
Brand Perception and Power



What really drives student perceptions of your brand? Rankings, heritage, research impact, social values - they're all in the mix.



This research was conducted by Mammoth in partnership with UniTaskr. Together we surveyed 1,072 UK undergrads to explore the drivers behind student perceptions of university brands, and some of the results may surprise you.

What stands out is that students feel university brands are much of a muchness, but opportunities to differentiate are there for the taking for those brave enough to embrace them.

As a sector we love a market research report, especially when it comes to the factors that influence student recruitment. Far less common is insight into perception of university brands beyond the normal hygiene factors like rankings. We asked 6 thought-provoking questions to build data to help higher education institutions elevate their brand.

1



What drives your perception of universities?

The challenge

Our UK undergrads were asked to rank a range of factors that influence their perception of university brands. Some of the findings should give you food for thought. Although those two sacred cows of university marketing, rankings and location, came out as the two most important factors (no surprise there), it is what comes next that's interesting.

The third most influential factor by some distance was brand values / what you stand for. Way ahead of history & heritage and research impact - which both tend to feature heavily in many university's messaging.

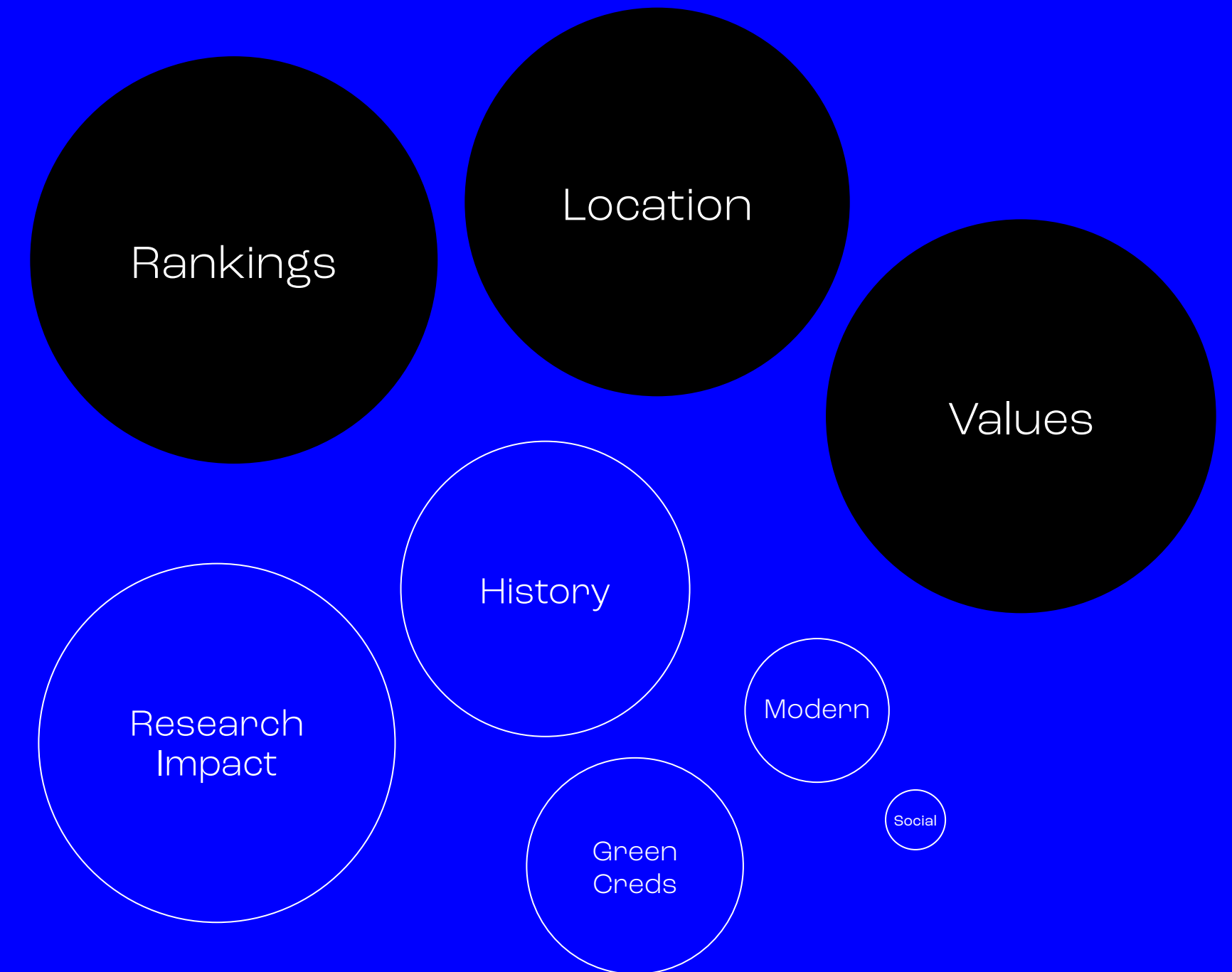
Perhaps even more surprisingly, an institution's perceived commitment to environmental sustainability was ranked 6th of 8, ahead of modernity and social life.

Key insight

Your university's brand values and what you stand for as an organisation are really influential for this audience. Far more than some more traditional factors that we assume to be important.

We would suggest that your values should go beyond a published list of anodyne phrases buried on your website somewhere, your brand comms should embody them and make it clear to the world what you stand for as an institution.

Perception drivers in order of importance



*size of circle denotes level of importance

Ask yourself...

What proportion of your marketing messaging is devoted to history & heritage/prestige, research impact or environmental sustainability in comparison to your brand values and where you stand on social issues?

2



What do you consider to be the key ingredients of a quality university?

The challenge

We asked our students what they considered to be the key factors that denote a good quality university. Understandably for an undergraduate audience, world-class teaching and an ability to prepare students for their future career was the most important factor. However, once again – perceptions around social issues feature more prominently than you might expect.

The extent to which a university is considered socially responsible with a commitment to issues like equality and diversity and widening participation came a strong second from our list. To drive this point home, what could broadly be described as a university’s civic credentials came next. The fact these factors trump research impact, student lifestyle, global footprint and even environmental sustainability is certainly at odds with majority of university marketing currently in use.

Natural assumptions about the need to profile world-class research or global connections as a by-word for quality and prestige seems to be a little misplaced. Our survey shows the domestic undergraduate audience would appear to be more impressed by what could be considered more local or grounded issues.

Key insight

It seems that a university’s stance on social and civic issues are closely intertwined with undergraduate perceptions of their brand. The extent to which these areas would appear to be significantly more prevalent than ‘green’ issues is particularly surprising.

Factors driving perceptions of quality in order of importance



Ask yourself...

As an organisation seeking to connect with a Gen Z audience, could your university apply a greater focus on social issues as fundamental facets of your brand?

3



Which would you choose?

The challenge

We gave students a direct choice of two universities that offer the same fundamentals: **University A offers greater prestige and personal benefits whilst University B is more closely aligned with the student's own values.**

Although a clear majority made the predictable choice, i.e. the one which would afford them the most personal benefits, a very substantial minority – approx. a third - would choose the lower status institution.

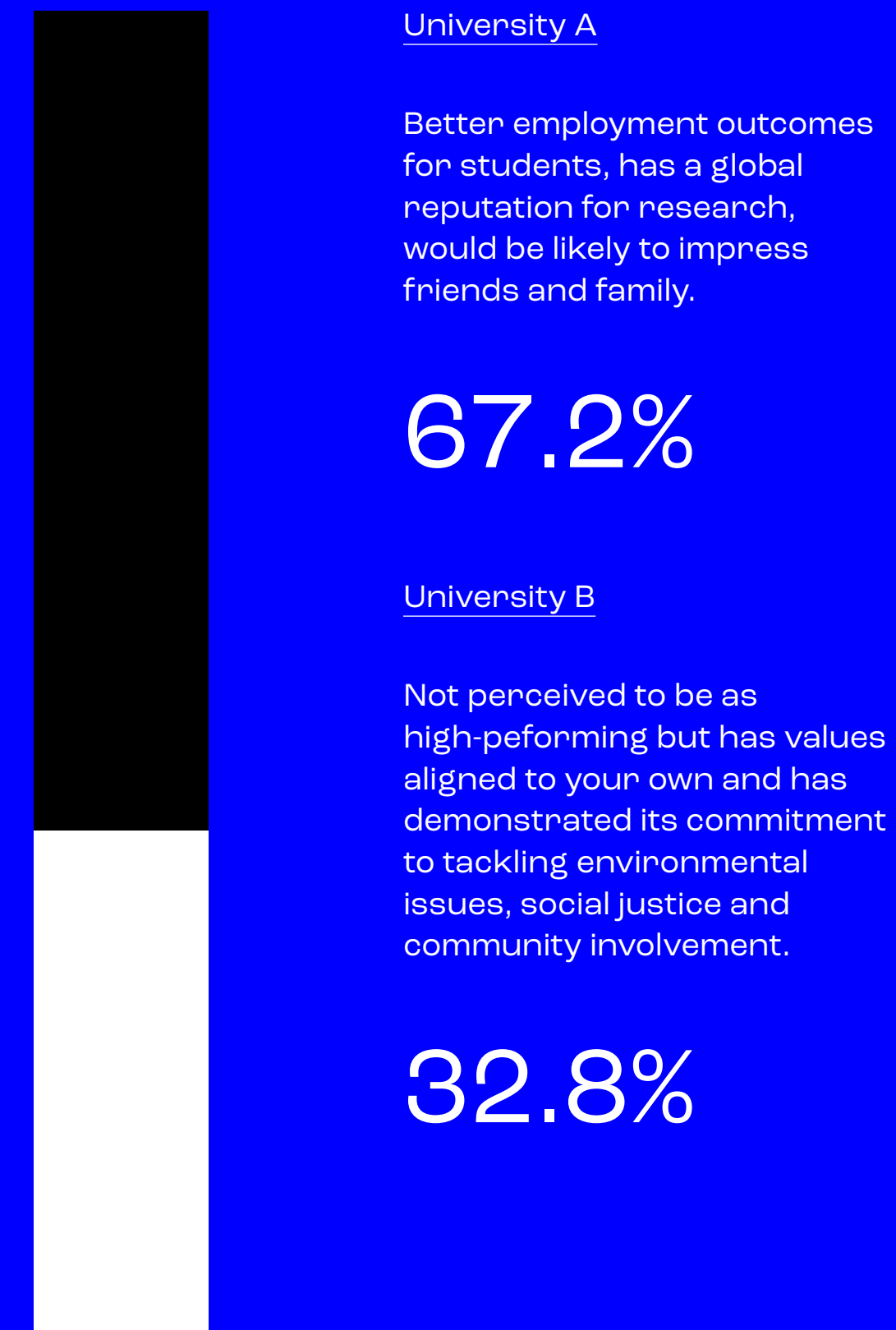
It is undeniable that many university brands seek to encapsulate the same or all of the qualities we have prescribed to 'University A'. In comparison, few universities embrace the more altruistic, mission-based positioning that seems to appeal to large proportion of students.

Key insight

Challenge your assumptions. Although the majority of students are still attracted to those traditional benefits that speak to personal and career advantages, there are many others who place a greater value on other things.

This suggests that many universities would be well served to take a closer look at what their brand says about them from a different perspective.

If you had to choose between the two universities to study at, both offering the course you wanted in a suitable location and for the same fee, which would you choose?



Ask yourself...

All brands should strive to differentiate themselves from their competition and if your brand is associated with the same or similar qualities to the rest, how do you stand out?

4



What is your level of trust of universities?

The challenge

A casual review of press coverage of the sector over recent years or indeed the lived experience of those working on campuses up and down the country could lead you to believe that trust between student and universities is disintegrating.

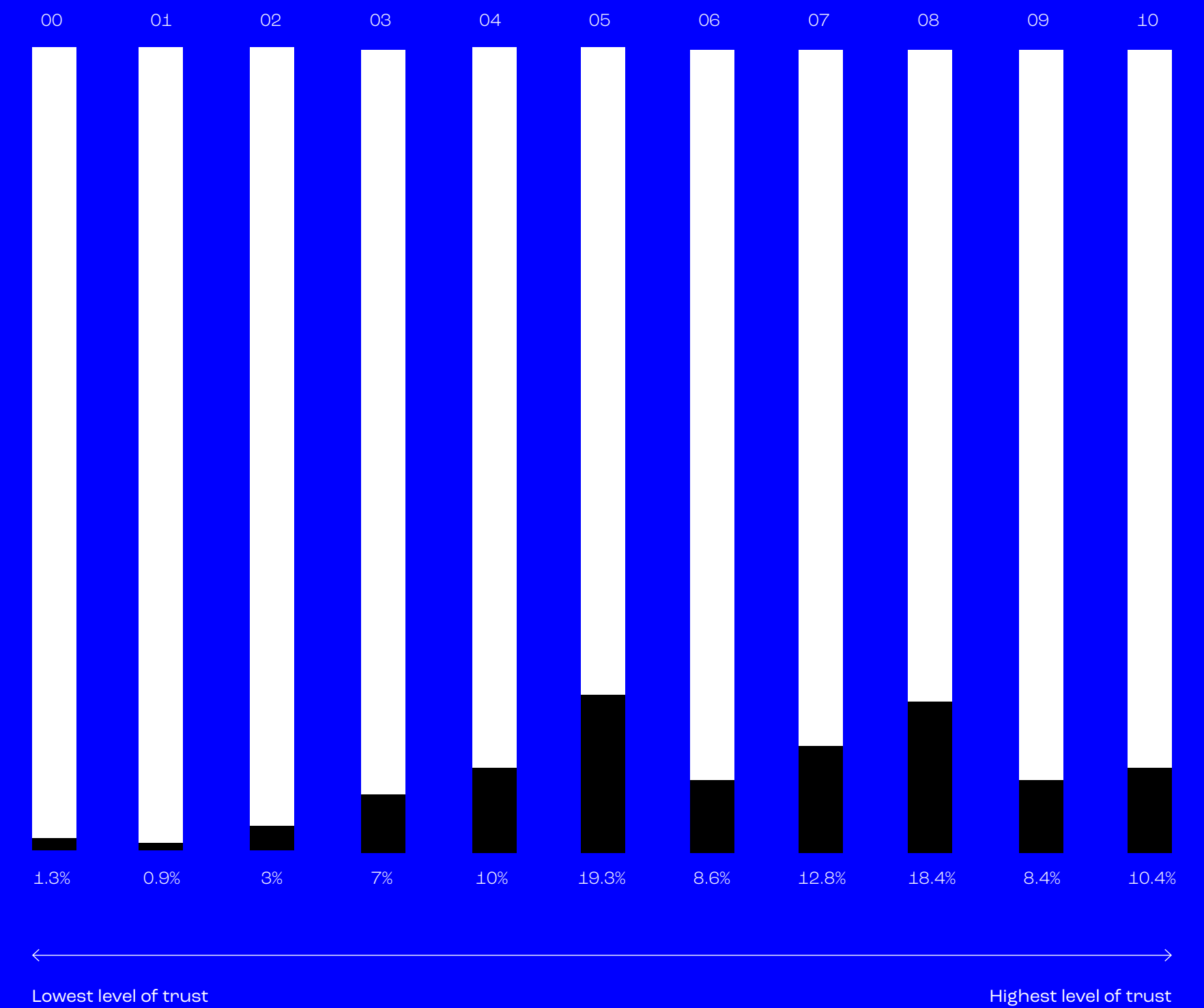
Industrial action, the impact of covid on teaching and learning and student accommodation challenges are just a few of the issues that have increased the strain on the relationship.

But don't be too hasty. Despite this, trust levels remain reasonably high. On a scale of 0-10 (with 10 being the highest level of trust), half of respondents rated their level of trust in universities as 7+ which is really encouraging. Less than 25% rated it as below 5. Given recent history, this should be seen very positively indeed.

Key insight

On the whole, students are still positively disposed towards universities. This should give HE marketers confidence in how they communicate.

Level of trust for a university



Ask yourself...

Are you clearly articulating your brand proposition given that universities are still well placed to directly influence the perception that students have of them?

5



To what extent do you think university brands are differentiated?

The challenge

With broadly similar ‘product offerings’ it is little surprise that rankings and location are so often used as mechanisms for distinction. But that’s still a little too blurry for our liking. Just 25% of respondents considered university brands to be well differentiated which demonstrates the need for more universities to have a long hard look at just what it is that makes them stand out.

Although the long-standing prestige of the sector is reflected with just over half recognising a degree of differentiation based on quality, there are very few examples of individual institutions with unique stories to tell.

Key insight

All universities are unique, and often to a greater extent than you might believe from their marketing output. The sector as a whole has allowed itself to become somewhat generic and homogeneous in its presentation and this presents an opportunity for those brands that are prepared to take bold steps towards true differentiation.

To what extent do you think university brands are well differentiated?

They are differentiated in terms of status and quality but not much else



They are largely the same but I can think of one or two stand out



Well differentiated - each university is distinct and I can make well-informed judgements about their brand



Not differentiated at all - they are all pretty much the same to me



*Note: respondents were able to select more than 1 option. Total exceeds 100%

Ask yourself...

Are you part of an institution that is able and willing to carve out a distinct brand proposition in pursuit of better differentiation? If the answer is yes, then what's stopping you?

6

High-status Universities
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Do you feel more positively about 'high-status' universities
e.g. Russell Group, or not?

The challenge

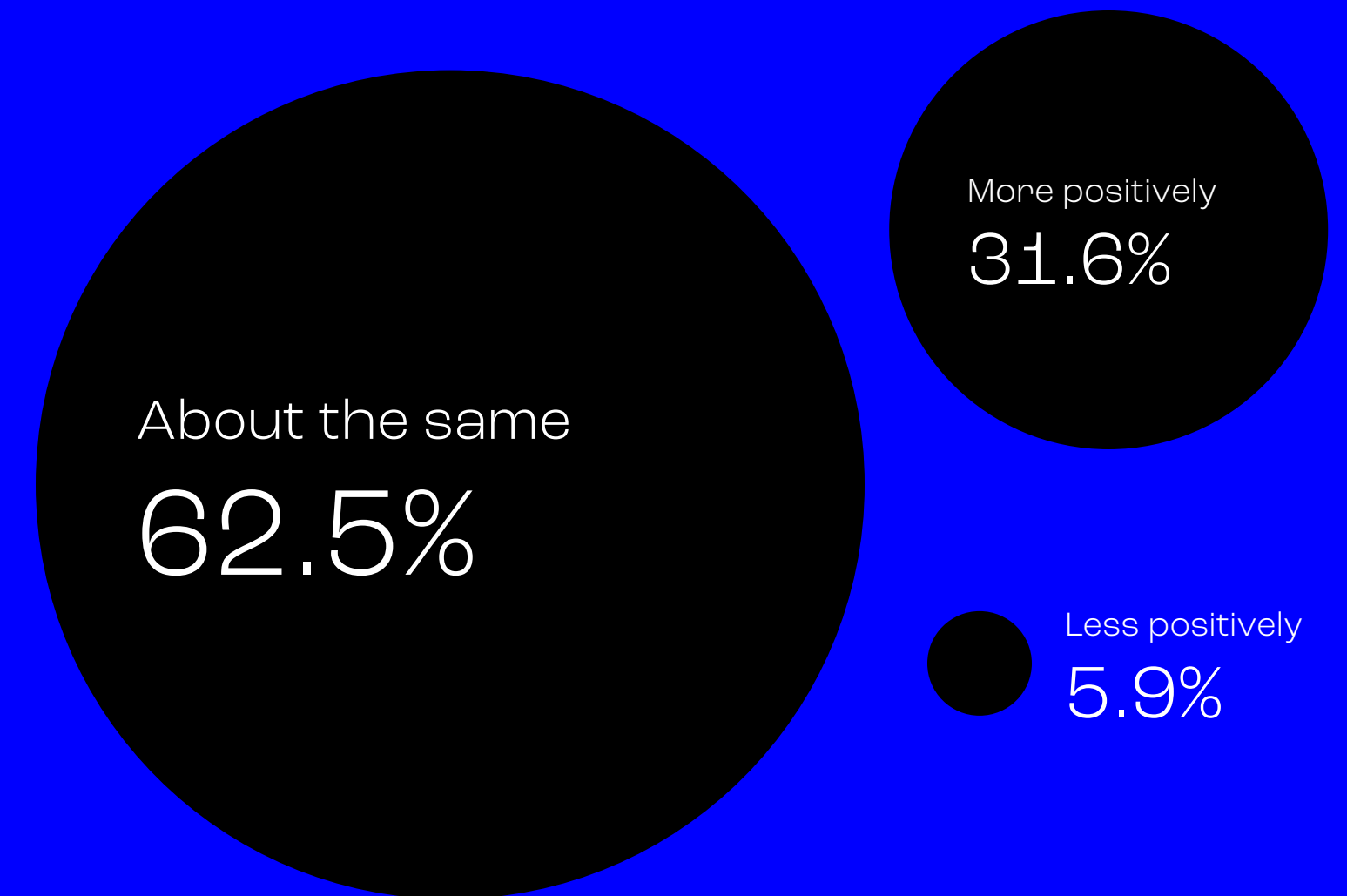
It's widely accepted that Russell Group membership is seen as a stamp of quality or prestige that carries significant weight. Those on the inside will proudly display their badge and include reference to their membership in much of their marketing copy. Those on the outside will often decry the competitive advantage it affords their illustrious counterparts. However, over two thirds of respondents told us that they do not view RG brands any more positively.

It is certainly possible, if not likely, that Russell Group status is more important to international students, but the lack of positive brand associations respondents have with the Russell Group is certainly a surprise.

Key insight

Don't rely on lazy assumptions that have evolved over time. Russell Group membership is undoubtedly a positive, but it should not be assumed to be a by-word for quality that will result in more positive association for your brand. Similarly, non-RG institutions should not assume that it puts them at a significant disadvantage.

Do you feel more positively about 'high status' universities e.g. The Russell Group, or not?



Ask yourself...

Do you rely upon or are you limited by your status as a symbol that shapes your brand narrative, or could your university consider other ways to elevate your brand?

The higher education marketing landscape is dominated by assumptions and long-held beliefs.

These assumptions shape the messaging that universities employ to build their brand, enhance reputation and recruit students. It's clear that many of these assumptions which underpin marketing messaging are not as watertight as you might think.

Although rankings, quality of education, employability etc remain significant, this survey also suggests that students make up their minds about university brands across a broader spectrum of factors.

The perceived lack of brand differentiation combined with the importance that the respondents place on social issues suggests that the development and articulation of brand propositions that align with audience attitudes are worthy of consideration.

We're the first to admit that with a sample size of just over 1,000 UK undergrads, this research represents the attitudes of a smidgeon of the UK student population. What it does show, however, is an appetising insight into a key stakeholder group's perceptions of university brands and should give many HE marketers pause for thought.

At the very least, our research points to the fact that restricting your marketing messaging to the comfort blanket of rankings, research impact and status might not be as effective as you think.

Let's talk about elevating
your brand.

Mammoth Education

We are a brand and creative agency with deep expertise in HE. We work with many of the leading universities in the UK and Ireland, supporting them to elevate their brand and build their global reputation. Our dedicated Education Team are sector specialists with an in-depth knowledge of the marketing landscape for universities, supported by a team of talented creatives, strategists and digital experts.

Let's talk

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UniTaskr

We are the voice of students across the UK. The UniTaskr platform connects students with the opportunity to build relevant experience and financial stability surrounding their studies. We're here to help students prepare for their future in a way that's conducive to their studies.

Our in-house agency SHOUT, connects universities and brands alike with an authentic and engaging way of reaching the student demographic. Through our army of student content creators we have the ability to reach millions of youth. Elevating social proofing, educating the masses and driving informed traffic for our partners.

Let's talk

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