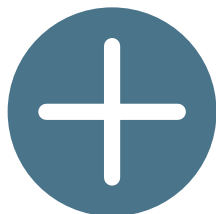


# Design strategy for Brunel University London



**Industry sector:** Public sector  
**Client company:** Brunel University London  
**Design consultancy:** Brand Ethos with Reason Design  
**Submission date:** 1 July 2016  
**For publication**

Our increase in student numbers has renewed our confidence in ourselves, and our institution. Morale is definitely up.

**Professor Andrew George**  
Deputy Vice-Chancellor  
(Education and International)  
Brunel University London





The design strategy has reignited our growth. We are delighted with the turnaround

**Helen Coleman**

Director of marketing,  
communications and  
student recruitment  
Brunel University London

£9.45m  
fee income  
boosted in  
2015

350  
extra students

Brunel University London is ranked 10th among London's universities.

Across all UK universities, even in the face of numerous challenges, there has been limited albeit slowing growth in student numbers. Yet, over the three years to 2015, numbers at Brunel reduced by 2,000, down 13%, to 13,720.

Brunel has always attracted local students. The deregulation of student numbers and an increasingly competitive stance of higher ranked institutions impacted on applications from our core market.

Competition for the 2015/16 and 2016/17 intakes has been fierce. Following the deregulation of student numbers, Brunel's market share was vulnerable.

A further rebranding wasn't the answer, but a refreshed design framework was needed to drive the recruitment, align messages and create communication ideas to reconnect with the core market and reverse the decline.

Underpinned by fresh research, Brand Ethos developed a dual proposition: "Applied Learning" plus "Only at Brunel". It created a platform of messages that would capitalise on Brunel's two genuine strengths.

The strategy translated into a graphical "plus" device used to dramatise the two sides. This was supported by on-theme photography, an updated palette of colours, and an engaging social media campaign with the #goingtobrunel tag. It established a focused five-year platform for communications inspiring a raft of new activity.

A significant impact for Brunel was in Clearing in 2015. We saw a 25% increase in acceptances through Clearing at the same time as 'Russell Group' universities were expanding and poaching from our potential student pool. That's 350 extra students and £9.45m in additional fees.

In 2016, undergraduate applications rise by 9% compared to the 1.1% increase across the market and an 8% fall among our competitors. Conversion rates have also increased significantly, and one year on, Brunel is entering the Clearing period with 1,000 more offer holders than the previous year.

[299 words]

Student recruitment touches all aspects of a university. A change needs to have credibility with a wide range of internal stakeholders

**Helen Coleman**

Director of marketing, communications and student recruitment  
Brunel University London

### Outline of project brief

In 2015, Brunel University London saw student numbers decline for the third year in a row. It needed to compete more successfully with other London universities or risk continuing to lose market share.

Although the university had rebranded, it did not change its strategy for student recruitment, relying on existing feeder schools, recruitment fairs and an online presence. Its prospectuses reflected its new visual branding, but content followed prospectuses that had gone before. There was no student applicant journey and no single story that followed the applicant from school to open day to applicant to fresher week.

A design review was undertaken to address the decline and focus the marketing and communications strategy for student recruitment, initially for undergraduates.

The starting points of the project were:

- Declining student applications
- No research to inform a compelling recruitment proposition
- Brand identity and messaging was not resonating with core market
- Fierce competition from UK universities following deregulation of student numbers
- Communication channels insufficiently exploited and lacking creative concepts.

There was one business objective:

- To reverse the decline in student numbers to achieve undergraduate entrant growth of 5% in 2016.

Marketing communications objectives:

- To increase prospective student engagement
- To develop compelling messages and design assets for the core market
- To develop a linking story throughout the applicants' journeys.

### What we did

Primary research among students and open day participants informed the basis of the proposition development, backed up by a review of other existing research. Workshops with the marketing team helped understand and shape the student recruitment journey, highlighting touchpoints. The propositions fed the creative brief and allowed everyone to rethink their approach to their area of expertise.

### Description

There are 21 universities in London, excluding those that are private and colleges applying for university status. Brunel, founded in 1966, is ranked 10th among them\*. Its mission has always been to combine academic rigour with the practical, entrepreneurial and imaginative approach pioneered by its namesake Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

## Project overview

In effect, undergraduates hold vouchers worth £9,000 and universities are expected to fight much harder to recruit them

**Nick Hillman**  
Higher Education Policy Institute

It is based in Uxbridge, west London, on a single-campus famous for its green spaces and revered brutalist architecture. It has 34 modern self-catering halls of residence onsite and a strong sense of community. There are three colleges:

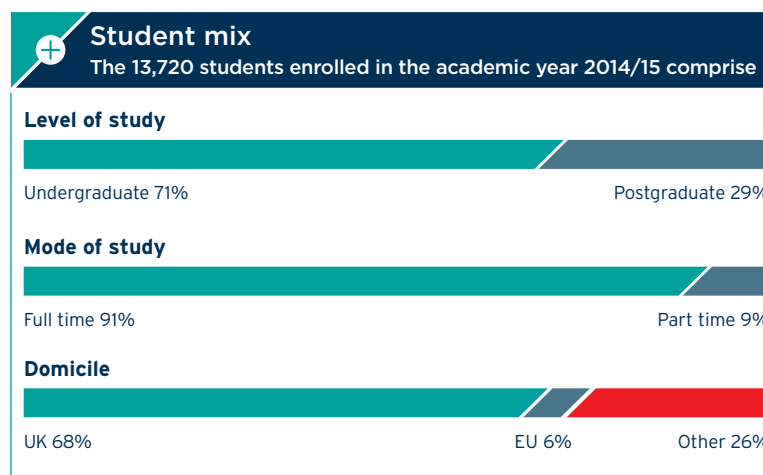
- Engineering, Design and Physical Sciences
- Business, Arts and Social Sciences
- Health and Life Sciences.

It is most famous for its engineering courses, but also has an award-winning business school, and world-class sports facilities and courses.

The university focuses on producing industry-ready graduates. It incorporates work experience placements of between six and 12 months into most of its degree courses, which are supported by its strong links with business and commerce.

Brunel is unusual in that it continues to offer students career advice and mentoring after graduation. Its Professional Development Centre employs a team of career consultants to assist students in exploring career options from freshers' week until up to two years after they leave. The university offers pastoral care and supports students with free foreign language courses such as Russian and Japanese.

The majority of Brunel's students come from the UK and apply for full-time undergraduate courses.



Source: <http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/brunel>

### Overview of market

All British Universities currently face huge challenges in student recruitment. In 2012 university fees for UK students were increased from £3,000 to £9,000 per year making them the highest in the world. For non-EU students, fees are considerably more, and in some instances over £30,000 for courses in medicine. Added to this there is cost of living in London.

\* Source: <http://www.topuniversities.com/where-to-study/europe/united-kingdom/top-10-universities-london>

## Project overview

UK universities face increased competition from European rivals, which are investing in higher education and offering courses in English to attract international students

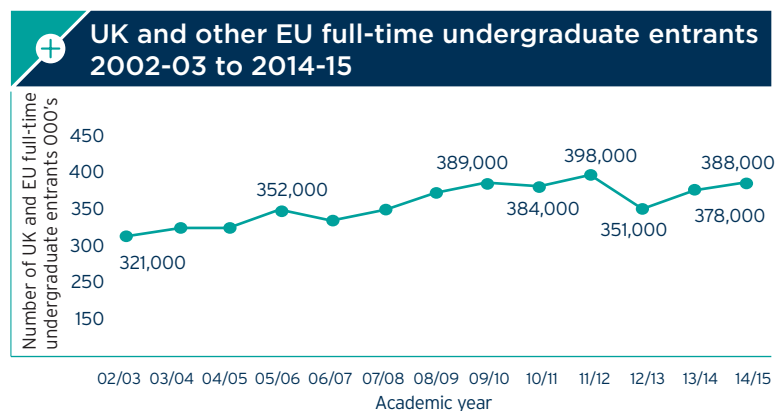
FT.com  
September 30, 2015

There has been increased competition from other international destinations and tightening of visa policies. More significantly for Brunel, there has also been an increase in private providers in the UK, particularly in London where they attract London residents. 2015 and 2016 also saw a decline in the population of 18-year-olds in England and across the EU.

Despite all of this, following the general dip in undergraduate numbers brought on by the increase in tuition fees there has been some slowing growth across the market: 1.1% in undergraduate students. Brunel failed to benefit from this trend and student numbers declined.

There are new challenges, too. 2015 saw the deregulation of student numbers. Universities can now admit as many students as they want rather than sticking to quotas. It is now an entirely demand-driven market and as such, much more competitive. Popular competitor universities in London are able to increase their intake and market share to meet demand.

In this harsh environment, all universities have increased their recruitment activity, including open days, outreach in schools and colleges, increases in support staff, and expenditure in marketing and communications. Brunel is not alone in upping its game. The significance of this project has been that it has devised an effective strategy based on understanding its market and using design to engage it. It needed to punch above its weight.



Source: [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Analysis/HE,in,England/HE\\_in\\_England\\_2015.pdf](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Analysis/HE,in,England/HE_in_England_2015.pdf)

### Project launch date

March 2015

### Size of design budget and production costs

£12,220 design fee

£11,600 consultancy fee

All production and implementation done in house

[826 words]

# Outline of design solution



## Insight and strategy

Research continues to show us that the top three reasons for choosing Brunel are the same as any other university: course, location, and reputation.

But fresh, primary research among students, those attending open days and among staff, also helped us to understand the factors that draw applicants specifically to Brunel. We developed our insights into a dual proposition: “Applied Learning” plus “Only at Brunel” supported by four message themes, which became the foundation of the design framework.

1. Applied learning
2. Get ready for work
3. Diverse, international community
4. On one London campus.

## Design framework and assets

This project was not a one-off campaign. It is about providing a platform for ongoing design and communications to establish a clear and consistent proposition. A design toolkit was developed to dramatise the four core messages. It was about a new approach, one that would inspire rather than simply guide design and communication activities.

## The design components

### The ‘plus’ device

This was a simple mechanism to relate the two core elements of what Brunel stands for: applied learning and getting ready for work, on the one hand, and a diverse, international community on one London campus, on the other.

Research showed that prospective students attending open days understood the two components without explanation. Even if the learning environment shown didn’t match their own chosen field of learning, they identified with it. They welcomed the idea that there appeared to be a diverse community on campus, learning and living together. The ‘plus’ device was seen to bring these two elements together and this was confirmed by their visit to campus.

### Colour palette

The university’s colour palette was seen to be outmoded and out of touch with a younger student recruitment audience that collateral was targeted at, as well as many staff. The new palette sat comfortably alongside the older one, but allowed for more playful, upbeat graphics and better complemented the messages and images being used, not just in print, but online, in social media and on campus, from flags and banners, to merchandise and giveaways.





## Outline of design solution



### Theme-led photography

We started photographing people more in their academic context with a focus on what they are doing and learning helping to bring the core themes to life.

### Going to Brunel

To link the student application journey and to allow people to connect with one another, the 'going to Brunel' story was introduced. It started with school day trips, open days, applications, through to 'on boarding' and freshers' week. It was carried as a hashtag, #goingtobrunel, the student application website, [goingto.brunel.ac.uk](http://goingto.brunel.ac.uk) and through messaging such as invitations and follow ups.

Unlike other university campaigns, the underlying story was not summed up in a strapline, whose story needs unpicking, or isn't seen as universally relevant, or reflects only part of the journey. This approach was seamless, honest and motivating.

### Design applications

The design approach was taken across all student recruitment touch points. Social media meant it was shared much further than advertising would have allowed.

[497 words]

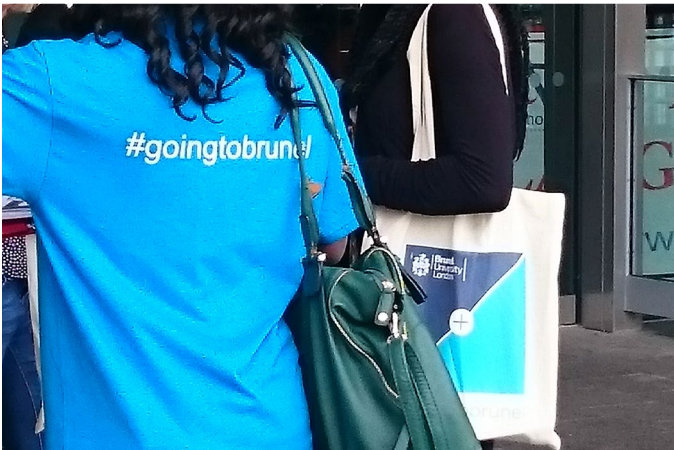
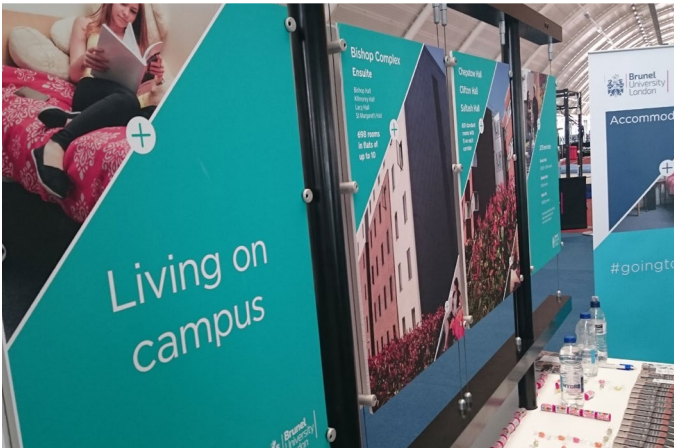
The framework has enabled us to have meaningful conversations with applicants at key points in their decision-making

**Shani Bishop**

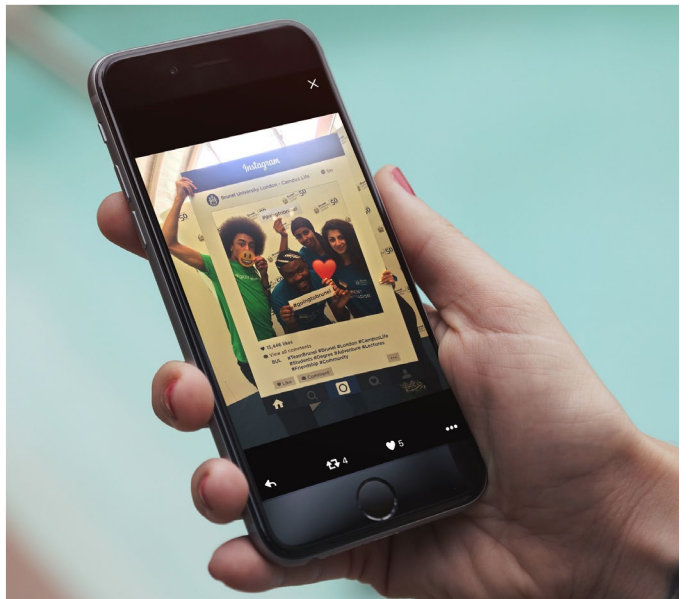
Brand Campaigns Manager  
Brunel University London











## Summary of results

### A clever idea and a job well done

**Ashley Brown**  
Games Design Lecturer  
Brunel University London

Exceeded 5% growth target by four percentage points

### Increase in Clearing numbers in September 2015

A significant impact for Brunel was in Clearing in 2015. We saw a 25% increase in acceptances through Clearing at the same time as 'Russell Group' universities were expanding and poaching from our potential student pool. That's 350 extra students and £9.45m in additional fees, plus the additional income they bring through staying in our halls and using our facilities on campus.

In 2016, undergraduate applications rise by 9% compared to the 1.1% increase across the market and an 8% fall among our competitors. Conversion rates have also increased significantly, and one year on, Brunel is entering the Clearing period with 1,000 more offer holders than the previous year.

Not only has the project reversed the decline in student numbers, we exceeded our 5% growth target by four percentage points.

Results for our clearing campaign, focused around the design strategy saw 25% uplifts in offers being made to students and 26% increases in acceptances. Calls coming in to our team went up by 32%.

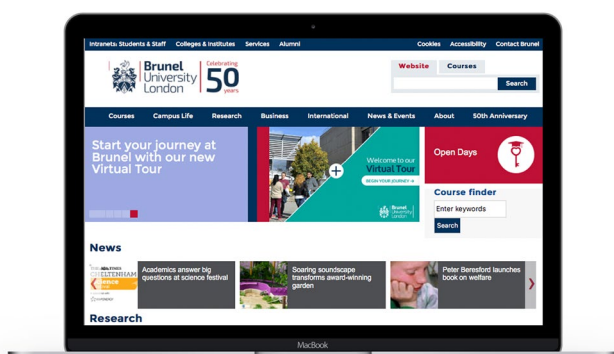
### Increase in prospective student engagement

Social media has been central to student engagement and the #goingtobrunel tag provided a concept for dialogue around the core message themes. This resulted in:

- Campaign referral traffic generated 17,254 sessions on the Clearing microsite.
- Google display ads generated 5,789 sessions and paid search generated 4,341 sessions, with a bounce rate of 34.77% (15% less than average)
- Our top performing Facebook advert gained 103,139 impressions and had a click-through rate (CTR) of 0.79% (vs. average CTR of 0.36%)
- 68.1% Open rate for email sent to students who previously declined (vs. industry average of 22.44%)
- Secured 24 students through UCAS Precision, putting Brunel in the top ten most successful universities to use the service
- Increased position on Edurank to #8 from #133 last year

### Increase in academic staff engagement

The new design framework was authentic, and for this reason engendered the support of academic staff and current students who were proud to be a part of it.





## Other influencing factors

Campus university in London is the best of both worlds

Applicant

Brunel had the best placement opportunities. I felt like they focused on this more than other Universities. This made Brunel my first choice

Applicant

Many factors influence the number of university entrants.

First, let's look at the market context. The application rate from English 18 year olds in 2016 increased by just 1.1 percentage points compared with 2015 (UCAS). At Brunel, entrants were up by a much higher proportion at 9% showing that the University was outperforming the general trend.

What else could have influenced the Brunel's success in student recruitment?

Marketing and communications activity was increased at Brunel. This is true, as it is for nearly every UK university. All have stepped up activity in a bid to compete for students. Our argument is that the new design framework coordinated and inspired Brunel's increase in activity. Without the current project, activity would not have increased.

With rising rents and increased threat of terrorist attack perhaps Greater London has become more attractive than Central London as a location for study. With the high cost of study, perhaps students are looking for more work-related study. These points may be valid. Our argument is that the new design framework communicated the advantages of Brunel in the current environment. It enabled the university to use its benefits to attract students.

There has been an increased demand for STEM subjects where Brunel has strengths. This is the case, but other London universities such as LSE and King's College have excellent reputations in these subjects, too.

Our conclusion is that the design framework provided a way of coherently communicating the total experience of Brunel, making sense of the sum of its parts.

## Research resources

Brunel University London

UCAS

HESA

The Complete University Guide

Times Higher Education

