Engaging Gen Z & Gen Alpha in UK Higher Education

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Gen Z discovery is social-first
AI Overviews cut clicks
E-E-A-T still matters

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This is a structural shift, not a downturn

Falling numbers are a symptom

Confidence is the real issue

Students are recalibrating risk

"Adults underestimate how hard it is to get a job in this newer society in comparison to their adulthood."

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The dominant student mindset

Pressured. Overwhelmed. Hopeful — but worried.

Stakes feel higher than ever

Failure feels riskier

Trust is no longer automatic

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What sentiment data shows us

High engagement doesn't equal confidence

Anxiety drives participation

Reassurance is what's missing

Volume increases where uncertainty is highest

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Where anxiety lives

Process without reassurance

- Applications
- Student finance
- Clearing

High volume. Weak sentiment.

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Where in your current recruitment journey do students face high process but low reassurance?
Which of these areas generates the most anxiety for your applicants?

- Applications
- Finance
- Clearing
- Decision-making

What are you currently optimising for:
- Completion?
- Compliance?
- Or confidence?

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Finance is not a messaging problem

It's a confidence problem

Cost of study shapes choice

Living costs drive behaviour

Risk outweighs aspiration

TSR research

Students are "moderately" or "very willing" to choose a less preferred path, such as a local job, because of "immediate financial concerns."

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Where confidence returns

Positive sentiment peaks at:

- Choosing a university
- Starting uni

Decision stems uncertainty

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Closing the experience gap

Utility restores confidence

Students want:
- Clear pathways to work
- Practical skills
- Financial transparency

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Radical authenticity

Students want individuality

Generic messaging erodes trust

Peer voices outperform polish

Where do you amplify peer voices?

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True digital natives

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Hyper-personalisation

Scaling reassurance, not automation
Students want one-to-one advice

AI handles repetition

Humans deliver reassurance

TSR research

Students ask for "one-on-one advice or mentoring," especially around money and future pathways.

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If you redesigned one part of your recruitment journey to reduce perceived risk, what would it be?

What would you stop doing?

Where could AI remove friction so humans can add reassurance?

What would you do differently to:
- Increase personal relevance?
- Offer reassurance earlier?
- Sound more human?

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What must change in 2026

Design for confidence, not conversion

Financial clarity first

Dialogue over broadcasting

Reassurance before commitment

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"Hopeful but worried"

Students still believe in HE.

They are watching who understands risk.

Trust will decide the future.

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