. In particular, categories built up from unusually active participants can be less effective at picking up more diffuse and everyday contributions. Whether this impacts an investigation will depend on whether the researcher is interested in locating particularly active participants, or in creating a representative picture of general participation. Either way, it is advisable to engage with the original text, as we have above, in addition to using computerised tools.

Overall, however, we feel that automated techniques have the potential to allow researchers to determine nuanced topics within large, noisy datasets, which could be used to better understand conversations within them or inform future research.

### Technical notes

The following section describes in more detail the software used in this study, and the ways in which they were applied to our datasets.

#### Iramuteq

Iramuteq analysis proceeds through a series of stages:

1. Firstly, the text is divided up into a series of short segments. The programme looks for pairs of words that frequently appear in the same text segment, and pairs which rarely appear in the same text segment. These are used to collect lists of words that commonly occur in the same text segments – these lists form classes of words.
2. Initially the programme only produces two classes. It then runs the same analysis on each class to see if it can break it down into another pair of classes. This produces the branching structure displayed in the dendograms. If classes appear closely together on the dendogram, this means that words from those classes frequently occur closely together (though not frequently enough to merit being in the same class).
3. Once the programme has finished producing classes, it labels each of the original short text segments with one of those classes (based on the words within that text segment). The percentage values displayed below show the proportion of text segments labelled with each class.
4. The ordering of words in the class is determined by how ‘characteristic’ it is of that class, i.e. words which appear at the top of the list are very likely to occur alongside other words from that class and very unlikely to occur alongside words from other classes.

## Method52

Building algorithms to categorise and separate tweets formed an important part of the research method for this paper. This responds to a general challenge of social media research: the data that is routinely produced and collected is too large to be manually read.

Natural language processing classifiers provide an analytical window into these kinds of datasets. They are trained by analysts on a given dataset to recognise the linguistic difference between different kinds of data – tweets in this case. This training is conducted using a technology called ‘Method52’, developed by CASM in partnership with the University of Sussex to allow non-technical analysts to train and use classifiers.

Classifiers are built to analyse two kinds of text, (a) the content of the Tweet itself, and (b) the profile of the Tweeter. Both pieces of information are contained in every Tweet produced by Twitter’s API. Each classifier was built by using Method 52’s web-based user interface to proceed through the following phases:

### Phase 1: Definition of categories.

The formal criteria explaining how tweets should be annotated is developed. Practically, this means that a small number of categories – between two and five – are defined. These will be the categories that the classifier will try to place each (and every) tweet within. The exact definition of the categories develops throughout the early interaction of the data. These categories are not arrived at *a priori*, but rather iteratively, informed by the researcher’s interaction with the data – the researcher’s idea of what comprises a category will often be challenged by the actual data itself, causing a redefinition of that category. This process ensures that the categories reflect the evidence, rather than the preconceptions or expectations of the analyst. This is consistent with a well-known sociological method called ‘grounded theory’.

### Phase 2: Creation of a gold-standard test dataset

This phase provides a source of truth against which the classifier performance is tested. A number of tweets (usually 100, but more are selected if the dataset is very large) are randomly selected to form a gold standard test set. These are manually coded into the categories defined during Phase 1. The tweets comprising this gold standard are then removed from the main dataset, and are not used to train the classifier.

### Phase 3: Training

This phase describes the process wherein training data is introduced into the statistical model, called ‘mark up’. Through a process called ‘active learning’, each unlabelled Tweet in the dataset is assessed by the classifier for the level of confidence it has that the Tweet is in the correct category. The classifier selects the Tweets with the lowest confidence score, and these are presented to the human analyst via a user interface of Method52. The analyst reads each Tweet, and decides which of the pre-assigned categories (see Phase 1) that it should belong to. A small group of these (usually around ten) are submitted as training data, and the NLP model is recalculated. The NLP algorithm then looks for statistical correlations between the language used and the meaning expressed to arrive at a series of rules-based criteria, and presents the researcher with a new set of tweets which, under the recalculated model, it has low levels of confidence for.

### Phase 4: Performance review and modification

The updated classifier is then used to classify each tweet within the gold standard test set. The decisions made by the classifier are compared with the decisions made (in Phase 2) by the human analyst. On the basis of this comparison, classifier performance statistics – ‘recall’, ‘precision’, and ‘overall’ (see ‘assessment of classifiers’, above) – are created and appraised by a human analyst.

### Phase 5: Retraining:

Phase 3 and 4 are iterated until classifier performance ceases to increase. This state is called ‘plateau’, and, when reached, is considered the practical optimum performance that a classifier can reasonably reach. Plateau typically occurs within 200–300 annotated tweets, although it depends on the scenario: the more complex the task, the more training data that is required.

### Phase 6: Processing:

When the classifier performance has plateaued, the NLP model is used to process and label all the remaining tweets in the dataset into the categories defined during Phase 1, using rules inferred from data on which the algorithm has been trained. These new labels can then be used to filter the dataset, or as a component of further analytical processes.

## Classifier performance

No NLP classifier used on this scale will work perfectly, and a vital new coalface in this kind of research is to understand how well any given algorithm performs on various measures, and the implications of this performance for the research results. Each classifier trained and used for this paper was measured for accuracy. In each case, this was done by:

- Randomly selecting 100 tweets to comprise a ‘gold standard’.
- Coding each of these tweets by hand, conducted by an analyst.
- Coding each of these tweets using the classifier.
- Comparing the results and recording whether the classifier got the same result as the analyst.

There are three outcomes of this test. Each measures the ability of the classifier to make the same decisions as a human in a different way:

### Precision

Precision is a measure of the correct selections the classifier makes as a proportion of all the selections it has made. If a relevancy classifier selects ten tweets as relevant, and eight of them actually are indeed relevant, it has a precision score of 80 per cent.

### Recall

Recall is a measure of the correct selections that the classifier makes as a proportion of the total correct selections it could have made. If there were ten relevant Tweets in a dataset, and a relevancy classifier successfully picks eight of them, it has a recall score of 80 per cent.

### Overall – F score

The 'overall' score combines measures of precision and recall to create one, overall measurement of performance for the classifier. All classifiers are a trade-off between recall and precision. Classifiers with a high recall score tend to be less precise, and vice versa.

### Classifier scores

**Classifier 1:** Politics (accuracy 0.75)

Label	Precision	Recall	F-score
Relevant	0.8	0.836	0.818
Irrelevant	0.633	0.576	0.603

**Classifier 2:** The UK's place in the world (accuracy 0.77)

Label	Precision	Recall	F-score
Relevant	0.797	0.9	0.846
Irrelevant	0.667	0.467	0.549

**Classifier 3a:** Education (accuracy 0.76)

Label	Precision	Recall	F-score
Relevant	0.813	0.813	0.813
Irrelevant	0.667	0.667	0.667

**Classifier 3b:** Employment (accuracy 0.63)

Label	Precision	Recall	F-score
Relevant	0.703	0.776	0.738
Irrelevant	0.423	0.333	0.373

## Keywords used

### Theme keywords

The following are full lists of keywords used to initially sort tweets into broad categories, before further refining through NLP or manual classification. Tweets concerning the 'education and employment' category were annotated and classified as two separate groups, then recombined.

Category 1: Politics	Category 2: The UK's place in the world	Category 3a: Education	Category 3b: Employment	Brexit specific terms
politics Theresa May David Cameron EU Brexit USA Trump George Osborne Hammond Parliament migrants Prime Minister President Clinton vote Syria conservative labour #labourleadership libdems altright britain scotland wales ireland Nicola Sturgeon austerity policy regime agreement election general election NATO Boris Johnson Sadiq Khan refugee Iain Duncan Smith Brexit White Paper	EU NATO Commonwealth internationalist country TTIP Continent foreign migrant refugee abroad immigrant immigrants migrants refugees Britain Brexit trade deal erasmus overseas The west referendum world stage patriotic place in the world colonialism the empire british empire sovereign sovereignty	application uni college school university universities UCAS GCSE GCSEs A Levels A level EMA Bursary Scholarship personal statement tuition fees maintenance loan maintenance grant	job search apprentice scheme apprenticeships job work working colleague employee salary intern interning interned internship apprenticeship	Brexit Brexit Whitepaper Vote Remain Vote Leave Britain leaving the EU EU membership remoaners Links to the EU euref referendum voterremain voteleave project fear article 50 article50 stay in the eu remain in the eu free movement 350million 350 million 350,000,000 leave the eu brexiteer





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