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Adapting to **change**:

What we learnt from 5 years of
undergraduate conversion campaigns

Presented by **Jackie Thompson** and Sarah Colegrove

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Today's agenda

01 About us:

Our university, our college, our team

02 Conversion in higher education:

What it is and why we do it

03 A new approach

An integrated multi-channel college-wide campaign

04 Learning and growing:

Adapting to further impacts and iterating on what we learnt

05 Top tips:

Top tips for staying agile in HE recruitment and conversion

06 The future:

Over to you!



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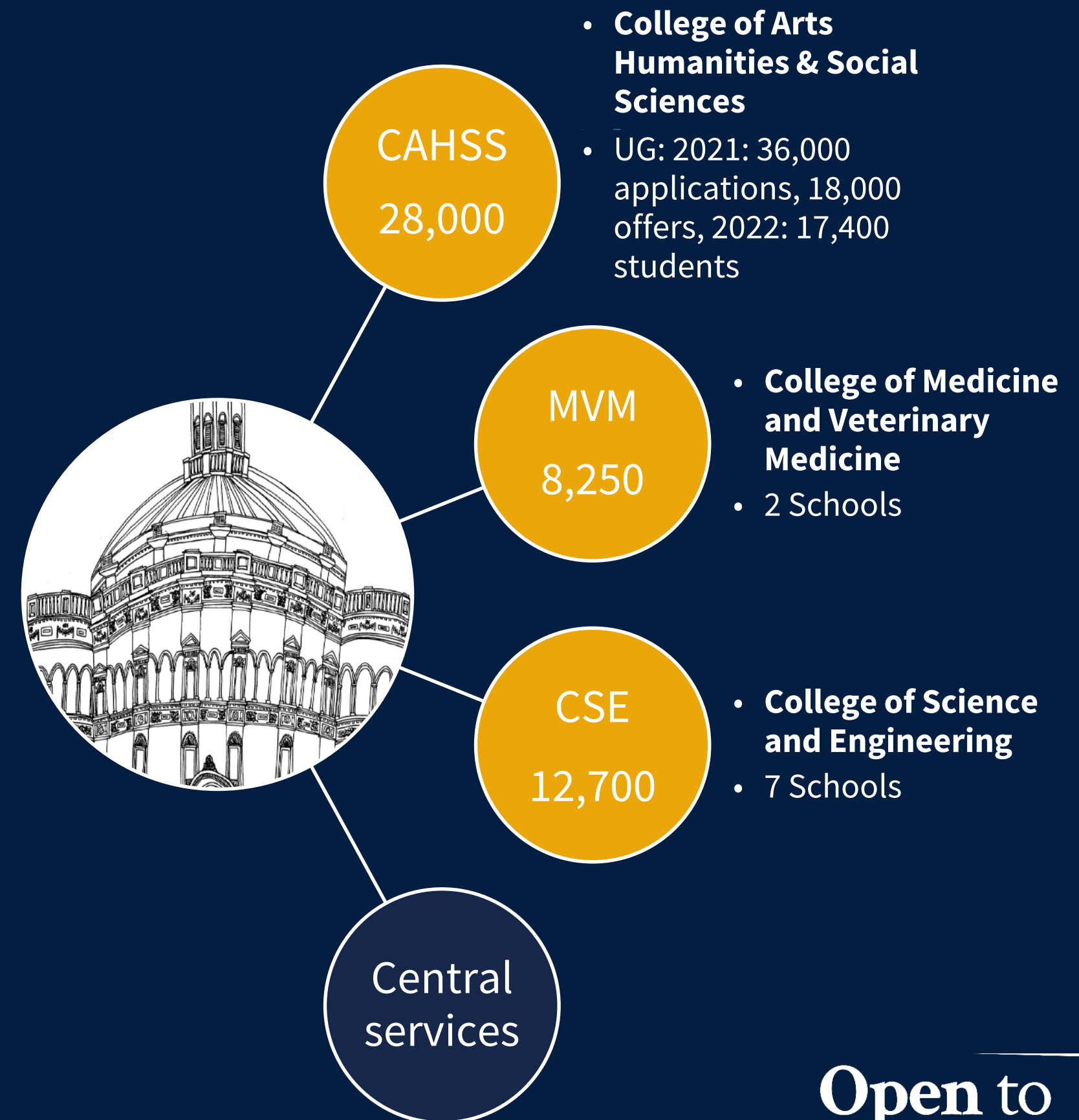
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Who we are

8th largest university in the UK by enrolment, 49,000 students in 2022

CAHSS Marketing and Recruitment

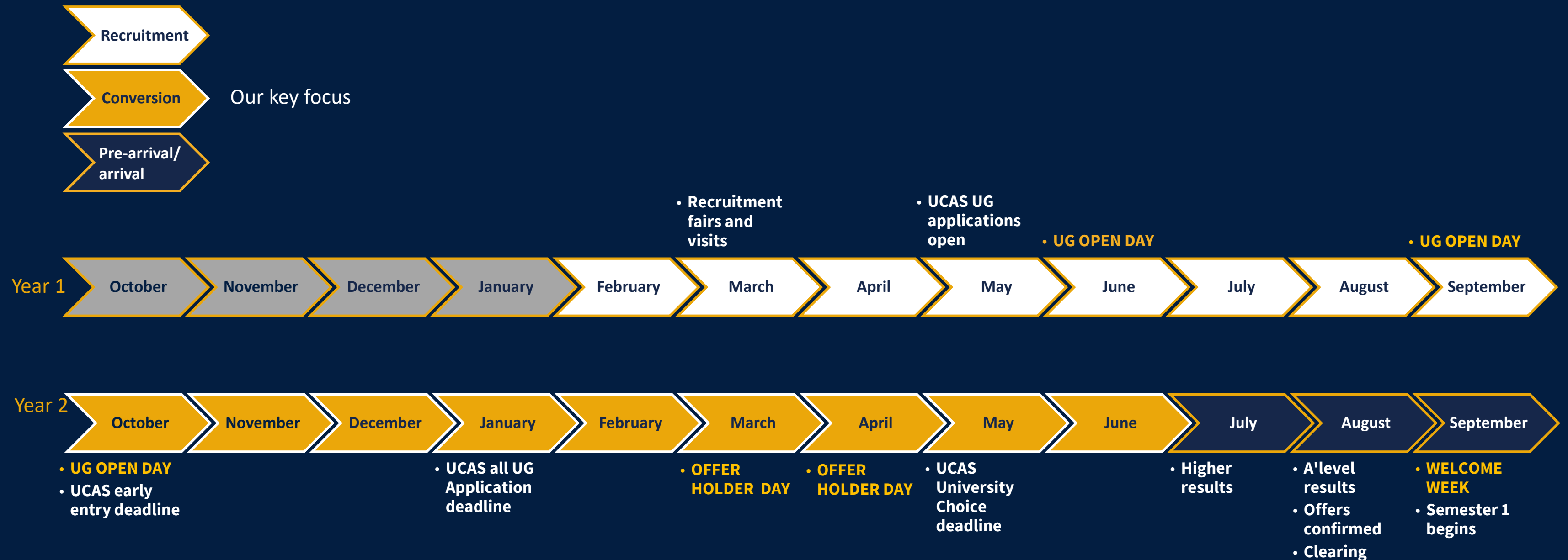
Team of 4 (FTE) Marketing Managers and 1 Applicant Experience & Conversion Officer



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Undergraduate applicant journey



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Undergraduate Conversion

What is conversion and why do we do it?

SELL: Encourage offer holders to take up their offer:

Allay fears, create excitement, sell the university and the city.

INFORM: Give impartial advice that allows offer holders to **not** choose us:

Are we a good fit for them? Are they a good fit for us?
Provide functional info i.e. Campus v city, 4-year degree.

EXPERIENCE: Provide excellent UX:

If they **do** join us, start UoE journey positively, if they **don't**, provide a positive experience for advocacy (siblings, friends) that enhances our reputation.



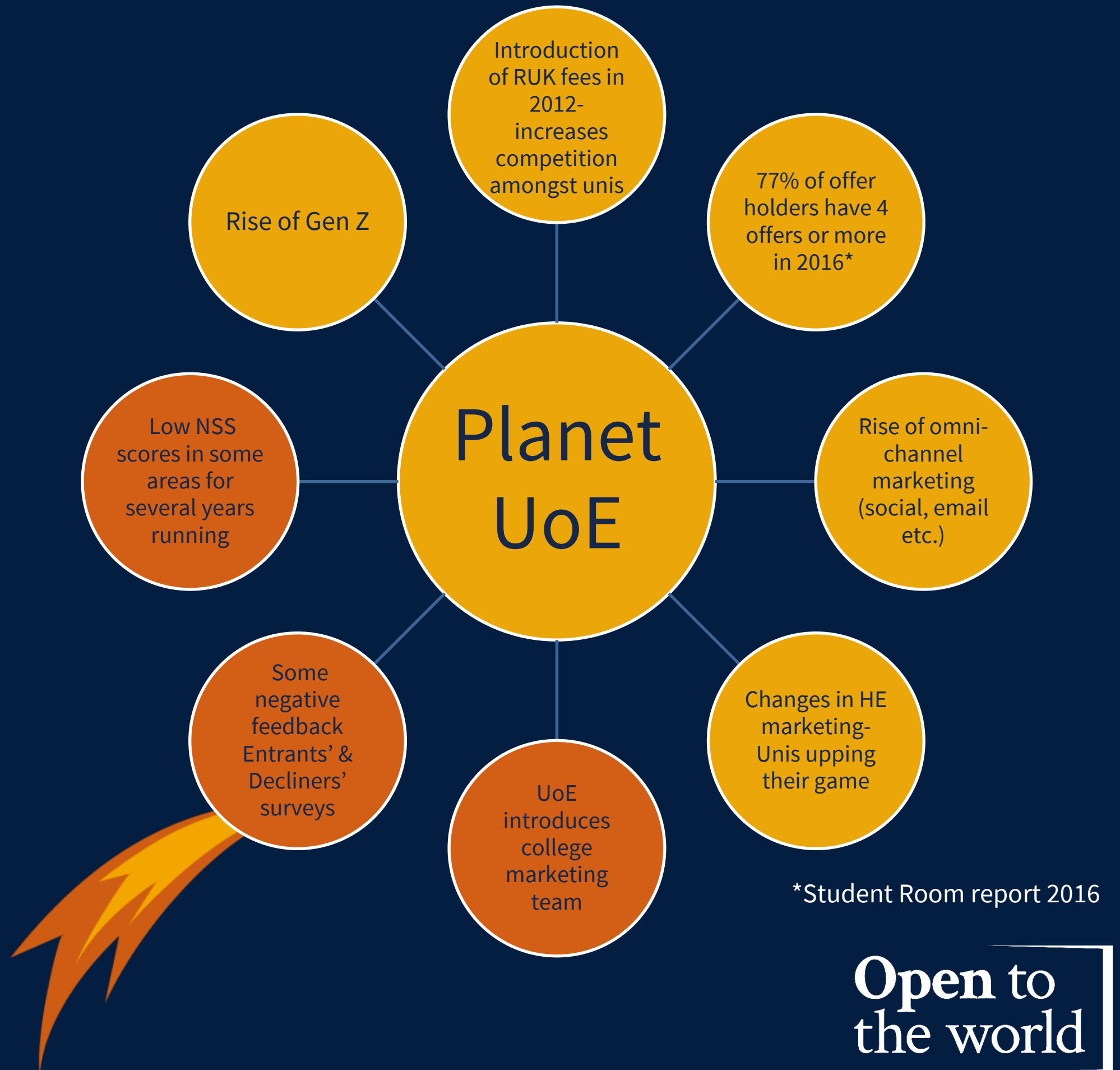
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Forces shaping UoE recruitment and conversion

2012-2016 UoE is impacted
from outside and in:

- PESTEL (political, economic, social, technological, environmental, legal)
- UoE strategy



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“

I was sadly surprised by a lack of communication from the university after my offer was made. I found all the other universities which I received offers from were far more engaging.

“

It was my first choice to start with, although the communications from other universities almost made me change my mind. I felt that other universities tried to involve me in the community immediately, whilst Edinburgh was particularly standoffish in its letters and emails.

Entrants' Survey 2016



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First steps...

Changes in internal and external landscape. How did we react?

First steps 2013-2016

Provide email templates to CAHSS schools, web links and ideas. BUT schools aren't resourced. Results in:

- Lack of timely, relevant content
- Inconsistent experience
- Off brand
- No student voice
- Lack of segmentation
- Duplication of effort

Results:

- Surveys – no change
- Email engagement low: Open ave. 69%, CTO ave. 6%



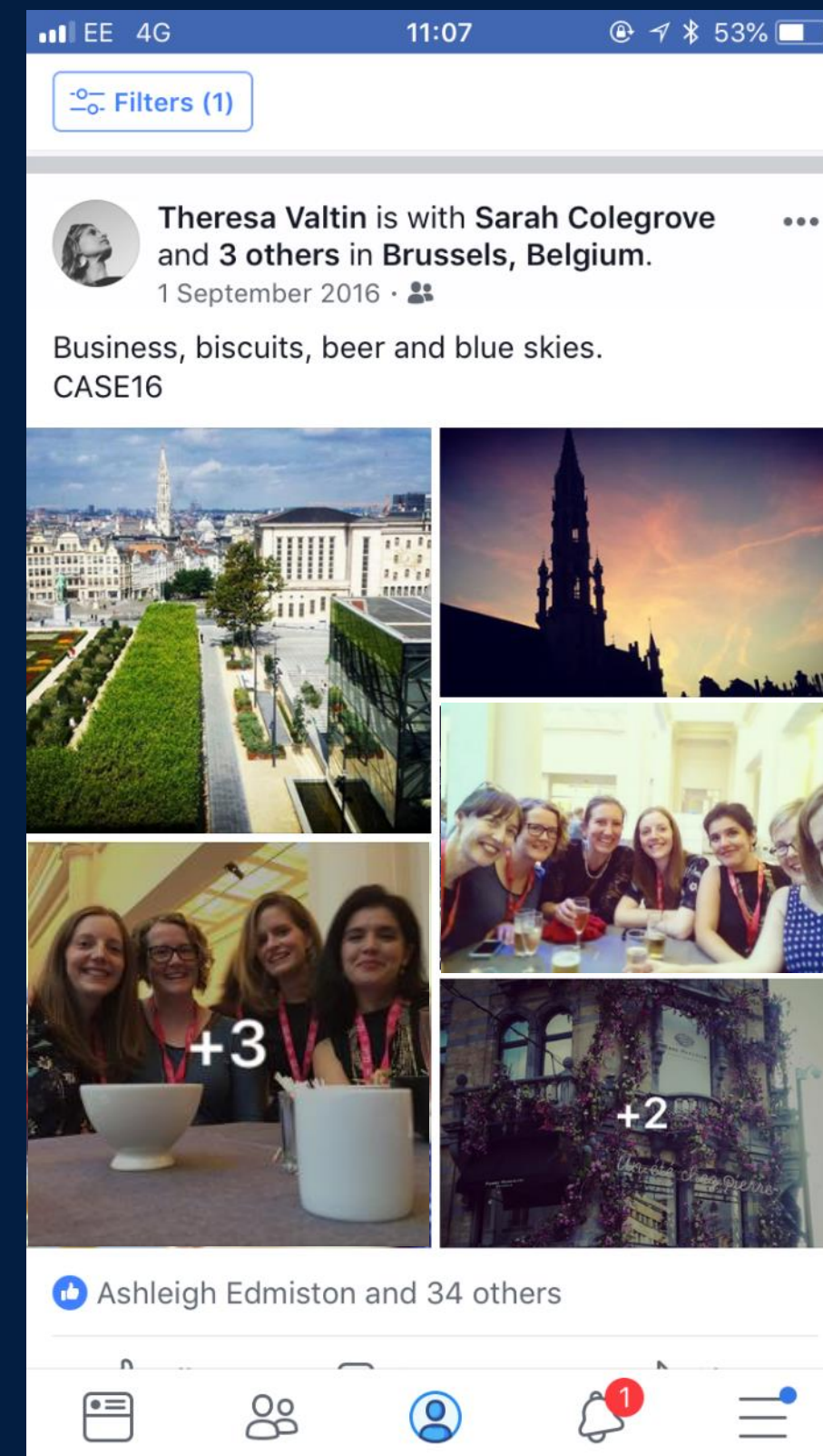
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Inspiration

CASE Europe conference
2016 in Brussels

Chance to be inspired and think
outside the (chocolate) box!



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A new approach

Timely, relevant, authentic

2017-entry: First college-wide multi-channel UG conversion campaign

- Deliver campaign centrally, produce all content - take burden off CAHSS schools and deliver consistent experience
- Research: Who? What? When?
- Employ students for authentic student voice
- Segment content
- Cross-channel: email, social media, events
- On-brand – new 'Drawn to Edinburgh' campaign



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Campaign elements

Content for a range of channels

Email:

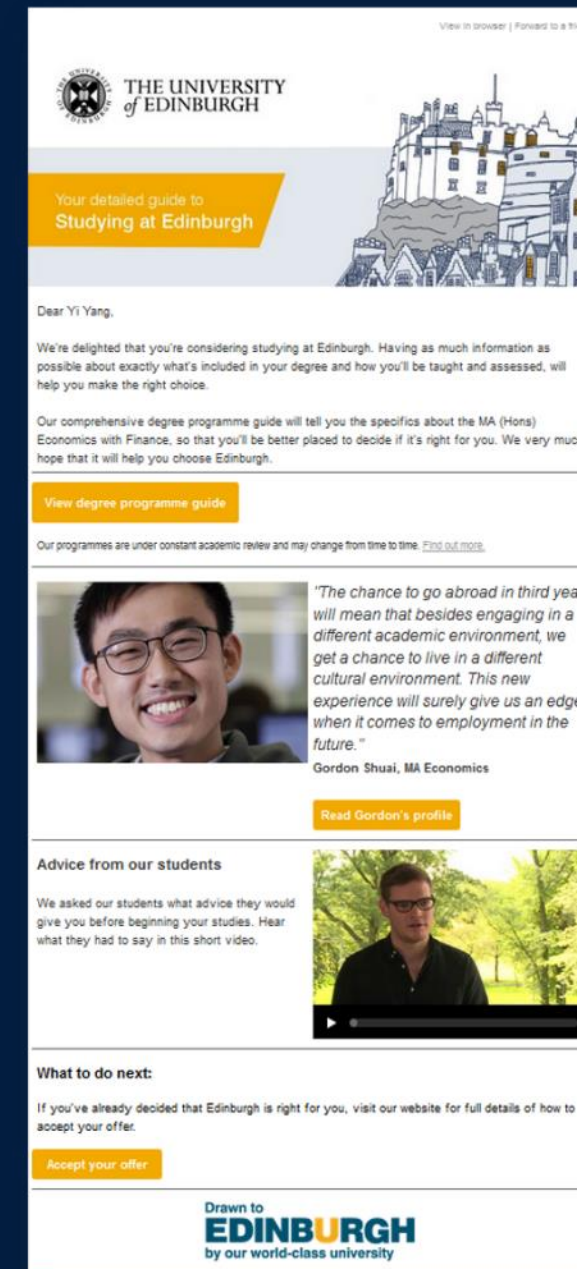
Student life: Student blogs and Instagram take-over
15 students, 3 posts a day

Academic experience:
segmented course info, student profiles by subject, joint degree video

Social media:
Instagram takeover promoted via FB & Twitter

Student blogs

Events:
Post offer visit days



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Campaign Results

It worked!

Email:

- **Student life:** Open 80% CTO 23%
- **Academic experience:** Open 86% CTO 43%
- **Improved UX:** On brand, relevant, timely

Social media:

- **Student voice**
Added genuine student voice to corporate channels for first time
- **Instagram**
Increase followers by 500, Between 1000-3000 views and likes per post
- **Student blogs**
Views rise from 467 to 7427 in takeover week 2

Internal:

- **Reduced burden on schools**
- **Less duplication**



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Adaptation and iteration

The marketing team takes on the campaign, learning, iterating and adapting as we go

Some examples from the next 5 years!

Impacts

- External: PESTEL
- Internal: UoE strategy

Campaign elements

- Email
- Print and direct mail
- Content and student voice
- Events

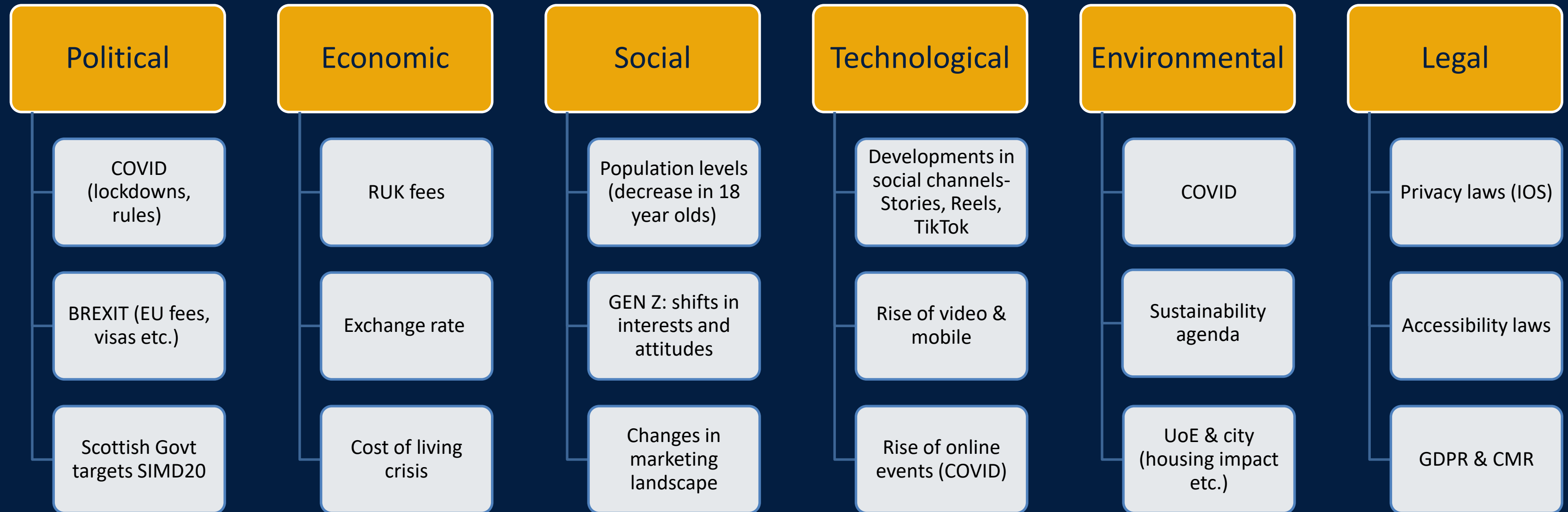


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PESTEL

External impact examples:



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UoE strategy

Internal impact examples:

- UG targets
- Sustainability goals
- Web and digital developments
- Widening participation strategy (2017 and 2022)
- Social and Civic responsibility
- New Principal and Strategy 2030
- Internal metrics: Entrants' and Decliners' surveys, NSS scores



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Adaptation and iteration

Email

Learnings and iterations

- Using metrics: A/B tested, tweaked content, experimented with timings
- Audience info: Focus groups with incoming students 2018/9
- We missed topics (e.g., accommodation): Increased number of single-focus emails
- Content hub: Developed college landing page, then UoE-wide Offer Holder Hub

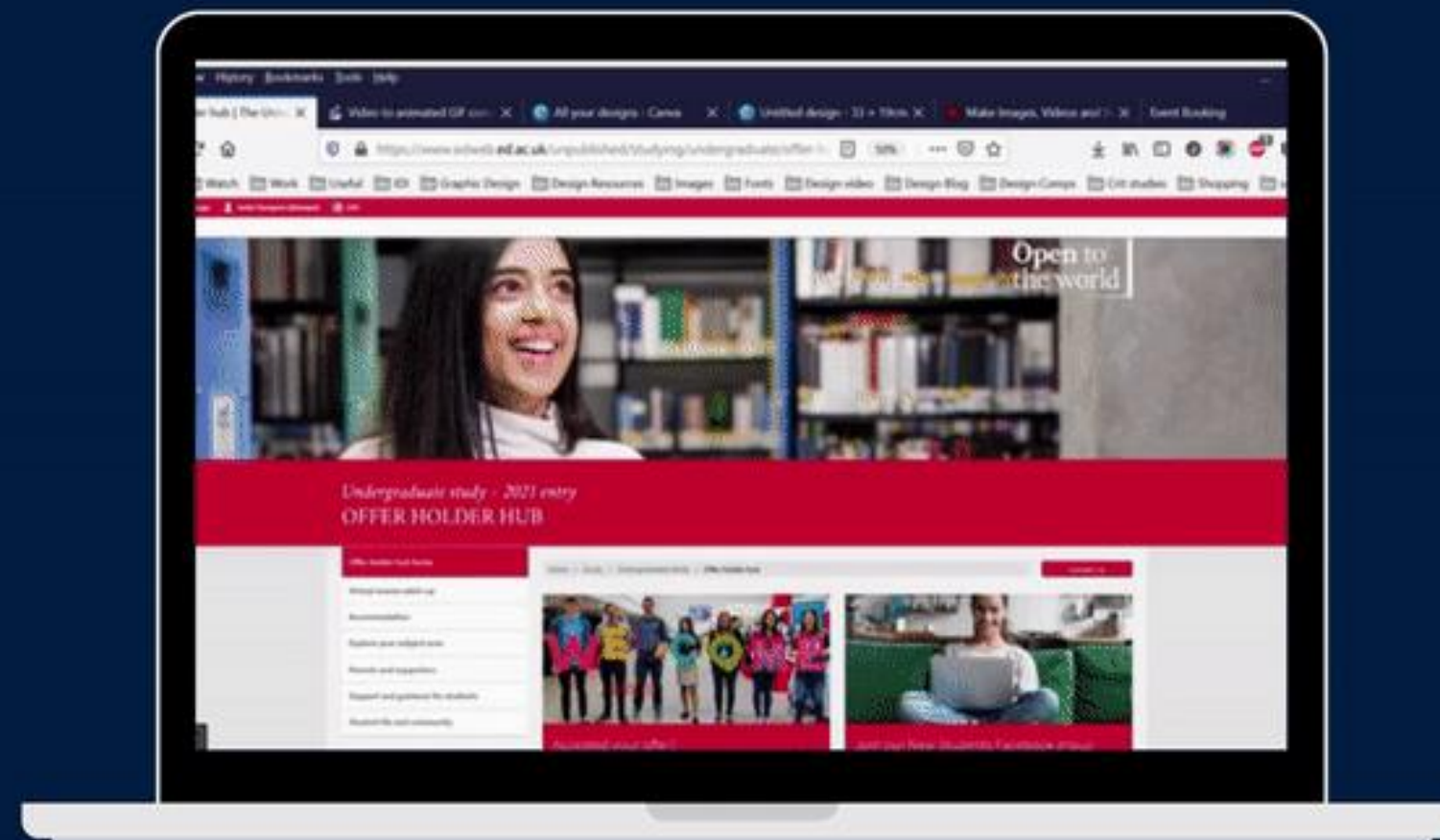
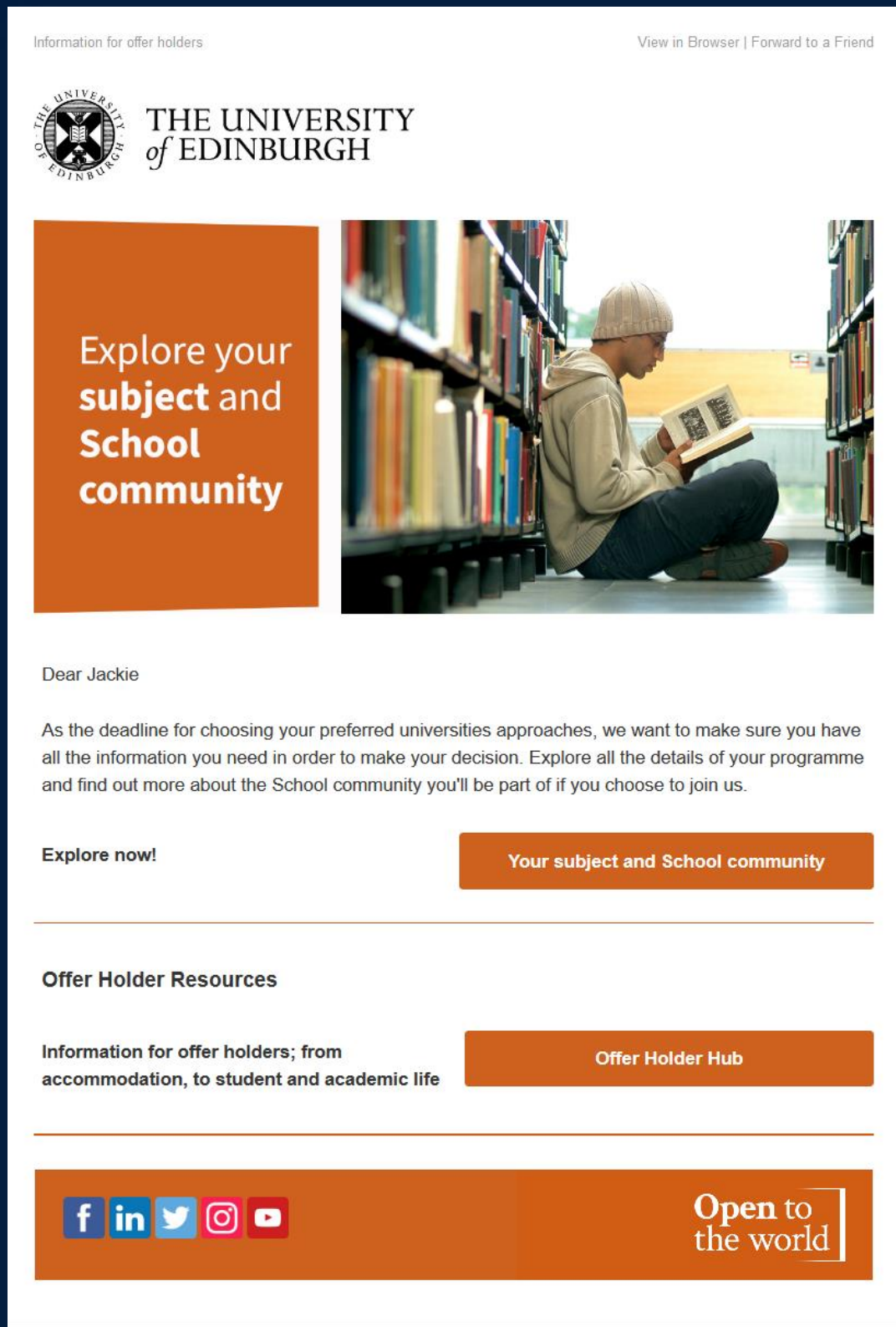
Impacts and actions

- Increased competition and no stand-out: Introduced direct mail
- Later offer making/gathered field meant info too late. Will open comms to applicants for 2023-entry
- IOS privacy laws affected measurement



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Successes

- Email open rates remain consistently high: between 70-90%, CTOs 20-40%
- Offer holders kept informed and reassured during lockdowns
- Better UX: emails optimized, offer holders get essential info, consistent experience for **all**
- Good way to test corporate campaign styles
- Hub becomes one-stop shop, all info & event bookings. Better UX, brings colleges together. Now an essential part of conversion.
- Templates shared across colleges

Adaptation and iteration

Print and direct mail

Learnings & iterations

- Print is not dead – but we've learned a lot and evolved what we do.
- Direct mail has cut through that email doesn't have.

Impacts and actions

- COVID
- Sustainability goals begin to conflict



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Direct mail

Learnings and iterations

- Email had limited cut through
- It took time to get buy-in for direct mail
- Digital alternative needed for international students

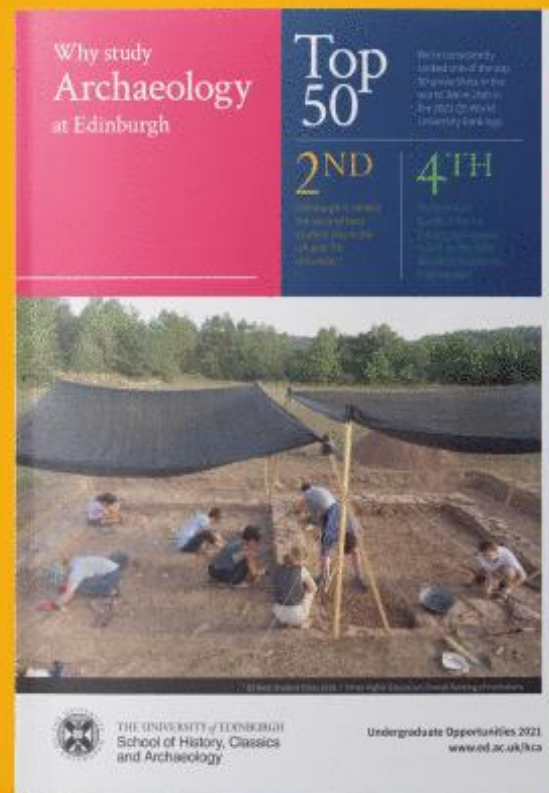
Successes

- First direct mail piece in 2019. We showed that it had good cut through which made it easier to get buy-in for direct mail subsequently
- Authentic student content
- Sent to over 8000 offer holders
- High recall and positive reception in focus groups



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Brochures

Learnings and iterations

- Improved and made offer holder day brochures more consistent through research, audit, templates and coordination.

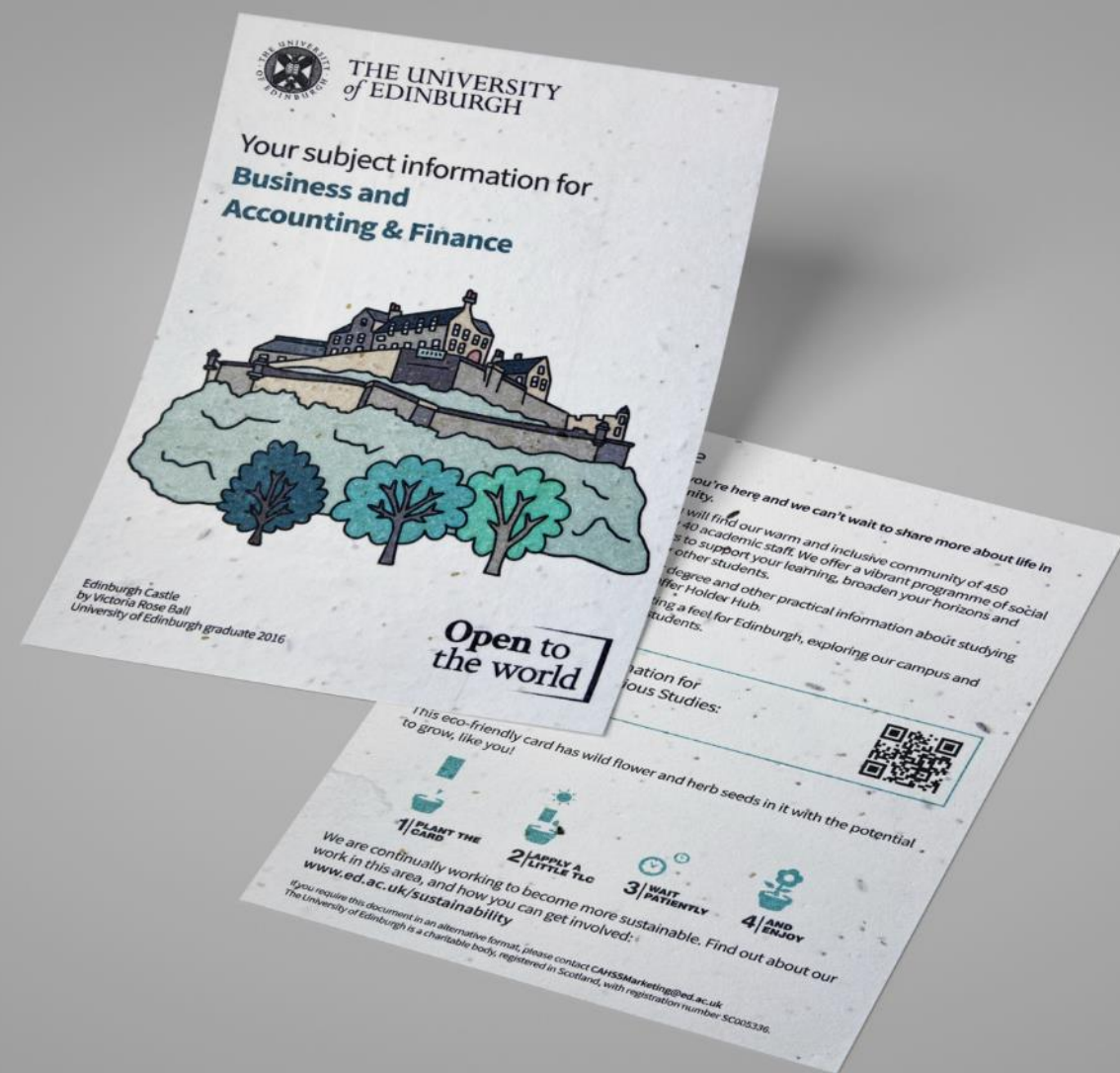
Impacts and actions

- COVID: Direct mail gives us a way to have direct material connection to offer holders.



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Impact of sustainability and success

Postcards not brochures

- Brochures replaced by seeded postcard for 2022 campus events: ethical company, sustainable materials, less paper waste
- QR code to subject pages on Hub: CTA and evaluation

- Offer Holder Day survey 2022: 52% remember receiving one, 64% say it made a positive impression. QR code drives 650 sessions with ave. 2 minutes on site

Priority subject letters with better CTA

- 2022 letters sent to priority subjects only on recycled, sustainably produced paper
- Priority letters see good engagement with 18% scanning the QR code, ave. 9 mins on site



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Adaptation and iteration

Content and working with students

Learnings and iterations

- Year 1- we took on too much, 30 blogs and 3 posts per day on Instagram
- Video issues – permissions, skillset, training, equipment
- Importance of collaboration with Digital Marketing Team (CAM)
- Some content not very visible: promoted via email and cross-promoted on social channels
- Accessibility (captions etc.) - consider resourcing needs from outset

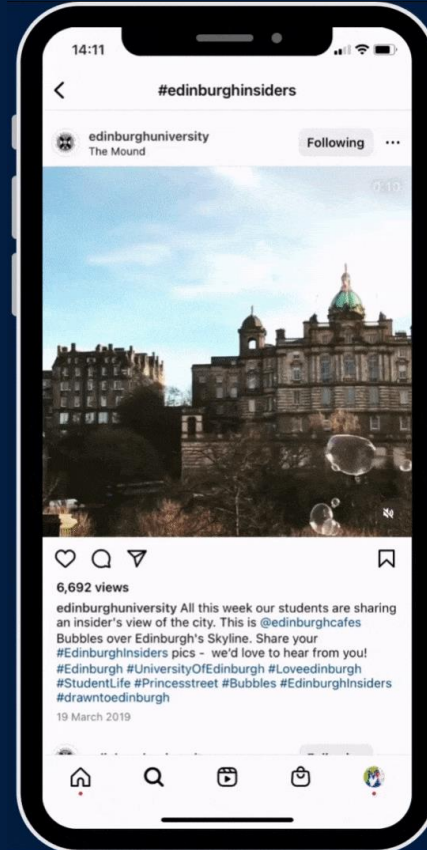
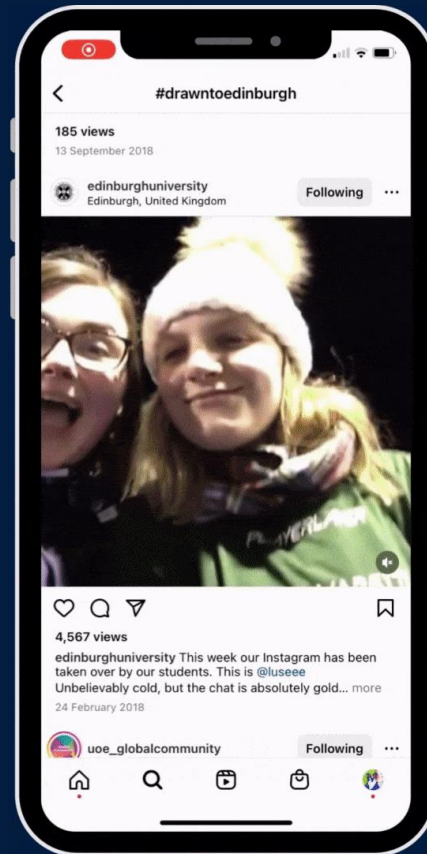
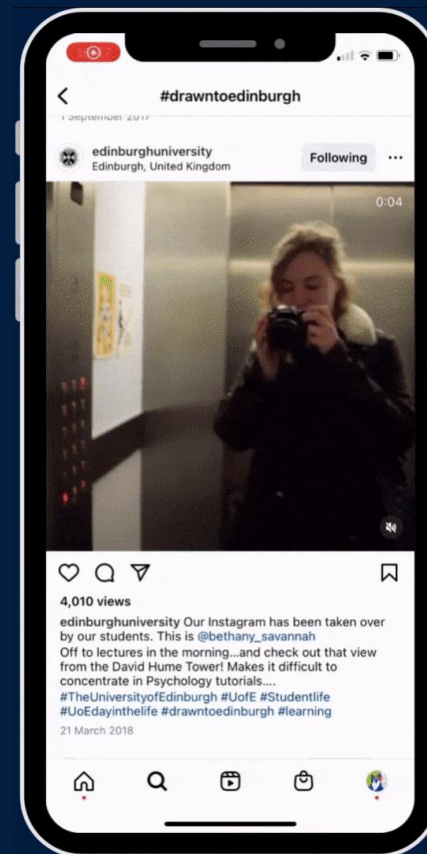
Impacts and actions

- Channels developed - decline of email/Facebook for Gen Z, rise of Instagram: We started to make sure our content could adapt (COPE)
- COVID - pivoted quickly and produced 'Life in Lockdown'



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Student content: Successes

Continue to include student voice on corporate Instagram & social channels

2018 Day in the life

- 2000 new followers
- 245 comments
- 40,859 likes

2019 Edinburgh Insiders

- 900 new followers
- 30,612 likes
- 27,000 video views

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Student content: Successes

COPE
Create once
publish
everywhere!

- Adapted to platform innovations and opportunities (Instagram stories)
- Repurposed from student Q&A videos
- 40+ stories, 8,000 ave reach, 2000 swipe ups

Adaptation and iteration

Events

Learnings and iterations

- No dedicated resource pre-2018: College created Applicant Experience and Conversion Officer – helps us work better with schools.
- Friends Icebreaker event 2018, successful but a lot of work: We established a firm cut-off after conversion in 2019 to conserve our resources
- Events and conversion campaign not well-integrated: We instigated closer ties and regular catch ups. Events promoted through emails and Offer Holder Hub
- Space. Tension between recruitment and teaching: We worked closer with time-tabling to ring-fence rooms

Impacts and actions

- COVID. Huge impact: We put all campus events online in 2020/21. 203 live events in 2021, 11,000 bookings, 5,300 attendees (49%).
- No online events prior to COVID: Post Covid we continued with hybrid approach & created video on-demand content. Services events open door to Uni-wide collaborations.



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top tips

01 Get inspired:

Conferences, workshops, away days. A chance to brainstorm with your team and get inspired by new and different ideas

02 Pay attention to the landscape:

Think about PESTEL, and don't underestimate good desk Research (HEFCE, The Student Room, UCAS)

03 Plans and goals:

Know what you're aiming for and get research and metrics in place well before you start. KPIs also vital to get buy-in from senior management. Think outcomes not output. Don't expect perfection- be pragmatic!



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top tips

04 Evaluate, evaluate, evaluate!

It's not something you do just once- put in key checkpoints throughout the campaign to tweak as you go. Use qual and quant, during and after each campaign, look at trends over time

05 Change and innovate:

External and internal pressures will keep coming. Change can be seismic (COVID!) or atomic (Instagram Stories). Keep changes and their possible effects front of mind as you develop campaigns

06 Get buy in:

Check your stakeholder map. Who should be consulted/informed? Keeping the right people in the loop is a good way to keep them on board. You might have to do the work in the first instance before you get buy-in.



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top tips

07 Don't be afraid to ask

And don't presume the answer! Widen networks.

08 Work with students:

Complicated but worth it for authentic content. Students get valuable experience too!

09 Repurpose, reuse, recycle:

As communication channels grow (and shrink!) reaching your audience where they are gets harder. Create content that can be used in a range of ways and places.



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Over to you!

A chance to inspire each other!

- What do you currently do at your university for conversion/applicant experience?
- What would you like to do differently?



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Thank you!

CURRENT TEAM

Heather MacBain: Head of Marketing

Sarah Colegrove: Marketing Manager

Kirsty McIntosh: Marketing Manager

Jackie Thompson: Marketing Manager

Catriona Regan: Marketing Manager

Colin Mclean: Applicant Experience &
Conversion Officer

PAST MEMBERS

Theresa Valtin: Marketing Manager

Africa Reboto-Lopez: Marketing Manager

Louise McCreath: Marketing Manager

Rachael Bailey: Marketing Manager

Bethany Easton: Marketing Assistant (secondment)

📷 **'I'll be there for you': Friends the inspiration for university welcome**



↑ More than 400 new students made a splash in Edinburgh University's Old College Quad for a welcome event inspired by the title sequence of 1990s TV show Friends.

PICTURE: EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY/WHITEDOG PHOTOGRAPHY

Watch UoE videos: www.youtube.com/@EdinburghUniversity



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