Marketing & Communications Strategy 2017—2019

UNIVERSITY *of* LIMERICK

OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Our aim is to enable UL to communicate and market its potential for growth and increased impact to all its strategic audiences

University
of Limerick
Marketing and
Communications
Strategy
2017 — 2019

Contents

Introduction & Background

1

Introduction

The University of Limerick's Strategic Plan 2015-19, articulates a clear and ambitious roadmap for the organisation's continued growth, identifying a range of academic and business performance objectives that reflect UL's ambition.

Student recruitment, research and innovation, international market expansion, accentuating the UL brand reputation and building productive stakeholder engagement are all high-level features of the plan. It is in that context that the UL Strategic Plan identifies the need to 'communicate our ambition and success' as one of its three key enablers.

The UL Strategic Plan calls for operational excellence in marketing, communications and brand development to help achieve real impact in these areas and, as the plan indicates, to:

'Provide the operational capacity, expertise and infrastructure for UL to develop and implement integrated strategies, plans and operations to optimise UL's image and reputation; and to closely align strategic communications and marketing activity to strategic objectives'

Consequently, this proposal presents a university-wide Marketing and Communications (M&C) strategy, comprising several specific strategic strands.

It introduces a centralised support unit consisting of experts to deliver quality services to address the university's key purposes and to assist each of UL's faculty and business units to achieve their own plans. This strategy takes a progressive approach to building the M&C infrastructure and capacity for engaging UL's audience more effectively, aiming to focus on key and essential developments now and to build upon these going forward; steps by which UL can develop to compete where it has decided to compete in the areas of research reputation, international profile, undergraduate and post-graduate recruitment and accentuating the distinctiveness of the sum of these parts.

Of equal importance, it introduces a joined-up, integrated and consistent approach to improve external client engagement so that the UL's overall profile and reputation with external priority audiences, becomes consistent and each of its market-facing areas communicate to the highest standard.

Background

Universities now have well-resourced marketing and communications capacity, often comparable to that found in industry and enterprise. They have recognised that a marketing approach and marketing and communications tools can be adapted with the purpose of broadening their institutional impact across diverse client and stakeholder groups.

To date, UL has taken a devolved approach to marketing and communications. That is, each of its parts undertakes marketing and communications at a departmental level. Aside from some centralised templates and guidelines, strategy and outputs are set at a localised level. In addition to this being a reflection of the segmented structure of a university, it has also been a product of necessity in the absence of a central, expert M&C support division at UL.

In 2014, in order to address the university's needs in this area, UL commissioned a review and report into UL's approach to marketing, communications and external engagement. Its findings and recommendations provided the foundation for recent developments.

In 2015, UL appointed a Director of Marketing and Communications with the purpose of leading the development and performance of a university-wide marketing and communications strategy and plan. At that time, UL also brought together individuals and small functions working in related areas to create an embryonic marketing and communications division.

« **… marketing and communications tools can be adapted with the purpose of broadening their institutional impact across diverse client and stakeholder groups.**

Executive Summary

Aim
To enable UL to communicate and market its potential for growth and increased impact to all of its strategic audiences.

Goal
Deliver the marketing, communications, web and brand support services required to help enable the achievement of the ambitious targets set our in UL's Strategic Plan which seeks to 'build on our achievements, raise our international profile and accentuate our distinctiveness'. Ultimately, this is about UL standing out from the crowd!
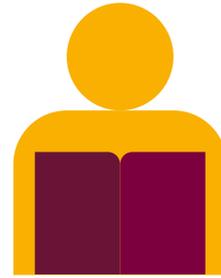
Objective
To provide UL with a consistent, integrated and expert approach to promoting its core activities and achievements to its audiences and markets.
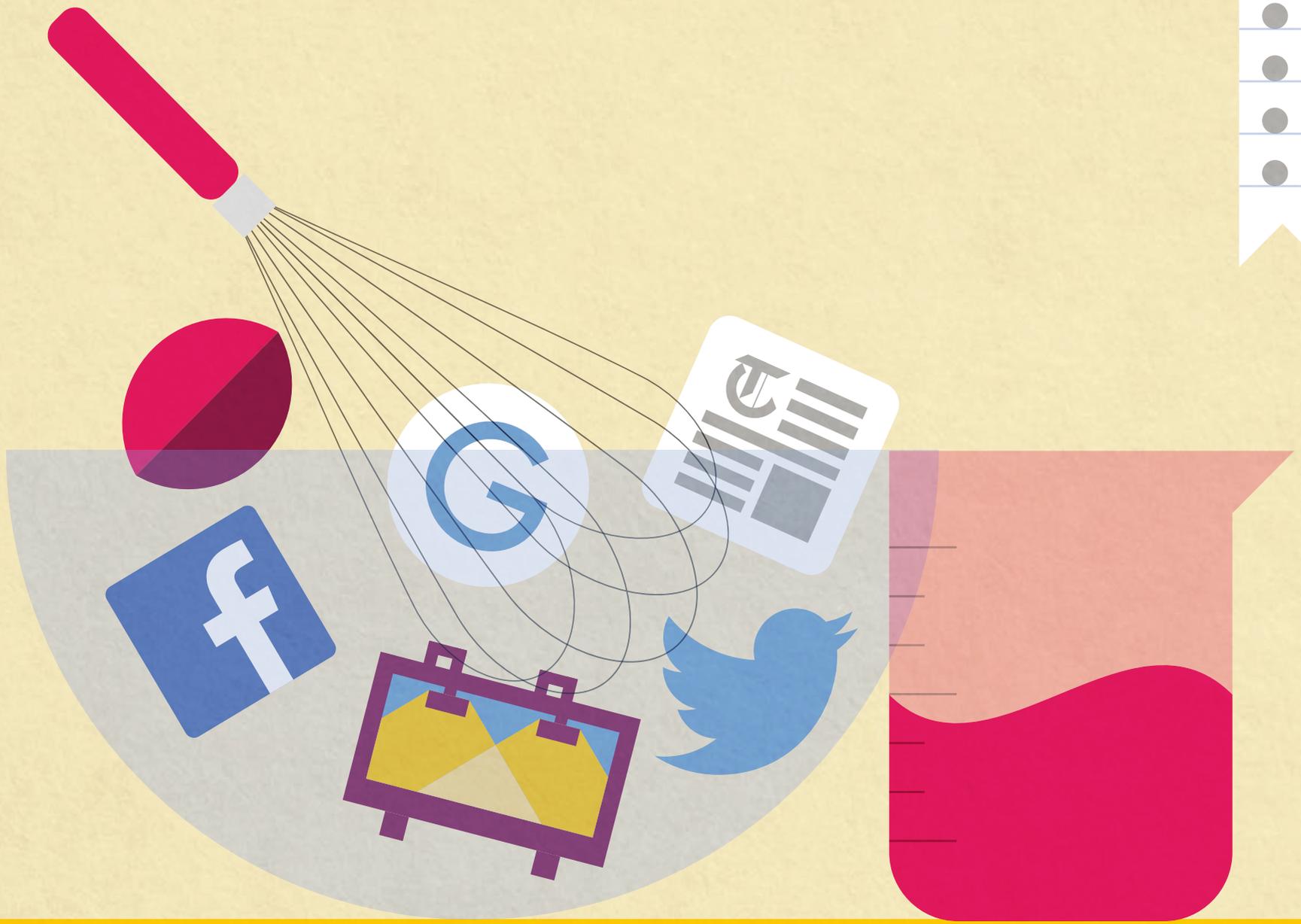
Approach

1

Establish a clear and consistent UL proposition for the university as a whole.

2

Develop and support a series of primary UL messages.

3

Design UL's marketing and communications around its audience(s) and customers –putting the end user first. Communicate and market with a focus on creativity, flair and originality.

4

Establish 'a sum of the parts' approach to marketing and communications through an inclusive, partnership approach to projects, initiatives and campaigns.
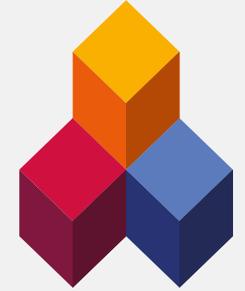
5

Translate UL stories into compelling media content.

6

Communicate and market with a focus on creativity, flair and originality.

Actions

1

Infrastructure

A
Build a world-class university website.

B
Create a compelling brand strategy around a clear UL proposition.

C
Develop an integrated Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system that supports a consistently high-quality experience.

2

Standards

A
Develop an outstanding social and digital media presence.

B
Create an integrated UL network that connects its entire people.

C
Establish market research as an upstream feature of the UL business model.

3

Operational

A
Establish integrated marketing teams to serve our core audiences.

B
Create a marketing and communications team equipped to provide professional, expert support across the university.

C
Develop a market intelligence and data analysis service for faculty and key business units.

The Strategy

The M&C strategy project was initiated by the UL Marketing and External Relations Committee, (MERC), in April 2016.

The project included a programme of considerable consultation and deliberation which is covered fully in the key supporting documents to this proposal, being:

The Project Report

The Project Report details the consultation undertaken which, in summary, comprised meetings with various groups, consultative interviews and workshops. It draws from the Project Grid, provides further observations and conclusions and makes recommendations that have informed this strategy proposal.

The Marketing & Communications Project Grid

This identifies the many components that were incorporated in the project and which informed the report. It summarises the inputs received through the consultation programme and, in some cases, initial observations. An annex to that grid provides a summary of structure and staffing comparisons with four equivalent UK universities' marketing and communications functions. An Irish equivalent was not available.

Resource Implementation

This is a summary of the key investments, human resource expertise and strategic projects, to be delivered to move this strategy from aspiration to actual impact. It highlights current approach, current resources and contrasts them with the resource and implementation investment required if this strategy is to be achieved.

Key Strategies

There are six key strategies by which a M&C strategy can support the delivery of the 2015-19 UL Strategic Plan.
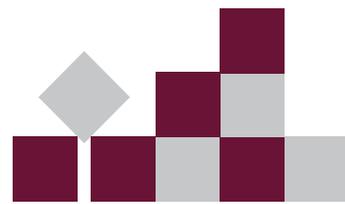
A coherent and powerful brand.

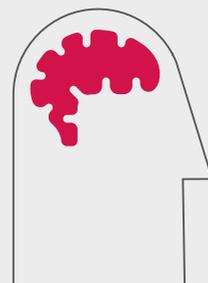**Creating a world class user experience.**
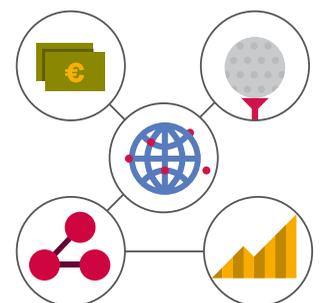
The sum of the parts.

Putting our audiences and markets first.

Expertise in marketing, communications, web and branding.

M&C planning and operations informed by insight and intelligence.

Key Strategies

1

A Coherent and Powerful Brand

Action: to deliver a comprehensive brand, messaging and positioning strategy to be deployed university-wide.

In summary, the plan is to agree to top-line proposition that UL can integrate into its external message and allow it to permeate its brand identity. The proposal is for UL to be clear, consistent and disciplined in promoting a strong reputation externally that is both founded on genuine strengths and potential and sufficiently inclusive of what is now a very broad university offering.

From workshops and consultation in developing this plan, there has been wholehearted support for UL to adopt a single, unified brand proposition for marketing, communications and wider external engagement purposes. This primary proposition message consists of UL, as a university that is external facing and exceptionally engaged and responsive with industry, commerce and community; a university that places graduate employability as a top line priority and that offers incredible access between education, research and business. UL is determined to build this research-led reputation over the lifetime of UL's Strategic Plan.

This primary proposition already permeates UL's reputation – this is a proposal to simply harness this message for maximum leverage. Aligned to it will be the wider range of Unique Selling Points (USP's) that already define UL across UL Sport, the campus experience, its cultural infrastructure and initiatives.

Providing a firm foundation for the core brand proposition there are a number of key messaging strands, identified through the project, that highlight the broader range of benefits and features for UL clients. These serve to both expand awareness of the university and deliver evidence of its benefits and features; its quality and value in its own right and in a competitive context.

Specific propositions will also continue to address the specific needs of any given audience – adding to and drawing from the strength of the primary brand proposition. As examples, UL will present a cohesive and stronger identity to the industry and business sector - CPE, CoOp, the Kemmy Business School, Research and proposition to this strategically important audience.

A comprehensive brand strategy for UL will be delivered, beginning with a baseline reputation and perception audit, which we will use to build our brand strategy.

2

The Sum of the Parts

Action: to adopt an M&C operational structure designed to achieve maximum return on investment.

This is a proposal for UL to engage externally in a more joined-up and consistent way. It is a proposal that puts UL's strategic audiences first – a number of UL divisions and departments are engaging the same audience independently of each of other, this is a plan for them to do so in a more unified way.

Many opportunities – and probably efficiencies – are being lost through the current compartmentalised approach. Strategically, it is key to recognise that a 'client' (whether consumer, community or business) has one journey and holds one view. It is thus also key to recognise that the university needs to present and perform consistently and effectively in shaping that journey.

The strategic recommendation is that appropriate internal stakeholders and functions integrate planning, operations and communications. To bring this together, we recommend establishing four steering groups to focus on key business purposes:

1. Undergraduate Recruitment Group;
2. Postgraduate Recruitment Group;
3. University to Business Development (U2B) Group; and,
4. International Development M&C Group.

A quarterly review group reporting to Executive Committee would help support and drive integration of these audience-focused business groups.

3

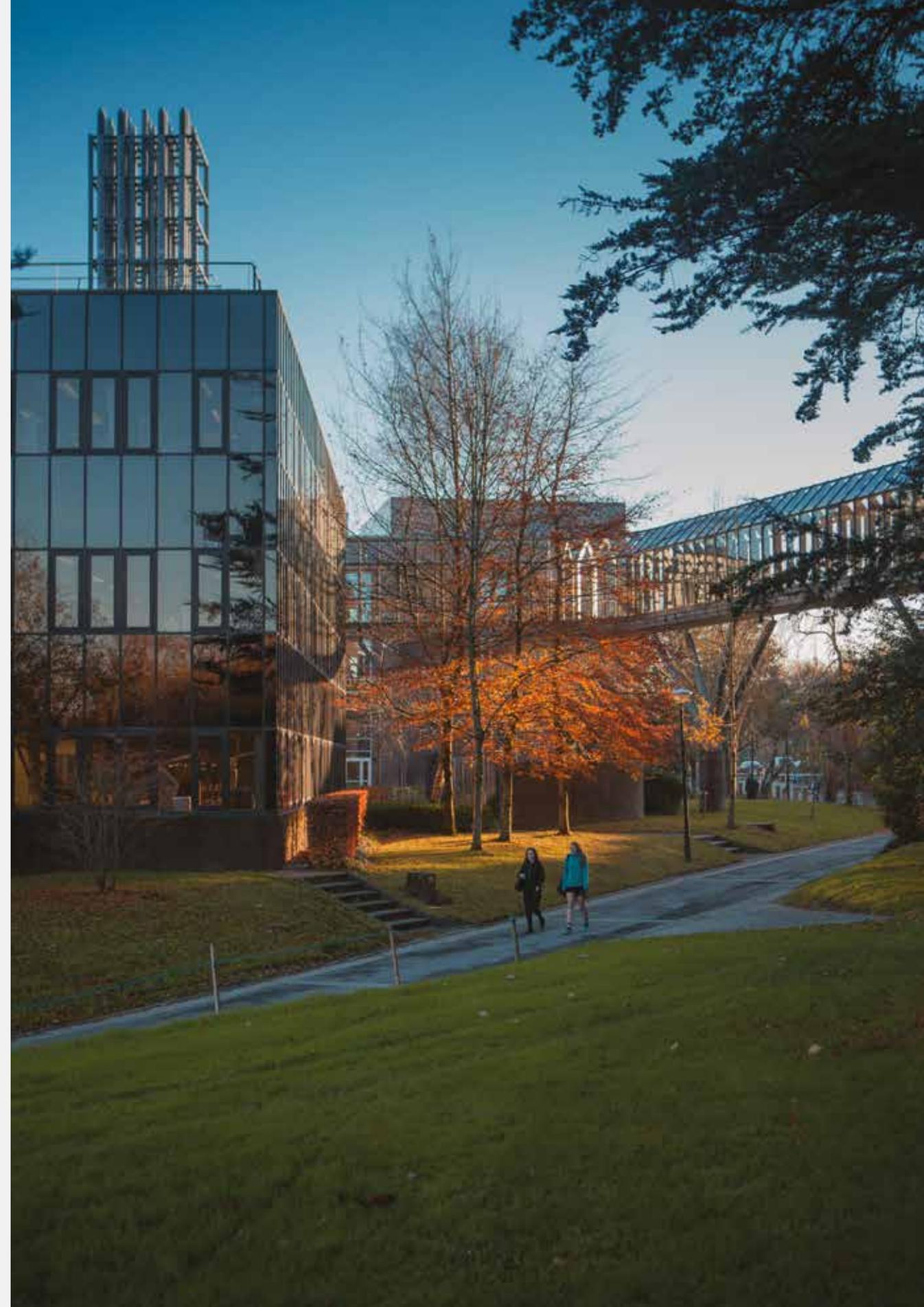# Expertise in Marketing, Communication, Web & Branding

Action: recruit and restructure to create an expert M&C hub to support university-wide business aims.

As industry knows, a strong brand and marketing excellence are key to success. This strategy proposes that UL give priority to its brand and how it is marketed. Creating a central M&C Division, that possess the knowledge, skills and resources to provide the expert marketing and communications services required to help UL achieve its ambitious growth targets, is proposed.

The tradition of diverse parts of the University assigning non-experts to undertake intermittent marketing was born of out necessity but is a poor return on investment; it offers minimum scope for:

1. Coordination or leadership;
2. A consistent direction or standard approach; and
3. Efficient use of resources. Web is a good example of this inefficiency but publications, advertising, social media are similarly lacking consistency.

A central tenet of this proposal is that marketing and communications is an expert and increasingly specialised activity. Within UL the evidence supports the view that M&C has been engaged as downstream activity across faculty and business units with no consistent expertise; this is self-evidently both ineffective and costly. This strategy therefore proposes that UL resources a central expert Marketing and Communications Division to support the university as a whole, its faculty and its key business units.

4

Putting Our Audiences and Our Markets First

Action: communicate in a consistently compelling way to an increasingly diverse UL audience.

To communicate effectively, a university needs to know its message, know its audiences and hone that message to maximum effect on the channels that connect best with each audience.

Recruitment of Clients (including all faculty, graduate school and research office)

UL's various student audiences are distinct in nature and are processed via multiple admissions routes. If marketing is primarily about the generation of leads via the creation of a larger and deeper market share, these multiple admissions offices are the point of *sale* for UL. The focus should be to ensure a consistency in sales effectiveness – even in such a diffuse business model. The focus should also be to integrate UL's multiple admissions routes – both for CRM purposes but also to begin to build a data-

informed approach to marketing. The absence of a data strategy, a CRM and an integrated approach admission at PG level all currently hinder effective marketing and sales.

Research, Science and Innovation Clients for University-To-Business (U2B) Development

Effectively communicating a compelling research and innovation story has to be core to UL's Strategic Plan as it focusses on UL becoming a 'research-led' university. Many factors are critical to achieving the research-led reputation outside of brand and M&C. However, an accelerated approach to building UL's national and international research reputation with both peer and wider strategic audiences should be a factor at business level.

This is a proposal for UL M&C to be resourced to a standard that allows it to compete with comparable universities. For example, it aims to deliver a full-time promotion of the UL research and innovation story targeted at strategic audiences, hosted across the correct channels and achieving real impact through compelling content. This is to be consistent with UL's strategic plan of building a research-led profile.

The Return on Investment (ROI) for UL is to achieve the research and innovation reputation that its competitor universities are achieving and in so doing, provide researchers with the profile and exposure that

can help drive connections with their respective research activities. This actions speaks to the ambitious plans set out in UL's Strategic Plan

Communicating with a Focus on Creativity, Flair and Originality

Telling the UL story is the cornerstone of the communications strategy. It requires clear internal channels for stories – or 'content' – to be captured by a central communications team with the expert skills to translate these academic, expert and research-based endeavours into compelling stories that connect with significantly larger target audiences and the wider public through the most appropriate communications channels. The UL story should be told with colour, personality, creativity, and the avoidance of outmoded convention.

This is where the marketing and communications perspectives merge: compelling content on the website is the launch pad for effective communications and, increasingly, social media provides the channels to UL's target audiences alongside traditional media.

The independent, autonomous faculty and business unit perspective will be aided by a professional approach to communications that is increasingly supported by the M&C infrastructure that competitors have developed across web, brand and social media.

UL Public Experts

The mutual interest of institution and

academics are served when experts with the appetite and ability to contribute to public policy and discourse are effectively supported to realise the potential ROI in terms of reputation and profile building. This strategy proposes to put a structure in place that proactively supports UL academics with the potential and interest to develop a public expert dimension to their work and career.

UL M&C will manage an annual programme of briefings, workshops and communications support for UL academic and research community colleagues and match this with a national-level network that provides the public platform required to build individual profiles. Communications experts will support, advise and promote UL experts who are interested in contributing to regional and national policy debates and forums. UL will also become a founding member of the RTE led Brainstorm initiative. Brainstorm aims to serve both the need for greater exposure for Irish public academics and greater access to their commentary for the public and wider media.

5

Creating a World Class User Experience

Action: introduce a new UL website and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system.

UL needs a web presence that serves its many audiences and that makes engaging with UL online a consistently easy experience; internally, UL needs to integrate its many reception points with its external audiences so that their experiences become consistently positive and optimised for maximum business success. The priority areas in need of action are:

A) WEBSITE

A compelling web profile and proposition is of paramount importance to any university and especially so to a university with the ambition of UL's Strategic Plan. The internationalisation aims of UL's Strategic Plan speak to a global audience whose first impression of UL will be online. Equally, the recruitment ambition articulated requires a national-level web strategy that matches the presence being achieved by the wider sector.

Audiences that are increasingly, and often almost wholly, reliant on web communications will judge the calibre of an institution on its online content and performance. For these reasons and for the fact that virtually all external engagement refers back to the UL website and is founded on a baseline of online excellence, a transformation of UL's current website has to be a high priority for this marketing and communications strategy.

Central to this proposal is a web presence that, first and foremost, serves the user and audience experience and requirements; a UL website that is fit for purpose in terms of impact, presentation, user experience, content and conversion – serving all stages of customer engagement from 'first look' to detailed searches and consequent enquiry.

The project timeline to UL having a high performing website that matches and outperforms competitor universities is a probable two-year time frame, hence the web strategy requires both a short-term 'remedy' to the current website and, alongside this, a new website project.

The current model of devolved web development is inefficient, ineffective and a poor return on investment. It lacks a central arbiter to set a consistently high standard that aligns with an effective web development policy. It is not informed by a user-experience perspective, web and marketing best practice or a vendor management approach informed by web development excellence.

The proposal is to replace this current approach with a central, professional service that is equipped to ensure UL presents itself online effectively.

The progress that needs to be made is as follows:

1. UL's web activity is to transfer from UL's IT Division to UL's M&C Division – reflecting a move from web as IT infrastructure to web as a principle means of communication and engagement with multiple UL audiences regionally, nationally and internationally;

2. UL web requires leadership informed by expertise - M&C wish to provide this and this strategy seeks the resources to provide it;

3. There is a need to recruit and establish a team that will enable the university to better address the pressing short-term issues in the current site. UL requires the capacity to maintain a high quality website and web presence, so a web team, comparable to competitor universities, is a priority. Around this, the current devolved approach to web development would be replaced by an expert central web team that is equipped to ensure a consistent level of excellence is available to faculty and business units;

4. An early priority is a programme to audit UL's current website, to map the content requirements of our audiences and to embark on a content generation programme to ensure the university is maximising its offer;

5. Ensure ul.ie is optimised for Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) purposes; and,

6. A comprehensive user needs and experience (UX) project to ensure the future site is user/audience oriented is planned. This would equip UL with a path to developing a web presence that puts our current and prospective online audience first.

A detailed project plan for the delivery of a new UL website will be delivered as the first step to what will be a complex project process.

B) Enquiry Capture, Enquirer Response and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Processes

Action: introduce an operational model and CRM system that promotes consistent excellence in how UL markets itself and converts leads to applications and successful admissions for all UL recruitment.

It is essential to optimise the capture of 'enquiries' and interest from prospective students, at all levels, if UL is to achieve its recruitment targets as defined in UL's

Key Strategies

5

Strategic Plan. Achieving a consistent quality and integrated handling of enquiries is a central feature of those universities that UL seeks to compete with and it is a priority proposal of this strategy.

A strong recommendation is for the establishment of an enquiries and information function for undergraduate and postgraduate related enquiries with aims to:

1. Manage the capture of enquiries and the establishment of customer relationship management processes to maximise consumers' choice of UL through the various stages of their journey;

2. Achieve excellence in customer relations and customer data management which are a key to the new approach to marketing; and,

3. Accomplish excellence in the provision of information requested by prospective students and stakeholders and in the appropriate follow-up.

Separating marketing and sales is, ultimately, a false dichotomy – when successfully applied, it should be one seamless journey. However, at postgraduate level, UL chooses to operate multiple entry/conversion/sales points – faculty, IED, Graduate School, CPE etc. A strategy to achieve excellence in converting demand generated by marketing will require a less fragmented or diffuse approach to admitting students. This strategy recommends the

establishment of a first-contact centre/team with clear pointers to this function from marketing outputs and from the increasing availability of data and marketing analytics. Operationally, the existing admission office presents the most practical location in UL's current operational structure for undergraduate conversion. Postgraduate is more diffuse due to UL's multiple postgraduate entry points. A reconstituted Graduate School with a focus on the sales and CRM approach to recruitment may offer the equivalent practical location for postgraduate.

As previously recommended, undergraduate and postgraduate should be led by two audience focused groups. However, a single, unified UL CRM should integrate them.

Of course, this is a strategy and so the operational application of the recommendations is for UL to determine.

C) Enquirer / Client Engagement and Conversion Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Systems

Action: acquire a university-wide CRM.

Whilst the planning and development of the processes to maximise the conversion of enquirers and applicants is the focus above, there is a need to secure a system that will enable the effective capture of these constituencies and facilitate the delivery of the desired communications
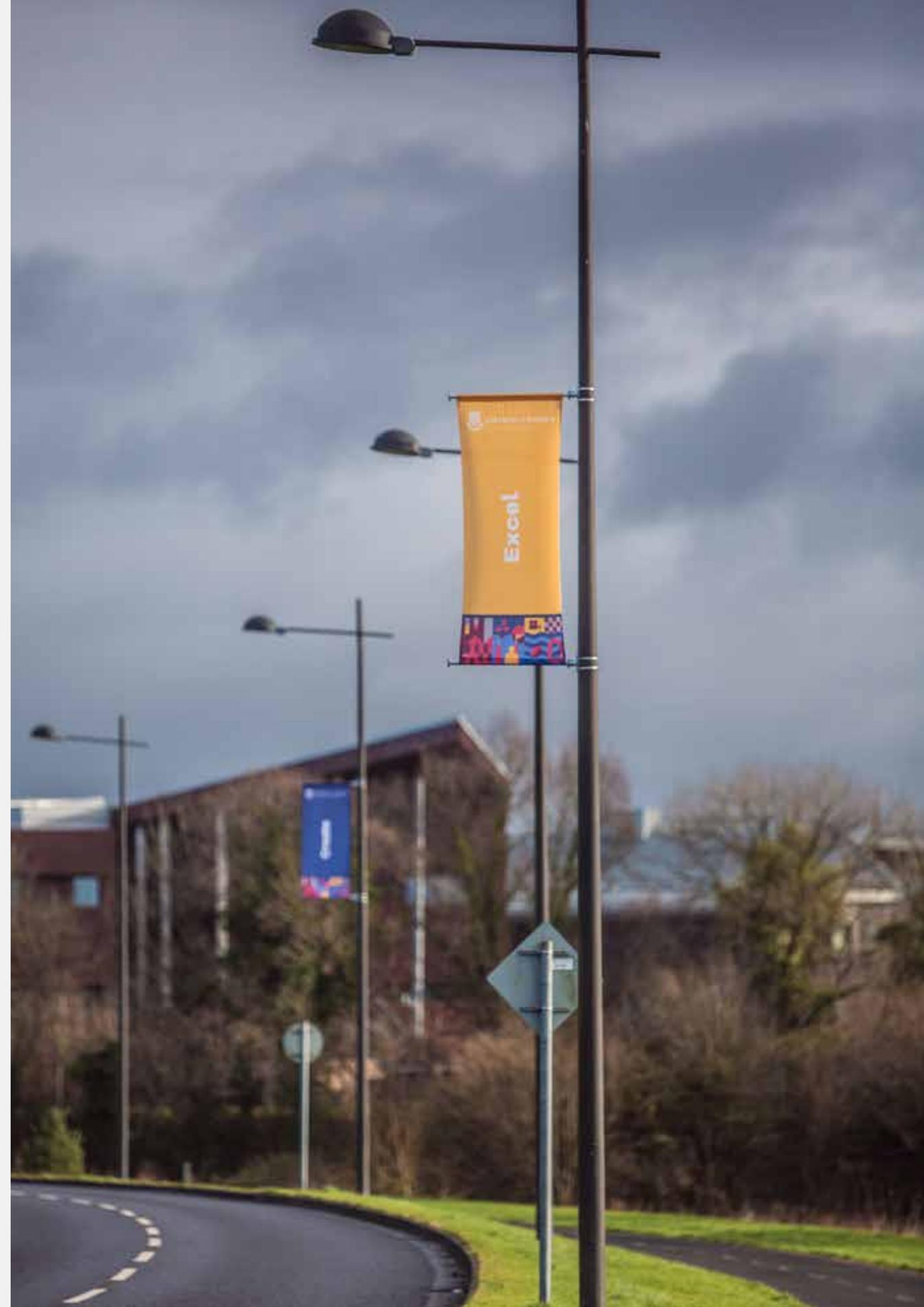
Key Strategies

campaigns and engagement activity. The strategy therefore proposes the selection, acquisition and implementation of a CRM system that enables the effective delivery of the CRM process, as above.

D) Social Media

Action: implement the UL social media strategy that seeks to rapidly build and engage UL's social audiences as a means to supporting branding, recruitment marketing and profile building.

Social media is a dominant medium for many of UL's core audiences – it is where many of UL's strategic audiences reside and currently competitor universities are engaging with this audience on social media much more effectively due to having invested in a social media strategy.

UL's Social Media Strategy aims to:

1. Align all of UL's official social media accounts on one publishing platform;

2. Allow UL to promote its primary message to its diverse audiences;

3. Allow each faculty and business area access to a much wider audience via an integrated publishing platform and standard than that achieved

by a stand-alone approach;

4. Collectively promote excellence in UL's social media content and tone; and,

5. Undertake campaigns for both recruitment and industry audiences that are compelling, scalable, targeted and measurable.

E) Marketing and Communications Production

Action: introduce a quality, minimum standard to all UL collateral via a centralised support service to faculty and business units that promotes a consistently high standard to how UL, as a sum of many parts, portrays itself to external audiences through content, design and branding.

Currently, there are various production houses working directly with faculty and/or business units producing online and offline outputs of varying presentation and quality. To some extent, the development of a UL house-style is addressing this. However, a concern arises whereby the cost to the university in a wholly outsourced and devolved solution in this area cannot deliver efficiency or maximum return on these investments. UL M&C, as reconfigured and resourced in this strategy, can provide a central content conduit for both faculty and business units. This would deliver a higher quality content production process, better

content and collateral for stakeholders and real efficiencies for UL financially. Moreover, the external audience would begin to experience a single, unified UL. This would help inform the aforementioned brand strategy too.

The recommendation here is to establish a production unit through which the university can better build its brand and image whilst saving costs and providing faculty and business units with solutions that address their needs whilst adding to the university's profile building.

### F) M&C Planning and Operations Informed by Insight and Intelligence

Action: Invest in a system that means that all to-market, external facing activity is informed by data, research and intelligence as a means to achieve greater efficiency and greater competitive edge.

The recommendation is that a Data, Research and Intelligence group is established within which all key stakeholders can contribute to the development of the capture, sharing and purposed analysis and interpretation of inputs to inform the university's plans and operations in many respects, not least to include marketing and communications.

Marketing and communications planning and operations have largely been guided

by limited data, anecdotal evidence and judgement and, to a very limited extent, the experience and advice of external agencies. In the absence until recently of a cohered M&C function the level of demand for consumer and market insight has been low. Consequently, as the report indicates, there is no coordination and integration of the sources of data, research and intelligence or the interpretation of these to guide marketing planning and operations.

A key role and early aim of the group would be to complete a full audit of all current and potential data, research and intelligence inputs to UL' s decision making and operational performance. And from this to then evaluate their potential and value and, to recommend the processes and resources required to optimise these resources going forward.
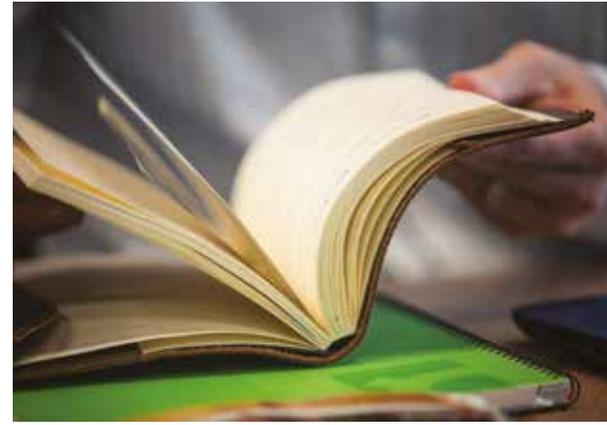
Ultimately, we want to make UL stand out from the crowd