

Glasgow Caledonian University: submission for category 19 – best website

Aims and objectives

Background

University vision: Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) has an ambitious vision as ‘a university for the professions, with a strong commitment to the common good’. It is committed to:

- ° social and economic regeneration through partnership with business, the professions and the public sector;
- ° producing employable, civic-minded graduates;
- ° raising GCU’s profile for learning, teaching and research in the UK and internationally;
- ° helping more people to access a university education.

Website: The GCU gcu.ac.uk website had evolved organically. Its design no longer reflected the university’s brand, ambitions or ‘personality’ and its information architecture and navigation schema were disjointed. It was hard to navigate because the content was organised around university structure rather than user needs. It lacked a content management system (CMS) and so was difficult to manage and out of date.

In 2008, planning began for a new website. Delivery involved a partnership between GCU’s Marketing and Communications team, its IT Services department and an external agency, Different. The project was overseen by a Web Redevelopment Board representing a range of university stakeholders.

Project objectives: The overarching objective was to produce a website that would be driven by the university’s business needs and help to deliver its vision. This meant designing a new site which would measurably improve user experience and more effectively:

- Support student recruitment via provision of quality pre-application information and ‘brand experience’.
- Highlight the university’s efforts to internationalise, which are key to growing income in a difficult economic climate.
- Promote excellence in key areas of research and business development – focusing on the university’s contribution to the social and economic benefit.

Website metrics were identified to measure an improved user experience. Target metrics included overall page views, average page views and time on site (minutes). A 25% increase in each metric (compared with the previous year) was set for the site as a whole and for the Study and International sections.

It was anticipated the new site would be much more search engine friendly. Targets of 25% increased traffic (total visits and absolute visits) were set for the site as a whole and for the Study and International sections.

Meeting the needs of GCU's target audiences

Extensive consultation and analysis was undertaken to understand audience motivations, needs and behaviours. The site was therefore designed entirely from a user perspective to help the key external audiences (prospective students, including international; businesses; professional researchers, funding bodies and prospective collaborators; GCU alumni) navigate their way quickly through the site, without any prior knowledge of university structure.

Research indicates that prospective students' overriding concern is finding subject-related information. A sophisticated course search facility was developed, enabling all prospective students, whether international or home, undergraduate, postgraduate or professional to find information easily.

Since the website's overriding priority is to engage with prospective students, a large promotional panel on the home page features quick links to undergraduate, postgraduate, international, part-time and professional study. Related videos give a flavour of student life and contribute to brand experience.

Other key areas – research excellence and business engagement – are highlighted in the home page's global navigation and in homepage panels.

Content is accessible, informative and easily searchable. Key images, developed as part of a parallel rebranding strategy, showed purposeful, career-oriented students against a backdrop of the university's modern facilities.

Design and creativity

The principal innovation was the application of User Centred Design as a project methodology. The previous website focused on organisational structure rather than users, resulting in a difficult to use website with no brand 'personality'. The new site delivered a measurably better user experience for key stakeholders.

Through messaging, images and structure, the website is now much more effective communicating the university's brand proposition – its commitment to the common good through individual transformation as well as social and economic regeneration. The design is bright and modern and the photography dynamic. The home page reflects the project's priorities, with a large promotional panel bringing the university's brand to life for students through dynamic photography and case study videos.

Evaluation and feedback

Phase 1 of the project completed in April 2009 with a new design, CMS and user-centred navigation. Phase 2 went live in November 2009 with enhanced design and functionality, sophisticated course search function, enhanced news and events functionality and dynamic content.

A project review has recently been completed and a web governance strategy has been developed to ensure the website's sustainability and continuing enhancement.

Feedback from the university community has been highly positive and the project's consultation and communications process encouraged a much deeper staff engagement in web development than previously. Good feedback from other universities and external bodies was

another informal measure of success. The website was named joint top award-winner in the Heist (UK education marketing) awards in May 2010.

Statistics indicate the site is delivering on its objectives:

- *Greater exposure of the university to prospective students:* evidenced by a substantial increase in visitors (up 35.56%), including absolute new visitors (up 19.75%). This suggests search engines are finding the site more easily.
- *Improved user experience:* evidenced by increased overall (up 79.73%) and average page views (up 32.59%) and the average time people are spending on the site (up 94.32%).

The website redevelopment contributed to a rise in GCU undergraduate applications over and above market trend (UCAS applications on January 10, 2010 were up 17.5% compared to 8.7% in the sector as a whole).

Both phases of the website redevelopment were delivered on budget. Phase 1 was on time and phase 2 four weeks late, due to competing operational demands.

The website redevelopment remains a work in progress. External-facing content was prioritised and the process of transferring staff and student pages into the new templates continues. A social media strategy is being developed and further enhancements are planned.

The project budget, including external agency costs and staff time is in band h) over £100k.