A powerful new perspective on communications, service design and the Student Experience
Loughborough University is one of the UK’s top campus institutions with a reputation for delivering a world-class experience to more than 16,000 students. To support its strong and consistent performance in the rankings, Loughborough University continues to look for ways to develop and enhance its offering. However, the limitations of existing Student Experience research were becoming clear - it was increasingly difficult to identify real, actionable insights that would lead directly to a positive impact on students.

In 2012 Loughborough Students’ Union, with the support of the university, commissioned Red Brick Research to undertake a comprehensive and innovative research project. The Loughborough team wanted to identify gaps in the provision of services and information, and to improve the effectiveness of communication and engagement with students.

They set Red Brick a challenge; to look beyond the headline statistics, discover the hidden opportunities and help the university develop a deeper understanding of itself and its students.

The resulting data was processed and analysed to identify a small and cohesive set of attitudinal clusters, or ‘segments’.

A powerful and robust tool for change

“A Focus on Excellence

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A fresh approach was needed to overcome the limitations of traditional demographic thinking, and find new ways of understanding increasingly diverse groups of students.

Red Brick worked closely with the Loughborough team to review and analyse existing research, CRM data, and inherited wisdom within the organisation to inform the study design and ensure maximum value was extracted out of existing resources.

Exploratory focus group work informed the development of a structured university-wide survey of student attitudes, motivations, expectations and behaviours. The survey was distributed to the entire student population including postgraduates, internationals, mature and part-time students, and was supported by a teaser campaign and comprehensive promotional activity.

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“Tribes’ has become central to what we do, the way think, the way we plan and it has gained increasing traction right across the university.”

– Andy Parsons, Union Director.
These segments were then studied in more detail and refined through a series of co-creative student workshops, leading to the final set of well-rounded and thoroughly profiled 'Tribes'; Party People, Leading Lights, Conscientious Carers, Flow Goers and Academic Individualists.

Further statistical analysis was conducted for each Tribe, to identify and map their different 'key drivers' of satisfaction and engagement. Predictive models were developed to estimate the impact of different engagement strategies and produce a clear set of strategic priorities.

**A New Prism of Understanding**

Each of the Tribes represents a diverse demographic cross-section of the student population, who nevertheless share key common characteristics that influence the way they experience their university life and interact with on-campus services and communications.

This alternative approach to understanding students has enabled Loughborough to look beyond base demographics and to think more creatively about how to meet their needs. ‘Tribes thinking’ has already been influential across a wide spectrum of university and students’ union activity, from strategic planning and brand strategy through to campaigning and sports development.

**Far from dividing students along traditional demographic lines, Tribes is actually bringing diverse students together in ways that are meaningful to them and reflect their outlook on life.**

Tribes have even been used in the allocation of students into shared university housing, resulting in a dramatic reduction in complaints, reduced management workload and a better student living experience.

**Tribal by Design**

Communications strategies have been developed to target different Tribes with relevant information aligned to their interests. This targeted approach is helping to cut through the ‘noise’, leading to an increase in email open rates and subsequent benefits such as a significant boost in student union democratic participation.

Existing union and university services have been re-imagined with the Tribes in mind, and KPIs have been defined to ensure that changes are delivering higher levels of satisfaction and broader engagement from traditionally hard-to-reach student groups as well as ‘mainstream’ undergraduates.

**A Powerful Tool for Change**

Tribes has now been integrated directly into the heart of the student enrolment process with students allocated and moved between Tribes based on a small set of five ‘Golden Questions’ and a sophisticated algorithm developed by Red Brick Research.

In addition to its direct application to communications and service design, Tribes is increasingly integrated into other student-focused research undertaken by the university itself, providing a fresh perspective and an alternative prism onto the student population that is proving to be a powerful and robust tool for change.

“Getting the attention of students who have become adept at ignoring literally hundreds of messages every day is the biggest communication challenge we face.”
To discuss ways in which you could benefit from a deeper understanding of your audience, call us today on: 01892 249 650

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