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A new future for universities: how can we ensure universities support British success and build local pride?



Tuesday, 7 October



13:00 to 14:00



Chester Suite, Secure
Zone, The Midland



**Alex
Newton (Chair)**

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**George
Freeman MP**

Member, Science,
Innovation and Tech
Committee



**Steve
O'Neil**

UCL



**Matt
Warman**

Former MP &
Minister



**Sophie
Stowers**

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Britons tend to think positively of universities

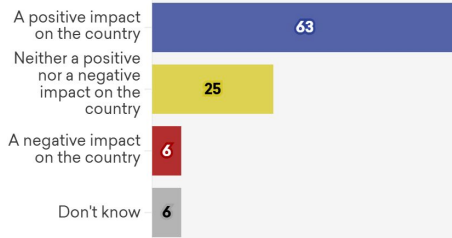
At a time when many Britons feel the country is broken and faith in institutions is low, **universities remain a source of pride.**

Most see them as a net good for Britain: **63% say universities have a positive impact nationally** (with just 6% saying negative), and **61% of those living near a university say the same for their community.**

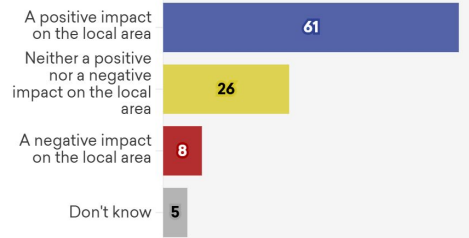
A majority also believe their benefits extend beyond students, with **59% saying universities are good for the country as a whole.**

Around three in five Britons think that universities are a net positive to local areas, and the country as a whole

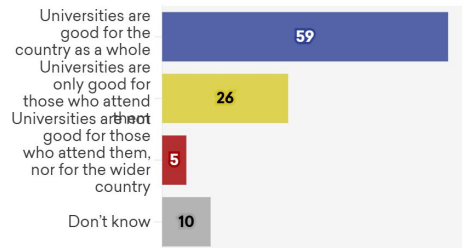
On the whole, do you think universities have...



Thinking about the university/universities in your local area, do you think they have...



Which of the following comes closest to your view?



The public thinks of universities as having three key roles

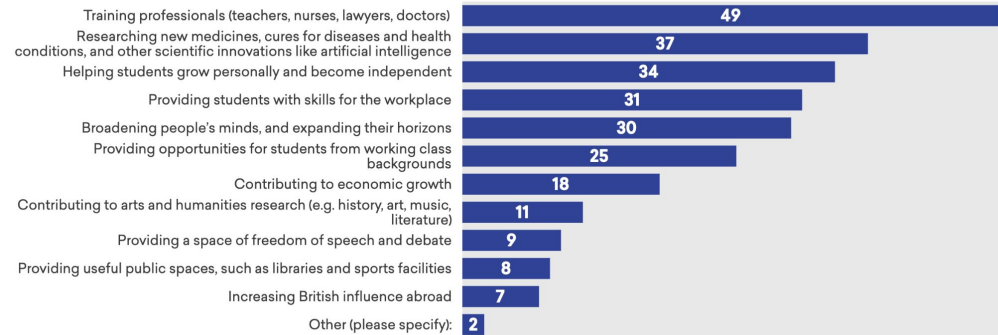
The perceived responsibilities of universities can be broken down into three broad categories: National, Personal and Local.

The National: This tends to be considered as the most important- Britons expect universities to provide the country's next generation of professionals, with 49% seeing training teachers, nurses, doctors, and lawyers as the primary role of universities.

The Personal: A third of Britons - graduates and non-graduates alike - see 'helping students grow personally' as a core purpose of universities. Graduates also emphasise universities broadening minds and driving economic growth, while non-graduates prioritise widening access for working-class students and workforce skills.

What do Britons see as the main purpose of university?

Which of the following do you think are the most important roles that universities play?



"You're hoping they're training the best of the best, don't you? So you're getting the best doctor, you're getting the best vets and everything like that. You're getting the people that can save lives and do amazing things. So you're hoping that that system breeds that into the wider country."

-Ian, Chef, Frome

The local role

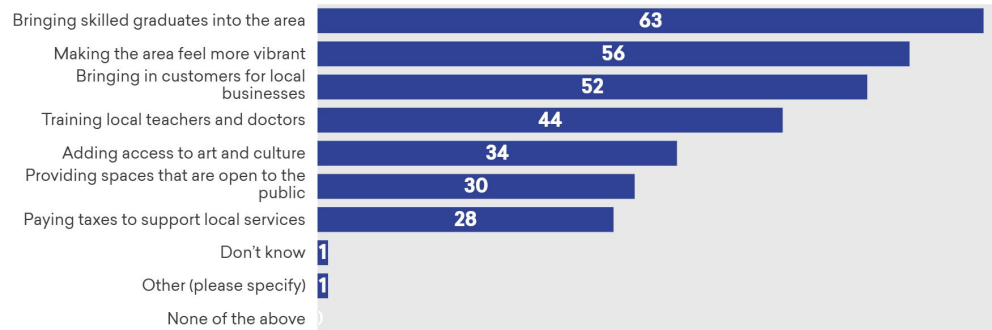
The Local: Those living near a university are generally positive, with **three in five saying the university has a good impact on the local area.**

The top benefits people point to are bringing skilled graduates into the area (63%), making the area more vibrant (56%) and supporting local businesses (52%). In focus groups, people living in university towns often describe them positively, **highlighting both their economic and cultural role.**

The negatives people associate with universities locally are pressures on housing, public services and neighbourhoods, as well as student anti-social behaviour. While not hostile to students or universities, **people believe universities should help address these issues, alongside local authorities and landlords.**

The local benefits of universities

You said that the university/universities in your town or city have a positive impact on the local areas. Why is that? Please select all of the reasons that apply.



“There's a major influx of building student accommodation at the minute (...) Most of the young people can't even get on the house ladder, but yet we're building students' accommodation.”

-Mark, design engineer, Wolverhampton

Are universities thought of as national institutions?

It's clear that many Britons view our university system as a source of pride. The public see universities as national institutions, with the rights and responsibilities that flow from that.

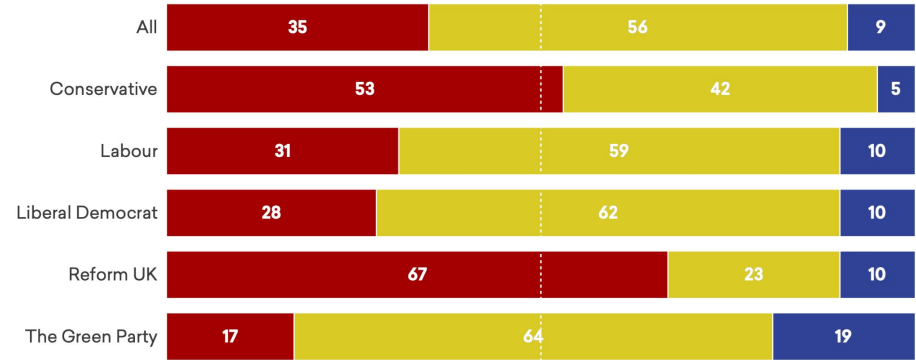
But while many Britons view universities as national institutions, there seems to be limited demand for greater shows of patriotism. For example, while 35% say that universities should fly the union flag, most (56%) believe it should be up to the individual university to decide.

In general there is little appetite for the pageantry seen on some American campuses.

Most Britons think universities should be free to decide whether to fly the Union Flag

Which of the following comes closest to your view?

- British universities should fly the union flag on campus.
- Each British university should be free to decide whether or not they want to fly the union flag on campus.
- British universities should not fly the union flag on campus.



"If they did [flag the union flag] I wouldn't think it was weird, but I also wouldn't expect them to."

-Beth, Education Consultant, Essex

There is a 'graduate gap' in views toward universities

Attitudes toward universities are shaped strongly by experience: **81% of graduates say they have a positive impact on the country versus 55% of non-graduates.** Non-graduates are more likely to think **they only benefit attendees (31% vs 16%).**

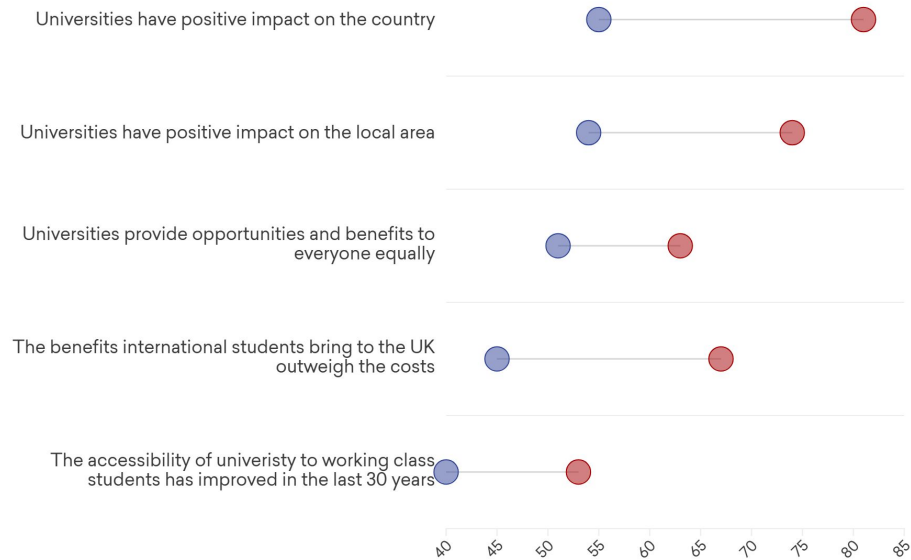
Non-graduates are also less likely to believe it has become easier for working class students to study at university- 54% of graduates, but just 40% of non-graduates, believe universities have become more accessible in the last 30 years.

Despite this, non-graduates are more likely to say providing opportunities for working-class students is a key role of universities (27% vs 21%), highlighting the need for institutions to better demonstrate the strides that have been made in accessibility in recent years.

The graduate gap in attitudes toward universities

Proportion who agree with each statement, by education history

● Graduates ● Non-graduates



Reform voters tend to be more sceptical of universities than average

Reform UK voters are notably sceptical about **universities**, chiming with their more cynical attitude toward institutions overall. This group is less likely to see universities as beneficial for the country than average.

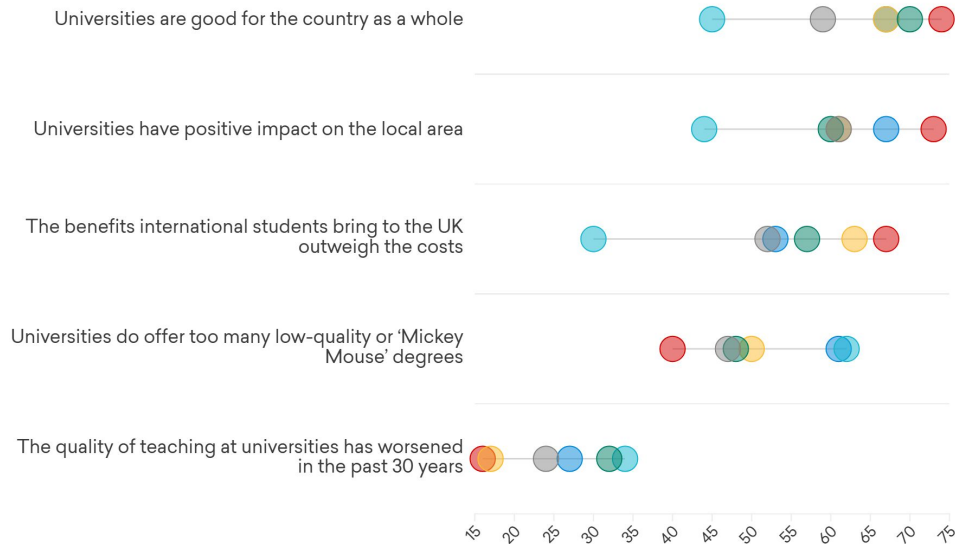
However, Reform supporters do have specific concerns about universities, alongside this general distrust - **62% think universities offer too many low-quality degrees**, and they are **the only group more likely than not to say teaching quality has declined over the past 30 years**.

However, attitudes on universities are not deeply polarised- majorities of all voter groups, including Reform supporters, see them as having a net positive impact. **The influence of the graduate gap is also hard to unpick**, as Reform voters are the least likely to have attended university.

Reform UK voters are more pessimistic than average about the role of universities

Proportion who agree with each statement, by 2024 vote

● All Britons ● Conservative ● Labour ● Liberal Democrat ● Reform UK ● The Green Party



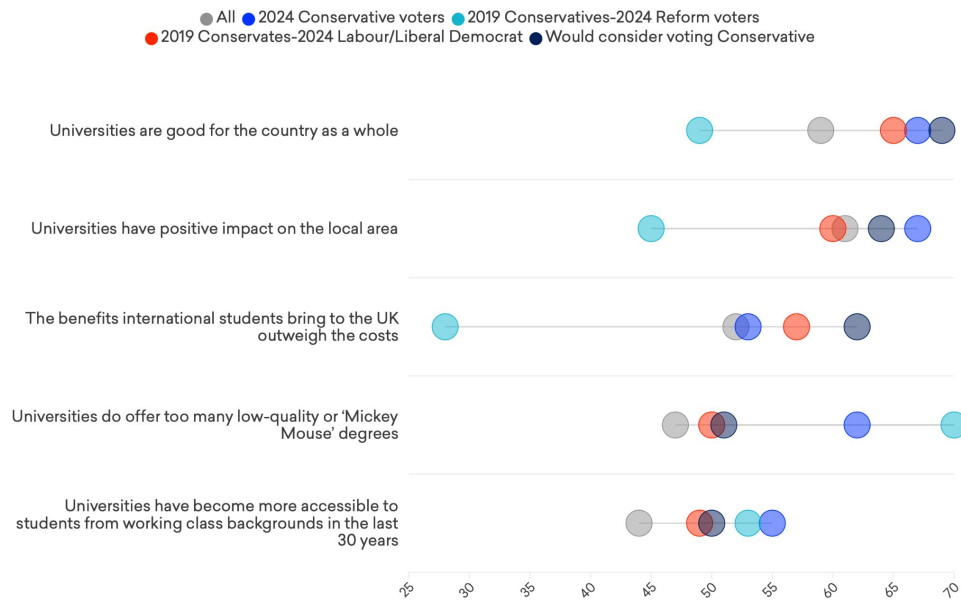
Conservatives coalition breakdown

The Conservatives' voter coalition is divided on universities. Those who backed the party in 2019 but have since shifted to Reform are **more negative than average** about universities' local and national contributions and concerned about degree quality. They show particular scepticism toward the benefits of international students.

In contrast, former Conservatives to Labour/Liberal Democrat switchers, as well as voters who say they are now open to supporting the Conservatives, **tend to view universities more positively**. This suggests that pursuing more critical rhetoric on universities could risk alienating some former supporters and persuadable voters, even if it appeals to Reform switchers.

Those who moved away from the Conservatives to Reform at the last election tend to be more pessimistic about universities than those who moved to other parties

Proportion who agree with each statement (%)



The value of a degree will be a sticking point in debates on the future of universities

While Britons believe that most aspects of the university system have improved in the past 30 years, there are two notable exceptions: **the value of a university degree to employers, and the affordability of university education for students.** 34% say the value of a degree has decreased in recent years.

Of the 17% of graduates who actively regret their degree, a **belief that their degree hasn't provided value to their career is the main reason.**

For some, this experience has made them question the **inherent value of degrees that don't have a clear career path** They think the debt and risk associated with a non-vocational degree are no longer worth it.

"People used to respect degrees. (...) I think things have obviously changed a lot more now. So people are looking at more of the experience side of things."

-Salma, project manager, a graduate who regrets his degree

Graduates and non-graduates agree that the affordability and value of a degree has decreased in recent years

How do you think UK universities have changed over the last 30 years? For each of the following, please indicate whether you think they have improved, worsened or stayed the same..

Net improvement

(Proportion who think they have improved, minus those who think they have worsened)



There is concern that universities offer too many 'low quality' degrees

Nearly half of Britons (47%) believe universities offer too many low-quality or 'Mickey Mouse' degrees, a view shared by graduates and non-graduates alike. This is particularly a concern of those who voted Conservative in 2024, but have since shifted to Reform (69%).

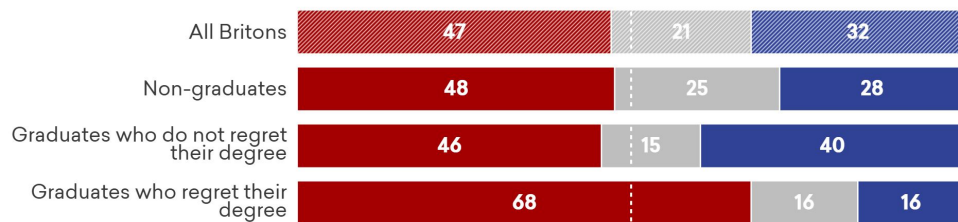
Among graduates who regret their degree, 68% hold this view.

However, focus group discussions show that degrees labelled 'Mickey Mouse' are not criticised for covering niche or unconventional subjects, but for failing to provide practical skills or clear career pathways for students, with participants distinguishing course content from employability.

Nearly half of Britons believe that universities offer too many low-quality degrees

Some people say that universities these days offer too many low-quality or so-called 'Mickey Mouse' degrees. Which of the following comes closest to your view?

- Universities do offer too many low-quality or 'Mickey Mouse' degrees
- Don't know
- Universities on the whole offer high quality degrees



"I'm a big fan of apprenticeships (...) I don't like these Mickey mouse degrees as well, just doing a degree to come out with something that has got no relevance to what you want to do in life."

-Paul, 61, Sales Manager, Northampton

Britons are concerned about the financial sustainability of universities

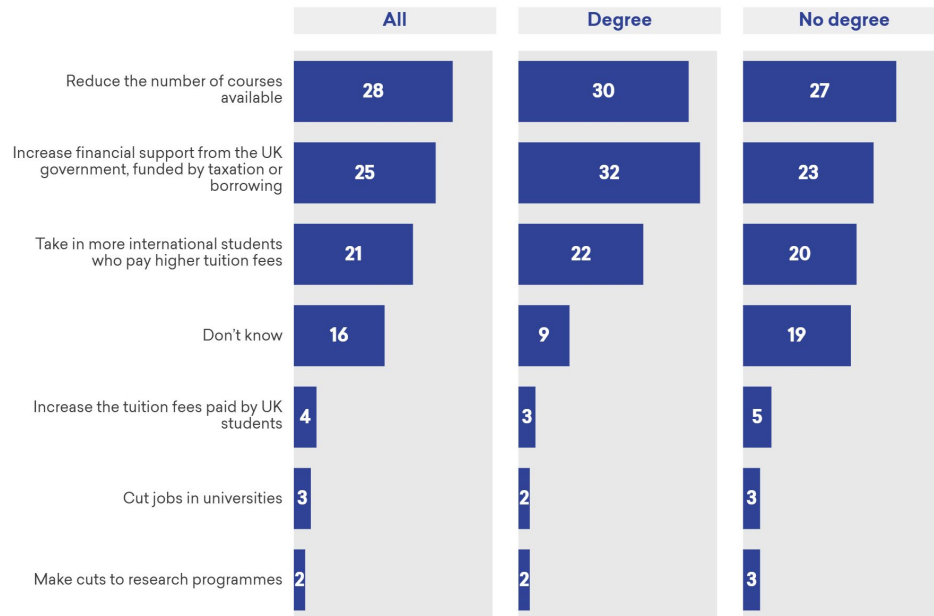
Concerns about the financial future of universities have cut through: **42% of Britons say they are worried about universities closing down**, and **53% believe that this is likely to happen** in the coming years.

Given a list of potential directions for cost-cutting, the public are hostile to fee rises for UK undergraduates. The most acceptable levers are **reducing the number of courses (28%)** or **increasing government funding (25%)**.

Very few endorse **higher domestic fees (4%)** or **cuts to research (3%)**.

Britons would rather reduce the number of courses - while only 4 per cent would prefer to increase tuition fees

Several UK universities are facing financial difficulties, with some running a budget deficit or in debt. Which of the following do you think is the best way for universities to raise money?



Conservative-Reform switchers are more likely to say universities should cut courses and jobs

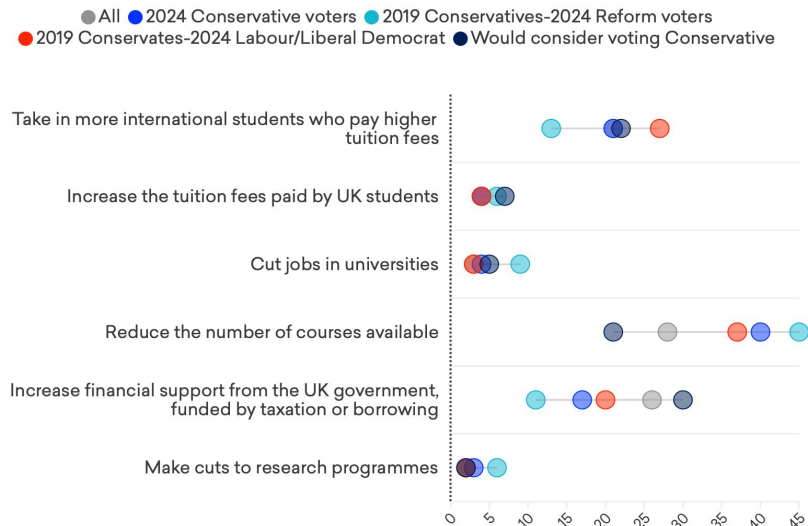
The Conservative's former voter base is divided over how best to fund universities. Reducing courses is broadly the most popular approach, though it is less likely to be supported by voters who are currently open to backing the party.

Those who moved from the Conservatives to parties on the right at the last election are more inclined toward supporting 'efficiency' measures, like cutting jobs, courses, and research funding, compared with those who shifted to left-leaning parties.

Despite these differences, there is a clear consensus across all groups in rejecting increases to tuition fees.

Conservative-Reform switchers are more likely to object to taking in more international students to fund universities than Conservative-Labour/Liberal Democrat switchers

Several UK universities are facing financial difficulties, with some running a budget deficit or in debt. Which of the following do you think is the best way for universities to be funded?



Voters are broadly supportive of international students

Britons are broadly supportive of international students, with some caveats- **52% say the benefits of international students studying here outweigh the costs.**

Most prefer international student numbers to stay the same (39%), while just under a quarter want them either increased or reduced. Many view their presence as a point of national pride and evidence of a strong university system.

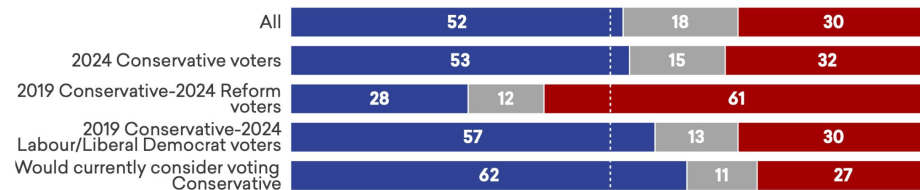
However, concerns persist, including housing and course capacity, and **30% believe costs outweigh benefits- a figure rising to 58% among Reform UK voters and 61% among 2019 Conservative/2024 Reform voters.**

Discussions in groups show that, among more sceptical groups, support for international students is contingent on the idea that **they will remain in the UK and use their newfound skills and qualifications to 'give back'.**

Those who switched from voting Conservative to voting Reform at the last election are less positive about international students

Thinking about international students coming to study in the UK, which of the following comes closer to your view?

- The benefits international students bring to the UK (e.g. spending in local areas, filling skill shortages) outweigh the costs (e.g. pressure on housing and public services)
- Don't know
- The costs of international students in UK (e.g. pressure on housing and public services) outweigh the benefits (e.g. spending in local areas, filling skill shortages)



"There's not enough British people being able to go to these universities to get these degrees to work in hospitals, as doctors, surgeons or whatever. And then they're getting shipped back to their country with all of this great education and then it's just getting lost, in a sense. It's not actually staying in the UK. I'd rather it stayed in the UK personally."

-Harry, 31, Window Cleaner, Minehead



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Later today...

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 **Tuesday, 7 October**

 **16:00 to 17:00**

 **Chester Suite, Secure
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A Reset on Immigration: Can Conservatives regain public trust?


**Rachel
Sylvester (Chair)**
The
Observer


**Luke
Tryl**
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**Chris
Philp MP**
Shadow Home
Secretary


**Gavin
Rice**
Onward


**Robbie
Moore MP**
Shadow Farming
Minister


**Salma
Shah**
Broadcaster &
former SpAd


**Lord
Davies**
Shadow Home
Office Minister

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 **Tuesday, 7 October**

 **18:00 to 19:30**

 **Stanley Suite, Secure
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Rebuilding the Coalition: A Tory Reset


**Emily Maitlis
(Chair)**
The News
Agents


**Greg
Smith MP**
Shadow Transport & Shadow
Energy Security & Net Zero
Minister


**Claire
Coutinho MP**
Shadow Energy Security
& Net Zero Secretary


**Luke
Tryl**
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**Cllr Aled
Richards-Jones**
Leader, Conservative
Group, Wandsworth
Council


**Sir Gavin
Williamson MP**
MP for Stone, Great
Wyrley and Penkridge