

Polling in practice: Understanding and responding to public attitudes

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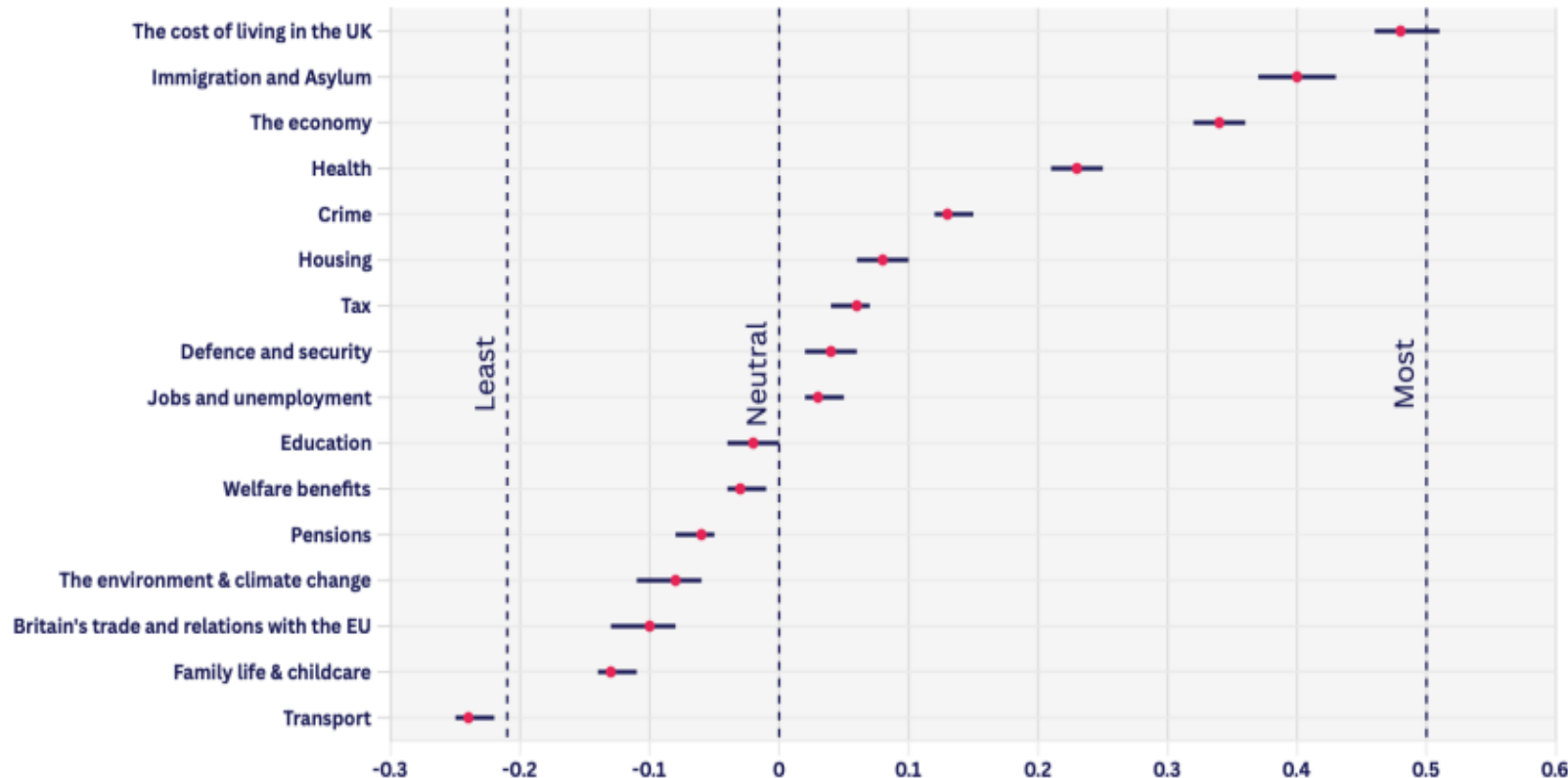
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What is reputation?

- Reputation isn't just what people say about us, but whether they think about us at all – **public indifference now as much of a reputational risk as hostility**
- The challenge is to **re-enter public consciousness with relevance and purpose**, rather than assume our value is understood

Own the link to public realm

Which of the following do you think are the MOST and LEAST important issues facing the country at this time?



YouGov on behalf of Best for Britain, September 2025

- Choice: Stand apart, or step forward
- Public see universities as public actors
- Trust requires speaking beyond the sector
- Speak fluent 'human', not sector jargon

Transformation at pace: crisis as catalyst

- UEL's 2018 crisis forced a fundamental strategic rethink, demanding clarity about the **distinctive value a modern university can offer** in a rapidly changing world
- Crisis became a **catalyst for bold, deliberate transformation** rather than reactive short-term fixes

A careers-first university

- UEL made a deliberate choice to pursue a careers-first mission, embedding **employability throughout the institution**
- Vision 2028 introduced **curriculum redesign, employer partnerships, career readiness and Careers Guarantee**
- This strategy **aligned directly with what students and businesses wanted**: value, opportunity, and clear routes to good jobs

Credibility through outcomes

- UEL's transformation has delivered measurable results:
 - **25% improvement in positive graduate outcomes**
 - **Rise from 90th to 2nd for graduate start-ups**
 - **Now one of 15 UK universities with no institutional debt**
- Communicating credibility through **evidence of impact that matters to communities**

Advocacy starts at home

- Culture, transparency and internal trust are as important in shaping an institution's reputation - internal alignment allows **staff and students to become authentic advocates**
- Public concerns about fairness and the use of public money mean **universities must explain decisions clearly and act consistently with their values**

Agility as a differentiator

- **UEL works to move quickly**, adapt to employer and student needs, and respond to fast-changing labour markets
- This responsiveness **reflects what people increasingly expect from modern public institutions**: practical, visible solutions
- Agility strengthens partnerships and **shows that universities can deliver impact at the pace the world now demands**

Tangible relevance

- Public trust grows when universities **demonstrate real-world relevance that people can see and experience**
- Projects like **UEL's Neighbourhood Health Hub** show universities contributing directly to civic life and national priorities
- Reputation is shaped more by lived experience than messaging: **what people encounter matters more than what they are told**



Reputation needs advocates

- In the rail sector, **rebuttal and defence never shifted public perception**
- Universities face similar pressures and must **cultivate partners, students and communities who can credibly say ‘this matters’**
- Partnerships as **routes to trusted storytelling**

Trust is built nationally and locally

- UUK's national work key, but **trust also takes root through stories that resonate in local contexts**
- Institutions must understand their communities, **acknowledge scepticism and communicate with honesty**
- **Local relevance** is what will make the national campaign meaningful and effective

Closing thoughts

- The sector must speak beyond its echo chamber and engage the public in **language that feels human and understandable**
- We need to **demonstrate, not simply describe**, the everyday value universities create in people's lives
- Reputation is built through what others say when we're not in the room - and our job is to **give them something positive to say**