

# University Website Design in International Student Recruitment: Some Reflections

*Emmanuel Mogaji*

## INTRODUCTION

The competition for higher education enrolment is no longer a secret— institutions compete with each other within and across national and continental borders to connect with prospective students. Coupled with increasing budgetary pressures, universities are upgrading their advertising strategies in this competitive situation and revitalising their marketing departments in order to maintain their share of the global international student market (Maslowsky 2013). Most educational institutions now realise the vital importance of marketing themselves in this competitive globalised world, and an extensive literature has emerged on the transfer of the concepts and practices of marketing from other industrial sectors to higher education (Gibbs 2002).

Rust and Kim (2012) acknowledge that globalisation has become the focal point of higher education, as universities compete in the closely connected, global, free-market economy that is currently reshaping higher education. To their advantage, students have the opportunity to shop around and choose where they want to study. Brown et al. (2009) note that, given this competitive environment, universities need to provide

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N. Mogaji (✉)  
University of Bedfordshire, Luton, Bedfordshire, UK

information to their prospective students in order to enable them to make informed choices and, as of now, the Internet is considered one of the principal sources of information for potential students, highlighting the importance of websites to universities.

Marginson (2004, 2006) explores the dynamics of competition in higher education, highlighting a national competition among universities within the same country, and a global competition among universities from different countries. This chapter focuses on the global competition among universities, identifying how universities can better use websites as a marketing communication tool, to break geographical boundaries and reach out to prospective, diversified, global students.

Naidoo and Wu (2011) laid the foundation for a better understanding of the implementation process of marketing strategies for recruiting international students, building on previous studies in this area such as students' search for information (Menon 2004; Menon et al. 2007), the segmentation of this information (Weinstein 2013; Brown et al. 2009; Soutar and Turner 2002), and the stimulation of information search through the creative and functional designs of university websites (Armstrong and Lumsden 1999; Hartley and Morphew 2008; Mogaji 2016).

This current chapter adds to this literature. It offers university administrators and managers an insight into the effective deployment of institutional websites in reaching out to a global student market. A conceptual framework is developed to analyse student information search. It is hoped that this study will lead to further research in this area. The following sections discuss strategies for marketing higher education, with particular attention given to websites. Glimpses into the challenges and projections for the future are also provided.

## INFORMATION SEARCH BY STUDENTS

The decision to enrol at a higher education institution is an important one (Menon et al. 2007). This decision can involve consideration of the individual's needs, values, and interests (Zaichkowsky 1994). It can also be difficult to understand, risky or otherwise worthy of a student's attention (Choi et al. 2012).

Menon et al. (2007) noted the rationality assumption highlighted by the proponents of human capital theory, which suggests that prospective students act as rational decision makers in choosing where and what to study. However, this rationality is often absent in practice. For instance, while

examining factors influencing the choices of prospective undergraduate students in Australia, James et al. (1999) find that many applicants were under-informed on important matters regarding their choice of a higher education institution. They noted that university applicants reported generally low levels of knowledge of the specific characteristics of universities and of the courses offered by them.

Menon et al. (2007) additionally note limited active information search on the part of the students with the vast majority of students sampled not having visited any university prior to their choice. Menon (2004) find this particularly surprising, indicating that some of the students did not consider it necessary to become personally involved in an information search, even as home students with easy access to university campuses. It was also found that a high percentage of students had not requested information on any university before deciding where to seek enrolment, representing yet again another contradiction to human capital theory which posits a systematic comparison between higher education institutions.

Furthermore, in terms of access to financial support, Mangan et al. (2010) find that many students appear to be just as ignorant of grants and loans as of bursaries, as they had not engaged in a substantial search for information on financial support. The authors note that many students only search for information about local universities, and may not search further if they feel their needs have been met.

Interestingly, Ball et al. (1999) find that students from higher socio-economic status families had clearer strategies for choosing their universities. Menon et al. (2007) also note that students who considered the choice of higher education important were found to be more likely to engage in an information search, while students who felt that the choice of higher education was not important did not seem to bother with collecting significant information.

By extension, given the high cost associated with an international education and the self-transformative investment that it represents, prospective international students can be considered as proactive in their search for information regarding which university to attend (Pyvis and Chapman 2007). For example, Menon (2004) suggests that higher education institutions can influence the decision-making of prospective students by providing relevant information through promotional campaigns, invitations to prospective students for visits to the university premises, and by maintaining informative websites.

Websites are particularly important in international markets as distance and the cost of overseas advertising can make these approaches ineffective with prospective international students. Indeed, while campus visits give potential students an opportunity to explore the university environment, to ask questions, and to get a feel of what they are about to experience if they join the university, they might not be a good way to enrol international students, as these students may not be able to visit the campuses on the open days, mostly because of distance.

For those who cannot attend the open days, universities also invest in promotional campaigns such as the publication of colourful prospectuses and associated marketing materials that offer visual information about the university. However, the production and distribution costs of this type of marketing material is a financial burden, especially given the logistical, cultural, and transactional costs of operating in another country. Additionally, it has been shown that these promotional materials have little influence on a student's final decision (Newell et al. 1996).

Brown et al. (2009) note that the information provided on university websites is often more effective in informing prospective students. Similarly, Moogan (2011) finds that university websites are increasingly becoming a useful source of information for prospective students ranking them as the second-most frequently consulted information source after the traditional prospectus. Given this increasing rise in the usage frequency of websites, Hartley and Morpew (2008) point out that it is important for universities to pay attention to how they communicate with prospective students through their websites, and to update them regularly. They note that the words, images, and symbols contained in these marketing materials constitute the basis on which the institutions begin forming relationships with their students.

## STRATEGIC MARKETING AND SEGMENTATION

Segmentation is an important marketing theory that can be considered while developing a marketing strategy using websites. This has become a more common practice now, as it makes it easy to identify the requirements of the segments within specific markets, and to match them with the organisation's strategic objectives (Kotler 2003). Rindfleish (2003) sheds light on the marketing technique of segmentation, exploring the ways in which marketing could be efficiently used to assess the potential of different segments and examining the feasibility of strategic planning within the higher education sector.

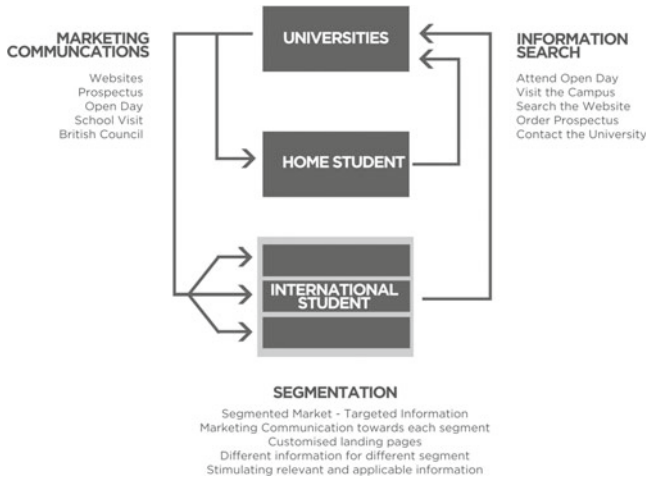
Similarly, Weinstein (2013) describes segmentation-based marketing as the essence of a sound business strategy and value creation. With this in mind, it has also been suggested that it is important for universities to see how well they can target their three main customer (i.e. student) segments—international students, mature students, and domestic high-school leavers (Brown et al. 2009). This is particularly relevant as every segment has its own characteristics and requires a different strategy (Soutar and Turner 2002).

Additionally, Moogan (2011) highlights the need for university marketers to address potential students' concerns and to offer more 'tailor-made' communication strategies to suit them. She notes that every student is unique and should be treated accordingly. For example, the needs of an international student from Africa is different from those of an international student coming from China since international students from different countries have different requirements and, consequently, a differentiated targeted marketing approach is necessary to effectively reach out to them (Mortimer 1997). Segmentation also allows a university to create differential positioning strategies, whereby it can focus on its core differentiating points that may differ across specific segmented markets.

As suggested by Weinstein (2013), having a good ranking is not enough; a university must be ready to aggressively target the discriminating customers who can choose from a multitude of other universities offering quality education and student experience in a global market. Mass marketing is no longer applicable. As international students from different countries and backgrounds have different needs, university marketers must effectively target these markets and niches with their unique needs and wants (Weinstein 2013). For example, the Students Online: Global Trends report found that prospective students from Africa and Latin America were more than twice as likely to view social media as essential to their higher education research than those in the USA and Europe. This suggests that targeting students of these regions specifically through social media may well be easier than targeting students elsewhere (Top Universities 2014).

## THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 5.1 illustrates the conceptual framework of this study with three main constructs—the universities sending out the information, and home, and international, students engaging with the information to make a choice regarding which university they attend. The relationship between these three constructs is discussed below.



**Fig. 5.1** Conceptual framework for universities' proactive marketing communication and student information search

The framework suggests that the provision of, and search for, information is a two-way process. Based on information search theories (Menon et al. 2007; Ball et al. 1999; James et al. 1999; Mangan et al. 2010), it is expected that universities will stimulate information search by prospective students by making the information readily available. In the same way, it is important for prospective students making the highly involved choice of selecting a higher education institution to be proactive in their search.

This can be achieved by providing relevant information such as financial aid in the form of grants, scholarships, and bursaries. It is the university's responsibility to help students find this information. Irrespective of the target market (i.e. home or international students), such information is still necessary.

Similarly, information on academic reputation and location of the university should also be made available to prospective students, as this will attract those seeking a high-quality education, especially if the institution is in a country with a prestigious higher education system (Bourke 2000; Cubillo et al. 2006; Naidoo and Wu 2014). In addition, Brown et al. (2009) suggest that details about courses, entrance requirements, and financial considerations should be made easily accessible online, as these are vital for students.

Information on university websites is typically more effective and up-to-date than that found in prospectuses (Brown et al. 2009). When using this medium to provide information, however, universities must ensure that it is appropriately targeted towards the right market. Universities can send out information to both home and international students, but, as Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) suggest, marketing activities should be geared towards particular customers, taking into consideration their location and demand for information. The conceptual framework, for example, specifically states that universities should provide some information relevant to the international student market.

The conceptual framework identifies three groups within the international student market (though this is for illustrative purposes as there could be more than three groups within the international student market of a university). For instance, these three groups could be international students from Asia, Africa, or Middle East who require different information before making a decision; here the university ought to make an effort to purposefully target these students with information regarding their cultural needs, the universities' affiliation with the region, tuition fees, or even the equivalents of their qualifications for admission purposes.

Naidoo and Wu (2011) highlighted the exponential growth in the interest of universities in reaching out to prospective students across their national boundaries, which further establishes the needs for relevant information. Segmentation of the market is considered as part of the framework to aid the university in providing students with relevant information, and this suggests the need to have different landing pages, ensuring that the right information can be provided to the right targeted market. As suggested by Weinstein (2013), this requires conscious effort by the universities to aggressively target the customers. Such a tactic highlights an important feature of websites. Unlike prospectuses, websites can be used to offer targeted messages to targeted markets.

The difference between the information search processes of home and international students is acknowledged within the conceptual framework. As argued by Soutar and Turner (2002), every segment of the targeted market has its own characteristics and needs a different strategy. Though both home and international students may be searching for information regarding their degree programme on a university website, the search process is different for an international student who requires student visa advice, and accommodation details, which home students may not find necessary. Brown et al. (2009) add that students' decision-making processes are complex, and universities should both recognise and respond

to these needs in the context of their institutional and subject/discipline settings. Universities should be able to provide relevant information to the different segments of their market, suggesting that personalised web services are required. These are some of the conscious efforts that universities need to make to position their brands effectively. Mortimer (1997) concludes that for universities to achieve a competitive advantage, they need to become better aware of the needs of international students and to improve the level of customer service provided.

To achieve this effectiveness, in the subsequent sections of this chapter, some practical implications and creative techniques for using websites to appropriately target prospective students is offered.

### CREATIVE STRATEGIES FOR UNIVERSITY WEBSITES AND AN INCREASINGLY GLOBAL COMMUNITY

Having identified the importance of websites as marketing communication tools in reaching out to prospective international students, and having highlighted the marketing theories surrounding this strategy, this section provides practical insights into using the proposed conceptual framework to more effectively reach out to students.

The form and function of a website is very important, including a creative user interface design and a strong back end, to increase the viewers' attention span. Other characteristics to increase students' attention towards a university page's content include a flawless fluidity of resolution, compatible browsing, quick response rate, easy readability and formatting, optimal use of multimedia with other viewing options, perfect image implementation, and, on top of everything, user-friendly content and navigation dynamics (Emmerling 2015).

These creative strategies can be considered along with the following areas of attention:

#### *Individualistic Approach*

As far as universities are concerned, a segmentation marketing strategy involves knowing the customers—in this case, international students—and giving them exactly what they want, or may want, building strong relationships, and communicating by using highly targeted promotional material (Weinstein 2013). Websites present considerable opportunities to make this possible.



A cue can be taken from the airlines here. Airlines offer an opportunity to book flights based on the country from which one is flying. The universities who target students from a diversified global student community can also adopt this idea of having a person-centred marketing approach, whereby students have the opportunity to choose their country of origin and are offered a personalised experience on the website.

As indicated within the conceptual framework, universities can provide information specifically created for students from their target countries, separately. For instance, universities can share alumni testimonies from a prospective student's country of origin, and also provide regional specific entry requirements. A prospective student from West Africa can, for example, be provided detailed information on whether their West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) lead to direct entry at a university. This understanding of where they stand, in terms of their qualifications, will aid international students in making an informed choice.

Figure 5.2 illustrates a proposed global landing page for a university website, identifying from where the visitor is viewing the website, and thus personalising the information. The top right corner shows that it is a global landing page, which will not be seen by prospective students browsing the website from their home country. This page allows a prospective student to select his or her country manually and, if need be, to get a more personalised experience. Universities can also include facts relating to the visitor's country,

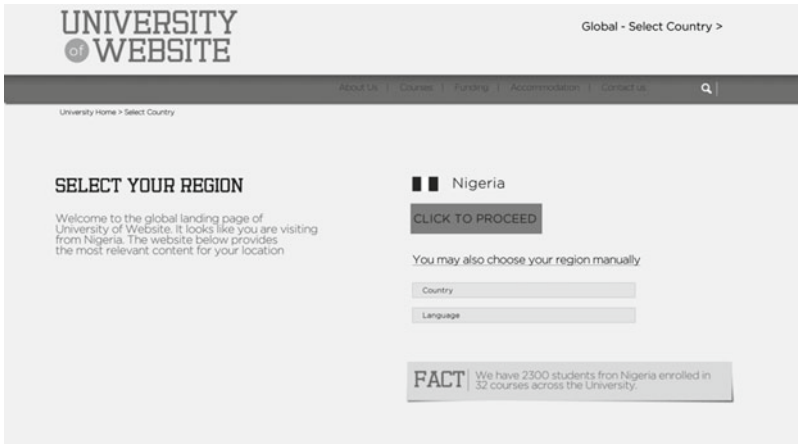


Fig. 5.2. Proposed global landing page for a university website

such as, in this illustration, the number of students studying at the university. Such targeted information can assist prospective students to determine how well they can fit into the system, should they decide to attend the university.

### *Information*

According to Wedel and Kamakura (2000), segmenting a market aims at defining the different types of homogeneous groups present in a heterogeneous market, to help at the design stage of a targeted marketing strategy. Given these different groups, different kinds of messages need to be communicated, as the message that appeals to a domestic student may not appeal to an international student who is leaving his/her country for the first time.

It is very important to have information before making a decision on which university to attend, or which country to travel to, and it is important that university marketers understand this idea of providing relevant targeted information to customers from a heterogeneous market. To assist students in making their decision, universities often ‘bombard’ them with promotional material, employing a wide range of communication devices in an effort to reach out to, and influence, potential students (Veloutsou et al. 2005). As noted earlier, mass communication is no longer applicable. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance for universities to offer relevant information to students, while segmenting the market into groups of potential customers with similar needs and/or characteristics, who are likely to exhibit similar purchasing behaviours.

In the increasingly hyper-competitive higher education market, universities have to be strategic in reaching out to various segments of their market, and in responding to both information needs and curiosity. This can be well achieved with a personalised landing page on the university website, as the students can then easily get the information they specifically need, and not get lost in the vast, and often irrelevant, information available on the website.

Moving to another country for study could be a daunting decision, especially for those leaving their home country for the first time. Thus, relevant information regarding accommodation is important for those students who have to settle down in a new environment. For the same reason, the extracurricular spectrum, such as sports, social activities, and clubs, should also be made known. An example could be information on the Society of African Students being targeted to prospective African students.

### *Images*

Websites are expected to present information creatively, relevant to different stakeholders, along with images reflecting their diverse student body and extracurricular environment. Even international students can visually explore the universities on the websites, in order to be aware of the experience in store, the culture, the facilities, and even the weather.

Indeed, studying in a different country can also mean studying in different weather conditions, which for some prospective students may be relevant information as part of the decision-making process. Often universities adopt a creative approach to their use of such weather-related imageries. For instance, Bradley (2013) observes, the images used on British prospectuses exclude pictures where it is raining, suggesting that it does not really rain in England, and that the country always has bright blue skies and sunshine. Such misconstrued advertising can lead to post-enrolment dissatisfaction for an international student and should therefore be avoided.

The attitudes towards advertisements featuring characters of the same ethnic groups have also been documented by previous researchers. Deshpande and Stayman (1994) find that an advertisement targeting an ethnic group, featuring a character of the same ethnic group, is viewed more favourably by that group when it is in a minority in the local population. Similarly, the anecdotal evidence cited by Aaker et al. (2000) suggests that individuals are likely to feel neglected, distracted, irritated, or even offended by an advertisement that has not been designed to appeal to them. Hence, the image of a staff member of their own nationality or ethnic group, in a position of authority in the university, can influence a student's attitude towards the university. A Nigerian staff member identified by their name, featured on a UK university website, targeting prospective students from Nigeria, is an example of the use of this strategic marketing and segmentation approach. Such individuals could also share their experience of life at the university, welcoming prospective students and encouraging them to choose the university.

Forehand and Deshpande (2001) suggest that an exposure to different ethnic groups in advertisements influences the response of people to the advertisements, and may cause them to respond favourably. For example, images of ethnic minorities on a university website can increase the level of attention to, and consideration of, the university by heterogeneous students. Aaker et al. (2000) conclude that persuasion may occur because

the individual identifies a similarity with the spokesperson and there are desires to maintain positive self-esteem in light of their shared traits. Such favourable attitude, achieved through segmentation and provision of relevant information, can motivate prospective students to search for more information, order prospectus or even plan to visit the campus as they have been appropriately targeted.

However, images should not be overused, as the textual information is also important. Even while using the images and links, the text descriptions of all of them should be provided, as some visitors may not be able to see the images. Accessibility options should also be considered for those users who need assistance. Websites should allow visitors to increase the font size, and to use text description, voice reader, or special inputs. Emmerling (2015), for instance, provides useful insights into the usability of websites as visitors surf for information.

### *Integration*

Charlotte Tangye, the Web Content Manager at University College, Falmouth, noticed a significant drop in requests for the college's printed prospectuses, and decided to create an interactive prospectus containing an abundance of visual content without the usual website navigation, in order to make it more fun for visitors to explore (Anyangwe 2012). Universities today are acknowledging the power of information technology, and it is important for them to see how they can integrate it with their marketing communication strategy.

For example, YouVisit's powerful platform allows businesses and institutions to easily create embeddable virtual tours, using virtual reality ([www.youvisit.com](http://www.youvisit.com)). Similarly, the University of Birmingham in England offers website visitors an opportunity to take an interactive virtual tour of its campus, using photos, videos and 360° panoramas, prompting them to immerse themselves in the beautiful surroundings of the campus ([www.virtualtour.bham.ac.uk](http://www.virtualtour.bham.ac.uk), 2015). Likewise, CampusTours builds video tours, photorealistic interactive campus maps, mobile walking tours, and custom data-driven multimedia applications for universities ([www.campustours.com](http://www.campustours.com)). Recording a campus tour and open day for publication on a website is another way of disseminating information to potential students (Moogan 2011). Applications for Android, iPhone, and Blackberry devices can also be created to integrate the website's features with smartphone apps.

In addition, social media have become an important platform for social interaction, communication, and marketing. An increasing number of businesses in various industries have already integrated, or are planning to integrate, social media applications with their marketing strategies. Constantinides and Stagno (2011) acknowledge that universities are showing an increased interest in the potential of social media as a marketing tool. Particularly important is the potential of these tools to reach out to, and attract, future students, a group that is especially active on social media. Thus, social media platforms can be incorporated into the universities' advertising strategies in order to reach out to a diversified global student body.

Social media provide new channels for marketing communication strategies, whereby relationships with the customers can be tailored in a more one-to-one environment, and relevant information can be passed on (Moogan 2011). By linking their websites with these networks, universities can provide potential students with challenging activities that will register in, and persist in, their minds. Thus, universities can use the insights from Facebook, which gives a detailed account of the members' demographics, media consumption, and page views, as well as listing the active page users. Similarly, images of the university can be shared through Instagram, and engaging messages can be tweeted through Twitter.

A video conferencing option or an online chat service can also be integrated with the website, allowing the marketing team to direct eligible prospective students to the right person within the university, and to build their interest in the university curriculum. In this initial experience, students can also raise their queries with the university authorities, who have the opportunity to respond to them quickly, while interacting face to face. It is important to realise that websites can do more than just provide information; the possibilities of Internet technology are immense—it can break down geographical barriers to reach out to the student community across the globe.

Maslowsky (2013) concludes that sophisticated technology is required for proper integration of the systems, constant data analysis, and reporting as well as activity-based logic that automatically adjusts the shopping experience, as prospective students advance through the process of researching the institutions. One challenge for the universities in this regard could be lack of the appropriate resources to fully commit to these strategies. Other challenges are highlighted in the next section.

## CHALLENGES

In the light of the above discussion, there can be no doubt as to the importance of the university website as a marketing communication tool. However, this tool has its own challenges. For example, the number of extra web pages that would need to be created for each segment of the market is enormous. Furthermore, unlike prospectuses, which are published once a year, the websites would need to be updated regularly, as students demand valid and current information. As emphasised by Brown et al. (2009), since prospective students utilise the Internet for their information searches, it is imperative that the web pages are current and regularly updated.

Sourcing this information may also be considered as additional work for marketing communication teams. Reaching out to various segments of the market would require them to find students from various countries to feature on the websites, with different text for different pages. Moreover, university marketers must ensure that their websites are kept up to date with respect to content, achievements, improvements, course amendments, and other necessary university curricula.

A Content Management System is paramount in this regard, as it allows the content to be created and edited by appropriate people from all sections of the university. The overall appearance is controlled centrally, maintaining a theme and look-and-feel based on the reputation of the university. In this way, authorised persons would have the flexibility of styling their content within the framework of the website style guidelines.

In addition, there is the challenge of the creative design of the websites. This will involve different professionals—designers and developers—in creating an aesthetically appealing website. Although a website may have all the information available, it is important to present this information in as visually attractive a form as possible, as universities need to create websites that are creative and engaging.

Finally, the biggest challenge for university websites seems to be the competition and clutter, which is increasing day by day. Thus, designers and developers will have to continually think out of the box and be innovative in order to retain an engaging, creative, and interesting website that will enable the university to dwell in the minds of its customers. Unfortunately, innovative ideas come at a cost, which many universities are unwilling to pay at this time as they have other priorities at hand.

Most universities put a large amount of information on their websites and users' connection speeds vary considerably. Therefore, the functionality of a website should also be considered, as poor functionality may hinder prospective students from fully experiencing the website. It is expected that university marketers will take this into consideration when designing and developing their websites.

In addition, compatibility with different web browsers should be considered. Emmerling (2015) notes that a poorly formatted web page can be rendered ineffective by different web browsers, since different users may use different resolutions that would make some web pages display incorrectly. Thus, the developers should make efforts to design websites that are compatible with, and can display properly in, most common web browsers. Compatibility with mobile devices and tablets is also important, as improved usability and accessibility of the websites on different devices will enhance the user experience.

## CONCLUSION

As the demand for quality higher education rises, universities are facing enormous challenges in attracting prospective students from outside their home countries. In today's competitive world of higher education, strategic marketing is vital, as universities endeavour to create brand names on the global platform, reaching out to a diversified global student community with different needs and expectations. The ever-growing expectations of students have also led to more pressure from the competition; the students feel that since they are paying for a service, they need to get the best offer.

This chapter makes three contributions to both theory and practice. Firstly, it contributes to a growing body of literature in the marketing of higher education, especially in strategically reaching out to the diversified student community. From a marketing communications point of view, the chapter expands on previous studies on effective design of websites (Flavian et al. 2009; Hasan and Abuelrub 2011; Al-Khalifa 2014); in addition, previous studies have focused on individual countries in highlighting websites as a marketing communication tool—North America (Kittle and Ciba 2001; Saichaie and Morphew 2014), Australia (Adams et al. 2002; Gomes and Murphy 2003), Britain (Mortimer 1997; Binsardi and Ekwulugo 2003), and Wales (Moogan 2011). This chapter offers a holistic approach towards adopting university websites in international student

recruitment without focusing on a particular country or region, and the recommendations provided can be applicable around the world.

Secondly, the study provides creative insights from the marketing practitioner's perspective, bridging the gap between theory and practice as it explores how universities can stimulate information searches through their website design. Thirdly, this study focuses on websites as a marketing tool, highlighting future directions and some challenges that may apply to different stakeholders, providing strategies on how to effectively reach out to diversified global students.

In developing an effective website, there are practical aspects that need to be addressed. Students should be able to get the information they need in order to make informed decisions, and images on the websites should reflect life in the new country, as well as the facilities, resources, culture, and even the weather to be encountered. Although a huge task, the results would be rewarding for both the university and the students. While a university would be able to corner a larger share of the global higher education market, the student experience would also be enhanced with the feeling of being welcomed from the time they first access the website.

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