

Brand report

redhouse

Issue 1

Higher
Education

Progressive institutions.
Conservative brands?

Welcome to the Brand Report

When you immerse yourself in the world of higher education brands, as prospective students do when they're choosing their options, everything quickly starts to look the same.

As a sector, UK universities are struggling to communicate clear, differentiated offers through their branding. Without doing extensive research and attending open days, it's hard for prospective students – or potential staff – to discover what makes one university more attractive than any other.

This presents huge opportunities for ambitious higher education brands

to stand out and get ahead. Almost by definition, a university has a progressive mission and an optimistic vision, the likes of which many commercial brands strive for but struggle to live up to.

Some universities are already ensuring growth and success by building global, inclusive brands. Universities like these, which tap into their sense of purpose to power their brand, will have an edge as the sector continues to evolve.

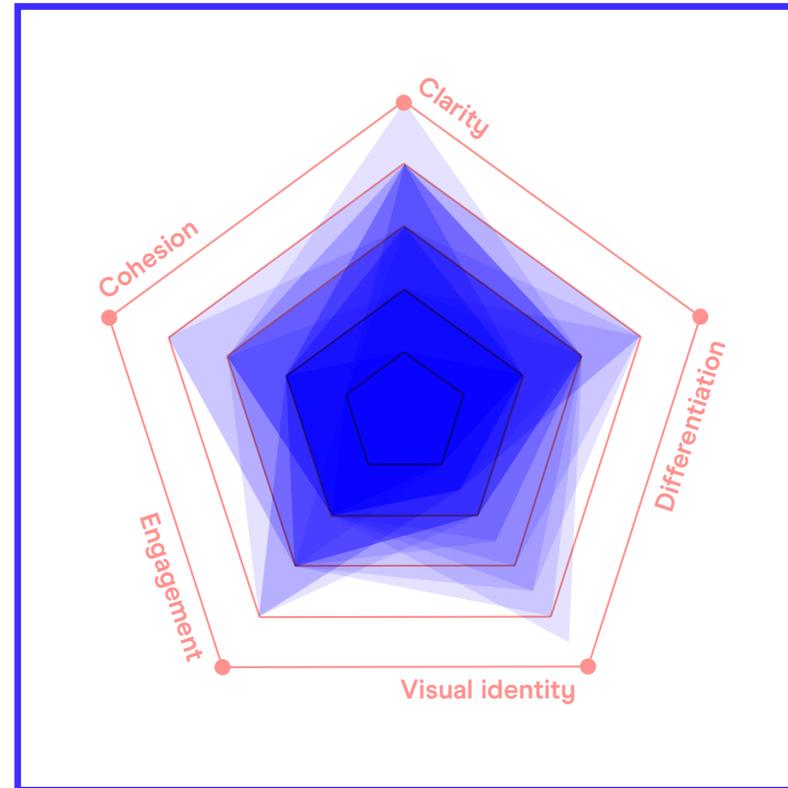
Find the full story, including many more insights, in this first issue of the Brand Report by Redhouse. In each issue we turn our attention to a different sector, analysing a notable selection

of brands in search of best practice to celebrate – and great opportunities for ambitious brands to seize.

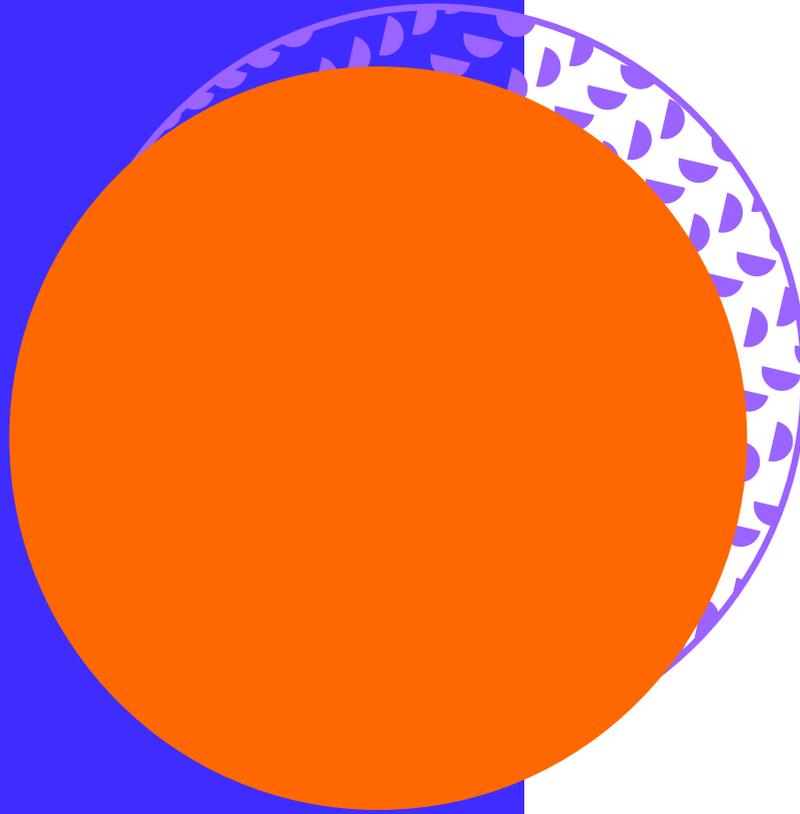
We're launching with higher education because it's a sector we know inside out. For more than 30 years, we've delivered brand, design and content projects for major players in education, including the Department for Education, the Office for Students, the University of London, and Pearson.

A university's brand – like any brand – needs to perform well in five areas: **clarity, differentiation, visual identity, engagement, and cohesion.** A brand that delivers in all five areas is one that will provide measurable value for the university, its students, its staff, its community, the sector ... even the world.

For more detail on the five aspects of understanding brand, and insight into the higher education sector's performance in each one, read on.



Clarity



A brand represents an organisation. Its various elements act as a kind of shorthand, letting the audience know what to expect from the organisation.

To make sure those expectations match reality, the organisation needs a clear vision, mission, values, and offer, and these need to be clearly expressed through the brand. When the brand makes a clear promise and the organisation delivers, the audience's trust will grow.

An absence of vision

Universities act as though their reason for existing goes without saying. This leaves an information gap for a growing number of prospective students and their parents. And that gap creates an opportunity for universities with strong, purpose-driven stories to tell.

case now more than ever. Thanks to the government's vocal support for apprenticeships, potential students and their parents are seeing that a degree is not the only reliable route to fulfilling employment.

Instead of proclaiming their value to the world, universities' brands tend to focus on the student experience, emphasising teaching quality, teaching and leisure facilities, and graduate employability. Government policy is probably responsible for this, too. With the Office for Students putting student experience at the heart of the metrics used to judge universities, it's only natural for universities to put it at the heart of their offers. But for exactly that reason, it doesn't make for a distinct offer. It lacks the confident and compelling position that comes from a vision and purpose you believe in.

What does a university education offer that other options do not? The chance to pursue learning for its own sake? A supportive environment to test the frontiers of thought? Skills for navigating the modern world, alongside subject-specific knowledge?

Whether your university's vision is something like these or something completely different, it needs to be

Outreach officers who staff stalls at careers events have told us that they frequently have to spend precious time promoting university in general, leaving them much less time to talk up the subjects they're actually there to promote.

But these big-picture benefits are missing from many universities' brands. Some of the universities we reviewed did provide a vision statement, but these tended to be located on corporate information or careers pages, far from content aimed at prospective students. Vision and purpose can be the golden thread tying all elements of the brand together, but even those universities with defined visions don't seem to be realising that potential.

Vision and purpose
can be the golden
thread tying
all elements of the
brand together.

A brand that can make a convincing case for its place in the world is more sustainable than one that exists simply to fill a niche or make a profit. And universities need to make that

clearly defined. Because a clear vision is the heart of a good brand, it informs how your organisation presents itself, how it looks and sounds and behaves, the direction it moves, and everything it does.

And when everyone else is chasing the same immediate priorities, taking a stand for something is how you stand out.

Best in class

Staffordshire University

“We are the Connected University.” It’s a bold claim but one that holds up. With a real focus on creative and technology based courses, Staffordshire University uses the idea of helping students connect with their world as a powerful and well expressed point of difference. This simple concept seems to really capture, articulate and tie together all the elements of the university’s offer.

The idea then manifests across all areas of the brand. There is a simple logomark and strong visual language that expresses the idea of connections in a number of ways: from connector graphics to an aspirational tone of voice, which communicates key messages about the benefits of the connections students

create at the university (aka “Staffs”, as in the #proudtobestaffs campaign).

We especially appreciate that the brand idea of ‘connections’ works so well across all the touch points we reviewed. From demonstrating on-campus community spirit on Instagram stories to explaining the numerous international sites as “connecting continents”. And from a strategic plan that expresses the benefits of “connected communities and talented people” to the prospectus, which must have used the brand book as a checklist for key messages: “connections that could last a lifetime”, “connections can take you anywhere”, “connected to a network of support”, “our connected city campus”, and more.

The future is global

It's an advantage right now for a university to present itself as global. In fact, a global brand could be the key to future financial viability.

Students from European Union countries made up about 6% of UK university students in 2018. With Brexit causing uncertainty about the status of EU citizens in the UK, those numbers are falling.

All this means UK universities are highly motivated to present an attractive offer to international students, especially those in growing markets like China. So how is this pressure affecting higher education branding?

Reflecting a global student community

All the universities we reviewed offer support for international students, including inductions, language boosters and help with visa applications.

But there's space for every university to do more, if they want to become truly global brands. Existing support is geared towards helping international students fit in with the university's systems and

culture. But what if the systems and culture could change too, meeting international students halfway?

This could mean changing curriculums, teaching staff, and approaches to language on campus to reflect a global student body, instead of treating international students as a special case.

That would make the difference between a UK university with a diverse student body, and a truly global university. And a truly global university appeals not only to international students, but to any student who wants their education to prepare them for a connected world.

Cultural exchange

Most UK universities offer international exchange and study abroad programmes, showing that they appreciate the value of different cultures and experiences.

In some cases, like London School of Economics, visiting academics both participate in teaching and pursue their own research while in the UK. Oxford and Cambridge practise regular digital

cultural exchange via profiles on the Chinese social network, Weibo.

Initiatives like these help to position universities as internationally aware and engaged. But it takes more to be seen as genuinely global.

There's space for every university to do more, if they want to become truly global brands.

Meeting students where they are

Coming to the UK to live and study is a big undertaking. Some universities are reducing the burden by allowing international students to enrol without coming to the UK.

For some universities, like Falmouth, this means emphasising online learning as a key part of their offer. For others, it means something a little more concrete.

The universities of Aberdeen, Kent and Middlesex are among those launching satellite campuses in other countries. Kent offers postgraduate study at centres in four European capitals, and Middlesex has centres in Malta, Mauritius and Dubai. Aberdeen's status as the first UK university to open a campus in Qatar features prominently on its website.

Global brands

A clear brand can make the difference between a university that makes some concessions for international students, and a truly global university.

Take the University of Kent – “the UK's European university”. Kent's offer references a brick-and-mortar footprint in four European capitals, a history of collaborating on research with European institutions, and the ability to award dual UK/European qualifications.

An international outlook is embedded at the heart of the brand, and is expressed clearly throughout the university's communications, initiatives and culture. **This level of clarity shows the brand isn't paying lip service: it's a core commitment.**

Action points

1.

Define your university's vision.

Make sure it's something you can articulate clearly and use it to inform all activities and communications related to the brand.

2.

Meet audiences where they are, practically and culturally.

Communicate in spaces they're already comfortable in, and adapt your systems and processes to their needs, instead of expecting them to be the ones to adapt.

3.

Celebrate famous alumni if you've got them but remember that **your history is only important to the extent that it informs your brand today.**

4.

When writing copy, imagine a student reading along and constantly asking “So what?”

(Being a “civic university” or an “anchor institution” may be a distinguishing quality, but what does it mean for students?).

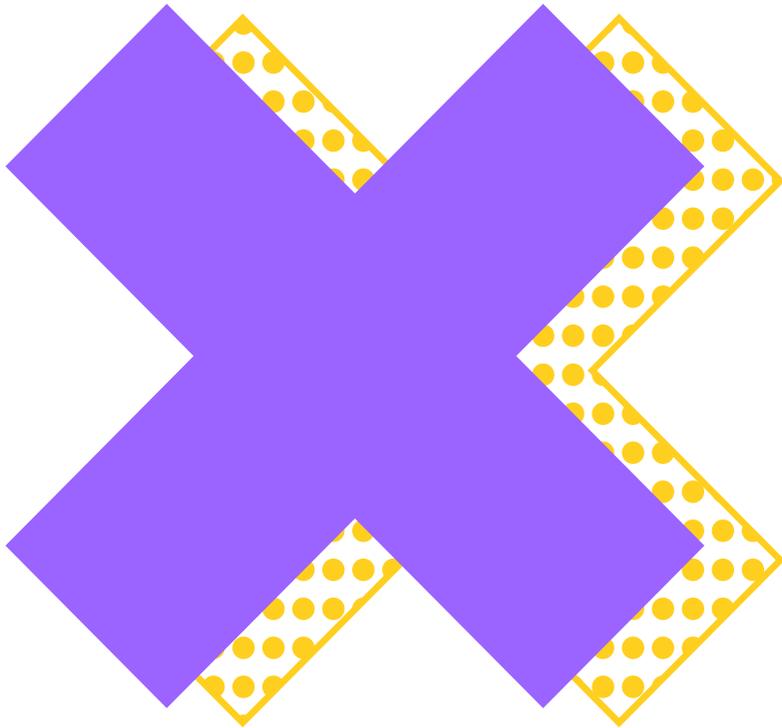
5.

State your offer clearly, but aim to prove it by your actions as well.

Oxford and Cambridge state that they have strong research capabilities; and they've made their website homepages into news hubs, publishing regular stories about the results of their groundbreaking, socially relevant research. Stated and proved.

Differentiation

redhouse



Effective brands stand out from the competition. Great brands stand out in a way that reflects the qualities that make the organisation itself stand out, telling the audience why they're right to choose this brand over all the others competing for their attention and commitment.

Excellence isn't good enough any more

Academic excellence. Great teaching. High rates of graduate employment. Any one of these qualities feels as though it should be a strong point of differentiation for a university. But in fact, even the three combined won't help a university stand out.

That's because nearly every university we reviewed mentions all three of these qualities as part of its offer. This puts the whole sector in an interesting Catch-22.

The sector has to up
its game, finding
new unique selling
points to stand out
from the crowd.

On the one hand, emphasising these qualities in your offer doesn't seem worth the effort, because it doesn't tell your audience why they should choose your university over all the others emphasising the same things.

On the other hand, they're still qualities that students and their parents look for. And if yours is the only university not claiming to offer these things, you risk looking like you're behind the rest of the sector.

Think of it as a form of inflation. Once enough universities claim to offer academic excellence, great teaching and high rates of graduate employment, the rest have to follow suit or fall behind. **Once those qualities were points of differentiation; now they're just the bar for entry,** and the sector has to up its game, finding new unique selling points to stand out from the crowd.

Same promise, different extent

Universities awarded Gold status on the new Teaching Excellence Framework have seized on this as a way to stand out. Hull, Huddersfield and Kent all used gold foil on their latest prospectus covers, incorporating their TEF Gold status into their visual identity. Kent even made its Gold teaching quality the stand-out message of its cover, overriding the university's core identity as "The UK's European university".

On the one hand, the TEF rankings certainly create ways to differentiate between universities. On the other, TEF Gold status is just another way of saying "great teaching". The independent award may make the claim more convincing, but the claim itself is the same one everyone is making.

The same is true of graduate employment statistics. **Higher stats and more reputable**

sources reinforce the claim, but the claim itself is not unique, so it only helps the university stand out so far.

Meaningful differentiation is especially important in higher education because of the way prospective students interact with university brands. When choosing their options, prospective students investigate a lot of different universities in some detail, over a relatively short period of time.

It's a pattern of interaction that might as well be designed to make it obvious when the same promises appear again and again. What's a more meaningful point of difference: the same promise with a higher percentage next to it? Or a promise no one else is making?

Of course all universities should let their audiences know that they deliver academic excellence, great teaching and high graduate employment. But those qualities aren't points of difference any more; they're just the playing field. Universities have an opportunity now to examine what makes them able to compete – and succeed – on that field.

Best in class

The university brands with the strongest differentiation are the ones that loudly and proudly claim a particular niche in the market:

Imperial College London

“The only university in the UK to focus exclusively on science, medicine, engineering and business”.

London School of Economics

“One of the foremost social science universities in the world”.

Norwich University of the Arts

“The best specialist university for arts, design, architecture and media study in Europe”.

It doesn't have to be a subject specialism; if your course list is broader, perhaps your niche is a style of learning (like Cambridge's supervisions or Norwich University of the Arts' Year 0 option) or a type of student with a particular education outcome in mind (like City, University of London, with its emphasis on business connections).

Location, location, location

If you were to list all the factors differentiating one university from another, location would be one of the first to come to mind. The nuanced differences between different course designs might take some explaining, but it's simple to understand that studying in Cambridge would be a different experience to studying in Hull.

Still, when branding a university, it's important to keep the focus on the institution first and foremost.

The question is not what makes the location unique; it's how the location makes the university experience unique. This means that even if the location has clear advantages, they have to be considered in terms of how they relate to the overall brand.

For example, according to the University of Aberdeen's prospectus,

Aberdeen is a good place to study because it's Scotland's safest city, and it's beside the seaside. These are certainly good reasons to live in Aberdeen, but the prospectus doesn't connect them with the university's main offer, "An ancient university with impact".

The University of Brighton, on the other hand, describes Brighton as "welcoming", "a place where different perspectives meet", "a place that looks at the world differently", "independent and inclusive" – all selling points that, as the prospectus makes clear, also apply to the university experience.

Your home reflects on your brand

A university that pitches its location as safe could be saying that it's caring and nurturing, or that it emphasises students' wellbeing. One that talks

about affordability might be targeting students who are less well off, or who want to be able to go out every single night without breaking the bank. One that celebrates the seaside might be courting more outdoorsy students, or those who want a more relaxed student life.

The question
is not what makes
the location
unique; it's how
the location makes
the university
experience unique.

These impressions are as much a part of those universities' brands as their logos or the pitches they give at recruitment events. If they don't align with the other elements of the brand, then however positive they might be, they're not the right way for the university to talk about its location. The local tourist board, yes, but not the university.

The weighting of a university's location within its overall offer can also be telling. **Heavy emphasis on the selling points of the city is a sign of a university that hasn't worked out how to communicate what really stands out about the institution itself.**

Here's a question more universities should try to answer: How would your branding and marketing change if another university set up shop in the same city or town? If your location is no longer a point of differentiation, then what is?

Action points

1.

If you offer something unusual, highlight it – especially if it aligns with the overall message of your brand. Abertay University doesn't build its whole brand around its Ethical Hacking degree, but it's a unique selling point that connects with the university's claim to prepare students for the modern world, so it makes sense to single out this degree in the offer.

2.

Spell out what's unique about your campus, city or courses. What do your students get that no other students do?

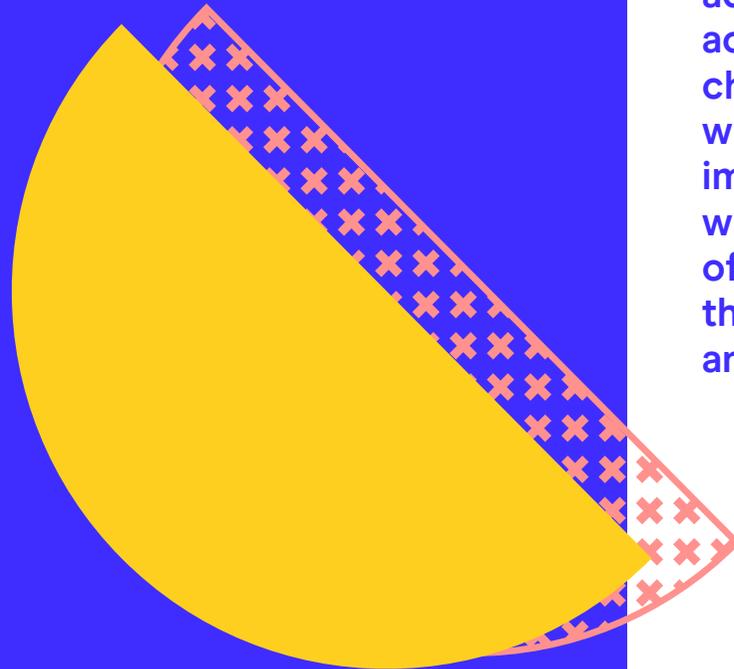
3.

Think about your offer as a complete package. Make a case for why the combination of elements your university offers is like no other – even (or especially) if the elements aren't individually unique.

4.

Structure your offer and prioritise messaging accordingly. What are your actual points of difference – the things no other university can promise? What services, features and accolades prove you can deliver on those promises? And what do you need to say to reassure your audiences you meet their expectations?

Visual Identity



From colour to typography, graphics to photography, and of course the logo, the visual identity is an integral part of any brand.

A brand's visual identity is a great example of applied design, tailored to appeal to a specific audience, and adapted to work elegantly across a wide range of channels. It should move with the times, but more importantly, it should align with the vision and values of the brand, communicating these elements on a visual and emotional level.

Your heritage, or their future?

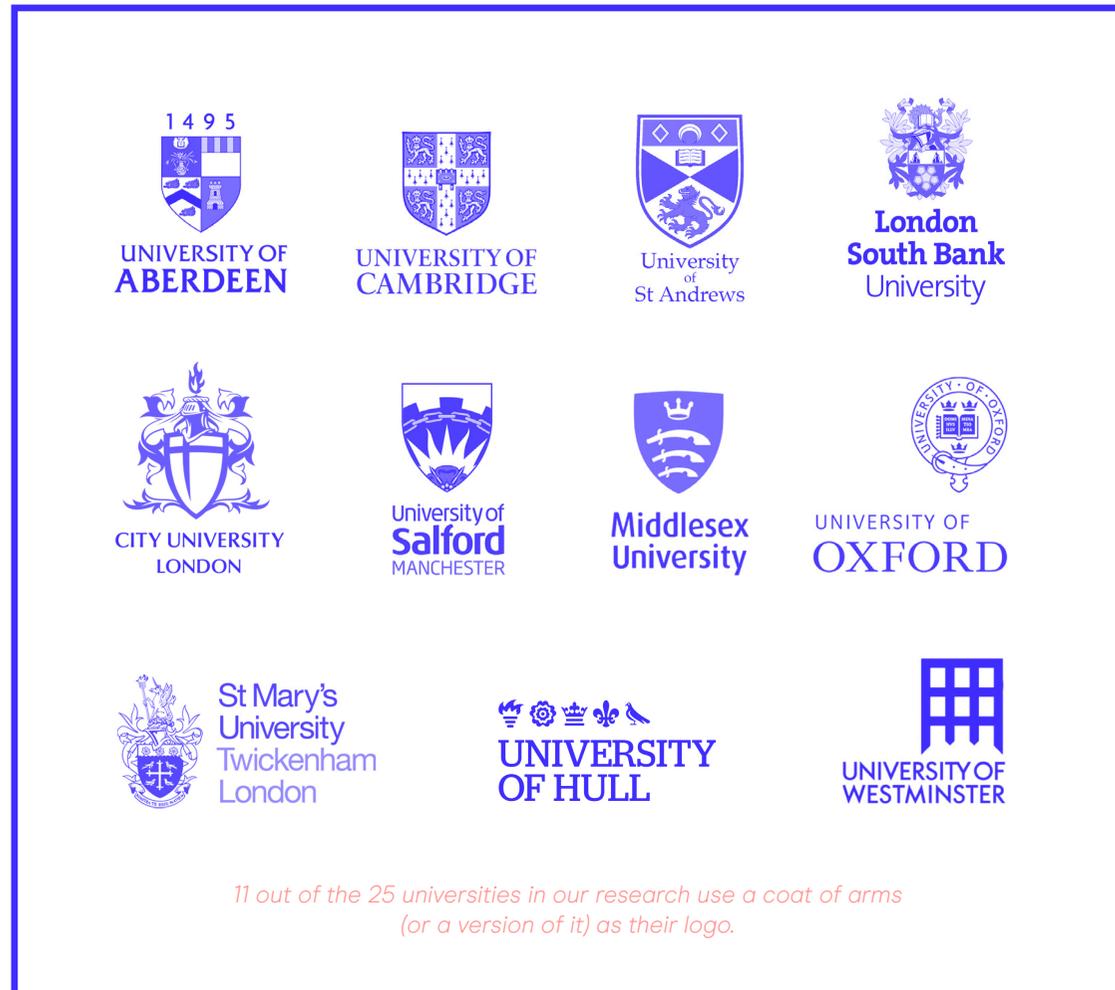
Why do so many universities use a coat of arms as their logo? They're so common in higher education branding, it actually makes more of a statement not to have one. But they don't make good logos by today's standards.

Coats of arms are old-fashioned by definition. They're intricate, so they don't adapt well at all to smaller-scale applications, like social media icons.

They do suggest a certain status and quality; a noble heritage, perhaps an association with royalty. But heritage can also be backward-looking and conservative.

Like any other brand, a university needs to decide on its story and weave it through every audience touch point, from the campus environment to the logo. Will that story be about the institution's heritage, or its students' future?

Most universities position themselves as progressive: continually improving facilities, preparing the leaders



of tomorrow, using research to move society forward. A coat of arms gives the opposite impression, conjuring up images of dusty traditions and strict social hierarchies.

If the whole brand hangs on history, you'll struggle to communicate new research and future-focused strategies.

This isn't to say a university's heritage can't be part of its offer. Oxford's status as the oldest university in the English-speaking world is such a powerful point of difference, you'd have to be asleep at the wheel to leave it out of the brand story. But if the whole brand hangs on history, you'll struggle to communicate

about new research and future-focused strategies in a way that feels coherent with the rest of your story.

So should universities throw out their coats of arms? Not necessarily. After all, the logo is only part of the brand. There's no reason why a university can't update its coat of arms and build a contemporary, progressive look and feel around it. The coat of arms as a concept could be deconstructed, rethought and reinvented for modern audiences, new design thinking and future-focused universities.

The tension between heritage and progression will always be there, especially for older universities. What's important is to make a conscious choice about how to balance the two in your brand. Don't go with a coat of arms just because it's always been that way. Think about what it says to prospective students and other stakeholders, and decide if that's the story you want to tell.

Best in class

University of the West of Scotland

- A logo that strikes a great balance between classic and contemporary – achieving gravitas without a coat of arms.
- Contemporary website design.
- A well designed prospectus, with a high quality editorial approach that stands out from the crowd.
- Prospectus available as a interactive PDF optimised for reading on screen (why aren't all university prospectuses like this?).
- Smart use of graphics and typography to brand video content.

Three and a tree

No two universities are the same. So why are their visual identities so similar?

Nowhere is the similarity more noticeable than in universities' photo libraries. The issue is so pronounced that the sector has given it a name: "three and a tree".

How do you show audiences that the campus is pleasant and relaxed, and the student body is diverse and welcoming? With a photo showing a diverse trio of students relaxing around a tree. Three and a tree. It ticks all the boxes, and no one's going to object to it, so that's what ends up in the prospectus.

But choosing the unobjectionable option – in photography, in typography, in colour, throughout the visual identity – is what leads to bland, generic looking brands.

It's not just higher education – we see this in every sector, in any organisation

where the chain of approval for branded visuals is more than a couple of links long. It only takes one cautious link – one that hasn't grasped the importance of differentiation in branding – to push a brand's visual style away from something distinctive, towards the same middle ground the majority of the sector already occupies.

A visual identity informed by brave ideas will naturally be more exciting.

But what's unobjectionable to the organisation isn't necessarily unobjectionable to the audience. In fact, when you take the middle road with your visual identity, "unobjectionable" is probably the best you can hope for.

The more likely outcome is an identity that's boring, unmemorable, or worse, not credible.

Brands stretch credibility when elements seem at odds with each other. For instance, if the messaging is all about brave new ideas, independent thinking and experimental approaches, but the photography, imagery, typography and colour palette are nothing but safe choices, audiences will question which impression is really true.

Any university with the confidence to carry through its forward-thinking attitude into its visual identity has a big opportunity to stand out from the crowd. And more than that, it's an opportunity to inspire students and gain their trust. Stepping off the middle road means taking a position. The risk is that not everyone will identify with that position; the reward is that some students will, much more strongly than they ever could with a generic, unobjectionable stance.

Photoshoots with style

Falmouth University and the University of the West of Scotland both avoid the “three and a tree” problem with studio photoshoots. Instead of trying to be fly-on-the-

wall or documentary style, the shoots are strongly art-directed to present specific, evocative pictures of the universities, their students, and the experience of studying there.



*Left: A typical example of “three and a tree” photography
Right: UWS’s editorial approach to photography for its undergraduate prospectus*

The reward hugely outweighs the risk. Students attracted by a clear position make far better advocates for their university. Plus, a visual identity informed by brave ideas will naturally be more exciting, more eye-catching, and more distinctive.

And when your visual identity, messaging and – most importantly – actions all reinforce the same brave position? That tells everyone, students, staff and stakeholders, what the organisation stands for and where it’s heading. So everyone can pull in the same direction – bringing the university closer to achieving its ambitions.

Action points

1.

Design a single, cohesive visual identity and apply it consistently to different channels and touch points – don't approach each touch point as its own design project. If a prospective student sits with your prospectus open on the table, and your website open on their phone at the same time, they shouldn't feel as though they're dealing with two different entities. Apply the same principle to all the ways your audiences interact with your brand.

2.

Avoid the "three and a tree" problem by setting aside realism. Fly-on-the-wall photography, showing what campus life looks like, won't vary much between universities. But the feeling of studying at your university is unique – and a creative photoshoot can capture that feeling in a unique way.

3.

Find a visual style flexible enough to cope with the different functions of your prospectus – it is both a sales brochure for a lifestyle and an aspiration, and a catalogue of course details. Flexibility and clarity are key.

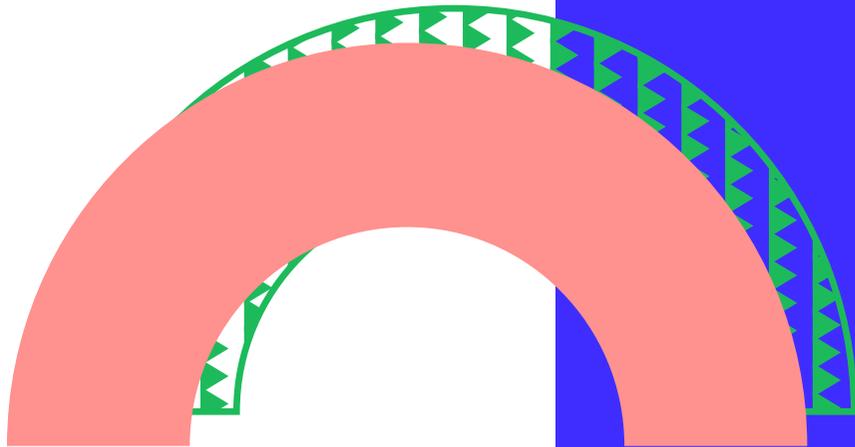
4.

Make sure the digital version of your prospectus is optimised for on-screen viewing. Don't upload the print-ready file; no one wants to see the crop marks! Make sure the resolution is high enough to show off your photography beautifully. And when formatting the file, consider the shape and orientation of the screens it'll be viewed on.

5.

Don't just upload your master logo file as a Twitter icon; think about an icon that works well at small sizes, and in a circular frame, that still represents your brand.

Engagement



An organisation interacts with its audience through its brand. The brand shapes the organisation's internal and external communication, in the form of campaigns, social media activity, and internal systems and initiatives.

A successful brand enhances these interactions, making sure they're valuable for both the organisation and its audience.

Social media: window into your brand

All universities are present and active on the major social networks, mostly posting several times a day. But are they taking full advantage of the chance to connect with their audiences?

Social media without the ‘social’

Most universities get minimal engagement on posts in their social channels. Most posts – on any network – are lucky to get a few likes. Even when content attracts a lot of comments, the majority are simply brief, immediate reactions – like an emoji or a “Yes!”. Nothing considered.

There are outstanding exceptions, though. Middlesex University has built an active, positive community on Facebook, and students interact enthusiastically with the student takeovers Oxford University runs on Instagram, where a student gets access to the official university

Instagram account for a limited time. By introducing varied voices, posting content that resonates directly with the audience, and limiting the timeframe to engage, these takeovers boost engagement by orders of magnitude.

Your brand informs your social strategy

Generally, universities are about community and the exchange of ideas. Social media should be a venue where those qualities can flourish. Perhaps it’s the growing distrust of social media companies, or perhaps it’s the way universities are using their platforms, but there’s very little depth to the conversations going on there.

It’s well worth universities defining specific goals for their social media channels. Is it just to be discovered there, because it’s expected? (That seems to be the goal for

Social media takeovers boost engagement by orders of magnitude.

most universities right now). Is it to be a customer service channel for prospective students with questions? To encourage discussion and debate?

A clearly defined brand will help with this strategic thinking. And with a strategy in place, universities can make informed decisions about which social

With a strategy in place, universities can make informed decisions about which social networks it's really worth investing in.

networks it's really worth investing their time and effort in.

The potential for more

Social media is immediate, connecting brands with audiences in real time. Individual posts can be put together quickly and with little effort, compared to a press release or a polished publication.

University campuses are busy, interesting places, where there's always something going on. What if a university's social media presence acted as a window into life on campus?

In our review, we saw plenty of important headlines about significant visiting lecturers, awards, and so on. But what about the everyday goings-on of the university? The socials, sporting events, spontaneous debates or performances breaking out in social spaces – all the things prospective students usually have to attend an open day to discover, but pushed to their phones in real time?

This is just one possible example of a way universities could be using their social networks differently – and engaging their audiences more strongly.

Best in class

Middlesex University

Middlesex University responds diligently and enthusiastically to comments on its Facebook posts. Its responses are individualised – not just directing every question to the website FAQs, as many social media strategies dictate – and delivered in a warm, human tone of voice.

This matches the personal tone of the posts themselves, many of which feature videos of real students speaking direct to camera in their own words.

As a result, the community on its Facebook page is thriving, with hundreds of positive reactions and highly engaged comments under every post.

There is such a thing as society

If a university gives back to its local community and no one else hears about it, did it do any good? Simple answer: of course it did. It did good for the community, and that's a reward in itself.

But what's good for the community can also be good for the university's brand. It would be a waste not to make something of it.

An effective brand communicates what it can do for the audience it directly targets with its product or service. So an effective university brand is one that communicates what it offers students.

But "effective" is a low bar. **An engaging brand, an inspiring brand, one that people will want to get behind, is one that communicates what it can do for others.** Not just the audiences it wants to attract, but the people and communities affected by its presence.

For a university, that could mean the local community around the campus;

it could also mean communities its audience cares about, like those involved in environmental action and human rights struggles.

A university affects these surrounding communities in numerous ways. A well thought-out brand can guide the university's activities, providing a vision of how it wants to be viewed and the sort of relationship it wants with the community: a target to aim for when making decisions.

Share results, not just promises

Many universities seem to understand that it's important to address the local

Students care about the ethics of brands they interact with.

community as part of the brand. Local communities are often listed among universities' values, priorities or commitments. But **because this engagement mostly takes place offline, it can end up invisible** to anyone outside those communities: a missed opportunity for the brand.

Oxford University sets a strong example, dedicating a significant amount of website content to local engagement activity. The university funds heritage projects, provides schools with teaching resources based on its research, and has developed parks for the enjoyment of students and locals alike.

Goldsmiths, University of London is supporting the creative industries in its local Lewisham community, hosting events and training on campus as part of a Creative Enterprise Zone project.

This isn't to say that Oxford and Goldsmiths are the only universities doing community engagement right. It's just that we know they're doing it

right, because they're communicating effectively about it.

Showing that you deliver on your commitments builds trust in your brand.

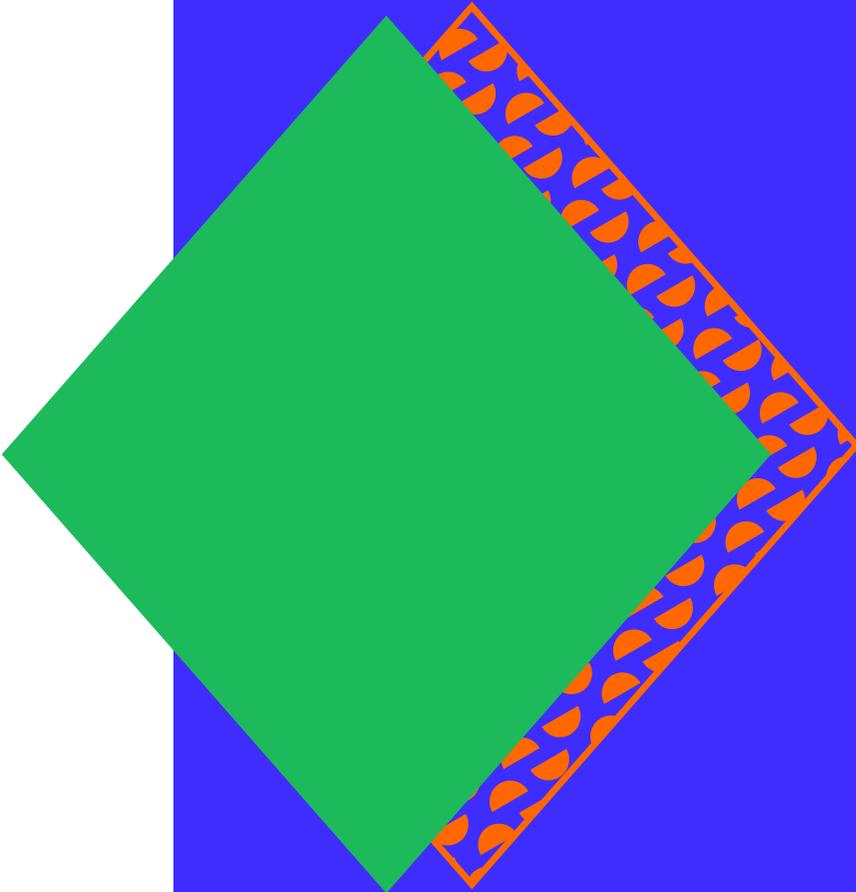
And when the specific commitment also shows that your university cares about its impact, it's a huge missed opportunity not to talk about it. Students may prioritise value for money more than they used to, but they still care about the ethics of brands they interact with. That goes double for a brand like a university, which they'll be associated with for life.

Action points

1. **Give students the chance to tell their stories using the university's social media channels.**
2. **Embrace students' efforts to engage with the university and related communities.**
The organisation doesn't always have to be in the lead – sometimes engagement means taking a supporting role.
3. **Make sure your brand's tone of voice doesn't prevent you from responding constructively** – to all likely types of engagement, including students protesting on social media.
4. **Make offline engagement**, like local community initiatives, **visible online** as well, with news, videos, social media updates.
5. **Make sure there's some motion on your Instagram.** Videos attract more engagement than still images.
6. **Consider podcasting if you aren't already.** On-demand audio is growing and top brands like Cambridge, Imperial and LSE are already taking advantage.
7. **Moderate spam comments quickly!** Nothing makes a social media page look unloved like irrelevant comments promoting essay-writing services.

Cohesion

redhouse



Modern brands are spread widely across traditional and digital media, between owned channels and third-party venues, each with their own limitations.

A great brand is consistently recognisable and tells a coherent, compelling story wherever the audience encounters it. All instances of the brand should work together to create the most seamless possible experience for the audience.

5

Prospectus drifting off-brand? It's time for a change

When important publications drift from the brand, it's a sign that the organisation is losing confidence in its brand – and it could be time for an update.

As the keystone of any university's annual student recruitment campaign,

Treating the prospectus as a special case can damage the overall cohesion of the university's brand.

the prospectus is one such important publication. Part marketing brochure, part tourist guide, part course catalogue, the prospectus needs to be capable of taking potential students from unaware to converted all by itself.

The weight of responsibility placed on prospectuses shows through in their design. It's clear that most universities take extra special care to make sure these publications have a big impact on potential students. But treating the prospectus as a special case can damage the overall cohesion of the university's brand.

We've seen behind the scenes of enough branded design projects to imagine the process. Designers lay out the content, following the brand guidelines. Then people start wondering whether the on-brand designs will have

the necessary impact. They ask for extra colours, typefaces and graphics to make the content stand out more.

The instinct to make sure the prospectus really grabs its target audience is a good one. And more often than not, the result is a high quality publication that's sure to have an impact.

But when that impact isn't matched by the brand's other channels, its effect is severely dampened. This lack of cohesion can even be damaging, giving the impression of a university that cares about getting people in through the door, but not about giving them a quality experience once they're inside.

Move with the times

If you're looking at a draft prospectus that follows your brand guidelines

Maybe the brand has been the same for so long that it's simply time for a refresh.

and worry that it won't land with your audience, that means it's time to revisit your brand.

Maybe your audience has changed, maybe design trends have moved on, or maybe the brand has been the same for so long that it's simply time for a refresh.

Whatever the underlying reason, it's important to stop tinkering with the prospectus, get that back on brand, then pull back and **consider what changes might be right for the brand as a whole.** How would new or updated colours work on your website and in campaigns? How might new styles for impact stats

interact with existing visual hierarchies – or enhance your social media posts?

Only once the refresh project is complete, and all changes formally documented with an update to your brand guidelines, should you start incorporating the new brand into your prospectus (as part of a full roll-out across all your channels).

Unless everyone's on the same page, a cohesive brand is impossible. But **with efficient communication, your brand can adapt and evolve while remaining cohesive** – ensuring you're always achieving the right impact with the right people.

Best in class

Falmouth University

Messaging and visual elements combine across all Falmouth's touch points – website, prospectus and social media channels – to tell a single, clear story: the university focuses on creativity across all its courses because creativity cannot be automated.

With this clear theme uniting its brand elements, Falmouth is able to tailor its communications to different channels – adopting a much less formal tone of voice on Instagram, for example. It's a great example of how a strong story allows a brand to introduce variety and still be coherent.

Join it all up

Cohesion is the aspect that can make or break your brand. Strength in other areas can be undermined by a lack of cohesion.

Your offer could be crystal clear, but if it's not consistently expressed everywhere your brand is present, that clarity will become muddled.

Your brand could be unique among its competitors, but if those unique qualities don't come across in design, messaging and behaviour, they won't provide the edge they should.

Your visual identity can be contemporary and compelling, but if it doesn't reflect the brand's offer and personality, then it's sending the wrong message.

And you can build engaged audiences in each of your brand's channels – but that engagement won't translate to value unless people can move seamlessly from one channel to the next.

Whether your brand is cohesive is down to the audience's experience. As students go from first hearing about a university to browsing the prospectus, attending open days, enrolling, studying, and eventually staying in touch as alumni, does their experience feel like one exhilarating journey? Does it feel as though they've been interacting with a single organisation, the whole way through?

Every element of the brand can contribute to this cohesive audience experience.

Clarity around your vision, purpose and offer provides a consistent message and a consistent goal. By referring back to these core goals and messages whenever you produce a new expression of the brand, you can ensure everything's pulling in the same direction.

Differentiation from your competition ensures your audience always knows who they're dealing with, and reinforces

at every touch point why they should continue their journey with your brand and no one else's. Your brand should always be communicating what makes it special; differentiation shouldn't only come across in a direct comparison with other brands.

Cohesion is the aspect that can make or break your brand.

A strong **visual identity** acts as a system of signposts, pointing your audience back towards your brand if they ever break their journey, and reassuring them that they're back in familiar territory.

And active **engagement** with your audience, wherever they expect to be able to engage, can help them feel as

if their journey with your brand is one smooth, unbroken interaction, not a series of stepping stones with different teams or silos.

This level of cohesion requires everyone to work together behind the scenes in a highly coordinated way.

Conveniently, a cohesive brand with a clear vision and purpose makes exactly this kind of collaboration possible. When everyone communicating on behalf of the brand is pulling in the same direction, the experience for those interacting with the brand becomes intuitive and seamless.

Most universities aren't quite there yet. But we're confident the insights in this issue of the Brand Report will help many in the higher education sector move closer.

Action points

- 1. Acknowledge when the brand isn't working as well as you need it to, but resist the temptation to bolt on new bits in a piecemeal way.** Document those less-than-ideal cases and use them to inform a brief for a brand refresh.
- 2.** Be aware of which assets are likely to appear to audiences side by side. **Cohesive doesn't have to mean uniform or samey**, but you don't want things to clash either.
- 3. Investing in new facilities? Your brand should inform the architecture.** Arts University Bournemouth applies its brand philosophy to its architecture, designing unique spaces intended to inspire the creativity it values in its students.
- 4. Use storytelling to weave together seemingly disparate elements of your offer.** If it's grown organically, with acquisitions here and expansions there, it might not feel cohesive as a whole – but each choice was made for a reason. Tell that story.
- 5. Practise brand hygiene:** keep a central record of all your touch points (website, prospectus, all social media accounts, event collateral, etc.) so that when you update your visual identity, you can update it everywhere at once.

Who will make the next
brand breakthrough?

Higher education is about discovery. Universities provide students with a supportive environment where they can learn, try new things, fail, try again – expanding their understanding of their chosen field, and potentially expanding the field itself.

Universities – individually and as a sector – could benefit from selling this idea much harder. From the outside, most of higher education looks behind the times, and a combination of assumed understanding and unclear communication makes it seem as though most universities aren't sure what they stand for.

The sector is still adjusting to huge change. New national metrics are imposing new priorities that brands and communications must accommodate. It's still relatively new for universities to be thinking of themselves as competitive, commercial enterprises.

And it shows. Most universities are proving slow to catch up to the best practices established by modern commercial brands.

Universities need to play to their strengths. They are institutions of knowledge, perfectly capable of gathering the latest thinking on a topic and applying it to launch towards new horizons of thought.

Some are already applying those capabilities to their brands. **The ones who bring it together first are the ones who will make a brand breakthrough.** And when the rest of the sector catches up, perhaps commercial brands will be the ones with catching up to do.

Opportunities that work for you

The techniques we used to uncover these insights could work for you too, whatever sector you're operating in. Let us analyse your brand assets and touch points, and we'll identify opportunities to improve your brand's clarity, differentiation, visual identity, engagement, and coherence.

For the Brand Report, we only assess publicly available materials. With access to more material – like your brand and communication strategies, brand guidelines and staff engagement channels – we can uncover even more detailed, valuable insights.

The Brand Report team

Matt Boothman, strategist
Fiona Corey, client director
Rosamund Croft, account manager
Dionysis Livanis, creative director
Joana Morgado, designer
Lyndsay Smith, business development
Jonathan Walker, client partner

**TALK TO US
ABOUT FULFILLING
YOUR BRAND'S
POTENTIAL**

redhousebrand.com
hello@redhousebrand.com
+44 (0) 20 3728 7878

Our methodology

Selecting the universities

Using the [Complete University Guide league tables](#), which are [based on public domain information](#), we picked:

- the top 5 highest ranking universities
- the 10 universities that climbed the most places in the latest ranking
- the 10 universities that fell the most places in the latest ranking

Assessing the universities

For each of the 25 universities in our sample, we obtained and examined the following materials.

- Prospectus
- Website
- Facebook, Twitter and Instagram profiles
- Flickr photostream if available
- Google image search results for the name of the university

Based on these materials, we assessed the clarity, differentiation, visual identity, engagement, and coherence of each brand, using a consistent set of criteria to award each brand a score from 1 to 5 in each category. In the process, we noted and discussed qualitative observations that formed the basis for the insights shared in this report.

The list (in alphabetical order)

- Abertay University
- Arts University Bournemouth
- Bath Spa University
- City, University of London
- Falmouth University
- Goldsmiths, University of London
- Imperial College London
- Liverpool John Moores University
- London School of Economics
- London South Bank University
- Middlesex University
- Norwich University of the Arts
- Staffordshire University
- St Mary's University
- University of Aberdeen
- University of Brighton
- University of Cambridge
- University of Huddersfield
- University of Hull
- University of Kent
- University of Oxford
- University of Salford
- University of St Andrews
- University of the West of Scotland
- University of Westminster

redhousebrand.com

The contents of this report are the sole intellectual property
of Redhouse Lane Communications Ltd. © 2019