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UNI MARKETER

HIGHER-ED MARKETING MAGAZINE



Moe Kamal Jr. On

Growth Isn't a Campaign

Why clarity, alignment, and confidence are becoming the real enrolment strategy

Brand as a Growth Lever

The shift from institutional prestige to student-centred positioning

— Before They Bounce

— Read The Room

— What Makes Students Decide?

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FOREWORD

Why UniMarketer, *Why Now?*

Higher education is not short on demand. It is short on clarity.

Across markets, enrolment is growing, but decisions are becoming harder. Students are exploring more options. Families are asking sharper questions about value and outcomes. Institutions are investing more into visibility than ever before.

Yet somewhere between the first inquiry and the final application, progress slows down. Not because the market is confused. But because it is being underserved.

This is also a moment shaped by uncertainty. Decisions today are made with more caution, more comparison, and higher expectations. In this environment, the role of institutions is not just to inform, but to provide confidence.

This issue of UniMarketer exists for that reason.

To make growth clearer.

Not as a campaign challenge. But as a system. Across the pages that follow, a consistent pattern emerges.

Growth challenges rarely begin in one place. They appear as misalignment between teams, messaging that explains but does not guide decisions, and journeys that create friction where confidence is needed most.

Students are not lacking information. They are lacking certainty. And institutions are not short on activity. They are often short on alignment.

This is not a report. It is a working document for teams responsible for turning interest into decisions.

A FINAL THOUGHT

Students don’t convert when they are convinced. They convert when they feel certain.

And in uncertain times, helping them reach that certainty is the work that matters most.

Team Ubrik Media

● LEADERSHIP LENS

What Universities Get *Wrong About Growth*

Words By

Moe Kamal, Jr.
Executive Director of Strategic Communications,
Marketing & Student Recruitment
Ajman University

Most universities treat growth as a marketing challenge. I do not.

Having led enrolment growth across Canada, the United States, the Caribbean, and the Middle East, I have seen the same pattern repeat itself: when universities pursue their next phase of growth, many look first to channels, budgets, and visibility. In my experience, that is usually the wrong starting point.

Enrolment growth is rarely a marketing issue in isolation. It is an institutional leadership issue first. It reflects how clearly a university understands its value, how well its teams are aligned, how quickly decisions are made, and how confidently strategy is translated into action.

That is the part many institutions are reluctant to admit.





Markets differ. Student expectations certainly do. Competitive landscapes shift from region to region. But the fundamentals do not. Universities that grow sustainably tend to be the ones that are internally coherent. They know what they stand for, they are clear about the promise they are making to students, and they organise themselves to deliver that promise consistently.

Growth pressure, in other words, rarely exposes a marketing gap alone. More often, it exposes an alignment gap.

One of the defining challenges universities face is not a lack of ambition, but a lack of integration. Competition has intensified. Families are more selective. Students are asking harder questions about value, return on investment, relevance, and outcomes. Yet many institutions still operate through strong but disconnected functions. Marketing is active. Admissions is working hard. Academics are focused on programme delivery. Senior leadership wants growth. But activity is not the same as integration.

And integration is where growth lives.

That is why I do not view enrolment as a campaign exercise. I view it as an operating model imperative. In higher education, enrolment influences far more than admissions targets. It affects institutional confidence, academic planning, resource allocation, staffing, and momentum. When growth is strong, the whole university feels it.

> *The more important executive question, then, is not, "How do we market more?" It is, "What promise are we making to students, and are we structured to deliver it credibly?"*

That distinction changes the work.



ABOUT MOE KAMAL JR.
Mr Moe Kamal Jr is the Executive Director of Strategic Communications, Marketing, and Recruitment at Ajman University. He is an award-winning marketing strategist with 15+ years in student recruitment, growth marketing, and EdTech, leading enrolment strategies across Canada, the US, the Caribbean and MENA.

It shifts the conversation from tactics to orchestration. It requires leaders to think less about isolated outputs and more about institutional coherence across the full student journey, from brand perception to inquiry handling to counseling, conversion, and student experience.

That thinking helped shape ***Be Career Ready***, the campaign I led at Ajman University that went on to win Campaign of the Year in Education in the UAE. But the campaign's real strength was not creative alone. Its strength came from a credible institutional promise into a simple, compelling idea.

Career readiness was not treated as a slogan layered onto the university. It was positioned as a strategic expression of what students and families increasingly value most: confidence that education will lead somewhere meaningful. That sharper proposition helped move the institution away from generic higher education language and toward something more relevant, differentiated, and strategically effective.

At Ajman University, that clarity helped support record enrolment growth and reinforce the institution's momentum in an increasingly competitive UAE market. More importantly, it created stronger alignment between what student values and what the university was prepared to deliver.

That is the point too many institutions miss. The strongest campaigns do not invent value. They clarify it.

The executive mistake many institutions make is assuming that broader messaging will create broader appeal. In reality, messages that are too polished, too generalized, or too institutionally safe often underperform where it matters most. They may generate attention, but not conviction.

That is why I hold a firm view on positioning: **The safest message is usually the weakest one.**



The Safest Message is usually the Weakest One

Institutions often dilute their position in the name of consensus. They smooth the edges. They replace strategic sharpness with internal comfort. They choose language that feels easy to approve rather than language strong enough to compete.

But students do not choose universities because the message is harmless. They choose because the proposition feels clear, credible, and relevant to their future.

That is why sustainable growth requires institutional courage. The courage to define a sharper position. The courage to say something distinct. And the courage to align teams around a stronger promise, not a safer one.

It also requires operating discipline.

At Ajman University, that work was strengthened by a clearly defined institutional vision, one that helped create stronger alignment, sharper priorities, and a more confident expression of the university's value in a competitive market.

Throughout my career, whether leading large portfolios across regions or building integrated growth systems inside institutions, I have seen the same principle hold true: growth becomes durable when brand, recruitment, academic relevance, student experience, and leadership accountability operate as one coherent system.

I have never believed brand and recruitment are separate conversations. Reputation shapes conversion. Conversion experience shapes reputation. Universities that separate those two usually pay for it somewhere in the funnel.

The same is true of cadence. Growth is not built through short bursts of campaign energy alone. It is built through institutional rhythm: review, learn, adjust, repeat. That kind of cadence creates better decisions, faster responses, stronger handoffs, and clearer accountability.

Growth is not built in bursts. It is built in discipline.

The most important indicator of progress is not always the first headline metric. It is often internal maturity. When admissions teams become more confident, academic units become more engaged in differentiation, and leadership conversations shift from fragmented tactics to system-wide performance, the institution is usually moving in the right direction.

That is the real signal.

Looking ahead, I believe the universities that will outperform will not necessarily be the ones with the biggest budgets or the loudest campaigns. They will be the ones with the clearest proposition, the strongest internal alignment, and the discipline to execute consistently across the full student journey.

That is why I challenge the idea that enrolment growth is a marketing function.

It is not. It is a leadership agenda.

Marketing matters, of course. But marketing can only amplify what leadership has made true.

A campaign cannot fix institutional ambiguity.

And after years of leading across markets, institutions, and growth environments, this is the conclusion I trust most:

> *Enrolment growth is the byproduct of institutional clarity, operating discipline, and leadership alignment.*

That is why I no longer ask whether the campaign is strong enough.

I ask whether the institution is.

Before They *Bounce*



What students and parents are signalling during the enrolment journey, and why most institutions are reading it wrong



Chandana J S
Content & Messaging Expert at Ubrik

Somewhere between the first inquiry and the unopened application portal, a prospective student quietly stops moving forward. It happens gradually, through a question that went unanswered, a follow-up that arrived three days late, or a programme page that listed fourteen modules where the student was looking for one clear reason to apply. The market is not confused. It is being underserved.

The Decision Journey Breaks in Predictable Places

The most frequently cited concern across all 3,112 student records was financial. Finding an affordable university and searching for scholarships accounted for 1,250 mentions, the single largest cluster in the dataset. Close behind it is confusion over admission requirements, including grades, tests, and equivalency (980 mentions), and anxiety while waiting for admission decisions (855 mentions). Together, these three concerns account for nearly a third of everything students discussed. The common thread is a persistent feeling of being left without enough clarity at the moments that carry the most weight.

Two further pain points in the data speak directly to the conversion challenge. Difficulty choosing between universities or majors generated 720 mentions, and concerns about post-graduation job prospects and institutional reputation generated 690. These are signals of high intent without sufficient information to act on. Students at this stage are not walking away because they are uninterested. They are pausing because no one has given them a clear enough reason to move forward.

Top Student Pain Points

Mention counts across 3,112 student Reddit posts, and comments analysed (The Reddit Files: UAE Student and Parent Pain Points)



The Reddit Files:

This report by Ubrik analysed 3112 student Reddit posts and comments and 438 parent Reddit posts drawn from the UAE higher education communities, mapping the exact topics where anxiety concentrates and decisions stall. What the data reveals is a communication gap that institutions are well-positioned to close, but rarely do.

3,112

student posts and comments analysed across the UAE higher education dataset

438

parent posts and comments analysed, revealing a separate and distinct set of concerns

1,250

mentions of scholarship and affordability concerns, the single most cited student pain point



FOR ENROLMENT TEAMS:
Parents and students surface different concerns at different stages. A parent's primary question is whether the investment is justified and the outcome is predictable. Treating parent inquiries the same as student inquiries compresses two distinct conversations into one and addresses neither well.

What Parents Need to Feel Confident

The parent Reddit dataset, drawn from 438 records, tells a story that sits alongside the student data but does not mirror it. Where students express stress and confusion about the process, parents concentrate their anxiety on return on investment. The cost of university tuition fees was the most cited parent concern at 95 mentions, followed by the challenge of identifying the right university for a specific major (78 mentions), and anxiety about comparing UAE options against international alternatives in the UK, US, and Canada (65 mentions). Anxiety over ROI and future job prospects for graduates added another 45 mentions. These are parents who are financially committed but intellectually unsatisfied with the information available to them.

What the parent data makes clear is that financial confidence is not just a nice-to-have in the enrolment journey, it is a prerequisite for parental support. Lack of clear information on scholarships and financial aid appeared in 38 parent records, and difficulty with long-term financial planning for education in a further 29. Institutions that surface fee and scholarship information early, transparently, and without making families search for it, remove two of the most consistent barriers between a motivated student and a submitted application.



What Students Keep Asking For, and Rarely Receive

The data surfaces a persistent gap between what students are looking for and what most programme pages and admissions teams actually provide. With 690 mentions, concerns about post-graduation job prospects and university reputation ranked fifth among all student pain points, sitting just below the anxiety students feel about choosing between universities in the first place. Students are not simply evaluating a course structure. They are evaluating whether the institution can be trusted to deliver on the implied promise of a degree. Outcome evidence, graduate employment data, and named employer relationships are what build that trust. Module lists and accreditation credentials, presented without context, do not.

The third request was for honest guidance on fit. Students wanted someone in admissions to tell them directly whether they were a good match for the programme they were enquiring about, and if not, which programme would suit them better. The willingness to have that conversation, even when it redirects a student elsewhere, is among the most powerful trust signals an institution can send. It reduces post-enrolment attrition in ways that no amount of pre-enrolment marketing can replicate.

The Language of Doubt and the Language of Intent

Language is data. How a student phrases an inquiry reveals where they are in the decision process, but this signal-reading rarely makes its way into CRM qualification frameworks or team training.

The report identifies two distinct registers that appear consistently at different stages of the journey, each requiring a different kind of response.

SIGNALS OF DOUBT — DECELERATION

"I'm still figuring out what I want to do."

"I'm just exploring my options right now."

"I need to speak with my parents first."

"I'm not sure if this is the right fit for me."

"Can you just send me the brochure?"

"I'll look into it and come back to you."

SIGNALS OF INTENT — ACCELERATION

"What are the exact intake dates?"

"Is there anything I can do to strengthen my application?"

"How quickly is a decision made after applying?"

"Are scholarships still available for this intake?"

"Can I speak with someone from the faculty?"

"What is the next step after submitting the form?"

The pattern the report identifies is not that institutions fail to recognise these signals. It is that they respond to both in the same way. Deceleration language needs a slower, more exploratory response like a peer connection, a low-commitment campus visit, or space to build confidence at their own pace.

Acceleration language needs speed and a clear next step. The student has already done the reflective work. Responding to doubt with urgency rarely resolves it. Responding to intent with delay squanders it.

"Student discussions are overwhelmingly dominated by stress and confusion. This stems from navigating complex admission processes, uncertainty about meeting requirements, and anxiety about choosing the right university and career path.

The Reddit Files: UAE Student and Parent Pain Points report, 2025

What Institutions Can Do Differently

The pain point data is not a verdict on higher education marketing, but rather a map. Each of the top concerns points directly to a communication decision that institutions can make differently.

1. Scholarship and affordability confusion (1,250 mentions) calls for financial information that is proactive, specific, and easy to find, not reactive, buried, and conditional.

2. Admission requirement confusion (980 mentions) calls for clearer, more human-language guidance at the inquiry stage, rather than giving longer PDF guides.

3. Anxiety about decisions (855 mentions) calls for faster, more transparent communication once an application is submitted.

Lead programme pages with outcome evidence.

Concerns about post-graduation prospects ranked fifth among all student pain points. A programme page that answers this question upfront, with real graduate data, addresses the concern before it becomes a barrier.

Train admissions teams to read the language of intent.

A student asking about intake dates and scholarship availability is signalling readiness. A student asking for a brochure is signalling hesitation. These require different responses, and the difference between getting it right and wrong is often the difference between conversion and silence.

Treat scholarship information as a front-door conversation.

With 1,250 student mentions and 38 parent mentions, affordability and scholarship access are the most persistent concerns in the dataset. Institutions that surface this clearly at first contact remove the most common source of drop-off.

Build a separate communication track for parents.

The parent dataset shows a concentrated anxiety around ROI, tuition cost, and university selection. These concerns do not resolve through the same messaging that works for students. A dedicated parent track, even a simple one, addresses this directly.



The market is not difficult to read. *The Reddit Files: UAE Student and Parent Pain Points report* gives institutions something concrete, starting with 3,112 student voices and 438 parent voices, captured on Reddit and organised by what concerns them most and at what frequency. The pain points are specific, the patterns are consistent, and the communication gaps they point to are fixable. Affordability confusion, admission process anxiety, outcome uncertainty, and the feeling of being stuck between options; each of these is a place where a well-timed, well-informed response from an admissions team changes the outcome. What remains is the willingness to close the gap.



Brand As A Growth Lever

Awareness doesn’t guarantee enrolment. What actually changed conversion for a new campus in Dubai?

Kate Westwood
Head of Marketing and Communications,
University of Birmingham - Dubai

One of the most common misconceptions when it comes to branding within the higher education sector is that if we improve our brand awareness, enrolment growth will follow. Brand awareness certainly plays a part in enrolment growth but it isn’t the only factor. You can be well known, but without a compelling product and strong admissions processes, you may attract attention yet fail to convert prospects into paying students.

The gap exists for a number of reasons. In some institutes, marketing and admissions are working in silos and therefore aren’t as effective in the recruitment journey. Leadership expects immediate results from brand activity without understanding that brand marketing compounds over time. Higher education institutions also tend to reflect how they see themselves rather than what the prospect needs to see, so they focus on messaging such as rank and heritage rather than outcomes such as graduate employment. There is much interesting and useful debate around rankings. They can offer a broad indication of institutional reputation, but their influence on a student’s decision to study varies widely and often depends on individual priorities but that’s a debate for another day!

Our branding challenge in the early days of us setting up a campus in Dubai was around awareness – the key question being does our potential audience know we exist? The answer to that was mostly no.

We were confident as a wider institute that we had residual brand awareness in certain markets driven by our Edgbaston, UK campus but setting up a new campus in Dubai was a different challenge. Brands don't always cross borders and you can't rely on brand heritage and expect that to resonate in a different market immediately.

The strategic decisions made to try and bridge that brand awareness gap were untested and unknown within this region. We didn't yet have that playbook written, it had to be developed.

Firstly, we had a strong sense of who we were and what we offered, but we needed to communicate that clearly to our audiences. This meant asking ourselves some difficult questions about who our audience truly was and where we could reach them. Those early days brought some tough, but valuable, lessons. It quickly became apparent that prospective students often struggled to understand the value of studying at a British institution in the UAE rather than going abroad. We also learned that relying on brand recognition from one country and assuming it would translate seamlessly to another was a wake-up call.

> *The turning point came when we shifted our focus to building a narrative rooted in the local context.*

Our first step was to move away from generic prestige-based messaging: ranking, heritage, and tradition. While our strong institutional ranking mattered to our audience, it wasn't enough on its own; we needed tangible proof points that demonstrated the quality of our education. That meant letting our students speak for us. We prioritised student-led content that addressed what mattered most to our prospective audience: employability after graduation, authentic student testimonials, and the overall student experience.

The narrative evolved from "We are a respected British university" to "We are a British university that understands and prepares you for your future." The brand became less about legacy and more about outcomes. By reframing the story around relevance, opportunity, and belonging, we built trust with prospects who wanted both global credibility and local applicability.





The narrative evolved from "We are a respected British university" to "We are a British university that understands and prepares you for your future."

ABOUT KATE WESTWOOD

Ms Kate Westwood is the Head of Marketing and Communications at the University of Birmingham Dubai. A strategic marketer with 15+ years of experience across higher education and B2B sectors, she specialises in brand positioning, student recruitment, and growth marketing.





The way we brought this narrative to life varied across channels. Our content deliberately centred on our students, from using a student's voice in our radio campaign to documenting a student's journey from their first day at university through to graduation, complete with the obligatory cap-throwing moment. On social media, our student content creators produced "day in the life" videos, explored Dubai, shared "Dubai on a budget" tips, and captured testimonials and student-led events. Through digital campaigns, we highlighted internships and alumni success stories, and even featured our careers team explaining how we support students in transitioning into employment after their studies. We also developed agent training materials that showcased market-specific student success stories, and ensured students were present on our exhibition stands to bring the experience to life first hand.

Results didn't appear overnight, but over the following year we began to see real momentum. The volume of prospects moving through the pipeline, from enquiry to application, increased noticeably, with applications doubling and continuing on a strong upward trajectory. More importantly, our conversion rates improved significantly, confirming that we were reaching the right applicants and that our strategies were resonating. Since then, we've continued to refine and adjust our approach, consistently optimising our messaging and tactics to further strengthen conversion throughout the funnel.

Looking ahead to the future, the belief is that the competition will remain fierce amongst HE in the UAE with institutes competing on price and quality and this is only set to grow as Dubai attracts further institutes to the city.

> *What will make institutes stand out is clear positioning and targeting. This is what I like to call 'owning your space'. Be clear about who you are in the environment you operate in. There is opportunity to stand out and be unique.*

MARKET INTELLIGENCE

Read *the* Room

What HubSpot's 2026 Data Is Telling Marketers

Curated By



Gousiya Tabassum
Senior Copywriter, Ubrik

HubSpot surveyed 1,505 marketers across North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia in September 2025. Following are the five findings most relevant to the higher-ed marketers in the UAE, and what they actually mean for how you work this year.

/01 Channel presence is not the strategy. Brand consistency across channels is.

> *75% of marketers use five or more channels. 52% use between five and eight. 17% operate across more than eight.*

KEY FINDINGS

Omnichannel marketing amplifies content

75%

of marketers use 5+ distinct marketing channels.

Brand drives demand

85%

of marketers revisit their brand identity quarterly or annually.

Personalisation gets audiences to act

93%

of marketers report that personalisation improves leads or purchases.

Optimisation is a growth engine

59%

of marketers review performance on a daily or weekly basis.

AI is a core part of marketing workflows

80%

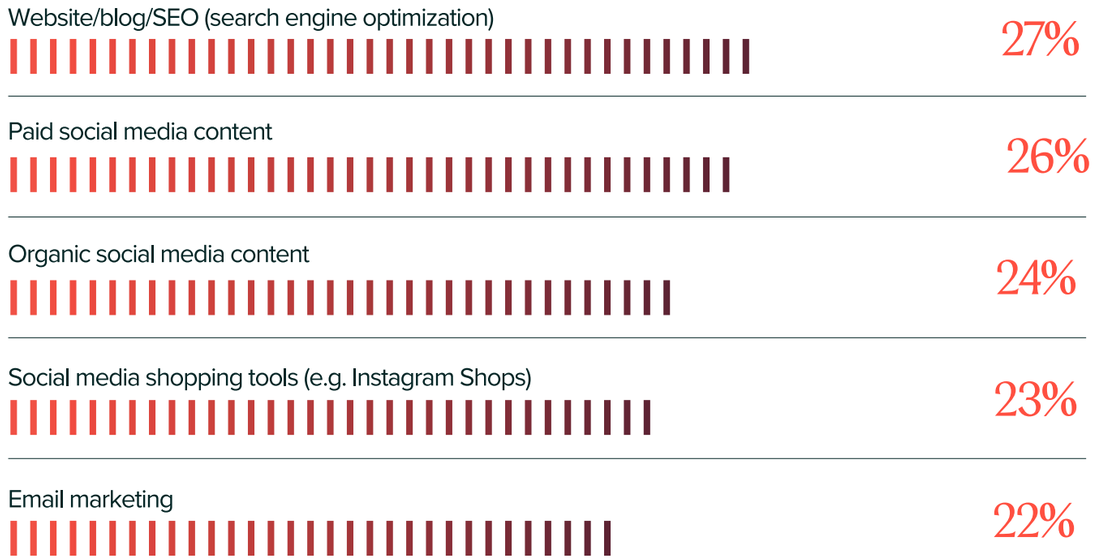
of marketers use AI for content creation, and 75% use it for media production.

As search changes, so does content strategy

41%

of marketers say the top trend they're exploring is updating SEO strategy for changes in search.

TOP MARKETING CHANNELS BY ROI



Source: HubSpot 2026 State of Marketing Report

The more relevant question is not which channels perform best, but why they perform. When HubSpot ranked channels by ROI, the top five were Website/SEO (27%), Paid social (26%), Organic social (24%), Social shopping (23%), and Email (22%). When they ranked the same channels by personalisation effectiveness, the order was nearly identical. The report's conclusion is direct: the more personalisation a channel supports, the more effective it will be.

For UAE universities, the question is not whether to be on five channels. It is whether the same student encountering your institution on Instagram, Google, and at an open day experiences a coherent story, or three different ones. Inconsistency at the decision stage creates doubt. In higher education, doubt rarely resolves in your favour.

ACT ON IT:
HubSpot's own framework for this is clear. Repurpose content strategically across five to eight active channels to maximise brand consistency, not just brand presence. Map your top three programmes across every channel a prospective student touches. Find where the message changes. That gap is where leads stop moving.

/02

Brand POV is now a competitive advantage. 40% of teams still haven't defined theirs.

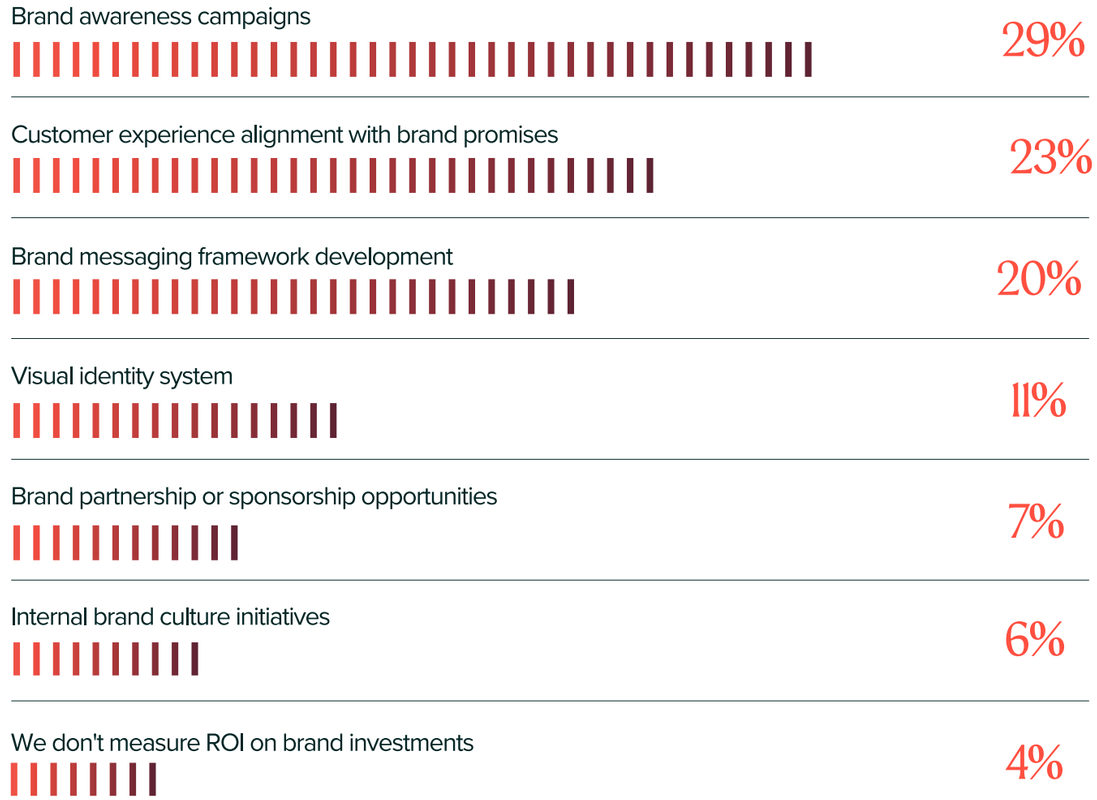
YEAR-OVER-YEAR LEAD PERFORMANCE ON MARKETING TEAMS





85% of marketers revisit their brand identity quarterly or annually. 61% agree that brand POV and tone are essential for effective work in an AI-driven environment. Yet 40% of teams have not clearly defined or documented their unique value proposition.

THE BRANDING INVESTMENTS THAT DELIVER THE HIGHEST ROI



Source: HubSpot 2026 State of Marketing Report

The gap is clear, and it matters. Teams are revisiting the brand regularly, but almost half have never established the foundation that makes revision meaningful. Meanwhile, the data on what actually delivers brand ROI is specific: brand awareness campaigns (29%), aligning customer experience with brand promises (23%), and brand messaging framework development (20%). Visual identity, by contrast, ranks fourth at 11%.

This is a direct challenge to how most universities approach brand. The investment goes into visual systems: logos, colour palettes, campaign aesthetics. The return is in messaging clarity and experience alignment. A prospective student in the UAE does not choose an institution because of its visual identity. They chose it because the institution's messaging answered their specific question convincingly at the moment they were deciding.

Year-on-year, 93% of marketing teams reported higher-quality leads and 74% saw more leads. The teams driving those results share one thing: a documented point of view that makes their content distinct from everything else in the market.

ACT ON IT:
Define your institution's brand POV in one sentence. The belief that makes your approach to education different from every competitor's. Not a vision statement. Not a positioning line. A belief. If your team cannot agree on it, the brand work comes before any campaign.



/03 93% say personalisation works. The data reveals why most teams aren't doing it.

> *93% of marketers report personalisation improves leads or purchases. Only 14% actually personalise at least half of their content.*

LESS THAN HALF OF MARKETERS HAVE ACCESS TO KEY PERSONAL DATAPOINTS

44%
of marketers know their customers' shopping habits

39%
of marketers have access to basic demographic information like name, gender, and location

31%
of marketers have access to customer purchase history with their company

27%
of marketers know what products customers are interested in buying

17%
of marketers know their customers' experience preferences and expectations

16%
of marketers know their customers' pain points and challenges

The reason for that gap becomes clear when you look at what marketing teams actually know about their audiences. 44% know their customers' shopping habits. 39% have basic demographic information. 31% have a purchase history. 27% know what customers want to buy next. Only 17% know their customers' experience preferences, and just 16% know their pain points and challenges.

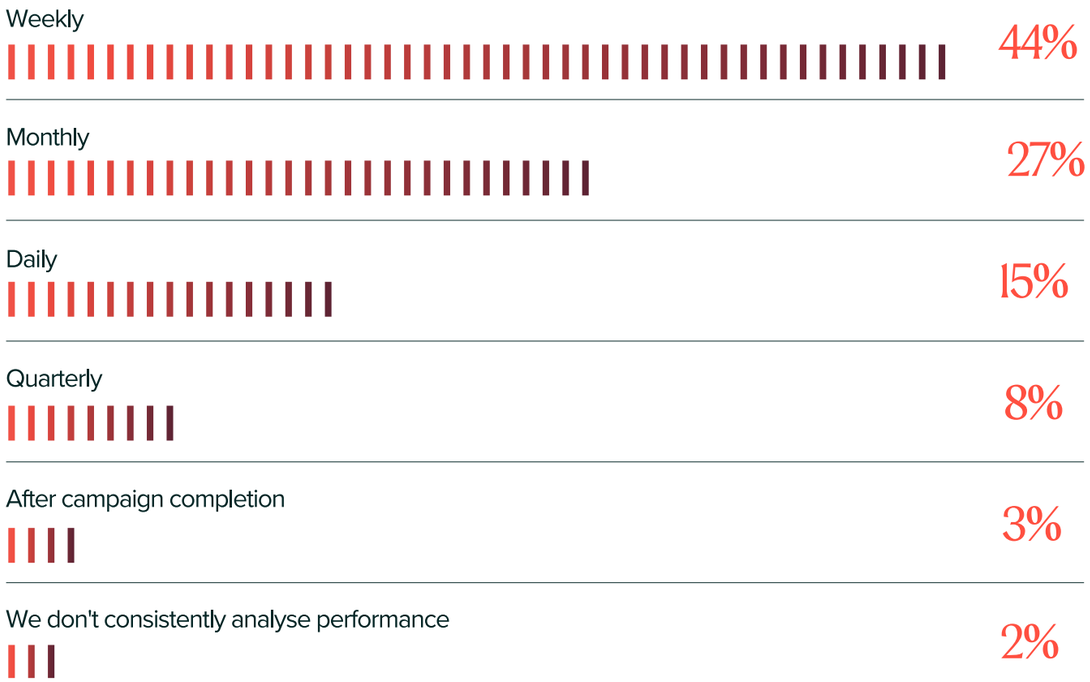
This is the number that should concern every higher education marketing team. If only 16% of marketers globally know their audience's pain points, the follow-up sequences most universities send after the first inquiry are almost certainly built around what the institution wants to say, not what the student needs to hear. Personalisation is not a technology problem. It is a data problem, and specifically a problem of which data teams choose to collect and act on.

ACT ON IT:
Pull the last 50 inquiry responses for your most important programme. Identify the hesitations, the specific questions, the moments of doubt. Build one follow-up track that speaks to those directly. The data you need already exists in your CRM, it is not being used.

/04 The teams outperforming aren't just reviewing data. They're acting on it within hours.

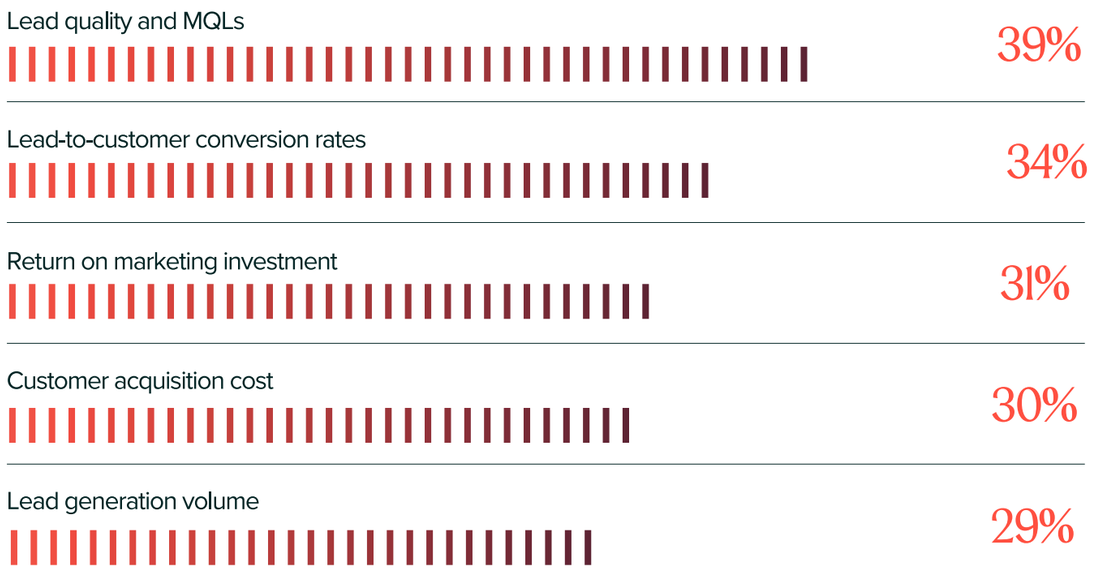
44% of marketing teams analyse campaign data weekly. 15% do so daily. Combined: 59% reviewing at least weekly. And 73% implement changes to active campaigns within days or hours.

HOW FREQUENTLY MARKETING TEAMS ANALYSE CAMPAIGN PERFORMANCE DATA



Source: HubSpot 2026 State of Marketing Report

THE KPIs THAT MATTER TO MARKETERS



Source: HubSpot 2026 State of Marketing Report

Most teams already review data regularly. The difference is in how quickly they act on it. Weekly review is a habit many have built. Acting on what they see, adjusting spend, rewriting follow-ups, changing targeting, while the enrolment cycle is still live, is far less common. The report is explicit: agility is now a necessity, not an advantage.

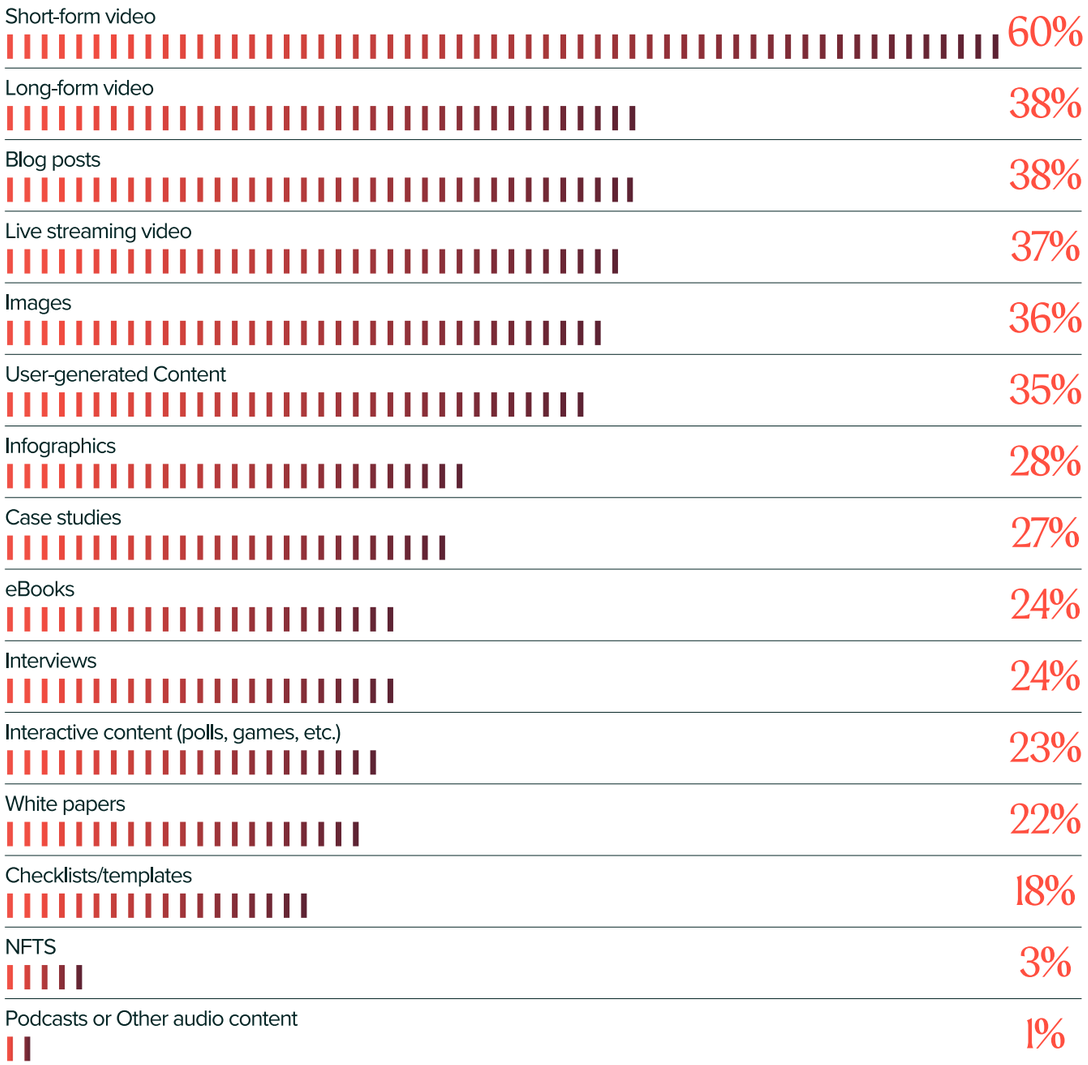
The KPI picture reinforces this. The metrics the highest-performing teams track are: lead quality and MQLs (39%), lead-to-customer conversion rates (34%), return on marketing investment (31%), customer acquisition cost (30%), and lead generation volume (29%). Volume is last. What is first, lead quality and conversion, is what connects marketing activity to actual enrolment outcomes.

ACT ON IT:
Define three metrics your team will review every week during active enrolment cycles, agreed before the cycle opens. Make one of them lead-to-enrolment conversion rate, not cost per lead. Then build the habit of acting on what you see, not archiving it for the end-of-semester review.

/05 AI is making content cheaper to produce & harder to make worth reading.

> *80% of marketers use AI for content creation. 75% use it for media production. 52% believe AI makes content less effective overall. 53% struggle to differentiate their content in an AI-saturated market.*

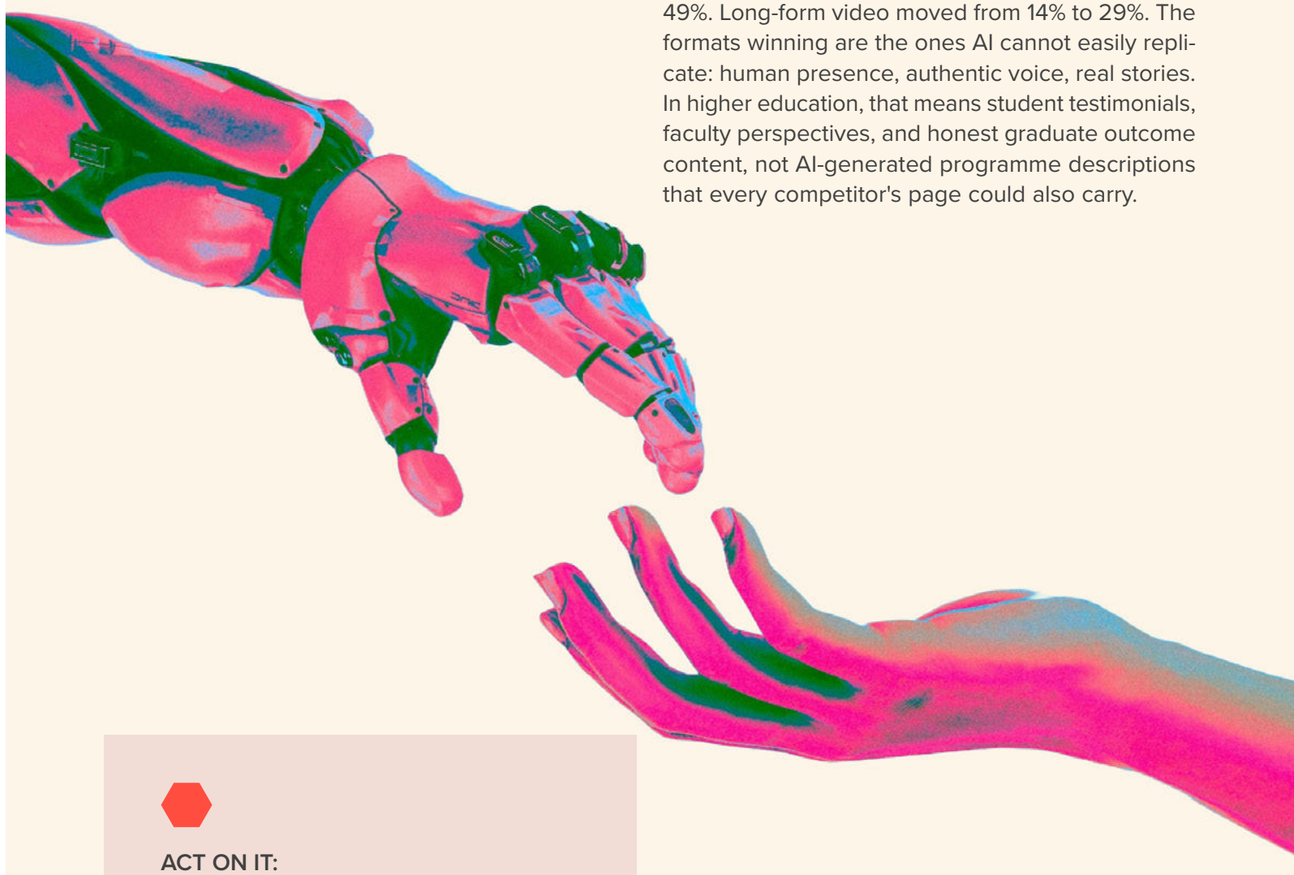
MEDIA FORMATS COMPANIES USE IN THEIR CONTENT STRATEGY



Source: HubSpot 2026 State of Marketing Report

The pattern is clear: content has become easier to create, and harder to differentiate. AI adoption is near-universal, and the consequence of that universality is a market flooded with content that reads the same, sounds the same, and converts at lower rates. The top content challenge marketers face in 2026 is not production; it is creating content that receives genuine engagement (35%), followed by finding ideas worth pursuing (28%).

The format shift is also significant. Short-form video's ROI rating doubled year-on-year, from 24% to 49%. Long-form video moved from 14% to 29%. The formats winning are the ones AI cannot easily replicate: human presence, authentic voice, real stories. In higher education, that means student testimonials, faculty perspectives, and honest graduate outcome content, not AI-generated programme descriptions that every competitor's page could also carry.



ACT ON IT:
Audit your three highest-priority programme pages. Remove every sentence that AI could have written about any university's programme. What remains is your actual content. Build from there, using AI for speed on the structural work, and human judgment on anything that carries trust.

What Makes Students Decide?

What 100,000+ Fit Checks Actually Reveal



When a student lands on a programme page, they're not looking for more information. They're trying to answer a quieter question:

"Is this right for me?"

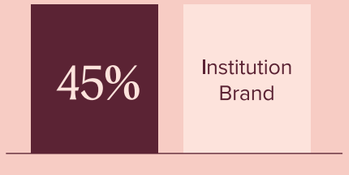
At Studentspeak, we see this play out through our fit-check tool, a short, 30-question assessment embedded on programme pages. It explores motivations, interests, and preferences, then recommends programmes that align with how a student thinks, not just what they search for.

With over 100,000 completed fit-checks, a clear pattern emerges:

Students don't struggle because they lack options.

They struggle because they lack confidence.

Course Over Brand



45% students rank course above institution brand

Students Want Relevance

65% want outreach that reflects their motivations

93% say a personalised message encourages further exploration



Volodymyr Manoilo
Co-founder, Studentspeak

Volodymyr Manoilo is the Co-founder of Studentspeak, a student decision intelligence platform that uses personality-based fit assessments to help universities improve enrolment conversion.

Top 10 Holland Code Triads

A framework from vocational psychology used to classify personality types and their fit with careers or work environments.

Quick breakdown

Holland Codes (RIASEC) represent six personality types:
R – Realistic
I – Investigative
A – Artistic
S – Social
E – Enterprising
C – Conventional

A triad is the three-letter combination that best describes someone's dominant personality profile.

Triad	Full Form
SEA	Social, Enterprising, Artistic
SAE	Social, Artistic, Enterprising
ASE	Artistic, Social, Enterprising
SEC	Social, Enterprising, Conventional
ESA	Enterprising, Social, Artistic
EAS	Enterprising, Artistic, Social
SAI	Social, Artistic, Investigative
AES	Artistic, Enterprising, Social
SCE	Social, Conventional, Enterprising
CEI	Conventional, Enterprising, Investigative

The order of the letters matters -- it reflects priority. So SEA means Social is the dominant trait, Enterprising is secondary, and Artistic is third. Same three letters as ASE, but a meaningfully different profile in terms of what drives that person.

The Dominant Profile Mix

SEA	SAE	ASE
Helping Others & Initiatives	Social Impact & Creativity	Action & Expression

14% of all profiles analysed

Fit Drives Engagement

Exploring Options

High-Fit Choices

88%

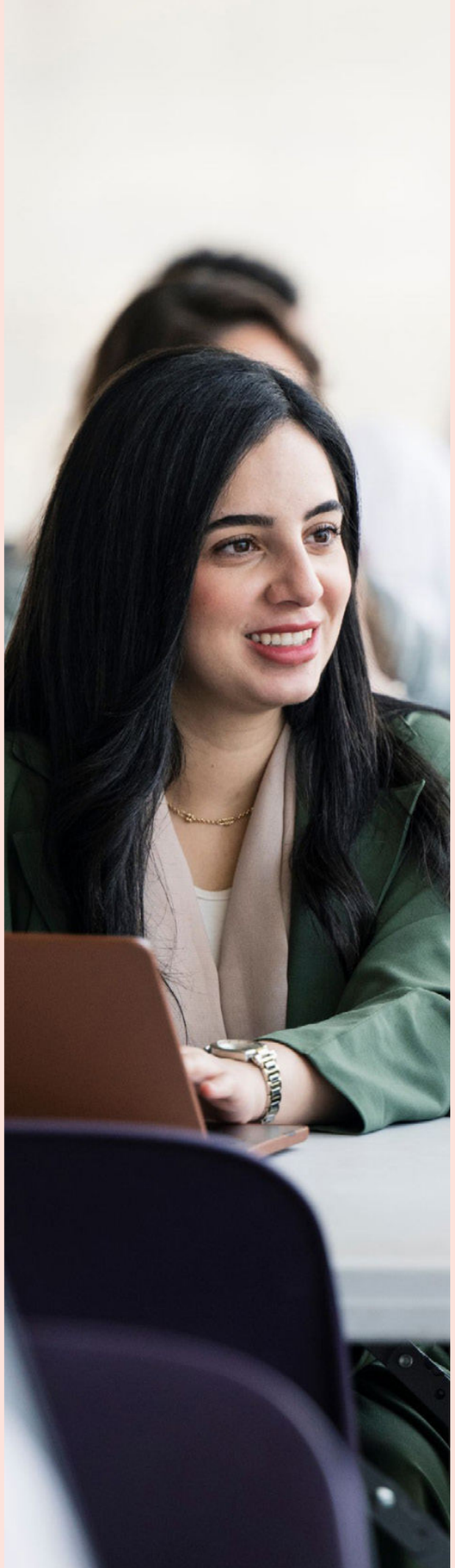
of clicks from
Very High-Fit Choices

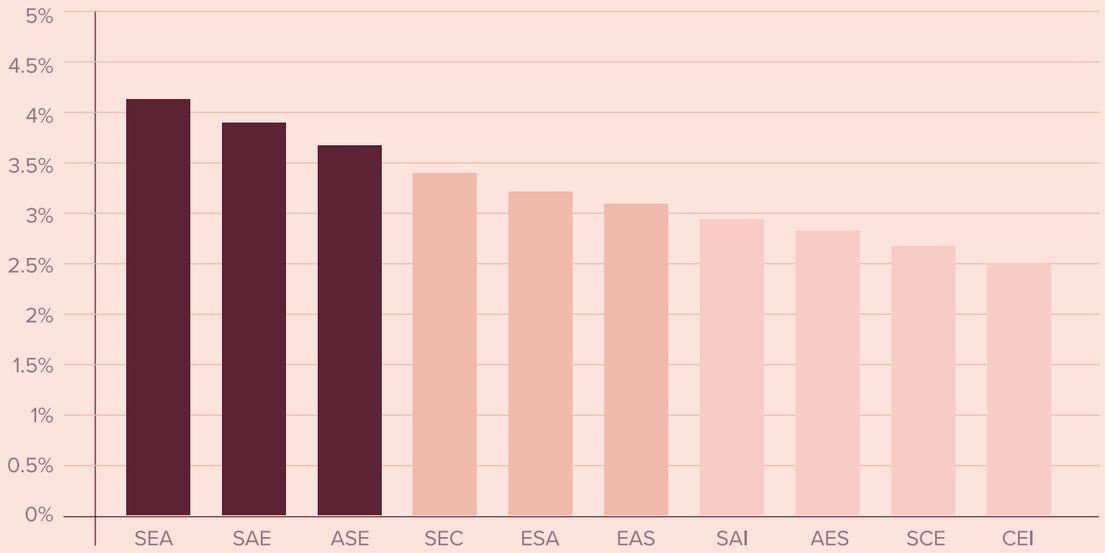
Insight 1

Students Are Not Choosing Courses. They Are Trying to Recognise Themselves

Across thousands of responses, one pattern shows up consistently.

Students are not looking for a single defining trait, like “business-focused” or “creative.” Instead, they are trying to reconcile multiple identities at once.





Top 10 Holland Code Triads account for 42% of all applicants

We repeatedly see combinations of:

- Purpose (wanting to help or contribute)
- Expression (wanting creativity or individuality)
- Direction (wanting a clear, practical outcome)

This matters because most programme pages force a narrower narrative. They present courses as linear pathways, while students are thinking in layered identities.

WHAT TO CHANGE:

Programme pages should move beyond “what you will study” and start answering:

- Who is this programme for?
- What kind of person thrives here?
- What does this path feel like?

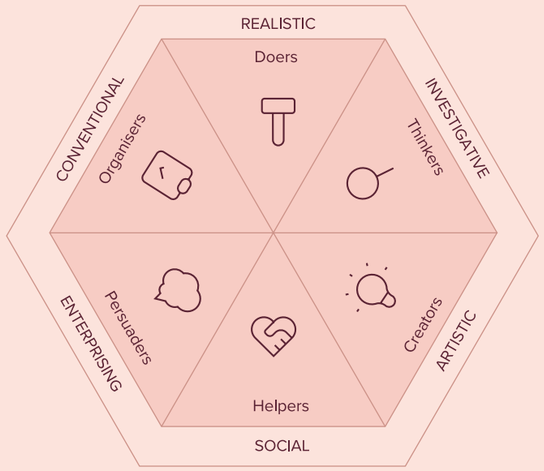
Because students don’t convert when they understand a programme. They convert when they see themselves in it.

Insight 2

Universities Are Explaining Programmes. Students Are Trying to Make Decisions

Another clear signal: students don’t lack information; they lack clarity.

In the fit-check journey, when recommendations align closely with a student’s profile, behaviour changes immediately. Engagement becomes sharper, faster, and more decisive.





In contrast, when alignment is unclear, students don't reject options, they delay decisions.That delay is where most institutions lose them.
The gap is simple:

- Universities optimize for information delivery
- Students are seeking decision support

WHAT TO CHANGE:
Instead of adding more detail to programme pages, reduce decision friction:

- Replace long descriptions with clearer positioning
- Show 2–3 distinct "paths" or outcomes within the programme
- Make it easier to compare "fit," not just features

Because the biggest drop-off doesn't happen at awareness. It happens at second-guessing.

Insight 3

Confidence Comes From Recognition, Not Persuasion

One of the strongest behavioural signals we see is this: When a student feels a strong fit, they don't explore widely; they focus.

In fact, the majority of engagement concentrates on high-fit recommendations. When students feel alignment, they don't need convincing. They move forward.

This challenges a common assumption in marketing: That conversion comes from stronger persuasion. In reality, it comes from stronger recognition.

Students are not asking:

"Is this a good programme?"

They are asking:

"Does this feel like me?"

WHAT TO CHANGE:
To build confidence, programmes should:

- Use language that reflects student motivations, not just outcomes.
- Show real student journeys that mirror different profiles
- Surface signals of fit early, not after long exploration.

Because confidence is not built through information.

It is built through clarity and alignment.

The Shift: From Information to Confirmation

Most programme pages are designed to inform. But students don't need more information.They need help confirming a decision.

That requires a different approach:

- From listing features ➜ to guiding choices.
- From describing programmes ➜ to reflecting identities.
- From pushing applications ➜ to building confidence.

What Teams Can Do Tomorrow

Three simple changes can immediately improve conversion quality:

1. Add a "fit layer" to programme pages.
Not just what the programme offers, but who it is right for, in clear, human terms.

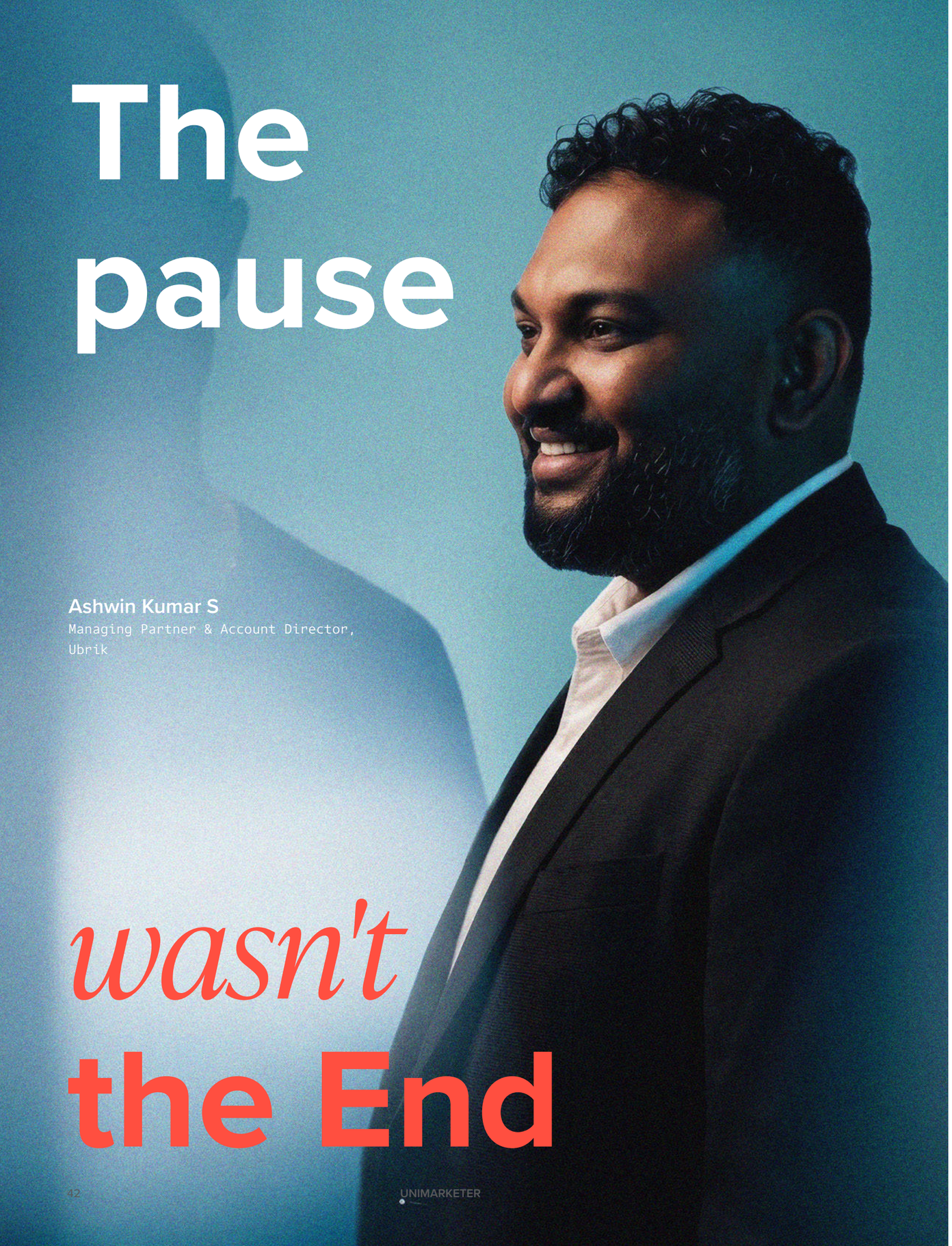
2. Reduce cognitive load.
Simplify structure. Help students navigate decisions faster instead of overwhelming them with detail.

3. Align follow-up with motivation
Instead of generic nurturing, reflect on what the student is actually looking for: purpose, creativity, direction, or a mix.

The biggest shift we've seen is this:
Students don't convert when they are convinced. They convert when they feel certain.

And that certainty comes from one thing: Seeing themselves in the decision.

The pause *wasn't* the End



Ashwin Kumar S
Managing Partner & Account Director, Ubrik

When the crisis hit, higher education felt it first. Enquiries dropped. Parents took over. Some universities went quiet. Some picked up the phone. This is what happened in between.

Where were you when this kicked off?

India. Reading the news, watching opinions form around me, on WhatsApp with my team in Dubai trying to separate what we actually knew from what international media had decided the story was. The first thing we did, before any strategy, was email our university clients. Simple message: we're here, come to us if you need anything. Sheyaf and Sujeevan from our team created a viral video series - Dubai as it actually was. Open. Normal. People getting on with their lives. The story the international media wouldn't tell. The day I landed back in Dubai, the ceasefire was announced. That moment mattered - for me, for our business, for every university trying to protect its September intake.

What did admissions teams actually see in those first weeks?

A pipeline in freefall. We surveyed teams across six UAE universities in early April. Nine of the ten universities confirmed that enquiry volumes had dropped. International daily enquiries fell from approximately thirty to ten. A few reported a 70% decline. Walk-ins went to zero - campuses had temporarily closed. Email reply rates dropped sharply. The phones got quieter.

The outliers were universities fully dependent on the local market, where lead numbers actually held. The honest read is that the data is partial - but it's also a signal that institutions with deep brand trust absorbed less of the shock.

ABOUT ASHWIN KUMAR S

Ashwin Kumar S is Managing Partner and Account Director at Ubrik. He works with higher education institutions across strategy, marketing operations, and enrolment growth, helping teams respond to market shifts with clarity, speed, and practical execution.

What were students and parents actually saying?

The contact numbers being submitted in enquiry forms weren't the students anymore. They were their parents. That single shift tells you everything about the emotional temperature of those weeks.

Students were asking about safety, class continuity, when campuses would reopen - and weighing cheaper online alternatives as a fallback. Parents across GCC, Africa, India, and Pakistan were in a holding pattern, waiting for full resolution before committing financially. Agents reported they couldn't underplay the situation without losing credibility. As one coordinator put it: it's our word against global media.

Which markets and programmes took the hardest hit?

GCC was perceived as ground zero - international media treated the region as if it were inside the conflict, not adjacent to it. India pulled back sharply, particularly the South. Pakistan and Africa were compounded by domestic political instability.

At a programme level, niche offerings were more vulnerable than generalist ones. Design, animation, and digital media saw the steepest pull-back. When families hesitate, they hesitate hardest on programmes they perceive as higher-risk.

WhatsApp held up. Walk-ins, telephone, and email all fell.

What separated the universities that held their pipeline from those that lost it?

Communication. The institutions that said something early - even when they didn't have full answers - held trust. The ones that went quiet didn't. Silence is never neutral. Families don't read silence as "no news is good news." They read it as confirmation that something is wrong.

What does higher education need to internalise now?

Seven things. None of them are optional anymore.

1. Parent influence is now permanent. Institutions marketing only to students will lose ground. Parent pages, parent webinars, parent FAQs, visible crisis-support policies.

2. Domestic and nearby markets matter more. When cross-border confidence weakens, lean harder into resident expat pools and stable feeder markets.

3. Hybrid trust journeys replace linear funnels. "Run ads, collect leads, hope they enrol" is dead. The new path is ad → FAQ → counsellor call → webinar → application support → WhatsApp nurturing.

4. Brand trust outperforms performance marketing. A dean speaking honestly on camera to a worried family in Lahore or Lagos is worth more right now than a hundred retargeted ads.

5. Flexibility is a recruitment product. Online pathways, alternate start dates, payment flexibility, admission counselling, timeline clarity. Deciding factors, not perks.

6. The agent is now a core pillar. When digital funnels slow down, agents sit closest to the family. Equip them properly or lose to those who do.

7. CRM maturity separates winners from losers. The institutions that win will know who's worried, from which market, at what stage, and what reassurance they need.

What should marketing and admissions leaders prioritise over the next 6-12 months?

1. Stop optimising for cost-per-lead. Start optimising for confidence. When trust falls, lead quality shifts, decision time lengthens, and direct conversion dips before reassurance content has time to work. The funnel has to widen - FAQ videos, dean messages, parent communications, advisor callbacks, webinars, one-to-one counselling.

2. Don't cut media budgets blindly. If a geography still shows search and conversion intent, hold the line. If sentiment in a market has collapsed, shift from aggressive conversion to nurture and reassurance. If competitors go dark, keep brand presence alive where intent remains.

3. Build a usable communications stack - not a 20-page document. One holding statement. One student/parent FAQ. One admissions script. One paid media adjustment. One internal escalation owner. One weekly review cadence. That stack moves the conversation from fear to action.

4. And invest in the September intake recovery now. Re-engagement workflows, market-specific creative, retargeting pools, lookalike audiences from confirmed students, deferral and flexible payment options. The window to convert hesitant prospects is narrower than most teams think.

Who actually comes out of this stronger?

Not the loudest. Not the cheapest. Not the most optimistic.

The clearest. The fastest to adapt. The most operationally prepared.

The institutions that understood the psychology of a scared family making a very large decision in an uncertain world.

The demand for education in the UAE didn't disappear. It paused. The pause is lifting.

The students are watching. The families are starting to ask real questions again.

We'll know which universities earned their trust by September.

GROWTH TAKEAWAYS

Signals, Patterns, & What Comes *Next*

5 Takeaways from This Issue

Five things define enrolment growth right now:

/01

Growth starts before marketing

Clarity, alignment, and leadership decisions drive outcomes. Campaigns follow.

/02

The market is not confused

Students and parents know what they want. Institutions are not answering clearly enough.

/03

Awareness is not the problem

The biggest drop-off doesn't happen at awareness. It happens at the decision.

/04

Consistency beats scale

More channels don't improve results. A consistent experience does.

/05

Confidence is the real conversion metric

Students don't convert when they are convinced. They convert when they feel certain.

3 Promising Moves in 2026

Three shifts are becoming visible:

1

Programme pages are becoming decision tools

Less information. More clarity.

2

Follow-ups are becoming intent-driven

Not every lead needs urgency. Some need reassurance.

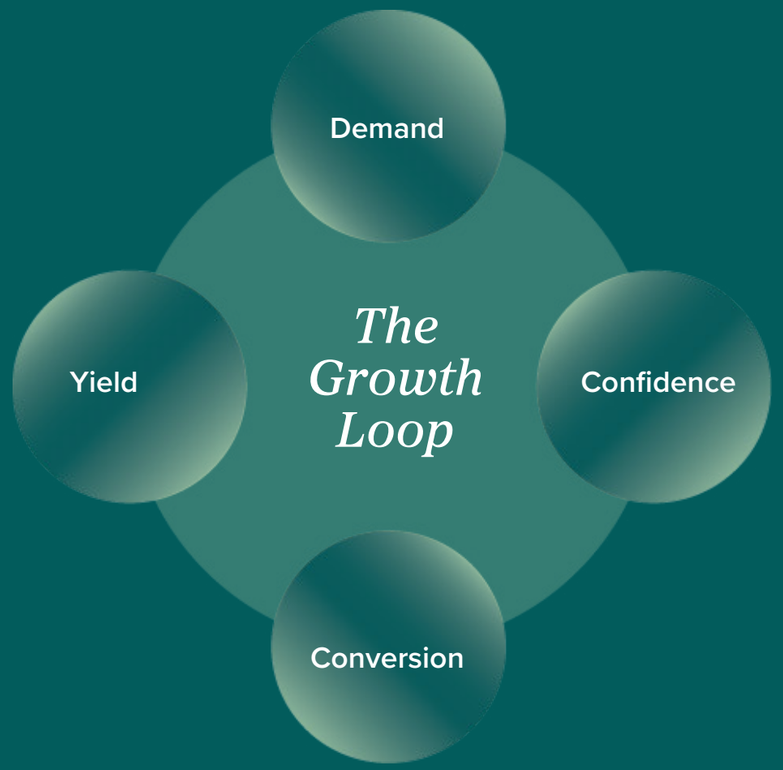
3

Brand is becoming a point of view

Not positioning. Not messaging. A belief the institution stands on.

The Growth Loop

Growth now follows a simple loop:



Most teams focus on demand.
The problem sits in **confidence.**

What's Next

The next issue will focus on one question:

What actually drives enrolments today?

We'll go deeper into:

- The student journey as a system
- CRM, data, and decision speed
- Conversion as a leadership responsibility

An Invitation

This is not a closed publication.

If you're building something that's working, or seeing something others are missing, we want to include you.

Closing Thought

Growth is not a volume problem. It is a clarity problem.

The institutions that fix that first will move ahead.

Higher education marketing in the UAE deserves its own conversation.

UniMarketer

is that conversation.

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