Guidebook for diversifying international student recruitment

Building effective strategies for diversification

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Diversification and diversity

This guide helps institutions think through diversification strategies , from a strategy and portfolio and market position point of view.

An effective diversification strategy must also consider the diversity of students in the classroom in a more holistic way. Diversification brings valuable new perspectives into the classroom to enrich the learning experience for all students. Diversity refers to all the ways in which people differ including (but not limited to) race, gender, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic background, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, disability and neurodiversity. These aspects of diversity also need to be considered of in the context of inclusion – diversity without inclusion is pointless.

A comprehensive strategy for international recruitment must also consider the ecosystem that facilitates good outcomes for international students beyond enrolment– this includes good alumni networks, on-campus services, alumni relations and student satisfaction.

Geographic diversification

> "Every three weeks or so we try to identify markets that are underperforming or overperforming compared to previous years with the goal of redistributing budgets between them. The whole idea is that we want a diverse applicant body and we want to maximize our total budget to achieve it."

JOACHIM EKSTRÖM
HEAD OF STUDENT RECRUITMENT
UPPSALA UNIVERSITY

The identification of source countries to create a more varied and sustainable portfolio is one step in a broader diversification framework.

Of course, geographical diversification should be a major focus of university decision-makers.

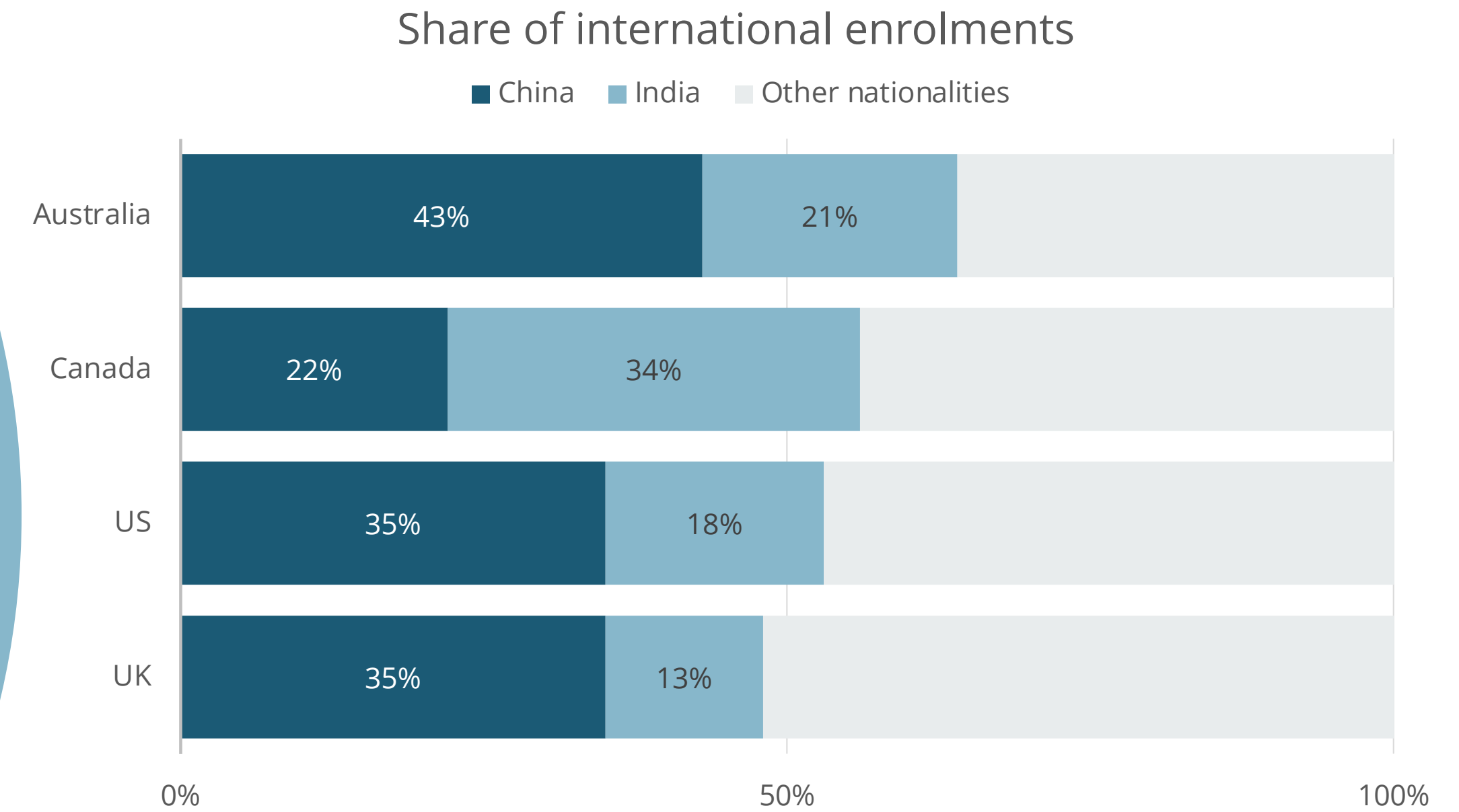Geographical diversification, however, is interrelated with other aspects of diversification. Decisions about which recruitment countries universities should focus on must consider student interest in different disciplines and subjects, across different levels and formats.

Deciding on focus countries is not a once-off process. In order to take full advantage of emerging trends, make sure you are up to date with global shifts in student interest.

Remember not to miss opportunities by being too focused, too early on in the process – keep your options open and revisit different options over time.
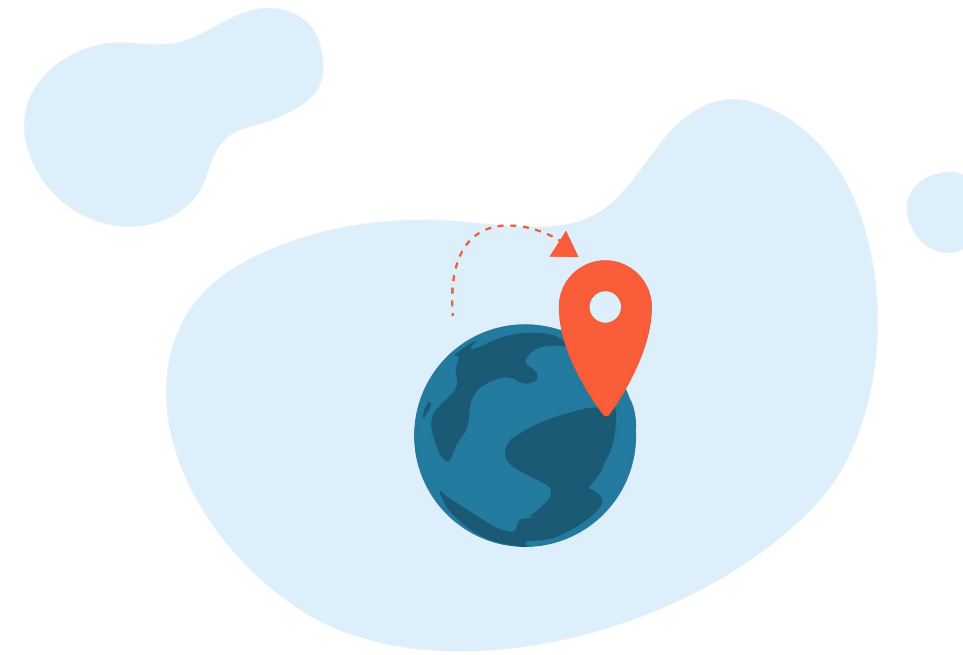
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Why diversify?

- Knowledge Based Economy
- Cultural democracy
- Diversity on campus
- Rankings and reputation
- Quality of classroom experience
- Negotiation power
- Risk diversification
- Global alumni networks

Why diversification is important

Share of international enrolments

■ China ■ India ☐ Other nationalities

Country	China	India
Australia	43%	21%
Canada	22%	34%
US	35%	18%
UK	35%	13%

0%   50%   100%

Sources: Austrade, CBIE, US Statista, UK HESA

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Dimensions of diversification

Geographic/demographic

Balance in sourcing countries
(at least 6 sourcing countries)

Academic

All departments appealing to
international students

Marketing

Diversify marketing channels and
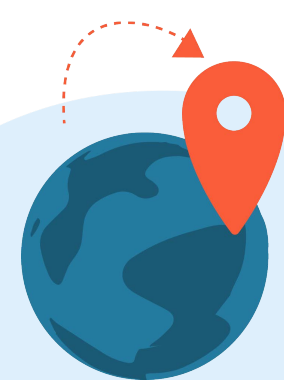maximise your message outreach

Product

Full product range across all
delivery methods and levels of
education

Financial

Manage risk by diversifying
income streams

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Geographic/ demographic diversification

> *"A university's best-fit students don't only exist in the regions they most frequently recruit from—they're everywhere. When institutions prioritize diversification in their recruitment efforts, they build stronger, more talented communities."*
>
> **DIEGO FANARA**
> CEO
> UNIBUDDY

To consider

? Does one nationality make up more than 15% of the total international student population (or one-in-six students)? This percentage is suggested by [Maurits Van Roojen](#) et al, but will depend on the dynamics of your institution.

? How much does your institution rely on international students for revenue?

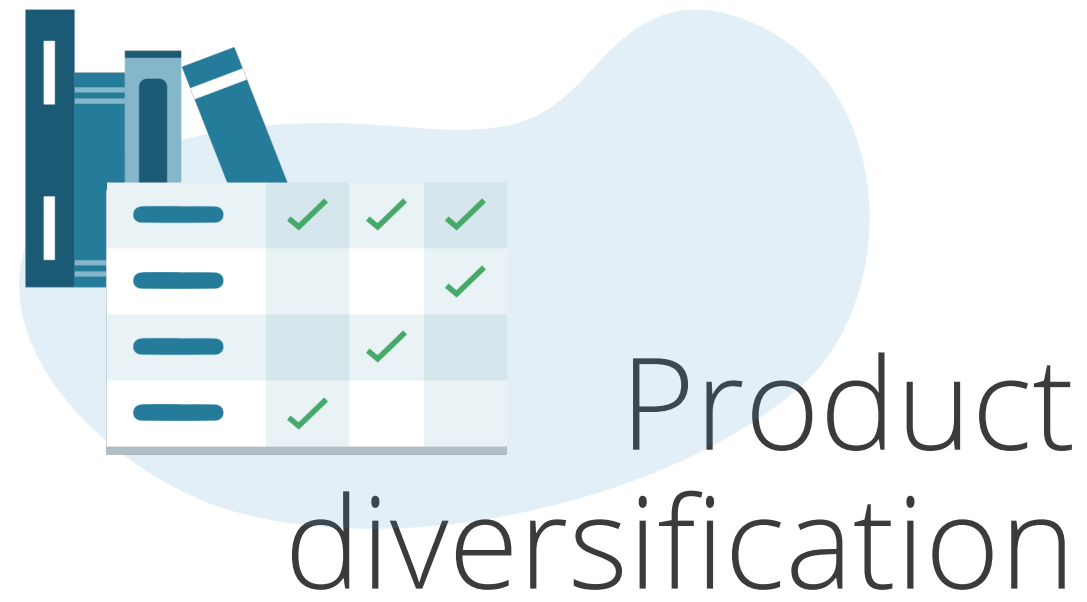**?** Is your institution dependent on a few source countries?

? Which countries does your institution recruit from and why?

? How does this compare with best practices in the sector, in your country?

? How does this compare with universities worldwide?

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Product diversification

Product diversification speaks to increasing the appeal of all types of programmes offered by a university (with summer schools, language programmes, undergraduate or post-graduate programmes, on-campus or online adding up to the mix of programmes available for international students)

To consider

What is the mix between undergraduate, post-graduate and research students?

Are you catering to different kinds of students? Older students, transfer students, etc.?

Can courses be adapted to fit different formats?

"Flexible delivery of degree qualifications is not well established. Investigate the opportunities of delivering courses almost as though they were micro-credentials or smaller certificate programmes as a means of either testing demand or as marketing/visibility tools."

TIM ROGERS
VICE-PRESIDENT ENROLMENT
THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF PARIS

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Academic diversification

Academic diversification means ensuring all departments have programmes that are relevant to international students (not only relying on a few popular courses such as International Business but also on less popular subject areas with high growth potential; e.g., Studyportals' supply and demand data shows that this is the case for Environmental Economics and Policy).

To consider

Are there particular departments that have more international students?

Does the academic programme mix fit the goals of the institution?

Are there programmes whose success relies on international student recruitment?

"Sometimes institutions offer niche programmes that won't attract volume but will help them stand out from the crowd."

JEMMA DAVIES
GLOBAL HEAD OF ENROLMENT PARTNERSHIPS
STUDYPORTALS

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Marketing diversification

Marketing diversification is about having multiple ways to communicate with prospective students across different channels throughout the entire year: online and offline, education fairs and agents, alumni and partner universities, etc., as well as a variety of online channels: education portals, various social media, search engine marketing, etc.

To consider

Do you have more than 50% of students coming through an individual channel?

How important are different sources of student enrolment?

Are you targeting the right students to get top talent?

What is the efficiency of each marketing channel?

How do you manage aggregators and agents?

Do you understand how students from different countries use different channels?

"No one in education can afford blanket, cross channel media coverage. So, select your channels agent & direct, set a time frame and budget and then implement your plan. If you have the same plan for each market, you missed a trick."

TONY LEE
CHIEF VISION OFFICER
ICEF

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Financial diversification

Financial diversification should spread risk across multiple markets by generating various income streams, to navigate downturns and to reduce the impact of changes in any one market.

To consider

Does your institution have sufficiently diversified income streams?

Is there a long-term plan to lessen the reliance on 'at-risk' markets?

Would summer schools, winter schools or joint degrees or partnerships help diversify revenue?

> *"Use scenario planning to diversify with both risk management and opportunities in mind!"*

MONIQUE SWENNENHUIS
SENIOR ADVISOR INTERNATIONAL
MARKETING AND RELATIONS
HANZE UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

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1

Clarify your diversification objectives

What are your institution's objectives and primary goals and how will diversification support them?

How can focusing on different dimensions of diversification help achieve different goals?

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Key output

- Decide on your primary and secondary objectives

- Which cohorts of students would your institution like to increase, decrease, shift to different disciplines or diversify with more source recruitment countries? Identify the disciplines where this cohort is overrepresented and underrepresented.

- For different disciplines and subjects, decide which student cohorts your institution would like to increase, decrease shift to different subjects or diversify with more source recruitment countries.

- Consider the current product and format mix – for example, which nationalities might be open to studying part-time or online.

"Online learning can support rolling intakes generating a regular income. It also allows for a source of income in the face of a pandemic!"

JEMMA DAVIES
GLOBAL HEAD OF ENROLMENT
PARTNERSHIPS
STUDYPORTALS

Useful resource:

Use this table to plot the strategic objectives, current situation and goals of the different dimensions of diversification

Dimension of diversification	Strategic objective	Current situation	Goal
Geographic/ demographic			
Academic			
Financial			
Marketing			
Product			

Understand the dynamics of your institution

2

? Which countries does your university receive the majority of international students from and why?

? What has created obstacles for diversification in the current recruitment process?

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Recruitment

To consider

? What is the recruitment process? Is this different across different countries?

? Which countries are the easiest for your institution to recruit from? Why?

? Which countries are difficult markets to recruit from? Why? What are some of the challenges?

? How flexible and supportive is the recruitment process?

? How does your university track acquisition cost per student?

? Does your university have different recruitment channels?

? Do you have a sense of what works and what does not?

? Are you distinguishing between quality and quantity in your metrics?

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Conversion

> "As students on average apply to 4 or 5 universities, as a rule of thumb, the conversion from application to enrolment should be about 20%."

THIJS VAN VUGT
DIRECTOR ANALYTICS AND CONSULTING
STUDYPORTALS

To consider

? Are you following up to all your leads in a timely and appropriate fashion to minimise applicant drop-off? What does the conversion from leads to applications look like?

? How fast are you processing applications? Within a matter of weeks or months? Is the conversion from application to offer letters above or below 70%? If below, reconsider your messaging.

? And what about the conversion from application to enrolment? If it is below 20%, review your process: are you following up on offer letters sent out? If not, are responsibilities clear on who should do so?

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3
Understand the wider landscape

? How would you describe your institution's recruitment in the context of the wider Higher Education landscape and your competitors?

? What are your institution's competitive advantages

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The wider higher education landscape

> "A diverse classroom mitigates risk, but more importantly, it drives education quality and prepares students for a global world. Diversification is a cornerstone of international higher education, so being informed of the latest trends in student interest across the world gives universities an advantage."

EDWIN VAN REST
CEO
STUDYPORTALS

Be aware of what different data is describing. Many public data sets are descriptive of a past situation. Metrics may change and updates are usually on an annual basis.

Data from Studyportals shows a definite correlation between page views and enrolments 12-24 months into the future. Our data uses consistant metrics and is updates monthly.

Useful resource:

Studyportals' Market Interest Dashboards Modules for Marketing and Recruitment provide real-time data on where student demand for your courses is coming from and can help you diversify your student population.
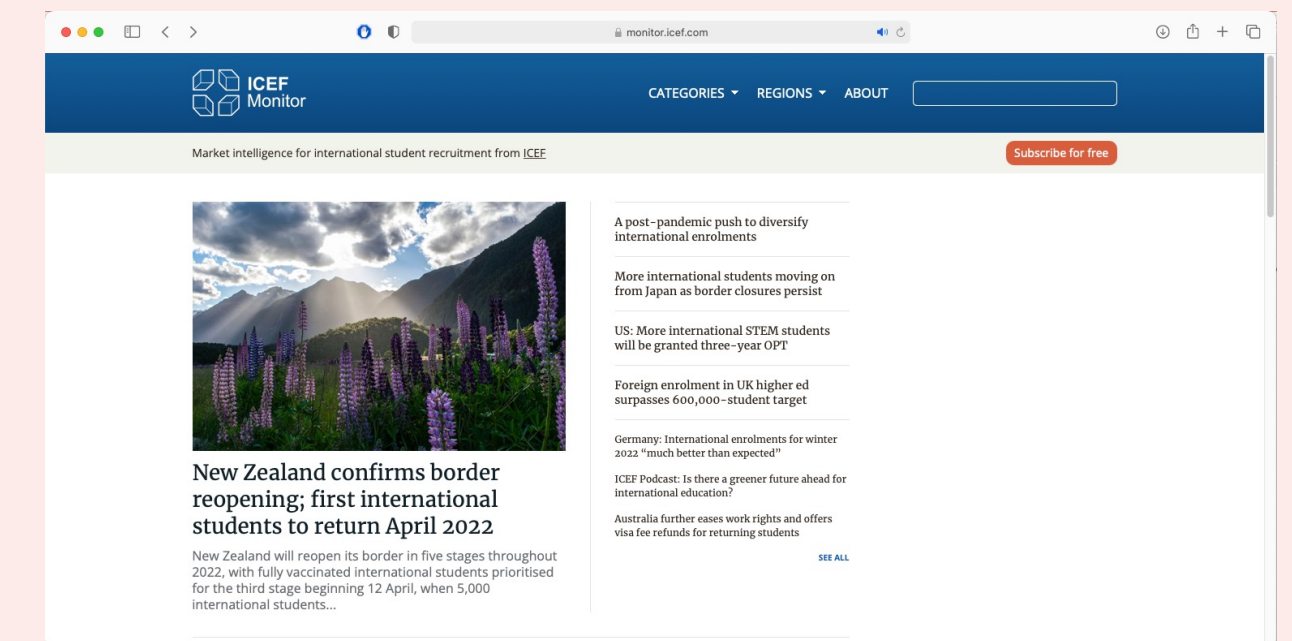
https://act.studyportals.com/analytics/

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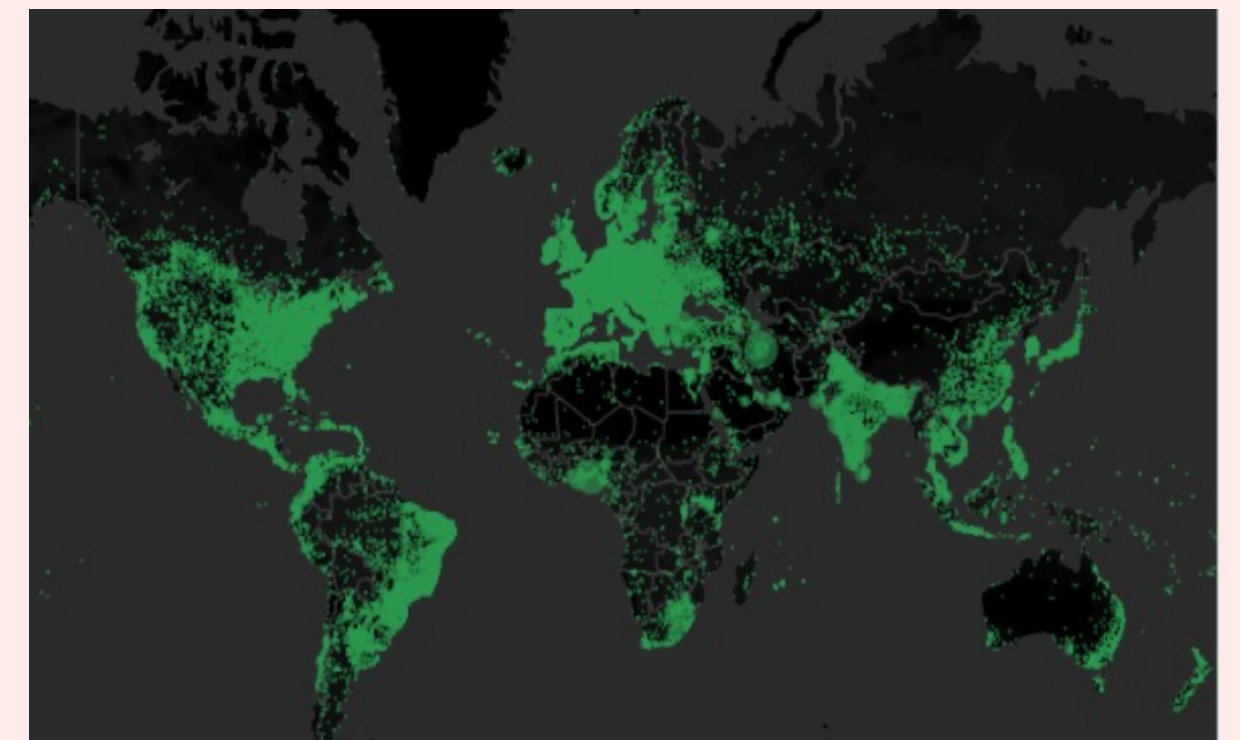
The international student recruitment landscape

> *"We have seen a rapid acceleration of the sector's transformation to digital, which has given rise to exciting opportunities, including the ability to connect with schools and agents virtually. Some recruiters will make fewer trips to source markets. The savvy recruiters will leverage a hybrid approach and reach more places than ever, with a clever mix of onsite and online."*
>
> **MARKUS BADDE**
> CEO
> ICEF

Useful resource:

ICEF Monitor is a good resource to keep up to date with news in international higher education

https://monitor.icef.com/

Useful resource:

Unesco's Institute for Statistics shows the global flow of international students and can be filtered based on origin or destination country. Note that enrolment data is backwards-looking.

Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students

http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow

Useful resource:

'PESTLE' framework

Understand external trends, opportunities and threats by considering a 'PESTLE' framework. Note that differences across and between different countries may create opportunities

Political	Economic	Social
Eg. Political unrest, rhetoric around international students and visa policy, post-study work visas	Eg. The impact of unequal economic growth, unemployment rates and currency fluctuations, GDP per capita, share of middle-class per country, etc.	Eg. Changing career attitudes, changing demands of Gen Z, health risks (e.g. covid-19 pandemic)
Technological	**Legal**	**Environmental**
Eg. The rise of online learning during the pandemic, internet penetration rate, quality of mobile internet per country	Eg. The impact of national visa policies on student recruitment and employment, post-study work visas	Eg. The role of education in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, and the rise of student interest in sustainability

Competitive advantage

Sample Competitor Analysis

Competitive advantage often comes with tradeoffs. It is unlikely your institution can be all things to all people.

Points of Parity are the bare minimum factors that must be in place to compete in a space and are not a source of competitive advantage. For example, institutions being accredited.
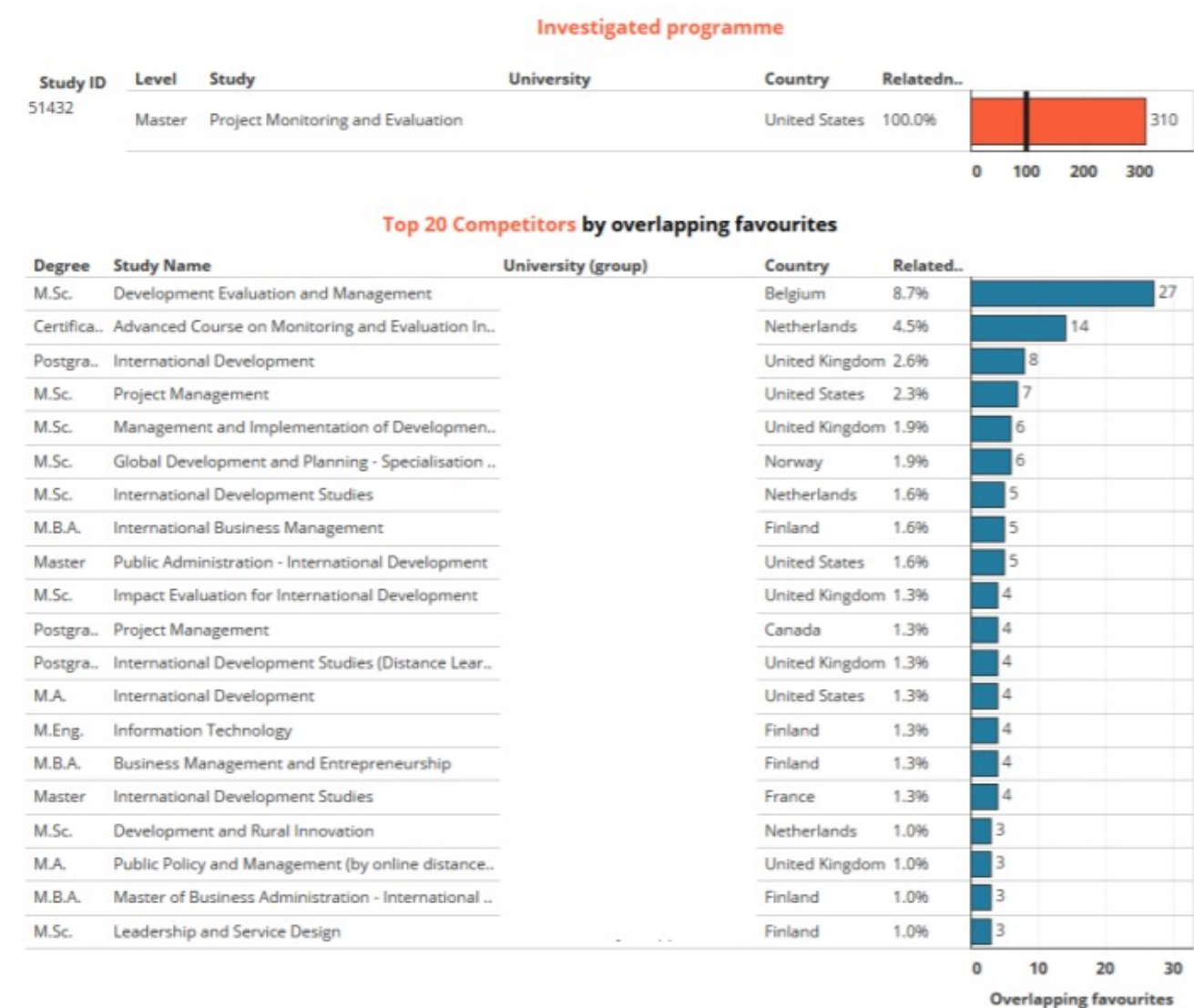
Points of Difference refer to the factors that make your institution or programme different from the competition. These can help you to focus on what aspects of your institution to highlight. E.g., do your degree programmes include a (compulsory) internship or exchange programme or not?

Points of Difference may be different for different competitors, in different markets. Location is often a point of difference: is your university located in a large metropolitan area, or in a rural setting?Competitors come in all different shapes and sizes. How do you monitor local, national and international counterparts?

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4

Identify
opportunities
across different
dimensions of
diversification

? Are there geographical differences in student interest, discipline or level or format that could translate into opportunities?

? Can you find new opportunities by understanding how your offering matches the needs of different students?

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How to choose recruitment countries

1. University Strategy

What will the classroom look like in five years? Certain countries may be higher in priority than others: institutional ties, governmental programmes, and concerns from different departments can narrow down your list even further.

2. Source Market size

How large is student demand for international education in the country? Is the college aged population growing or declining? Is this market worth the investment? Will enough students be able to get student visas?

3. Student interest

Are students interested in the value proposition my HEI can offer? Are they interested in studying my disciplines and/in my country? These questions define where marketing efforts can be more successful. They also challenge assumptions and reassess long-held beliefs.

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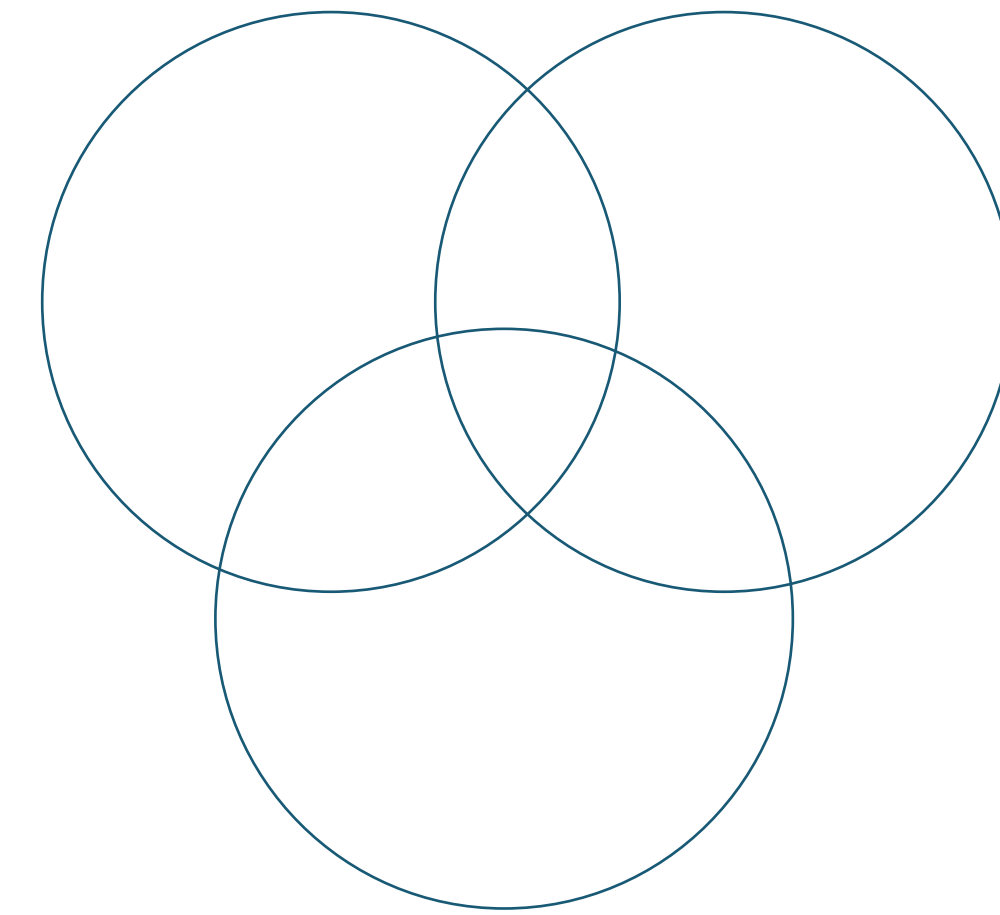
Take steps to understand features of the markets you would like to explore

? What resources can be used to understand the characteristics, behaviours and concerns of different markets?

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Steps to understand features of the markets you would like to explore

> "I think there's huge variation across countries and keeping that in mind, in your communication is incredibly critical because it allows you to save energy and resources in recruiting those students."

CARMEN NEGHINA, PHD
SENIOR MARKETING ANALYTICS
CONSULTANT STUDYPORTALS

Speak to current students and alumni from focus countries to understand how their student journey has been influenced by their context. Map out what is offered at the moment and what is asked by international students to identify gaps and opportunities.

Access quantitative and qualitative data available on market demand and to understand the concerns of prospective students from focus countries.

Utilising the conversational data enabled by the Unibuddy platform is one way to gain actionable insights into specific student concerns and areas of interest.
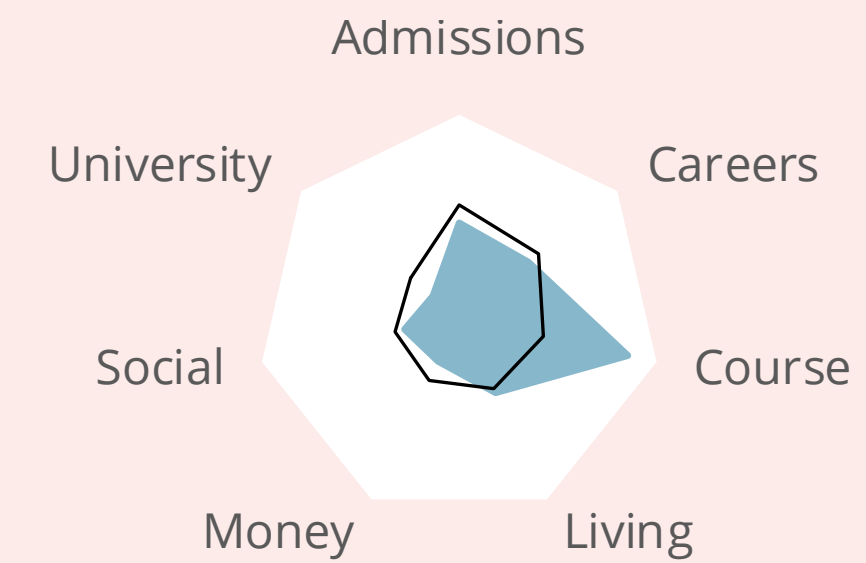
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Useful resource:

The report New frontiers: Diversifying student recruitment identifies different student concerns across 17 interesting source countries.
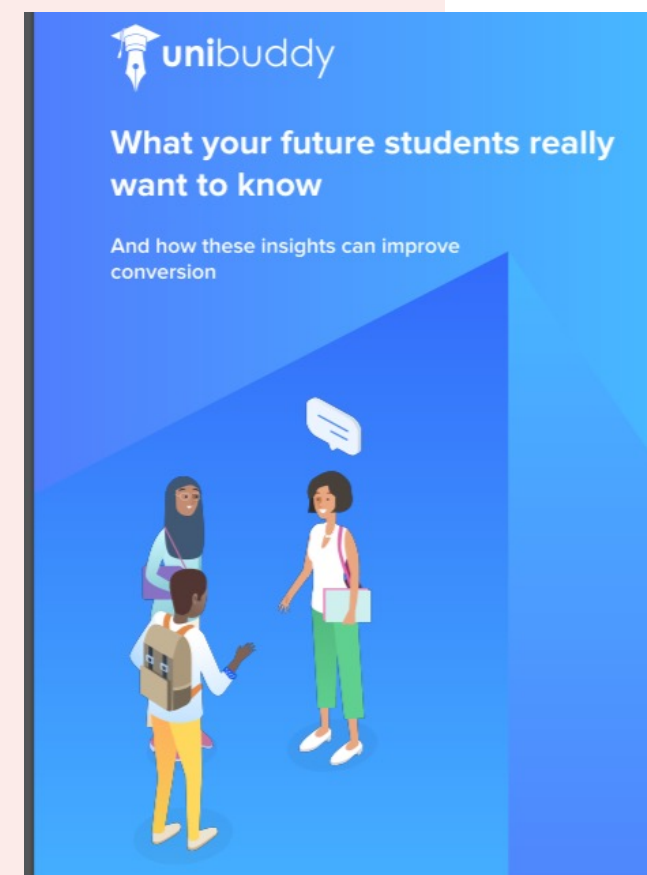
studyportals.com/diversification-report/
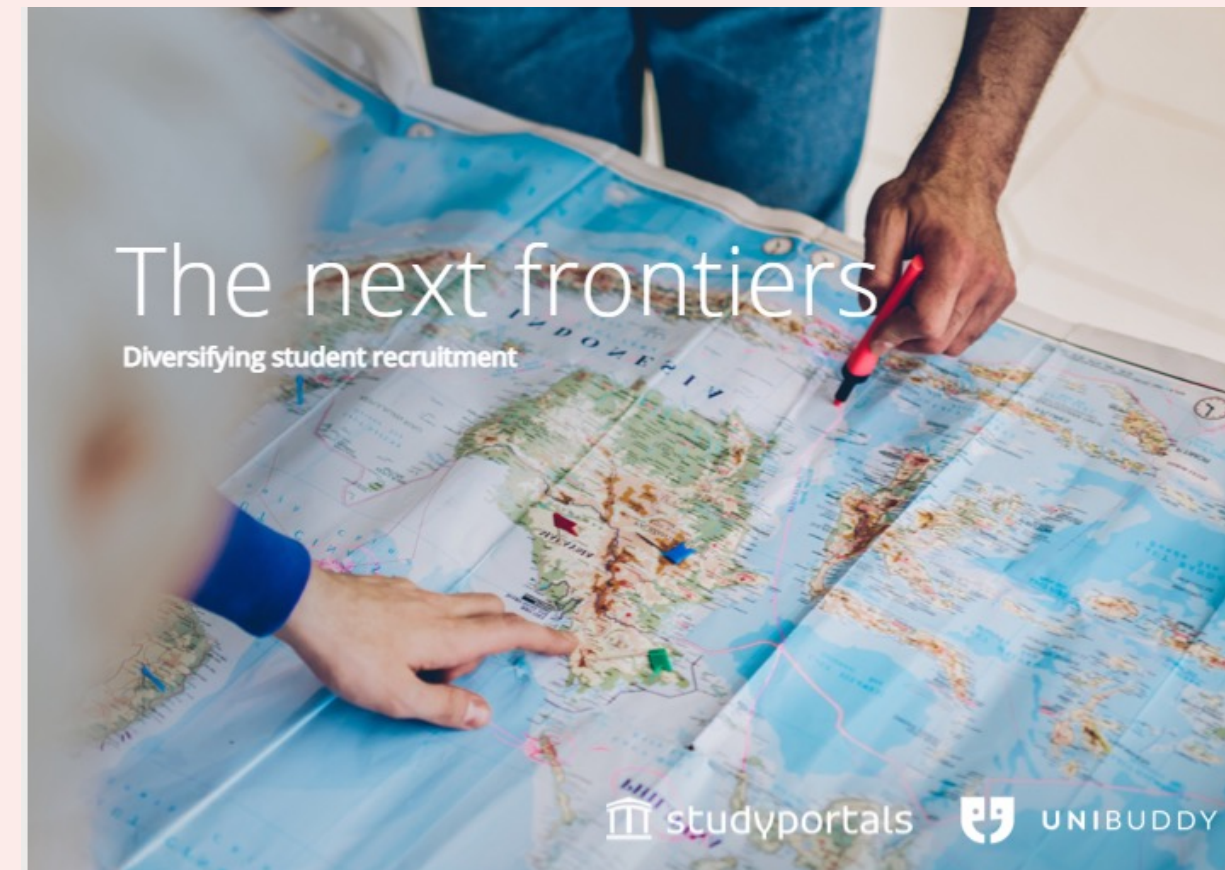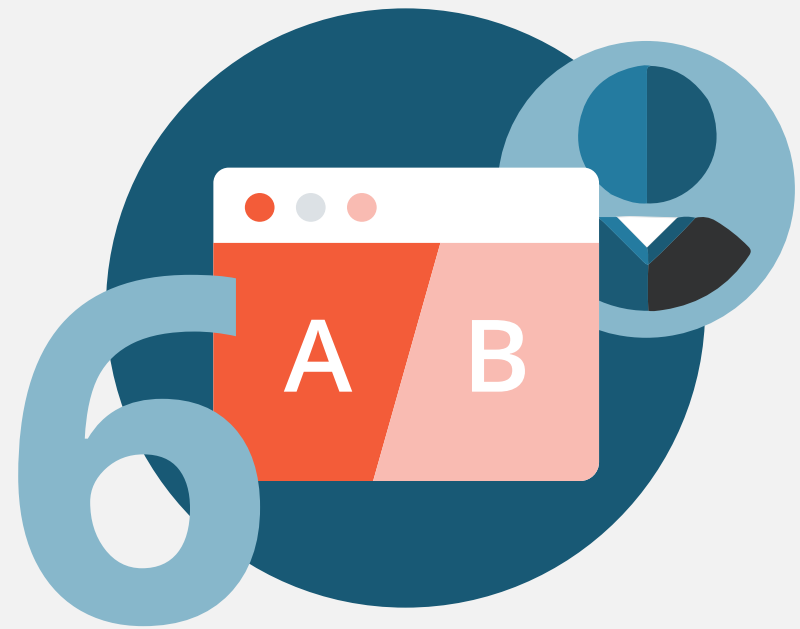
Student concerns

Useful resource:

This report from Unibuddy: What your future students really want gives insights into the interests and concerns of different student segments

https://unibuddy.com/resource/new-resource/

Useful resources:

Gapminder.org, wittgensteincentre.org or ourworldindata.org are good resources for economic and demographic data.
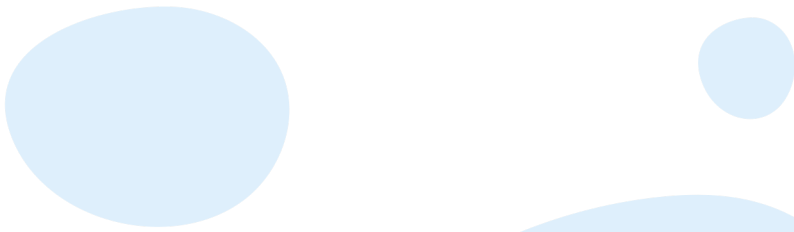
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Articulate your offering in a way that appeals to these markets

How can you match your knowledge of student concerns in your target countries, to different aspects of your offering?

What messages, platforms and information might appeal to different target groups of students?

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Articulate your offering in a way that appeals to these markets

One of the aspect to consider is targeting based on demographic data such as age and gender. Different levels of study, such as undergraduate and postgraduate studies, attract students in different age groups.

Create student personas in order to tailor recruitment and marketing tactics and successfully attract prospective students.

Make sure students are getting the information they need at the right point in the student journey. Develop multiple touchpoints on various channels before, during and after enrolment.

Keep an open communication line at each stage of the journey. Make sure that students can also pull information when they need it, and that they have an overview of the process.

Useful resources:

**Developing International Student Personas +
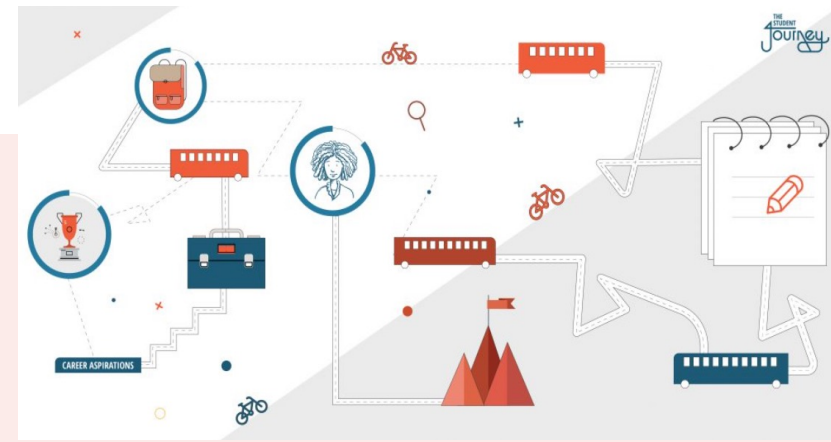Free Canvas**

This template will help you to craft student personas
as a first step towards personalized communication

Insights into student personas:

https://studyportals.com/student-recruitment/international-
student-persona-canvas/

Download the canvas:

https://studyportals.com/wp-
content/uploads/2018/07/International-Student-Persona-
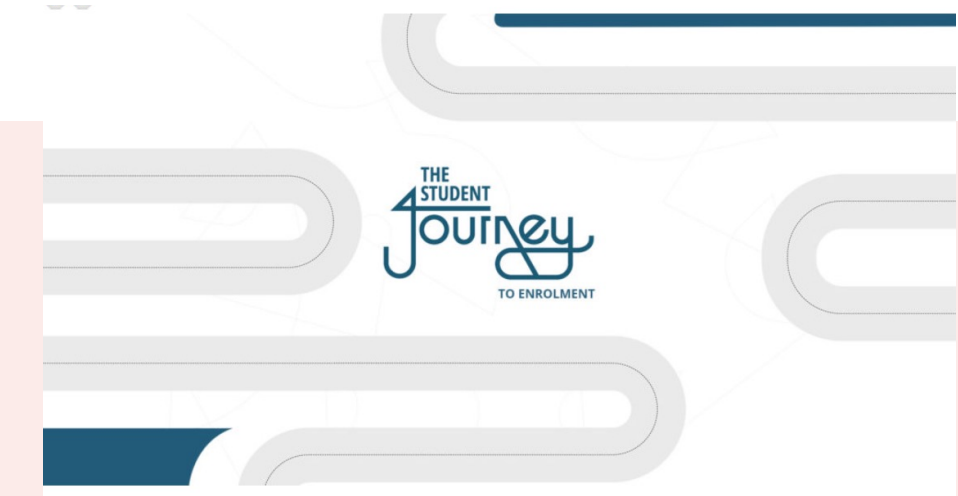Canvas-Studyportals-downloadable-file.pdf

Useful resource:

**Mapping the Student Journey to Enrolment
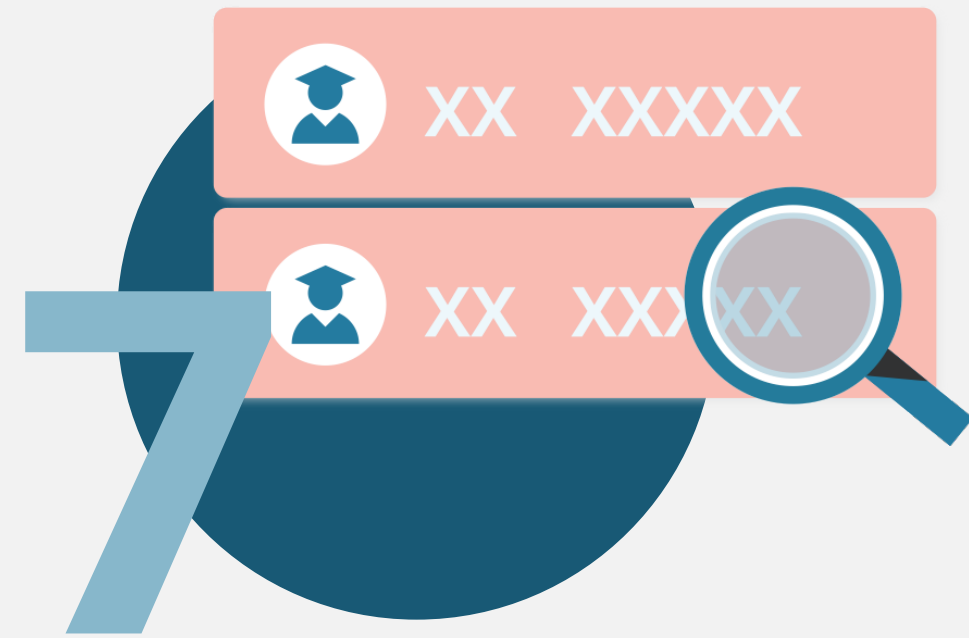+ Free Journey Map Template**

**Create a student journey map to track
student touchpoints, goals and pain-points**

https://studyportals.com/student-
recruitment/mapping-student-journey-to-enrolment/

Download the Journey map:

https://studyportals.com/wp-
content/uploads/2022/02/Student-Journey-Map-
Template-Studyportals.pdf

7

Understand how to compare international students

- **?** How can universities compare international students?

- **?** What questions can universities ask to determine what different indicators mean?

- **?** What 'red flags' are actually attributable to context?

- **?** How can universities collaborate to explore new markets?

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Understand how to compare international students

"I think we focus perhaps externally on recruiting more diverse applicants not enrolled students. We don't examine our processes. [For example] we don't think about if we have a requirement for a standardised test, can students in a given country even access the testing centre or do they have to leave their country entirely just to take this test that may or may not predict whether or not they're gonna succeed once they enrol in the institution."

DAVID DI MARIA
SENIOR INTERNATIONAL OFFICER &
ASSOCIATE VICE PROVOST FOR
INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND
BALTIMORE COUNTY

Recruiting students from different countries means understanding how a student's context may affect their application. It is impossible to gain an in-depth understanding of every aspect of every country. Understanding the kinds of aspects affected by context is a good starting point.

Circumstances can impact access to unpaid internships, attitudes to risk, time for hobbies, and international exposure. Interviews can provide a space to understand the context of students and their motivations.

Make sure you try not to judge students based on their literacy around the admissions process. This should not be a metric in accessing ability, as students have been exposed to different contexts and information.

For standardized test scores, understand the structural reasons for regional disparities. Comparing test scores by region can help to account for this.

When comparing referral letters, take into account that there may be cultural differences around praise and that attitudes to mentorship can vary by country

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Understand how to compare international students

Comparing academic qualifications is difficult without understanding the educational system in different countries or the context of different courses. For example, some countries have higher marks across the board than others (grade inflation). Ask specific questions about the type and rigour of the course and institution. A useful indicator of academic potential could be a student's rank in the class.

Useful resources:

Understanding and comparing qualifications across countries can be daunting but there are resources available. International education database Scholaro can help you gain some basic knowledge: https://www.scholaro.com/pro/

The International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS) International Education Guides from Alberta Canada go into more detail for selected countries: https://www.alberta.ca/iqas-education-guides.aspx

The ENIC-NARIC network in Europe also provides useful information on credential evaluation: https://www.enic-naric.net/

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Authors

Thijs van Vugt

Thijs van Vugt is Director Analytics and Consulting at Studyportals and partner in iE&D Solutions. He has over 30 years of experience in international education, 14 of which as a consultant. Thijs has worked at Tilburg University in the Netherlands , the ERASMUS Bureau in Brussels, Sheffield Hallam University in the UK and was interim Head of Marketing at IHS Erasmus University Rotterdam and at RNTC. He is the founder of the Expert Community on Marketing & Recruitment of the European Association for International Education (EAIE) and was the Chair of M&R from 2002 to 2008. From 2004 to 2008 he also was a member of EAIE's Executive Board. Thijs served on EAIE's Conference Programme Committee in 2010 and 2011. In September 2009, he was awarded the Bo Gregersen Award for Best Practice of the EAIE.

Cara Skikne

Cara Skikne is a communications specialist with a background in journalism. Cara worked as a current affairs producer for the State Broadcaster in South Africa and then as a financial journalist and producer for CNBC Africa and Business Day TV. She has also written for publications of the Graduate Management Admission Council - Businessbecause.com and mba.com. Cara has a Bachelor of Journalism from Rhodes University in South Africa. She has an MBA from Oxford University, where she was a Chevening scholar, and where she co-chaired the Media and Marketing Oxford Business Network.

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Looking to take your diversification strategy to the next level?

Contact hello@studyportals.com