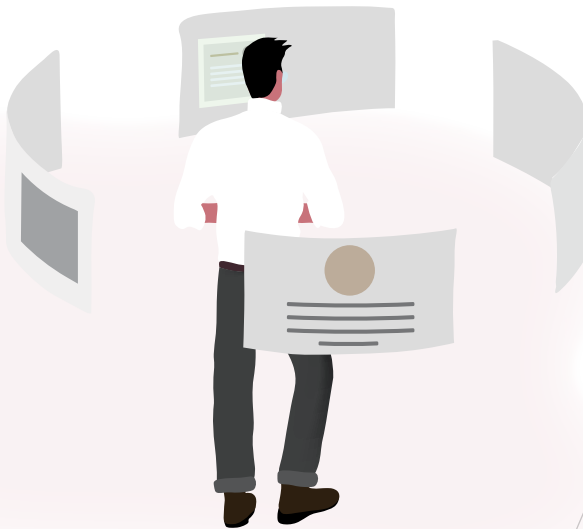# The Access Platform

ThinkTAP Research paper #2

Collaborate: using students as content creators

How universities are harnessing the creativity of their most powerful assets; their students!

INTRODUCTION

Hey! Welcome to our second ThinkTAP research paper!

The Access Platform

This time we're digging deeper into peer recruitment strategies and looking at how universities collaborate with student content creators to ensure their digital channels are packed full of incredible, engaging and authentic content.

Over the course of this report, we'll look at:

01 why you should be working with your students

02 how you can incentivise and manage them

03 a couple of our favourite case studies that we'll pick out

04 the analysis of the results of our own survey about working with student content creators

05 plenty of tips and inspiration to help you get started

OUR SURVEY

The starting point for this research paper was a survey we put out to the Higher Education Social Media community during the first quarter of 2019. It was an in-depth, largely qualitative survey that was answered by representatives of 11 universities across the United Kingdom, Republic of Ireland and the United States of America.

ABOUT US

We're The Access Platform by the way - hi! We're redefining student recruitment with our fantastic tool, which makes it really easy for you to supercharge your peer recruitment efforts by connecting prospective students to people already studying with you.

Our **chat feature** allows prospects to talk directly to your student ambassadors - it's visible, authentic engagement.

While our **content feature** allows you to harness the creativity of your current students, source user-generated content and publish directly to your social media channels and TAP page – all from one

On top of that, our **FAQs feature** offers genuine and excellent answers to common queries, written by your current students.

You can find out more about us at **theaccessplatform.com**

WHY WORK WITH STUDENT CONTENT CREATORS?

When it comes to Generation Z - who, let's face it, probably make up a significant chunk of your target audience - they crave hyperpersonal experiences. More than that, they want to hear from people they can relate to, and they want to do it on social media.

85% of Gen-Z learn about new products and brands through social media (1)

With that in mind, it's more important than ever for universities to have vibrant and attractive social media channels. And, spoiler alert, collaborating with your students is one of the most effective ways of doing this!

WHAT'S ALREADY HAPPENING IN THE SECTOR?

Instagram and Snapchat takeovers have been popular for a while now, and it's easy to see why; they're incredibly personal channels where authentic human content thrives, they work for a variety of subjects - as well as staff and alumni too, and their plethora of fun features like stickers and GIFs make it a doddle to create engaging and interactive content. Universities have been using social media to help their international recruitment efforts in particular, and it's no wonder; check out our previous research paper, where we learned that a disproportionately high number of international students are engaging with university Instagram posts. Digital ambassador schemes - or those similar - have been around in some form since at least 2013, but have really become more powerful in recent years.

STUDENTS TRUST STUDENTS

Students are sceptical folk. They can smell a marketing message from a mile off and are far more likely to listen to a fellow student than anyone from your marketing or recruitment teams - regardless of how cool

Also, students don't trust brands; only 15% of consumers trust content created and shared by companies (2).

As it happens, 89% of university applicants want to see content created by current students and 80% of them choose their university based on word-of-mouth information. (3)

We reckon the case for collaborating with your student content creators is pretty clear; your current students know what prospective students want, so it makes logical sense to work alongside your student community to create the most engaging, interesting and insightful content possible. Your current students also understand the 'experience' of being at your university far better than a marketing/recruitment/comms professional ever can. Sure, you work there... but they are living it.

" "Ultimately students are universities' most powerful brand advocates and it's about finding ways to tap into their ideas, conversations and networks." (4)

Tasha Quinn, Social & Digital Media Officer at the University of Glasgow

References:
1. Hootsuite: https://blog.hootsuite.com/generation-z-statistics-social-marketers/
2. Go4Social: https://www.go4.social/blog02-50P2Pmarketing.html
3. UCAS Media
4. The Access Platform blog, February 2019: https://blog.theaccessplatform.com/social-media-student-stories/

OUR SURVEY SAID, PART 1

Here are some chunky stats from our survey into how universities are collaborating with student content creators - and there are more to come later in this report.

On average, **each university we surveyed has 14 content creators**, but it does vary massively - we saw a range of 1-32. In fact, one university we surveyed technically has 228 student ambassadors, when you take into account one-off guest bloggers.

228
Ambassadors

Average number of student ambassadors

14
Content Creators

The biggest number of content creators

Job titles for these students vary from university to university:

Social media ambassador

Student blogger

Student marketing ambassador

Student social media officer

Social and digital media intern

Student content creator

Digital ambassador

100% of the universities we surveyed pay their student content creators.

Most pay on an hourly basis, ranging from £9-£12 per hour, while some pay per piece of content created - for example, £25 per blog post, £25 per Instagram/ Snapchat takeover and £50 per vlog.

The most popular platform for student-created content

Instagram	82%
Facebook	73%
Student Blog Pages	73%
Twitter	55%
Snapchat	36%

The most popular types of content created by students are **Instagram takeovers, vlogs and photography** - most often with a focus on student experience.

Instagram is the most popular platform of choice for student created content (82%), followed by Facebook and student blog pages (both 73%). Twitter (55%) and Snapchat (36%) are less popular.

Most universities are using students to create content for their main, corporate channels - 64% in fact. 18% of those institutions have separate digital ambassador accounts, while 9% have both.

How frequently student-created content is posted ranges wildy, from **once a month to every single day.**

DIGITAL AMBASSADOR SCHEMES

We're big advocates of digital ambassador schemes here at The Access Platform. Why? Because they are a great way to generate digital channels!

Not only can your digital ambassadors create great content and cover events you might otherwise not be able to make, they can also be that critical friend when it comes to brainstorming new ideas and campaigns.

Our survey has taught us plenty about how universities are running their digital ambassador schemes right now.

81% of universities we surveyed provide their digital ambassadors with some form of training.

The content of this training ranged from evaluating other universities' channels and discussing brand guidelines, to crash courses in video editing and coding.

All universities we spoke to had very flexible working arrangements with their students - this is vital to keep them engaged with the work, and for them to feel respected. Also, it almost goes without saying that it's important for their academic studies and other commitments.

The areas most teams wanted to expand on were training, other opportunities for the ambassadors such as internships and time in office, and personal/professional development (one-to-ones).

19% of universities we spoke to said their students had direct access to the institution's social accounts (passwords), with 37% not having access, 19% having access for takeovers only and 9% only having access to some accounts.

Those that didn't provide their ambassadors with passwords to their profiles say it was due to security and management not allowing it, as well as previous experience resulting in lots of editing to correct mistakes.

CASE STUDY: ONE OF OUR OWN! REBECCA LONGHURST

Aside from generating amazing content, one of the most rewarding aspects of running a digital ambassador scheme is giving your students real work experience, genuine skills for their CV and tangible career benefits to take with them post-graduation. We know this, because we've seen it for ourselves.

Our Marketing and Content Manager, Rebecca Longhurst, started work with us right after graduating from the University of Sussex, where she was a 'Digital Media Guru' and where she learned a bunch of the skills that make her so good at her job now.

Here are some of Rebecca's reflections on the value of being a student ambassador.

Why did you apply to be a Digital Media Guru?

I've always been very career driven so was always on the lookout for opportunities to gain experience and improve my CV. Although I had some experience managing multiple social media channels, I didn't have any experience creating content for an institution and following a brief, so when I saw the social campaign calling for digital ambassadors, I had to apply. I also wanted to 'give back' to a university I loved, and my way of doing that was showcasing how great Sussex was on social media.

What did you enjoy most about the role?

My favourite part of the role was reflecting on my experience at Sussex and sharing what I'd learned at university during my degree. I was in my final year when I was a Digital Guru so it was a really nostalgic role to have as I approached graduation. During my time as a Guru, I was also introduced to the sector as a whole, and how running social media and marketing for a university is like, a *THING*. It was only when I attended CASE Social Media and Community Conference in March 2018 that I realised there was an entire world of jobs I had no idea existed before.

What challenges did you face as a digital ambassador?

The core challenge was probably finding creative ways to showcase a wide variety of topics. Possibly the most challenging brief we were given was to do an Instagram story about a new piece of research that had been conducted at Sussex. My fellow Guru, Edd, and I locked ourselves in a seminar room for 2 hours and created a story about this research, and it went down really well! It proved that making engaging content about somewhat confusing topics makes them far more accessible, and introduces it to an audience who may not have interacted with that content, had it been created by a scientist, or shared as a press release on Facebook. The moment you hand over something to your students, they'll add their own spin (and GIFs) to it, and more often than not, it will go down incredibly well.

What was your proudest moment as a Digital Media Guru?

I was helping out at the Freshers' Fair towards the end of my time working as a 'Digital Media Guru' and a fresher came up to me and said 'I've loved watching your content over the last year when I was looking at Sussex. I really want to apply to be a Guru too'. So I explained the process and gave her some advice for her application. Then a few weeks later I was scrolling on Twitter and saw she got the job. I've followed her content ever since and she's incredible, so the fact that my work for Sussex may have had the tiny impact of showing her what Sussex was all about, is definitely my proudest moment.

Which skills have you found most valuable after you graduated?

Learning about marketing campaigns and how they come together to promote a university was so insightful because I had zero knowledge of it before. Content creation and social scheduling was also incredibly valuable - pretty sure I've nailed finding the perfect GIF for every situation now. A skill I didn't expect to improve when I started as a Guru was public speaking. I got the opportunity to speak at a Higher Education social media conference and it was really helpful to practise speaking about something other than a topic I'd researched for my English degree.

What would be your top tip for any University wanting to run a successful digital ambassador scheme?

Give your ambassadors creative freedom and trust them to do a great job. They know what students want to see, so if you give them the tools and freedom to explore, you'll see some incredible content in return. Another major factor in accepting the role as a Digital Guru for me, was the flexibility in the working arrangement. With studying, society and sports, and a social life, it's *super* important universities offer roles that are flexible, and the teams coordinating the students are understanding if content doesn't get produced when students are busy.

seen

Rebecca is @becca_longhurst on Twitter

OUR SURVEY SAID, PART 2

You've seen some of the key stats from our survey, now for some more juicy insights. We were blessed with plenty of great bits of advice about working with student content creators, so we've picked out some of our favourite responses here.

How student content creators were hired - what the application process was

"We headhunted some of them specifically having seen strong examples of content on their personal channels. Some of them replied to call outs on social for content creators."

"Tell us why you should be a digital ambassador in a piece of content, video, Instagram post, image, artwork, graphic, GIF, blog, poem etc. Be creative!"

Did they have any particular requirements from their students - a large social following, for example?

"For general ambassador work they need to be able to demonstrate an ability to use different social platforms in an engaging and student-friendly way. Our vloggers need to be able to demonstrate an ability to speak confidently on camera, and to film and edit their own videos, preferably with a channel of their own (we're not fussed about subscriber count, just the ability to film/edit interesting content)."

"Their following wasn't relevant but their online behaviour was a huge factor. One applicant had a massive following but regularly trolled/bullied."

What skills they were actually looking for...

"Enthusiasm was the most important factor when recruiting; some applicants did have previous social media/blogging experience which we indicated was useful, but some of those we hired had no experience, just demonstrated good writing

and strong content examples in their application, plus enthusiasm for the role."

"The mock assignment helps us judge if the student has an eye for capturing/identifying content. We can train them to take better photos, write better copy, but the ability to see things on the fly is crucial."

Here's why students actually applied for these roles...

"To give something back to the university, to help students in your situation make the right decisions on where/what to study at university, to inspire young people about Higher Education, for skills on a CV and work experience, to get your work seen by thousands on a public channel."

"Practical work experience within a social media team. Chance to share content you create with a wide audience. Build your profile for future career opportunities. Access to university events. Training opportunities. Flexible working arrangements."

How the various digital ambassador schemes have evolved over time...

"The scheme has changed in the sense that it's helped to shift our social channels to be far more engaging with target audiences than it used to be. Even current students are getting involved so we're creating that team community I strived for."

"It's more informal and they're given more freedom now."

What sort of impact students have made on their universities' channels...

"The student blogs and vlogs have some of our best engagement. Prospective students and freshers respond particularly well to the content."

"Much more authentic, expands my capacity and the content capture/creation and dissemination capacity immensely for a low cost."

Some of the challenges of running digital ambassador schemes...

"Although the WhatsApp group is great, conversations sometimes pop up out of office hours, which means we're 'on' almost all the time. We're going to try to encourage keeping conversations to working hours."

| "Senior stakeholders who don't have a clue about anything digital!"

What does university management think?

"Upper management are unaware of the initiative I'd imagine. We are within budget and meeting objectives so they don't care as such."

"Once we proved the value the students were adding to our content our management supported us in hiring them on an hourly pay basis. To prove their worth we sent reports including stats on the content they created to senior management."

Where universities would like to take their ambassador schemes in the future...

"Better training, more funding for the programme to hire more students. Expand to have blog editors, and vloggers at a minimum."

"We would like to launch a student podcast with our interns as hosts. Also, we would like the students to finish the scheme with a body of work of a high quality that they can show future employers and new digital skills to aid them after graduation."

INCENTIVISING YOUR STUDENT CONTENT CREATORS

It's all well and good deciding you want to get your students involved on your digital channels, but how can you keep them incentivised and motivated to continually contribute amazing content for you?
It's a great question, and it's one we can help with - in case you hadn't noticed already, we're quite big on student ambassadors! In fact, we recently quizzed a bunch of current student ambassadors to find out why they do it and what motivates them.

We found that students become ambassadors for a number of reasons:

To make a difference

by helping others who are making the life-changing decision of applying to university

To gain experience

and employability skills for future job applications

To earn money

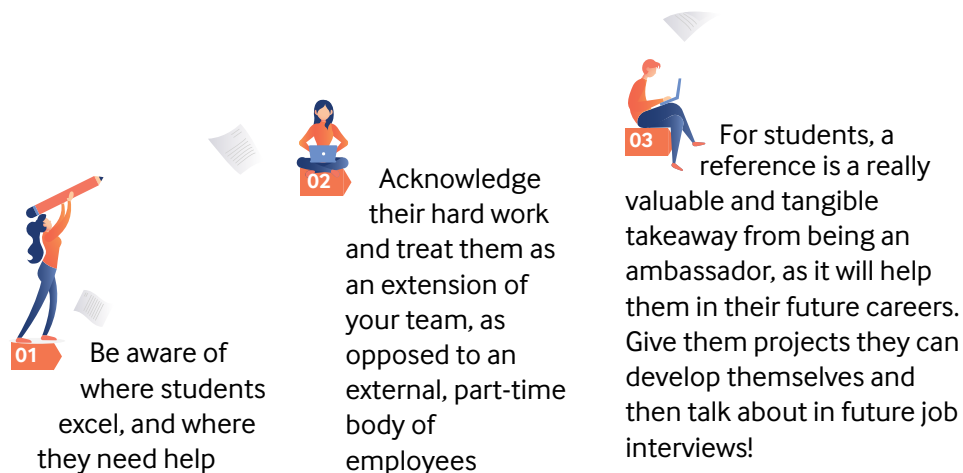alongside their studies and work flexibly

To support

and play a greater part in, their university community

50% of the ambassadors we surveyed said the best thing about being an ambassador was the feeling that they were making a difference to the life choices of others.

There are many ways to nurture and show support to your ambassadors:

01 Be aware of where students excel, and where they need help

02 Acknowledge their hard work and treat them as an extension of your team, as opposed to an external, part-time body of employees

03 For students, a reference is a really valuable and tangible takeaway from being an ambassador, as it will help them in their future careers. Give them projects they can develop themselves and then talk about in future job interviews!

(**Top tip**, in our Platform you can ensure your ambassadors are rewarded for building key career skills using TAP Career Points and showing them the career reference tool - contact us for more information)

MONEY

Average hourly pay from TAP research = £9.60

We were delighted to see that 100% of the universities we surveyed about student content creators pay their ambassadors for their work - although we know this isn't necessarily true of the whole sector.

Other incentives listed by people we surveyed included giving their students positive reinforcement they were creating excellent content, and keeping the role as varied and creative as possible.

COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR STUDENT CONTENT CREATORS

Another key part of running a successful student ambassador scheme is maintaining excellent communication with your team. Not only is this crucial for sending out requests for content, it's also a huge part of ensuring your students feel supported, part of your team and know where to turn to for support, if they need it.

We asked our survey respondents how they communicate with their student content creators and got a lot of love for **WhatsApp** in their answers - with one institution simply saying it was 'perfect'.

There were also plenty of shout-outs for **Facebook** - either using **Messenger or dedicated Facebook Groups** for student ambassadors.
As for email, our survey offered mixed results. Some found email really helpful - particularly as it offers a paper trail - whereas others didn't. In fact, one respondent told us 'students don't respond to emails'.

It's also worth noting the value of face-to-face communication as an add-on to all your digital efforts; **91% of universities we surveyed have regular meetings with their student content creators**, ranging from weekly to monthly, or just a couple of times per term.

These meetings are not only helpful to plan content and event coverage, but they also allow universities to look at reporting, insights and stats - giving them the chance to give useful feedback to their student content creators.

That's not forgetting the value of face-to-face communication as a way of regularly checking in and keeping everyone happy - after all, the better working relationship you have with your content creators, the better work they will do for you, as one respondent showed:

> "We have a very close working relationship with our ambassadors, we've managed to build a really tight knit and supportive community. We know their individual strengths and weaknesses, and can tailor content to specific individuals if we know they'll be particularly suited to it."

CONCLUSIONS

So, what have we learned here? Well...

- Students are the most persuasive/trusted group to prospective and current students

- They enjoy hearing about personal experiences

- Don't underestimate the value of student-created content

- Pay your student ambassadors

- Give your students meaty projects that allow them to express their creativity and build something they can put on their CV and talk about in interviews

- Don't treat your student content creators simply as hired guns; make them a proper part of your team

- Be aware of where students excel and where they might need more support

- Make it fun

- Trust them!

Keep reading for a load of solid gold tips to supercharge your student ambassador schemes

CASE STUDY: UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK

When it comes to picking an example of a university using student content creators for exceptional results, we rarely shout out anyone other than the University of Limerick (UL) in Ireland.

Their student-created content is truly magnificent. Seriously, it's won awards! You only have to look at the beautiful video made to celebrate UL winning **'Best Student Campus'** in 2019 to see what we mean - it's thoroughly captivating and, most impressively, was totally shot, produced and edited by their students.

This close relationship between the university and its student content creators started in the run-up to Christmas 2018.

Like many universities, UL wanted to post a festive video to mark the end of term and to wish their community a Merry Christmas. But, they didn't want to walk the well-trodden path of academics singing a carol or international students saying "Merry Christmas" in their native language, nor did they have the budget to go to a big agency.

So, UL's social media manager Tony Sheridan turned to some students, and recruited a crack team of student content creators whose work had already caught his eye.

Armed with a small budget and an idea of wanting a Christmas video to rival the annual tear-jerker from John Lewis, Tony left his students to it - and, wow, did they deliver.

The film - entirely made by those students - promoted wellbeing and self-care over Christmas and had exactly the tone that had been asked of it; the Irish Examiner featured it with the headline 'move over John Lewis'.

The results were spectacular; it was UL's most successful content ever, it was completed for a modest budget and the students involved got plenty from it too - something for their CV and enjoyed the process.

Tony Sheridan said:

> It was better than I could have expected and all of that credit has to go to the students involved. For one of the team it was really important - his relatives saw the finished product and, for the first time, they actually believed in him and his skills.
>
> It was actually an easy project to manage. The students were more bothered about kudos than money. They wanted a bit of leadership from me, and some clear expectations and deadlines. More than anything, though, I just had to trust them - and that resulted in a better product."

The festive video has completely changed how UL approaches content creation and working with student content creation; students are now a vital part of UL's content process. The university has worked with the same team of creators on subsequent projects and is expanding its collaboration scope to include journalism students, music technology students to create the beats and backing tracks and 'performing arts - voice' students to sing on them.

Aside from trusting your student content collaborators to do a great job, Tony's other top tip is to simply be as easy as possible to work for.

I rarely ask for an edit. Does it do what I asked those students to do? Is it relevant to our target audience? Is it on time? Does it look good? If so, I'm happy to say 'cool' and mark it as done.

I'll give a bit of direction and support when needed, but generally like to get across my idea and then get out of the way and let the students do their thing. It's worked pretty well so far!"

Tony Sheridan is @tonyismyname on Twitter.

5-POINT ACTION PLAN

Feeling inspired to kick-start your own student ambassador scheme?
Get off to a flying start with our action plan!

1 Level up your student ambassador recruitment campaigns

Look for diversity

Find students from a variety of backgrounds, covering a range of subjects and, ideally, in different years of study.

What is their motivation?

Find out exactly why students want to become an ambassador for you.

Use all possible avenues to promote your scheme

That means social media, email newsletter, Freshers' Fairs and even getting your academics to help.

Ask for examples of content they've created and links to their personal profiles

2 Give your ambassadors great training before they start

Get them together in person

Talk them through what it means to be an ambassador, what the role entails and what you expect from them.

Use role play

Allow your ambassadors to practice answering the sort of questions and queries prospective students might have. Evaluate the answers as a group and work out how they might be improved.

Be safe

Make sure your ambassadors know how to report anything that might concern them.

Don't forget technical training!

Your students might need to be shown how to use your office equipment, or might just appreciate a crash-course in video and/or audio editing software.

3 Keep your ambassadors incentivised and motivated

Remember why they got involved

Most student ambassadors do it to make a difference, be more involved with university life and gain tangible skills and experience that will help them as they look to begin their career post-graduation.

Pay them

Ambassadors also apply for such roles to earn a bit of extra cash, so don't cop out. They can't buy food or pay their rent with vouchers.

Make them part of your team

Let them work in your office and communicate with them regularly. Get to know them and learn where each ambassador excels as well as where they might need extra support.

Think bigger picture

Remember how important that career-focussed stuff is. Write references for your ambassadors and give them projects that allow them to build real skills and experience they could talk about at a job interview.

See more ➡

5-POINT ACTION PLAN

4

Collaborate to succeed

Give students creative freedom

Allowing your ambassadors to come up with their own ideas is important and demonstrates the value of their creativity, and results in the most authentic content possible.

Be flexible with working hours

Student life can be busy and timetables and commitments are continuously changing, so be as flexible as you can with timescales and hours. Ambassadors will really appreciate this!

Provide clear briefs

If you are after specific pieces of content, be clear with your instructions to allow students to perfect the content with minimum editing or re-shooting required.

Trust your ambassadors

Giving your students the same trust and respect as fellow colleagues is important to show they are valued and are on a level playing field with the rest of the team. If they've applied for the role, they are clearly passionate and invested in your institution, so trust them to create the best content!

5

Make your life easy - use our Content tool!

Request and gather content in a few clicks

You can create a group of your ambassadors (similar to a WhatsApp group) and ask for content whenever you need it - all requests go straight to an app on your ambassador's phone where they can create something and send it back instantly.

Easily publish

As soon as you receive content from your ambassadors, you can publish it to your social media channels and your TAP Page on your website in a few seconds.

Keep your accounts secure

With our Content feature you can fill your channels with student-created content without having to hand over your password.

Find out more about us, book a demo, check out our podcast
or sign up to our newsletter at theaccessplatform.com

Say hi on Twitter @TAPlatform

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