

University Websites: The Window into the Future Sojourn for International Students

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ABSTRACT

Before the pandemic, university websites only played a passive role in promoting higher learning institutions. The promotional activities to recruit international students have traditionally been done by the university public relations team or the international student's department. The university's promotion teams would travel to many countries to attract international students to enrol in their universities. However, with the lockdown situation and no-cross border policy during the Covid-19 pandemic, the websites suddenly need to play an active role. They have become the window for potential international students or future sojourners to discover the universities. This paper explores the websites of 10 universities – seven (7) from Malaysia and three (3) from each of the traditional host countries which are The United Kingdom (UK), The United States of America (USA), and Australia. The exploration of the websites was steered by two (2) research questions which are; (i) what are the main features found in the websites, and (ii) how is the support given to the international students through the websites. These universities were chosen based on purposive sampling. They are the hosts to the highest number of international students in their respective zones in Malaysia and from the 3 host countries. The zones in Malaysia refer to areas that are known as northern, southern, eastern, western, central, and Sabah/Sarawak. The method employed for data collection was document analysis and the data were then thematically analysed. It was revealed that there were nine (9) features shared by all these websites. The features can be divided into two (2) functions. The main function is to promote the universities to potential students. Features like highlights on the university's successes, information about each programme, each faculty, contact details, and vision and mission are among the features. It was also discovered that the second function for the websites that stood out was updated for the current students. Most of these websites are overlapped. The only feature that is dedicated purely for potential students is 'what to do for admission'. However, features like calendar, newsletter, latest announcement are a few samples from the websites which share both functions. In addressing the second research question, the websites assist the students in the enrolment or admission process. Furthermore, the majority of the websites provide a handbook for international students. However, the level of usability in retrieving the handbook is different. Some dedicate a page in the website to share the contents in the handbook, while, some require downloading. The latter is rather cumbersome as the process might take some time. Another point is that there are some differences between the features in the Malaysian-based universities' websites and those from the host countries. The most outstanding difference is that the latter includes information for the students' significant others. One of the websites from the universities in the traditional host countries includes possible activities for students' family members. This is an advantage because it shows that the university cares about the important individuals around the students. This paper also shares some suggestions on features to be included in further helping the international students in their future sojourn.

Keywords: host countries, international students, support, university websites