

## **Social Media in International Student Recruitment**

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### **Abstract**

The landscape of international student recruitment is changing. It is getting tougher to compete in an environment of decreasing budgets and increasing competition. Many institutions are now facing intense pressures to adapt to the change by becoming more prompt and efficient in achieving their recruitment goals. However, institutions face several challenges in prioritizing and optimizing their recruitment efforts. These challenges include the increasing complexity of recruitment practices with the emergence of controversial channels such as commissioned agents, as well as the changing communication and decision-making process of prospective students using new channels such as social media. Given the potential and relevance of social media to deliver results in an efficient manner, the purpose of this issue brief is to highlight the value of social media in international student recruitment. It deconstructs the complexity of social media, highlights changes in communication patterns of prospective students, and proposes models of engagement to encourage institutions of higher education to prioritize social media as an integral component of their international student recruitment strategies.

### **Social Media in International Student Recruitment**

Higher education institutions are complex and loosely coupled systems where decision-making is distributed and change is inherently difficult to implement throughout the organization (Kezar, 2001). Diamond (2006) asserts that “[s]ignificant change will never occur in any institution until the forces for change are greater in combination than the forces preserving the status quo. And in colleges and universities, the forces for resisting change are extremely powerful”.

The landscape of international student recruitment is changing at a fast pace and achieving recruitment goals will require adapting to this change. Many institutions are facing intense pressures to become more competitive, prompt and efficient in achieving their recruitment goals. This pressure to perform is even more difficult in an environment of decreasing budgets and increasing competition.

Institutions also face several challenges in prioritizing and optimizing their recruitment efforts. This is due to an increasing complexity of recruitment practices with the emergence of controversial channels such as commissioned agents as well as the changing communication and decision-making process of prospective students using new channels such as social media.

The debate over engaging recruitment agents is not only fraught with concerns about direct expenses in terms of commissions but also the reputational risk to institutions’ brand (Redden, 2011). Bartlett and Fischer (2011) also highlight the risks to the integrity of the admissions process: “though agents act as universities’ representatives, marketing them at college fairs and soliciting applications, that’s no guarantee that colleges know the origin of the applications, or the veracity of their grades and scores.”

In this context, social media presents an ideal opportunity by not only balancing institutional control of the communication and admissions process but also adapting to the changing engagement patterns of prospective students. However, change is inherently difficult in higher education, even if it is from worse to better. So how can international education administrators, institutions of higher education, and admissions officers embrace this change while remaining true to their institutions’ messages and practices? What risks and opportunities

are embedded in the strategic decisions related to social media? Who are some of the early adopters and what can we learn from their successful models in social media communication?

Given the potential of social media to deliver results, the purpose of this issue brief is to deconstruct the complexity of social media and propose models of engagement in order to help international education administrators<sup>1</sup>, their institutions, and international admissions officers recognize the importance of social media in international student recruitment and effectively prioritize social media as an integral component of the international student recruitment strategy. This brief will address issues related to social media in three primary sections. First, the need for social media in the context of international higher education is stated, then good practices and cases of social media usage are presented, and finally, limitations and conclusions are discussed.

### **The Need for Social Media in the Context of International Higher Education**

Internet adoption was one of the most powerful changes at organizational and personal levels and is now catalyzing the next revolution of communication through social media<sup>2</sup> (Qualman, 2010). Twitter, a micro-blogging site with heavy mobile usages, has grown to nearly 290 million monthly active users at the end of 2012 since its launch in July 2006 (see Appendix C). This boom in social media is not restricted to the U.S. alone, and social media usage in various countries has followed similar patterns, reflecting the growth of the Internet (see Appendix A). Tencent, a Chinese social media company which operates a Twitter-like micro-blogging service called Weibo, has more than 277 million active users at the end of the third quarter in 2012, and number of daily active users (DAU) grew from 82 million to 94 million in three months (see Appendix C).

The internationalization of higher education is not a new concept, however, its scale and scope are expanding to include a growing recognition that “internationalization is an institutional imperative, not just a desirable possibility” (Hudzik, 2011, p. 6). Yet achieving the goals of comprehensive internationalization is not easy, as decreasing budgets and increasing

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<sup>1</sup> The scope of the paper is limited to administrative applications and does not include teaching and research.

<sup>2</sup> Social media is used as an all-inclusive term for content platforms ranging from blogs, videos and wikis to networking websites such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

competition are compelling institutions to deliver more with fewer resources. In these times, resource efficiency is a competitive advantage. Social media offers at least four unique advantages on the dimensions of relevance, speed, cost and personalization, which makes it highly relevant to resource efficiency in the context of international higher education.

*i. Relevance: Social media adapts to students' communication style*

Students are the center of activity for higher education institutions, and effective communication with prospective students will certainly contribute to resource efficiency. The decision-making process of prospective students involves a complex buying behavior with high levels of involvement that result from expense (time and money), significant brand differences, and infrequent buying (Nicholls, Harris, Morgan, Clarke & Sims, 1995). The process becomes even more complex for prospective international students, who are unlikely to visit a campus before deciding whether to attend. From the students' perspective, social media provides a communication platform built on honest opinions and experiences of students and alumni. Zeisser (2010) notes that social media provides an opportunity to "tame the fundamentally unpredictable and serendipitous nature of word of mouth without losing what makes it so valuable in the first place—its authenticity".

*ii. Speed: Social media enables faster communication across geographic boundaries*

In addition to authenticity, social media also has a time dimension as pace of response influences prospective students' expectations and decisions to apply to an institution. According to Nurlida (2009), "[s]tudents will be satisfied with their choice of college if college performance conforms to the information regarding the attributes of the college. Their satisfaction with their choice of college is therefore dependent on their satisfaction of [sic] the information they have acquired with regards to the college attributes" (p. 16). Social media provides an opportunity for admissions officers and current students to promptly provide the information, which in turn may positively influence students' perceptions.

*iii. Cost: Social media overcomes geographic distances in a cost-effective manner*

Traditional recruitment methods like education fairs pose a challenge in terms of not only high cost but also limited opportunity to continue a conversation with prospective students after the initial meeting at fairs. With social media usage, institutions save on direct costs such as travel and registration but also indirect costs such as the unavailability of admissions personnel in the office. Cost efficiency is further achieved by using authentic communication from current students who are /can be trained about the scope of their communication as university ambassadors. These student ambassadors cost much less than salaried admissions officers and at the same time bring credibility to conversations with prospective students. In addition, entry to and use of social media applications are low in terms of start-up costs, though it must be noted there is still a cost involved in terms of time and skills (Ford et al. 2011).

*iv. Personalization: Social media allows communication in local language*

Social media offers a unique opportunity to customize messages and engagements with students' needs and language preferences. Although social media platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn are globally popular (see Appendix B), there are differences in usage by countries as well as additional local favorites. For example, 12% of all LinkedIn users (163.5 million as of February 2013) are from India, making the country the second largest group of users after the U.S. (see Appendix B). However, Orkut, a Google-owned website, has a relatively small U.S. usage base while more than half of its users are in Brazil. These regional differences are important to consider in crafting social media and outreach strategies if institutions are to productively engage with prospective students from the targeted region or country.

### **Social Media Applications in International Student Recruitment**

In times of budget cuts and increasing competition, resource efficiency in international student recruitment is gaining even more importance. While some institutions support the use of intermediaries such as commissioned agents, disintermediation through social media offers more credible and cost-effective connectivity with prospective students.

This section presents applications of social media in international student recruitment with specific emphasis on good practices and models in three parts. First, the use of virtual

platforms and communities is discussed. Second, leveraging alumni as a credible source is presented. Finally, examples of use of local websites are highlighted.

*i. Virtual platforms and communities*

Traditional recruitment channels such as education fairs are giving way to virtual fairs, as the latter not only allow higher education institutions to attract prospective international students from across the world, but they may be hosted for a longer period of time as compared to a few hours or days in a physical education fair. In addition to the obvious cost-advantage, virtual fairs provide an opportunity to funnel prospective students to other social media platforms such as Facebook to continue engaging with them, while also offering 24/7 access to conversations irrespective of time-zones. EducationUSA organizes virtual fairs, offering institutions access to a fully equipped web-meeting environment where they can connect with students through short online presentations and online Q&A sessions (see Table 1). Likewise, WESStudentAdvisor.org offers free and reliable information by connecting admissions experts and current students with prospective international students.

Another potent tool for international recruitment is the use of online videos to help international students understand campus life and set more accurate expectations. Such videos offer a highly convincing communication channel to students, many of whom cannot visit campus before making a decision. Such multimedia technologies are becoming even more important with the surge in mobile usage in international markets.

*Table 1. Use of Social Media in Building Virtual Platforms and Communities*

<i>Example</i>
WESStudentAdvisor.org – webinar based blog ( <a href="http://bit.ly/WjJoVg">http://bit.ly/WjJoVg</a> )
EducationUSA – Virtual Fair ( <a href="http://bit.ly/XB6CD7">http://bit.ly/XB6CD7</a> )
G-Match MBA Virtual Fair ( <a href="http://bit.ly/9mNf1n">http://bit.ly/9mNf1n</a> )
Inside Colby International Blog ( <a href="http://bit.ly/vXEipf">http://bit.ly/vXEipf</a> )
UMN International Student Ambassadors Blogs ( <a href="http://bit.ly/15xZagG">http://bit.ly/15xZagG</a> )
Australian Catholic University International Student Blogs ( <a href="http://bit.ly/oShmoM">http://bit.ly/oShmoM</a> )
The International Experience at Dartmouth - Youtube ( <a href="http://bit.ly/qSda4H">http://bit.ly/qSda4H</a> )

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University of Buffalo International Admissions Ambassadors (<http://bit.ly/33GIYh>)

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### *ii. Alumni engagement*

International alumni are an excellent resource, not only for student recruitment opportunities through referrals, but also in terms of future potential fund-raising. Many institutions lose touch with international alumni once they graduate, and social media provides an opportunity to find and reconnect with international alumni. The University of Massachusetts at Lowell, for example, organized an alumni event in Mumbai in April 2010. With several top administrators scheduled to attend, the alumni office wanted to ensure good turnout -- however, the alumni database did not have up-to-date information on Indian students. So the school decided to use LinkedIn to search for alumni using the school name, allowing them to obtain the most up-to-date contact information of Indian alumni, raise interest in the event, and also update their database for future reference (Makrez, 2011).

Alumni reunions are often the highlights of annual activities, but attendance at such events may be too costly for alumni living abroad. Online social media events can assist by supplementing an on-campus event, as in the case of Columbia International University hosting a "virtual reunion" on Skype (see Table 2).

*Table 2. Social Media Applications in International Alumni Engagement*

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#### *Example*

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The University of Michigan Alumni Worldwide (<http://linkd.in/qAcPKy>)

Northwestern University Alumni (<http://linkd.in/WVJVcT> )

GWU International Alumni Network ( <http://on.fb.me/pucoOG> )

The University of York (<http://bit.ly/oTnCgm>)

Alumniportal Germany (<http://bit.ly/Vz409m> )

Belmont University - Young Alumni Blog (<http://bit.ly/bLYiSN>)

Pepperdine University – Alumni Blogs (<http://bit.ly/Z6tCZ>)

Rutgers University – Official Blogs of Rutgers Alumni (<http://bit.ly/19t6cm>)

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University of South Australia- Virtual reunion (<http://bit.ly/rpkAYQ>)

Columbia International University – Virtual reunion (<http://bit.ly/ruaDUUp>)

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### *iii. Localization of social media usage*

International student recruitment is inherently complex, as it requires deeper understanding of local markets and differences in student decision-making processes. These differences are amplified by language and cultural contexts of countries. Social media offers a potent solution with its ability to adapt to needs of prospective students from a wide range of languages and cultures.

For example, the University of Kentucky College of Arts & Sciences has developed pages on Chinese websites such as Sina Weibo and Renren to attract more applicants and to facilitate study abroad programs and faculty exchange. The College consulted faculty with expertise on China and engaged one of its own Chinese undergraduate students to develop the pages. Likewise, the School of Graduate Studies of Canada's Memorial University established an online presence on the most popular social networking sites in Japan, South Korea and China, hiring a graduate student from each country to help leverage the potential of Mixi, Naver and Renren in international student recruitment.

*Table 3. Localization of Social Media Applications*

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#### *Example*

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College of Arts & Sciences, University of Kentucky (<http://bit.ly/sCcUes>)

School of Graduate Studies, Memorial University, Canada (<http://bit.ly/rKYuRp>)

University of Delaware (<http://bit.ly/t90Ify>)

Thompson Rivers University, Canada (<http://bit.ly/vRJTH9>)

Brock University, Canada (<http://bit.ly/rKYuRp>)

Durham College, Canada (<http://bit.ly/tLmfov>)

Griffith University, Australia (<http://on.fb.me/w00zvH>)

Kaplan International Colleges (<http://on.fb.me/uED7Iw>)

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### **Limitations and Conclusions**

The emergence of social media in recent years is one of the major influences on the future of international higher education; adapting to this change will be critical in realizing internationalization goals in general and recruitment goals in particular for many institutions. However, social media is not a panacea for international student recruitment, and it comes with its own set of limitations and challenges.

The pace of growth and change in social media presents ongoing challenges for higher education institutions in terms of comprehending the value and opportunity of its use. As social media technologies and its applications are still evolving at a fast pace, it is not easy to measure its direct influence and impact in achieving desired results. There is a serious lack of proven practices on what works and what does not. Social media is cost-effective and easy to start, but building momentum and measuring the cost of human resources and time can be challenging.

Social media also clashes with the established norms and traditions of higher education institutions specifically related to communication flows and styles. Higher education institutions are geared towards structured and formal information flow, whereas social media is driven by informal and interactive conversations. Thus, many institutions are also concerned about a loss of control over information. At another level, institutions also grapple with too many choices of social media platforms, which make it difficult to select and prioritize relevant channels.

Despite these limitations, social media is one of the biggest changes in terms of communication styles and engagement with prospective students. With social media, communication channels have converged, enabling engagement with a wide range of stakeholders and supporting an efficient utilization of resources.

Although from the world of business, the following quote is applicable to the context of international student recruitment: "Consumers have always valued opinions expressed directly to them. Marketers may spend millions of dollars on elaborately conceived advertising campaigns, yet often what really makes up a consumer's mind is not only simple but also free: a word-of-mouth recommendation from a trusted source" (Bughin, Doogan & Vetvik, 2010, p.2). Social media does just this, becoming a trusted source for students' decision-making.

Social media is an emerging and evolving channel, which is quickly becoming indispensable in international student recruitment. Like any new change, it faces several challenges and opportunities. However, institutions that embrace this change in an informed and entrepreneurial manner will create a significant competitive advantage. The key is to experiment, engage and evolve in a credible and effective manner.

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## Appendix A

Top 10 countries with highest number of Internet users

#	Country or Region	Users	Penetration (% Population)	World % Users
1	China	538,000,000	40.1%	22.4%
2	United States	245,203,300	78.1%	10.2%
3	India	137,000,000	11.4%	5.7%
4	Japan	101,228,700	79.5%	4.2%
5	Brazil	88,494,800	45.6%	3.7%
6	Russia	67,982,500	47.7%	2.8%
7	Germany	67,483,900	83.0%	2.8%
8	Indonesia	55,000,000	22.1%	2.3%
9	United Kingdom	52,731,200	83.6%	2.2%
10	France	52,228,900	79.6%	2.2%

Source: <http://bit.ly/WkAo> as on June 30, 2012

## Appendix B

Number of social media users in Top 10 countries (millions)

<i>Facebook</i>	<i>LinkedIn</i>
United States (163.1)	United States(76.5)
Brazil (66.6)	India(19.1)
India (61.5)	United Kingdom(11.2)
Indonesia (47.2)	Canada(6.5)
Mexico (40.0)	Australia(4.1)
Turkey (32.4)	Netherlands (3)
United Kingdom (32.2)	China (3)
Philippines (30.1)	South Africa(2.3)
France(25.3)	Brazil(1.8)
Germany (25.1)	Pakistan(1.6)

Source : [www.socialbakers.com](http://www.socialbakers.com), as of February 2013

## Appendix C

## Differences in use of social media by country

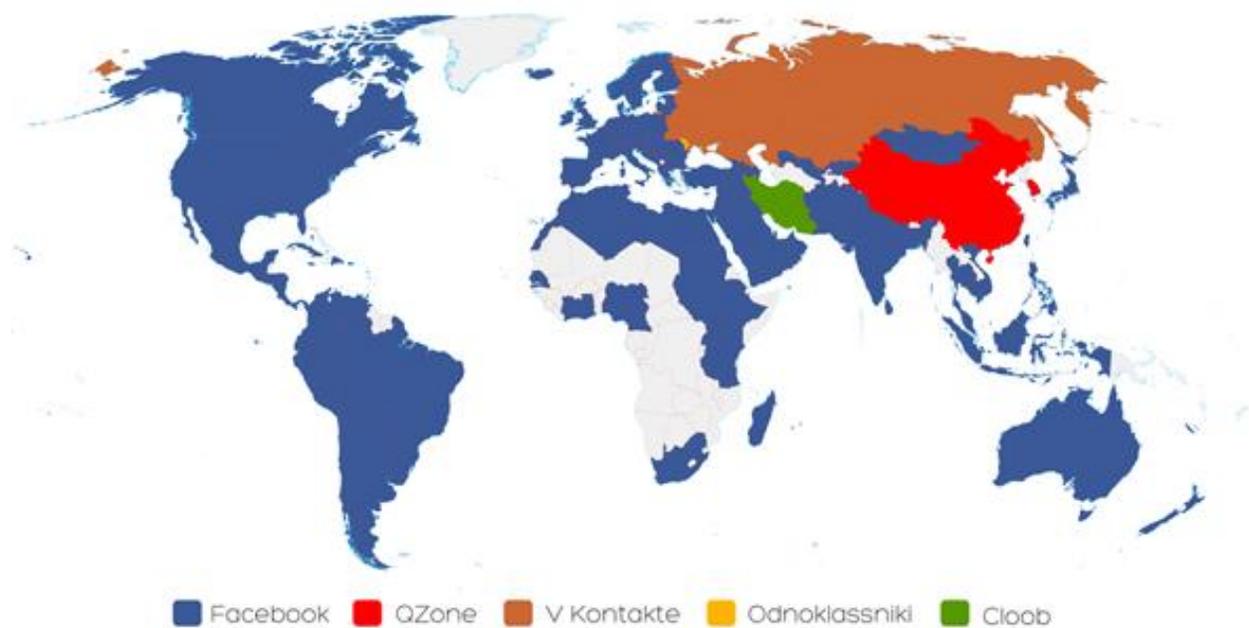
<i>Country</i>	<i>Social media users in Top 10 most popular website visited in the country (Alexa.com)</i>	<i>Total users of social media websites (million) in given country</i>
China	#2 QQ #6 Sina Weibo	QQ: 784 Sina Weibo: 287 Tencent Weibo: 277 LinkedIn: 3 Facebook: 0.6
India	#3 Facebook #8 LinkedIn	Facebook: 61.5 LinkedIn: 19.1
Brazil	#1 Facebook	Facebook: 66.6
US	#2 Facebook #10 Twitter	Facebook: 163.1 Twitter: 33.8

Number of users for QQ as of September 2012 (data source: <http://bit.ly/VzMXiZ>); for Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo as of December and September 2012 respectively (data source: <http://bit.ly/12wsoN2>); for Facebook and LinkedIn as of February 2013 (data source: <http://www.socialbakers.com/>) Twitter as of December 2012 (data source: <http://bit.ly/VMw5si> )

**Appendix D**

# WORLD MAP OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

December 2012



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sources: Alexa

Source: World Map of Social Networks. *VincosBlog*. <http://bit.ly/s2GUkj>