

Exploring Inbound International Students' Choice Architecture through University Webpages

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Abstract

Shifting funding models have made Ontario universities increasingly reliant on international students for economic viability. However, recent federal study permit caps have intensified an already competitive recruitment landscape. This study aimed to identify the key factors—or determinants—that inform international students' university applications and to assess how effectively Ontario universities communicate this information on their websites. Furthermore, we sought competitive intelligence into whether universities communicated the determinants effectively through international studies webpages. The research followed a four-phase systematic inquiry to gather actionable insight through environmental scanning, grouping, competition analysis, and findings. Environmental scanning involved gathering industry trends and implications, forecasting potential issues, outlining a focal point, and establishing a database. The database informed the grouping phase, resulting in the selection of 12 university international studies websites for further review. Additionally, we derived 15 determinants and four emergent themes—geography, employment & finance, institutional information, and student perspectives—from a systematic report review outlining perceptions from over 171,000 students and 1,399 international degree-granting institutions. Competition analysis involved scanning and evaluating selected university webpages for effectiveness and the determinants. The findings indicate diverse approaches and varying abilities to communicate determinants. Also, higher-ranked universities transmit information more effectively. Study limitations include focusing on two English-language provinces and using secondary aggregated data to source determinants. The study addresses two research gaps: First, we foster awareness of higher education organizational practices, and second, we detail a Canadian perspective on inbound university student mobility.

Keywords: Higher education, university, marketing, sludge, inbound mobility

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International cross-border learning has been a part of higher education since it emerged in its current form and is an impactful pillar of Canada's long-term competitiveness (Global Affairs Canada, 2019; Gümüş et al., 2020). Cross-border learning refers to *student mobility*, which UNESCO (n.d.) defines as physically crossing “an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in the country of destination” (para. 1). While global student mobility is an established educational activity, the industry is experiencing a growth phase. Worldwide, there were two million internationally mobile students in 2000, five million in 2017, and estimates project that there will be seven million by 2030 (Education Intelligence Unit, 2021; Global Student Flows Project, 2023; Gümüş et al., 2020). Inbound and outbound mobility, which respectively refers to entering a nation or going to another one, is beneficial for students as it supports an ability to experience new cultures, ideas, develop

global modern skills, and improve future employment while also stimulating economic growth (Global Affairs Canada, 2019; Rodrigues, 2013; Roy et al., 2019).

Inbound international student mobility is important to Canadian higher education through its role in cultural, skill, and economic development (Global Affairs Canada, 2019; Statistics Canada, 2022). However, to develop a relationship with the students, institutions must be able to inform them why their services meet individual needs. An impactful tool that limits friction and can nudge students' decision-making is an institutional website which offers information on brand identity and the critical determinants—items deemed as important to what happens in a situation—guiding their enrollment applications (2CV, 2021; Canadian Bureau for International Education [CBIE], 2022; Delmestri et al., 2015; International Consultants for Education and Fairs [ICEF], 2019; Lažetić, 2019; Oepfen Hill, 2020; Sunstein, 2019; Thaler & Sunstein, 2021).

This study uses a pragmatic worldview and outlines the process of spearheading revisions to a medium-sized university's website, in line with Pawar's (2023) contention that institutions can improve their competitive advantage for international student marketing. Specifically, we will focus on using online platforms to co-construct brand meaning, gaining evidence of global market trends and student needs, developing awareness of competing universities, and using available institutional resources. Furthermore, we seek to increase Canadian research perspectives—which are underrepresented in the research (Pawar, 2023; Shen et al., 2022)—into organizational practices associated with informing and recruiting international students.

Digital Sludge or Nudge and Boost

Ensuring that students can easily access the online information they need or desire reduces digital sludge and acts as a catalyst or nudge, that may improve student perceptions of brand identity, both of which can influence enrollment (Hannan, 2021; ICEF, 2019; Sunstein, 2019; Thaler & Sunstein, 2021; Yaping et al., 2023). Sludge can be defined as a viscous mixture that causes friction and reduces the clarity of information required in decision-making (Sunstein, 2019). The sludge, in turn, unnecessarily increases the time required to complete a task, such as finding the requisite information to inform decisions.

The antithesis to sludge is a nudge or a boost. A nudge refers to enhancing choice architecture so the information recipient can readily gain the critical information to make wiser decisions and limit unwarranted friction (Thaler, 2018). Moreover, a nudge enables students' existing motivation and personal agency that helps them achieve one of their already existing goals (Hertwig & Yanoff, 2017). A university's ability to develop and express an understanding of student needs or desires is critical for enhancing communication between the institution and the prospective student, and providing such information can act as a nudge or boost (Sunstein, 2019).

Literature Review

To gain a greater understanding of the research landscape, we provide a descriptive review of inbound student mobility online communication efforts and context from Canadian perspectives, which have limited research. Then, to address the larger international body of research, we followed an integrative literature review to address a vast body of research in a concise manner.

Online Communication

Using online communication to promote institutional opportunities such as programs, research opportunities, and student experiences is an integral part of higher education marketing (Camilleri, 2019; Pawar, 2023). While international students still seek family input to guide enrollment decisions, online access points—for example, websites and social media—have become common tools affording personalized awareness about an institution, its reputation, its identity, and the region it exists in (Lansigan et al., 2016; Rekhter & Hossler, 2020; Simiyu et al., 2020; Zhu, 2019). Furthermore, the *Canadian Bureau for International Education* indicates that inbound international students found institutional websites to be the most valued resource for choosing where to apply (CBIE, 2022). The ability to anonymously gather an understanding of the institutional environment, culture, and geography holds great appeal, especially when the alternative is listening to a recruiter's high-pressure sales pitch (Rekhter & Hossler, 2020; Zhu, 2019).

For lesser-known universities, online engagement will be the first interaction that shapes the student and their family's perception of an institution's brand identity or character. The experience is important, as a university's brand identity is crucial to relationship-building, retention, and future recommendations (Hannan, 2021; Yaping et al., 2023). As such, ensuring a positive virtual experience benefits both parties: students can gather the insight they seek, and a university can model their character and identity.

Canadian Context

Throughout most of the 1900s and into the early 2000s, Canadian higher education largely relied on public funding (Anisef et al., 2015). However, following a recession in 2008, federal funding stalled while inflation increased—which widened funding disparities and the importance of inbound international student enrollment tuition for institutional financial sustainability (Statistics Canada, 2020, 2022). In response to the funding disparities, colleges and universities across Canada have become increasingly reliant on student fees to generate the revenue required to sustain operating costs, salaries, and research (Statistics Canada, 2020, 2022; Stokes, 2021). A substantial portion of the student fees required for operation comes from international student tuition, which is unregulated in most Canadian regions. A sixfold increase in inbound student enrollment between 2010 and 2020 has fully covered the collective increase in institutional operating budgets (Statistics Canada, 2022). From a societal perspective, the enrollment is estimated to support ~170,000 jobs, contribute \$21.6 billion to Canada's GDP, and augment the reduced role of public funding (Global Affairs Canada, 2019; Statistics Canada, 2022).

In early 2024, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) implemented policy changes to limit the number of study permits processed across Canada (ICEF, 2024; IRCC, 2024). The number of study permits to be processed for the province of Ontario has decreased significantly, making the Ontario international student recruitment market highly competitive in a time when all Ontario publicly assisted institutions rely on international student tuition fees.

Ontario Institutions. As this study is part of an institutional improvement initiative at one Ontario institution, the following provides an overview of the situation in Ontario, where universities face significant funding challenges, increasing competition, and a precarious job market for current students and graduates (Ontario, 2022a; Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2022; Statistics Canada, 2023). Financial sustainability challenges for provincial universities are due to ongoing reductions in provincial funding as well as a 10% tuition freeze in domestic tuition over several years. In addition, there were disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2022; Statistics Canada, 2022). Simultaneously, Ontario universities face increased competition with the recent growth of private institutions and the increased capacity of colleges to award degrees (Buckner & Gong, 2022; Ontario, 2022a). Given the funding challenges and precarious state of the provincial economy, Ontario institutions must recruit international students to sustain, increase, and improve operational efficiency (Crawley, 2023; Feige & Yen, 2021; Ontario, 2022b; Smith-Carrier, 2020; Statistics Canada, 2023). To do so, particularly in the current highly competitive environment, institutions can benefit by clearly communicating their ability to meet the potential student needs and desires—determinants—associated with enrollment decisions (CBIE, 2022; Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2022; Statistics Canada, 2022).

International Context

To further understand the current state of the literature, this integrative narrative review draws data from two systematic reviews comprising 192 articles published between 1981 and 2021 on the topics of marketing education to international students and academic student mobility (Pawar, 2023; Shen et al., 2022). The two studies presented unique perspectives to limit potential overlap and increase the knowledge scope. Both reviews found that the fields—and research into them—of marketing education to international students and academic student mobility are expanding. For example, a large percentage of the research has been published since 2011, while international contexts are most prominent from 2015 onwards. Reflecting on the context of this study, Canada was barely represented in the literature (Pawar, 2023; Shen et al., 2022).

Building on findings from 52 articles published between 2004 and 2021, Pawar (2023) sought to systematically analyze and synthesize the existing empirical marketing research focusing on interna-

tional higher education student mobility. The author's key findings were that marketing in the context of connecting with international student recruitment needs to consider global market trends, the needs of the students, competing universities, and available university resources. Future research should consider university brand positioning to establish a competitive advantage. Specific examples include co-creating the university brand through online platforms and building on the host country's reputation to inform student perceptions of quality education.

Shen et al. (2022) critically reviewed 140 articles published primarily in the *Higher Education Journal* between 1981 and 2021 to outline the related academic mobility literature. An overview of the research indicates that the primary study focus is students and countries with greater political, economic, and cultural impact ($n = 8\%$ in the USA, 7% in the UK, and 7% in China). Following the review, the authors proposed that future research would benefit from focusing on four knowledge clusters: *conceptual and cognitive*, *embodied*, *encultured*, and *organizational practice*. The authors posit that increasing the underrepresented institutional perspective in each cluster can help co-construct knowledge systems that move beyond transactional relationships.

Purpose of the Study

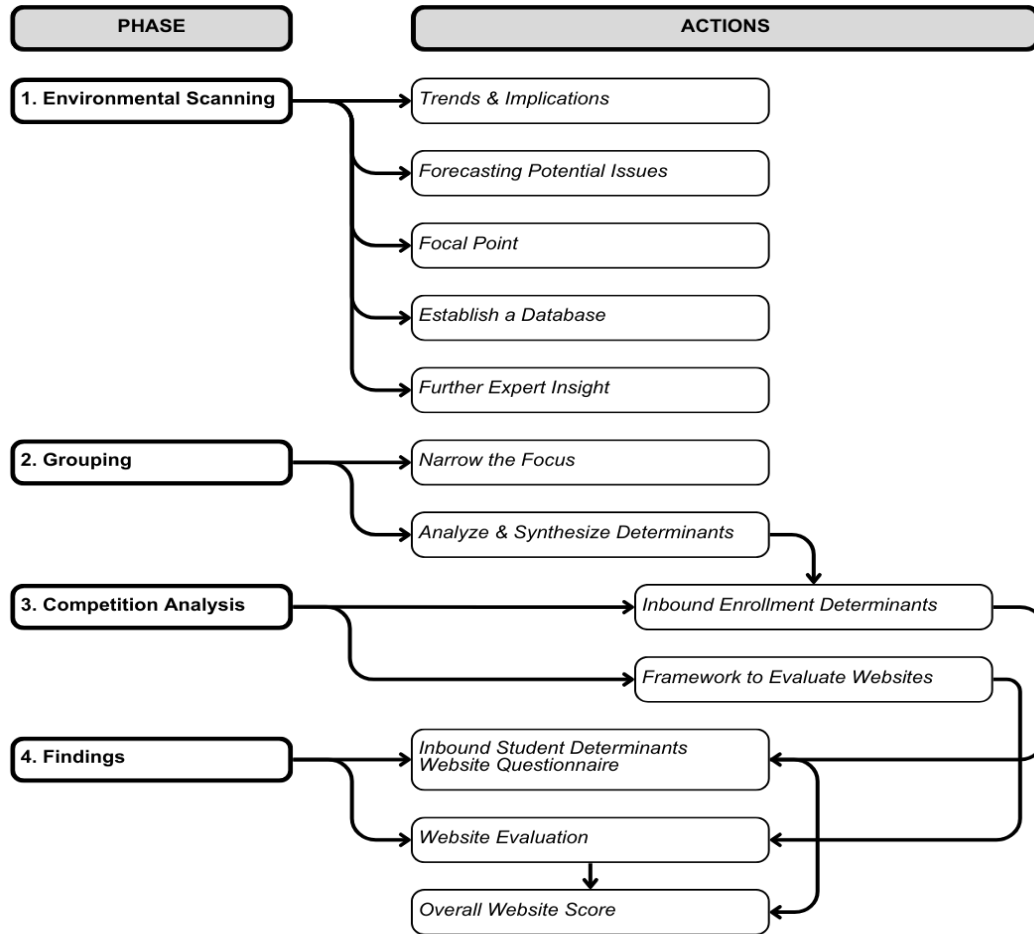
Guided by the *Population, Exposure, Outcome* (PEO) framework—used to construct answerable questions concerning key concepts in systematic research (Bettany-Saltikov, 2016)—our pragmatic research questions include:

1. What are the critical determinants for inbound university students (P)?
2. And, is there evidence that they can effectively be communicated through Canadian university websites (E) to reduce the digital sludge students experience (O)?

Method

To better understand the international student applicant experience, we pursued competitive intelligence. Madureira et al. (2021) defined competitive intelligence as “the process and forward-looking practices used in producing knowledge about the competitive environment to improve organizational performance” (p. 15). The process followed an iterative four-phase approach—used to limit bias and emotion-based judgements (Levy, 2018)—mixed-methods exploratory sequential design to investigate a problem through qualitative methods in phases one and two and a quantitative approach in the third (Creswell, 2015). The overall flow is illustrated in Figure 1, and each phase is expanded upon below.

Figure 1
Competitive Intelligence Flow



Environmental Scanning

Environmental scanning is a systematic process of developing information literacy regarding external environmental forces to avoid threats and assist in strategic decision-making (Babatunde & Adebisi, 2012; Moutinho & Chien, 2008; Zhang et al., 2010). For this study, we adapted a concise five-step scanning system outlined by Moutinho and Chien (2008), focusing on *trends & implications*, *forecasting potential issues*, *the focal point*, *establishing a database*, and *further expert insight*. We provide greater context in the following subsections.

Trends & Implications

Recent publicly available national data focusing on higher education enrollment was sought and acquired from government websites to provide foundational insight into international enrollment trends. The resulting data indicates that public universities in Ontario, Canada, increasingly rely on international student enrollment to sustain operations (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2022; Statistics Canada, 2020, 2022). As a result, two nations—China and India—have become critical to supporting the Canadian higher education infrastructure (Buknova et al., 2020; CBIE, 2022; Stokes, 2021).

Forecast Potential Issues

We then found that competition amongst public and private institutions is growing, and the fragility of

provincial institutions has become evident with struggles such as insolvency and deficits (Buckner & Gong, 2022; Ontario, 2022a; Torrie, 2022). A search of coverage from national news organizations focused on international relations between Canada and the top nations for inbound international students provided context for potential issues. The most prominent challenge is the increased political tensions with the aforementioned top nations for inbound students globally, China and India, which escalated around the start of the COVID-19 pandemic global economy (Aschaiek, 2023; Balu et al., 2023; Bukenova et al., 2020; CBIE, 2022; Kannan & Fleguel, 2023; Nagy, 2023; Stokes, 2021).

As decision-makers continue to monitor the tensions and potential implications, the importance of inbound international students is still critical, and actions must be taken to enhance their experiences.

Focal Point

Building from insights derived from the literature review, university websites are a critical aspect of students' enrollment decision-making process, as they are one of the most important sources of student information gathering (2CV, 2021; CBIE, 2022). Furthermore, websites and web pages are one of the few institutionally managed assets that can be rapidly adapted due to management structures and limited requirements for external validation or time. The strong impact and access make websites the focal point.

Establish a Database

In the spring of 2023, we compiled a list of Canadian public universities and their characteristics. First, information was sourced from University Study (n.d.) and its publisher, Universities Canada: A membership organization representing the interests of institutions at the federal level and beyond (Universities Canada, n.d.). The collected characteristics included enrollment, geography, a link to the host institution's home page, and its international studies page. If international webpage links were outdated, we acquired them from the official institution's website through their embedded homepage search option. Next, we added a qualitative description of each institution's size, which include *small*, *medium*, *large*, and *huge* to allow for comparisons based on relative comparison (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.; CollegeData, n.d.).

Further Environmental Experts' Insight

For the experts' insight scanning portion, we gathered further intelligence from aggregated international student perspectives and general university quality. We first sought recent global context for inbound student mobility determinants from three top destinations: the United States, the UK, and Canada (Institute of International Education, 2021). Next, we gathered insight into perceptions of university quality rankings through the *Quacquarelli Symonds* (QS) and *Times Higher Education* (THE) rankings (Lane, 2023; THE, 2022). Quality rankings were gathered due to their prominent effect on institutional marketing and strong influence on inbound international students' decision-making process, as they often have greater brand power (Bukenova et al., 2020; Olcay & Bulu, 2017).

Grouping

The grouping phase involved two steps. First, we narrowed the focus to outline specific institutions based on their characteristics. Second, we analyzed and synthesized the determinants of international student applications from international reports to guide the development of answerable questions for the competition analysis phase. Both steps are outlined in further detail below.

Institutional Inclusion

Following the largest concentration of international students in Canada—Ontario (n = 315,915 students) and British Columbia (n = 155,455 students), which collectively represent 72% of the total national enrollment (Global Affairs Canada, 2019)—we evaluated the international web pages of ten medium-sized and two larger institutions across both provinces. Medium-sized institutions were chosen as they are the most common category in Canada (n = 23, 30%). Next, we sought further evidence in each province from two huge and highly ranked Canadian universities as defined by the QS and THE rankings (Lane, 2023; THE, 2022). The larger, higher-ranked universities add a greater scope to the analysis and context beyond medium-sized institutions. All selected universities were grouped for analysis and outlined in

Table 1.

Table 1
Institutions Overview

Institution	Province	Size
UJ3Rw	Ontario	Med
U1n71	Ontario	Med
URBjU	Ontario	Med
U6XNX	Ontario	Med
UMHFH	Ontario	Med
UblNv	BC	Med
Uu2A0	BC	Med
U3L59	Ontario	Med
UBx22	BC	Med
UFJA6	BC	Large
Uq0DG	Ontario	Large
UR6I0	BC	Med

Inbound Student Enrollment Determinants

To gather insight into how information is communicated on institutional websites and whether it provides the relevant insight for students' applications, we first sought to categorize the determinants. To do so, we collected reports focusing on the experiences of inbound international students and conducted a systematic analysis and synthesis of the collected report findings to develop answerable questions for the competition analysis phase.

Report Overview. We conducted a systematic mixed-research synthesis focusing on top destinations for international students, which include the United States (n = 1,075,496 inbound students), the United Kingdom (n = 551,495), and Canada (n = 503,270; Institute of International Education, 2021). Findings from each open-source report outline factors influencing global student application processes from approximately 171,818 students and 1,399 degree-granting institutions (2CV, 2021; Bukenova et al., 2020; CBIE, 2022; QS, 2022). An overview of each report follows.

United States. A report from *NAFSA: Association of International Educators* (NAFSA) sought information on factors influencing international student enrollment in the United States (Bukenova et al., 2020). Data for the report comes from responses to the *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System* (IPEDS), which includes 1,399 degree-granting institutions. Analysis crossed data from 2007 to 2018 with findings from the *NAFSA International Student Economic Value Tool*, the *Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU)*, institutional rankings, the *Bureau of Economic Analysis*, *Gallup*, and *OECD*.

Following a review of data and trends, the top three determinants of student enrollment include:

1. Institutional rank, with the top 50 ranked institutions growing 2.2 times more than other universities;
2. Campuses with higher international student populations, with larger populations being 1.94 times more likely to grow; and
3. Third-party pathway partnerships, as the pathways drove international enrolment 1.73 times that of institutions without (Bukenova et al., 2020).

During the analysis period, overall international student enrolment dropped with a reduction in location aggregation and more students moving to higher-ranking institutions (Bukenova et al., 2020). Most inbound students came from Asia, notably China and India, followed by South Korea. Relating to the primary intake source, the researchers found that the time difference between the original location and the intended destination is often notable. Two recommendations to help reduce the impact of time

differences include providing accessible, high-quality digital asynchronous information and hiring advisors or counsellors operating during the hours associated with desired foreign student origins. Finally, recognizing that systemic inequities exist, Bukenova et al. (2020) proposed that institutions will benefit from ensuring they create and communicate efforts to support ethnically diverse students.

United Kingdom. Focusing on students considering studies in English-speaking nations, 2CV (2021) surveyed those associated with the British Council: Study UK. Findings build from 18,000 prospective students in China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Pakistan, along with parents (n = 100) from China and India (2CV, 2021). The researchers outlined eight critical determinants impacting the decision to study abroad:

1. Course quality or innovativeness (n = 84%);
2. The cost of education (n = 84%);
3. Impact of education on future employability (n = 83%);
4. Living requirements (n = 80%);
5. Appealing culture and daily affordances (n = 70%);
6. Health safety in the context of COVID-19 (n = 74%);
7. Website and marketing information (n = 71%); and
8. Information from family or friends (n = 67%).

The most widely used sources were online information, family and friends, virtual events, educators, direct contact with institutions, university rankings, recruitment agents, and destination country agencies (2CV, 2021). Education agents were increasingly influential throughout the pandemic, and family or friends continued to be important for the decision-making process. Based on the survey responses, universities will benefit from presenting information for prospective students and their parents on quality assurance, the financial value of the degree, and—for the near future—assurances of student wellness in the context of COVID-19.

Canada. The CBIE conducted its sixth version of the *International Student Survey* in 2021 to inform Canadian higher education policy and decision-making processes. Sixty-seven institutions—69% of universities and 31% of colleges—of varying sizes responded (n = 41,512 students), representing 12% of all higher education international students in Canada (CBIE, 2022). Respondents were primarily first-year students (49%), female (51%), and of Asian heritage (55%). Study permits indicate that inbound students primarily come from India, China, France, Iran, Vietnam, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, the United States, Nigeria, and Mexico. The survey responses provide nine key determinants of why students study in Canada:

1. Geography: Canada's reputation as safe and stable (79%);
2. Institutional reputation/rank: The education system's reputation and quality (69.5%);
3. Work Opportunity: Students are afforded opportunities to gain work experience, ideally related to the field of study (67%);
4. Societal Tolerance: Offers a generally non-discriminatory society (50%);
5. Opportunity in Country post-grad: The ability to apply for a post-graduate work permit (31%);
6. Culture & 21 Skills: Gaining intercultural awareness and key competencies (29%);
7. Personal Connection: Knowing someone with experience studying in Canada (27%); and
8. Cost of Living: Affordability of studying in Canada vs. other countries (26%).

Students found that the five most valuable resources for gathering determinants were institutional websites (74%), personal recommendations (64%), fairs and virtual events (61%), institutional rank (52%), and social media (44%). The least valuable resources included fairs and virtual events (67%), home government departments (54%), recruiting agents (49%), EduCanada (42%), and the Canadian immigration website (37%). Moving forward, institutions may benefit from providing scaffolded and continuous information about employment opportunities and skills, inclusive activities, and Canadian Indigenous culture (CBIE, 2022).

Report Synthesis. To express the collective findings from the investigations, we adopted an integrated analysis and synthesis strategy to qualitatively assimilate the report findings (Sandelowski et al., 2006). The analysis occurred in two steps. In the first step, we gathered four reports representing the United States, the UK, Canada, and a global review that provided deep insight into the enrollment decision-making process. Then the report summaries, demographic data, and student mobility determinants

(n = 22 determinants) were extracted to outline a descriptive background for each referenced report.

For the second step—an integrated synthesis—comprising three stages, we employed emergent coding from thematic analysis to construct enrollment determinant themes (Popay et al., 2006; Sandelowski et al., 2006; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). In the first stage, enrollment determinants were grouped through similar attributes to develop tentative themes. The second and third stages were dynamic, with one informing the other. Specifically, related determinants—similar findings with differing verbiage—were merged. The final stage included concept mapping to evaluate the quantity and quality of the emerging themes (Popay et al., 2006).

Mapping occurred via tables that contain extracted data outlining the primary inbound student determinant from each report. Patterns are identified and linked within each table through concurrent, convergent triangulation to develop emergent themes through potential codes (Creswell, 2014; Popay et al., 2006). Two authors developed the emergent, or open, codes by individually moving back and forth between the data and codes to develop, merge, remove, and refine groupings to achieve inter-coder agreement (Cole, 2023).

We included codes with an individual occurrence in the four reports due to potential usefulness and to increase the scope of knowledge. The process resulted in 15 determinants outlined in Appendix A and four primary themes: *geography, employment & finance, institutional information, and student perspectives*. Seven potential determinants from the initial scan were removed, as they were beyond direct institutional control (n = 3 determinants), were housed in department-specific areas of the university website (n = 2), or were not applicable (n = 2).

Competition Analysis

The competition analysis phase provides context into how the selected universities communicate student determinants—factors influencing student application choices—while also reviewing a website’s general effectiveness. This phase was executed in tables following processes to limit errors as they can support effective and transparent data collection and analysis (Broman & Woo, 2018; Cloutier & Ravasi, 2021).

Instruments

We used two instruments to provide comprehensive evidence into webpage effectiveness in the Summer of 2023 by analyzing enrollment determinants and evaluating the website, which we outline below.

Inbound Student Determinants Website Questionnaire. The grouping phase (outlined above) provided 15 total determinants and four primary themes through triangulation, which serve as the framework for analysis. We expanded each determinant from a phrase into a question, resulting in 15 total questions outlined in Appendix B. The potential score was 15 based on a *yes = 1* and a *no = 0* system.

Website Evaluation. Allison et al.’s (2019) *Framework to Evaluate Websites* guided our analysis of each web page’s general effectiveness. The framework is a dynamic sequence of attributes and criteria used to evaluate website quality derived from a systematic review of 43 evaluation methodologies and 69 articles. Thirty-two attribute criteria were deemed appropriate for this study in the categories of *usability/ease of use, content, web design, functionality, appearance, interactivity, satisfaction, and loyalty* (Appendix C). Each international studies webpage could receive a total score of 32 based on the same *yes = 1* and *no = 0* scoring as used for the determinants review.

Process & Scoring. The process involved following the website links, limiting navigation to no more than two links beyond the original page, and scoring each aspect with a “1” or “0.” Scores of one or zero are associated with whether the subject of inquiry existed or not, respectively, with a tally of each providing a final score for each tool. The decision to limit clicks builds on the modern affordances of continuous scrolling. A reduction in online pages is an experience enhancement feature for applicants due to the ability to improve storytelling flow, sustain user attention, and reflect the common digital experience through such artifacts as social media applications and Google Search (Anand, 2021; Babich, 2017; Penfold, 2017; Sharma & Murano, 2020).

Findings

Following a review in May and June 2023 of 12 university international studies departments’ web pages—10 medium-sized and two huge universities in Ontario and British Columbia—this section outlines

the best and worst scoring pages. Five institutions were listed within the top 1200 global universities in at least one of the two quality ranking systems. To ensure anonymity and reduce potential bias, we encrypted each institution's name. Finally, to limit potential oversight, each site was reviewed twice. The findings are expanded below.

Inbound Enrollment Determinants

The top medium-sized university international studies web page providing important study determinants was UR6I0 (n = 67%), the second included a two-way tie between U1n71 and UbLNv (n = 53%), and UJ3Rw (n = 47%) took third. Four of the five (n = 80%) internationally ranked universities received scores that positioned them in the top half, while Uq0DG (n = 60%) was the best *huge* university. UM-HFH had the lowest-scored webpage overall (n = 7%). Figure 2 illustrates each institution's score based on its communication of critical enrollment determinants.

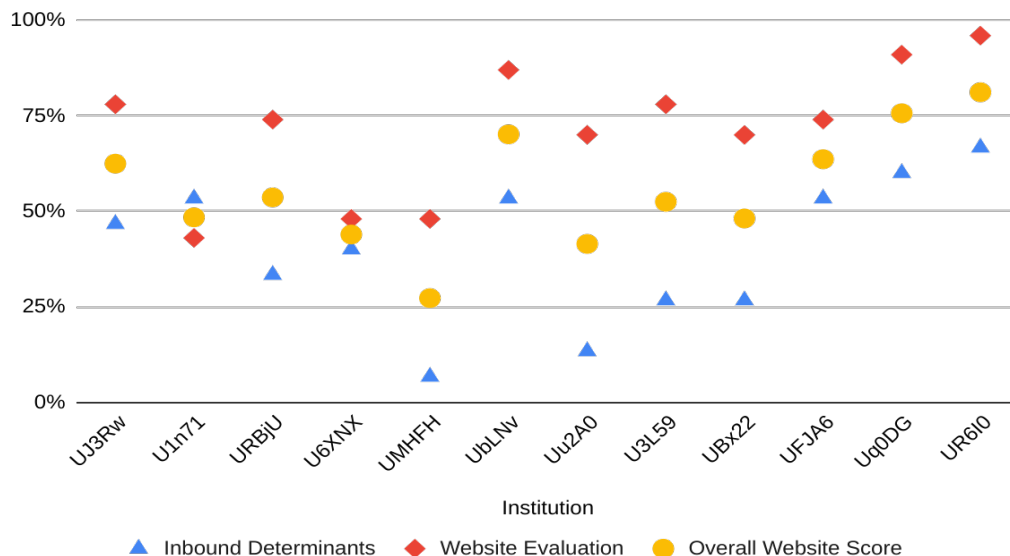
Website Evaluation

The three highest-quality medium-sized university international studies websites include UR6I0 (n = 96%), UJ3Rw and U3L59 (n = 78%), and URBjU (n = 74%). Uq0DG (n = 91%) was the top huge university, while U1n71 had the lowest-scored page (n = 43%). Three of the five (n = 60%) internationally ranked universities received scores that positioned them in the top half. Figure 2 outlines the website scoring outcomes.

Overall Score

The best overall web pages for international students—ones that provide the desired information with high-quality experiences—include UR6I0 (n = 81%), Uq0DG (n = 76%), and UbLNv (n = 70%). UM-HFH had the lowest web page score (n = 27%). Four of the five (n = 80%) internationally ranked universities received scores that positioned them in the top half of the overall applicant experience. Figure 2 outlines the overall scoring outcomes.

Figure 2
Overall Institutional Scores of International Recruitment Web Pages



Discussion

This study sought to gain insight into the critical determinants of inbound university students and awareness into its effective application to guide the redevelopment of a medium-sized Ontario, Canada univer-

sity's international studies website. The mixed-method study included a systematic four-phase analysis and synthesis, building on findings from four reports outlining a global perspective and those from the top three destination countries ($n > 171,818$ students and $n = 1,466$ higher education institutions) to develop competitive intelligence and actionable information, and an investigation of website quality. Our motivation for inquiry builds on two factors. First, Canadian national and provincial public higher education funding models require that institutions increase international student enrollment (Global Affairs Canada, 2019; Statistics Canada, 2020, 2022). Second, as the authors are interested in institutional sustainability, there is a strong desire to ensure potential inbound students receive the relevant information to inform their application decision-making process through easily accessible determinants.

Inbound Student Enrollment Determinants

A systematic report review resulted in 15 critical determinants that students and their supporters sought while considering international higher education applications and enrollment. The three most referenced insights influencing application decision-making include university rank, regional cost of living, and ability to work during the study ($n = 3$ reports each). The following influential factors include global location, regional tolerance, an opportunity to experience new cultural skills, an ability to work after graduation, and an established international student population ($n = 2$ reports each). Finally, individual reports indicate that private or public institutional funding was a consideration, along with international student graduation rates, the region within the country, recruiters, the campus environment, environmental sustainability efforts, and financial aid were also important.

Competitive Intelligence

Following a review of 10 medium-sized and two huge Canadian universities, we found that limiting the digital sludge a prospective student experiences is possible. As Levy (2018) indicated, we were able to use the critical intelligence process to conduct unbiased research, as the researcher's home institution scored poorly overall, but this affords an awareness of where growth needs to occur. Based on a potential score of 15 rooted in the critical determinants outlined in the four reports, six of the 12 universities provided over half the information students sought to inform their application.

The scores were lower than anticipated, primarily due to three determinants—the global region (Canada), a listing that the institution was public or private, and the graduation rate of international students—which did not appear on any of the reviewed pages. For the lack of responses to the first two, inductive reasoning indicates that website content developers are likely unaware of the need to provide a national context to their content. The oversight may be explained by the fact that many Canadian universities have been publicly funded since the 1970s, with domestic enrollment being a more statistically significant focus than international enrollment until 2008 (Jones, 2014; Statistics Canada, 2022). The general website quality was much better, with 75% ($n = 9$ universities) of the evaluated sites scoring 70% or above. Combining both evaluations, three institutions scored 70% or above.

Addressing the study purpose, our findings indicate that universities are capable of effectively communicating the critical determinants that were important aspects of inbound international students' choice architecture. Additionally, asynchronous communication through university webpages can be an effective process that serves as a nudge for student applications, as it allows students the opportunity to easily navigate to the desired information. A unique finding from this study is that four of the five globally ranked institutions accounted for the top 80% of the top-scoring universities. We propose that the finding calls into question whether it is ultimately a university's rank or ability to communicate that is more influential in students' application decision-making process.

Limitations and Future Research

While our study provides unique insight into university marketing efforts in two provinces within Canada, our approach may not be generalizable, as we focused explicitly on two regions that are also primarily English-speaking. Also, we are using aggregated data, which, if merged prior to its synthesis, could reveal different determinants. A third consideration is that the *inbound student determinants* instrument has only been used in this study, which limits its reliability. Finally, using a single website rater may increase potential errors, even with processes in place to limit such issues or bias. While this study adds

to the growing focus on academic mobility, it is one of the few studies from Canada, a top destination but with limited research to date (Pawar, 2023; Shen et al., 2022). As such, future research should focus on Canadian higher education mobility and outline institutional efforts to reduce student digital sludge experiences during enrollment. Additionally, our finding that 80% of the top-ranked universities received the best overall scores—the combination of communicating critical information and positive user experience—is a novel finding that requires further research.

Conclusion

Considering the increasing importance of inbound student mobility for Canadian university viability, efforts must be made to ensure that potential applicants can gain the information they desire to make a potentially huge life decision: enrolling in cross-border learning. We propose that universities should prioritize their communication ability and that developing informative, user-friendly web-based experiences is attainable. Furthermore, as political turmoil continues with the current nations responsible for the greatest number of inbound students, higher education institutions must ensure that they are able to effectively communicate with emerging partners such as the Philippines, Ukraine, and Nepal (CBIE, 2022). This study provides context for two research gaps, including comprehending organizational practices and expressing a Canadian perspective on student mobility in higher education (Pawar, 2023; Shen et al., 2022). Furthermore, it can exemplify a first step for institutions looking to nudge students towards enrolment through improved communication and marketing methods.

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Appendix A
Institutions Overview

Institution	Province	Size
UJ3Rw	Ontario	Med
U1n71	Ontario	Med
URBjU	Ontario	Med
U6XNX	Ontario	Med
UMHFH	Ontario	Med
UblNv	BC	Med
Uu2A0	BC	Med
U3L59	Ontario	Med
UBx22	BC	Med
UFJA6	BC	Large
Uq0DG	Ontario	Large
UR6IO	BC	Med

Appendix B

Determinants Overview

Citation	Work	Country	Societal	Culture & 21 Skills	Public	Int. Grad Rate	Recruiters	Envi. Sustain.	Financial Aid
CBIE, 2022	1	1	1	1	1	1			
USA	1		1	1			1	1	1
2CV, 2021		1	1						1
UK									
QS, 2022	1	1	1		1			1	1
Global				1					
Total	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	1	1

Appendix C

Determinant Questions

Theme	Determinant Website Review Questions
Geography	<p>Does the site give/link to information about the country?</p> <p>Is there any indication of societal tolerance for international students?</p> <p>Is there further insight into the region?</p> <p>Is there any reference to gaining cultural experience or modern skills?</p>
Employment & Finance	<p>Does the site link to/reference international student employment opportunities?</p> <p>Does the site reference opportunities post-graduation?</p> <p>Does the site reference/link to students' cost of living? (If so, is it accurate/up-to-date?)</p> <p>Does the site reference/link to financial aid?</p>
Institutional Info	<p>Is there any ranking information about the institution?</p> <p>Is there any insight about the campus environment?</p> <p>Does the site note that the institution is "public"?</p> <p>Does the site reference/link to institutional efforts for environmental sustainability?</p>
Student Perspective	<p>Can students connect with recruiters/agents?</p> <p>Does the site indicate the total international student enrollment?</p> <p>Is the graduation rate of international students listed?</p>

Appendix D

Website Evaluation

Attributes	Criteria	Observation/Experience
Usability/Ease of Use	Intuitive Navigation	The website is easy to navigate with intuitive options.
	Information Architecture	The website clearly provided the required information.
Content	Accuracy	Information from the website is accurate and provides resources for further verification.
	Accuracy	The website was free of spelling, grammar, and punctuation mistakes.
	Relevancy	The website content is accurate, appropriate, useful, and appears to be up-to-date.
	Timeliness	The website content aligns with the rest of the world—it is authentic but not out-of-step with the world.
Web Design	Understandability	The website is not overly complex and avoids jargon.
	Media	The website uses media (e.g., pictures and video) effectively.
	Search Engine	The website offered useful search options.
	Originality	The website feels original (vs. common).
Functionality	Multi-Language	The website provides options for different languages.
	Links	The links to other resources work (are not broken).
	Speed	The website loaded quickly.
Appearance	Security	The website is secure (e.g., https vs. http in the address).
	Layout	The website layout is appealing.
	Font	The font is readable and appropriate (https://www.w3.org/WAI/GL/low-vision-a11y-tf/wiki/Font)
	Colours	The website colours are appropriate (https://www.w3.org/WAI/WCAG21/quickref/?showtechniques=141#use-of-color)
Interactivity	Page Length	The website length feels appropriate.
	Feedback/ Comments Allowed Help/	The website provided options for further two-way interaction (e.g., social media). The website provides easy-to-find help options.
Satisfaction	Customer Service Usefulness	Overall, I found the website to be useful.
	Pleasure	I found that using the website was a pleasurable experience.
Loyalty	First Impression	My first impression of the website made me want to stay and find more information.

Note. Adapted under CC by 4.0 from “A comprehensive framework to evaluate websites: Literature review and development of GoodWeb” by R. Allison, C. Hayes, C. A. McNulty, & V. Young, 2021, *JMIR Formative Research*, 3(4), e14372. <https://doi.org/10.2196/14372>