

International student recruitment 101

A guide for education marketers



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Introduction

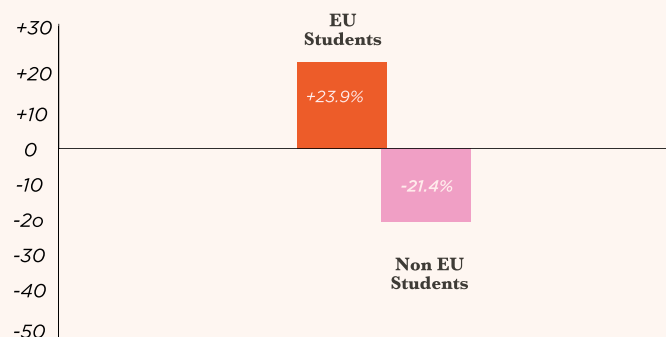
Welcome to international student recruitment 101!



Grab a cup of coffee (or tea if that's your thing) and join us as we dive into the exciting realm of **attracting** and **engaging** students from around the globe.

In this ebook, we will peel back the curtain and reveal the secrets to success in this ever-evolving landscape. We'll explore the challenges higher education institutions face in the wake of the pandemic and how they can overcome them with strategic marketing tactics. Get ready for a wild ride as we uncover the untapped potential of digital marketing, the importance of cultural sensitivity, and the art of crafting personalized experiences that will make your institution stand out in a sea of the ordinary.

In 2021-22 the total number of non-EU students grew by 23.8% whilst EU students fell by 21.4%.



Chapter 1:

Understanding the international student recruitment market

Put simply? Students are more in charge than ever.

The international student recruitment market is a thriving ecosystem fueled by the aspirations of millions of students worldwide. In a world grappling with the painfully long-lasting impact of Covid-19, the landscape of international student recruitment is undergoing a seismic shift.

Who would have thought that a tiny virus could disrupt the global movement of students? There we were, cruising along, witnessing a steady rise in worldwide student mobility, with dreams of surpassing the 8 million mark by 2025. Then, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, bringing travel restrictions and border closures that shook the higher education landscape. The OECD projected a bright future, where the number of international students would soar. But alas, reality had other plans. In 2020, the number stood at 5.6 million, far from the estimated heights.

The pandemic's impact on international student mobility has been profound. Travel restrictions transformed bustling campuses into ghost towns, and virtual classrooms became the new norm. Dreams of studying abroad were put on hold, leaving students and institutions grappling with uncertainty.

But it's not all doom and gloom.

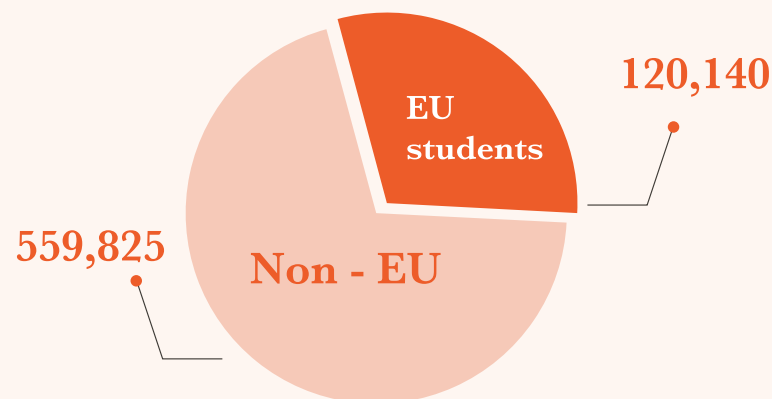
As we emerge from the shadows of the pandemic and international travel reawakens, higher education institutions are poised to seize the opportunity to revamp recruitment strategies and embrace the evolving landscape.

The suppressed demand for international education is like a pressure cooker waiting to release its steam. Now is the time to strike, to tap into the longing of students around the world who have been yearning for educational experiences beyond their borders. It's time to reimagine recruitment campaigns, injecting them with a fresh perspective and a deep understanding of the current climate.

To truly go global, higher education institutions must actively court and engage with foreign students. It's about creating personalized experiences that speak directly to the desires and aspirations of prospective students. It's about going beyond the surface-level efforts and diving deep into tailored recruitment strategies.



What the numbers tell us about international student recruitment in Europe, specifically.



International students studying in the UK

Based on HESA's Higher Education Student Statistics, 2021-22 saw 679,970 international students studying in the UK. 120,140 of these were from the EU and 559,825 were non-EU.

By the end of September 2022, there were 463,315 sponsored study visas granted. This is the highest annual number of study visas granted on record and represents both a recovery from the lower number of visas granted during the Covid-19 pandemic and an increase in pre-pandemic levels.

Key drivers of the market

1. A focus on risk management for diversification

The new normal has quickly been defined by increased uncertainty, where expecting the unexpected is the name of the game. Risk management now sits at the top of the priority list for educational institutions worldwide. In response, institutions are now taking proactive steps to mitigate risks and diversify their student body simultaneously. Here's how they're doing it.

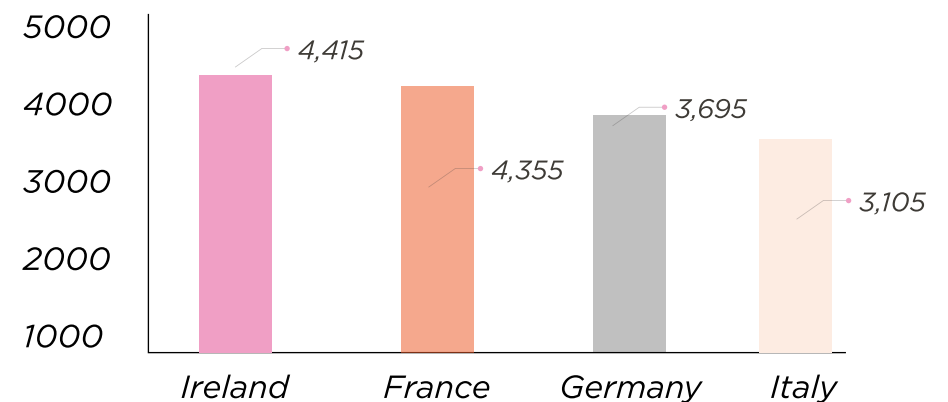
- **Expanding into new markets:** International institutions are venturing beyond traditional student sources like China or India. They're exploring untapped markets, seeking out prospective students from countries that were previously overlooked. This approach enables them to stretch their enrolments across a diverse range of nationalities while increasing the pool of prospective students.
- **Embracing online education:** The digital revolution has catapulted online learning to the forefront of education. Institutions are investing in developing robust online courses and content delivery capabilities. This allows them to transcend the limitations of physical classrooms and offer remote learning opportunities to international students who may prefer to study from the comfort of their home countries.

- **Establishing global partnerships:** To further expand their reach, institutions are actively seeking partnerships with foreign universities and setting up offshore campuses. By collaborating with international partners, they can tap into new markets and offer joint programs that provide students with a global perspective and a diverse educational experience.

The goal is clear: to diversify student enrollments across nationalities and transcend the boundaries of traditional in-person classes. Educational institutions are embracing the changing landscape and finding innovative ways to attract and engage international students, regardless of geographical limitations.

Remember, uncertainty can be an opportunity too!

According to HESA's Higher Education Student Statistics, Within the EU, the highest number of new enrolments came from Ireland (4,415), France (4,355), Germany (3,695), and Italy (3,105).



2. Increased reliance on agents

The use of agents is on the rise, with educational institutions recognizing the immense value they bring in reaching global student populations and fostering fruitful international collaborations. These strategic partnerships proved to be invaluable over the past years, providing a lifeline when international travel came to a halt and students' plans were upended by border restrictions.

- **Local support in uncertain times:** When the world seemed to come to a standstill, institutions with strong agent partnerships found solace in their local market connections. These agents became a guiding light for students who were grappling with uncertainties and disruptions. With their deep understanding of local contexts and regulations, agents played a pivotal role in assisting students whose plans had been derailed. They provided guidance, support, and alternatives, ensuring that students' dreams of studying abroad could still be realized, even in the face of adversity.
- **Maintaining a brand presence:** While digital channels became the primary means of communication during the crisis, institutions with agent partnerships enjoyed an additional advantage—a sustained brand presence in key markets. Even with limited physical interactions, agents acted as ambassadors, representing the institutions' values and offerings. This ensured that the institution remained visible and connected to prospective students in meaningful ways, beyond the confines of virtual platforms.

- **Real-time market intelligence:** In times of uncertainty, having access to up-to-the-minute market intelligence is crucial. Strong agent partnerships provided educational institutions with a competitive advantage by offering invaluable insights into evolving market trends, student preferences, and emerging opportunities. Agents on the ground were the eyes and ears of institutions, informing them of the changing landscape and helping them make informed decisions to stay ahead of the curve.

Recognizing their instrumental role in navigating through the crisis and the increasing need to diversify source markets, institutions are now turning to agents more than ever before.



3. Establishing local offices

As the landscape of international student recruitment continues to evolve, educational institutions are exploring innovative strategies to establish a stronger local presence in key sending markets. One such approach gaining momentum is the setup of in-country offices, providing institutions with a sustained and impactful promotion throughout the year.

- **Strengthening local engagement:** In-country offices act as valuable resources for institutions to engage directly with agents, schools, and other stakeholders in the target market. With dedicated representatives on the ground, institutions can foster deeper relationships, gain local insights, and navigate the unique dynamics of each market. These representatives become ambassadors for the institution, providing a human touch and building trust with prospective students and their families.
- **Continuous presence and timely engagement:** Unlike periodic visits by institutional staff, in-country offices offer a continuous presence, ensuring sustained promotion and engagement throughout the year. These offices facilitate active participation in student- or parent-facing events, school visits, and agent meetings.

- **Cost-effective solution:** Setting up in-country offices is a cost-effective alternative to frequent travel by institutional staff. It eliminates the logistical challenges and expenses associated with multiple trips and allows for efficient resource allocation. Instead of relying solely on sporadic visits, institutions can establish a permanent base in the target market, maximizing their outreach efforts without straining their budgets.



4. A new approach to messaging

Today's students are a force to be reckoned with - pragmatic, astute, and skeptical, with a keen eye for the future. Unlike any generation before, they gather proof, seeking concrete evidence to support their study abroad choices. They want to connect with current students, alumni, and faculty to get firsthand insights. They scour institutional websites, searching for guarantees that their chosen program will lead to immediate career success. Endlessly scrolling through platforms like TikTok or Instagram, they seek validation from student influencers who can assure them of a seamless fit within the campus community.

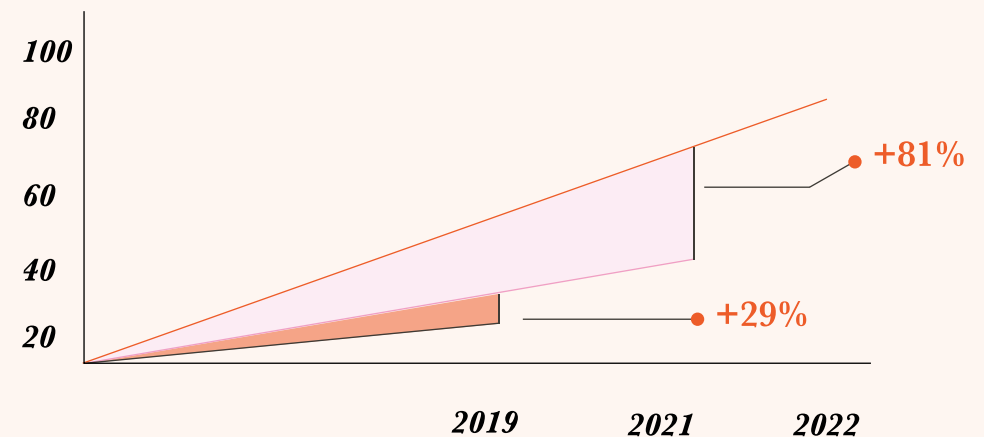
In response, institutions are stepping up their game and fiercely competing for student enrolments. This competition extends beyond traditional markets like China and India, as educators embrace emerging markets in their quest for diversification. Affordable options and scholarships are critical considerations for many students, and institutions are taking note. They are ramping up scholarship offerings, recognizing that it may be the differentiating factor that sways students in their favor.

These shifts in student expectations and market dynamics are driving changes in marketing strategies, messaging, and investments. Some institutions have even turned to chatbots, providing near-instantaneous responses to students' questions, acknowledging their need for quick information.

Student ambassador programs have become commonplace, and the rise of paid student social media ambassadors underscores the institutions' commitment to delivering personalized and authentic messaging.

Finding the right balance between efficiency and personalization in student communications is an ongoing challenge for many institutions. The key lies in striking a chord with the pragmatic generation, providing relevant information, personalized experiences, and a sense of belonging.

It's a delicate dance that institutions should master to remain competitive in today's ever-evolving landscape of student recruitment.



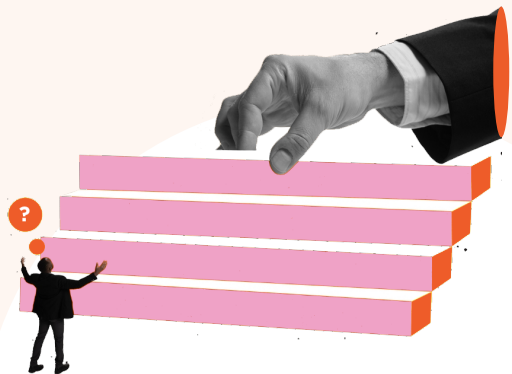
December 2022 figures show that Sponsored study visas for higher education students grew by 29% compared to the year ending December 2021 and increased by 81% compared to the year ending December 2019.

Challenges of international student recruitment

Every market has its challenges, and international student recruitment is no different.

It's an exhilarating quest of capturing the attention (and hearts) of students from around the world. It's like chasing a shooting star through a maze of possibilities, where every corner brings new cultural nuances, language barriers, and competitive landscapes.

Despite the hurdles and obstacles that may arise, the allure of studying abroad remains strong, as evidenced by the steady increase in international student enrollment worldwide. Yet, we can't ignore the growing concerns and hurdles that students encounter on their academic journey. Economic and political changes, along with the fierce competition in the higher education market, can cast a shadow of uncertainty.



Challenge #1

Lead generation

In a world shaped by globalization, the international higher education industry stands as a testament to the interconnectedness of our daily lives. With over 5 million students venturing across borders to pursue their dreams, the quest to attract these bright minds to your university is no small feat. It's a challenge that education marketers face head-on, striving to create irresistible opportunities that transcend national boundaries. The goal? To captivate the hearts and minds of prospective students and boost those application numbers like never before.

Here's what you can do to overcome this challenge.

Armed with a deep understanding of your university's strengths, a strategic approach to content creation, and a digital presence that sparks excitement, you'll stand tall among the competition.

Discovering what sets your university apart is the first step on this exhilarating journey. Uncover the unique qualities that make your institution shine and delve into the minds of your current and prospective students. Despite their diverse cultures and backgrounds, international students all share a common quest for vital information. From captivating program descriptions and prestigious rankings to transparent admission requirements and tuition fees, these are the pillars of knowledge that ignite their curiosity.

Armed with this insight, it's time to craft tailored content that speaks directly to their passions and aspirations. Imagine the thrill of immersing your future international students in a virtual reality experience, where they can explore and discover your campus as if they were walking its halls. It's the ultimate fusion of technology and storytelling, capturing their hearts and minds from the very first click.

In their quest for information, online platforms become their trusted allies. Be present where they seek knowledge, be adaptive in your distribution strategies, and embrace the power of non-traditional channels such as social media. Tap into the vibrant online communities and engage in conversations that resonate with their interests and aspirations. Let your institution's story unfold in captivating ways, seizing every opportunity to showcase your unique value proposition and ignite the curiosity of those who seek the transformative power of education.

Challenge #2

Measuring the ROI of a campaign

Let's talk about the bottom line, shall we? Return on investment (ROI) is the name of the game when it comes to assessing the success of your international student marketing endeavors. Given the fact that international students will have a vastly different decision-making process from local students, it can be challenging to accurately measure the ROI of a global campaign and even more so to optimize.

Here's what you can do to overcome this challenge.

Before diving headfirst into your international marketing initiatives, it's crucial to define your objectives. What do you hope to achieve? Are you looking to increase enrollments, boost applications, target specific countries, or raise your university's brand awareness on a global scale? Knowing your goals will guide your strategies and provide a clear direction for your efforts.

Once you have your goals in sight, it's time to create a robust measurement plan. Tracking and analyzing data will be your compass on this journey. You want to capture metrics that will reveal the true value of your marketing endeavors. Consider metrics like cost per student enrolled, the volume of leads generated, cost per candidate reached, or the effectiveness of targeting specific audiences. These measurements will provide valuable insights into the impact and efficiency of your campaigns.

To capture and analyze this data effectively, consider using web analytics software such as Google Analytics. It's a powerful tool that allows you to track website traffic, user behavior, and conversion rates. Diving into the data will give you a deep understanding of how your online international education marketing is performing and make data-driven decisions to optimize your strategies.



Take it a step further and leverage a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) solution, like HubSpot. It's a game-changer! A CRM system helps you manage your interactions with prospective students, track their journey through the enrollment process, and measure the effectiveness of your communication efforts. It provides a comprehensive view of your marketing and recruitment efforts, enabling you to identify patterns, spot areas for improvement, and make informed decisions to maximize your results.

Challenge #3

Securing the right budget

The eternal struggle of getting the green light for a bigger marketing budget. We feel you! Convincing the powers that be to loosen those purse strings can be a Herculean task.

Here's what you can do to overcome this challenge.

First and foremost, it's crucial to present a compelling case for why investing in international marketing is a wise move. Highlight the potential returns and long-term benefits that come with attracting international students. Show them the numbers, the trends, and the untapped market potential. Paint a vivid picture of the opportunities that await and the competitive advantage your university can gain by expanding its global reach.

But let's be real for a moment - we know that financial flexibility isn't always a given. So, it's time to get creative! Look for cost-effective strategies and innovative solutions that can make a big impact without breaking the bank. Explore digital marketing avenues, leverage social media platforms, and harness the power of targeted advertising to maximize your reach on a limited budget.

Another tactic is to demonstrate the value of collaboration. Seek partnerships and collaborations with external agencies, industry stakeholders, or even fellow institutions. Pool your resources, share the workload, and multiply your impact.

A little teamwork can go a long way in securing the help you need.

Lastly, don't underestimate the power of persistence. Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither is a robust marketing budget. Keep making your case, gather supporting evidence, and engage in ongoing conversations with decision-makers. Show them that investing in international marketing is not just a short-term expense but a long-term investment in the future success and growth of the university.



Chapter 2:

Creating your international student recruitment strategy

You're on a mission to find your institution's perfect match in the big, wide world. But you can't just rely on luck and wishful thinking. That's where a comprehensive international recruitment strategy comes in. It's the secret weapon in your marketing arsenal that helps you uncover the right markets, understand what students want, and create a game plan that hits the bullseye. You'll dive deep into research and analysis, uncovering juicy insights about their preferences, expectations, and what makes them tick. Armed with this knowledge, you'll design a customized approach, messaging that speaks their language, and a persona that'll make them go, "Wow, they totally get me!"

It's your guide to truly understanding the intricacies of a new market. It's extensive - and not always light work, but it is worth it!

Here's an example!



Why do you need a customized strategy for a new market?

In the dynamic landscape of international student recruitment, a one-size-fits-all approach simply won't cut it. To truly attract and engage with prospective students from diverse cultural backgrounds, institutions must embrace the power of customized strategies. A tailored approach allows institutions to tap into the unique needs, preferences, and aspirations of their target audience, ultimately increasing their chances of success in the competitive global market.

- **Connecting on a personal level:** Customization enables institutions to forge genuine connections with prospective students by addressing their specific interests and motivations. This personalized touch demonstrates a sincere understanding of students' individual needs and fosters a sense of belonging and trust.
- **Showcasing relevance and value:** A customized strategy allows institutions to highlight their unique strengths and offerings that are most relevant to the target market. This targeted approach showcases the specific benefits and opportunities that set them apart, giving students a compelling reason to choose their institution over others.

- **Enhancing student experience:** Customization goes beyond attracting students; it also extends to the student experience throughout their academic journey. This personalized approach enhances student satisfaction, and retention, and ultimately contributes to the institution's long-term success.

What do you need to cover when creating your strategy?

Simplifying the complexity

Building an awesome international student recruitment strategy is no small feat, It takes time, and resources. Most importantly, it takes collaboration. Break it down into manageable chunks, and keep your eye on the prize!

Here are 7 key elements you need to consider:

1. **Thoroughly research your potential market:** Dive into comprehensive market research to uncover cultural preferences, educational expectations, and all those juicy insights that will help you connect with prospective students on a personal level.
2. **Find your entry points:** Identify the best ways to enter the market, whether it's through partnerships with local agents, collaborations with schools, or showcasing your flair at international education fairs.
3. **Flex and expand:** Shake things up and adapt your existing strategy to suit the new market. Customize your messaging, fine-tune your value proposition, and sprinkle some cultural considerations to make your approach shine.
4. **Breaking language barriers:** Speaking the same language is key, both literally and figuratively. Decide if you need to launch local language campaigns or if your existing assets just need a little translation magic. The goal? Connect with students in their native tongue.
5. **Nail your tone:** Unleash your institution's unique personality and confidently embody your brand identity. Harmonize with the cultural vibe, craft a compelling manifesto, define your brand spirit, and exude an authentic voice that resonates with your target audience.
6. **Make the elements work for you:** Put all the pieces together to create a strategy that screams success. Unleash your unique strengths, understand your target personas, and create content pillars that showcase your institution's awesomeness. Oh, and don't forget to let your USP shine!
7. **Mix it up:** Strike the perfect balance between organic and paid efforts. Develop a content strategy that attracts attention while also leveraging paid advertising to supercharge your reach and conversions.

Chapter 3:

Digital marketing

Your passport to success

In this dynamic era, digital marketing has become an indispensable resource in international education recruitment, shaping the way prospective students discover and choose their future academic destinations. Over the past couple of decades, digital marketing has become the real MVP in the recruitment game, especially for the international education sector. No surprise there, as the internet has become the go-to hub for students to dig deep, research, and make the best decisions about their educational paths.

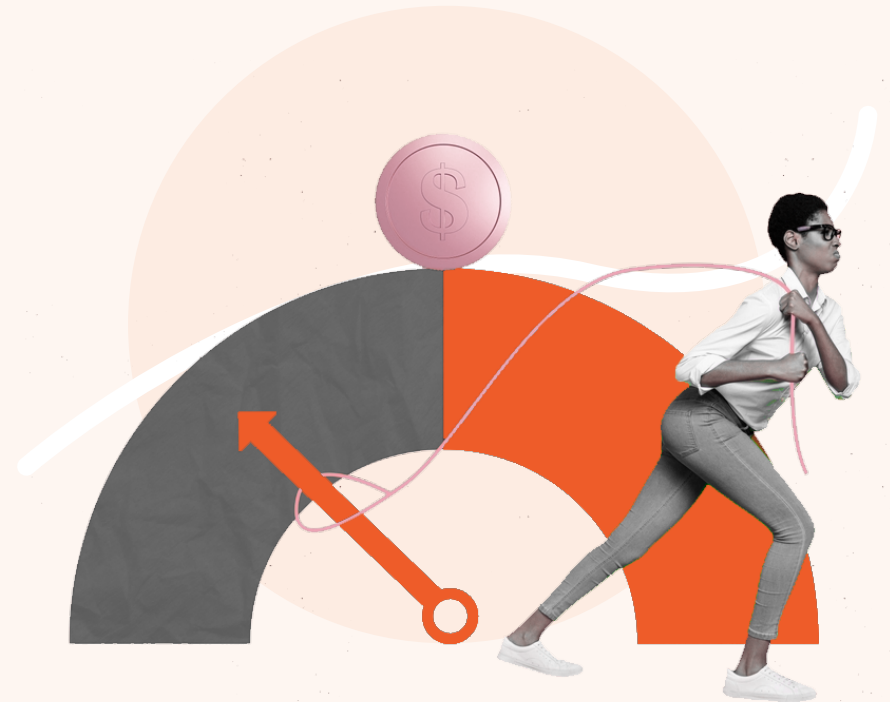
As the international education sector experiences monumental changes and intensifies its competitiveness, educational institutions that embrace a robust digital strategy find themselves at the forefront of reaching a diverse and ever-expanding student pool.

The role of digital marketing in international student recruitment

When it comes to picking a university, many students are drawn to the allure of studying abroad. It's a chance for personal growth through cultural exchange and the excitement of living in a whole new country. Some seek to enhance their language skills, while others have their sights set on a specific institution.

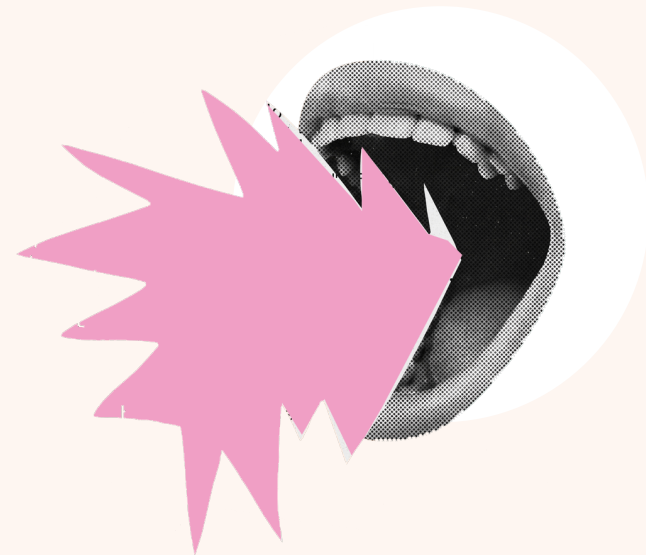
For colleges and universities, international students are worth their weight in gold. They add diversity and perspective to the student community and bring in valuable revenue. Plus, they become global ambassadors for a university, paving the way for future enrolments from all corners of the world.

But let's face it; competition to attract these bright minds is fierce. To stand out in the crowd, digital marketing is the name of the game. A targeted approach is key to capturing the attention of prospective international students.



10 Steps to reaching prospective international students

- 1. Define your target audience:** Start by understanding who your ideal international students are. Conduct thorough market research to identify key demographics, preferences, and pain points. Knowing your audience inside-out will guide your marketing efforts and ensure your content resonates with potential students.
- 2. Create the right content:** With your target audience in mind, create engaging and relevant content. Highlight your institution's strengths, faculty expertise, cutting-edge programs, and any unique opportunities that set you apart from the competition. Use storytelling to share student success stories, campus life, and the vibrant culture of your university.
- 3. Leverage social media:** Social media platforms are your digital megaphone to connect with students worldwide. Identify the platforms your target audience frequents the most, and tailor your content accordingly. Share user-generated content, behind-the-scenes glimpses, and live sessions to foster authentic engagement.
- 4. Invest in paid advertising:** To boost your online visibility, consider investing in paid advertising, especially search engine marketing (SEM). SEM allows you to appear at the top of relevant Google searches, driving more traffic to your website. Utilize display ads and social media ads to reach your target audience effectively.
- 5. Optimize your website:** Your university's website is your virtual front door. Ensure it provides a seamless user experience with clear navigation and easy access to essential information. Create a dedicated "International Students" section with comprehensive details on admissions, scholarships, student support services, and living in the host country.
- 6. Localize your content:** Tailor your content to resonate with the cultural sensitivities and language preferences of your target regions. Translating key sections of your website and social media content can significantly enhance engagement with international students.
- 7. Engage with prospective students:** Engage with potential students through virtual events, webinars, and Q&A sessions. This direct interaction builds trust and allows you to address their queries and concerns effectively.



8. **Leverage influencer marketing:** Partner with student influencers or alumni who can share their experiences and promote your university to a broader audience. Influencers can add a personal touch to your marketing efforts, attracting more students through word-of-mouth.
9. **Utilize email marketing:** Build an email marketing strategy to nurture relationships with prospective students. Send personalized content, such as program updates, scholarship opportunities, and campus news, to keep them engaged throughout the recruitment process.
10. **Measure and optimize:** Track the performance of your digital marketing efforts using analytics tools. Analyze website traffic, engagement metrics, and conversion rates to gauge the effectiveness of your strategies.

While digital marketing can be a powerful tool for international student recruitment, sometimes it takes a village to achieve remarkable results. As the competition intensifies, universities may find it beneficial to seek agency support to augment their marketing efforts.

Here are some key scenarios when partnering with an agency can make a significant difference:

- **Lack of in-house expertise:** Developing and executing a comprehensive digital marketing strategy requires a specialized skill set. If your university lacks in-house expertise in areas like search engine optimization (SEO), social media marketing, or content creation, an agency can fill those gaps and provide valuable insights.
- **Limited resources:** Smaller universities or institutions with limited marketing budgets may struggle to maintain a robust digital marketing presence on their own. Collaborating with an agency allows you to access a full team of marketing professionals without incurring the overhead costs of hiring additional staff.
- **Market expertise:** Navigating the complexities of different international markets requires a deep understanding of cultural nuances, preferences, and regional regulations. Agencies with experience in global education marketing can help tailor your strategies to resonate with diverse audiences.
- **Measuring ROI:** Tracking the return on investment (ROI) of your marketing efforts is crucial to refining and optimizing your strategies. Agencies have the tools and expertise to measure the impact of your campaigns effectively.

- **Multilingual marketing:** To effectively reach international students, multilingual marketing is essential. Agencies with language capabilities can help translate and adapt your content to resonate with diverse language groups.

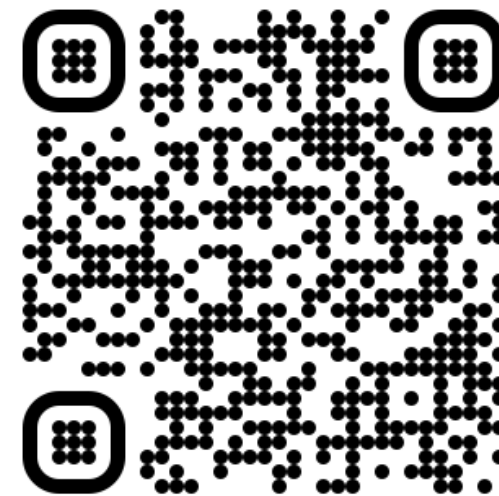
The role of digital marketing in international student recruitment cannot be overstated. As education marketers, we have a unique opportunity to harness the power of digital platforms to reach, engage, and guide prospective students from around the world. By crafting a well-defined digital marketing strategy, understanding the preferences of our target audience, and leveraging the latest trends and technologies, we can position our institutions as leaders in the global education market.



Remember, it's not just about attracting students—it's about building lasting connections and providing valuable support throughout their journey. Together, we can shape compelling digital marketing content that showcases the unique offerings of our universities, cities, and countries, inspiring students to pursue their dreams with us.

So, embark on this exciting journey of international student recruitment with confidence and determination. Whether you're a seasoned education marketer or just starting, there's always room to explore new strategies and partnerships that will take our efforts to new heights.

Ready to take your international student recruitment to the next level?



Book a session