

Education Futures Mini Conference series summary: Recruitment reality in a post-Covid-19 international Higher Education landscape

Background

The below summary is taken from the first of the British Council's Education Futures Mini Conference series. A series of in-depth discussions and reports linked to a variety of key topics on global implications for the international education industry. The aim of the series is to support the UK sector's strategic action planning and decision-making allowing the UK education sector to better anticipate challenges, manage risks and respond to opportunities.

Our first series, focussing on international student recruitment, included the following sessions:

Breakout session one:

The view from the frontline – evolving student perceptions and changing market sentiment

Breakout session two:

Digital transformation – the future of international student recruitment

Plenary:


Yes, no, maybe...we don't know – probable and possible implications of Covid-19 on the international Higher Education landscape

Higher Education experts from around the globe joined British Council staff to explore recruitment reality in a post-Covid-19 international Higher Education landscape.

Recruitment Reality summary – Views from the Frontline

There is no doubt that the world is in a period of crisis and transition, but one thing remains certain: there is still demand for an international higher education experience – and ideally one on an international campus. As higher education institutes (HEIs) across the world manage the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, international recruitment remains a fundamental mission both for intellectual vitality of UK campus and for survival. Now more than ever, digital recruitment is at the forefront of recruitment strategies – not as a stop-gap measure until the pandemic wanes, but possibly as the future of recruiting.

The current trajectory of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has closed university campuses around the world, indicates that on-campus learning may not be an option until next



year. International travel is likely to get more complex and more expensive, rendering useless the previous reliance on face-to-face events and on-the-ground activities. Under these conditions, HEIs must innovate, communicate and engage, and adapt to digital strategies.

To tackle the short and medium term, international recruitment teams must re-evaluate their current strategies and goal posts, using the resources that are already available to their teams and defining new metrics of success. Most universities in the UK already have robust digital recruitment programmes that must now be adapted to develop communication, marketing, and virtual events where possible. Universities have quickly shifted their international strategy from attracting new applications to converting the ones it had already received; and have leaned more on its digital communication with students, parents, agents and partners, and found that their relationships have benefited from increased, ad hoc communication.

A digital strategy necessarily relies on digital platforms for virtual fairs and tours, webinars and meetings. Universities that do not have an in-house platform must take care in choosing trustworthy third-party partners that will faithfully execute the strategy and meet specific needs. Where webinars are not feasible – such as the many agent conferences that have been postponed or cancelled entirely – HEIs have already begun providing materials and videos for agents to consume on their own time.

Continued engagement and communication are key, and recruitment teams can take this opportunity to find new ways to connect virtually with prospective students. Passive communication events, such as virtual drop-in hours, are useful, but so are making individual appointments. Students are concerned that they will lose out on an international experience of cultural and linguistic immersion. They also worry about the logistical issues of delayed exam results, visas, lecture halls, and dormitories. HEIs must assure students and parents that online provisions will be of high quality and that appropriate health and safety measures will be taken when students are on campus.

In the long term, digital recruitment may take precedence over in-person events. While face-to-face meetings will still be valuable, universities may reconsider frequent trips abroad and instead make fewer, more productive visits. Digital specialists are likely to become a permanent role on recruitment teams. Because the online environment varies so greatly between regions and countries, tailored content can go a long way to increasing engagement.

Ultimately, this is a period for innovation and opportunity. Whilst this is going to be a tough ride, the actions and solutions that have appeared as an outcome of Covid-19 are an inspiring indication that the international education industry can embrace fundamental change, even where when totally unprepared. There is no blueprint to forecast what the industry trajectory will look like, but the foundations of the industry are strong and should be able to weather this. We don't know what the landscape on the other side of this tunnel will look like, but the demand for international study is still there, and many families see international study as a worthy investment. Online learning may not be considered as a replacement for this in the long term, but could be a short-term measure, with students understanding that current global situation may require some initial compromise.

Continuing demand for international education experience means that universities have an opportunity to redefine what their offers might look like in the longer term with Covid-19 - but the fundamentals of education as a route to develop future generations who are culturally astute, strong and resilient remain the same.

<https://education-services.britishcouncil.org>

*This report is based on examples and best practise cited by panellists on the **RECRUITMENT REALITY** strand of the British Council's Education Futures Mini Conference series.*

The British Council wishes to thank the following speakers and panellists for their invaluable contributions to this series:

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