

Why aren't applications converting? And what to fix

Conference Theme: Winning on Market Position

Room 2

13:40-14:20

Adgen.

HE's Big Brand Problem



Above.

Beyond

We are at
the forefront
of airborne
threats



HE Catchphrase Bingo

Find your place

Unlock your potential

Explore our campus

Global reputation

Discover more

State-of-the-art Facilities

Vibrant Community

World Leading

Links with industry

Teaching excellence

Future-focused

Shape your future



Same Vocabulary
Same Structure
Same Proof Points
Meaningless





**(Probably) the biggest study
of brand health
in the HE sector**



Turning brand difference into growth advantage



**Brand
Divergence
Index**

Our Brand Divergence Index measures how far an education brand diverges from its competitors; helping education brands identify smarter ways to build demand, strengthen preference and improve conversion performance.

- 60+ Higher Education Brands
- 2,000 respondents
- 30,000+ data points
- 49 advanced statistical models
- 95%+ confidence level



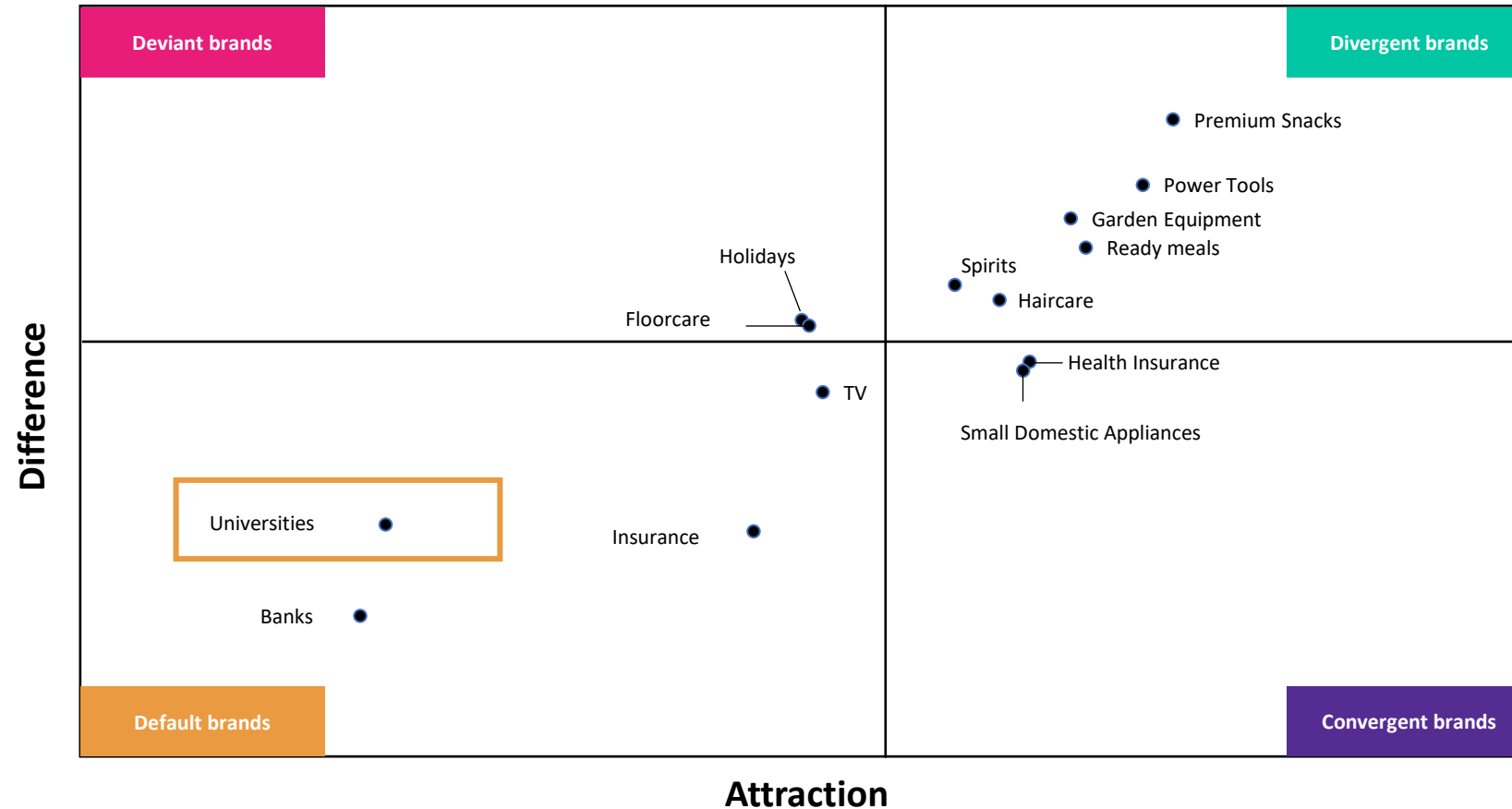
The HE category spends big on media

c.£200m

HE annual media
spend 2026



BUT most HE brands are indistinguishable



Divergent brands
High difference, high attraction

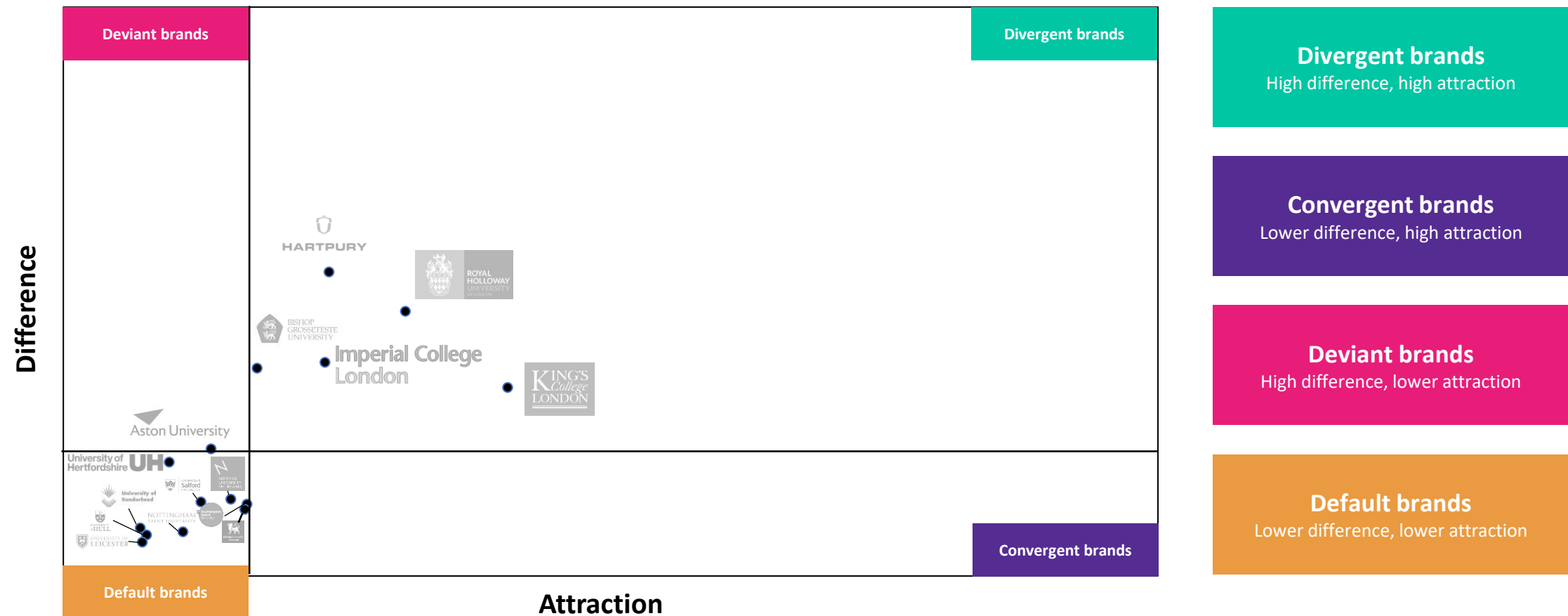
Convergent brands
Lower difference, high attraction

Deviant brands
High difference, lower attraction

Default brands
Lower difference, lower attraction



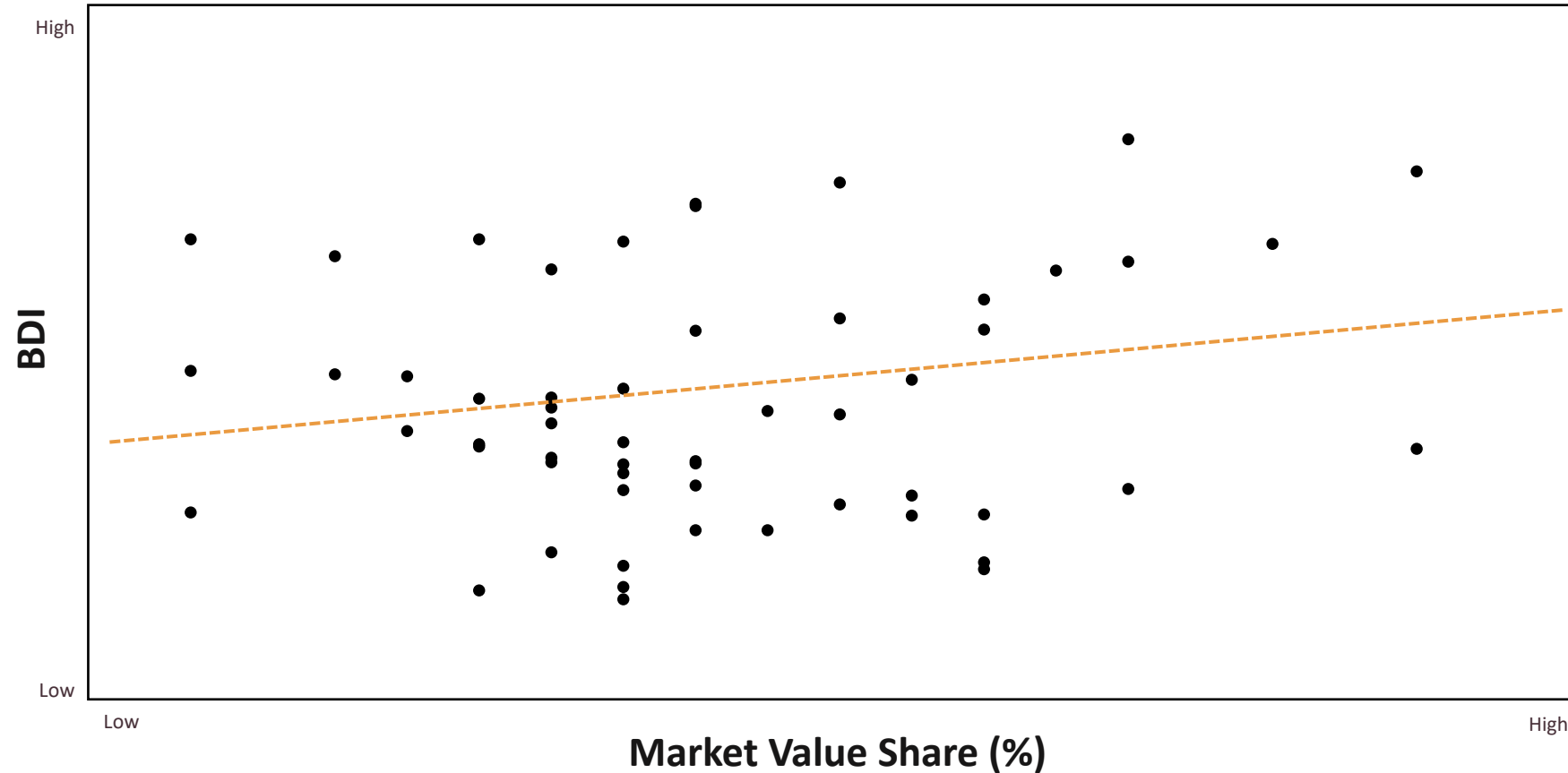
Many universities are stuck in Default



Quadrant lines are placed at the average of all universities for Difference and Attraction



A better BDI means better conversion



By correlating HESA data with BDI for 60 universities in the 2025/2026 academic year, we have shown there is a positive correlation between BDI score and share of students.

Basically, university brands with higher levels of Attraction and Difference tend to convert a greater share of demand into enrolments.



**When
brands look
and sound
the same**

**Media must
work
harder**



From data to action



BDI is a framework to map where you are ...

Difference

Default brands

Not spending or standing out enough
to attract students to apply.

Opportunity: Outthink across the board to drive
Attraction AND Difference.

Attraction



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Convergent brands

Category leaders, following conventions and
often winning by outspending.

Opportunity: Amplify Difference to improve
marketing effectiveness.

Attraction



BDI is a framework to map where you are ...



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... and plot what you do next across media, message and measurement

Difference

Default brands

Rebuild salience and meaning by breaking category conventions.

Use high profile partnerships and impactful, high-attention formats to stand out from the crowd.

Attraction



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Difference

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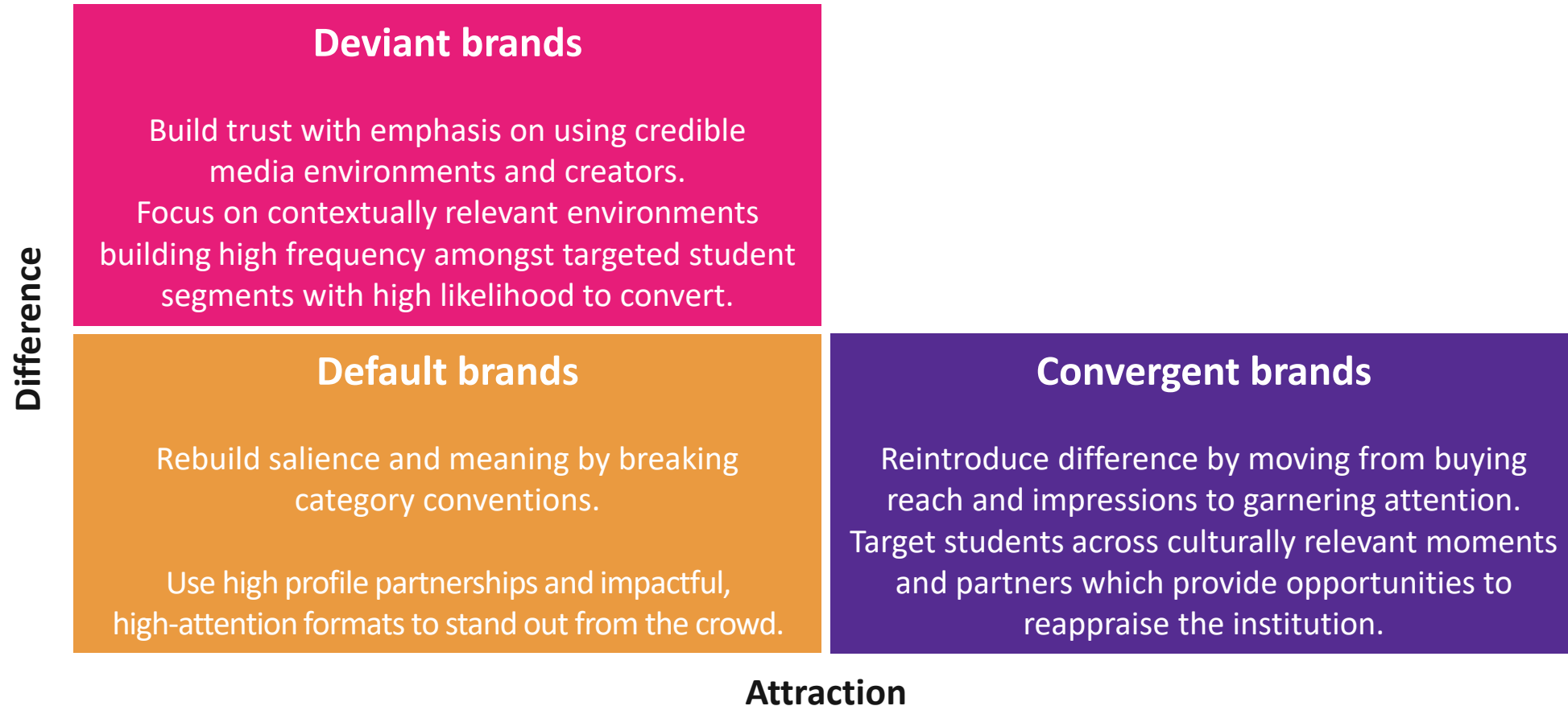
Convergent brands

Reintroduce difference by moving from buying reach and impressions to garnering attention. Target students across culturally relevant moments and partners which provide opportunities to reappraise the institution.

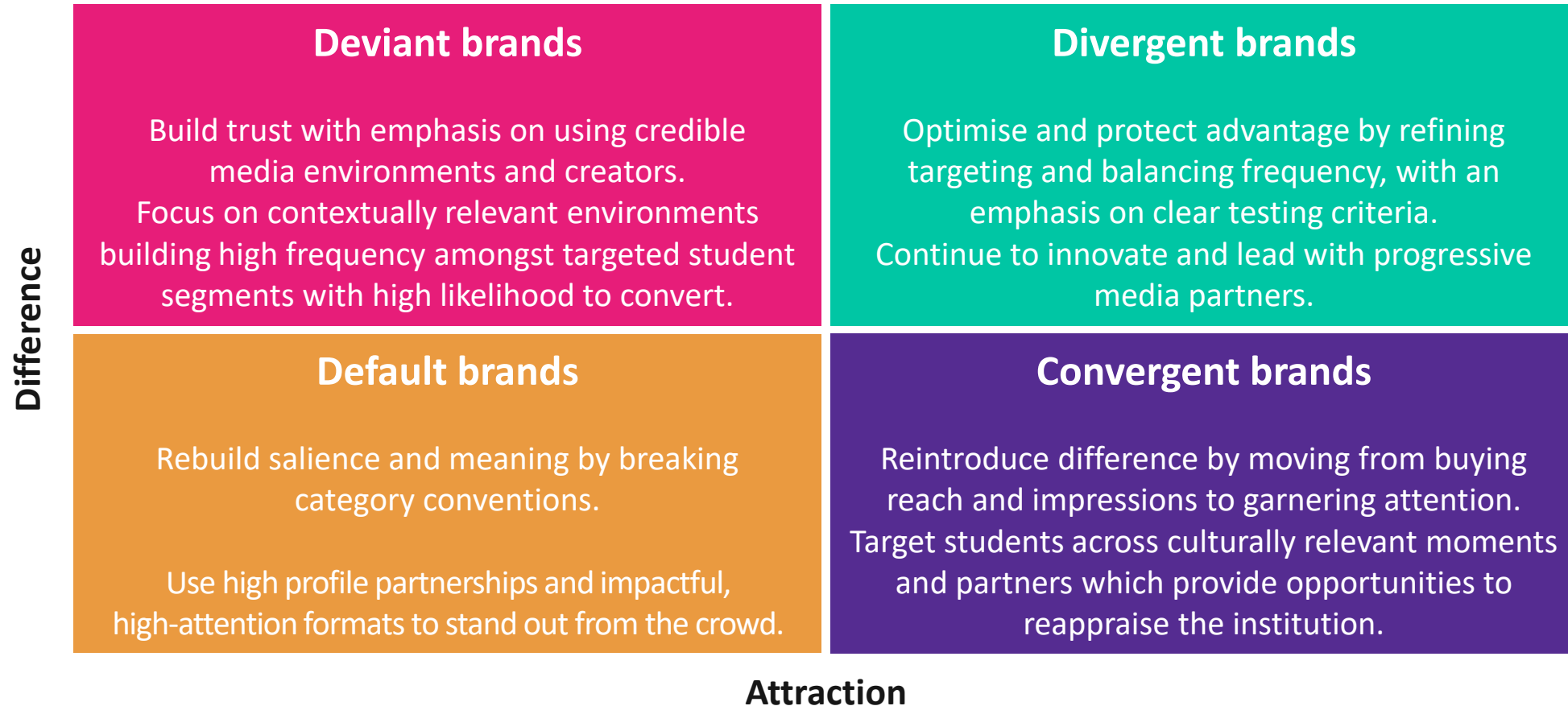
Attraction



... and plot what you do next across media, message and measurement



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In real life



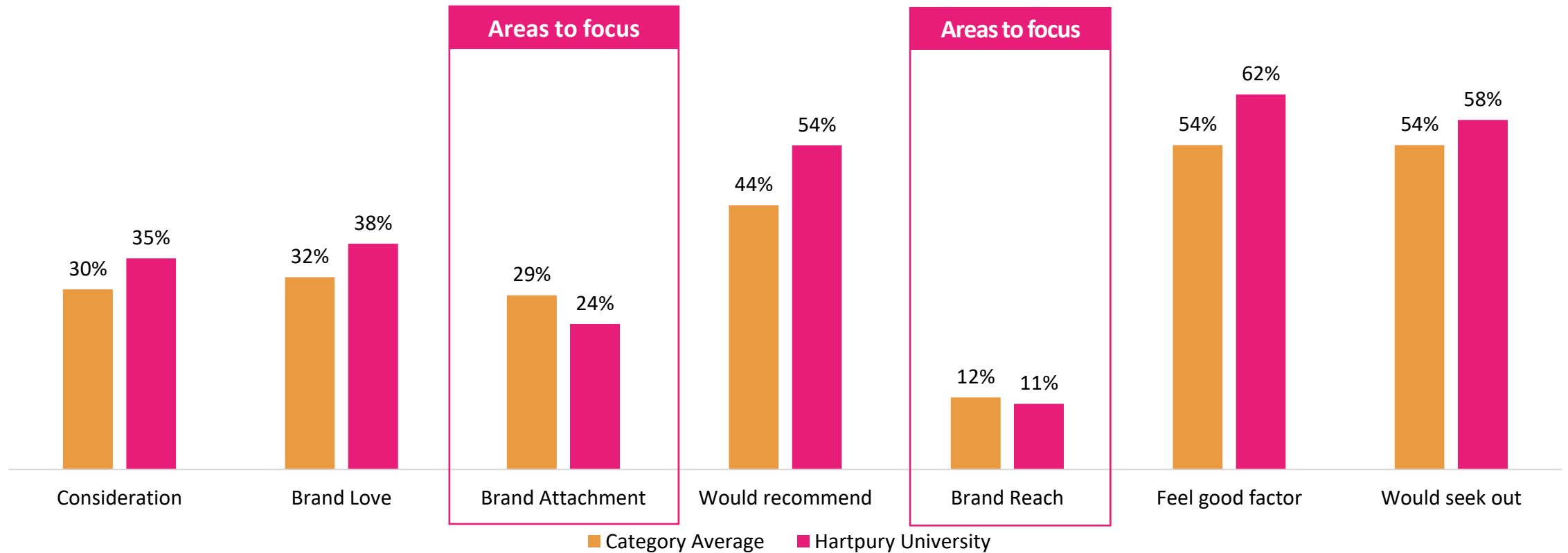


HARTPURY
UNIVERSITY

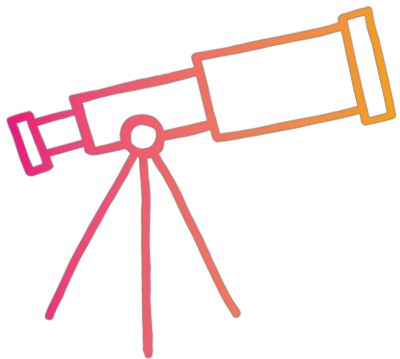
Success Story



Average Attraction, low growth



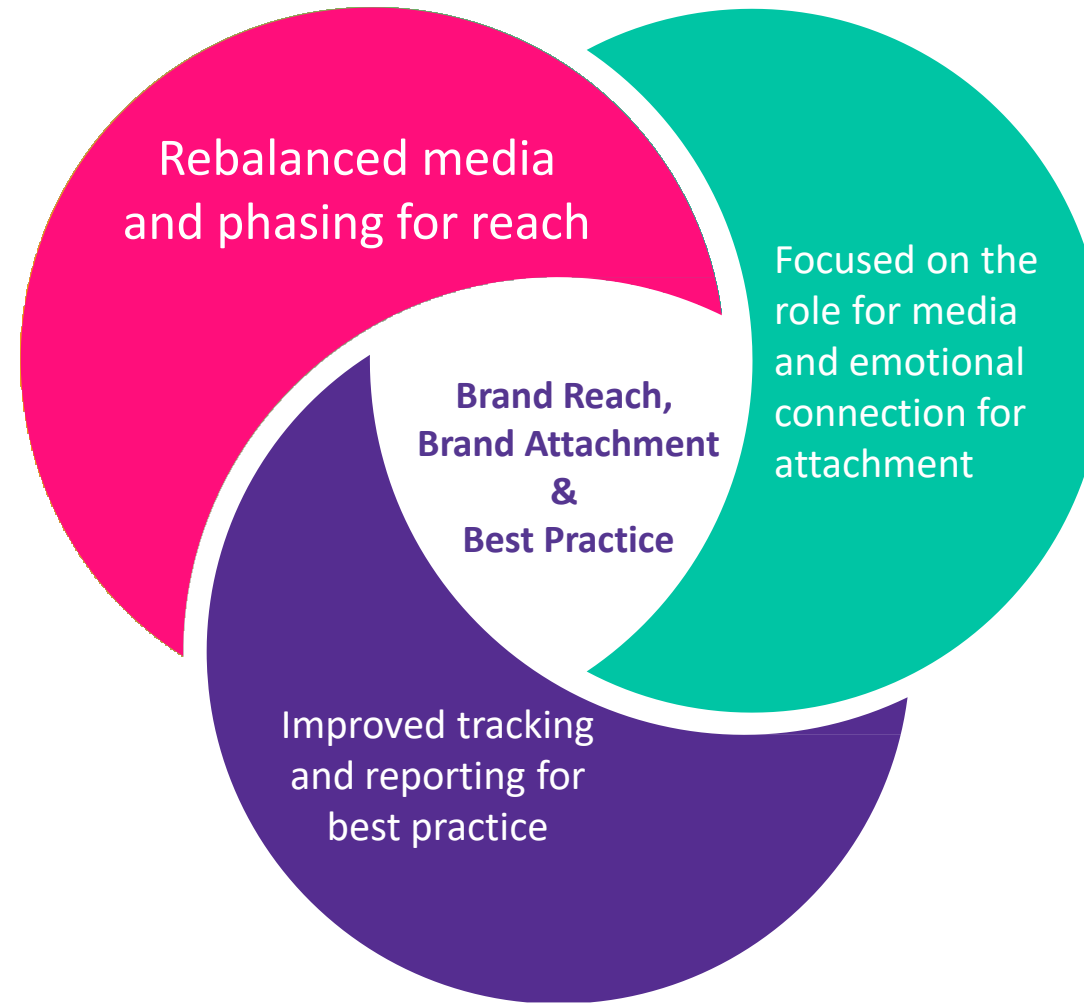
What we did next



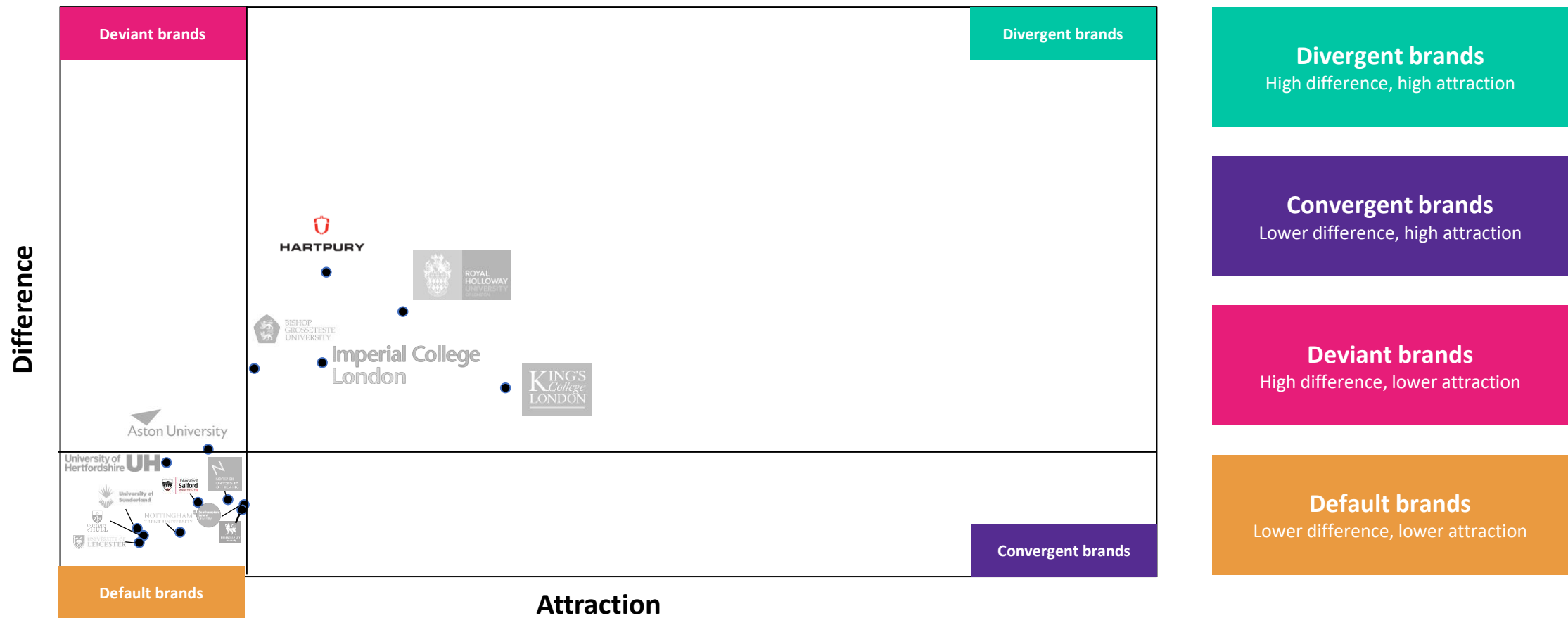
Full funnel recruitment

- Moved beyond “last-click” conversion activity into broader brand-building and demand generation
- Began with insight to map the full student journey and gave each channel a clearer role in the funnel – Meta to drive consideration, Google Search to capture demand
- This identified gaps at Top of Funnel, so we expanded the media plan from performance only into TikTok, Spotify and other awareness channels
- For bottom of funnel, added Programmatic Display to support retargeting and delivered conversion growth
- Rebalanced investment away from one-day spikes – investing more in pre- and post-clearing, not just Results Day – to build brand demand
- Improved tracking and reporting through GA4/GTM

What we did next



Now we outperform on all BDI metrics



With a measurable impact on performance



+70%

year-on-year conversion
growth in Clearing 2025 with
only 2% budget increase

+93%

year-on-year Google Search
conversions

10x

Below target CPA

+5%

improvement in overall
conversion rate



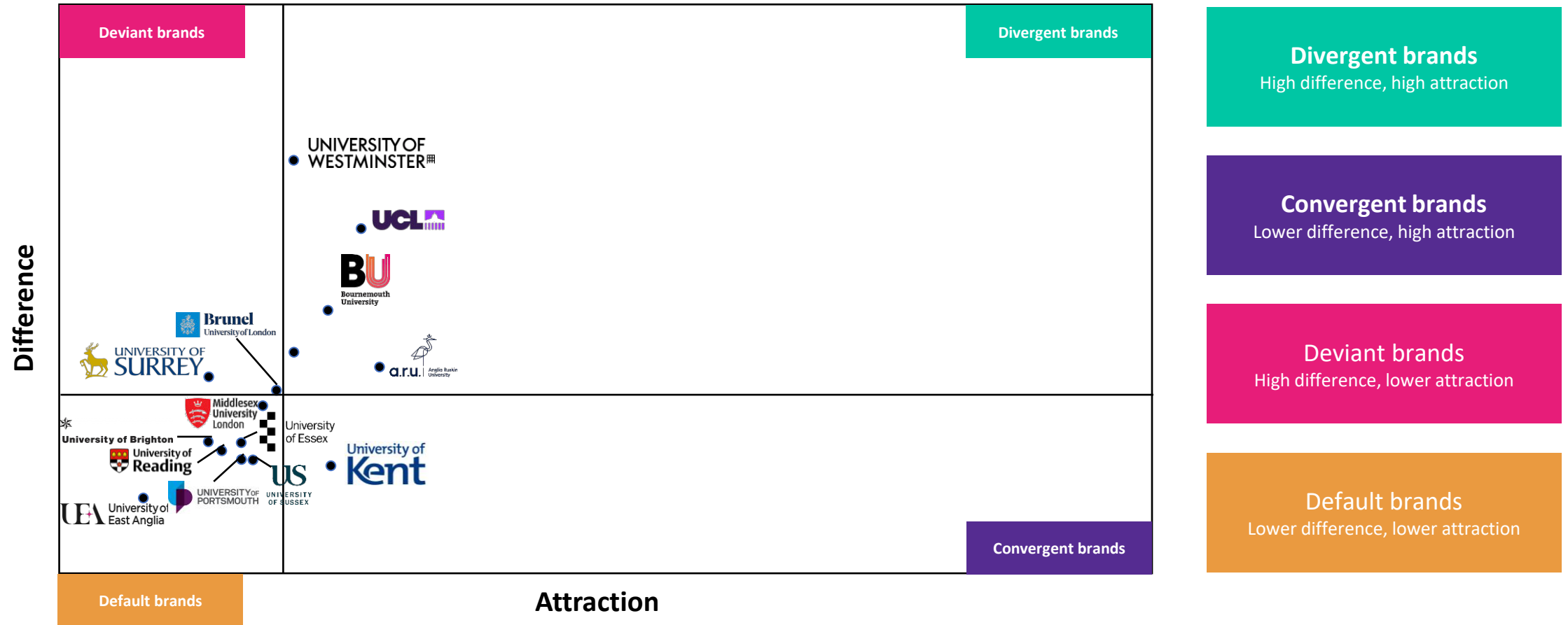
Applying it to your brand



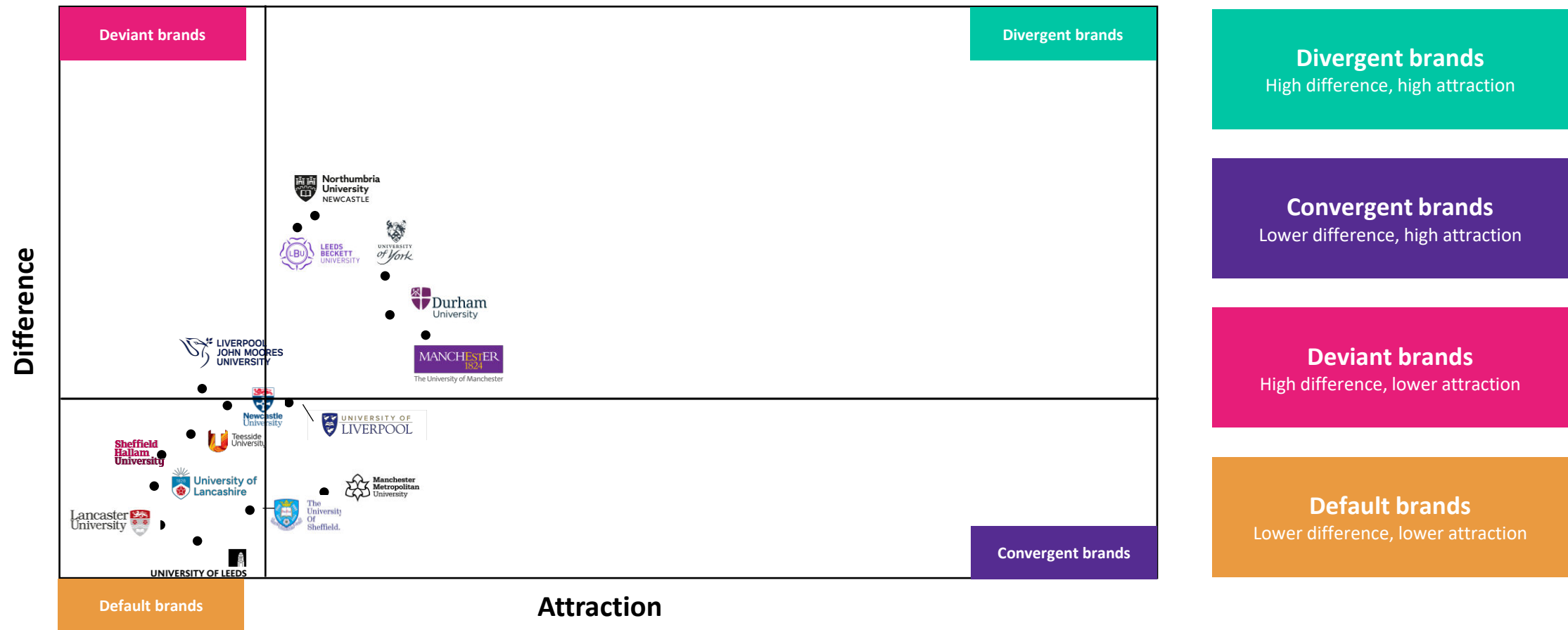


Spot your university

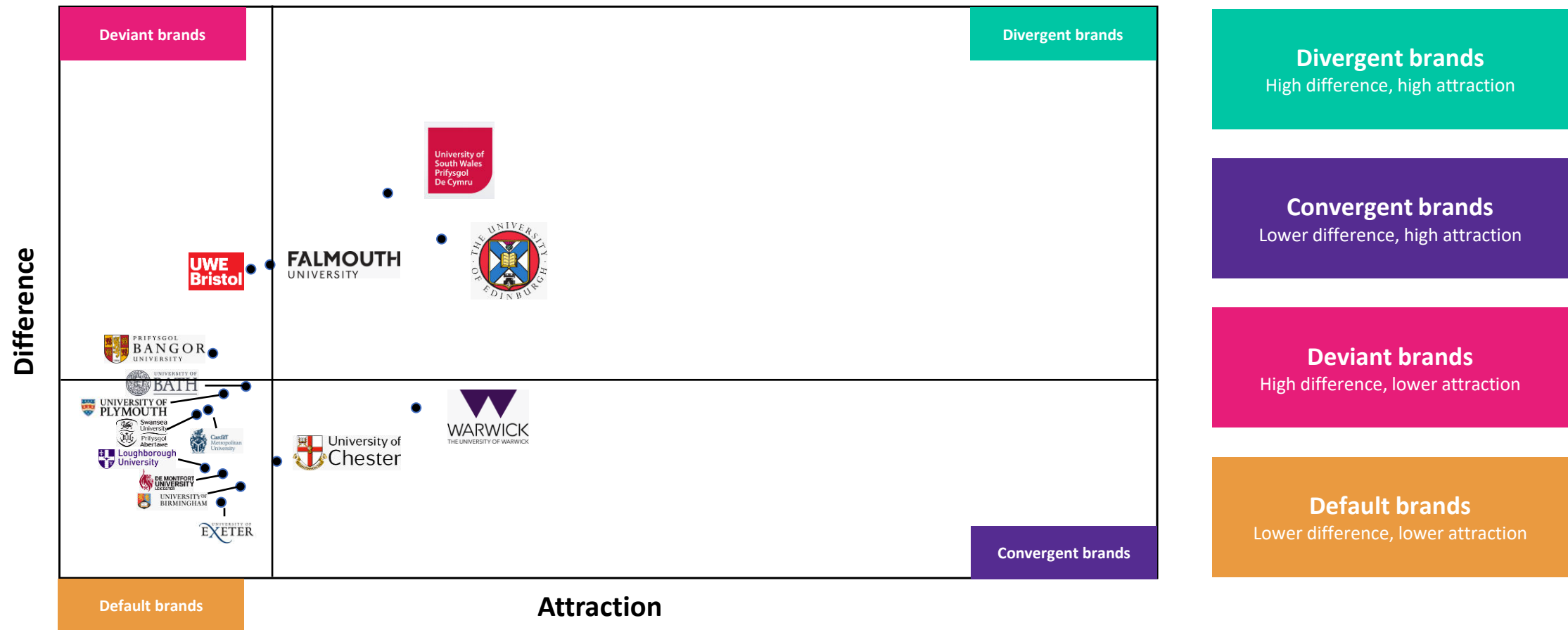
Some Southern Universities..



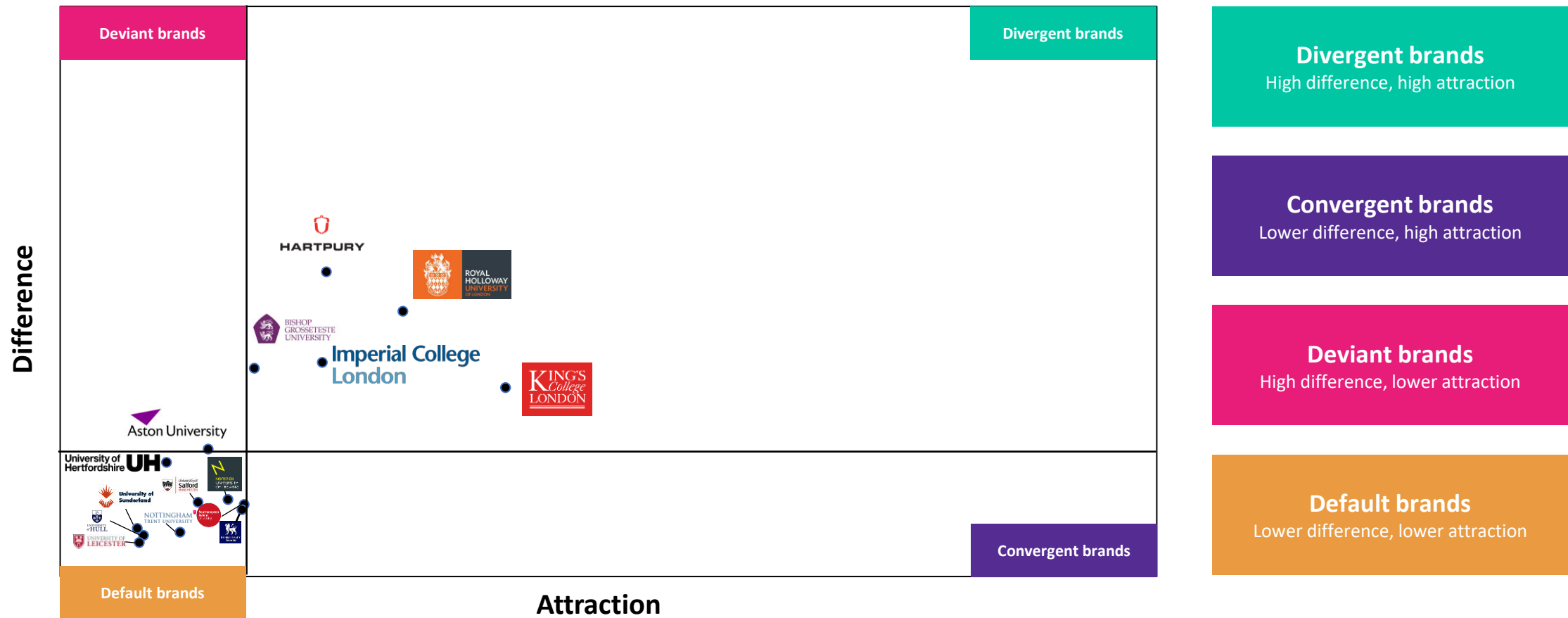
Some Northern Universities..



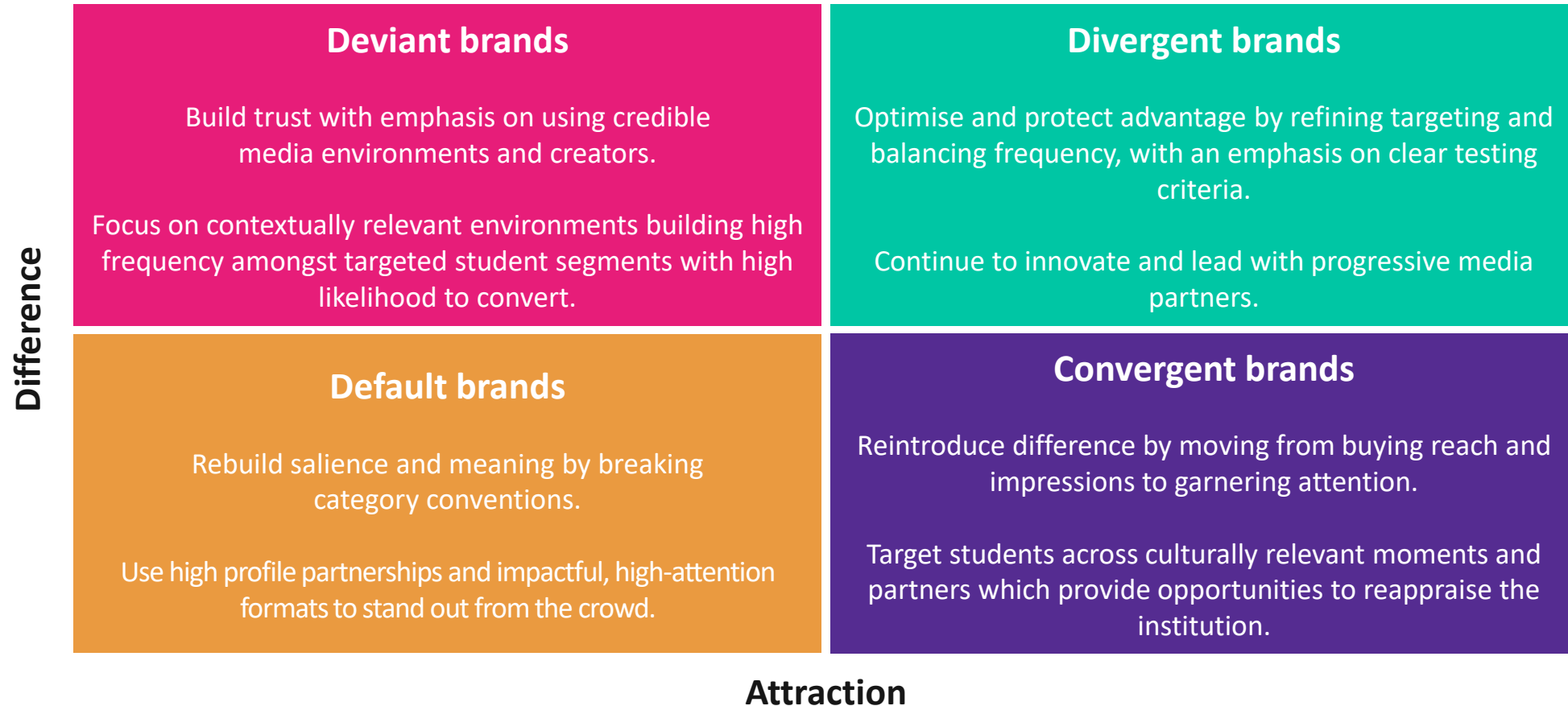
Some South West and Celtic Universities...



London and Midlands



What will you do next? Starters for 10...



What will you do next?

Fill out the form for a bespoke BDI Deep Dive:

- Your name
- Your university
- Your BDI category
- Your challenge
- One thing you could do tomorrow to fix it



Top Take Aways

1. Brands win on Difference and Attraction
BUT most HE brands are indistinguishable
2. Small media and marketing changes can have a disproportionate impact on conversion
3. Map your brand against competitors, find the metrics holding you back and fix them!



How can BDI help you and your institution?

Our latest Brand Divergence Index (BDI) study analysed more than 50 UK universities and 30,000+ data points, revealing one of the sector's biggest challenges: universities are becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish from one another.

The problem is widespread. Across the sector, institutions rely on the same language, messaging structures and catchphrases. How often have you seen phrases like “world-class teaching”, “vibrant community” or “future-focused” in university marketing?

Learn more:

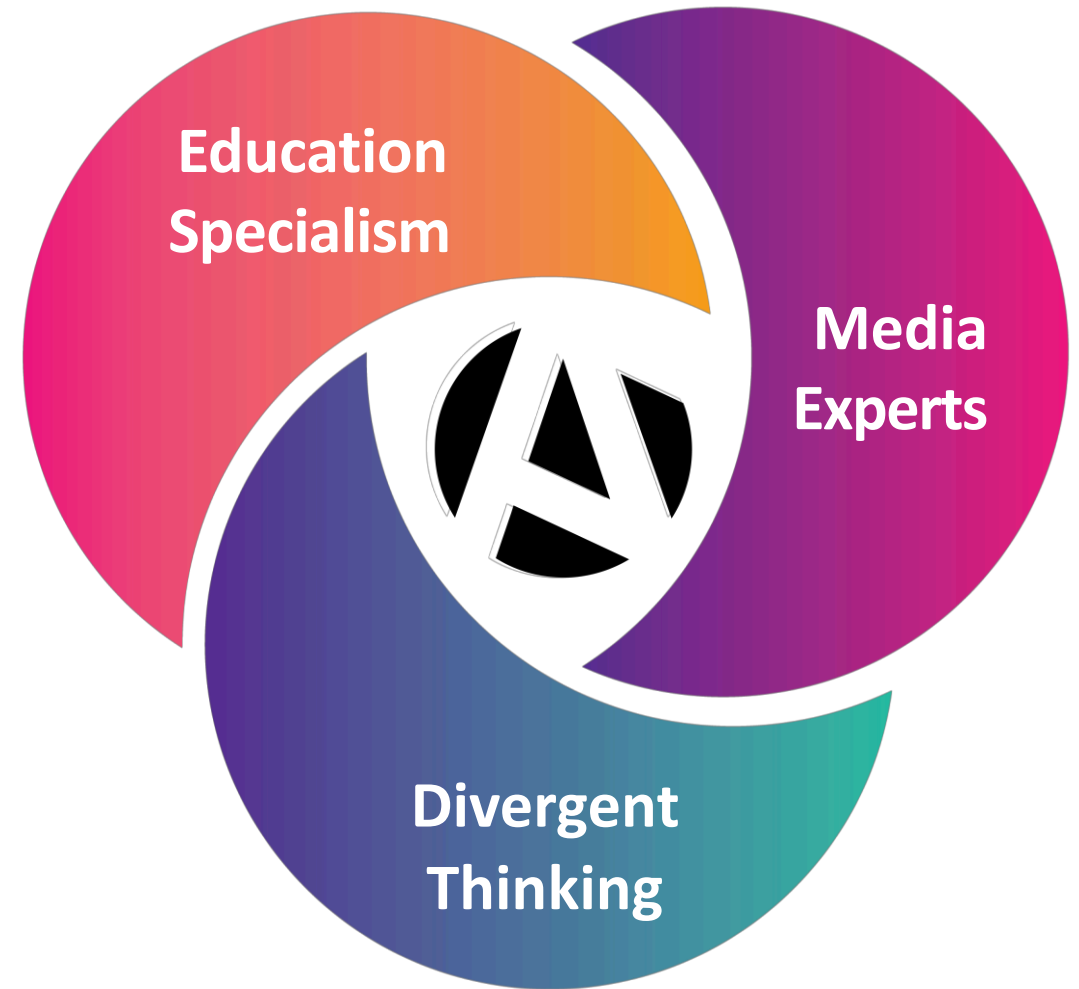


Outthink the obvious in education

Adgen helps ambitious education brands build demand, improve conversion and prove value by applying divergent thinking across the full learner journey.

We combine specialist education and youth media expertise with strategic tools, including BDI and ALTthink, to help education brands make sharper decisions on audience, message, market, channel and budget.

Our core strength is Higher Education, with work spanning brand, undergraduate, postgraduate, Clearing, international, online learning, open days and subject-level recruitment. The same discipline also applies to adjacent education sectors where learners are making high-consideration decisions and providers need clearer growth from limited budgets.





Q&A