

Recruiting International Students with Technology: The Changing and the Unchanged

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Introduction

Internationalization in higher education has become increasingly relevant over the past two decades, not only in traditional areas like North America and Europe, but also in emerging regions such as Asia and the rest of the world. The expansion of the global higher education mobility is obvious, with over 4.6 million students seeking education outside their home countries and an estimated 13 million cross-border online students in 2015 (OECD, 2017). These statistics suggest the global higher education system needs to pay more attention to international students, especially regarding recruitment. In the past, universities recruited international students by providing face-to-face consults and delivering printed documents and brochures, activities which required much manual effort. In recent times, new technologies have had large impact within the education sector, and the domain of international student recruitment, itself an inherently complex, costly and competitive landscape, has been no exception (Becker et al., 2017). Further, since the emergence of global rankings and increasing competition, the role of the International Office has switched from engaging in academic cooperation and exchanges, to focusing on international student recruitment, services, and advertisements. Thus, a strategic, deliberate, and informed recruitment approach, with technological inputs, is likely to help institutions maximize their opportunities in an efficient manner.

The Changing Appearance

While traditional marketing strategies remain important, social media marketing is emerging as a large influencer on potential students. For example, although campus visits have long helped students to choose their desired universities, many prospective students no longer see this as an essential part of their university search. According to a recent survey of undergraduate international students, 58 percent said they had no plans to visit a campus before applying and 28 percent said they wouldn't visit even after being accepted (Levitz, 2015). Technology, such as virtual reality tours, social media platforms, and a user-friendly, responsive, and multi-language website, play an increasingly important role in the student decision making process. Many young people have been shaped by the ubiquity of social media like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and WeChat and often choose these as their desired platforms for obtaining school information, allowing recruiting staff to easily reach out to potential students, domestically and internationally.

In addition to increasing user access, technology can aid higher education institutions in re-appropriating money from inefficient projects to better help students. Many institutions are facing similar budget cut challenges and new technologies can help universities increase their recruiting international students while keeping the overall budget down. Virtual education fairs, online orientations, and other technology-aided methods can decrease the costs of personnel and travel while expediting the dissemination of information. Big data and cloud sharing techniques can contribute to the digitization of recruitment documents and files, making the records trackable, manageable and of benefit to recruiting staff. While many International Offices have not yet achieved the ideal blend of technological processes within their everyday methods, with the recruitment of ever more information technology professionals by universities, these processes are likely to change in the near future.

Internationalization and Technology

Universities which find themselves under pressure from global competition and rankings are increasingly finding the need to address internationalization on their campuses. According to a recent report by the American Council of Education, the increase of study abroad opportunities for local students and the recruitment of international students have become central to internationalization activities on campuses (Helms & Brajkovic, 2017). In Asia, the field of recruiting international students will loom large in the near future, as some countries, like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, are facing severely declining birthrates and similarly decreasing college student enrollment (Sharma, 2018). These institutions face stronger pressures to attract students and should focus on international student recruitment in their institutional internationalization strategies. On a whole, increased internationalization and virtual communication with past, current, future students is especially important for universities today and the strategic use of technology can be conducive to improvements in these areas.

The development of technology promotes human progress and transforms communication among people. Technological applications also change with each passing day and what is popular today may be outdated or irrelevant tomorrow. The education and service sectors cannot escape from the use of technology within their processes and should adapt to take advantage of its usage. We should also realize that recruiting international students is a multi-dimensional task, with a heavy reliance on human-related expertise, tailored services, and social skills. These skills, which are essential, can be enhanced by the strategic use of technology. Integrating technology into recruiting processes is not a goal in itself, but a means towards increased internationalization, and diverse and authentic means of interaction with potential students.

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