

<b>Session Title:</b>	<b>Session 2.5 Engaging Gen Z &amp; Gen Alpha in UK Higher Education</b>
<b>Speaker(s):</b>	<b>Adam Molloy, The Student Room</b>
<b>Chair:</b>	<b>Hilary Beck</b>
<b>Reporter:</b>	<b>Caitlin Houston</b>

<b>Speaker/Institution Bio/Information:</b>	Adam Molloy is the Head of Marketing at The Student Room (TSR). He has worked in Higher Education Marketing for over 10 years. TSR is the UK's largest online student community. TSR lets students find and chat to other students for peer-to-peer support, as well as allowing them to connect with institutions. Forum discussions include conversations across a range of areas from UCAS and applications, personal statements, finance, exam support and general life topics (family, friends, wellbeing). The Uni Guide (TUG) is TSR's sister site – a course finder and reviews site.
<b>Overview/Aim of session:</b>	TSR has access to conversations students in Gen Z and Gen Alpha are having on a daily basis, they are able to observe how student mindsets are evolving. The landscape of higher education recruitment is evolving rapidly, as is student behaviour. Gen Z are reshaping how trust is built, how decisions are made and how institutions are judged. Gen Alpha are digitally fluent and incredibly AI aware.  The session focused on how to connect with these students in a meaningful way.
<b>Workshop Content</b>	Gen Z has changed how search works. They rely on social platforms and YouTube far more than Google. To reach them, recruitment must use social-first, high-quality, trustworthy content.  Students view the world as riskier, believing adults don't understand modern job-market pressures. This leads to quiet disengagement, hedging bets, and choosing "safe" options.  They feel pressured, overwhelmed and highly stressed.

	<p>Trust isn't automatic; it must be earned continuously. Negative sentiment is highest on TSR around Applications, Student Finance and Clearing.</p> <p>Financial anxiety stems from low confidence, not confusion. Many consider less preferred paths due to money worries. Clear communication should reduce perceived risk.</p> <p>Students respond positively once they feel supported, needing clarity, reassurance and evidence to feel confident in their choices.</p> <p>They want to be seen as individuals. Peer voices and user-generated content outperform official materials. AI should automate admin/large scale tasks so humans can provide reassurance.</p> <p>Gen Z spends significantly more time with creators and User generated content, and are fatigued by traditional ads. Authentic, creator-led content is essential.</p> <p>For 2026, student recruitment should focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• financial clarity</li> <li>• dialogue over broadcasting</li> <li>• building trust and reassurance early</li> </ul>
<b>Case Studies/Examples:</b>	<p>All of the session is grounded in TSR large-scale data and research alongside student sentiment reports so demonstrates real evidence of how students feel.</p>
<b>Scenarios/Roundtable discussions:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where in the student recruitment journey at your institution do students face high processing (e.g. forms/admin/general effort) but low reassurance (e.g. long wait times, no briefing on how to complete), and which of these areas generate the most anxiety? How can we adapt our processes to alleviate some stress?</li> <li>• If you redesigned one part of your recruitment journey to reduce perceived risk for students, what would it be?</li> </ul>
<b>Questions and Answers:</b>	<p>Q: What's next for The Student Room?</p> <p>A: TSR is looking at evolving AI (has recently launched their AI assistant Diggory) to build relationships with students and generate more discussion on site. They are also looking at how to maximise the value of the Official Reps on site by giving them more access to training, support and providing guidance on making the most of their accounts. They have also recently developed Campus Lens – a dashboard for clients to view and track sentiment across</p>

	<p>forums. This is a great resource for reps to be able to use.</p> <p>Q: While today's talk has focused primarily on Undergraduate students, I wondered if TSR has much of a Postgraduate audience?</p> <p>A: Yes, there are Postgraduate enquiries on the site. This is a much smaller group compared to Undergraduate, but we are seeing it grow</p> <p>Q: Do you know whether students using TSR tend to be from Widening Participation backgrounds/not?</p> <p>A: There is a growing number of WP students on site, but this is a challenge as they need to know TSR exists in order to use it, and they may not provide information to indicate whether or not they are WP at registration. TSR are considering how they can begin to build relationships with teachers and advisors and this could perhaps lead to more targeting of WP students.</p> <p>Q: Are there parents engaging on site?</p> <p>A: Yes, there's a section on the site for parents called 'The Parent Room'. TSR now collects information at registration to collect more data so will start to build up more of a picture of how many active parents there are.</p>
<b>Key takeaways:</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Meet Gen Z where they search: social-first, creator-led, trustworthy content Gen Z bypasses traditional search and relies heavily on social platforms and peer voices. Recruitment must prioritise authentic, high-quality social content over broadcast-style messaging.</li> <li>2. Reduce perceived risk through clarity, confidence and reassurance Students feel the world is riskier, driving stress and cautious choices. They need clear pathways, financial transparency and ongoing reassurance to feel confident in their decisions.</li> <li>3. Build trust early through personalisation and dialogue Trust isn't assumed. Students want to be seen as individuals and respond better to personalised support and open conversations. AI can handle admin so staff can focus on the human reassurance that strengthens trust.</li> </ol>