



PEER-TO-PEER: WHY STUDENT AMBASSADORS ARE KEY CONNECTIONS THROUGHOUT THE RECRUITMENT FUNNEL

A report from IDP and The Ambassador Platform



INTRODUCTION

Supporting students throughout their international education journey is a key focus for IDP. Through our use of innovation and technology, backed by our human support and global connections, we can provide trusted guidance from the moment a student starts their research.

Today's prospective students have a wealth of information sources to turn to when they start their research and many higher education professionals face the challenge of knowing where to invest marketing budgets and how to ensure they get the best messaging to the right students.

At the top of the funnel, we need to ask ourselves three key questions:

1. Where do prospective international students look for information?
2. What do they want to know?
3. How do we make an impression on them?

Knowing the answers and making sure our approach fits and continues to fit with them is key to building brand awareness and, in turn, building trust and connection.

This report will explore when prospective students start their research, how and where they look for information, the platforms they use, how they begin to differentiate within their search, the value of peer-to-peer communication, and, ultimately, how we can ensure they get the best information at the right times.

WHAT DO STUDENTS WANT?

HOW DO THEY FIND IT?

To understand what students want, we need to understand when, where, and what the upcoming cohorts of prospective students are researching. At the very top of the funnel, we know that many students start their research into international higher education while they are in secondary school, high school or junior college. In fact, a survey by UCAS found that three quarters of international students decide to study overseas at this age.ⁱ For some, around one in ten, the decision is already made to travel abroad for higher education before their 11th birthday.ⁱⁱ

Today, Generation Alpha is becoming an ever-increasing part of the top-of-the-funnel audience. Born after 2010, the earliest Gen Alphas are already 14 years old. They are the first entire generation to have never known life without the internet, smartphones and round-the-clock accessibility to information and entertainment – they are all about connectivity. While both Gen Z and Gen Alpha are tech-savvy, Gen Alpha's immersion in the digital landscape from birth has fostered stronger self-awareness and a more global perspective.

While Gen Z students are still making their way into higher education, focusing now on some of the characteristics that sets Gen Alpha apart can be strategic and useful. Educators have already begun analysing how the methodology for imparting knowledge to Gen Alpha will need to change and we, as marketers, also need to start thinking differently.

Professors Ziatdinov and Cilliers say “visual, auditory and kinesthetic tools will support the future teaching-learning environment, to provide a real experience with supporting social connections. In this sense, the challenge would be to bridge the literacy gap between teachers and students to enhance the social connections and interactions, and to develop soft skills that will foster a sense of belonging, of community and of sharing.”ⁱⁱⁱ

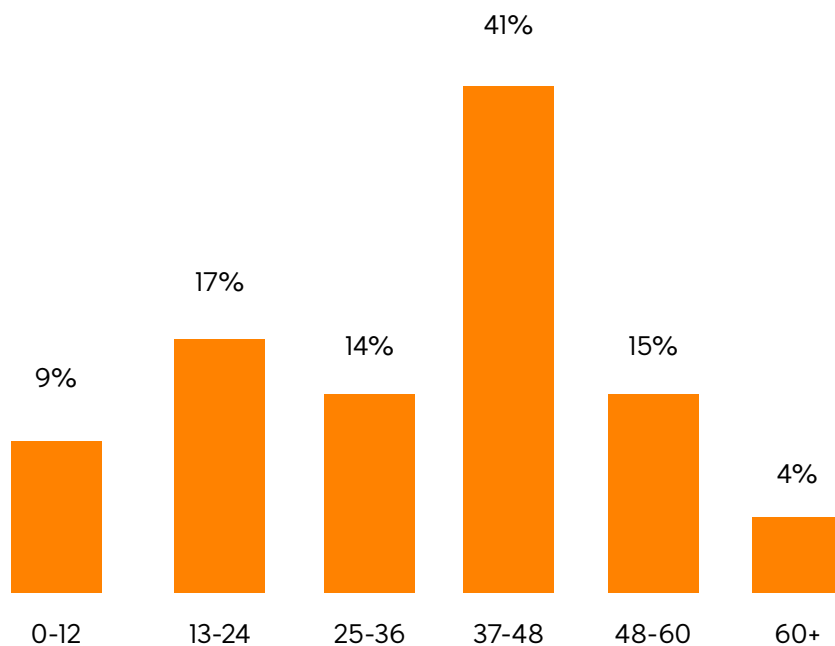
Students who are researching their higher education options want to understand the real experience of a university, they don't want the corporate view – they want real-life, interactive experiences and social connections.

EARLY VISIBILITY IS KEY

Reaching students at the top of the funnel requires your institution to be present on the right platforms and channels. You must make yourself visible to them, and you must be found early. Such early, positive awareness of your institution is the foundation on which you can start building true connections and feelings of belonging.

Research by IDP Education shows that international students begin their study abroad research process well before they apply - typically around two years before, with some students starting four to five years before. Only 9% of students start their studies within 12 months of beginning their research.^{iv}

IDP data shows that most students begin their research years in advance.



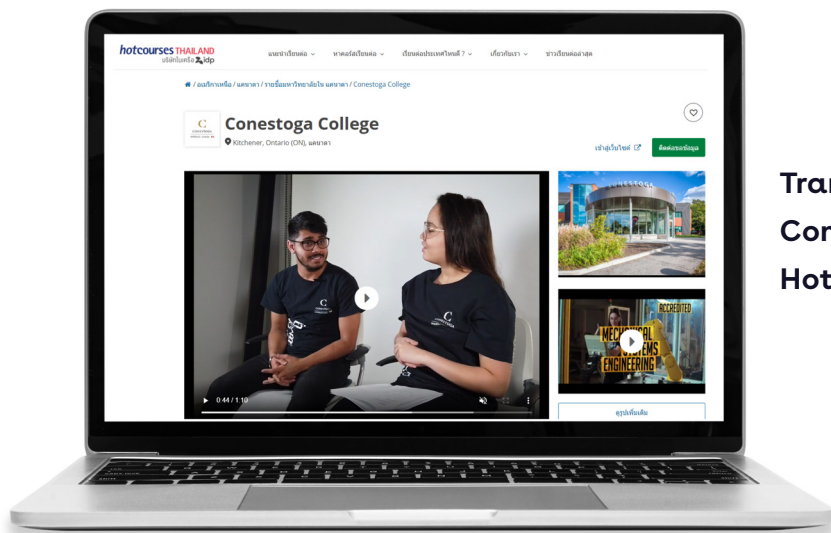
Average months from initial research to enrol

BROAD SEARCHES ON A VARIETY OF PLATFORMS

Because students' research is conducted almost entirely through digital platforms, winning the race for prospective students' attention requires a robust digital presence in places of high visibility. IDP's team of SEO experts identified that international students typically begin their research with broad searches for academic programmes and destination countries, for example, "engineering courses in the USA." As these types of searches are wide-ranging and exploratory, they do not typically return individual institution websites in the results.

Instead, more often, these searches return institutional search sites and profile websites that aggregate information about numerous institutions to assist students in this early stage of research. Search engines especially favour websites that are locally hosted and translated to the local language, such as Hotcourses and IDP.com. Institutional search engines and other online sources, where millions of internationally mobile prospective students go to review profiles, have become even more relevant for institutions to ensure they are visible.

It is critical that institutions are not only present on these digital platforms, but also that they are using visually engaging content marketing. Content marketing uses a strategic approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content, instead of more traditional sales-focused content.^v This is especially important for international students, who may not have the opportunity to visit your campus before arriving for their classes.



**Translated institution
Content Hub on
Hotcourses Thailand**



AWARENESS AT AN EARLY STAGE IS CRUCIAL

When an institution appears early in student research their brand can have lasting impact. By offering useful information at all stages of the student journey, the institution will build connections and provide the necessary support that will build trust with students.

When IDP asked students what they wish they had done differently during their search process, the main response was that they wish they had started it sooner. Students were not aware of how time-consuming the process can be and did not realise how much support they would need along the way.

“

I would have started a lot earlier because the higher education research process is rigorous, and you need to know what you are doing before starting. So, giving students awareness very early in their search is the best option in my opinion.

”

IDP Education Student Lab Participant, 2021

“

It would have been great if I had had more chance to get in touch with representatives or students of the university to which I was applying for.

”

IDP Student, Vietnam, July 2023

WHEN DO PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS WANT TO TALK TO OTHER STUDENTS?

Research by The Ambassador Platform (TAP) shows that peer-to-peer connections are most important at the top and middle of the funnel, prior to application:^{vi}

When in your research journey is it important for you to learn from real students?

When I'm discovering my options	34%
When I'm researching my options	41%
When I'm making applications	31%
When I'm choosing my first choice institution	24%
When I'm preparing to arrive at the institution for the first time	25%
In my first term at the institution	15%
It's not important to learn from real students to me	2%
Not applicable	1%
Other (please specify)	1%









MAKING TRUSTED CONNECTIONS

Today's researching students tend to prefer authentic content over glossy corporate marketing, and while many may still want to view a prospectus, they are likely to do it digitally from the institution's website. In fact, Institution websites are a top source of information for students.

TAP research found that 60% of survey respondents said university websites were one of the most useful sources of information when researching study options, while 58% said "talking with real students (online or in person)". Surprisingly, although social media appeared third on the list, only 34% of the respondents chose this source as a 'most useful' source.^{vii}

In terms of the platforms on which students prefer to facilitate connections with "real students", TAP research revealed the following responses:^{viii}

What platforms would you ideally like to engage with real students on?

	The university's website chat	39%
	Email	40%
	Whatsapp	43%
	Text message / iMessage	20%
	WeChat	9%
	Facebook	10%
	Instagram	20%
	LinkedIn	11%
	Other (please specify)	2%

THE DIFFERENTIATION STAGE

Once a student shortlists institutional profiles in their search process, the next step is often to navigate directly to the institution's website to continue their research.

This is when they will begin digging deeper into other guiding factors: the community, campus facilities, events, clubs, sports, and other determining features. This differentiation stage is guided by emotion, and personal wants and needs. At this point, prospective students begin building a sense of how it might feel to attend an institution and whether they can truly imagine themselves studying and living on the campus.

For today's international students, data and written information are not enough for an institution to make a complete impression. Students will be assessing the "vibe" of a university website just as much as the usefulness of its content, and they will use this as a barometer to assess the personality of the school. It's about seeking belonging and community, right from the outset.

Student Ambassadors and peer-to-peer connections

It is no surprise that authentic, personalised, trustworthy human communication is one type of information that students value highly, but delivering that personal message in all the right places is a challenge and even more so at the scale that many institutions will need to be operating in 2024 and beyond.

An active community of student peers is an invaluable source of valued and trusted information that can inspire, support, and accelerate decision making among prospective students.

When TAP asked why students want to learn from their peers, 64% said they want to speak to someone with first-hand experience of the university, 32% said they would like to confirm that what they heard from the university is true, while 22% said the amount of information available about universities is overwhelming and speaking to students is easier.^{ix}

WHAT DO STUDENTS WANT TO KNOW?

As part of IDP's internal research we asked prospective students (those who have not yet applied, those who have applied but not yet received an offer, and those who have received an offer but not yet accepted) what they wanted to find out from study abroad peers.

- 74% wanted to ask about funding, costs and affordability, and hidden costs
- 73% wanted to ask about job opportunities
- 69% wanted to ask about the destination expectations vs reality
- 68% wanted to ask about scholarships
- 67% wanted to ask about work experience, key concerns, and barriers that students might need to overcome on their journey

In relation to institutions, courses or student experience, prospective students wanted to ask study abroad peers about the following:

- 68% wanted to ask about scholarships
- 61% wanted to ask about careers and career outcomes
- 61% wanted to ask about the study experience
- 56% wanted to ask about the student experience
- 55% wanted to ask about the education or course quality

Most of these topics are driven by prospective students' need to be certain about their investment in their international education - and not necessarily just financial investment - students want to be certain that the time and energy they put into the decision-making process has been well spent and student ambassadors are well placed to help them get the best answers.

HOW IDP CAN HELP

IDP helps institutions reach millions of prospective students across our suite of world-leading student-facing websites, including institutional search sites and microsites. Through Hotcourses and IDP websites, we provide global reach – the largest digital presence of any provider.

Our trusted websites help students find their best-fit institutions based on qualifications and preferences. ‘Content Hubs’, our institutional profiles, enable students to learn about schools on a familiar, intuitive, and reputable platform using native language content.

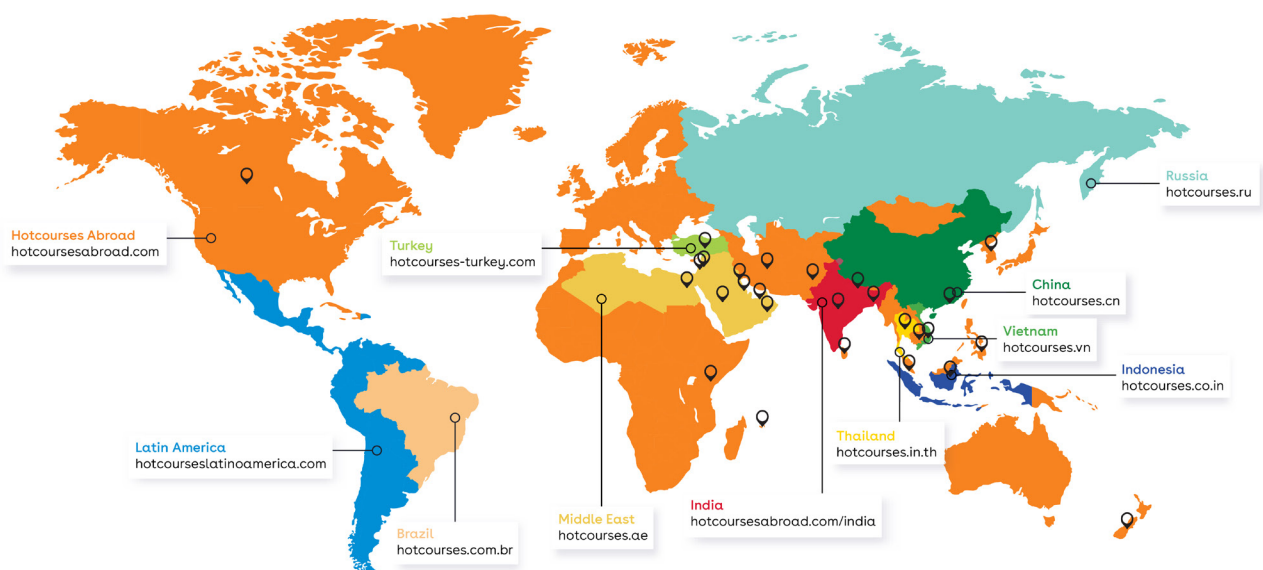
In addition to websites, IDP offers in-person and virtual counselling services to international students. While some students enjoy the “DIY” route of gathering information online, others prefer to receive the support of a trained counsellor early in their journey. Students can easily find an IDP office and schedule an in-person or virtual counselling appointment through the IDP Live app.

40+

connected websites

100 million+

site visits per year



HOW THE AMBASSADOR PLATFORM CAN HELP

The Ambassador Platform is a peer-to-peer marketing and student recruitment platform for higher education providers.

As well as facilitating global peer-to-peer chat, TAP enables the creation and promotion of user-generated content, including video and photos, articles and blogs. Through TAP, student ambassadors can react quickly to emerging situations within host countries and provide the content that prospective students are seeking.

This means that prospective students receive up-to-the-minute answers about the issues that matter to them and have access to the information they need to help them make and feel confident about their decisions.

Student recruitment teams who connect prospective students to current students and use student ambassadors as part of their toolkit are likely to see an increase in conversion rates particularly at the top and middle of the recruitment funnel. Peer-to-peer connections also drive applications and see more offers accepted.

Recruiters using the TAP platform can:

- See how prospective students are engaging with ambassadors
- Manage campaign progression
- Optimise student marketing in real-time
- Track ROI
- Identify most engaged prospective students
- Deliver highly personalised campaigns



IDP AND TAP PARTNERSHIP

IDP and TAP have formed a partnership that will bring all the benefits of the two higher education specialists together for the benefit of our students and university partners. Our aim is to create solutions that will resolve challenges, provide the peer-to-peer technology that will robustly and securely meet the needs of our audiences and provide new opportunities for strategic meeting goals.

From February 2024, IDP Core Partners and International / Whatuni Content Hub partners will be eligible to sign up for IDP and TAP joint Peer-to-Peer services; P2P Conversion and P2P Community.

Simon Emmett, CEO of IDP Connect, said, "Our strategic vision is to be the global platform that connects communities and guides people with global ambitions on their journey to achieve lifelong learning and career aspirations. Our collaboration with The Ambassador Platform will help us fulfil these aspirations by giving students more information and guidance when making such an important decision as to where to study."

George Olesen, CEO and co-founder of The Ambassador Platform, said, "We started TAP to help education providers unlock the power of the student voice in their marketing and recruitment campaigns. This partnership will accelerate our efforts in this area and is an exciting milestone for the company."

ANSWERING THE BIG QUESTIONS

In the introduction to this report, we set out three questions about top-of-the-funnel prospective students. The answers to these questions will help us reach them at the most important points in their research and decision-making journey and provide them with the information they want.

Where do students search and research?

Prospective students begin on search engines with broad searches for programmes and destination countries. Typically, they navigate to institutional search sites where they can compare institution profiles and shortlist their preferences. They are also visiting social media channels and chat platforms where they can access unfiltered opinions and unedited views of campus life and experiences of an institution. Students are still visiting institution websites, but, in addition to information about available courses and costs, they are actively seeking pages and connections that offer a true view of the community and campus.

What do they want to know?

Students want to find out about what's important to them: the costs, the experience, the challenges and much, much more. They want information that is up-to-the-minute and authentic. They want to understand what real life is like at an institution and imagine themselves in the campus community. While they value information on an institution's website, they desire interaction with their peers and those who can give them a genuine viewpoint.

How do you make an impression on prospective students?

The best impressions are made when an institution showcases visually appealing content across its online search profiles and social media channels at the top of the funnel. Genuine connections can be made when student ambassadors create content and build contacts with prospective students. This in turn fosters trust and brand awareness and can be a key influence when decisions are made.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Attracting the current and upcoming generations of international students will require new and diverse approaches. Institutions must build marketing and recruitment strategies that can meet the needs of digitally savvy and technology driven cohorts who crave authenticity and genuine connections.

Many institutions lack the infrastructure to deliver the right content and up-to-the-minute messaging that prospective students want. However, implementing a few simple changes can have a big impact.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR INSTITUTIONS:

- A digital presence across a range of mediums including institutional search sites and social media platforms is key to being discovered by tech-savvy prospective students.
- Early visibility is crucial – showing up as early as possible in your prospective students' journey can give you an advantage and build awareness.
- Current students are a valuable, often untapped resource. Giving prospective students the opportunity to connect with current students can improve your recruitment strategy.
- Understanding and sharing what prospective students are actually looking for is critical; speaking to both information and logic, and emotion and belonging will provide the full range of information required in the decision-making process.

ENDNOTES

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- vi. The Ambassador Platform (2023), Unlocking the secrets of peer-to-peer: 7 <https://www.theambassadorplatform.com/resources/whitepapers-and-reports/unlocking-the-secrets-of-peer-to-peer>
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To learn more about IDP Education's student recruitment and digital marketing solutions, please contact us

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To learn more about The Ambassador Platform's peer-to-peer recruitment solutions, please contact our team today

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