A man with a beard and long hair, wearing white over-ear headphones, is smiling and looking at a laptop. He is sitting at a wooden desk in a kitchen. In the background, there are wooden shelves with various items like jars, bottles, and a potted plant. A white mug is on the desk in the foreground.

# The New Virtual Student Journey: Changing Dynamics as a Result of the Coronavirus

Explore how institutions can pivot to implement effective online strategies, meeting students at new stages in the virtual student journey.

[www.qs.com/solutions/higher-education-events/](http://www.qs.com/solutions/higher-education-events/)



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# Introduction

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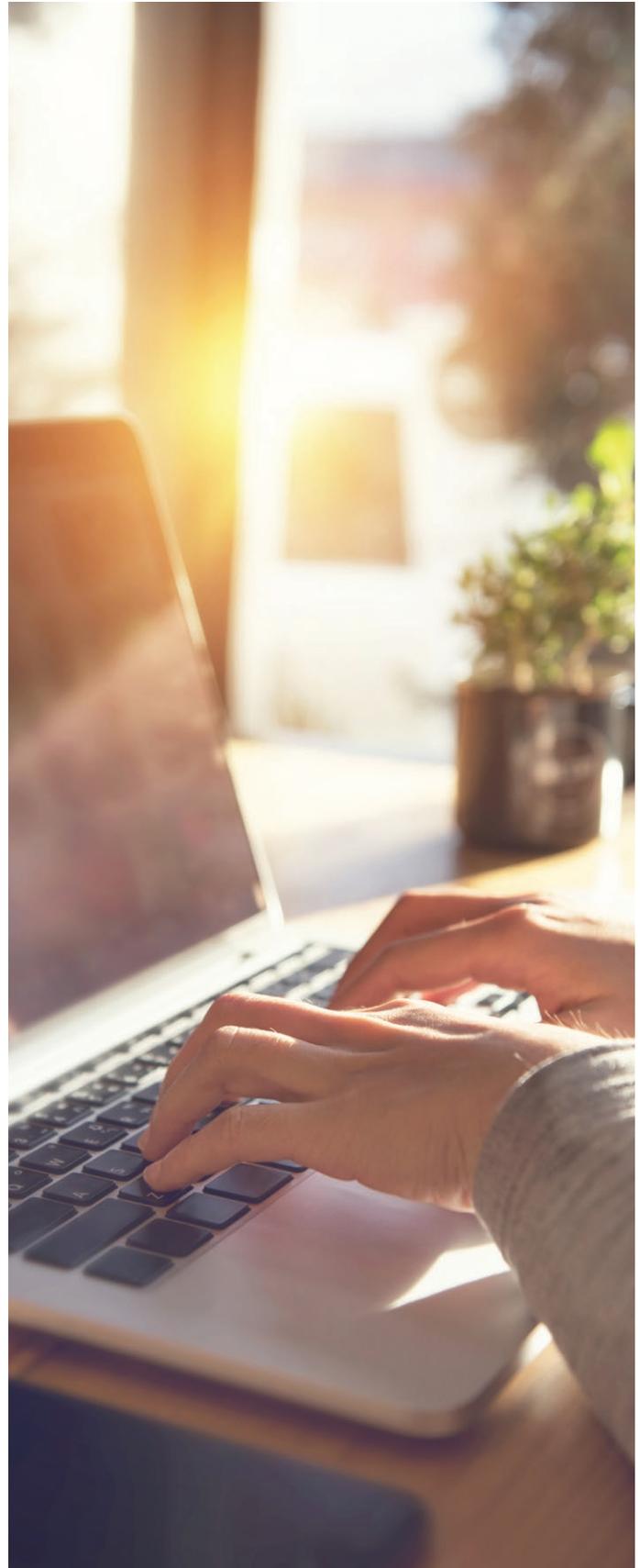
The global COVID-19 health crisis has led to the mass shutdown of institutions worldwide, sweeping travel restrictions, and other seemingly insurmountable social limitations, upending the once-predictable student journey for international students.

Yet, in a time of such unprecedented global disruption, a new student journey has emerged. Institutions that can offer new opportunities for engagement and leverage the data from online exchanges will excel in this new path forward.

In this report, we will summarize how students and institutions have changed course in response to the current global health crisis based on ongoing QS coronavirus surveys of prospective international students and universities.

We will also offer recommendations on how to attract and engage students at new stages in the virtual student journey, gaining insight from the QS Digital and Events team, who have recently launched a series of online, one-on-one meetings for prospective students and institutions.

In addition, this white paper aims to provide recommendations from the QS Enrolment Solutions team on how institutions can best engage and connect with students throughout the admissions journey.





# How institutions and students are responding to COVID-19 disruptions

From over 400 higher education institutions, we learned how institutions are changing their student recruitment strategies, what their biggest challenges are, and if they expect the number of applicants to change.

According to these institutions:

- 83% said that digital events are becoming more important as a result of the coronavirus
- 94% said that qualified, one-on-one online meetings are becoming more important
- 83% said that digital marketing is more important at this time

In addition, QS surveyed more than 20,000 students from around the world to learn how their 2020 study plans are changing.

According to our student respondents:

- 49% said they are now interested in earning their degree online
- 42% said that they are not at all interested in studying a degree online
- 46% said that they plan to defer or delay entry until next year
- 49% said they would be interested in starting their studies in the upcoming academic year even if it meant conducting the beginning of the course online

As the responses clearly indicate, there are significant shifts in attitudes and planning for the 2020-21 academic year. Online learning has risen in popularity, both out of necessity and slowly shifting attitudes to blended learning and online learning that we've seen in recent years.

It is hard to gauge how student attitudes towards online learning will change after the pandemic abates; this is especially true for international students, as the importance of the campus experience and cultural exchange cannot be undervalued.

Yet this newfound familiarity with digital learning tools and platforms could result in an even stronger acceptance of blended learning options in the future, emphasizing the need to extend a faculty's reach beyond the four walls of the classroom.

# The pre-coronavirus student journey

Prior to the coronavirus sweeping through every region of the world, students were able to access a wide range of physical touchpoints when researching and connecting with institutions.

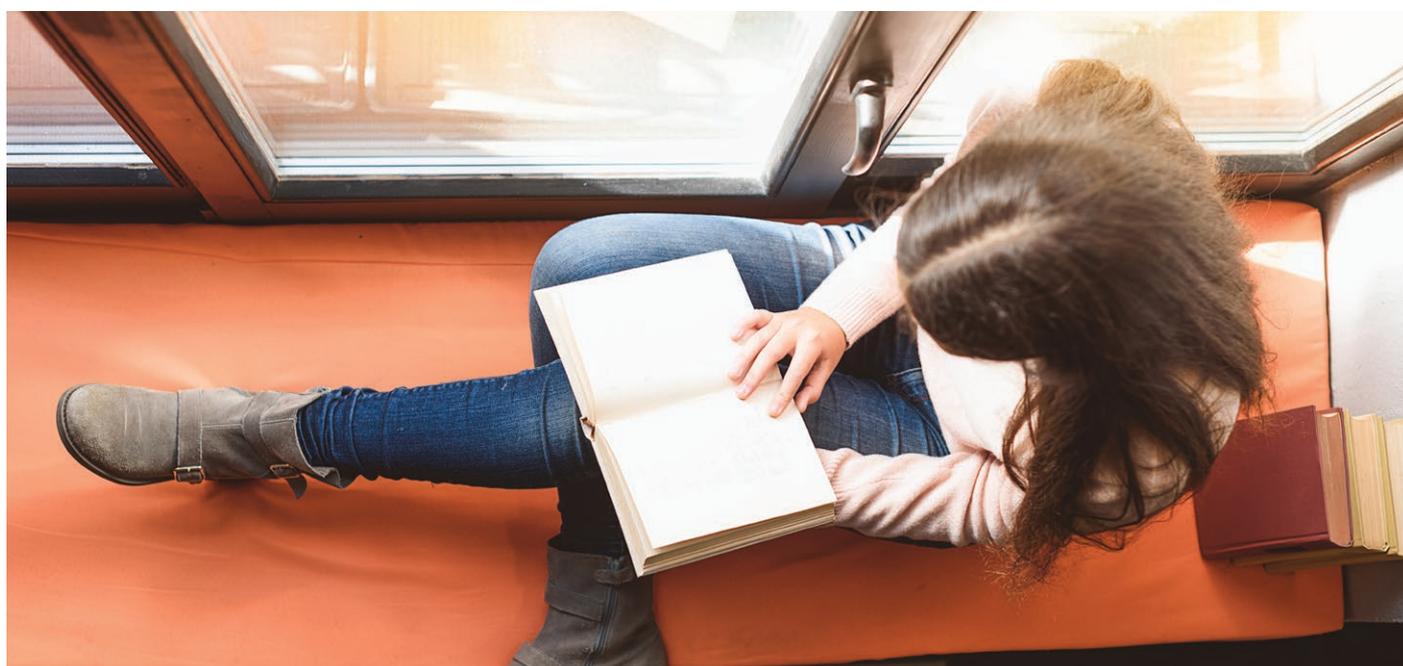
Open days or open houses, in-person interviews, auditing classes, and attending student recruitment fairs are just a handful of the physical connections that students could use to research their options under ordinary circumstances.

Face-to-face interactions offer prospective students a chance to “see” in very immediate terms what they can expect from the student experience, from accommodations to campus events and more.

However, if utilized creatively, online alternatives have the potential to not only provide a stand-in for making in-person contact but can give institutions an added level of access to a student’s background information, allowing them to then gauge motivation and level of interest.

Lest we forget, online marketing, social media outreach, and the official school website as brand statement have been decades in the making.

Several years before student recruiters saw major disruptions like COVID-19 affect their efforts, students were already taking their research online.





# The new virtual student journey

## Research and discovery

As colleges and universities around the world closed campuses due to the global pandemic, online learning and virtual events evolved to meet the need.

To meet students where they are online, marketers and student recruiters must follow suit in their engagement strategies.

There are multiple digital touchpoints that students engage with to begin the discovery and research process and these options are only growing. Organic, online searches will continue to be a large part of this phase, along with social media, and online student guides and portals.

Creating search engine-optimized (SEO) content that positions an institution as a leader in a sea of competitors is not only critical today, but it will be in the foreseeable future if marketing trends across all sectors hold.

According to a recent survey by SEO consultants [Conductor](#), 65% of marketers said they anticipate a decrease to their annual marketing budget due to the coronavirus; however, 63% are increasing their marketing spend on SEO.

Why the pivot to SEO? Just as virtual classrooms are supplanting the physical in times of disruption, virtual storefronts are growing to meet demand and they need virtual guideposts to point users in their direction.

When it comes to social media, an oft-overlooked strategy is to simply update the official school bio and boiler plate content across platforms. Like an official school homepage, an institution's social media presence must also adapt in light of global disruptions like the coronavirus.

For instance, if an official school bio on Facebook or Twitter still presents descriptors and visuals that emphasize in-person interaction and community engagement, it can immediately give students the impression that the information could be out of date and irrelevant.

In addition, re-evaluating your presence on third-party, student guide platforms like QS' own [TopUniversities.com](#) or [TopMBA.com](#) can prove an easy win in gaining backlinks and increasing SEO.

Ultimately, providing updated information that is timely across all online platforms can position your institution as innovative and responsive, thereby strengthening your digital imprint and meeting student expectations in the new virtual student journey.

## Making contact

Once a student has decided to make contact with an institution, there are a growing number of online opportunities to fill in the gap of missed in-person connections.

Online one-on-one interviews and virtual open days/open houses can still provide relationship building and give your institution the chance to leverage your internal expertise.

Better yet, add virtual campus visits and tours to your website for content that is evergreen and accessible for students at different stages in their journey, like the [University of Oxford](#) or the [University of California, Santa Barbara](#).

The next stage of engagement is typically follow-up phone calls, emails, and absorbing more relevant, targeted information from the university.

A major difference now is that the tone and approach to messaging should pivot, as students are now seeking out responsive, support-driven content that is reflective of the changing situation.

Whether a student is facing travel, student visa, or other restrictions, the ways you engage with students are critical at this phase as they often determine whether a student persists in applying.

## A further look at how students research online

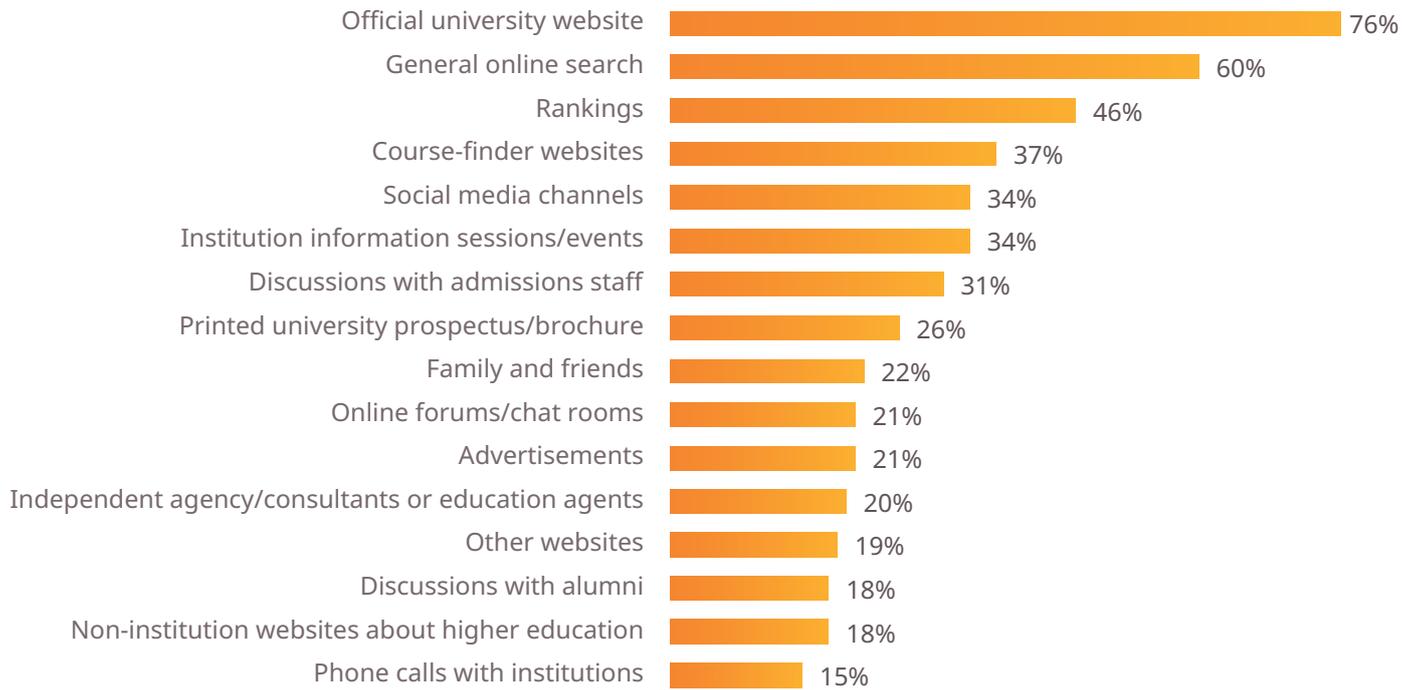
Before we offer recommendations on how you can respond to this changing student journey, we wanted to share additional insights from the [QS International Student Survey \(ISS\)](#).

The ISS is the world's largest survey of prospective international students from around the world. In the 2020 edition, over 78,000 students responded to our survey, with 193 nationalities represented.

While the survey was conducted prior to the coronavirus outbreak and its widespread impact on the global higher education sector, this uncertainty has reiterated the importance of listening to students' needs and concerns.

When students were asked to rank the most useful places to find information when researching a university, their first choice by a wide margin was the official school website.

Which five sources of information have you found the most useful when researching a university?



The second most useful source of information was a general online search, followed by rankings, course-finder websites, and social media channels.

Just below those sources, students ranked an institution's information sessions or events, followed by discussions with admissions staff, as their most important sources of information.



# Best practices in online student recruitment

How can you respond to the new virtual student journey today? To start, since we know that an official school website is the most useful source of information for students, now is the time to conduct an audit and make sure that the content is relevant and timely in this new climate, addressing these complex challenges and the opportunities for students.

## Auditing and aligning your online content

Institutions that follow these best practices capture more prospective students online than the competition:

- **Focus on tone and timeliness:** Be sure that the tone of your materials has changed to offer timely information, support, and resource sharing. As personal safety will remain top of mind for many students and parents in the months to come, ask yourself: how is your approach meeting their needs and expectations?
- **Check for consistency:** In addition, confirm that landing page copy is aligned with display ad copy that you have placed elsewhere so that all content can be said to be sensitive to the changing circumstances that students find themselves in. For example, copy such as: “Visit our campus today!” should be removed and updated.
- **Look at search trends and plan accordingly:** In times of rapid change and disruption, utilizing [Google Trend data](#) can also provide valuable insight into what the most popular search terms are around higher education at the moment. Adjusting your on-page optimizations to align with that data could give you an edge over similar institutions.
- **Utilize the data as you capture it:** As you conduct virtual one-on-one interviews and attend online recruitment events, ensure that you leverage the data of these online exchanges. This data gives your institution the key demographic and background information to inform recruitment that is localized and focuses on target ages or experience levels, among other considerations.

## Online student recruitment events

The power of technology has accelerated the higher education sector’s ability to adapt to the ‘new normal’ by hosting and participating in digital migration.

*“The coronavirus has brought significant and fundamental change to establish new norms and practices in the higher education sector, and nowhere have we seen that more than in the student recruitment fairs, conferences, and exhibition space,”* said Peter Lynch, Global Director of Client Partnerships at QS Digital & Events.

In early spring of 2020, in order to meet the continual demand for student recruitment events, QS ran a series of remote Digital Connect events with candidates in Vienna, Berlin, Dusseldorf, Frankfurt, Munich, Stuttgart, Geneva, and Zurich, before moving all remaining spring and summer 2020 events online.

*“While this has been challenging, this has also been enormously motivating and inspiring to see how as a sector we join together so quickly to leverage technology,”* Peter said.



Looking at how QS partners have succeeded in conducting virtual meetings with prospective students, we can share a few key recommendations in delivering real value and impact online.

Peter recommends the following best practices for institutions that are interested in digital events:

- **Prioritize high quality content:** An institution's first port of call is content curation. We've seen that the more quality content that a school has utilized, the more engaged the student(s). The strategy behind strong content is two-fold: to prime students to reach out and apply, and to best represent an institution's unique selling points.
- **Share dynamic, rich media:** Short and impactful videos shared during a virtual meeting that showcases campus locations, instructors, and senior university leaders can also be extremely effective in keeping students engaged.
- **Offer peer-to-peer engagement:** Leveraging your alumni pool to share a testimonial in real time is another strong way to leave a great impression, as peer-to-peer engagement is increasingly important for students that want to get a sense of the student experience.
- **Get creative in order to engage:** There are more ways to engage students beyond employing rich media. Throughout a presentation, get creative: reference recent social media posts, ask thought-provoking questions about study plans, and mention future cultural events or potential gatherings.
- **The follow up is key:** In some respects, the follow up to the virtual interaction is more important than the initial interaction itself. Utilizing the student data you capture during meetings or sessions, promptly reach out with personalized messages. To keep the conversation going, consider challenging them to reflect on their experience in speaking with you.
- **Don't forget the technical details:** And it should go without saying, but in order to align the experience with student expectations, presenters and contributors must prepare for a virtual meeting by familiarizing themselves with new platforms and technology to leverage them effectively.

Once you've enlisted any necessary representatives to your virtual engagement, curated impactful content, familiarized yourself with the platform, and crafted a strong follow-up strategy based on all the student data you have access to, you will be prepared to deliver a seamless online interaction.

# Best practices in nurturing and engaging students

The student journey continues as a lead becomes a prospective student—that is, when a prospect has shown interest in a specific institution and has agreed to receive more information. The student journey towards application continues and institutions are then tasked with balancing ongoing nurturing with one-on-one outbound contact.

*“Our QS teams put data at the center of everything we do and planning for the ‘new normal’ and post-COVID-19 is no different,”* said Kym Nguyen, Director of Global Market Development for QS Enrolment Solutions.

Based on data captured from 50,000 prospective international students that QS Enrolment Solutions helped partner institutions convert and enroll in 2019, the average international student enrolled at a UK institution 11 months after they made their first inquiry. It took the average international student 10 months to finalize their enrollment at Australian and New Zealand institutions.

Traditionally, international recruitment strategies included in-country visits, campus tours, open days, and other face-to-face experiences, which helped give prospective students and their families a personal experience and connection with the institution. But in the new virtual journey, institutions face the challenge of achieving these same objectives digitally and with as much proactive one-on-one contact as possible.

Leveraging prospect data collected by QS Enrolment Solutions between January-March 2020, Kym states that: *“Prospective international students are starting their journeys earlier, they are asking more questions, and are interested in a broader range of courses. Even with the disruption of COVID-19 on higher education, we have only seen a single digit decrease in new enquirers.”*

Below are a few of Kym's best practice recommendations and key considerations for nurturing students from inquiry to enrollment through the new virtual journey:

- **Focus on timing and cadence:** The online course pipeline is traditionally shorter and competition among course providers is higher, so you need to commit to creating strong communications plans and measure effectiveness along the way.
- **Use your CRM:** Personalize each and every piece of communication with dynamic content. Be direct about your unique selling points and share images and videos strategically. Leverage student preferences and proactively communicate one-on-one wherever possible.
- **Be smart about your most precious resources—your staff:** Consider the skillsets you have (or need) in your team and point them at the stages in the student journey where they'll make the greatest impact. Ongoing product, sales, and customer service/experience training is key to a cohesive and high-performing team.
- **Don't rollback online marketing or lead generation during this period:** Now is not the time to take your foot off the accelerator—your competitors won't.

During a crisis, there are likely to be many unknowns, which can make it challenging for your students to complete some of the routine processes they need to.

# Conclusion

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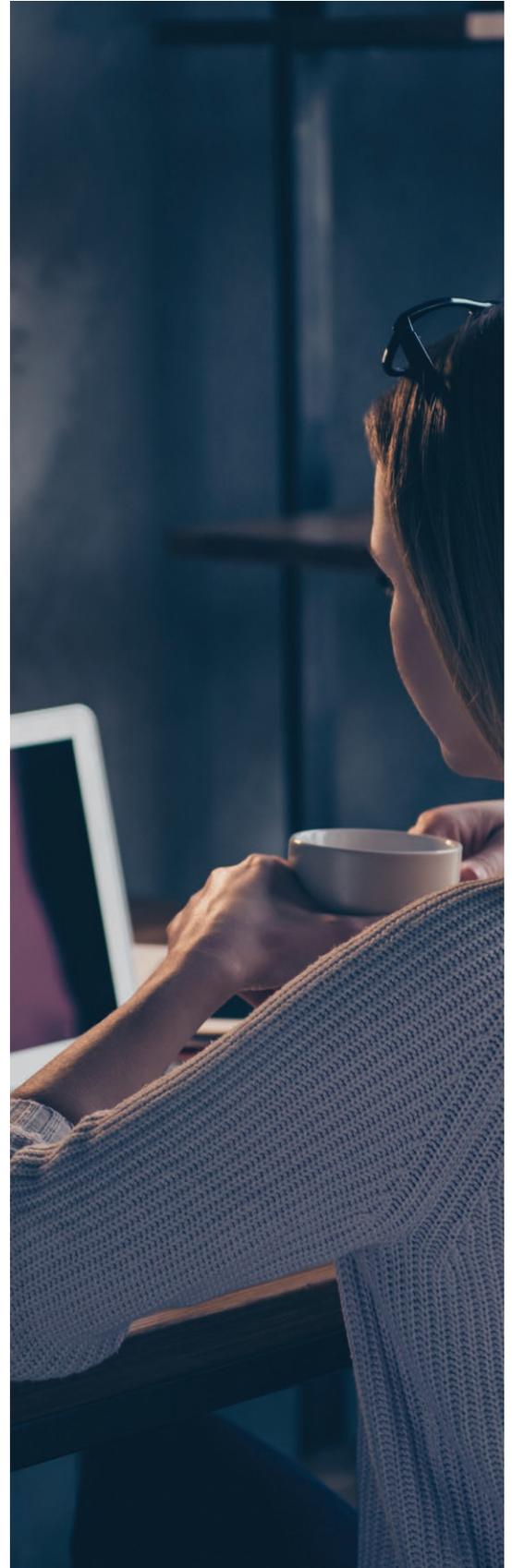
To give a recap of some of the solutions and best practices that we have offered in this report, we would like to provide a quick checklist of action items that your institution can begin to work on today.

The key areas of focus for your institution during times of mass disruption include:

- **Tone:** Students are under a lot of pressure right now, being empathetic and asking them more questions rather than assuming that you already know what they need can leave a very positive impression.
- **Timing:** As the crisis continues and we adapt to a ‘new normal,’ be sure your messaging reflects how students may be feeling in order to proactively address concerns.
- **Data:** Capture data at every stage to make sure you know what data you need – to understand prospects, the stage they’re at, and what they’ll need to hear from you to progress through their journey to enrollment.
- **Assess:** Collecting data is not enough—you should commit to measuring, benchmarking, and improving. Data can explain a lot, but we must ask the right questions and identify areas for improvement.
- **Pivot:** Being nimble is critical at a time like this. Make sure your staff are focused on the right things to keep you on the right trajectory.
- **Action:** Institutions must roll up their sleeves in the next few years and work hard to address any ripple effects from COVID-19 and take proactive recruitment steps.

To learn more about diversifying your international student recruitment, please visit [www.qs.com/solutions/higher-education-events/](http://www.qs.com/solutions/higher-education-events/).

**For any media queries, please contact**  
[qspressooffice@qs.com](mailto:qspressooffice@qs.com).





# About QS

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QS Quacquarelli Symonds is the world's leading provider of services, analytics, and insights to the global higher education sector. Our mission is to enable motivated people anywhere in the world to fulfil their potential through educational achievement, international mobility, and career development.

Our QS World University Rankings portfolio, inaugurated in 2004, has grown to become the world's most popular source of comparative data about university performance. Our flagship website, [www.TopUniversities.com](http://www.TopUniversities.com) – the home of our rankings – was viewed 149 million times in 2019, and over 94,000 media clippings pertaining to, or mentioning, QS were published by media outlets across the world in 2019.

## QS portfolio

- **QS Digital and Events** provides prospective undergraduate, graduate, and MBA applicants with independent guidance throughout their search and decision making. Our world-class digital platforms include TopUniversities.com, TopMBA.com, and QSLearn.com which support search and inform applications to programs matching their profile and aspirations. In parallel, prospective students can meet, either virtually or face-to-face, with admissions officers of international universities and business schools. For universities and business schools, it offers effective and innovative digital and off-line student recruitment and branding solutions.
- **QS Enrolment Solutions** supports higher education institutions to maximize their student recruitment with a range of specialist services, from data-driven insights and high-quality lead generation to optimized communications and student conversion. With over 20 years of experience QSES has an unequalled understanding of international student decision-making. Our international office locations (UK, Romania, India, Malaysia and Australia) enable us to operate across time zones to deliver high value to our partners and exceptional services for applicants.
- **The QS Intelligence Unit** is a leading originator of institutional performance insight drawing on unique proprietary datasets gathered in pursuit of its published research. Best known for the widely referenced QS World University Rankings, today comprising variants by discipline and geography, the unit also operates a sophisticated, multi-dimensional quality standard; a comprehensive analytics platform facilitating advanced benchmarking; and an in-demand consulting team. Our insights both inform and are informed by frequent presence and digital conferences for educators, university leaders, and policy makers.
- **QS Unisolution** is dedicated to developing SaaS technology solutions to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of international mobility, relations, and recruitment functions within education, positively impacting the educational experience for the students, staff, and partners we serve.

For more information about the QS services, please contact [b2bmarketing@qs.com](mailto:b2bmarketing@qs.com)



To continue empowering motivated individuals and institutions across the world alike during the coronavirus outbreak, QS's response has included:

- Moving its [student recruitment events online](#), ensuring that universities and talented potential applicants across the world are still able to achieve high-quality personalized engagement.
- Expanding its range of digital marketing offerings, empowering student recruitment teams as they seek to maintain outreach and enrolment efforts.
- Launching a webinar series designed to enable university faculty and administrators alike to share best practices as they transition their educational offerings into the virtual classroom.
- Ongoing surveys of prospective students and institutions globally to analyze how the COVID-19 crisis is impacting them.

In 2019, as part of our commitment to sustainability, [QS became a certified CarbonNeutral® Company](#), reflecting our efforts to reduce our impact on the environment through a range of efficiency initiatives and offsetting unavoidable emissions through a verified carbon offset forestry project in Brazil.

