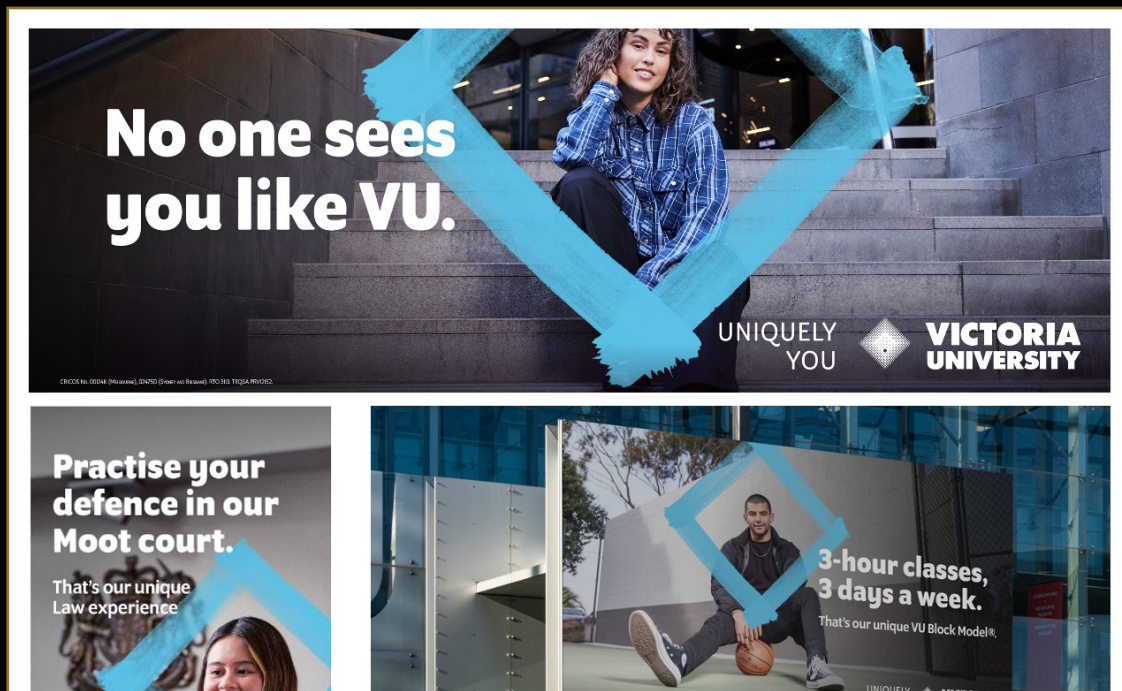


2025
Case Study



Entry ID Number
1239

Agency
Noisy Beast

Client
Victoria University

Title
Defying a Category in a State of
Decline to Deliver Breaking Results

Category
Challenger Brands

Author
David Brown
Noisy Beast



AANA

Google

© This case study is the property of Advertising Council Australia (ACA) and protected by copyright and intellectual property laws throughout the world. The case study can be used for personal reasons only and should not be reproduced, distributed, sold or published without the express approval of ACA. Any educational facility interested in using the case history for educational purposes should contact effies@adcouncil.org.au

1. Executive Summary & Why does this case deserve an award in this category? (10 points)

It was 2022 and Australia's university landscape was experiencing major generational change. Applications were declining as students shunned the traditional journey, and Victoria University (VU) was losing faster than its competitors. With total dedication, we upended the traditional model and set out to do something that no one else was: see the student as an individual.

In a category dominated by prestige, rankings and large budgets, VU found themselves unable to compete on the same terms, and it showed. The university was declining fastest in a shrinking market.¹

Three main players dominated the sector: Melbourne, Monash and Deakin.² Their ongoing fight to one-up each other had set a self-important, generic tone for the entire category. And with over half the total spend between them, one thing became clear: the more you spent, the more applications you got.³ The top three were controlling the positioning of every other university, meaning we weren't just taking on one competitor but the whole category.

It was a game VU couldn't win. With just a fraction of the spend and no prestigious reputation to fall back on, their lack of differentiation only fuelled their poor brand reputation, pushing them further down the ranks.³

So, we stopped trying to play the same game as everyone else. Instead, we left the category behind completely.

We didn't try to prove we were better. We set out to prove we were different. We challenged the dominant players, ignored the category's echo chamber of rankings and potential, and doubled down on the one thing they weren't talking about – the students. We embraced what made us and our audience stand apart and stuck with it.

The risk paid off.

Our new brand platform, Uniquely You, didn't just halt VU's downward trajectory – it turned it into unprecedented growth. By carving out a distinctive position that leaned into our students and told their authentic stories, we grew applications by 150% at a time when our category continued to decline.⁴

¹ Findings from the Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2022 student data, Australian Government Department of Education, 18 December 2023

² World University Rankings 2022, timeshighereducation.com, Aug 2021

³ Nielsen AQX, Jan 2022 - Nov 2023

⁴ Applications data sourced from INFOVU, as at 16/02/2023 compared to 13/03/2025

2. What was the strategic communications challenge? (10 points)

Victoria University was founded in 1916 to provide tertiary education to the children of Melbourne's blue-collar West. For over 100 years, the university held onto these roots in its mission to provide a practical education to prepare its students for the real world. But by 2022, this was no longer resonating. VU was struggling to stay competitive and facing a steady decline in student consideration and acquisition that saw no signs of improving.¹

(See figure 1)

Competitor challenge: There was no clear point of difference between competitors.

The category was dominated by several major players constantly trying to one-up each other. Deakin was trying to outdo Monash, and Monash was vying to take Melbourne's top place.² Their constant battle dictated the tone for everyone else, forcing them to follow suit. Phrases like "the future" and "your potential" were being used interchangeably by institutions as everyone began leaning on the same proof points. With nothing unique being said, competitors had to rely on institutional prestige and rankings to get ahead.

But the real issue? Communications had stopped being about students and turned into a copy-and-paste bragging contest. Instead of connecting with their audience, universities focused on themselves and their superiority, and, in their state of one-upmanship, were even taking media placements outside each other's campuses.²

(See figure 2)

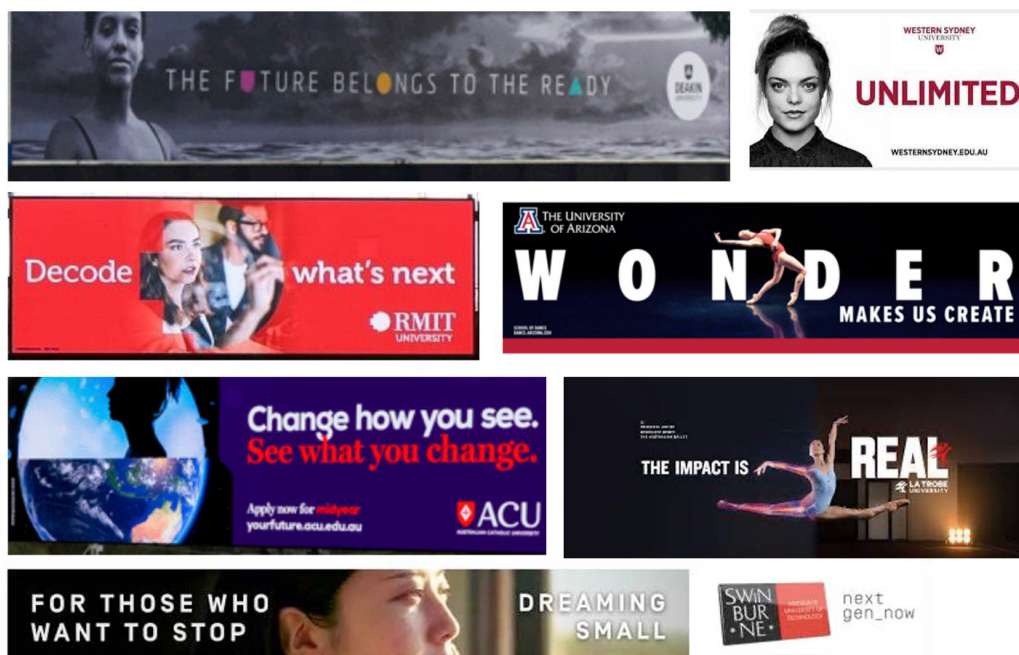


Figure 2
Creative Agency Pitch, May 2023

VU had fallen into this same pattern. But unlike the other unis, they didn't have a solid reputation and strong research ranking to rely on. With nothing differentiating them in

category, there was no incentive for students to choose them over other, more reputable or convenient options.

Commercial challenge: We were going up against bigger budgets.

Already the underdog in rankings and reputation, Victoria University was also going up against competitors with much larger budgets. In 2022, VU had a total media spend value of [REDACTED] with future budgets to remain similar. This was [REDACTED] below the category average and millions behind our closest competitors.³

And in this category, money matters. There was a clear link between spend and applications. It was no coincidence that the four biggest competitors were also the four biggest spenders, accounting for over half the total category spend.³

Making matters tougher, the entire sector competes at the same points in the year – start-of-year, mid-year, open day, preference and change of preference – with several blackout periods in between. Meaning 100% of everyone’s budget was crammed into just 50% of the year, and mostly condensed to metro Victoria.⁴

Without a clear point of difference, the only other way to win was to outspend. And for VU, that wasn’t an option.

(See figure 3)

Category challenge: Overall decline in students continuing to higher education.

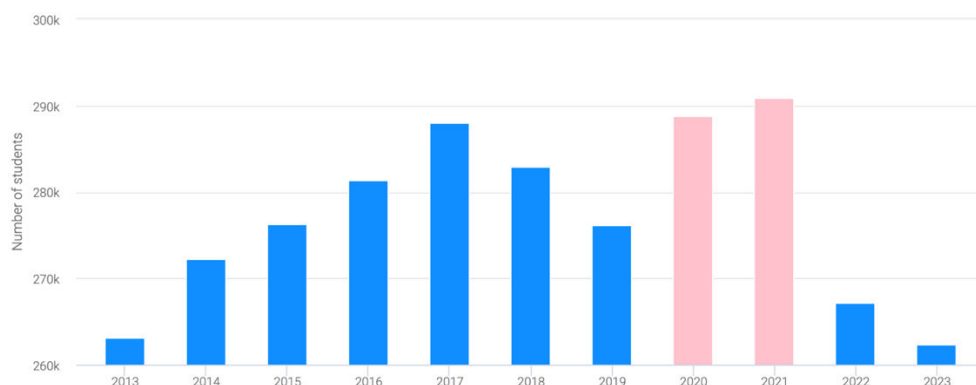
Our audience was placing increasingly less value on higher education in a major generational change. Gone were the days of the Year 12 rite of passage when a degree would guarantee a job, and here were the times when employers were prioritising experience over a piece of paper. Public confidence in Australian universities had steadily declined, dropping from 81.1% in 2008 to 67.9% in 2023.⁵ The result of this? Only 51% of Year 12 students enrolled in a higher education course in 2022, the lowest figure since 2017.⁶

But it didn’t end there. [REDACTED]. Student satisfaction across the board was falling⁷ at the same time cost of living was rising⁸. While everyone was experiencing higher dropout rates, this was a serious blow to VU. With a student base typically the first in their family to attend university, working multiple jobs and supporting dependents, their students were more at risk of dropping out due to financial concerns than most.

(See figure 4)

Figure 3: Number of domestic commencing undergraduate students from the past 11 years.

Download



Brand challenge: Students were dismissing VU as the ‘back-up’ option.

On top of everything else, VU faced a reputation problem. Despite strong prompted awareness, they were seen as a second-tier institution. [REDACTED]

(See figure 5)

Making matters worse was that the key influencers in students’ lives – parents, teachers, and advisors – were directing them toward the more established universities. The belief in attending these big players had been ingrained for generations, further reinforcing the perception of VU as a less desirable choice.¹

(See figure 6)

That’s not even taking into account the nearly one-third who dismissed them outright, driving a brand rejection score of [REDACTED]¹

We were never going to be able to compete the same way as the category's top players, the results made that painfully clear. We needed to do more than just keep up to stop the decline. We had to break away. Be bolder. Take a stand. So, with a new CMO, an agency overhaul and restructured marketing team, we hit reset and went all-in.

¹ VU Brand Research Report 2022, delivered January 2023, conducted by Threefold

² Creative Agency Research, Desktop, 2022 & 2023

³ Nielsen AQX, Jan 2022 – Nov 2023

⁴ Creative Agency Research, Reviewing Nielsen AQX, Jan 2022 - Nov 2023

⁵ Attitudes towards education in Australia, ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods, August 2023

⁶ Key findings from the 2023 Higher Education Student Statistics, education.gov.au, Jun 2024

⁷ Student satisfaction at Australia’s universities drops to all-time low in 2020, The Guardian, Mar 2021

⁸ University dropout rates rising as high living costs force some students to make a tough choice, The Age, Apr 2023

3. What were your objectives? State specific goals. (5 points)

Please note: Total campaign period for all objectives below is July, 2023 (when new strategy was first implemented through campaigns) to February, 2025 (when brand campaign concluded and main annual student intake commences). Open Day occurs annually in August, so metrics relate to August 2022 compared to August 2024.

Our marketing and communications challenge: Reframe and reposition Victoria University in the hearts and minds of our audience by creating a point of difference in category. Success would be determined by the below objectives.

Objective one: Drive consideration

Metric	2022 Result	2025 KPI Target
Brand consideration ¹		+2%
Open Day unique registrations ²		+10%
Open Day attendance (from registrations) ²		+7%
Website traffic (users) ³		+18%

To attract more students, we had to shake off our negative stigma and reposition VU as a serious contender for school leavers. We can track this by the number of students who were actively considering VU, also demonstrated by Open Day and website traffic.

Objective two: Improve awareness and comprehension of VU's product offering

Metric	2023 Result	2025 KPI Target
Awareness of product (VU Block Model®) ⁴		+2%
Familiarity ("very familiar") of product (VU Block Model®) ⁴		+5%

Please note: VU Block Model was included in brand health testing for the first time in 2023 after identifying it as a key component to the marketing & communications strategy.

Improving awareness of VU's offering product was also seen as essential to challenging this 'second tier' perception, especially given the current low levels of awareness.

Objective three: Increase Higher Education and TAFE applications

Metric	2022 Result	2025 KPI Target
Applications (HE & TAFE) ⁵	32,446	+10%

Ultimately, our primary objective was to reverse the decline and drive year-on-year growth in brand acquisition (applications).

Objective four: Become the preferred university among GenZennials

Metric	2022 Result	2025 KPI Target
VTAC Applications ⁵		+5%

We didn’t only want to be back in the positives. We set ourselves the ambitious goal to become the preferred university for our primary audience, GenZennials.

(See figure 7)

¹ VU Brand Research Report 2022, delivered January 2023, conducted by Threefold

² VU internal reporting, Open Day, August 2022

³ Google analytics, Mar 2022 to Feb 2023

⁴ VU Brand Research Report 2023, delivered February 2024, conducted by Threefold

⁵ Applications data sourced from INFOVU, as at 16/02/2023

4. What was your strategy – and how did you get there? (10 points)

We knew we faced a big challenge. We needed to break away and carve out a distinctive position in a category dominated by rankings and reputation. We wouldn’t be defined by the category. With only  of our target market seriously considering Victoria University as a first choice and another  feeling ambivalent¹, we saw this as both our problem and opportunity. This was our audience that we needed to reach and convince.

(See figure 8)

Finding our point of difference.

The first thing we needed to establish was what our point of difference would be. During our proprietary lighthouse workshop with the university, we defined that VU is relentlessly student-centric. They see their students as individuals, not numbers, and put their welfare, education experience and employment outcome at the heart of everything they do. It was why they had transformed their teaching model with the VU Block Model®.

They knew the traditional university model wasn't aligning with today's students. They needed flexibility, focus and a model that worked around them, not the other way around. So, they left the stuffy lecture theatres and rigid ranking systems behind and instead designed something radically different: a student-first model that puts the learner at the centre of their education.

While other universities were cramming 300 students into one hall, VU's class sizes were reduced to 30. Students completed one subject every 4 weeks and learnt in interactive workshops.²

There was nothing else like it in Australia,³ and the impact was undeniable. Since its introduction, VU had seen improvements in grades and student outcomes, and overall student satisfaction had risen to [REDACTED]. The only problem was [REDACTED] of the market was completely unaware of its existence and, those that did, viewed it as a lesser offering.¹

Identifying a unique kind of student.

After identifying the benefit of this unique product and how to communicate it, we defined a unique student who truly resonated with the model.

This unique segment within GenZennials possessed an entrepreneurial mindset and roll-up-the-sleeves attitude to get things done. Reflecting the diversity of VU's student base, they belonged to a generation driven by ambition, each individual equipped with their own strengths, skills, and aspirations.⁴ Unlike the dominant players, there was no privilege here.

However, their progressive ideals and desire to seek a personalised study path were in contrast to the way universities were engaging with them. Above all, they desperately wanted to feel seen and have their voice heard.

Our opportunity lay not just in acknowledging but celebrating this audience's differences.

Introducing our new brand platform.

Our new brand platform, Uniquely You, was born from a simple truth: no two people are the same and no two jobs are the same, so why should our students be treated the same and experience university the same as everyone else?

For the first time in Victoria's history, we shifted the focus away from the institution and placed it entirely on our students. We would embrace them as individuals, each with their own unique skills, passions, and experiences, never talking about ourselves, only them. Where other universities promote themselves by looking inwards, VU would be driven by the wants, needs and expectations of its students, with the VU Block Model® as our evidence.

¹ VU Brand Research Report 2022, delivered January 2023, conducted by Threefold

² Online learning at VU: how our students are thriving, vu.edu.au, 2020

³ Better grades tell the story of the Block Model's success, Australian Financial Review, Nov 2021

⁴ VU Connect Report, delivered by The Lab - The Australia Project - The Age of Empathy, Mar 2023

5. How was the strategy brought to life? (15 points)

Our point of difference was that everything at Victoria University revolves around its students. To successfully bring this to life with our new brand platform, *Uniquely You*, we needed to ensure it wasn't just a message. It had to be embedded in every communication. Our audience had to feel seen, heard, and understood in everything we shared, and that meant no holding back. We completely overhauled everything.

We started with our students.

Instead of talking about ourselves like the rest of the category, we talked about our students. We uncovered their individual tales of grit, resilience and ambition and wove them into dozens of unique student narratives. It was focusing on the journey to university, not the journey to follow, that set us apart.

These stories became the foundation of our owned social content, replacing heavily branded corporate comms with a 'for students, by students' approach. This focus also guided our 2023 core intake campaigns, shifting from traditional university messaging to connect more meaningfully with our diverse audience and reflect their unique realities.

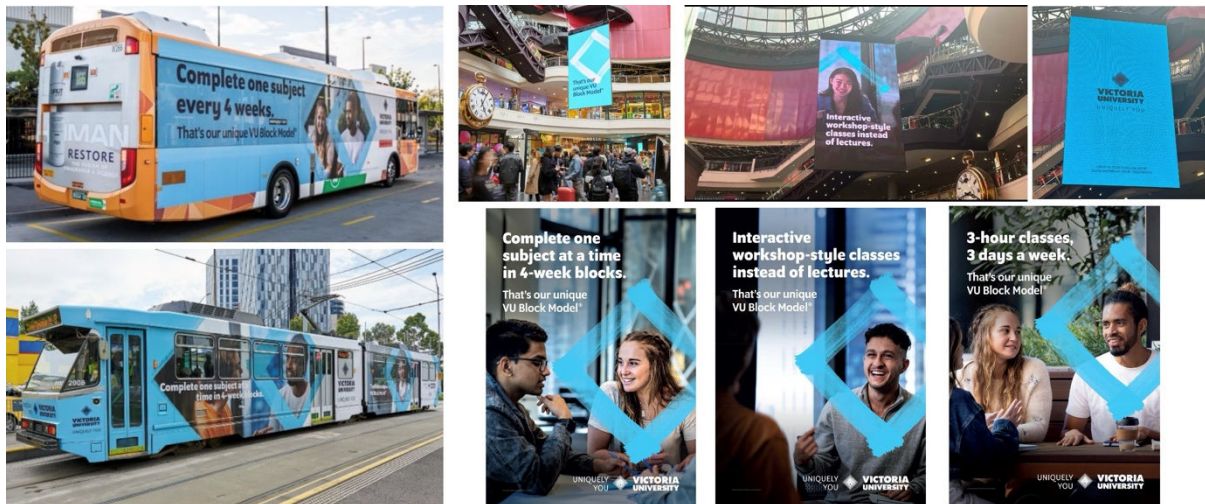
(See figure 9)

Evolving our brand assets.

Complementing our student stories was an evolved look and feel. We developed a distinct set of brand assets to make the university more recognisable and unique in category, and reinforce our student-first positioning.

A more personal, genuine tone of voice spoke to our audience on their level from their perspective. Outdated imagery was replaced with hero talent that not only better reflected our audience but *was* our audience – wherever possible, we featured our own, diverse student base.

(See figure 10)



The biggest transformation was VU's brand icon, the blue diamond. Long present in all their communications, we reimagined it as a visual representation of our student-first commitment. It became a way to consistently hero our students, framing them in every single communication we shared.

However, these transitional campaigns were just the beginning. Designed to introduce a new look and feel before we took things up another notch and completely relaunched in October 2024 with our new brand campaign.

Launching our brand campaign.

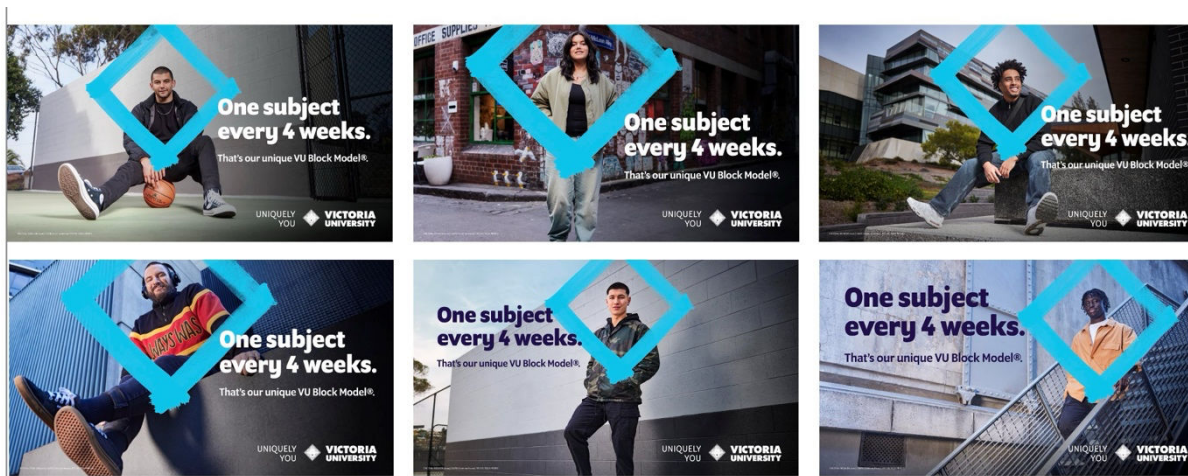
In embracing our relentlessly student-centric approach, our new campaign idea was born: No One Sees You Like VU.

The campaign demonstrated how we saw our audience for them; their differences, their inquisitiveness, their entrepreneurial spirit and their desire to do things differently and swim against the tide. How we see things from our students' perspectives, are acutely aware of their challenges, and respect the hard work and obstacles that many of them faced to get here.

This idea most powerfully came to life in our hero campaign asset, an emotive 60-second film. Through following the journey of a girl growing up and her defining life moments, we showcased our audience's differences as their superpower and reinforced our commitment to seeing the world through their eyes.

We brought our VU Block Model® into additional communications as our evidence to support this positioning, inferring we understood our audience so well we had reimagined the whole education experience to better support them.

(See figure 11)

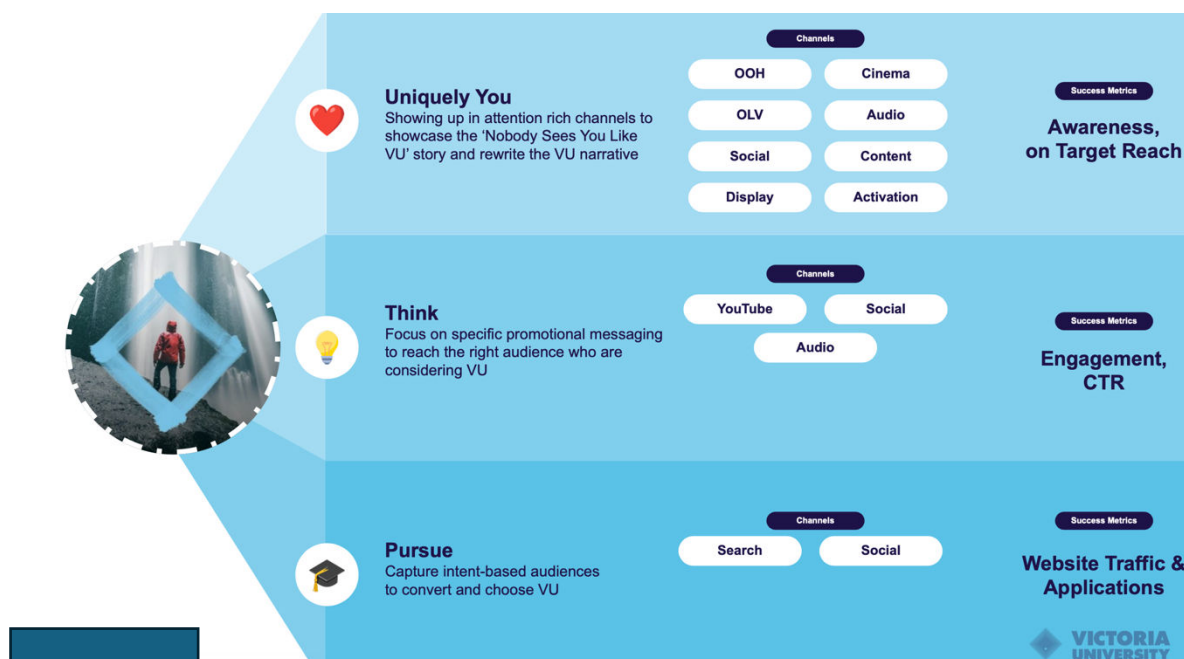


Showing up in a different way.

To truly stand apart, it wasn't enough to simply act different. We had to show up differently too. That meant using our channels in bold, unexpected ways that brought our new student-first positioning to life and investing in brand, something the university wasn't currently doing.

We developed a highly targeted, multi-channel plan where every placement was guided by our brand platform to deliver a cohesive look that cut through the sea of sameness. We also overlaid our audience's behaviours – risk taking, success and inclusion – as guiding principles to help us build our media strategy around their passion point environments. The outcome was a carefully constructed media strategy combining reach and lead generation to drive traffic and applications.

(See figure 12)



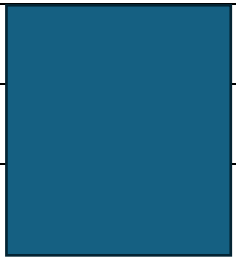
An always-on approach was adopted to ensure ongoing activity and presence, particularly around key periods. We reallocated spend into fewer, bolder channels to drive stronger impact in areas our audience hung out, such as tram wraps, bus wraps and large format OOH. A robust mass reaching screens approach was chosen instead of TV to drive impact and recall across platforms our audience consume, while a full funnel social strategy engaged and converted them across their key passion point environments.

Not only did we dominate Melbourne's West with this strategy, we strategically expanded our reach across the broader region.

6. How do you know your campaign was successful? 30 points

Objective one: Drive consideration

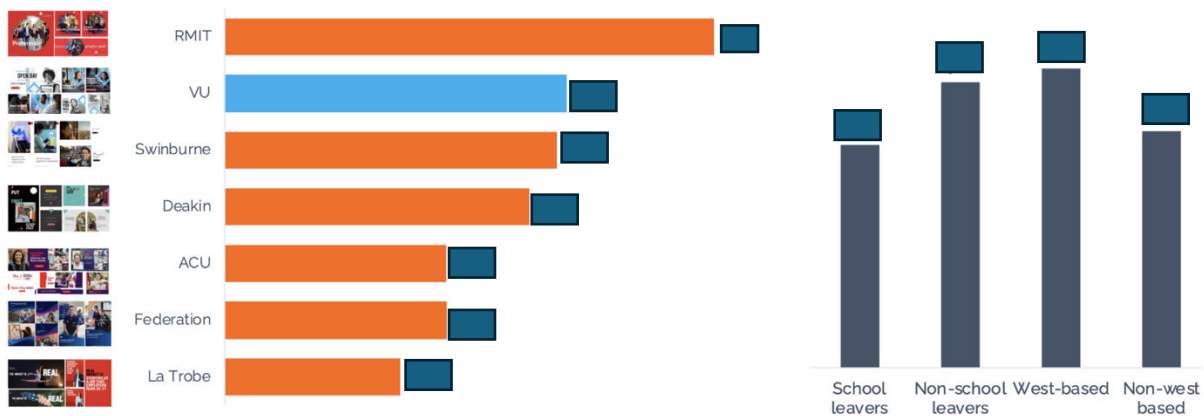
Result:

Metric	2022 Result	KPI Target	2025 Result
Brand consideration		2%	
Open Day unique registrations ³		+10%	
Open Day attendance (from registrations) ³		+7%	
Website traffic (users) ⁴		+18%	

We didn't only put VU back in the mix, we repositioned them as a serious contender in higher education. More students saw the value, with consideration at its highest since brand tracking began in 2019. Fewer were also writing them off immediately, with brand rejection dropping from  in 2022 to  in 2025.²

We additionally became the second highest university in Victoria for advertising recognition at  an increase from 3rd at  in 2022. A big feat given our media spend only increased  from 2023 to 2024.²

(See figure 13)



Q. Which university do you associate with these advertising images?
 2023 Victoria University Brand Research

Objective two: Improve awareness & comprehension of VU’s product offering

Result:

Metric	2023 Result	KPI Target	2025 Result
Awareness of product (VU Block Model)	██████████	+2%	██████████
Familiarity (“very familiar”) of product (VU Block Model)	██████████	+5%	██████████

Note: VU Block Model was included in brand health testing for the first time in 2023 after identifying it as a key component to the marketing & communications strategy.

By underpinning our new brand platform with the VU Block Model’s® proof points, we took a product that had previously struggled to gain cut-through in the cluttered university market and grew familiarity by ██████████

Objective three: Increase Higher Education and TAFE applications

Result:

Metric	2022 Result	KPI Target	2025 Result
Applications (HE & TAFE) ⁶	██████████	+10%	██████████

Having successfully caught our audience’s interest, we needed to convert consideration into acquisition. During the campaign period, VU received a total of ██████████ applications, a ██████████ uplift. We had successfully transformed VU into a proactive choice.

Objective four: Become the preferred university among GenZennials

Result:

Metric	2022 Result	KPI Target	2025 Result
VTAC Applications ⁶		+5%	

A sharper identity, stronger voice and clear message about what sets us apart have pushed us higher in the consideration set. We were successful in reaching and converting school leavers, the main feeder group into higher education, achieving a uplift in VTAC applications⁵. Proof our audience, GenZennials, are backing our new brand platform.

(See figures 14 & 15)

¹ VU Brand Research Report 2022, delivered January 2023, conducted by Threefold

² VU Brand Research Report 2025, delivered March 2025, conducted by Threefold

³ VU internal reporting Open Day August 2022 compared to August 2024

⁴ Google analytics, Mar 2022 to Feb 2023 compared to Mar 2024 to Feb 2025

⁵ VU Brand Research Report 2023, delivered February 2024, conducted by Threefold

⁶ Applications data sourced from INFOVU as at 16/02/2023 compared to 13/03/2025

7. Was the campaign a good investment? (General) 10 points.

From FY22 to FY24, application growth outperformed budget growth by which can also be translated to a growth in student revenue.

Alongside significant increase in applications, media cost per application from 2022 to 2024 decreased by over

When set against the backdrop of rising media costs, it provided a very robust return on investment.

This substantiates our challenger approach of defining our audience, differentiating from the category, communicating emotional benefit, and investing in brand.

8. Convince us that the result was not due to other factors. (10 points)

There is a direct correlation between tracking the campaign work, with associated performance across brand awareness, consideration and application completion.

What's more, the challenge only got harder, with competitors continuing to spend more on advertising and ad spend in the higher education sector up YOY in 2023.¹

Was there a significant increase in our media spend?

No, our advertising media spend remained consistent across the period, with just a increase in media spend between 2023 to 2024.

Was there a change in the category?

No, market conditions were the same for every other university.

Were there any changes to VU's offering?

No, there was no significant change to the campus facilities, teaching model or course offering or capacity during this time, which would potentially lead to an impact on applications.

¹ Nielsen data shows surge in Australian tertiary education ad spend and prospective student numbers, Nielsen, 2023

9. Give context to budget in comparison to competitors.

- ☐ Budget is less
- ☐ Budget is about the same
- ☐ Budget is more
- ☐ Not Applicable

Please provide more context to your budget in comparison to other competitors in the category. This section is designed to provide more context to Media Implementation.

10. Give context to the brand's overall budget.

- ☐ Brand budget is less
- ☐ Brand budget is about the same
- ☐ Brand budget is more
- ☐ Not applicable

Compared to the year prior, please describe the brand's overall budget this year.

11. Media budget elaboration

The majority of the media budget was allocated to paid media, equating to [REDACTED] million spend in Victoria only.

This was split between our No One Sees You Like VU brand campaign, intake (retail) campaigns, and always on activity, with greater weighting going towards brand and retail.

12. Describe owned media activity

The owned channels leveraged were VU's website, eDMs, and social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, TikTok).

13. Outline any sponsorships

N/A

14. Outline communication touchpoints

Screens: BVOD, YouTube

Social: Meta, TikTok, Reddit, Snapschat

Online Video: BVOD and YouTube

Audio: linear radio, streaming

OOH: retail, large format digital, buses, street furniture, rail

Influencers

Programmatic display

Search

