

Listen, Optimize, Repeat:

A Student-Centric Approach to Higher Ed Marketing

Insights from five UK university leaders



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A Race to Win Students' Hearts & Minds

This is a trying time to work in higher education marketing. Universities today must endeavour to give students a high-quality, safe, and valuable experience, while working harder to find and attract those students. Success rests on each university's ability to employ marketing strategies and tactics that set them apart other institutions.

To understand what works well – and to provide actionable insights for today's higher education marketing teams – we went directly to the source. We interviewed leaders at the

forefront of higher education marketing to get their ideas on best practices to attract new students, communicate effectively, and create a strong sense of belonging early on.

They shared what they were doing today and what the next generation of higher education marketing could look like. They also flagged what could stand in the way or, on the contrary, enable greater marketing success.

We spoke with:



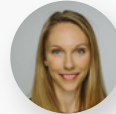
Alistair Beech

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Transformation Opportunities for Higher Ed Marketers



Today's students expect their universities to deliver nothing short of highly digital, personalised communications that give them the information they need, when and where they need it.

For some marketers, these expectations in addition to Brexit, Covid-19 have led to an understandable amount of overwhelm. "Many people are leaving social media roles in the UK due to fatigue and burnout," shares Emma Gilmartin, head of social media and student communications at the University of Glasgow.

Fortunately, as many of the marketing leaders we interviewed understand, working smarter – and not harder – can be the answer. The right marketing technology can be a great equaliser for universities where staffing is a concern.

Winning teams – like the team at Glasgow – are always on the lookout for increasing agility and maximising resources. They readily use and frequently assess the value of emerging technology for helping them reach,

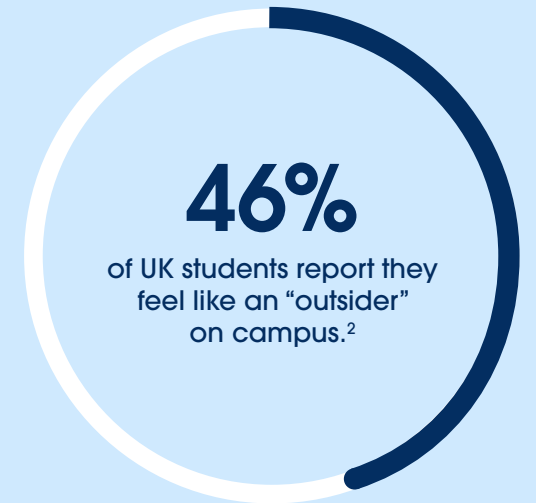
captivate, and engage students. To ensure that the conversation flows both directions and that the student voice is at the heart of the university narrative, marketers focus on:

Increasing Belonging with Personalised Engagements

Over six in ten UK students report that they are proud to be a student at their university ¹. Nonetheless, 46% of UK students still reported that they feel like an "outsider" on campus ².

Belonging is becoming a much more critical part of that experience. And many universities strive to improve in this area while dealing with rising student mental health issues in a post-pandemic higher education environment riddled with stress and uncertainty.

With less than half (48%) of UK students saying their university provides a personalised experience that's tailored to meet their needs³, there is an opportunity for universities to rethink their interactions with students and the channels they use to do so.



1,2,3 ([Connected Student Report](#))



Enhancing Experiences with Digital

Clearly, the pandemic heightened this need as more students turned to digital resources to learn and stay connected.

Yet, just 64% of UK students said that their institution was successfully able to pivot to a more digital experience during the pandemic³. This is in comparison, for example, to 78% of students in France, 75% in Australia, and 74% in the United States.

Despite some positive headway, “The UK is still not a destination of choice for online learning,” explains Alan Monteith, who works alongside Gilmartin as senior recruitment marketing officer at the University of Glasgow.

Beyond learning modality, a full quarter of UK students say their university is using outdated technology to support students⁴. Only 41% say their university services are hosted in the cloud⁵. Hence, there are still many opportunities to embrace the digital transformation.

1 in 4

UK students say their university is using outdated technology⁴

41%

of UK students say their universities services are hosted in the cloud⁵

3,4,5 ([Connected Student Report](#))

Eight Steps to Student-Centric Marketing



As universities look for ways to evolve their digital strategy to support students and market to prospective students: marketing teams are best-placed to help universities to redefine themselves and execute the strategies that will drive this revenue-generating transformation.

The marketing leaders we interviewed have well-earned roles as decision-makers and are driving both the university narrative and strategy. “We have a voice and a seat at the table,” shares Alistair Beech, social media and digital communications manager at the University of Manchester. “At MU, we have a large communications and marketing presence, and staffing-wise, we’re pretty well-stocked for expertise....the work is largely done by experienced practitioners.”

Having that seat at the table is important. But what the external narrative is and how it is deployed and understood by faculty, students, and prospective students varies greatly from university to university. In every case, it is tied to an institution’s most important intangible asset: its brand.

Here are eight steps to deliver student-centric marketing according to our interviewees:

Critical questions to help you define your university’s brand:

- What motivates us as a university?
- What motivates our students, prospective students, and alumni?
- What do audiences expect from us?
- How can we communicate our value to students and prospective students?
- What tools can we use to most effectively deliver our messages and communicate with those we serve?
- What do we learn when we measure and reflect on what we’ve done?
- What will we do with what we’ve learned through measurement and reflection?



1 Find your Authentic Voice

A brand promise is the unspoken contract between brand and end-user that guarantees a consistent level of quality, and that defines the types of experiences the end-user can expect. A university's brand promise, and how that promise is communicated to students, will depend on its reputation, aspirations, students, academic programs, research, geographical location, and countless other factors.

In order for any higher education brand to be effective, the voice that delivers it must be authentic. Some forward-thinking universities are successfully tapping into the student voice to deliver communications in a way that is resonating deeply with audiences.

"We like using our students and staff as storytellers," shares Gilmartin.

As marketing experts understand, any message construed as misleading or untrue can quickly unravel a university's reputation and brand. Transparent (and authentic communications – even if they aren't perfect – are valued greatly; more so than the polished brand communications to which many have long aspired.

"We're trying to move from being reactive to being proactive and having a more transparent approach with each student," shares Paul Napleton, head of digital and marketing automation at the University of East Anglia. "This means saying, 'If you share something with us, this is the experience we'll give you'...you have to build that relationship," he says. "They have to get to know you..."

"We have 27 student content creators who come to us with ideas and themes they want to talk about. They create blogs and vlogs...The movement towards peer-to-peer and letting them tell the stories has been very successful for us."

Emma Gilmartin, University of Glasgow



2 Build a Unified Communication Strategy

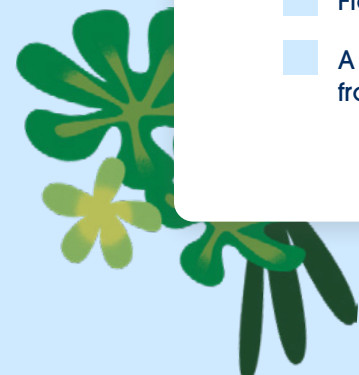
Unified marketing and communications strategy creates the foundation through which a university can help build consistent experiences for enrolled and prospective students alike. This involves taking what Napleton refers to as a “360 view” of the student experience.

“We articulate [marketing] as a digital ecosystem,” explains Napleton. “When we think of the role of content and other things we can control within our space – like virtual events or open days – if you take the helicopter view of it all, then you can integrate everything and demonstrate synergies,” he says. “In that way, you’re better able to create value.”

When these factors are in-place, university marketing teams at any university can be sure their strategy is robust and fit-for-purpose in order to help them meet their unique goals.

A unified marketing and communication strategy is:

- Built upon the brand
- Ambitious in its goals to increase enrolment
- True to the institution’s culture
- Widely understood and socialised across teams and functions
- Backed by strong buy-in from leadership
- Informed by data
- Powered by savvy people and martech tools
- Evaluated against meaningful metrics
- Flexible enough to be revised as needed
- A living plan that forms the basis of a brand’s front-facing presence





3 Increase Enrolment without Compromising Fit

Marketing leaders are tasked with attracting more students to their institutions. Global uncertainty linked to economic challenges and a host of unfolding geopolitical complexities in Europe make recruitment and enrolment even more complicated.

Yet if attracting more students is the goal, it should come with a caveat: they must be the right students. In other words, a university's brand should attract the attention of prospective students who are a strong fit for the culture and mission of the institution.

Getting that targeting right means different things for different universities.

"Oxford's application numbers are already high, so we focus our work on making a difference in specific areas," explains Elizabeth McCarthy, head of campaigns and digital communications at the University of Oxford. "We're really

lucky that we have a strong brand. It can mean we're combatting strongly held opinions about what Oxford is, but it's a huge overall benefit," she says.

Finding the right students – and tailoring personalised and impactful messages to them – requires marketing tools and skilled staff to glean specific insights and conduct deep audience segmentation.

With today's marketing technologies, teams can develop feedback loops that benchmark students who move through the admissions process seamlessly.

"We're trying to co-create an experience here with our students. You get back what you put in," shares Beech. "Students come to Manchester and they work with the university to build these outcomes for themselves...We can do a lot with that from the communications and marketing perspective". he adds

4 Break Down Silos... Every Silo!

When departments rely only on their own systems, practices, or data taxonomies, the likelihood of miscommunication, duplicated efforts, and missed opportunities increases.

However, many teams have learned – particularly during the pandemic – about the value of collaboration and finding synergies with other teams.

“It’s better now than before,” explains Gilmartin. “People used to be scared to share best practices, but now there’s much more sharing of information. We share assets and collaborate on campaign planning, for example, and we also work with other universities in Scotland and the UK.”

More and more institutions are building bridges between disciplines and teams by organising students, faculty and staff into agile, cross-functional groups that work together to approach a problem holistically.

The benefits of stronger collaboration are undeniable, and a good number of UK universities are "centralising marketing and communications teams for better sharing."

The key to ensuring silos are broken down – or aren’t unwittingly built in the first place – is rallying around shared goals.

“We will often take a project like graduation and say ‘Look, we all have the same objective, which is to create meaningful content to support our objectives so let’s come together,” explains Beech.

Collaboration benefits students, too. Instead of focusing on being the first department to score a “win” by communicating with students, marketers can focus on the end goal: joined-up, and meaningful communication that meet clear needs and drive a desired behaviour or action.

The collaborative spirit and student-first ethos are particularly important in today’s higher education context, when “crisis-mode” seems a more frequent occurrence. **Collaborative teams are better able to signal to students that the university is a reliable source of information when needed.**

“It goes back to the point about shared objectives and having a shared direction of travel,” says Beech. “We come together to define what we are trying to achieve as an organisation. We all want to enhance the student experience. That’s a tangible objective. We want to communicate better with our students.”

“We are trying to create a digital ecosystem and replicate the connectedness you see in the corporate world because everything is connected. Whether it’s SEO, social media or content, it’s marketing at its core.”

Paul Napleton, University of East Anglia



5 Activate Your Strategy

With a clear, student-centric marketing strategy in place, the question for marketing professionals becomes “How do you activate it?”. Although, the answer to this question depends on a university’s goals, students, and campaign deliverables: there are three elements at the core of a successful marketing execution:

- Stream(s) of inspiration
- Powerful storytelling
- Smart investment in marketing technology

The student voice is a constant source of inspiration and a smart vehicle for storytelling. “We have a lot of doors that open up for us around the stories we are able to tell. People are mostly willing to engage with us,” explains McCarthy.

Some teams also look abroad for inspiration to fuel their storytelling, particularly to places where marketing teams may be better resourced. “There’s a lot of creativity and fun happening in American and Australian higher education,”

explains Monteith. “We’ve taken inspiration from [the University of] Oregon, because they are so creative in the way they engage with students,” he says. “From the student recruitment and marketing point of view, it seems they have the freedom to try new things. But having the resources is a big thing. U.S. university internal budgets for content creation are massive by comparison.”

Others look outside of higher education for inspiration. “For storytelling, we look at major news outlets regularly,” shares McCarthy. “For example, we look at how The Guardian is using new media and data. For audience engagement and ads, we look across the space – at the best practice and examples that are highlighted in outlets like PR Week, and other publications that are focused on the commercial sector and the charity or NGO sector. We try to look everywhere.”

Inspiration, of course, is only one piece of the puzzle. Marketing leaders must analyse capabilities and needs, and invest in the right martech stack.

A smart technology spend is one that streamlines the workload of marketers, and that has the capabilities needed to deploy strong, effective communications.

“You really need a content management system (CMS) that’s easy to deploy and has AI-enabled search. I’m all about trying to simplify and streamline the martech stack,” says Napleton. “We do bring on board Salesforce-friendly tools. Things like accessibility, for example, are massively important. We have to make sure our communications are inclusive and accessible...Salesforce is doing this really well.”

Often, the tools that simplify processes win out.

“With things like our Open Day, text and SMS reminders and automation capacity are very important...but it has to be monitored and refreshed as needed,” Monteith says.

“We always look at and prioritise automation.”

Alan Monteith, University of Glasgow



6 Personas That Reflect Reality

How a university crafts messages that speak to its different audiences matters. That is why audience personas are useful tools for higher education marketers to gain a deeper insights into how those audiences think, speak and behave.

“[Personas are a] mixed bag,” explains Gilmartin. “Sometimes they get unwieldy. Twenty or thirty personas would be hard to implement....but three seems manageable.”

At the very least, persona-building is a helpful activity in that it helps marketers focus their messaging in a way that factors in the many variables at play in the lives of their target audiences. This is particularly true in higher education, where incorrect stereotypes about students have historically been used to inform messaging.

Today’s teams can lean on marketing technology, professional experiences, and the feedback of students themselves to gather reliable data and insights into their student body. Those data and insights can inform the creation of genuinely useful personas.

User personas should include:

- Relevant background information**
Include attributes like age, gender identity/preferred pronouns, place or country of origin, language(s) spoken, etc. This information is relevant because a diverse array of personas can help marketers mitigate unconscious bias and be mindful of cultural, generational, and interpersonal values and norms, as well as any language barriers that may exist.
- Academic and extracurricular interests**
Include their university program, career ambitions, whether they are studying full- or part-time, as well as any extracurricular interests and activities that are relevant to how you may engage with them. Also consider whether they are attending as an international or domestic student.
- Communication preference and personality attributes**
Include their level of social media comfort and communication style. This can give insight into their likelihood of engaging and possible avenues for connection. It may also be helpful to define personas that span a range of personality attributes – including levels of introversion and extroversion.
- Perceived support needs**
Include any limiting factors that could hamper their student experience or their ability to fully engage and communicate with the university.

Student persona card example

Jocelyn

Pronouns: She/Her/Hers

Age: 32

Location/Home: Bristol

Field of Study: Theatre

Status: Part-Time/Mature Student



Academics/Study Interests

Returning university student

Previously studied fine art

Now pursuing an acting degree on part-time basis

Goals

Work full-time for a reputable theatre company

Background

Busy single mother of two

Works and studies part-time

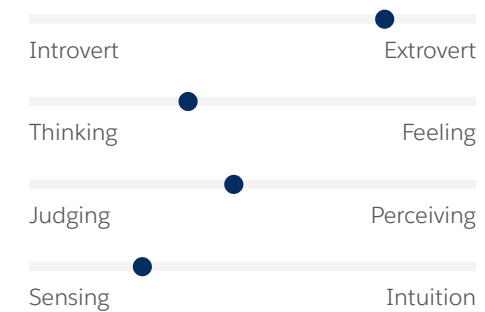
Potential Extra Support/Needs

Needs childcare

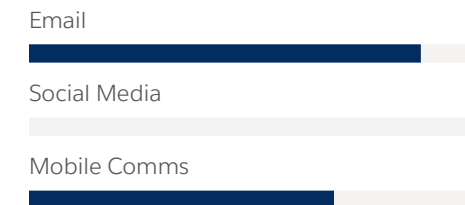
Part-time status/needs academic encouragement

Career counseling

Personality (if available)



Technology/Comms Preferences



Extracurricular Interests

Dance

7 Implement Student Marketing Journeys

Audience personas can be activated through the construction of comprehensive user journeys that map the timeline and key points of decision for prospective students, and key milestones for current students. **User journeys are visual representations that show how and through which touchpoints each persona progresses – from awareness to decision and beyond.**

User journeys are best informed by intensive user research, but can also be supplemented through more passive data collection like surveys of incoming students. They do not provide marketing direction for every student, but for as many different forms of student experience as possible. At a minimum, a few key commonalities, mapped against a handful of critical moments is an ideal way to put this into practice and can yield significant improvements in marketing activity. At each of those decision-making points, marketers can indicate the messaging points and vehicles that they think are best able to inform and convince these personas to take a specific action.

When mapping user journeys, the frequency of interaction is important, and getting the balance is crucial. “We know students sometimes feel they’re getting information from too many places,” shares McCarthy

Audience personas and user journeys are highly interdependent; either one without the other doesn’t do a marketing team much good. Taking the time to build them can bring clarity and efficiency to future marketing activities. For many marketers, this is an incremental process.

“We have a “crawl-walk-run” approach,” shares Napleton. “That means we spend time getting set up, build confidence in the data records, establish a few priority journeys, build more confidence...then we can start introducing AI and automation,” he says. “We have what we call mini fist-bump moments along the way. But first, we have to incrementally improve and prove out what our digital transformation can really do.”

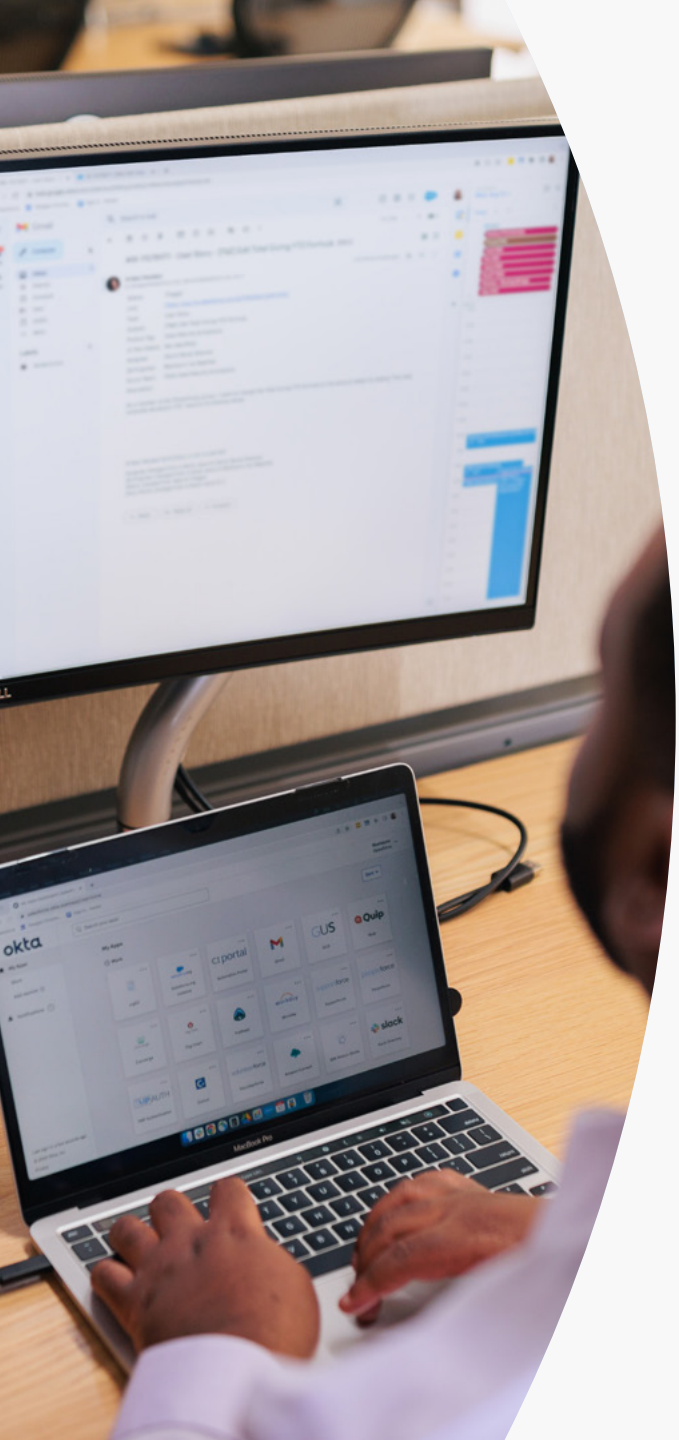
A full student-lifecycle user journey may be linear, while a campaign-specific journey may be circular and able to keep repeating for subsequent events.

The channel and device should also be considered.



“The number of touchpoints is also really important. (A student) might start on their phone then move to their iPad. And that journey needs to be seamless.”

Paul Napleton, University of East Anglia



8 Use and learn from data

Personas and journeys are tools that give marketers the theoretical knowledge-base they need to inform and deploy their strategy. Yet, in order to acquire and retain students, teams must have access to real insights and metrics to strengthen their marketing strategy.

This can come in the form of anecdotes and user experiences gathered by front-line staff, combined with data gathered from marketing activity. For some teams, having the ability to deploy 1:1 communications is the gold-standard and the ultimate goal.

Here are four data-driven marketing tactics used by our interviewees:

360 student view

“You have to work hard together with the data team,” Napleton explains. **“Most institutions do have the data, but not the confidence or agility to action it. But if you have this 360 view, that’s your dynamite...that’s your platform to personalise [messaging] and develop true 1:1 communications.”**

Data gives marketers valuable insights. How many students opened an email? If not many students opened it, why not?

Did they respond to a direct message? What information did they fill out in a form? Did they click on your A ad or your B ad? Real-time metrics give marketers the most valuable insights possible to inform ongoing and future marketing content, and to help bring personas and journeys to life.

Social listening

For Gilmartin and her team, listening is an invaluable part of the University of Glasgow’s data-informed strategy.

“It’s so important. You can test how things are going and amend things quickly. We monitor conversations about our brand at a granular level to see how it’s hitting. That way we can be agile and change quickly if needed” explains Gilmartin.

“Social listening gives you instant feedback.”

Emma Gilmartin, University of Glasgow



Lead scoring

Lead scoring is a useful tactic, in which an individual may garner points based on actions mapped to certain phases of the marketing funnel. Did a student open an awareness email? Did they fill out a decision-making form? Did they ignore a text? Assigning a lead score to prospective students and students can help you understand which triggers to activate in order to help them engage. It can help you understand preferred channels for communication, ideal frequency, tone, and much more.

With data powering a marketing strategy, a university can be confident in its ability to nurture and move students through their journey – from prospect, right through to successful graduate and alumna/us.

The effective collection and analysis of data is a critical piece of any marketer's toolkit and can be a deciding factor in how successful efforts are and how their budget is set.

The right marketing technology – specifically the right CRM – can shift the manual components of data analysis from your marketers' shoulders, and make data analysis an easier lift.

A/B testing

Marketers use A/B testing to learn what resonates, and further define their tone and approach. “We test everything,” shares Gilmartin. “We look at open rates and email names...We do it more so when we are investing more, because showing ROI is

very important. Especially when budgets and resources are limited.” With every click and message sent, and with every piece of data analysed, an opportunity for improvement awaits.



“You can't do personalisation without data. You need to capture information and stitch it all together into your CRM using automation as needed.”

Paul Napleton, University of East Anglia

To Begin? Go For It!

Continuing with the status quo in marketing may feel comfortable, but can mean a university misses out on the chance to elevate its mission and to transform what higher education means and stands for.

Many higher education marketers – like our interviewees – are embracing and sharing new ways of communicating and interacting with students.

By injecting innovative ideas and using marketing technologies that make your job easier: you are better able to deliver highly personalised student engagements and learn along the way!

Remember, no campaign or marketing activity is perfect at first. The best way to build a stellar marketing is to go for it.





Learn more