

CIPR PRIDE AWARDS 2010

Category: Special Award - Best Website or Microsite (19)
Region: Thames and Chiltern
Name: University of Bedfordshire
Project: www.beds.ac.uk

Background

As the largest university in the county with over 19,000 students and 1,000 staff across multiple campuses and sites the website is at the hub of the University's communications. While still continuing to develop and improve, it has already won acclaim from educational peers, key target audiences and government bodies.

The website consistently attracts over 180,000 visitors per month with peaks of over 220,000 visitors and is a vital communications tool in the University recruitment cycle.

Objectives / Aim of the website

- Reflect the brand values of the University of Bedfordshire both in content and visual design
- Enhance the University's customer service offerings by providing an information source that is available 24/7 for enquirers, applicants, staff, students and other stakeholders
- Support the University's local, national and global recruitment and communications strategies
- Provide a rich, easy to navigate and understand, university information and communications resource
- Tie web content closely with other key target audience communications projects – especially print materials.

The University has the largest student population in Bedfordshire and one of the most diverse in the UK. Thirty per cent of students are international with over 100 different nationalities represented. Around 44 per cent of students are over 24 years old.

The website also serves target audiences at a number of University locations – four main campuses in Luton and Bedford and a Buckinghamshire campus in Aylesbury.

These diverse audiences demand a simple, yet sophisticated web platform that is easy to use by visitors from many educational and cultural backgrounds.

Most of all, it needs to deliver a worthwhile and useful web experience while reflecting the university's educational profile, branding, values and ethos.

Meeting the needs of the target audience

The website's key target audiences are:

- Prospective students
- Key influencers – parents, teachers, careers advisors from key feeder institutions
- Key stakeholders – media, alumni, local businesses, local partners
- Staff
- Current students

Design and Creativity

As a result of an extensive market research project and in response to a series of web usability tests, the website has been specifically designed to reflect the University values, 'ASPIRE':

- **Access** – we value diversity and have a student focus on all we do.
- **Scholarship** – we develop and maintain our knowledge of subjects and disciplines which we impart to our students through our teaching.
- **Partnership** – we believe in working in partnership with individuals and organisations to develop our students, to inform our applicable research and to make a difference to the communities of which we are a part.
- **Innovation** – we expect our work to be innovative as well as true and believe in continuous improvement, thereby enhancing the quality of all our activities.
- **Respect** – we have a concern for all our students and staff.
- **Employability** – we believe in empowering our students and preparing them for the world of work.

In all web development projects, strenuous efforts are taken to avoid information overload or using the site as a digital dump of often excessive and little-used archive material - a real danger in many organisations, educational and otherwise. Information is restricted to what is fundamentally relevant and useful - but always delivered in an engaging way with the target audiences in mind and providing a seamless user experience.

The site's use of sophisticated style sheets, integrated social media and advanced technologies such as XML and RSS, provides both consistency and the ability to embed a rich variety of new web technologies and experiences.

Selected Highlights

- **Home Page** – the distinctive 'six-box' layout featured on the homepage has been implemented extensively throughout the site to help provide both subject focus and consistency for the user.
- **Navigation** – As well as the standard red navigation bar we also have a 'Mega Footer'. This provides additional 'deep linking' navigation to key areas of the website such as courses, application information as well as other university online offerings such as library services and careers.
- **International Accessibility** - Given such a diverse student population and the University's energetic international recruitment activities, special attention has been given to providing easily accessible sections for international audiences. There are already four different languages provided in the 'how to

apply' area of the international section - Vietnamese, Kazakhstani, Chinese and Russian.

- **Engaging web technologies** – to provide target audiences with a richer online experience so supporting the University's forward-thinking profile, a number of special features have been included in the website – but, each has been specifically chosen to deliver a worthwhile enhancement to text-based sections. For example.
 - Student recruitment's Twitter feed - Allowing prospective students to be updated as to the location of the University Student Recruitment team.
 - Student experience videos – real life comments from students on a variety of topics, such as course experience, etc.
 - A centralised section housing all campus virtual tours.
- **Social media integration** – With the increase in social media awareness the website has taken advantage of integrating exciting new technologies. All video content on the website is hosted via **YouTube** and then embedded within the University website allowing for a single channel for video content. We are currently running multiple blogs all hosted via **Blogger** and styled to the University brand and we have written a custom **Twitter** viewer for our Student Recruitment updates. We also utilise **Flickr** to run our photo slideshows

New for 2010/11

- Expanded International sections
- Tabbed layout for course descriptions to deliver course information via XML
- Further improvements to accessibility to achieve AAA status

Evaluation and Feedback

- A peak of over 249,000 web visits in one month (October 2009), of which over 50,000 were from outside the UK
- The website visits have increased by 22.58% year on year.
- Our firm acceptances for 2010 are up 40.1% on the figures for 2009.
- When asked 'Did you find all the information you needed on our website?' only 9% of those asked respond with a No (*New Student Survey 2009*).

Budget Range

£10,001 to £50,000