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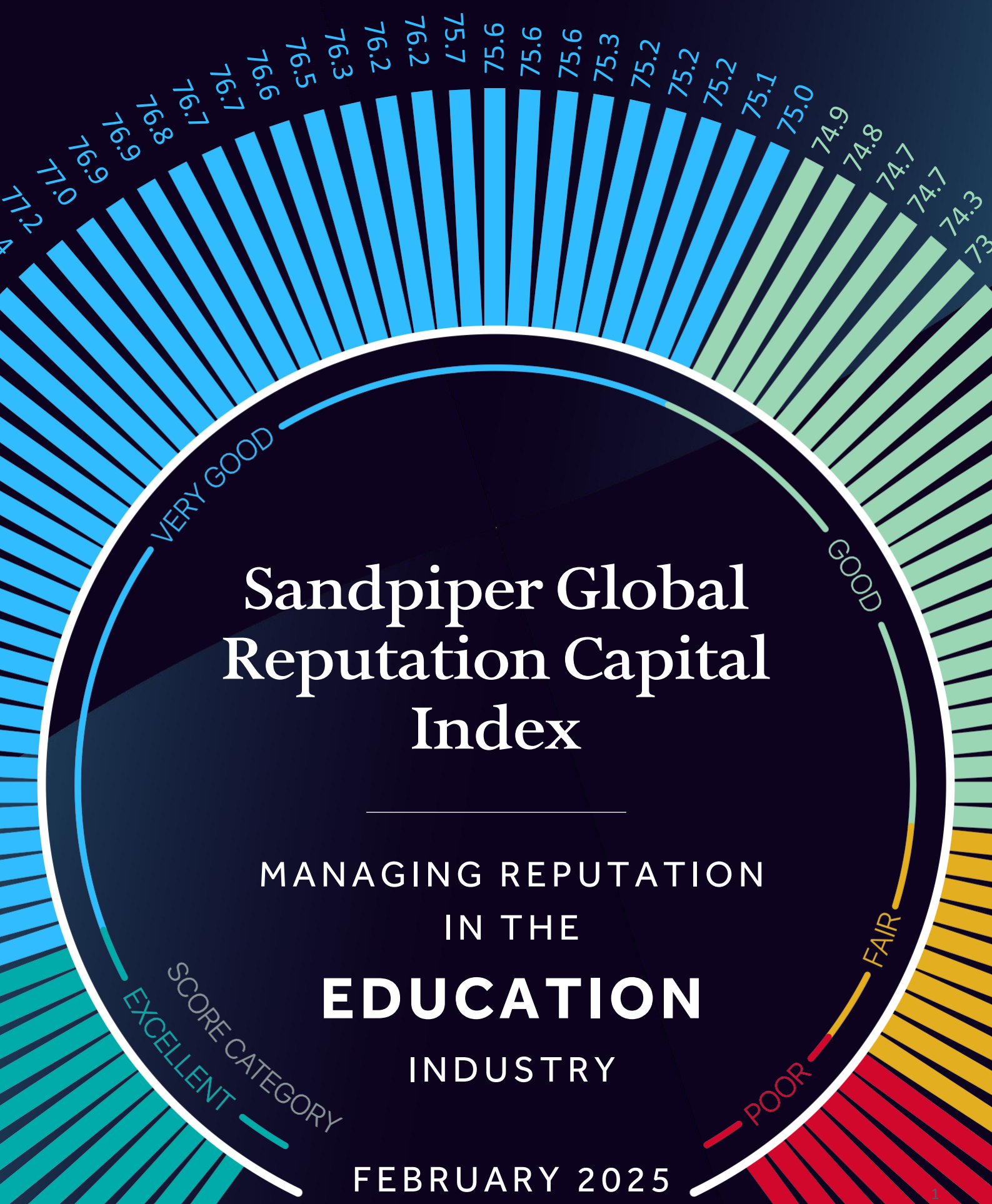

Sandpiper Global Reputation Capital Index

MANAGING REPUTATION IN THE EDUCATION INDUSTRY

FEBRUARY 2025

Inform. Create. Shape.

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FRANCESCA BOASE
Managing Director

EMMA HUANG
Director

About The Reputation Capital Index and the Education Sector

Today, Reputation Management is more complex than ever. Organisations are beset by issues and risks, and constantly looking to do more with less in uncertain economic circumstances. They are operating in a world that is paradoxically more connected yet deeply divided.

Leaders in the education sector surveyed globally for our inaugural ***Sandpiper Global Reputation Capital Index*** are keenly aware of the importance of reputation, with 98% rating it as important for commercial success. However, only around half of leaders in this sector think their reputation is strong in most reputation pillars. Furthermore, 62% of education leaders note that reputation is becoming harder to manage.

We wanted to understand why.

The data for this report was collated from a survey of over 2,700 CEOs, other C-suite Leaders, and Corporate Affairs leaders, of whom 180 were education sector leaders. All those surveyed are based in the global headquarters of their organisations across 27 markets in six continents.

Perceived importance and strength of reputation among education leaders

At a Glance: Reputation Capital in the Education Sector

Based on their responses to 51 separate variables across nine areas of reputation management studied, and using a 1-100 point scale, we have grouped education respondents into four performance-based categories: **Trailblazers** (12%), **Aspirants** (54%), **Followers** (32%), and **Beginners** (3%).

Compared with other sectors, education leaders are less likely to be in the **Trailblazing** group (7% vs 12% overall), but more likely to be in the following **Aspirant** group (67% vs 54% overall).

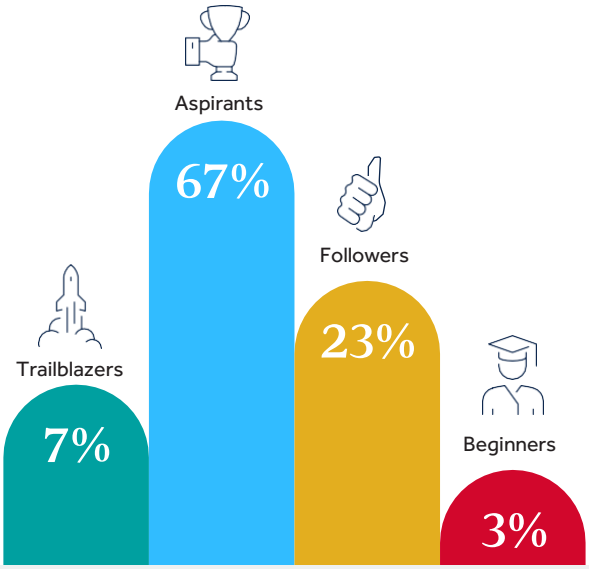
The Index assesses performance based on nine areas of reputation management: **Reputation Strategy**, **ESG & Sustainability Strategy**, **Crisis & Issues Management**, **Executive Profiling & Thought Leadership**, **Media Engagement**, **AI & Digital Environment**, **Employee Communications**, **Budget Transparency**, and **Government & Regulatory Affairs**.

The findings allow us to examine performance in each area of reputation management, and to create an overall global picture of reputation management practices and health. The Index is designed to help organisations assess their own capabilities, understand how their performance compares to global and sector peers, and ultimately use it to support decision-making about where to invest time and resources.

While 90% of education sector respondents rated all of these areas of reputation management as important, only 60% rated their own organization's capabilities as strong in these. This strategy-to-action gap is a consistent theme observed throughout the study findings.

A lack of reputational strength can have real impacts in the education sector. Over three quarters (77%) of leaders in the education sector globally say reputational weaknesses have negatively impacted their organisations in some way in the past 12 months, which is a higher proportion than the overall global average (72%).

Despite the number of challenges observed, these appear to be recognised, with more than seven out of 10 education leaders saying their organisation plans to increase investment in each area of reputation management over the coming 12 months.



- **Trailblazers** (75 to 100 points) have a strong grasp of reputation management and rate their ability to execute on essential tasks highly.
- **Aspirants** (50 to 74 points) score highly but inconsistently, falling behind Trailblazers in at least one area of reputation management.
- **Followers** (25 to 49 points) have a mixed ability to execute in reputation management, performing some tasks well but others poorly.
- **Beginners** (0 to 24 points) lack the basic skills and conceptual knowledge for reputation management and rate their ability to execute as low.

Key Stats from Education Sector Leaders

Reputation management landscape

98% believe **reputation is important** for commercial success.

62% feel reputation is **becoming more difficult to manage**, with 18% saying it is becoming easier.

77% experienced **negative organisational impacts due to reputational weak spots** over the past year.

↑90% are **concerned about a range of emerging reputational risks**: misinformation and disinformation, data privacy and cybersecurity, employee activism, stakeholder and customer activism, DE&I, media consolidation, and ESG scrutiny and greenwashing claims.

Respondents placed fairly even levels of importance on each of the reputation pillars studied:

Fiscal Governance

Products & Services

Employee Experience

Leadership & Governance

Cyber & Data Security

Citizenship

↑90% rate **all pillars of reputation as important**, yet ↓50% rate their organisations as strong in these, with Fiscal Governance, and Employee Experience an exception.

86% believe their **headquarters' geographic location** positively influences their **organisation's reputation**.

74% of **Education Leaders globally feel a high level of responsibility** for their organisation's reputation, yet only 36% of Corporate Affairs leaders do.

While ↓50% have **strong access to stakeholder and audience insights**, those who do score significantly better in influencing and managing audience and stakeholders expectations.

↑80% believe all of the **nine areas of reputation management** we studied **are important**, yet ↓50% rate their organisation as strong in these.

↑70% **plan to increase investment** in each reputation management area over the next year.

↓50% feel they **receive strong advice** across all areas of reputation management.

Performance Categories

Reputation Strategy

↓55% have a narrative that is clear, differentiated, compelling, effective, accurate, or that is highly aligned with the organisation's vision, mission, values, or purpose.

Just **37%** believe key stakeholders and audiences have high awareness and understanding of their organisation's narrative and key messages.

ESG & Sustainability Strategy

↓50% of organisations in the sector have a sustainability or ESG strategy or targets, and only **8%** (compared with 13% across all sectors) have a dedicated internal team in this area.

Only **26%** have a climate communications strategy and only **10%** have climate comms messaging.

Crisis & Issues Management

77% (compared with 67% across all sectors) have a crisis & issues management plan, but only 51% are very confident about using it.

Executive Profiling & Thought Leadership

97% say thought leadership activities have been effective in helping to build trust.

90% believe their organisation has clear thought leadership topics and themes, but only **27%** feel their organisation is recognised as an industry thought leader.

Media Engagement

81% of education sector leaders believe they are not engaging with media enough, compared with **69%** from other sectors.

While **84%** say media training is effective, only **57%** make it mandatory for all spokespeople. As a result, **80%** believe the quality of their spokespeople could be improved and **79%** say they do not always represent their organisation accurately.

The sector appears to be struggling with effective media engagement, with **79%** believing journalists do not portray their organisations accurately, or treat them fairly – at **76%** (compared with 66% and 63% for other sectors).

Performance Categories

AI & Digital Environment

The highest-ranking digital reputation activities for organisations are **SEO optimisation (55%)**, **influencer engagement (51%)**, and **digital advertising beyond social media (41%).**

Only **46%** believe they have a strong understanding of how generative AI tools are interacting with and influencing a range of digital reputation issues including low digital content.

85%+ are experiencing search-ranking issues, misinformation and disinformation, quality control of AI-generated content, manipulated media and deepfakes.

Employee Communications

Organisations are using multiple different channels **(11+ on average)** to engage employees, including digital, social, in-person and more.

Only **44%** say their Communications and Human Resources teams are highly aligned around employee engagement strategies.

Only **50%** say their employees have a strong understanding of how their role contributes to the corporate strategy, though this is higher than in other sectors (41%).

Budget Transparency

Only **50%** of education leaders believe their organisation's value is well understood by financial stakeholders, and **56%** say they have been highly effective in communicating budget transparency.

Just **42%** are very satisfied with their performance in raising capital.

Government & Regulatory Affairs

98% have attempted some form of stakeholder mapping, and **54%** have a comprehensive approach, compared with 43% in other sectors.

65% believe their policy engagement activity is insufficient.

69% say a lack of influence and relationships with stakeholders has negatively impacted their organisation in the past 24 months.

Part One: Global Reputation Capital Index

Reputation plays a strong role in the education sector, with 74% of leaders surveyed noting that it is 'very important' to their organisation's commercial success. Additionally, nearly two in three (63%) consider themselves to be Trailblazers in their industry.

Across the board, education leaders noted that their organisations perform well in reputation management. In particular, their scores for government and regulatory affairs markedly outperformed the global average, indicating a strong capacity to engage with key stakeholders in the realm of public education.

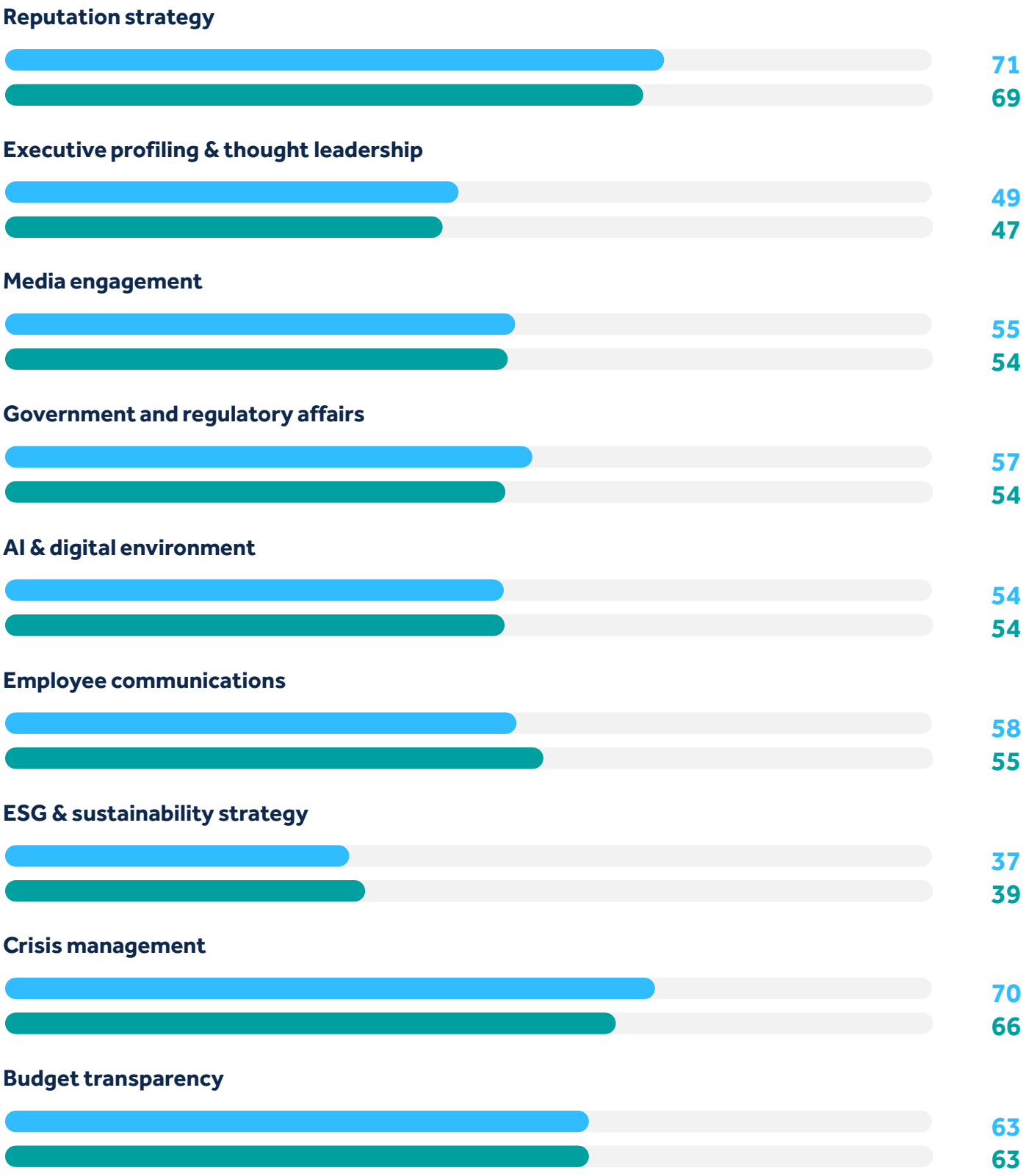
Crisis management also scored several points above the global average, as leaders attested to their organisations' resilience in the face of evolving issues in the sector.

Employee activism and stakeholder activism represented particular concerns (93% were concerned about each of these issues). Education leaders were more likely to rate themselves as highly prepared to deal with each, compared to the global average.

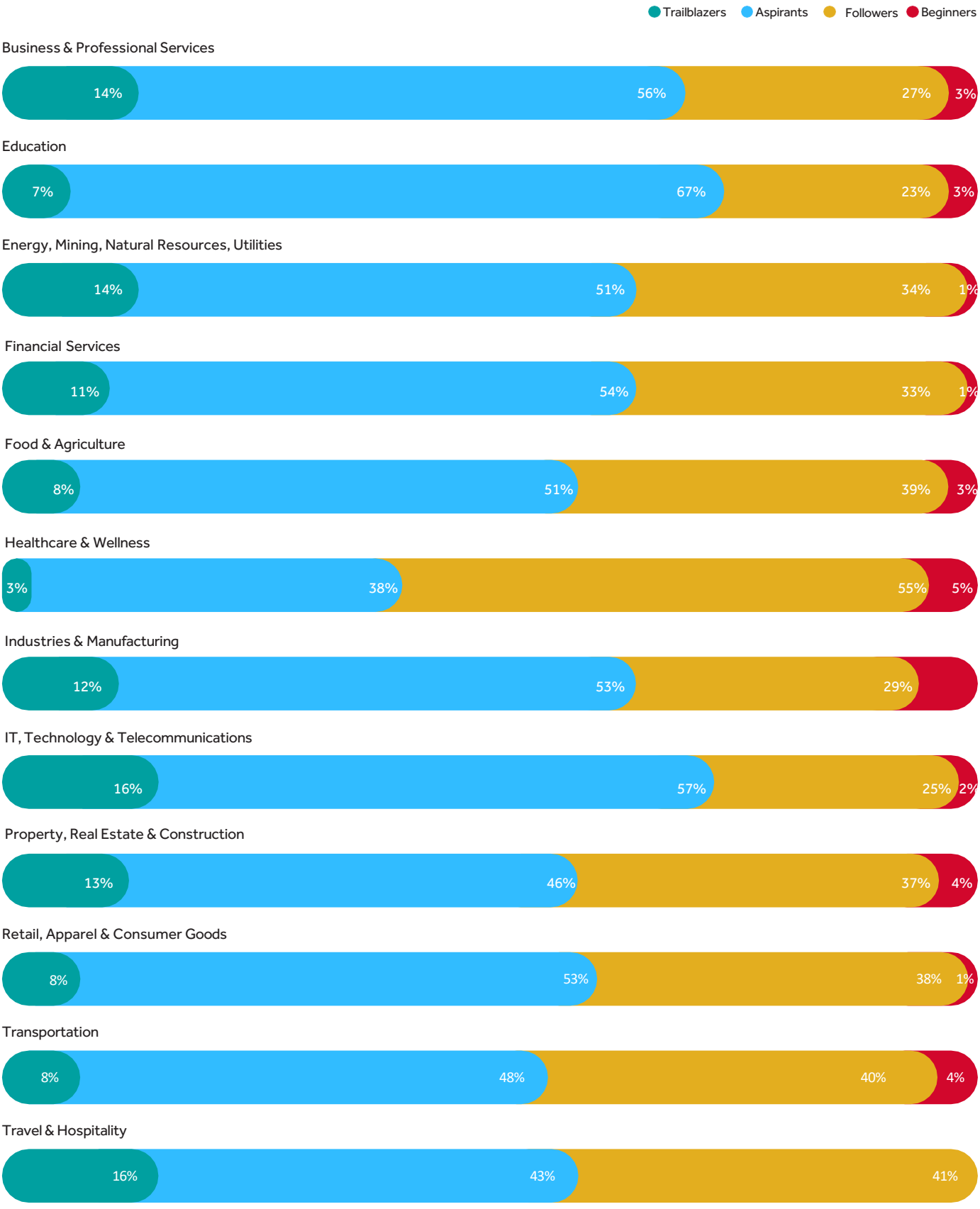
Education leaders did note some trepidation about their performance in the AI & digital environment, scoring just below the global average. In fact, when it comes to cyber and data security, only 42% said their reputation was 'strong'.

With widespread employee databases and students' information to protect, this is likely to be an area of investment in the future. 61% of our respondents noted that they would be making a moderate to large increase in AI integration in the next 12 months, while 77% noted they would be investing more in their digital footprint and profile.

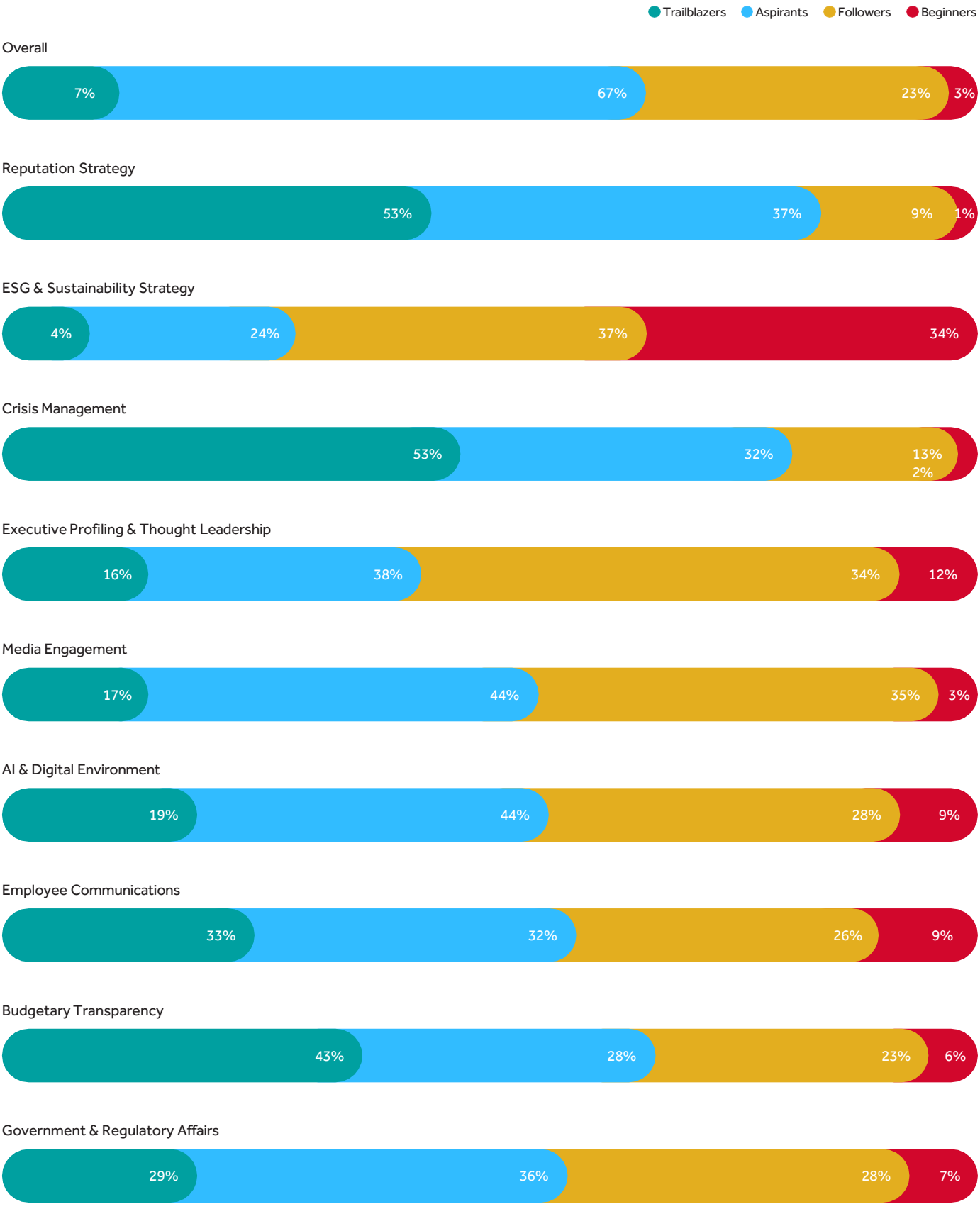
Education Reputation Management Index performance versus global averages



% in each performance category by industry



Global education sector % in each performance category



Part Two: How reputational risks and weaknesses are impacting organisations

Reputational weaknesses impact organisational performance

More than three in four (77%) of the leaders in the education sector surveyed say they have experienced at least one form of negative organisational impact owing to reputational weak spots over the past 12 months.

These impacts are varied and have affected a wide range of stakeholders, including customers, current and future employees, and government or regulatory stakeholders. The specific impacts experienced were around their organisation's ability to do work with stakeholders (66%), ability to attract and retain talent (64%), ability to recover from a crisis (63%), incurring losses or budget gaps (67%), and negatively impacting government and community relationships (63%).

A direct correlation is seen between performance and impact, with those scoring highest in the Index overall also scoring highly in Reputation Strategy. Only half (47%) of Trailblazers for Reputation Strategy faced negative organisational impacts from lack of reputational strength over the same time period – 25 points below the overall global average. By comparison, Aspirants, Followers, and Beginners in this same area were up to 10 points more likely to face negative consequences of negative reputation across categories.

Most institutions unprepared to tackle new threats

As reputational risks increase and the environment for audience engagement becomes more fragmented, 62% of leaders in the education sector believe that reputation is becoming more difficult to manage, with just 18% saying it is getting easier.

Many of the new emerging threats stem from technology – from AI to misinformation and disinformation, which will only increase as technology continues to develop at pace in the coming years. Several other areas of risk are connected to core organisational values, especially sustainability and DE&I.

Despite acknowledging the potential impact of key reputation-related issues on their companies, most leaders do not feel prepared to manage these. In fact, a significant gap exists between levels of concern and taking action to prepare.

For nearly every emerging risk we asked leaders about, roughly two in three feel concerned but unprepared to manage it.

The rise of misinformation and disinformation (67 pt gap), employee activism (67 pt gap), geopolitical tensions (66 pt gap), and greenwashing top the list, indicating a need for immediate attention in these areas.

Part Three: Investment is increasing

As reputation is viewed as a key driver of commercial success amid a growing risk landscape, so investment in reputation management is forecast to increase.

Most education leaders plan to make at least some level of investment in several reputation management functions over the next year. In contrast, less than 5% of education leaders said they would decrease their investments in any category of reputation management.

Compared to global leaders, education leaders were more likely to increase their investments in community engagement, showcasing the importance of the relationships between institutions and the communities they serve. These higher investments are partly in response to declining public trust in academic institutions and speak to the need for public engagement.

Employee engagement / sentiment (81%) was another top focus. As academic leadership, educators, and other staff play a pivotal role in building an institution's reputation, targeted investment can help propel their advocacy and impact.

	Global Education	Americas	APAC	Europe	Middle East & Africa
Reputation management strategy	80%	81%	80%	74%	94%
Leader profile	78%	80%	77%	73%	91%
Executive / leadership team profile	81%	80%	75%	68%	93%
Media profile and relationships	81%	77%	76%	69%	92%
Community engagement	84%	74%	75%	67%	90%
Digital footprint and profile	77%	69%	71%	65%	91%
(Generative) AI integration	79%	76%	75%	66%	90%
Employee engagement / sentiment	81%	76%	77%	68%	90%
ESG and sustainability performance and communications	76%	80%	75%	69%	92%
Crisis and issues communications preparedness	78%	75%	77%	68%	91%
Budget reporting / transparency	79%	75%	75%	70%	91%
Investor / shareholder relations	78%	76%	76%	67%	91%
Reputation measurement	78%	80%	77%	68%	93%

Part Four: Key Takeaways for Education Leaders

Now is the time for education leaders to lead
Only 7% of education leaders' organisations rank as Trailblazers, the second lowest percentage of any industry. While there were areas where education leaders performed well in the index (crisis and issues, regulatory affairs, etc.), there is more work to be done to improve the reputation management functions of educational institutions. Leaders in this sector should assess how they perform against the Reputation Capital Index, and invest in improving capabilities.

Managing reputation among diverse stakeholders is key
Education sector leaders are planning to increase investments in employee engagement/sentiment and community engagement, highlighting how important these stakeholders are to their success. Creating a full stakeholder map, researching audience insights, and tailoring messaging to resonate with diverse audiences should be central to education reputation management strategies.

Planning for sector-specific issues must be a priority
While the education sector rates itself is more prepared for issues and crisis than other sectors, there is a widespread need to improve preparedness for data and cybersecurity threats. Given the prominence of these issues in today's landscape, and the sensitivity of the data they handle, better preparedness for sector-specific issues will help to safeguard reputation in increasingly complex times.

Opportunities for improved media relations and digital communications
Media relations and digital footprint are two of the areas where education leaders rank lower in the index than other sectors. The majority of leaders think their top executives should be engaging with the media more, which requires training and preparation. In addition, more than half of leaders see the need to do more on digital channels, prioritising SEO and influencer engagement. Having a strong external communications plan and leadership buy-in is key to growing reputation in these areas.

Leaders must brace for AI disruption, but look for applications to improve learning
The education sector now recognises that AI has changed the way we think and work, disrupting existing ways of teaching, learning, and assessment, while also reshaping the employment market. However, most leaders in the sector are optimistic and embrace the change, believing that AI can help people to learn better and more quickly. More and more education organisations are investing in AI learning and teaching, and have the ambition to become leaders in this area, setting the stage for ongoing AI-driven change in the education sector.

About Sandpiper

Sandpiper is an award-winning strategic communications and public affairs consultancy based in Asia Pacific and operating globally.

We use our shared experience to make sense of the challenges our clients face in times of change.

We draw on rich, data-driven insights and research to inform our advice and deliver measurable value.

We work as a single, global team, with one P&L. This allows us to serve our clients flexibly wherever they are in the world.

Our team are trusted advisors to industry leaders and market disruptors. We combine strong regional market understanding with global perspectives.

We have deep specialist knowledge in the education industry, serving public and private universities, non-profit organisations, and global for-profit education companies. Our sector expertise ensures we understand the challenges our clients face, can think creatively about their issues, and shape communications to achieve their organisational goals.

Contact the Sandpiper Education team at education@sandpipercomms.com.

In 2023 and 2024 Sandpiper was awarded Specialist Consultancy, Sandpiper Energy, Environment and ESG Practice at the Public Relations & Communications Association (PRCA) APAC Awards 2024, Large Agency Certificate of Excellence by PRWeek Best Places to Work Asia Pacific 2023, Large Consultancy of the Year by the Public Relations & Communications Association (PRCA), Large Consultancy of the Year by PR Awards Asia Pacific 2023, and Midsize Agency of the Year by PRovoke Media SABRE Awards Asia Pacific 2023.

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AUCKLAND
22-28 Customs Street East, Auckland CBD,
Auckland 1010, New Zealand
+64 21 0844 0939

BEIJING
Suite 2001, Full Tower, No. 9 Middle East 3rd
Ring Road, Chaoyang District, Beijing, PRC
+86 10 8591 0056

DUBAI
The Prime Tower, Level 24, 2401-75,
Business Bay, Dubai, United Arab Emirates
+971 4 547 7727

HONG KONG SAR
1701-2, 17/F, Tai Tung Building, 8 Fleming Road,
Wanchai, Hong Kong
+852 3114 6339

MELBOURNE
Level 2/1 Southbank Blvd, Southbank,
Victoria 3006, Australia
+61 2 9098 4321

SHANGHAI
Room 26078, 26-27F Infinitus Tower,
No.168 Hubin Road, Huangpu district, Shanghai
200000, PRC
+86 185 1614 7739

SINGAPORE
6 Shenton Way, #25-11, OUE Downtown 2,
Singapore 068809
+65 6592 2883

SYDNEY
Level 24, Three International Towers,
300 Barangaroo Avenue, Barangaroo,
NSW 2000, Australia
+61 2 9098 4321