

Purpose

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DESIGN WITH SUBSTANCE

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BRANDING EDUCATION

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Student as consumer: How universities must adapt.



DESIGN WITH SUBSTANCE

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Higher fees have created a marketplace like never before... and it's this situation that requires a different kind of approach.

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Now we can begin to see the impact of the recent hike in tuition fees.

Whilst an average 9% reduction in reported applications is possibly not insurmountable, there are other worrying statistics emerging: a 30% reduction in applications for education courses, 40% on communications courses and one in ten writing off university altogether.

I have spent the last ten years championing the benefits of the other side – the vocational sector. Having been in the ‘challenger’ position for decades we’ve learnt from bitter experience how to market our cause effectively – and through the endeavors of the sector there is now a respectable alternative to higher education. Consequently, the sector is currently having a ‘purple patch’. Two thirds of young people are considering an apprenticeship and over 200,000 young people attended the WorldSkills London 2011 event this October. Our task now is to turn a purple patch into a golden age.

In a similar vein to the current situation universities find themselves in, individual providers of vocational qualifications have also recently needed to compete more aggressively against each other. The Qualification Credit Framework (QCF) commoditised vocational qualifications. Given the product is now essentially the same, a huge pressure has been placed on value and service to create distinction.

How can universities fight back and reverse the trend?

Competition between universities is not new; they have always fought hard to attract the best, maintain their reputations and keep their ‘brand’ front of mind to the many stakeholders. The difference now is that higher fees have created a marketplace like never before. This situation, is driving students to become ‘consumers’ whether we like it or not – and it’s this situation that requires a different kind of approach.

There are two issues to address here: firstly, the ‘Should I? Shouldn’t I?’ question – is an education at a university worth investing in, full stop? These questions are critical to address and UK PLC cannot afford a situation where people that should be going to university, don’t. It’s a scenario that could have an impact on all our futures. Secondly, what can universities do to convince their new ‘consumers’ they are making the best choice?

£27,000

The current maximum cost of a 3 year degree

How can we make sure that those who should go, do go?

If we acknowledge that the situation is forcing students to become 'consumers' then the answer is quite simple; they want what every other consumer wants which is value. The publication of the Which? research scheduled for release next September showcasing and comparing the 'value' of degrees from particular universities will put pressure on universities to deliver and effectively communicate value. £27,000 is a lot of money (the current, maximum cost of a three year university degree) but not if it enables a lifetime of fulfillment and a return far greater than your investment. Students, of course, appreciate this but it requires a huge leap of faith, trust and belief that their university experience will enable them to achieve this, especially against a backdrop that has seen the degrees 'devalued' over recent years.

This is an issue universities need to confront head on. The most attractive universities of the future will be those that can best create value around their product and deliver this in an inspiring, engaging and compelling way. Those that achieve this will effectively persuade 'consumers' that their choice was a decision made without risk if, of course, they are willing to deliver their side of the bargain.

Creating value

This is not just about student to staff ratios and the remuneration packages of graduates. I'm sure Which? will consider a far broader spectrum of the term 'value'. The ability to create value around a product is dependent on how effective the 'brand' is. Think of any successful brand – they create value by thorough clarity, engagement and distinction.

It is crucial that universities restate their case for higher education and the value of their proposition and brand product clearly. The cost must also be properly communicated, as so far, this has not been the case across all institutions. Although some universities are addressing this as part of a new, more commercial approach, this appears to be occurring at vastly different paces. The introduction of a KIS (Key Information Set) – seen as an equivalent to a Home Buyers Pack will alleviate and avoid some of confusion for the student as consumer and help universities to focus on their key messages and brand positioning for the future whilst setting key benchmarks. Will this be enough?

There has never been a greater pressure or urgency for a university to deliver an effective 'brand'.

Dare to be different

Why be daring? Why be different? Simple. To stand out and connect. How many of you reading are involved in an organisation where the colour blue is a key component of your visual identity? In research carried out by Purpose, we concluded approximately 70% of the top 50 universities in the UK used blue within their identity. It all looks the same, sounds the same and uses the same imagery. Referring to colour palette above is only one area of 'sameness' within the higher education sector. The sector is awash with sameness. In order to really stand out and compete within the higher education sector, that 'sameness' must be avoided. One extreme example of daring to be different comes from the University of Lincoln, where student Tom Ridgewell created an 'unauthorised' online campaign. It was unorthodox – it featured students on campus in clichéd environments responding to the question "Where do you study?" Each student is depicted as overtly happy and smiling with a sunny disposition and backdrop. Cut to later images that show those same students being suddenly attacked by an army of student zombies. The video is a parody of the numerous, clichéd student recruitment videos and communications out in the market and the message is clear – students are intelligent and can see through the clichés – they want messages, facts and communications to cut through all of the 'sameness' currently available to them. The unauthorised video attracted over 750,000 views on YouTube (and eventually a role within the marketing department at University of Lincoln). Whilst I am not necessarily advocating this approach it has given Lincoln a point of difference and it may be the first university campaign that has created 'noise' and got people talking. It would be very interesting to see the impact this campaign has had on their enrolments.

Readdressing imagery, I feel strongly that this must work very hard for your target audience who are already visually literate. Unfortunately most communications targeting prospective students don't appear to realise this. Why would a prospective student want to see a clichéd image of somebody sitting at a computer or in a laboratory? They know what that scenario looks like. Instead they want to see their end destination and where their choice in education is going to take them – what's the reward? It's definitely not throwing a mortarboard in the air.

An opportunity for your brand to work much harder

Whilst it is difficult to compete with the global reputations of a few select universities, for everybody else there is a fight to be fought. With so much sameness in this sector there is a brilliant opportunity to create far greater value around the product and for your brands to work much harder. Being first to do that takes bravery but for those that move first there are rewards-a-plenty.

Looking at the sector overall, the positive scenario that the optimistic, even idealistic amongst us hope for is this fight will raise standards further and actually deliver greater value for money. Then we will see more people with the confidence to pursue the right kind of education for them – those that should, will.

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Purpose is a brand communications consultancy specialising in brand identity and marketing communications.

Our strategic, design and production skills enable clients to communicate more effectively – to stand out, to connect, and to prosper.

We're over thirty strong – we're independent – and we're listed in the Design Week league table of Top 10 UK Creative Award winning agencies.

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