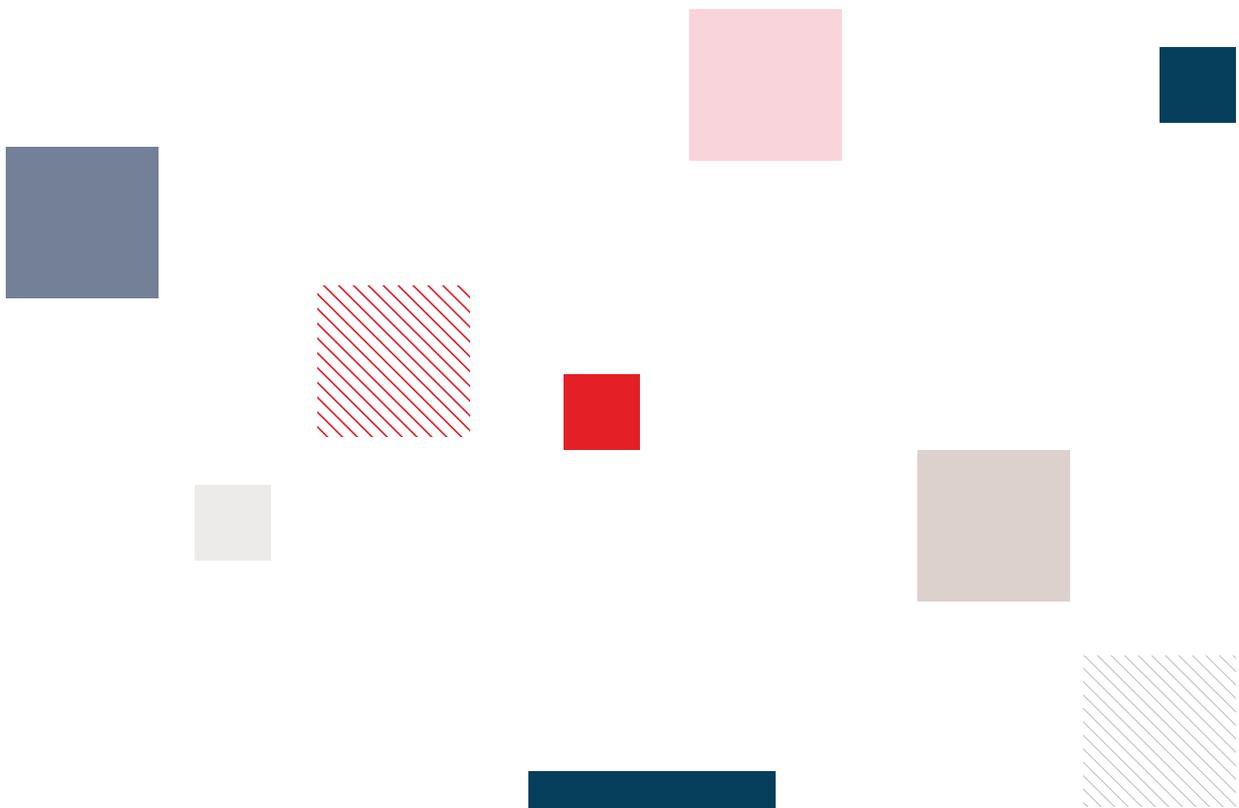


# The Spirit is Willing...

The road to a diversity of talent in university marketing teams and the toolkit to get there



# Introduction

University marketing teams play an essential role in portraying their institution and the higher education (HE) sector to the outside world. This includes brand communication, reputation building and student recruitment both in the UK and across the world. By its nature, this work targets diverse audiences – diverse in all its forms, including terms of gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, politics, nationality, and so on. But how diverse are the marketing teams that put the communications and campaigns together? How well equipped are HE marketers to reflect, understand and connect with these diverse audience groups?

In June this year, SUMS Consulting, in partnership with GatenbySanderson, set out to answer these questions with senior marcomms professionals in the sector, using a quantitative questionnaire along with a series of in-depth interviews with HE marketing directors.

We asked a wide range of questions to gauge HE marcomms professionals' personal experiences of equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). We explored their experiences of delivering EDI marketing activity through their roles in their university and their perspectives on the relative success of EDI marketing across the sector. We also gathered their views on the techniques, policies and methodologies that can be put in place to enable more inclusive practices in the future.

It won't surprise anyone to know that awareness of the importance of EDI and its role in higher education was exceptionally high. But there was also a strong sense that universities are not doing enough to address this issue. There's an acknowledgement that the sector is on a journey, and that there is still some way to go. Leaders and senior practitioners also recognise the important role that marketing and communications professionals have to play in driving change in this space.



## So, when they reflected on where marketing in the HE sector is currently at in this journey...

Respondents clearly saw a wide range of benefits from embracing EDI in marketing practices, including improved student recruitment, and being more reflective of society and the wider communities they are seeking to reach. Some were even more ambitious about the prospect of HE marketing moving the dial on social justice and driving greater consciousness of diversity in the world beyond universities.

It is perhaps telling that our respondents were not able to point to any campaigns that they thought did a great job of embracing EDI. However, a number of universities were mentioned as demonstrating good practice. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they cover the band across the Midlands and into West Yorkshire where there are high levels of ethnic diversity: University of Bradford, Leeds Beckett University, Nottingham Trent University, Coventry University, De Montfort University, Birmingham City University, Kingston University and the University of Derby.

There has also been some excellent work done at UCL and at Westminster in this space. The University of Westminster puts diversity right at the heart of its marketing and student recruitment positioning, and is actively championing this with businesses – helping them to recruit diverse talent that better reflects their customer bases.

From SUMS' race equality reviews in the sector, we can point to other good examples such as the University of Sheffield's Wall of BAME website celebrating success across ethnic groups. Similarly, a number of universities, notably Birmingham and Bristol, have run Be More Empowered initiatives to encourage race equality among their student and staff communities.

# 46%

Only 46% of respondents thought that the HE sector does a good job of delivering marketing and communication activities that authentically encourage EDI.

# 41%

41% stated that their institutions could do more to provide training and experience to continually refresh their knowledge and understanding of EDI developments.



## A number of themes emerged frequently in our conversation with HE marketing directors:

**Lean in** – not only is it morally the ‘right thing’ to have a robust EDI strategy in place for recruiting, developing, and retaining your staff, but this also presents a world of rich opportunities to bring to your profession and your institution. This does not mean you need to discriminate against people from a ‘white, middle-class background’ when you’re hiring, but it does mean you need to have a mindset and processes in place where it is possible for wide ranging, capable people to apply and be recruited, should they be the best person for the job.

**Role model it** – if marketing teams can’t role model an EDI representation of staff, then how will the real world be represented without it appearing tokenistic?

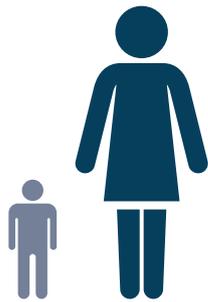
**See the value** – rather than regulations and legislation being seen as an annoyance or additional extra, embrace and incorporate established and emerging policies into subconscious working practices.

**Put your money where your mouth is** – internal communications are just as important as external ones. Staff networks representative of everyday people are here to stay. Those staff networks that have senior sponsorship and presence as well as grassroots commitment are going to drive a more inclusive culture. And, if there’s an event that will benefit both the network and the university – fund it! Why should Pride or Black History Month be delivered purely by the goodwill of the people within the network?!

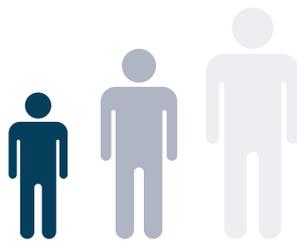


# The current picture of HE marcomms teams

Our quantitative survey stats show:



There is significant over-representation of females in marketing teams – over 80%



There is under-representation of diverse ethnicities, particularly in leadership roles



Almost a quarter of respondents said they live with a disability

There is clearly a strong need and business case to address the diversity of HE marcomms teams, but how can that practically be achieved?

We must first look to understand the behaviour of diverse talent. GatenbySanderson have collected data from over 10,000 applications for senior roles over the last 18 months. The impact of the pandemic and homeworking has seen an increase across all ethnic groups in the use of online content and networks to find out about new opportunities. With many organisations now moving to hybrid working models, this trend is set to continue.

There has been a reluctance to move during a period of uncertainty, particularly from women, with only 32% of applications for leadership roles coming from women.

The good news is that the proportion of ethnically diverse applications has increased from 19% in 2019 to 27% in 2020/21, however this increase has largely come from men.

The challenge remains to attract ethnically diverse talent from both sexes to first apply, but importantly, to then convert those applications into successful appointments.

The data and anecdotal evidence from applicants suggest that we need to be more persuasive, more supportive, and more creative in our approach to attract diverse talent.



# A Practical Toolkit

- HR Business Partners and Resourcing teams are a fantastic source of ideas and insights when considering how to attract and convert diverse talent. They will also be able to advise on how to navigate existing processes to design an appropriate recruitment campaign.
- What insights can be learned from student recruitment campaigns? Attracting diverse talent to consider joining the university has many parallels with the methods used for attracting students. Including existing marketing collateral such as virtual campus tours or videos of staff and students sharing their experiences can help to bring to life a recruitment campaign and strengthen employer branding.
- Avoid using “internal only” processes to attract new talent and drive as diverse a workplace as possible.
- Look at existing recruitment materials such as job descriptions and adverts. Are they fit for purpose? Can language be changed to be more inclusive? Consider removing essential and desirable criteria. It is a well-known fact that candidates from some under-represented groups are more likely to self-select themselves out of a process if they don't meet all the criteria.
- Higher education could be an unfamiliar environment for talent that have not followed a more traditional educational route. Consider methods to break down barriers and personalise engagement. Add your name to the advert and invite candidates to have an informal chat about the role.
- A simple and effective tool can be the use of video to introduce the role. A 3–5-minute video from the Director/Manager which addresses the purpose of the role, what attributes they are seeking and why diversity is important to their team, can be an emotive tool to embed into a campaign and can be shared across multiple channels.
- The rise in hybrid working models, with time split between the office and home, opens up the workplace to many more under-represented groups. If flexibility exists, then promote this front and centre in the recruitment campaign.



# A Practical Toolkit

- “Cultural fit” is a term used extensively in recruitment processes. A “culture fit” mindset seeks to hire and retain more of what you already have. In other words, it preserves comfort and familiarity. Consider instead “culture add”, which focuses on gaining valuable elements that your culture lacks. People who value your standards and culture, but also bring something different that positively contributes to your team. The hiring question then shifts from “What is this person lacking?” to “What can this person bring to the table?”
  - Consider the application and assessment process. An emphasis on previous experience, over values and behaviours will likely deliver familiar results. Is a CV or application form the right vehicle? Could moving to competency and values-based questions or even embedding video applications into a process, allow you to see more of the person and how they can add to the culture?
  - Consider creating a diverse talent pipeline. Your recruitment campaign has delivered diverse talent that want to join your team. Ask candidates if they wish to be contacted about future roles and keep them regularly updated.
  - Consider what transition and onboarding support successful candidates will need. Be clear about the support in place and weave this into the campaign narrative. Moving into a new sector can be daunting, so the reassurance of support will encourage more diverse applications.
- Once you have appointed diverse talent, how do you retain them?
- Ensure your marcomms staff are encouraged to be involved in representative staff networks within their universities. These networks should be open to those with protected characteristics but also to allies, whose empathy and recognition of their own privileges is key to addressing culture change. This approach has been particularly successful at the University of Reading. Beyond this, there’s certainly scope for a specialist marketing EDI network to be created for the sector.



It is important to factor EDI into all your university marcomms – and this requires specialist skills. So, designate and train specific roles in EDI communications to add this dimension to your team. This recognises that clear, authentic, and regular communication is vital for embedding and normalising diversity and inclusion initiatives. It's very easy to get the communications wrong on EDI initiatives. Communication professionals who are skilled and confident in EDI considerations can be transformative – but because it is a rapidly changing and sometimes controversial area, ongoing training and support is vital.

While there is some way left to travel on this journey, HE marketers are a long way out of the starting blocks. We work in a sector that embraces inclusion. We work for values-driven institutions that care deeply about this issue. There is clearly a strong belief in the power and importance of EDI along with a willingness to act, and to champion change – but as one of our qualitative interviewees suggested, “We just need to step on the gas!”



**Joel Arber**  
Group Managing Director  
SUMS Consulting



**Alison Elton**  
Higher Education Senior Consultant  
GatenbySanderson