THE WORLD'S **TOP 500** UNIVERSITIES
THROUGH STUDENT EYES

RESEARCH FINDINGS

StudyPortals Intelligence Unit
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Introduction

The Higher Education market is increasingly global. To enable international students to choose the programme that fits them best students have to go through a lengthy and scattered search process. Students rely to a large extent on online information to find their dream study opportunity but the process of gathering information is not always straightforward. Universities display information on their websites in various formats, often using jargon that is complex and unfamiliar to students with international study ambitions. The challenge of filtering information from multiple institutions across many countries is difficult and very time-consuming especially considering the global and inter-cultural context of the student audience.

It was this challenge, faced by today's international students, which prompted us to analyse the world's top 500 universities, **through student eyes**.

Apart from helping students, our aim is to enable universities to improve the quality of information they offer for prospective students, benchmark their provision globally and attract a more diverse student population. We also hope that this report will generate discussion and raise awareness of the need for transparency in information regarding the study choice process, application requirements and standardised English language testing requirements.

Lastly the research introduces a new methodology in the area of Higher Education research. It consists of working with a team of international student researchers to conduct a mystery shopping exercise looking at the world's top 500 institutions. This unique methodology presented specialised insights into how potential students may view the information institutions provide.

This report presents a global snapshot of the extensive data collected and main findings produced. Individual findings per institute will be reported to each university individually in confidence, including a benchmark against peer institutes.

Key findings

- UK and Irish universities together with Benelux and Scandinavia perform best in the student eyes rating
- Information on degree level and type, as well as programme email addresses was the easiest information to find across all 500 universities
- Information on programme accreditation and student testimonials was the most difficult information to find
- 57% of the world's top 500 universities responded to enquiries within one day
- 21% of the world's top 500 universities did not respond to enquiries at all
- 68% of the institutions that did reply, did not send a second email or reminder
- Institutions in the Netherlands, Canada and Sweden were more likely to respond to student enquiries in under one day
- Institutions in Spain and China were less likely to respond to student enquiries as promptly

Methodology

This study was conducted using a "mystery-shopping" data collection technique, wherein a team of international students explored the top 500 universities' websites. This allowed us to measure and compare the world top 500 universities' performance in terms of online information provision and findability, as well as enquiry response and follow-up.

The research was carried out in two phases:

1. During phase one, our team of international students assessed the official homepages of the top 500 universities and selected two programs from each institution. They then evaluated the level of difficulty in finding a predefined set of information relevant to international student decision making processes.

2. During phase two of the research our team of international students took the role of "mystery shoppers" using aliases and accompanying email addresses. They visited the university website, located the point of enquiry and contacted the institution, asking a specific set of questions. If no relevant enquiry form was found, they contacted the institution via email. All contact attempts as well as timestamps for each response received were documented and evaluated in terms of how professional, prompt and persistent the institution was in following up with the "mystery shopper".

Two programmes were evaluated for each institution. The programmes were chosen from English-taught full-degree programmes offered by the institution, one in the broad area of science and humanities and the other in the area of business-related subjects, if available. Within these disciplines, the choice was random.
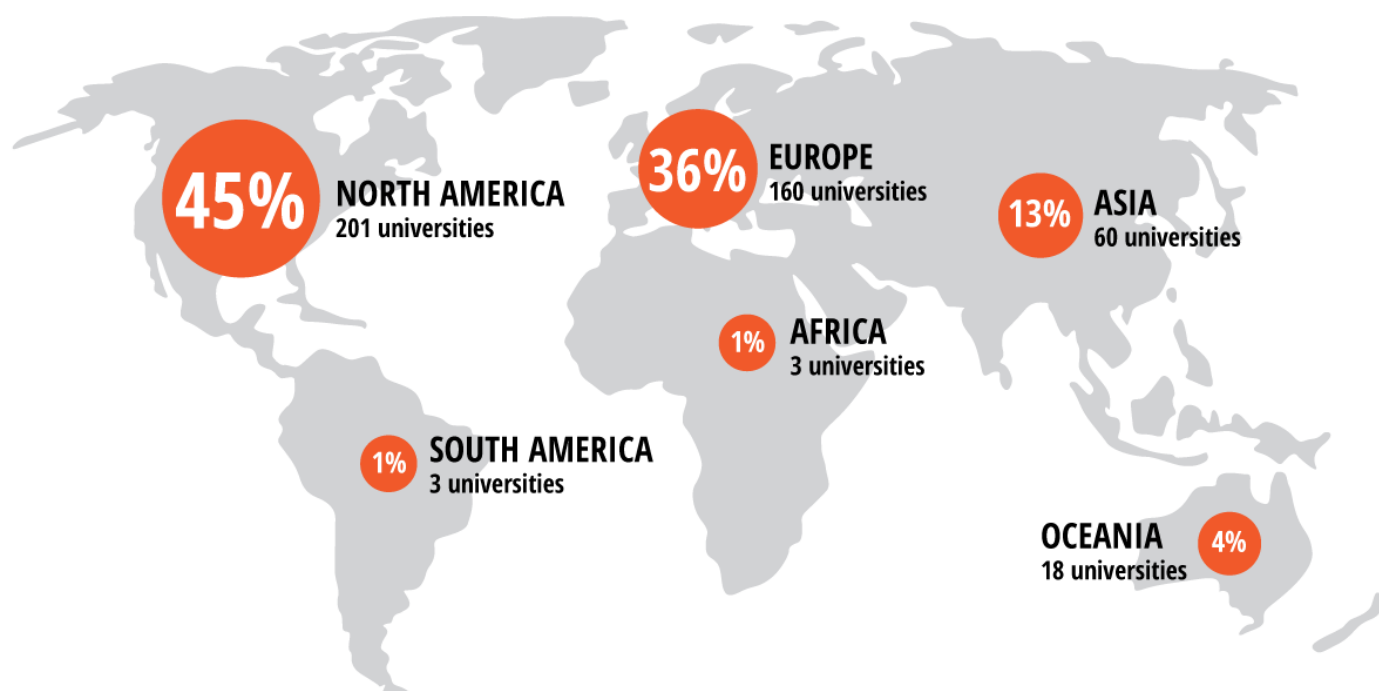
The scope of this research was global including analysis of institutions from 38 countries worldwide. The institutions included were chosen based on the Webometrics Ranking of World Universities, due to its inclusion of all universities globally. To ensure concise and complete coverage, all universities within the top 100 of the most recent U.S. News rankings, the Times Higher Education World University Rankings and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (the Shanghai ranking) were included in the research. As a result, 524 institutions and 1,048 programmes were included in total. The parameters of the study restricted analysis to programmes that were conducted in English therefore a number were excluded, as they did not fit our required criteria. The final total of institutions analysed within this study was 445, with a total of 886 programmes, as a few institutions offered only one English-taught full degree programme. The geographical distribution of the research can be seen in Figure 1.

Methodology constraints

The insights in this report are based upon the experiences of our Mystery Shopper students. Although the students have done their utmost to register their experiences in the most accurate and representative way, having been professionally trained and supported, information may have been overlooked. Personal experience can differ from student to student and from time to time, therefore information contained in this report should be interpreted as indicative. StudyPortals cannot guarantee nor accept liability for the accuracy of any of the insights provided.

The views expressed in this report are based on data gathered by mystery shopping international students and do not represent opinions held by the British Council or StudyPortals.

Figure 1: Geographical distribution of our research

45% NORTH AMERICA
201 universities

36% EUROPE
160 universities

13% ASIA
60 universities

1% AFRICA
3 universities

1% SOUTH AMERICA
3 universities

OCEANIA
18 universities **4%**

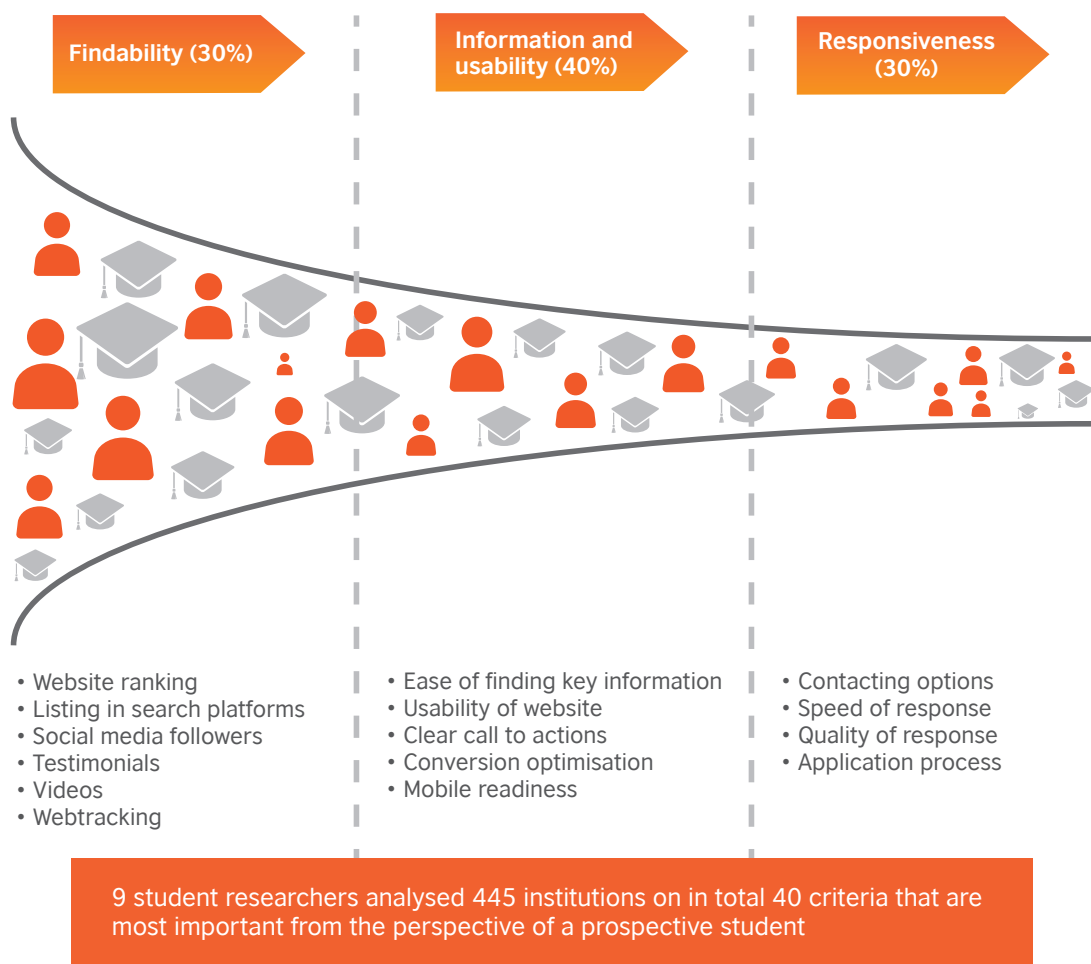Source: Through Student Eyes, 2014

Our findings

The Student Eyes Rating

There are three steps to successful online recruitment. First, draw students to your website. Second, provide the information they seek and, third, communicate with prospective students. In this research we have looked at all these elements in order to create a picture of how the world's top 500 institutions look through students' eyes.

All together we analysed more than 40 individual data points of each university's performance. Out of these we chose, together with our student researchers, the most important ones and weighted them to form an overall performance indicator for each university.

Figure 2: The student eyes research model

Findability (30%)

Information and usability (40%)

Responsiveness (30%)

- Website ranking
- Listing in search platforms
- Social media followers
- Testimonials
- Videos
- Webtracking

- Ease of finding key information
- Usability of website
- Clear call to actions
- Conversion optimisation
- Mobile readiness

- Contacting options
- Speed of response
- Quality of response
- Application process

9 student researchers analysed 445 institutions on in total 40 criteria that are most important from the perspective of a prospective student
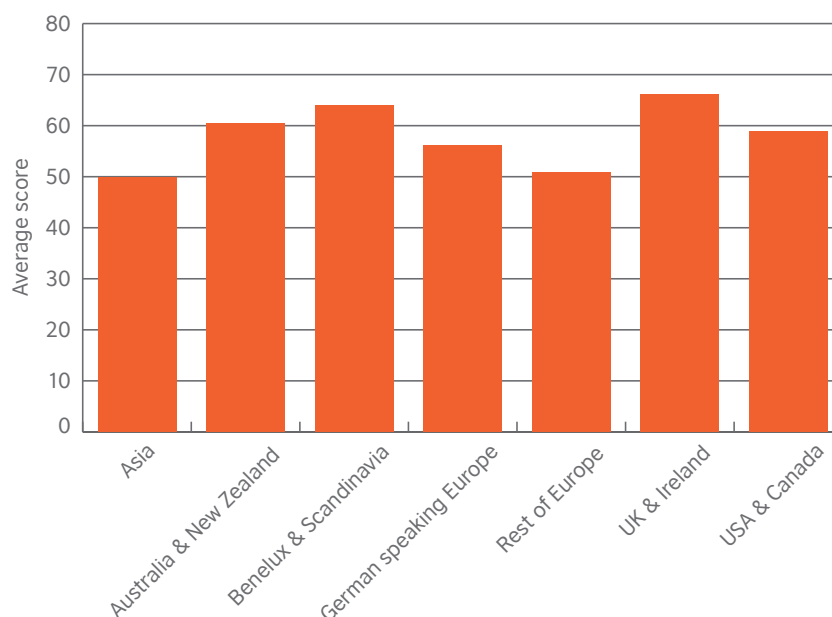
Source: Through Student Eyes, 2014

The section of information provision and usability was found to be the most important one and it was weighted to be 40% of the overall score. In this section the ease of finding a set of predefined information and the usability on mobile devices was evaluated. The sections of findability and responsiveness were each weighted to be 30% of the overall score. In findability, the webpage ranking in Google page rank and Alexa ranking were evaluated together with use of videos for example. In the responsiveness section the speed and quality of responses, as well as persistency to stay in touch with the student, were evaluated.

The scores of a researched university combined with their respective weighting deliver an overall institutional score: the 'student eyes rating', which reflects their total performance in the context of this report. The student eyes rating ranges from 0 to 100 points. With this we can compare the performance of institutions through student eyes. In Graphs 1 and 2 we can see that the institutions in the UK and Ireland received the best result averaging to 66 points. Universities in Benelux and Scandinavia received 64 points and Australia and New Zealand, 60 points. The average for all institutions was 57 points. South America and Africa are not shown in this graph due to the small number of programmes.

Graph 1 - The average score of performance of institutions by regions

Source: Through Student Eyes, 2014

Graph 2 - Score breakdown by regions
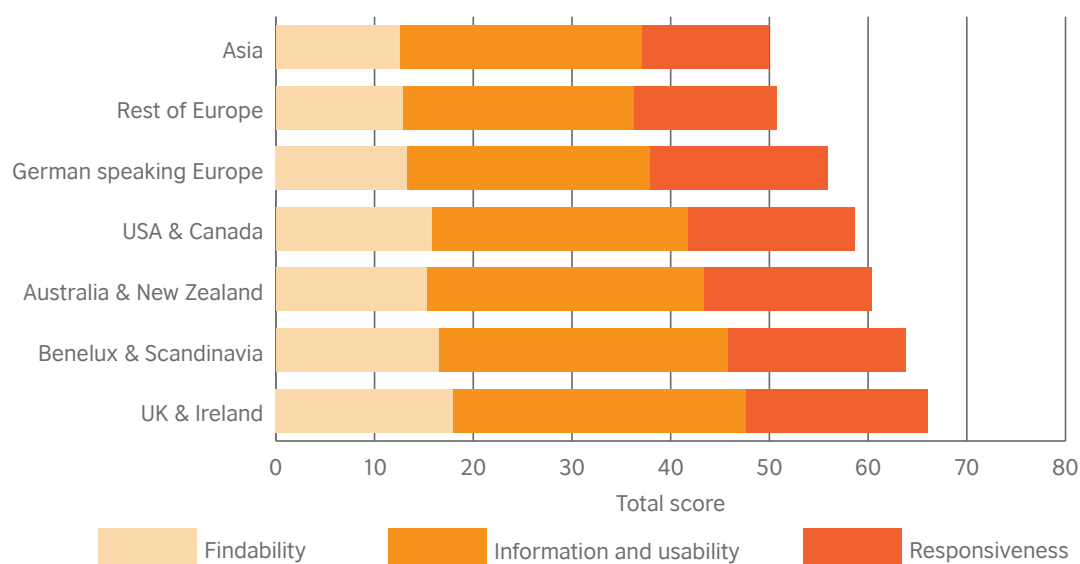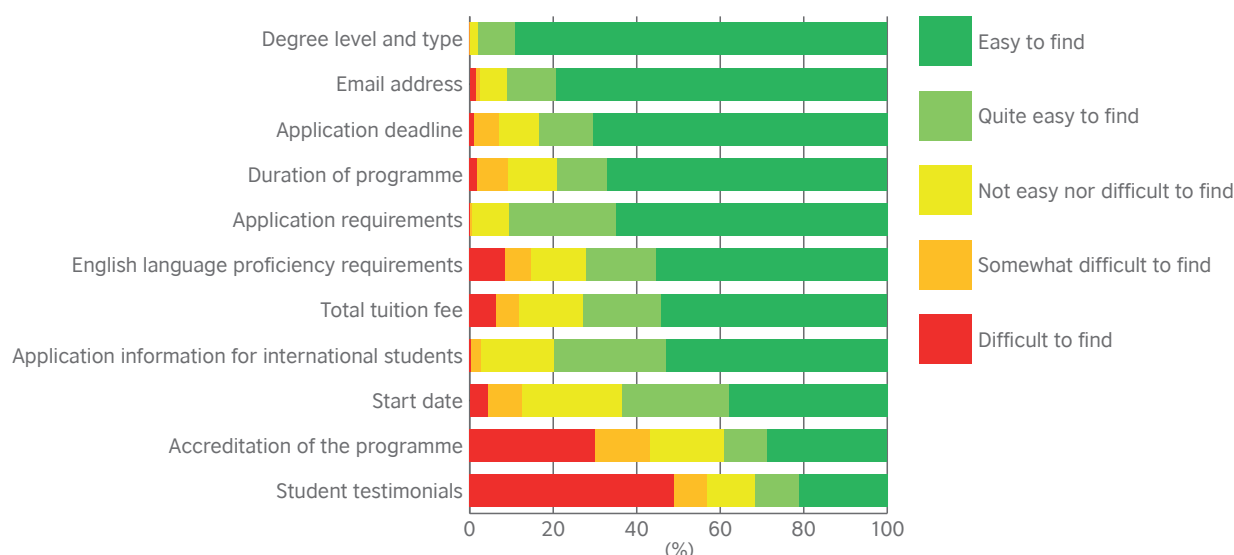

Source: Through Student Eyes, 2014

Providing information students need

When prospective students begin their online research for their future education, key searched-for information may include programme details, application requirements, application deadlines and tuition fees.

Information was collected on 11 individual data points that were identified and searched for by our team of international students; the students then evaluated the ease with which they could locate the selected criteria.

All programme websites from the top 500 universities were assessed on a five point scale from very difficult to find (1) to easy to find (5). Graph 3 illustrates the ease with which students could find each data point. Overall, information was considered easy to find across all the top 500 universities' websites, although key information, such as accreditation, was missing in a staggering number of cases. Most straightforward was information on degree level and type, together with email addresses and application requirements. Student testimonials and information regarding accreditation of the programme were the most difficult to find.

Graph 3 - Ease of find information on institutions' programme website
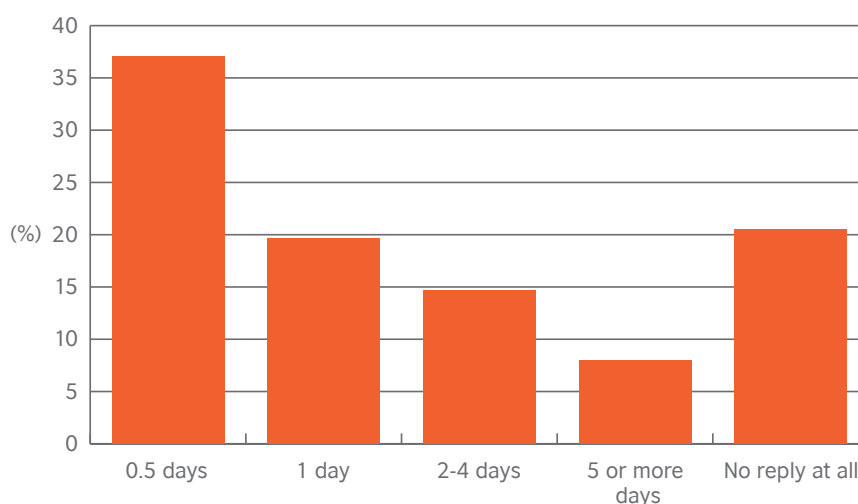

Source: Through Student Eyes, 2014

Interaction with prospective students

Our research team located the point of enquiry on institution websites for each programme analysed and sent a communication, via email if a form was unavailable, containing specific questions. Each response was time stamped and any follow-up to the original correspondence was recorded.

Our analysis showed that overall, 37% of the top 500 institutions replied to the student enquiries in less than one day. 57% of institutions answered an enquiry within one day and 8% replied to the prospective students after more than five working days. However, data revealed that 21% of institutions did not respond at all to the student enquiries.

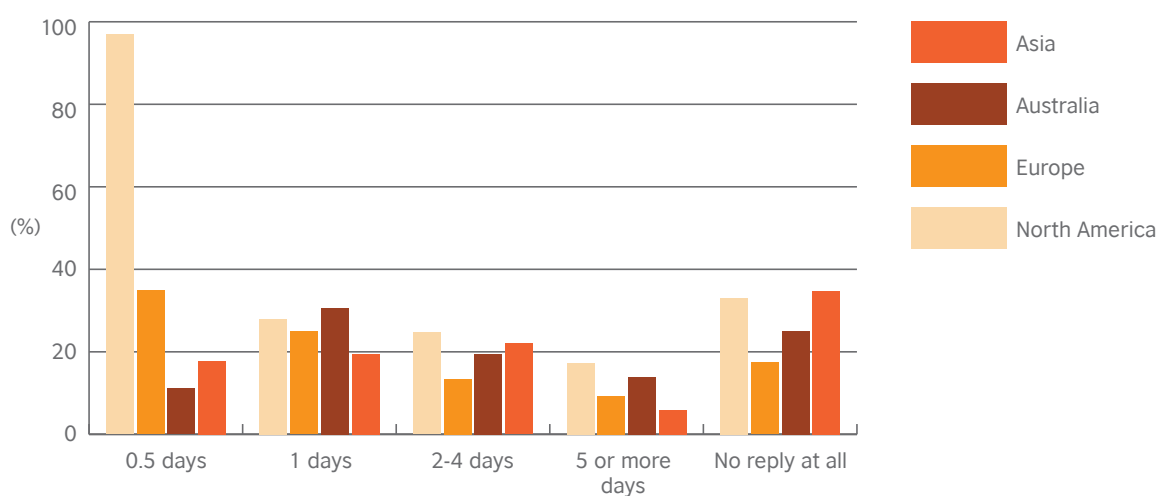### Graph 4 - Enquiry response time

Source: Through Student Eyes, 2014
Note: South America and Africa are not included due to small number of programmes.

Graph 5, which measures the response times of universities based on their continental location, shows that institutions in North America were the fastest to respond to student enquiries, whilst questions asked to universities in Asia were least likely to receive a response.

### Graph 5 - Enquiry response time, by continent

Source: Through Student Eyes, 2014
Note: South America and Africa are not included due to small number of programmes.

In depth analysis of the ten countries that represented the highest number of institutions with most English taught programmes within the study shows that half of the programmes in the Netherlands and Canada replied to enquiries within half a day. However, 60% of the institutions in Spain, and 64% of the institutions in China, did not reply the enquiries they received as part of this study.

Graph 6 - Enquiry response time, by top 10 countries
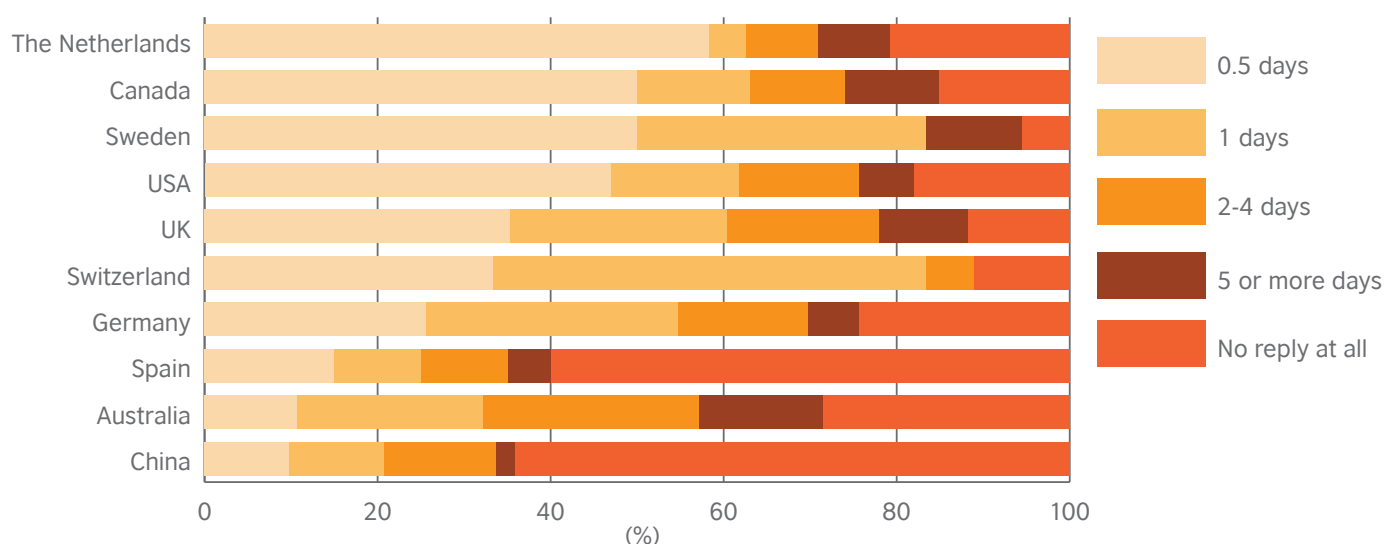
Source: Through Student Eyes, 2014

As students often send questions to multiple universities worldwide when searching for education information, a reminder or follow-up email can be a useful tool to retain prospective student's interest. Graph 7 shows that only 11% of top 500 universities follow up with students who have shown interest in the institution. Only a very small proportion of institutions send more than one follow up email.

Graph 7 - Level of contact with students
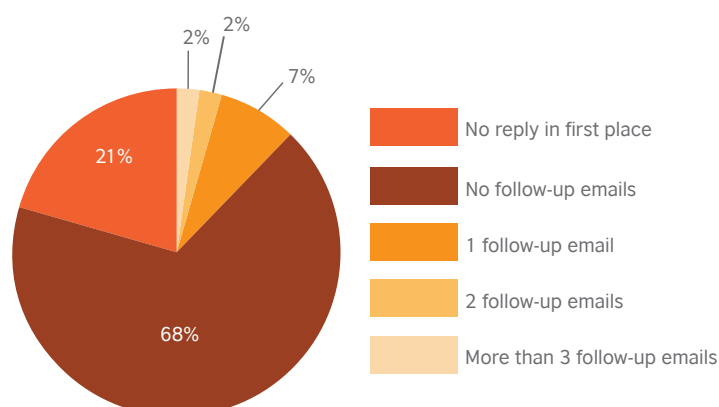
Source: Through Student Eyes, 2014

Below is a breakdown of the reminder email send rate for the top ten countries. Here we can see that Australia and the Netherlands are more proactive than other countries in following up on student interest.

Graph 8 - Number of contacts with students

Legend:
- No reply in first place
- No follow-up emails
- 1 follow-up email
- 2 follow-up emails
- More than 3 follow-up emails
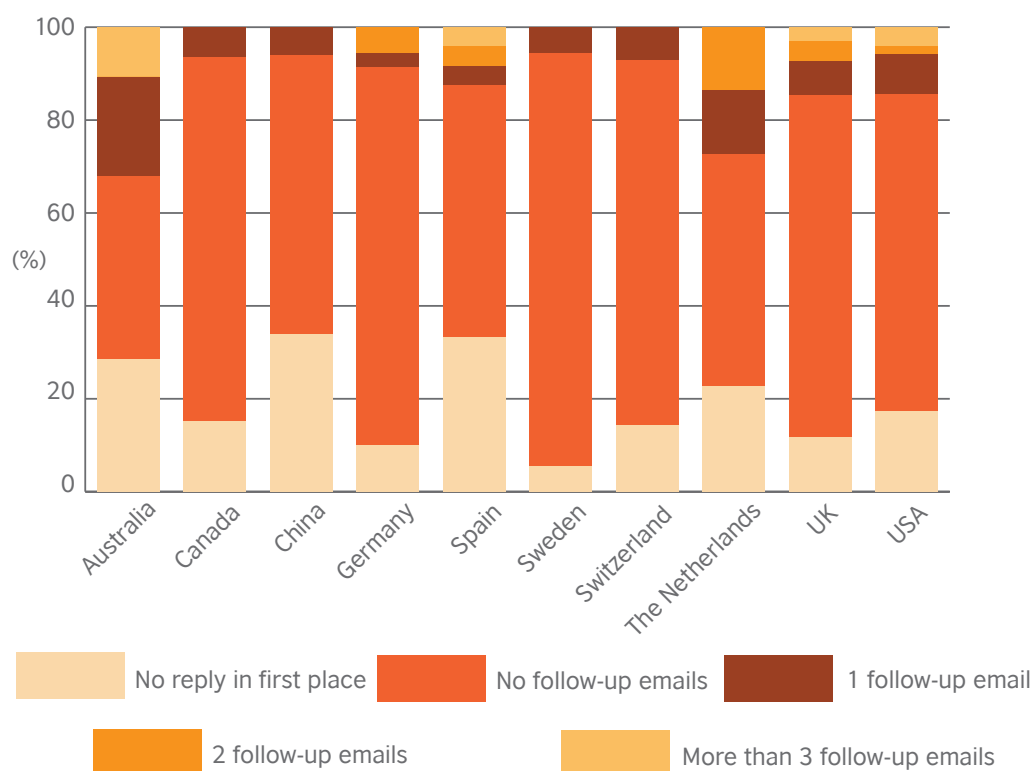
Source: Through Student Eyes, 2014

In general the top 500 universities reply promptly to student enquiries. But it is still notable that 21% of evaluated programmes did not reply at all. Across the globe institutes can benefit from staying in touch with their prospects.

About StudyPortals

StudyPortals has the mission to empower the world to choose (for) education.

We mean this twofold:

- We want to increase accessibility and stimulate people to develop and pursue an education (choose for education)

- Furthermore we want to inform and help them to choose the institute, programme and environment that fit them best (choose education).

Our ultimate ambition is to make study choice transparent, globally.

We do this through operating student-focused online study choice platforms. We focus on quality from both a student as well as a university perspective. Since 2007 have we informed and stimulated students to choose the best (international) university course, and have helped universities to reach out to the right students, worldwide.

Our quality approach has allowed us to build up unique experience on how to find university programmes and present them effectively to prospective students. Currently, over 1,450 universities participate, from 46 countries, creating transparency across over 35,000 study programmes. This empowers students worldwide to easily find and compare their ideal education, while universities benefit from well informed, well matching prospective students.

We have already almost fully cover the dynamic European market for on-campus education: 96% of the European ranked universities (private and public) participate in our website, and we have a large global visitor base of over 3.5 million visits per month. Since end of 2013 we are expanding our platform to a global coverage and are aiming to have at least the top 500 universities listed by the end of 2015.

Should you wish to join our mission, benefit from our unique position amongst searching students and profit from our experience and platforms, please get in touch with us at intelligence@studyportals.eu.

About British Council IELTS

The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. The British Council creates international opportunities for the people of the UK and other countries and builds trust between them worldwide.

IELTS (the International English Language Testing System) is the world's most popular English language proficiency test for higher education and global migration, with over 2 million tests taken over the last year. IELTS is developed by some of the world's leading experts in language assessment, and is accepted by over 9,000 organisations worldwide.

As a co-owner of IELTS, the British Council strives to ensure that all those wanting to study or work in an English-speaking environment have easy access, not only to an international English language test, but also to a wider knowledge of the English language, through information and preparation courses. We therefore welcome this initiative for three reasons:

- To support the decision-making processes of international students

- To assist universities with the international recruitment process

- To raise awareness of the importance of international English language tests and the accurate and user-friendly display of scores required by international organisations.

Should you wish to work with us in any way, including accepting or updating IELTS scores as part of your admissions process, please do not hesitate to contact us at ielts@britishcouncil.org.