

Session Title:	The Authenticity Advantage
Speaker(s):	Rebecca Giddings Deputy Director of Marketing and Brand University of Wolverhampton
Chair:	
Reporter:	Hannah D'Mellow, SRUC

Speaker/Institution Bio/Information:	
Overview/Aim of session:	<p>In an increasingly competitive and discerning HE landscape, the power of authentic voices to cut through the noise is undeniable. Join Rebecca Giddings, Deputy Director of Marketing and Brand at the University of Wolverhampton, for a session exploring how genuine student and alumni narratives can transform your recruitment campaigns.</p> <p>Drawing on the University of Wolverhampton's award-nominated initiatives, including the globally recognised "Every Story Has a Start" alumni campaign and the groundbreaking "Could it be?" collaboration with trans artist Nate Ethan Watson, Rebecca will share insights into:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why Gen Z and diverse audiences trust real stories over traditional advertising. • Strategies for identifying and cultivating compelling student and alumni narratives. • The collaborative approach of working with graduate intern content creators to amplify authentic voices. • How embracing real, often challenging, experiences can drive engagement and challenge institutional perceptions. • Measurable impact: Lessons learned from campaigns that delivered significant ROI and uplifted recruitment. <p>Discover how leading with authenticity can not only meet your recruitment targets but also foster deeper connections and genuinely inspire your next generation of students.</p>

Generation Z and Trust

You have to appreciate the era GenZ have grown up in – Recession, war, covid, Trump, digital bombardment. They are quite sceptical because they are used to being sold to.

BUT they are our main target market, and many of them are considering alternatives to traditional HE, so it's important we know how to give them the authentic look at the university they are seeking. They want the behind-the-scenes reality - photos, videos, and testimonials – over glossy corporate copy.

Name some brands who are winning at authenticity:

Gymshark: great combination of user-generated and slightly polished but carefully tailored content.

Chipotle: loads of user-generated content which does really well with engagement.

Fenty Beauty: Yes, an A-list celebrity, but still offering that “behind the scenes” authenticity. Also, extensive use of influencers.

Other examples from the sector:

Cardiff Met and the Help, I'm going to Uni podcast.

Loughborough Uni and their extensive user-generated content and graduation video.

Sheffield Hallam listening rooms and blogs.

University of Aberdeen graduate success stories.

What about what we are doing at the University of Wolverhampton?

“Every story has a start” campaign uses alumni stories to showcase excellence.

Top tips: Make sure as an institution you are filtering all your communication with the alum through one single person, else you will overwhelm them. Also, in this instance, we worked with an external agency which alleviated some of the pressure of organising filming.

Interviews were probably a couple of hours long plus a lot of B-roll footage, to really make the most of the filming effort.

Selection of the students / alumni was very careful and strategic. Video content was unscripted but carried key messaging such as employability.

The campaign started with high-achieving alumni with an aspirational focus, and is now being expanded to include a broader range of career outcomes.

Promoted extensively in OOH in the region, as appropriate to the purpose of the campaign.

Top tips: Continue to use what you already have – Wolverhampton did a follow-up campaign based on images of the alumni standing in front of the billboard adverts featuring them, which further increased social reach.

Meta: 1.2 CTR is an industry standard. This campaign exceeded that significantly, so the content was very engaging.

The campaign is ongoing.

“Could it be” campaign particularly focused on GenZ and featured a specifically chosen artist. Important to brief your artist in a very open way, to allow their authenticity to shine – keep briefing to a minimum.

Top tip: It's important not just to say you are doing things but you need to be able to demonstrate – choose messaging for your institution which are genuinely authentic.

Influencers and user-generated content

Test your ambassadors – some will get more relaxed in front of the camera over time. Use them for photo shoots, takeovers, video content... spend time with them and “train” them to deliver what you need without sanitising their voice.

- A graduate intern scheme can work well for UGC
- International students are more likely to say yes
- Ask the academics to recommend people they think will be good
- Pay your ambassadors

The “Safe Creative” slide within the slide deck offers a good framework for student content creators to work with – make your own version of this but keep it simple.