EDITION 02 | OCTOBER 2026
www.ubrik.com/unimarketer

UNI MARKETER

HIGHER-ED MARKETING MAGAZINE



Alanood Aldhaher

The Culture Behind the Brand

An alumna turned brand leader on what marketing can't create

Stop Trying to Be the Best

Being good gets you considered. Being distinctive gets you remembered.

— The September Number

— Reaching Chinese Students

— Agentic AI & Enrolment

— The Room Higher Education Was Missing

Contents

/04
School Spirit: The Culture Behind the Brand

/14
Stop Trying to Be the Best

/26
The September Number

/38
Unlocking China

/50
Agentic AI & Enrolment

/62
The Room Higher Education Was Missing

UNI MARKETER
Edition 02 | October 2026

PUBLISHER
Sujeevan Subrayan

EDITORIAL
Chief Editor: Gousiya Tabassum

ART
Magazine Design: Mohamed Farhan, Mohammad Nishan

OPERATIONS
Logistics & Print: Imran, Sarfaraz

CONTRIBUTORS
Alanood Aldhaher, Mike Bond, Ahmmed Eltayeb, Tait Lawton, Alex Goryachev, Sujeevan Subrayan

FOREWORD

What *Actually Drives Enrolments* Today?

The first edition of UniMarketer started with a simple argument:

Growth isn't a campaign.

This edition asks the question that follows.

If it isn't the campaign, what actually drives enrolments?

The answer lies beneath the campaign: in the decisions, systems, people and institutional truths that shape whether interest becomes an enrolment.

A forecast that reflects reality. A brand built on something the institution genuinely stands for. Technology that gives people more time with students. A market presence that lasts beyond a single intake.

Different challenges. Different perspectives. But one shared lesson: enrolment is shaped long before a student accepts an offer.

That is what this edition explores. Not another list of tactics, but the work behind the number.

There is no single lever called enrolment growth. The work is knowing which one to pull next.

Sujeevan Subrayan
Publisher | Managing Partner



School *Spirit*



The Culture Behind the Brand

By Alanood Aldhaher
Director of Strategic Communications and Marketing, American University of Sharjah

Students may discover a university through its campaigns, rankings and programmes. But what makes the promise believable is something marketing cannot manufacture: the culture behind it.

I grew up in Houston, Texas, where school pride was almost a language of its own. It was visible in the colours, the traditions, the rivalries and the rituals, but much of what made it powerful was unseen. It was the kind of student the school produced, the expectations placed on you, and the sense that you forever belonged to something. Go Chargers!

That was the experience I expected when I returned to the GCC and became an AUS Leopard.

At first, I could not quite find it.

American University of Sharjah was academically competitive, internationally minded and unmistakably different from the institutions around it. But its culture was not something that was loudly narrated. It was something I had to experience before I could recognise it.

That distinction is much clearer to me now, after returning to AUS as its Director of Strategic Communications and Marketing. As a student, I experienced the culture. Today, I have the responsibility to articulate it.

I have learned that those are two very different things.

After graduating from AUS, my career took me through global corporate communications, marketing and public affairs, and eventually into Dubai government, where I spent more than a decade helping shape the narrative of a city that became one of the world's most recognisable brands.

When I returned to AUS, I came back to a university that had evolved significantly. Its community had become even more diverse, its research ambitions had grown, and the UAE itself had entered a new chapter in which knowledge, innovation and human capital were increasingly central to the country's future.

But something familiar was still there.

The AUSer.

That is where I believe university culture begins.

Culture Is Lived Before It Is Articulated

We often speak about institutional culture as though it can be designed in a strategy document. I believe the opposite is closer to the truth.

Culture is difficult to define, but remarkably easy to feel when the right conditions exist.

At AUS, those conditions can be traced to the vision of its founder, His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, who envisioned a university where education would reshape young minds, research would address societal challenges, and the institution would be connected to the economic, cultural and industrial life around it.

The Latin root of education, educere, means "to lead out" or "bring forth." I think there is something profound in that idea. The best universities do not simply fill students with knowledge. They draw something out of them.

At AUS, that has meant an education that asks students to think, question and experience, and through that experience, learn. It is an American educational model grounded in the culture and context of the UAE and the Arab world.

That combination is not a marketing invention.

It is the institution's DNA.



"Culture is lived before it is articulated"

"The Latin root of education, educere, means 'to lead out'."

The best universities do not simply fill students with knowledge. They draw something out of them.



You Cannot Manufacture What People Do Not Experience

One of the greatest mistakes an institution can make is to confuse a brand narrative with a lived reality.

In communications, we can make almost anything sound impressive. “Innovative.” “Global.” “Future-focused.” “Inclusive.” Every university can say these things.

The harder question is: Can students feel them?

When I returned to AUS, one of the first things I wanted to understand was not what we were saying, but what we were doing. There was no shortage of communications activity, but I saw an opportunity to reconnect that activity to the deeper institutional story.

So my team and I began reframing our overarching narrative, developing a clearer brand framework and, importantly, looking at everyone in the community as an ambassador.

Because a brand is not owned by the marketing and communications team.

A professor embodies it in the way they teach. A student embodies it in the way they engage with a classmate from another culture. An alumna embodies it when she walks into a boardroom. A researcher embodies it when their work moves from a laboratory into society.

Communications can amplify those moments. It cannot manufacture them.

Reputation May Open the Door. Culture Shapes What Happens Next.

For prospective students and parents, culture can seem intangible beside rankings, tuition, programmes and career outcomes. Reputation is easier to measure.

AUS recently achieved its highest-ever position in the QS World University Rankings, reaching 258 globally in the 2027 edition and placing among the top 17% of ranked universities worldwide. It ranks first in the UAE for employer reputation and among the top three for employment outcomes.

Those are important proof points. They may get a prospective student to look twice.

But they do not fully explain what happens after the student arrives.

> *Culture is the four years between admission and graduation.*

It is the professor who challenges your thinking. The student club that introduces you to a new world. The team that takes you somewhere you never expected to go. The friendship that crosses nationality, language or religion. The confidence you develop because somebody gave you the space to try, fail and try again.

An AUSer, in my experience, is bright but curious; ambitious but collaborative; confident but open to being challenged. AUSers are taught to look beyond the immediate answer and consider the bigger picture.

Put an AUSer almost anywhere in the world, and they will find a way to connect, contribute and progress.

That is culture.





“Culture does not sit alongside the brand. Culture is what makes the brand believable.”

The UAE Gives This Conversation a Powerful Context

The UAE is a remarkable study in how identity and ambition can coexist.

It has built a global reputation without abandoning its sense of place. Sharjah, in particular, has developed an identity around education, culture, knowledge and intellectual life. AUS is a product of that environment.

Its mission describes the university’s role as harmonising an American educational model with Sharjah’s heritage and culture.

That is not a contradiction. It is the point.

The most compelling institutions do not become global by becoming generic. They become global by understanding what is distinctive about where they come from and making that distinction meaningful to the world.

Universities are no different.

Culture Compounds

A strong culture creates affinity. Affinity creates advocacy. Advocacy builds reputation. Reputation attracts talent, partnerships and opportunity. Those relationships, in turn, reinforce the culture.

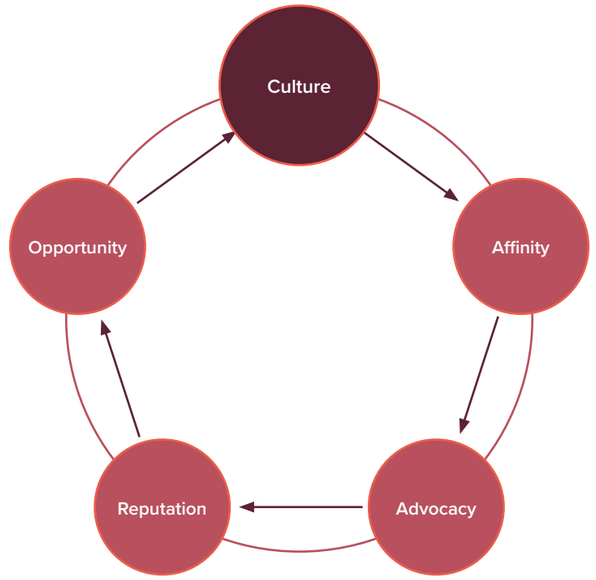
It compounds.

You see it in alumni behaviour. You see it when employers repeatedly return to recruit from the same institution. You see it when faculty choose to build their careers there. This year, AUS recorded its highest number of faculty. You see it when students become mentors, donors, entrepreneurs, researchers or ambassadors.

In 2026, AUS’s Career Fair connected students and alumni with more than 560 internship and employment opportunities, while employers continued to rank AUS graduates highly.

The culture loop

A strong culture creates affinity, affinity creates advocacy, advocacy builds reputation, reputation attracts opportunity, and opportunity reinforces the culture.



Culture compounds.

But the most meaningful form of growth is not necessarily the most visible.

It is when a graduate who left 10, 15 or 20 years ago still says:

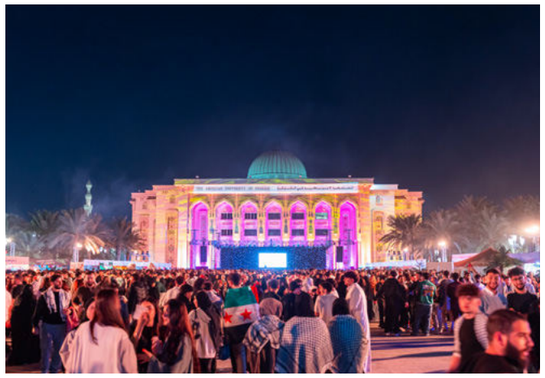
“I am a proud AUSer.”

That is when a university knows it has created something deeper than a brand.

“

If I had to choose one picture of AUS culture, I would choose Global Day.







Global Day at AUS. Photographs courtesy of AUS.



ABOUT ALANOOD ALDHAHER

Alanood Aldhaher is Director of Strategic Communications and Marketing at the American University of Sharjah, where she is also an alumna. Her career spans global corporate communications, marketing and public affairs, including more than a decade in Dubai government helping to shape the narrative of the city.

If I Had to Choose One Picture of AUS Culture

I would choose Global Day.

It is one of those traditions that is difficult to explain in a brochure and almost impossible to understand fully through a photograph.

The campus becomes a celebration of the cultures represented within it. Food, music, clothing, performance and traditions come together. But what stays with me is not the spectacle.

It is the ease with which people move between worlds.

Our diversity is not simply about having people from different countries in the same place. It is about what happens when those people engage with one another.

That is also where the wider UAE context matters. In a country that has made multiculturalism part of its lived reality, AUS becomes a microcosm of something the UAE understands instinctively:

Diversity is most powerful when it becomes connection.

Those words are often the beginnings of your real brand.

The job of marketing and communications is not to manufacture that story, but to give it language, consistency and reach.

I came back to AUS because I believed there was a voice here worth finding. Fifteen years of working in marketing and communications taught me how important it is to find the truth behind a narrative.

Returning to AUS taught me something else: sometimes the most valuable brand asset is the thing that has been there all along, quietly shaping people without ever being formally named.

Culture does not sit alongside the brand.

Culture is what makes the brand believable.

And sustainable growth happens when what an institution says about itself, what its people experience, and what the world comes to believe about it are all telling the same story.

Before the Next Campaign, Listen

If I were advising a university leader who wanted culture to become a stronger part of their growth story, I would not begin with a campaign.

I would begin with a listening exercise.

BEFORE THE NEXT CAMPAIGN, LISTEN

- *Ask students: What surprised you about this university?*
- *Ask recent graduates: What do you still carry with you?*
- *Ask faculty: What would you never want us to lose?*
- *Ask employers: What is different about our graduates?*
- *What makes someone an AUSer – or whatever your institution’s equivalent is?*



Stop Trying to Be *the Best*

As competition grows across UAE higher education, being better is not the only way to compete. The institutions that stand apart are often those with the clearest idea of what makes them recognisably themselves.



Words by Mike Bond
Co-founder, Bond & Coyne

CASE STUDY VISUALS
By Bond & Coyne for Bournemouth University and The Royal College of Art

The UAE university market is expanding at an impressive rate.

That expansion is being driven by government initiatives, increasing demand for quality academic programmes and a growing presence of international institutions.

But with that exciting expansion comes a host of new pressures.

More institutions, more international campuses, more choice for parents and students, sharper questions around fees, value and what a degree might lead to. At the same time, they're having to speak to a much wider audience than before – students, parents, careers advisers, academics, staff, employers, government and international partners.

In this kind of landscape, it can be tempting to try and compete on the same axis as everyone else. Be the biggest, the best ranked, the most international. It is easy to understand that instinct – but it's not the only approach.

Distinctiveness vs. Superiority

We're looking at a market where the competitive set is expanding faster than most marketing and admissions teams can reposition around it.

National data show that 57,035 new students enrolled in UAE higher education institutions in the 2024–25 academic year, a 13% increase year-on-year and the highest intake in a decade.

In Dubai alone, private higher education enrolments reached 42,026 students in 2024–25, a 20% surge compared to the previous year, driven by local and global demand.

In a market experiencing that kind of heat, saying 'we're better' is not the only strategy available. It can sometimes be hard to justify and equally hard to sustain. Plus, when everyone is making the same claim at the same time, the messaging can get cancelled out.

The institutions that succeed are the easiest to recognise, easiest to recall and easiest to link back to a clear idea. It's 'distinctiveness' – and it's markedly different to 'superiority'.

> *Superiority asks: how can we prove that we are better than the alternatives?*
>
> *Distinctiveness asks: what makes us recognisably us?*

For higher education marketers, that difference matters. Rankings move. Competitors make similar claims. Campaigns change from one recruitment cycle to the next. A distinctive idea should be able to survive all three.



57,035

new students enrolled in UAE higher education in 2024–25: up 13% year-on-year, the highest intake in a decade.

42,026

private higher-education enrolments in Dubai in 2024–25, a 20% surge on the previous year.

Source: National Enrolment Data



Truth vs. Uniqueness

It's not about striving for uniqueness either. In higher education, the product – curriculum, degree, campus – is structurally similar from one place to another. Uniqueness is rare and it's usually tied to something unrepeatable, like centuries of prestige, which can't be copied.

Finding your own distinctiveness is more achievable and worthwhile. It doesn't require you to invent something that no one else has. It's about clear, consistent positioning around something that's already true.

'Already true' is important here. The truth only works as a brand foundation if it's authentic and evidenced and if it's relevant to the decision the student and their family are making.

In my experience, the strongest brands combine tangible elements – design, space, product – with intangible ones like culture, tone and the experience of dealing with the institution. It is about considering the story of a university as a whole.

The strategic challenge is therefore not simply to ask, 'What is true about us?' It is to ask, 'Which of our truths gives people a useful and memorable reason to choose us?'

Finding Your Story

This challenge is particularly acute for broad, generalist universities that can't, like specialist institutions can, lean on 'we're famous for X'. A university offering everything from law to engineering and sport has a harder task: what is the single idea that can credibly hold all of that together?

We worked through exactly this problem with Bournemouth University in the UK. It is on the UK's South Coast, with seven miles of sandy beach.

Location is always a key truth, but 'we're by the sea' is a postcard, not a brand.

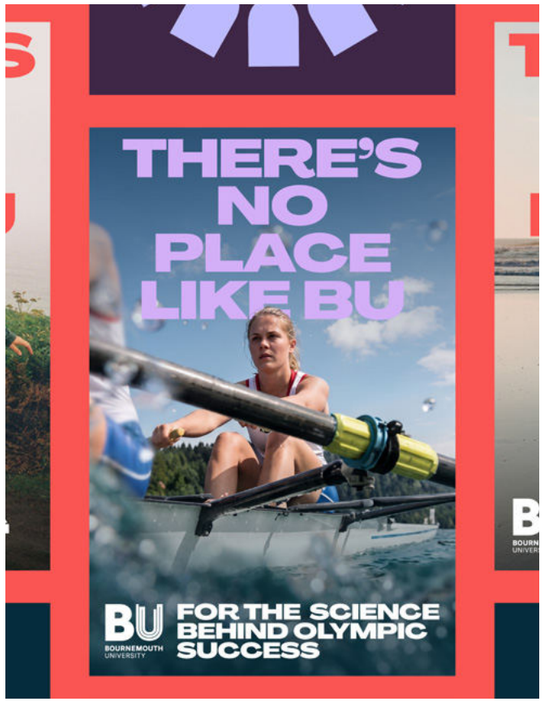
We had to look beyond the coastline to the wider context of the university – its geography, industry and institutions – and ask 'what does being in Bournemouth actually make possible?'

That led to 'There's no place like BU', built around the idea of opportunity in every direction.

The Jurassic Coast becomes a living laboratory. The Premier League football club creates proximity to elite sport.

All of a sudden, 'place' is part of the education, rather than the backdrop to it. The university's verbal identity and visual expression further underlined this concept of opportunity radiating in every direction.

This wasn't about finding one thing the university was uniquely famous for. It was about a distinctive idea (and distinctive expression) broad enough to connect the whole university, yet specific enough to feel unmistakably theirs.



FROM TRUTH TO EXPRESSION

There is a useful progression here for any institution trying to find its position:

/01 **Truth**

What is already true about us?

/02 **Meaning**

Why should that truth matter to a prospective student?

/03 **Distinction**

What idea could we credibly own?

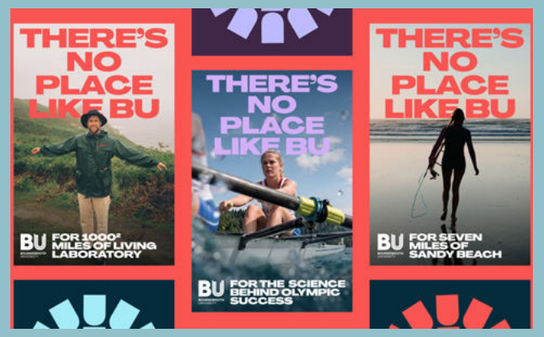
/04 **Expression**

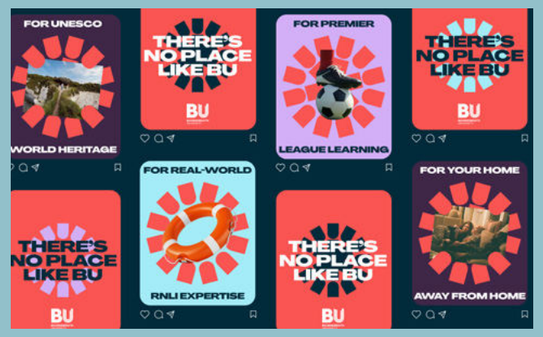
How do we make that idea recognisable wherever people encounter us?

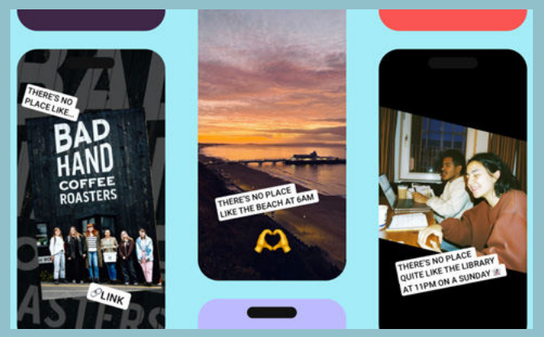


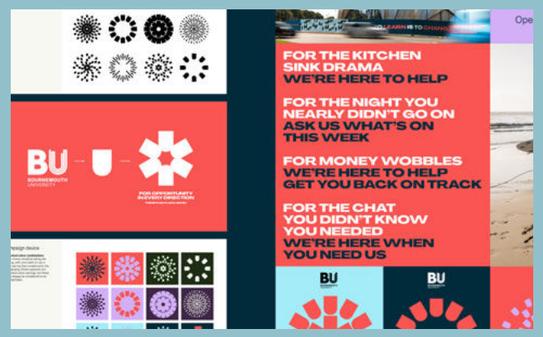


‘We’re by the sea’ is a postcard, not a brand.









// Royal College of Art, 'Where world class is made'. Creative by Bond & Coyne.



What if You're Already Number One?

Distinctiveness is a challenge for world-leading specialist institutions too.

The Royal College of Art, for example, has been ranked number one in the world for postgraduate art and design education for many consecutive years.

It is an incredibly powerful fact that perfectly supports their brand. It was critical, however, that they developed a distinctive brand expression that would complement this point and at the same time lay foundations for confident ongoing marketing – whether they retain or lose their #1 status in the future.

Working with them, we developed the proposition 'Where world class is made' and an abstract visual system that represented many distinct disciplines coming together. Together, these brought to life the creative ethos of the RCA and helped to deliver standout international recruitment activity for a brand that was already a world leader.

The ranking provided evidence of excellence. The distinctive idea gave that excellence an expression people could recognise.

That distinction matters because a strong brand should be able to carry institutional reputation through changing rankings, campaigns and market conditions.

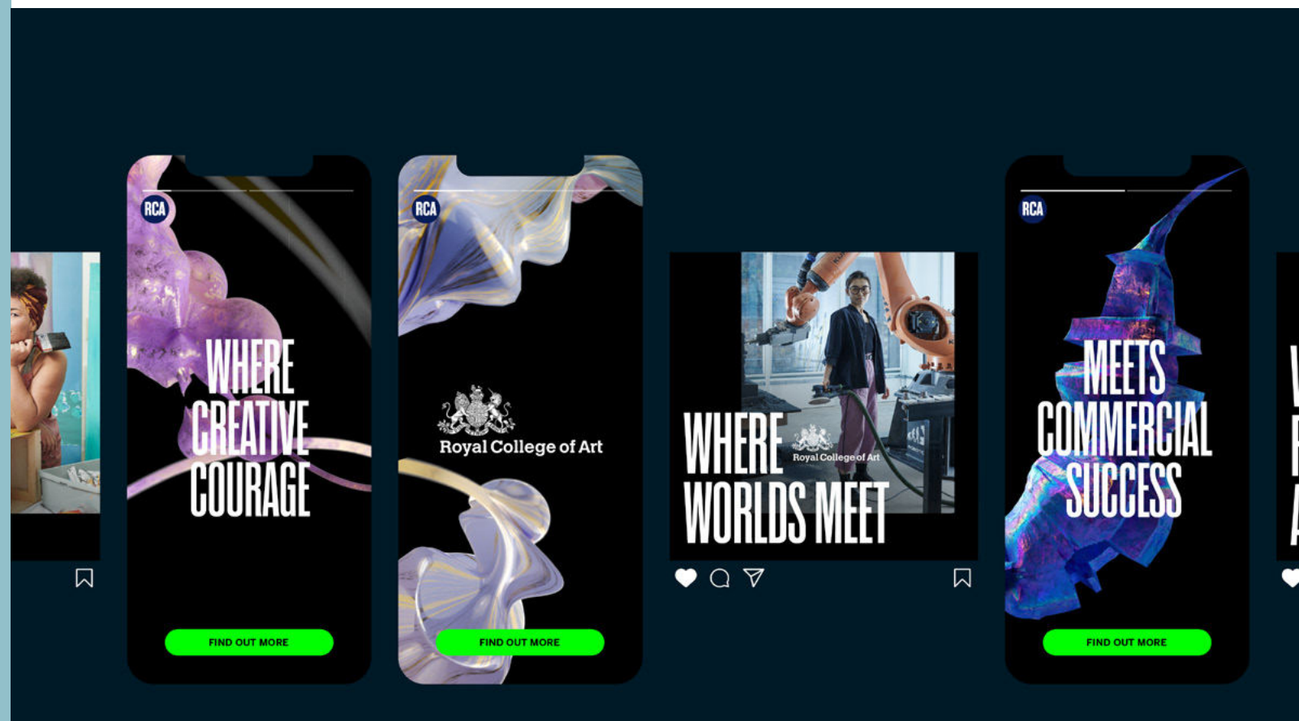
Driven to Distinction

In the UK, we're in the midst of a debate about the value of higher education versus alternatives such as apprenticeships.

It is an important discussion to have (and keep having), but it has created a greater demand for clarity – and therefore distinctiveness – from universities about their offer.

The context is different in the UAE, but actually the demand on brands is the same. There is growth, dynamism and a fast-rising awareness of the choice that's available to people. This is brilliant for the education landscape, and it's great news for future students too.

However, it means brand strategy needs to be robust. Messaging around prestige and being 'the best' are valid and sought after, but if everyone competes on this same axis, there is a risk that all market voices merge.



Different market pressures can therefore lead to the same strategic question: when students have more choices, what makes your institution easier to recognise and understand than the alternatives?

Distinction Has to Work Across the Institution

One of the reasons the Bournemouth University brand was such a success was because of the way in which we built it.

The strategy wasn't imposed top-down by marketing. It was built from the ground up. We involved students, academic staff, operations teams and leadership. All who deliver the brand day-to-day, in whatever context, had a hand in defining it.

Everyone's stories were heard, and truths were found. This ensured that everybody ultimately took ownership. They understood the what and the why – and they were personally invested in seeing it roll out successfully across all touchpoints.

A distinctive position cannot live only in a campaign. If admissions describes the institution one way, academics another and the website a third, the idea weakens.

The test is whether the same central truth can travel across the institution without every audience receiving exactly the same message.

Being Human

We all constantly adapt the way we communicate and present ourselves depending on the context in which we find ourselves – eating out with friends versus meeting in a boardroom – but we're still the same person with the same views and values.

It's no different for brands. A university talking to a prospective student on social media or communicating with a government representative via a strategy document is, of course, going to come across differently. But underneath it should be recognisably the same institution, working off the same true claims, with its own true voice.

A brand's voice needs to have that full range of expression to work effectively in modern markets. Without it, you risk freezing by rigidly 'staying on brand' indefinitely, or diluting through constant iterative adaptations.

Avoiding that trap requires deep work at the top – finding resonant, credible truth. And that's a human process. It takes real listening across the board to surface the 'evidenced' and not the 'invented'.

Stop Reinventing the Brand Every Intake

Every year can bring with it the pressure to come up with a fresh campaign and chase new prospects – but what that can do is weaken the core proposition and brand over time.

It's worth remembering that this year's entrants are just a small part of your audience. Those 'long-run' people – teachers, careers advisers, agents – will form an impression of your institution over time, not a single cycle.

That is why distinction requires consistency.

A campaign can change. The execution can change. Channels certainly will. But the underlying idea should not need reinventing every September.

There is a simple test I would encourage university marketing teams to try.

"

Distinction requires consistency.

THE REMOVE-THE-LOGO TEST

Remove your institution's logo from your website, prospectus, social posts and latest campaign.

How much of what remains could only belong to you?

If the same claims, imagery and language could comfortably belong to five competitors, the challenge may not be the campaign. It may be that the institution has not yet made a clear enough choice about what it wants to be remembered for.

ASK FIVE QUESTIONS

/01 *What is already demonstrably true about us?*

/02 *Which of those truths matters to the students and families choosing us?*

/03 *Could our competitors credibly make the same claim?*

/04 *Can the idea stretch across our programmes, audiences and touchpoints?*

/05 *Would we still want to be known for it five years from now?*

Every UAE institution already has truths worth telling. The harder task is deciding which one deserves to become the idea people remember you for – and then having the discipline to keep telling it.

Because in an increasingly crowded higher education market, being good may get you considered.

"Being distinctive is what helps you get remembered."



ABOUT MIKE BOND

Mike is a Cofounder at Bond & Coyne, a brand and technology agency that tackles complex design challenges for international organisations and universities. For more than 20 years, the team have shaped compelling brands, launched campaigns and built future-facing digital platforms. Mike also teaches and mentors across HE, maintaining a close connection with emerging talent and new thinking in design.



ENROLMENT OPERATIONS / FORECASTING

The *September* Number

Forecasting enrolment seat by seat, with measured yields instead of assumptions



By Ahmmed Eltayeb
Head of Student Recruitment,
Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi

In the last week of August, I removed nearly eighty students from our enrolment forecast.

Nobody had withdrawn. No programme had closed. What changed was one number deep in the calculation: the share of confirmed students who actually turn up, which we had been carrying at 95% and had never checked. Measured against last year's outcomes, it came back at 84%.

It was the best thing that happened to our forecast all summer. From that afternoon, the number was true.

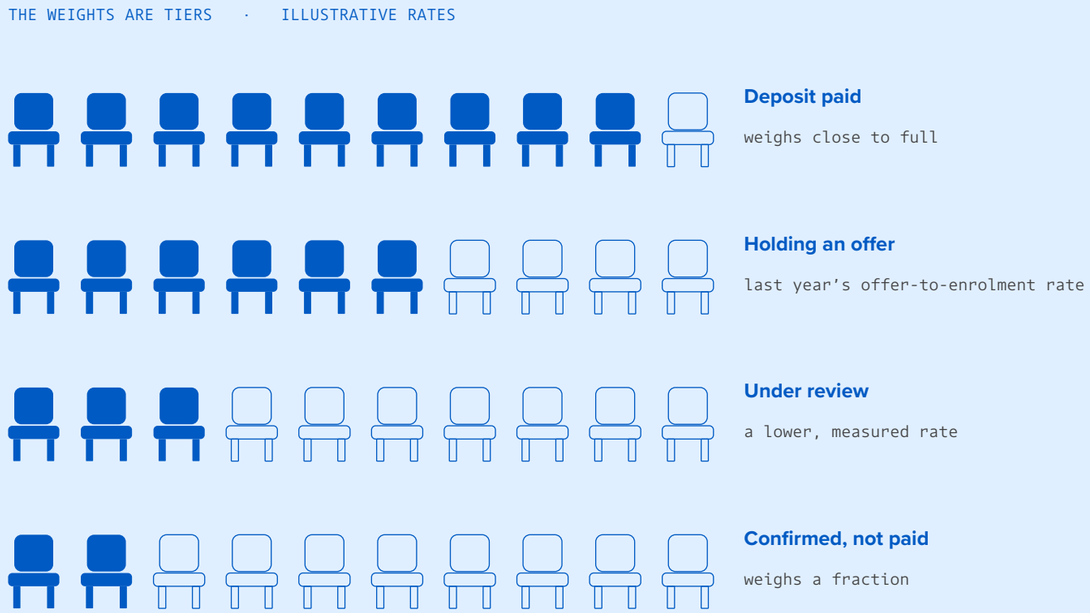
Every enrolment leader knows the question that number answers. From May onward, someone senior asks it in every meeting: **how many students will actually be sitting in class when term starts?** Not applications. Not offers. Enrolled students, by programme.

Miss by eighty and the consequences are physical: a residence hall overbooked, teaching sections staffed for students who never arrive, a budget resting on fee income that never lands.

We stopped guessing. Not with new software or a data science team. My team is five people, and most of their week is spent recruiting, not modelling. What we built is a discipline: measured rates, matched populations, forecasts at the level of the individual programme, a log of every change, and the whole thing run twice a week until registration closes.

This is what it looks like in practice, including the parts we got wrong.





The Method, in Brief

Take every live applicant in your pipeline. Weigh each one by what applicants in exactly the same position did last year, not by what you hope they will do or by a sector rule of thumb. Sum the weights by programme. Compare each sum to that programme's seats.

The weights are tiers. An applicant holding an offer carries the measured rate at which last year's offer holders went on to enrol. An application still under review carries a lower one. A student who has paid a deposit weighs close to full, while one who has confirmed but not paid weighs a fraction.

Our funnel is split, with national applicants coming through a government admissions platform and international applicants through our own CRM, so each track has its own tiers, measured on its own history.

None of the weights are opinions. Each one is last year's outcome for students who stood where this year's now stand.

The tooling is deliberately unglamorous: a spreadsheet, a scripted calculation and a log. There are vendors who will score each student with machine learning, and at large scale that has value. At our scale, with programme cohorts in the tens and low hundreds, a transparent rate you can audit beats a model you cannot.

If your institution has last year's outcomes in a spreadsheet, you can run this next cycle.

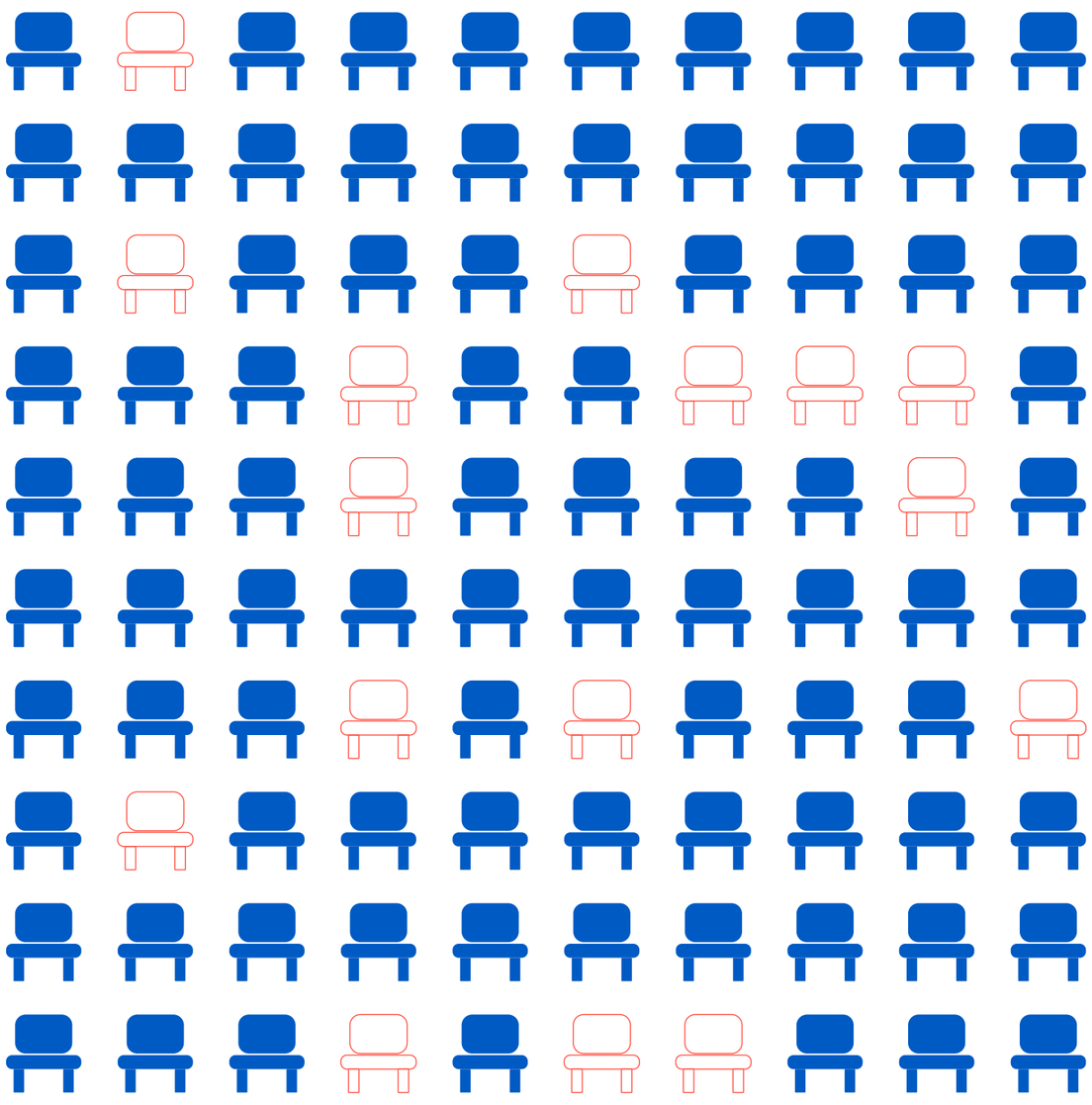
MEASURE WHAT YOU ASSUMED

~~95%~~

ASSUMED ARRIVAL RATE

84%

MEASURED: IN CLASS IN OCTOBER



One hundred confirmed students. Sixteen of them will not be in class in October: the no-show rate was 16%, not 5%.

Measure What You Assumed

The 95% I mentioned is where forecasts quietly fail.

Somewhere in every projection sits a factor somebody set because it sounded sensible: an arrival rate, a melt allowance, a conversion multiplier. Ours had sat in the calculation for months, unchallenged, because it looked reasonable.

Reasonable is not the same as true.

Measuring it was an afternoon's work. We took last year's confirmed students and counted how many were actually in class in October. The gap between the two is the no-show rate: students who confirm, sometimes pay, and never arrive.

It was 16% — the mirror of the 84% who do arrive — not the 5% we had assumed.

The correction did more than shrink the forecast. It redrew the map.

A programme we had treated as exactly full came back 43 seats under capacity. Another, over its cap on paper all cycle, landed seven seats under for the first time. The one genuine overage finally stood alone, 16 seats over, impossible to explain away.

One caution belongs here. All of this is measured on a single prior cycle, and one year of history gives you a rate without telling you how much of it is signal and how much is last year's weather.

We treat the large figures as reliable and the small ones as ranges. On a programme of forty, a two-point swing in yield is one student, so we say "between four and nine seats over" rather than pretending to precision the base cannot carry.

The honest hierarchy is simple:

One year is a datapoint. Two is a trend. Three is a rate.

The discipline pays regardless, because every cycle you run it adds another year to the history.

The takeaway costs nothing: list every factor in your forecast and mark each one measured or assumed. The assumed column is your risk register.

Work through it before September does it for you.

"Reasonable is not the same as true."



A Rate Only Transfers if the Populations Match

A measured rate can still mislead you if it was measured on a different population from the one you apply it to.

Our 84% was measured on last year's confirmed students net of deferrals. Students who postponed entry had already left that base before anyone counted who showed up. So the rate could only be applied to a base defined the same way.

This year's deferred students sit under their own status in the records system, outside the active count. Same numerator concept, same denominator concept, and the rate transfers cleanly.

Had the bases differed, our measured 84% would have been a guess with better paperwork.

The same test caught a subtler problem on the international track. We carry an attrition rate for students who have confirmed but not yet paid, and it had been measured late in the previous cycle, when the unpaid pool is mostly students who will never pay.

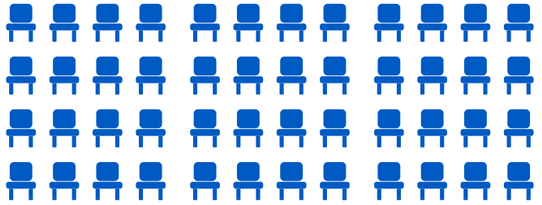
Early in this cycle, that same harsh rate was being applied to students who still had months before any deadline.

The fix was to stage the rate: gentler in the early months, tightening as the cycle ages, so each rate is applied at the point in the calendar where its history was made.

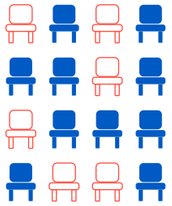
A rate has a place in the cycle as well as a population.

Before you borrow any rate from history, write down its numerator and denominator, note when in the cycle it was measured, and set this year's definitions beside them. If they do not match, fix that before you use the number.

THE SEATS EXISTED. THEY WERE NOT FUNGIBLE.



SUBJECT A · THREE TEACHING GROUPS · FULL



SUBJECT B · ONE GROUP · EVERY FREE SEAT SAT HERE



WAITLIST: MORE THAN FIFTY STUDENTS, ALL FOR SUBJECT A

WAITLIST: NONE

Forecast at the Seat, Not the Institution

Our university-level total looked plausible all summer. It was also nearly useless.

Few decisions in the closing weeks are taken at university level. Closing a programme to new applications, opening a waitlist, adding a teaching section: all of it happens programme by programme. A total that nets a 43-seat shortfall against a 16-seat overage hides both.

The sharpest version of this lesson came out of a capacity meeting in the middle of August, about two related programmes sharing one pool of seats.

On paper, seats remained, and I went in assuming we could release them to the waitlist.

Then the timetable came out.

The teaching groups were split by discipline, three for one subject and one for the other. Every free seat sat on the side with no waitlist. The entire waitlist, more than fifty students, sat on the other.

Someone asked, reasonably, why the two cohorts could not simply share a room. The answer: a couple of their courses diverge, and one diverging course is enough to make a mixed group unworkable.

The seats existed. They were not fungible.

We left the meeting having released nothing, with a rule I have kept since:

A forecast at institution level cannot see a timetable. A forecast at seat level is forced to.

The Definitions Move Under You

Late one August morning, a status we had never seen appeared in the national admissions platform, tied to a change in national service rules.

By that afternoon, we had costed the worst case: up to 67 students of swing on a single programme, depending on what the new status turned out to mean.

Nothing about that week was unusual. Statuses appear, caps move, rules change mid-cycle, and a forecast maintained as a standing model rots quietly against all of it.

So at every run we reconcile the configuration again: which applicants are excluded, how each status maps to a probability, what every rate means. Then we log what changed and why.

By late August, we were past run thirty.

The log reads like a diary of the cycle, and it is the reason a number published in July can still be explained in September.

Data teams would call this model governance. We call it knowing what our own number means.

The Band Becomes the Work Plan

A forecast's last job is to say where it is most likely to be wrong.

Once we corrected the arrival rate, that answer was obvious: the no-show band. Sixteen per cent of the confirmed pool on the national track is roughly a hundred students, the single largest uncertainty in the whole September number.

So the final weeks are organised around that band.

Payment deadlines are enforced rather than extended by default. Eligibility is verified rather than assumed. A tracker logs every student slipping out of confirmed as it happens, not as an autopsy in October.

Last year's 84% was measured before any of this machinery existed. That makes it a floor, not a fate. Every stale confirmation flushed out early is measurable movement against the forecast while the seat is still fillable.

Registration week either happens to you or gets managed. The forecast tells you where to manage it.



"A check that cannot disagree with your forecast is decoration."

An Audit That Cannot Disagree Is Not an Audit

Every run is audited before it leaves the room. I would defend that habit to anyone.

But the sharpest mistake we made this summer survived its audit.

The reason is worth more than the mistake: the audit had been built from the same assumptions as the calculation it was checking. Where the mapping was wrong, the check was wrong in the same way, so everything passed.

What finally caught it was a person, not the process. One programme's figure looked odd, and the unease would not go away.

We rebuilt the audit to derive its expectations independently.

A check that cannot disagree with your forecast is decoration.

There is a political dividend to getting this right too. A number that arrives with a log and an audit trail survives the leadership room in a way a number without a past never does.

Scrutiny should make your forecast stronger. When it does not, that is information too.



What It Costs

Nothing here required a data warehouse, a vendor or a statistician.

Last year's outcomes, a spreadsheet, a scripted calculation, a log, and the discipline to write down what changed: that is the entire bill of materials.

The method's real price is humility.

Your first year, the forecast will still be wrong somewhere, because your history was not collected with forecasting in mind. But you will know exactly where and why, and that knowledge compounds.

All summer, when the question came, I gave a number with a history: its assumptions on its face, its uncertainty in a named place, more than thirty logged runs behind it.

By the time you read this, registration will have closed and that forecast will have been graded against the students actually sitting in class.

We grade it whatever the result, because this year's errors are next year's measured rates.

That, more than any one accurate prediction, is the point.

A September number should not be a promise that survives until results day. It should be a position you can defend on any Tuesday, and improve by Friday.



WHERE DOES YOUR FORECAST SIT?

TIER 1 AGGREGATE

Last year's aggregate yield applied in a spreadsheet and adjusted by judgement.

TIER 2 SEGMENTED

Measured rates by programme and stage of cycle, reconciled and logged each run. This is the model described in this article.

TIER 3 PREDICTIVE

Machine-learning scores for individual students. Potentially valuable at scale, but more complex and less transparent.

The move that changes everything is Tier 1 to Tier 2. It needs no budget, only discipline.

FIVE QUESTIONS TO ASK OF ANY YIELD RATE

/01 *Was it measured or assumed?*

/02 *What exactly were its numerator and denominator?*

/03 *Is this year's population defined the same way, at the same point in the cycle?*

/04 *Does it apply to this segment, or is it an average that flatters the riskiest students?*

/05 *When was it last reconciled against reality?*



ABOUT AHMMED ELTAYEB

Ahmmed Eltayeb is Head of Student Recruitment at Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi, where he leads a five-person team across national and international recruitment. The forecasting discipline described here was built in-house with a spreadsheet, a scripted calculation and a log.

Unlocking China:

What UAE Universities Need to Know About Reaching Chinese Students



China is the world's largest source of international students, making up 15% of the total

(UIS Databrowser, 2026).



By Tait Lawton
Founder
Nanjing Marketing Group

Yet Chinese students represent only **6.6% of Dubai's international higher education population** (China Daily, 2026).



If UAE universities can reach Chinese students and persuade them to study, they could meaningfully grow the number of Chinese international students in the region.



UNLOCKING CHINA /01

Why Market to China

Agents remain one of the ways UAE universities reach Chinese students. But relying on them alone means the university never fully owns its access to the market.

You're renting access. Pay per intake, per lead, per season, and when that relationship changes, or your seats end up sitting next to five other schools' seats on the same agent's desk, your access changes with it.

Building your own presence in China is a different kind of asset. A WeChat account with a real following, a Baidu search presence, a Rednote page people actually engage with - none expires at the end of an intake cycle. A student who finds you today might not enquire for another year, but they'll remember you when they do.

Agents may provide access now. Building your own infrastructure gives you something that lasts.

UNLOCKING CHINA /02

Why It's Difficult to Enter

Here's the honest problem

The platforms schools normally use to market themselves - Facebook, Instagram, Google, YouTube and TikTok - are all blocked in China. Chinese users can't access them without a VPN. While some use VPNs, they can be inconvenient, and with strong Chinese alternatives already available, users may only switch them on occasionally.

IN THEIR PLACE IS A WALLED GARDEN OF CHINESE APPS:

- WeChat
- Rednote
- Bilibili
- Douyin
- Baidu

The logic of marketing hasn't changed: awareness, consideration and conversion still apply. What's different is where that journey happens, and who's part of it. Chinese study-abroad decisions are usually a family decision. Parents are actively researching on these same platforms. **If your content only speaks to the student, you're missing half the room.**

The Ecosystem

Here's what universities need to know about the major platforms.

WeChat

WeChat has more than 1.4 billion users worldwide. It's a messaging app, payment tool and content feed. For universities, the two things worth doing are publishing long-form articles through an Official Account and giving admissions teams a way to chat directly with prospective students, by text, audio or video.

Here's the part most UAE admissions offices miss: those conversations happen mostly in Mandarin, not English. A well-run WeChat account with no Chinese-speaking person behind it is still invisible the moment someone wants to talk. This is why agencies like ours also run conversion services, with a Chinese-speaking team member calling the lead and walking them through the application. It closes a gap most admissions offices simply aren't staffed to close on their own.

Rednote

Rednote feels a bit like Instagram, but is built around useful, practical content rather than entertainment. Short posts, images and videos do well here, as long as the content is genuinely useful, not just promotional.

Bilibili and Douyin

Bilibili and Douyin are the closest things China has to YouTube and TikTok. English video content can perform well on Bilibili even before you adapt it, making it an easy place to start. A Bilibili account also lets you embed videos on your Chinese-facing website, where embedded YouTube videos would otherwise be blocked. Douyin is the king of short video in China.

Baidu

Baidu is essentially China's Google. It's where a curious parent or student might check whether your university is real and what appears when they search its name. A Chinese-facing website is worth having, but it shouldn't be the centre of your campaign.

So, how do you *get moving?*

/01

Set up your accounts

/02

Build a Chinese-facing website

/03

Adapt existing English materials for a Chinese audience

/04

Review feedback and keep adjusting

Case Studies

Two examples from our own work show how this plays out.



Emory University School of Law

Emory University School of Law came to us in 2021 wanting to grow applications from Chinese students and build brand recognition in the market. We built a localised Chinese website, ran Baidu advertising, and set up accounts across WeChat, Weibo, Zhihu and Bilibili.

Within eight months, that combination brought in

111

applications.

Zhihu picked up

1,000

followers in the first six weeks

while Bilibili added

400



Cambrian College

Cambrian College, in Sudbury, Canada, started with very little visibility in China. Starting in 2019, we built its presence on WeChat and Weibo, then added a Chinese website, Zhihu and Rednote.

Listening to its students helped sharpen the campaign. Many were mature students who liked living in a smaller city and wanted practical information about costs, jobs and schools for their children. We adjusted the content around those questions.

Rednote alone brought in more than

243

enquiries in ten months

and Cambrian recorded

107

applications from Chinese students in 2022.

Enrolments from Chinese students increased by

600%

over the two-year campaign.

What Chinese Students and Families Actually Ask

Once a family gets serious about the UAE, the questions get specific fast. Universities that answer them clearly can earn trust before an enquiry ever comes in.

Trust and safety

Is Dubai safe, including for a female student living alone? What should they know culturally, and what should they expect during Ramadan? For many parents, these questions come before the programme itself.

Life logistics

What do monthly living costs look like? How can students save on accommodation? Is there a Chinese student community, and can a prospective student speak to someone already there?

Outcomes

Can graduates find work in Dubai? Can they stay after graduation? What's realistic on salary and benefits? What about starting a business?

Which university

With international names and lesser-known branch campuses competing for attention, "is this university actually good?" is a real question. Credentials, faculty and alumni outcomes help families answer it.

Return on the degree

Chinese families want to know whether the degree holds up back home for further study and employment. A major trust signal is whether the university sits on the Chinese Service Center for Scholarly Exchange (CSCSE)'s overseas institution database.

Without that, a degree can be difficult to use for civil service roles or further study in China. **If your university is on the list, say so clearly and early.** If you're not sure, check before investing further in the market.

English requirements

State the required proficiency clearly. If a student isn't there yet, explain whether you offer a foundation or bridge programme. Leave it vague and families may simply move on.

A Short Note on Targeting

Not every programme should chase the same audience

For energy and petroleum engineering programmes, strong feeder pools sit around universities like China University of Petroleum, Southwest Petroleum University and China University of Geosciences.

For Islamic studies and Arabic language programmes, the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region carry existing cultural and linguistic familiarity that makes a UAE programme a more natural fit.

Matching your message to the right regional and academic audience makes every other tactic work harder.

How Long Will It Take to See Results?

Plan for *two years,* minimum.

It takes time for a new account to build a real following, and Chinese students typically spend around two years researching before choosing a school. Realistically, this work should run continuously alongside everything else you're doing.

That doesn't mean two years of silence. Watch the signals along the way: rising engagement, follower growth and more direct enquiries through WeChat or other Chinese-facing channels. If they're moving, applications will follow. If they aren't moving after several months, adjust the approach rather than simply waiting.

What Not to Do (So You Don't Burn Money)

A few mistakes come up again and again.

Don't make your website the centre of everything	Keep one current, but treat social platforms as your main channels rather than funnels towards a site nobody is actively searching for yet.
Don't bet everything on one platform	Short video travels across WeChat, Rednote, Bilibili and Douyin. Spreading across several platforms protects you if one underperforms.
Don't start strong and go quiet	A campaign that runs hard for three months and stops does less good than a smaller effort that keeps going. This market rewards consistency over intensity.
Don't market only to students	Parents are researching too, and often making the final call on cost and safety.
Don't skip the recognition question	Confirm your university's standing on China's official list of recognised overseas institutions before investing heavily.
Don't leave English requirements or Mandarin-language support as an afterthought	A family that can't get a straight answer may simply move on without ever telling you why.

The Opportunity Is in Staying

China isn't a market to test for one intake and walk away from. The universities that make progress will be the ones that build a presence, learn what students and families actually need, and keep showing up.

The opportunity is there. But in China, being visible is only the beginning. *Being present is what compounds.*

Agentic AI & Enrolment



Agentic AI will not drive enrolments. *But the hours it recovers, spent in the right places, will.* Here is what that actually requires.



By Alex Goryachev
WSJ Bestselling Author,
Independent Expert on AI Education

The Emirates built a higher education sector in the time other systems spend reviewing one. In 2024 to 2025,

57,035 students entered UAE higher education institutions,

13% increase in a single year and the largest intake in a decade.

37 international branch campuses are now hosted in Dubai alone, with more opening this year.

A generation ago, most of that existed as intent.

Universities are among the oldest continuously operating institutions humanity has built. Their function is to carry knowledge from one generation to the next, and whoever runs them at a given moment holds that inheritance and hands it on. The Emirates hold a share of it now, at the moment the tools change.

Agents Will Hand Your Campus Back Its Hours. Spend Them in Front of Students.

What a University Is, Up Close

Walk a campus long enough and the same thing keeps happening in its corners. A supervisor notices a student has stopped turning up and sends the message that brings them back. A conversation after a seminar runs long past its end and redirects a career. An office hour where someone hears from an adult who knows the field that they are good at this.

I have spent years in those corridors, and the moments people describe decades later look like that. Everything else in the building exists to make them possible. Which raises the question for your own institution: which hours protect that work, and which occupy the people doing it.



The Only Intervention with Evidence Behind It

Pooled across 96 randomised controlled trials run in Australia, the UK, Sweden, Switzerland, Hong Kong and New Zealand, **tutoring moves student outcomes by roughly 0.37 standard deviations.** The pattern underneath that number matters more. The effect scales with the expertise of the person delivering it. Qualified teachers produce the largest gains, paraprofessionals substantial ones, volunteers less, and parents the least, **at 0.20 to 0.25.** Mentoring carries an effect of

0.63

on dropout prevention across 30 programmes.

Read that as an instruction about payroll. Contact hours from your most expert people are the highest-yield asset the institution owns, capped by whatever the timetable and workload leave over.

Every hour a professor spends on a form is an hour subtracted from *the only intervention with evidence this strong behind it.*

That is also the oldest thing a university does. Knowledge passing from a qualified human to a younger one has survived plague, empire and every machine that promised to make the teacher optional. It deserves defending in the budget, where defence is visible.

The Ratio Nobody Puts on a Slide

I work with universities around the world on AI, among them the California State University system, and I spent years before that building innovation centres across 12 countries, which puts me in those rooms. The first number I ask for is the share of payroll that stands in front of students. Every finance office can produce it. Almost no board deck contains it.

Australia published its version in 2023.

57%

of university staff are non-academic,

66,577 people against **50,033** in teaching and research.

In the UK, between 2005 to 2006 and 2017 to 2018, secretarial and clerical roles halved while management and non-academic professional roles grew

60%

The routine work moved up the org chart and acquired a *better title*.

Across 12 European countries, the share of academic working time spent teaching runs from

27%

in Switzerland

54%

in Portugal and the Netherlands.

Universities have been moving weight off the teaching line for decades, with no AI in the room. Agents arrive into a ratio that was already drifting.

Where to Point Them

Point the first agents everywhere except teaching.

FIVE JOBS QUALIFY:

- Admissions response triage
- Enrolment document chasing
- Registrar and financial aid queries
- Advising scheduling
- Back-office reconciliation

The test for a good first job is plain: high volume, rules already written down, reversible actions, errors visible within days, and a named owner who runs it today.

For enrolment teams, those recovered hours have a direct destination: more time for the conversations that move students from uncertainty to decision. The value of automation is not simply that an enquiry gets answered faster, but that people have more time for the enquiries that require judgement, reassurance and trust.

I have watched an agent chase incomplete applicant files by name at two in the morning, and answer the same fee question hundreds of times *without degrading*.

An Australian university has run a student assistant handling upwards of

12,000

conversations a day since 2018, and UK institutions have run similar services since 2017.

Expect attrition. My own record was 170 AI pilots that produced 51 live deployments, roughly

3/10

surviving contact with operations.

Baseline what you intend to move before launch: median response time on an enquiry, share of applicants with a complete file 30 days out, staff hours per week on the task. Put the day-90 delta in front of the cabinet.

Where This Goes Wrong

The costly errors repeat. Teams aim the first agent at teaching and assessment, where the stakes are highest and the rules are least written down. Ownership goes to a committee, and nobody tunes the thing on a Tuesday afternoon. Records stay fragmented. I have watched an agent act with complete confidence on the wrong student because one name was spelled three ways across three systems, caught by a human the following morning. Escalation rules get drafted after go-live, once the first complaint reaches a dean.

One distributional risk deserves naming. Documented deployments across the region cluster at well-resourced institutions, while public universities and technical colleges run with less. A sector that automates its wealthiest campuses first widens the gap it has spent years closing.

Governance lags in public too. Of 96 UK universities studied this year,

41%

have no publicly accessible AI policy.

Under the EU AI Act, education sits in the high-risk category, with obligations arriving in August 2026.

The most expensive mistake is quieter. An institution recovers thousands of staff hours, congratulates itself, and lets administration absorb every one of them. *The hours have to be spent somewhere deliberate, and the spend most likely to change a student's experience is contact with an expert human.*

Who You Need, and How Long It Takes

One named owner inside the function, admissions operations or registrar, with half their week protected. The CIO owns identity, data access and security. Process knowledge stays in-house, because that knowledge is the asset.

In the room from week 1:

The President

whose mandate settles the money argument

The Provost

who gives the work academic legitimacy

The Head of Admissions / Marketing

because a student's experience of an agent is a brand experience.

A Faculty Representative

whose early involvement prevents a senate confrontation in month 6.

Then the part most plans underestimate. The clerk who answered the same 40 questions becomes an exception handler and a workflow designer, which takes a training budget with calendar time behind it. The skills half-life is now shorter than a degree cycle, the argument at the centre of my new book, The Great Relearning.

The training line in your budget may predict the outcome *better than the software line.*

90 days: one workflow live in limited scope, baselines measured, governance approved. Week 6 will look worse than week 2, and leadership patience through it decides the result. 6 months: two or three workflows running, human review narrowed to flagged cases. 12 months: roles rewritten in job descriptions, the next wave chosen on evidence from the first.

Monday

Start with the people who do the work. Registrars, admissions officers, advisors, faculty, the staff answering the phones. They can tell you which parts of their week are wasted, because they spend the week inside it. Ask them before you take a vendor meeting or draft a plan.

Asking first is the cheapest insurance on the programme. Staff consulted before a deployment become its owners. *Staff who hear about it afterwards become its opposition.*

PUT THE QUESTION PLAINLY.

01 **What in your week could be done faster?**

02 **What could be done cheaper?**

03 **What could be done better?**

For most of working history you were told to pick two. Agents are the first thing that credibly offers all three at once on routine work, so refuse the tradeoff and take all three.

Two things go in writing this week. Name the owner. And decide where the recovered hours land, with advising contacts per student as the number you report against.

The Emirates act while other systems deliberate. An AI curriculum now runs from kindergarten to Grade 12, introduced in 2025 to 2026 with around

1,000
specialist teachers trained to deliver it,

and the national target puts AI at

20%
of GDP by 2031.

That is the instinct of a place that admitted 57,035 students in a single year, into a system built within living memory.

Innovation is rarely born in the corner office. I have spent a career watching the useful ideas arrive from the people doing the work. The registrar who knows which fifteen minutes of her day are wasted is holding the roadmap, and no board meeting on earth contains that information. The corner office can approve it, fund it and protect it. The list comes from her.

So ask.

Universities have carried human knowledge across centuries of upheaval, and the leaders holding that inheritance now have a chance their predecessors never had: to hand scholars back the hours paperwork has been taking, and to spend those hours where students are.

Do that, and the Emirates will be known for arriving early once again, *this time in the oldest work there is.*

The Room Higher Education *Was Missing*

The HigherEd Collective began with four people, no cameras and one rule: no selling. What followed revealed just how much the UAE's enrolment community needed a space to talk openly.



By Sujeevan Subrayan
Managing Partner,
Ubrik

WHY THIS ROOM EXISTS

There is something that has been sitting with me for years.

We have worked in this market for 17 years, with more than 30 higher education institutions across the region. Somewhere along the way, Ashwin and I kept noticing the same thing.

The people making decisions about enrolment, brand and the student journey rarely had a place to come together.

Not as competitors. As an industry.

Everyone was fighting their own fires and solving many of the same problems in isolation, often without knowing that someone elsewhere in the sector had already encountered exactly the same challenge.

Look at more established higher education markets such as the UK, US or Australia and you find associations, communities and platforms where marketing and admissions professionals can exchange ideas.

In the UAE, we felt something was missing.

Not another conference.

A room.

1.5

years in the making

4

people in the first room

22+

instituions represented by the fifth session

35

attendees by the fifth session

125

seats at the HigherEd Collective Summit



Before each gathering, a questionnaire: what is actually keeping you up at night?

The Idea Did Not Start in Higher Education

The idea actually began years earlier, in pharmaceuticals.

Before Ubrik, I spent time in an industry that ran something called RTDs: roundtable discussions. They were private, after-hours conversations with doctors about what was actually changing in their field.

No product deck. No hard sell. Just useful conversation between people who respected each other's time and expertise.

That stayed with me.

Years later, when Ashwin and I began thinking about how Ubrik could contribute something meaningful to the higher education sector beyond the work we already did with institutions, we kept coming back to that idea.

What if you put the right people in a room and simply gave them permission to talk?

That became the HigherEd Collective.

No selling in this room.

Without cameras, the conversation became more candid. The room became intimate and confidential. People could talk about what was working, what was not, and what they were struggling to solve without wondering where the clip might appear afterwards.

The First Room Had Four People

We reached out to around 10 to 15 people through our network.

Four came.

Maureen from Zayed University. Moe from Ajman University. Kate from the University of Birmingham Dubai. Camille from Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi.

And, looking back, I understand the hesitation.

A marketing agency invites a group of university leaders to “discuss industry challenges”. The obvious question is: what are they really trying to sell me?

We had no track record yet to prove otherwise.

For that first session, we had even set up cameras. The inspiration came partly from the long-form podcast format: experienced people from one industry sitting together and talking shop.

Our four attendees told us almost immediately that they did not want to be recorded.

So the cameras came out.

That decision changed the Collective.

Without cameras, the conversation became more candid. The room became intimate and confidential. People could talk about what was working, what was not, and what they were struggling to solve without wondering where the clip might appear afterwards.

We made another decision too.

No selling in this room.

We have kept that promise ever since.

Second edition. The room started filling itself.



We Stopped Deciding What the Conversation Should Be

By the second session, we had learnt something else.

If this was genuinely going to belong to the sector, we could not decide what the sector needed to talk about.

So before each gathering, we started asking.

A short questionnaire went out to attendees: What is actually keeping you up at night?

We took the challenges appearing most often across the group and built the discussion around them.

Not what we thought people needed.

What they told us they needed.

We experimented with the setting too. A mixology studio. A desert oasis. A Michelin-star restaurant.

The venues were deliberately different, not simply for spectacle, but because the environment changes the conversation. Take people out of the boardroom and something shifts. Titles become a little less important. People stay longer. The conversation becomes less rehearsed.

And gradually, the room started filling itself.

Not what we thought people needed. What they told us they needed.



Four Became 35

Over the next year and a half, we ran five sessions.

Four attendees became 35, representing more than 22 universities.

What mattered to me was that many of them were not Ubrik clients.

They came because somebody who had already been in the room told them it was worth their evening.

That was perhaps the clearest sign that the idea was working.

The HigherEd Collective was becoming less about who had convened the room and more about who was inside it.

Along the way, something else grew out of those conversations: UniMarketer, the magazine you are reading now.

The room gave us one way to create a conversation within the industry. The magazine gave that conversation somewhere to travel.

What the Room Taught Us

After five sessions, I think I understand better why people keep coming back.

It is not because higher education lacks events.

It is because there are relatively few places where the people responsible for enrolment can admit that they do not have every answer.

The most useful conversations often begin there.

Is anyone else seeing this?

How are you handling it?

Did that work?

What would you do differently?

The people who seem to get the most from the Collective are curious about what is changing beyond their own institution. They are willing to share what they know, question what they have always done and learn from people who might ordinarily sit on the other side of the competitive line.

To me, that is what being progressive in this industry actually means.

It is not a label.

It is a willingness to keep learning.









Five sessions in a year and a half: a mixology studio, a desert oasis, a Michelin-star restaurant.





The Room Is Getting Bigger

On 28 October, the HigherEd Collective becomes something larger.

The first HigherEd Collective Summit will bring the conversation to a bigger room, while keeping the principle behind the original four-person gathering intact.

The agenda reflects the questions institutions are dealing with now: changing international student recruitment patterns; the platforms reshaping the student journey; visa restrictions, political instability and global conflict; what those pressures mean specifically for the UAE's recruitment pipeline; and how the regulatory environment is evolving alongside the sector.

The scale is different.

The principle is not.

No pitch. No sales call the following morning. Just people who work in this industry sharing what they know, asking better questions and leaving with something useful.

When four people walked into that first room, we did not know whether there would be a second session.

There were no cameras by the end of the evening. There was no polished format. There was certainly no Summit.

There was simply a conversation that people wanted to continue.

Perhaps that was the thing the sector was missing all along.





HECS
HIGHERED COLLECTIVE
SUMMIT — 2026

The UAE's First Higher-Education Marketing & Admissions Summit

28 October
Dubai Knowledge Park
Conference Centre

Scan the QR code to request an invite

A COLLECTIVE EFFORT

The HigherEd Collective has always been a team effort. Sheyaf, Ubrik's COO, has shaped the experience behind each gathering, pushing us to create settings that feel considered rather than conventional. Imran has done much of the work that happens before anyone enters the room: speaking to people one-to-one, explaining what the Collective is and, especially in the early days, earning the trust required to get them there. Every session carries a piece of their work in it, and the Collective would not have grown from four people into the community it is today without them.

ENROLMENT TAKEAWAYS

What Moves the Number

FIVE THINGS FROM THIS EDITION

/01

FORECAST WHAT YOU KNOW

A September number built on assumptions is fragile. Measure the rates, segment the pipeline and keep reconciling.

/02

GIVE PEOPLE THEIR TIME BACK

The best use of AI may not be replacing human interaction. It may be removing the work that keeps people away from it.

/03

MAKE THE BRAND BELIEVABLE

Culture is not something marketing creates. The strongest brands articulate what people already experience.

/04

BE RECOGNISABLE, NOT JUST BETTER

When institutions make similar claims, distinction matters. Give people something clear to remember you for.

/05

BUILD ACCESS, NOT JUST AWARENESS

New markets require their own platforms, behaviours, content and routes to trust. Presence has to be built for the market.

Before the Next Intake

FIVE QUESTIONS WORTH TAKING BACK TO YOUR TEAM

FORECAST	*Which number in our enrolment forecast are we treating as fact when it is actually an assumption?*
PEOPLE	*Where are our best people spending time on work that does not require their judgement?*
BRAND	*If we removed our logo, what would still make us recognisably us?*
MARKET	*Where are we trying to reach students without really being present in the way they search, ask and decide?*
TEAM	*What does everyone around the enrolment table know that nobody else is hearing?*

WHAT'S NEXT

Edition 01 asked us to look beyond the campaign.

Edition 02 looked underneath it.

Edition 03 will follow the decision.

What happens between first interest and final commitment? Where does confidence build? Where does it disappear? And which moments actually change a student's mind?

That is where we go next.

AN INVITATION

If you are seeing something in the enrolment journey that others are missing, we want to hear it.

CLOSING THOUGHT

You do not need to fix the entire enrolment engine at once. Find the part that is costing you the next student.
Start there.

Higher education marketing in the UAE deserves its own conversation.

UniMarketer

is that conversation.

Published by

ubrik

www.ubrik.com

Ubrik Media
Office 113, DMC #10,
Dubai, UAE