



# WORLD'S TOP UNIVERSITIES THROUGH STUDENT EYES

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*OVERALL RESEARCH FINDINGS – TOP 500 US & CANADA*

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StudyPortals Intelligence Unit  
British Council  
2015

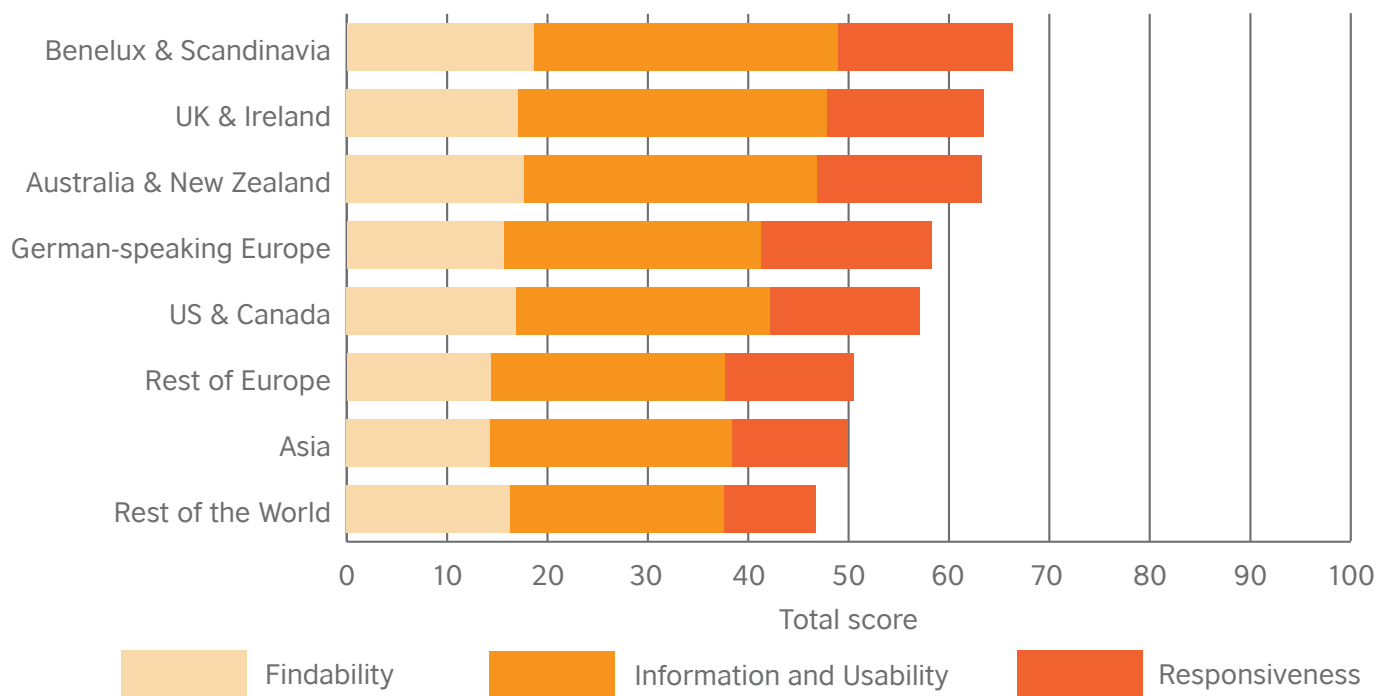
# Executive Summary

The number of students interested in studying abroad is at a record high, with more than 4.5 million students being globally mobile in 2014<sup>1</sup> and many more looking to follow in their footsteps. For these students, making an informed choice regarding what and where they would like to study is a complex, lengthy process, and inconsistencies and differences in how universities choose to communicate information about their programs is a significant barrier.

At present, there is no worldwide standard helping universities understand how to better serve prospective international students or what kind of information would be relevant to them – or how to better communicate it. In order to positively influence a change in this regard, our team of international prospective students mystery-shopped the world's best 1,000 universities. This report focuses on the top 500 universities in the US and Canada and investigates how they compare to the world's best universities in serving international students.

Overall, the US and Canada rank 5th in our “Through Student Eyes” rating, falling behind Scandinavian countries as well as behind competing native English-speaking student destinations, such as Australia and New Zealand and the UK and Ireland.

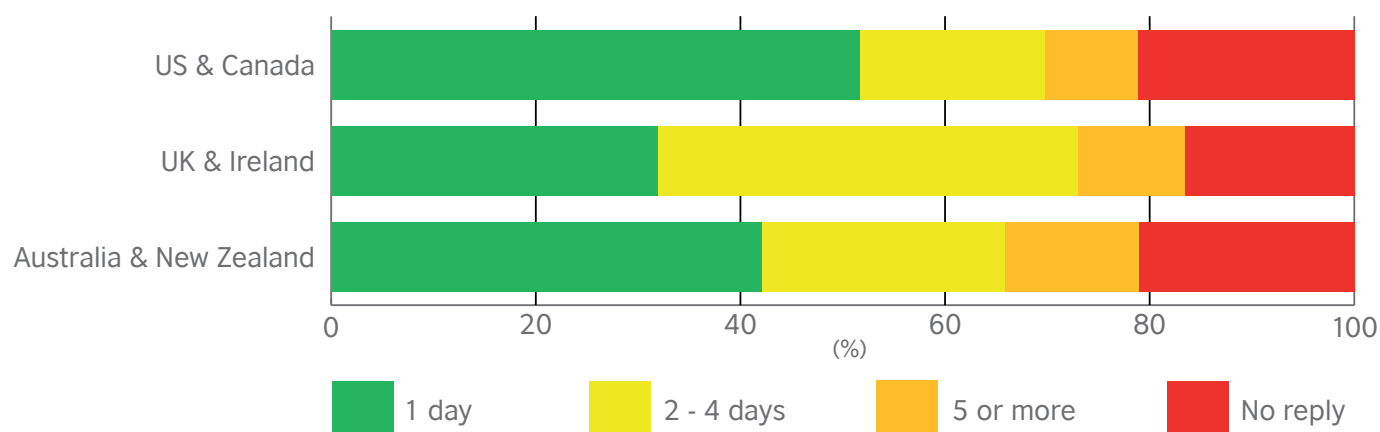
**Figure 1. Through Student Eyes - Score Breakdown by Region for the World's Top 1,000 Universities**



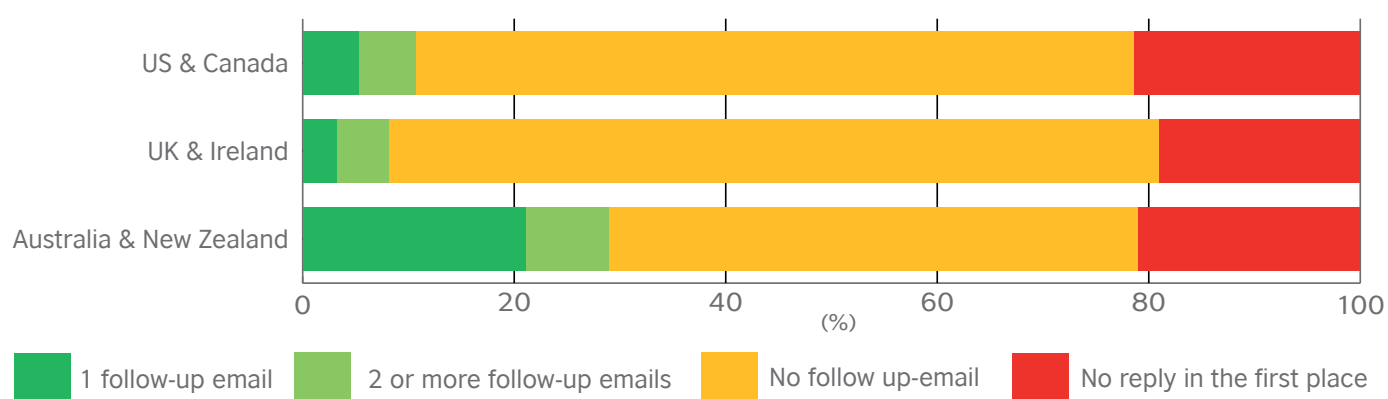
In terms of how easy it is to find information on different program websites, US and Canadian universities are good at providing basic information, such as degree type and student action-related information (such as application deadlines and requirements). However, they often fail to address important program-related information, such as study accreditation, duration, and start dates. While this information may be fairly standard for domestic students, international standards can vary greatly, and relevant information is crucial for prospective international students.

Our strongest concerns, as well as suggestions for greatest potential improvement for universities, are based on how universities interact with students who show an interest in their programs. When our students contacted different university programs to request additional information, 1 in 5 did not receive any reply from the university. This is especially alarming because many universities invest significant efforts in international recruitment, and a low level of responsiveness is counterproductive to these efforts. Even when universities reply to student inquiries, they fail to follow up with students who have shown an interest in their programs in 4 out of 5 cases. In an age where establishing a relationship with students is central to student enrollment, this lack of follow up is particularly concerning.

**Figure 2. Time Universities Took to Reply to Student Inquiries**



**Figure 3. Follow-up Emails Sent by Universities**



While mobile browsing is becoming increasingly popular and accounts for 1 in 3 searches on our portal, 33% of US and Canadian universities don't pass the Google Mobile Friendliness test, making it difficult for students to browse their websites for information.

In order to help universities improve, we are sending individual reports to all the universities we mystery-shopped. The reports compare their performance to the top 500 universities in the US and Canada, and also include actionable steps these universities can take to improve their website quality and better serve prospective international students.

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# Introduction

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The number of students interested in studying abroad is at a record high, with over 4.5 million students being globally mobile in 2014<sup>1</sup> and many more looking to follow in their footsteps. Prospective students wanting to study outside their own country have to go through a lengthy and scattered process when searching and applying for a study program. They must largely rely on information that's available (and findable!) online, but the search process 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 universities across many countries is particularly difficult and time-consuming, especially considering global and intercultural contexts.

This challenge prompted us to analyze how well the world's top 500 universities served the information-gathering needs of international students in 2014. The research was well received and generated a lot of interest, so we expanded our research to the world's top 1,000 universities and beyond. This report specifically focuses on the top 500 universities in the US and Canada in 2015 and investigates how they relate to other top-ranked universities around the world.

Apart from helping students, our goal is to enable universities to improve the quality of information they offer to prospective international students, to benchmark themselves against global or regional peers, and, ultimately, to attract international students more effectively. We also hope that this report will raise awareness of the need for greater transparency, and (although this term may be controversial) better "customer service" in the study choice process.

Our report is unique in that it introduces a new methodology to higher education research. We worked with a team of international student researchers to conduct a mystery-shopping exercise, which presents specialized insights into how potential students likely view the information provided by higher education universities. This report introduces the main findings for US and Canadian universities, which currently enroll the largest share of international students worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Individual findings will be reported to each respective university in confidence, including a benchmark against their peer universities.

# Key Findings

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- US and Canada universities rank 5th in our “Through Student Eyes” report, behind:
  1. Benelux and Scandinavia
  2. Australia and New Zealand
  3. UK and Ireland
  4. German-speaking Europe
- US and Canadian university websites fail to provide students with key information on:
  - o Program accreditation (missing from 1 in 3 programs)
  - o Study program duration (missing from 1 in 5 programs)
  - o Program start date (missing from 1 in 5 programs)
- Despite providing forms and email addresses to help students contact the university:
  - o 20% of universities fail to reply to student inquiries
  - o Universities that do reply still fail to follow up with students interested in their programs (4 out of 5 times)
- US and Canadian universities are going mobile (67% of university websites pass the Google Mobile Friendliness test).

# Methodology

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This study was conducted using a “mystery-shopping” data collection technique, wherein a team of international students explored university websites. This allowed us to measure and compare the performance of the world’s and the US and Canadian top 500 universities in terms of online information and findability – as well as how well they replied to inquiries and followed up with potential students.

## Research

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 US and Canadian universities and selected two academic programs to evaluate from each university. The programs were chosen from English-taught, full-degree programs offered by the university, 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.

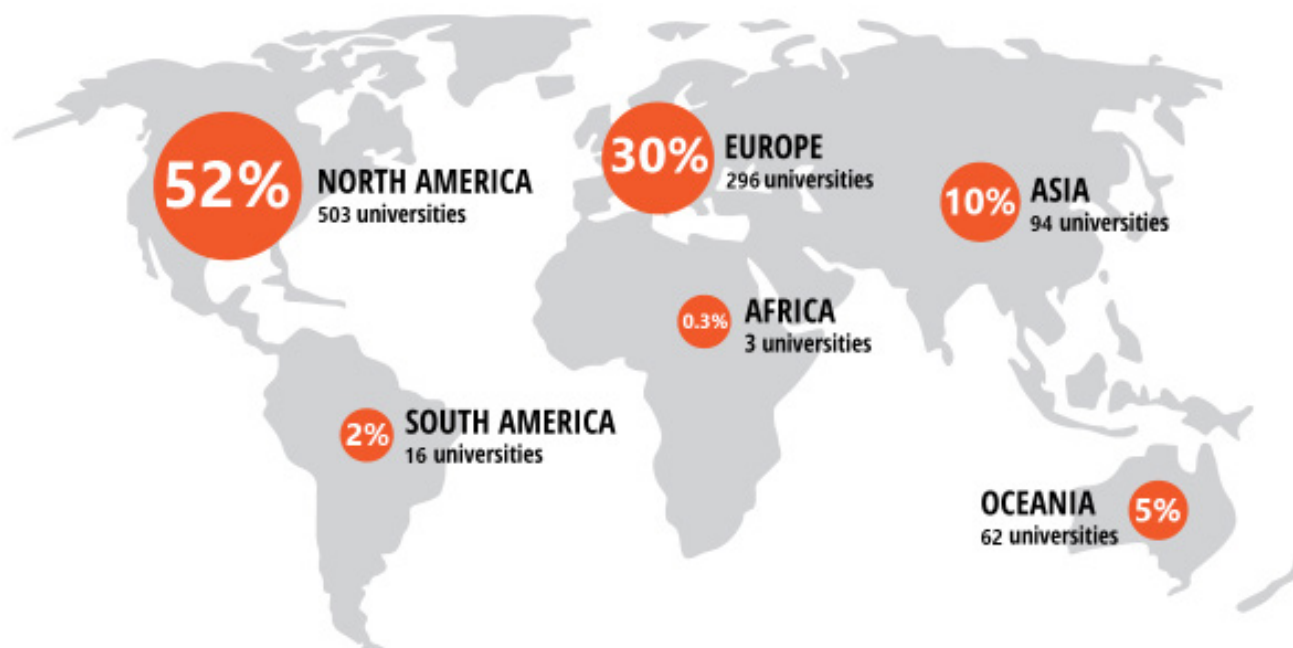
During this phase, students evaluated the level of difficulty in finding information that is relevant to the international student decision-making process, such as application and language requirements, tuition fees, and program accreditation.

2. During **phase two**, the students took the role of “mystery shoppers” using aliases. They contacted each respective university via their website to ask a specific set of questions. If no relevant contact form was found on the website, they contacted the university via email. All contact attempts as well as the timestamps for each response received were documented and evaluated in terms of how professional, prompt, and persistent the university was in following up with the mystery shopper.

## University Selection

The universities for this study were chosen based on their standing in the Webometrics Ranking of World Universities. All universities in the top 100 of the most recent US News & World Report rankings, Times Higher Education World University Rankings, and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (the Shanghai ranking) were included in the research.

We started out by researching 524 universities in 2014, and expanded our research to include 974 universities across the world in 2015. Their distribution is presented in Figure 4. For the US and Canada, our report covers 498 universities (5 universities in Canada did not offer English-speaking programs and were excluded from our sample).

**Figure 4: Geographical Distribution of Research, 2015**

### Methodology Constraints

The insights in this report are based on the experiences of our mystery-shopping students. Although the students have done their utmost to record their experiences in the most accurate way (through professional training and support), information may have been overlooked. Personal experiences also differ from student to student, so information contained in this report should be interpreted as indicative. StudyPortals cannot guarantee or 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.



# The Student Eyes Rating

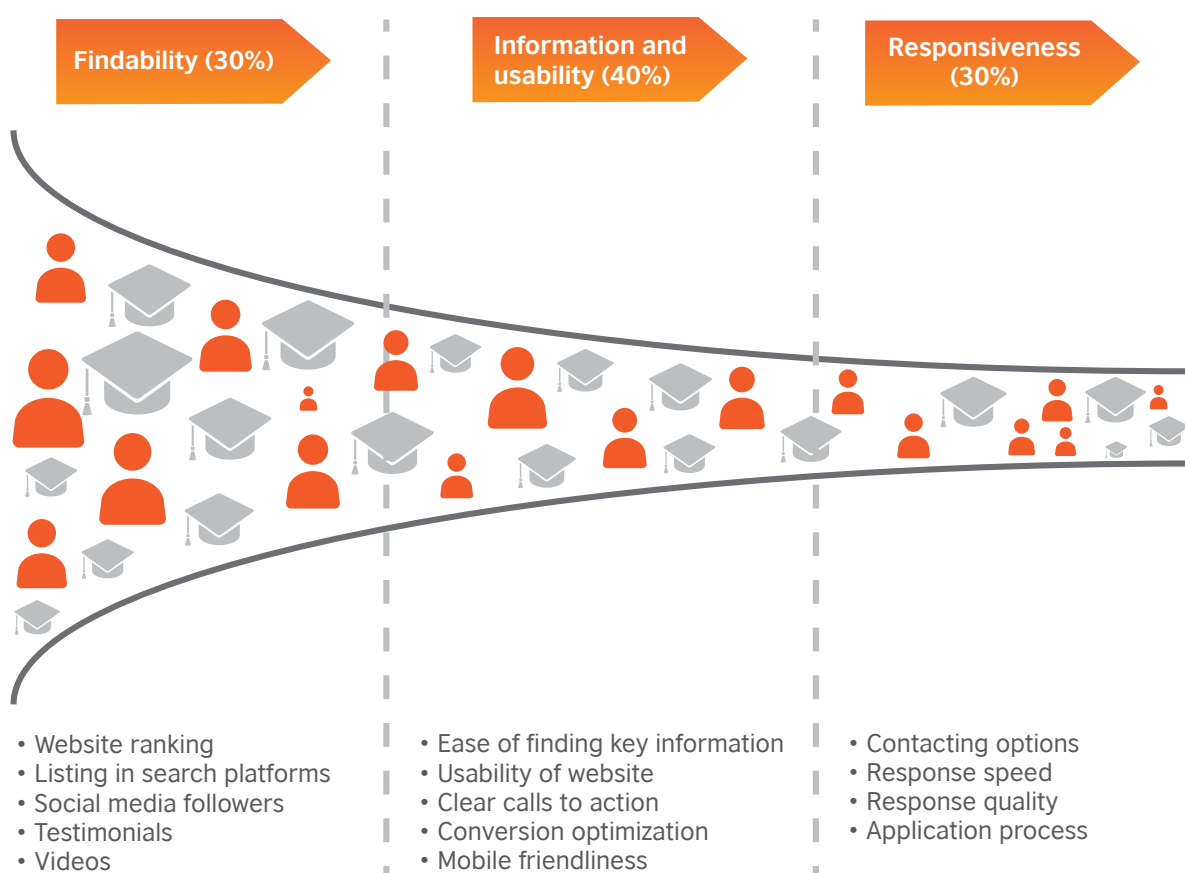
The research looked at roughly 40 data points spread across three categories deemed to be most important by our team and student researchers:

- Findability
- Information and Usability
- Responsiveness

Information and Usability was considered to be the most important category, and it was weighted to represent 40% of the overall score. This category focuses on evaluating the level of difficulty of finding a set of predefined information as well as the usability of the universities' websites on mobile devices. The categories of Findability and Responsiveness were both weighted to represent 30% of the overall score. The website ranking in Google PageRank and Alexa were evaluated in the Findability category, along with the use of videos and so on. The Responsiveness category evaluated the speed and quality of responses as well as persistence in staying in touch with the student.

The weighted scores of each university deliver an overall institutional score: the "Student Eyes Rating," which reflects its overall performance in the context of this report. The Student Eyes Rating ranges from 0 to 100 points. With this rating system, we can compare the performance of universities from a student perspective.

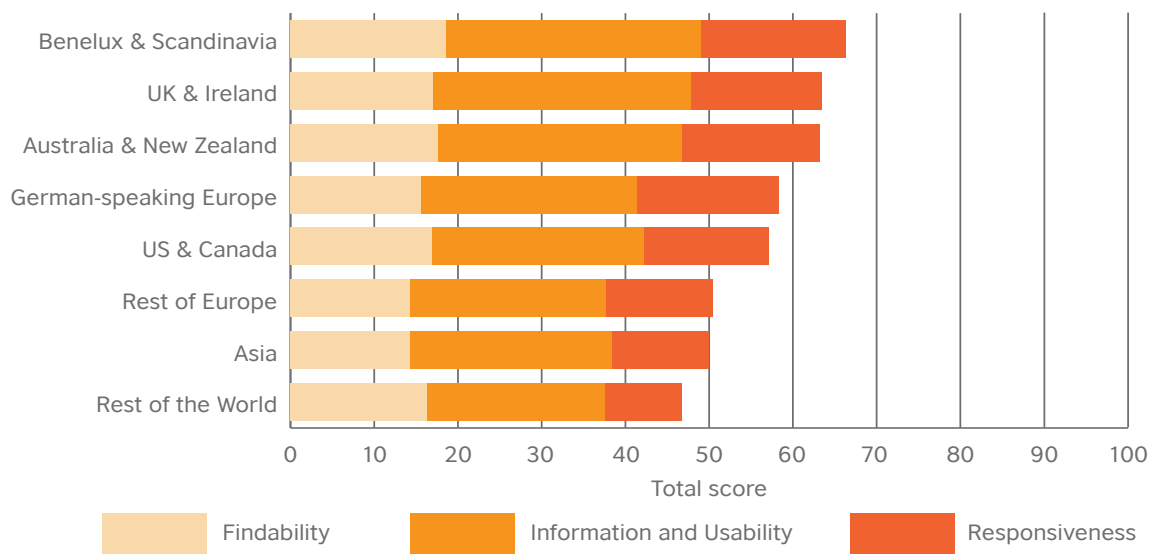
**Figure 5: The Student Eyes Research Model**



# Findings

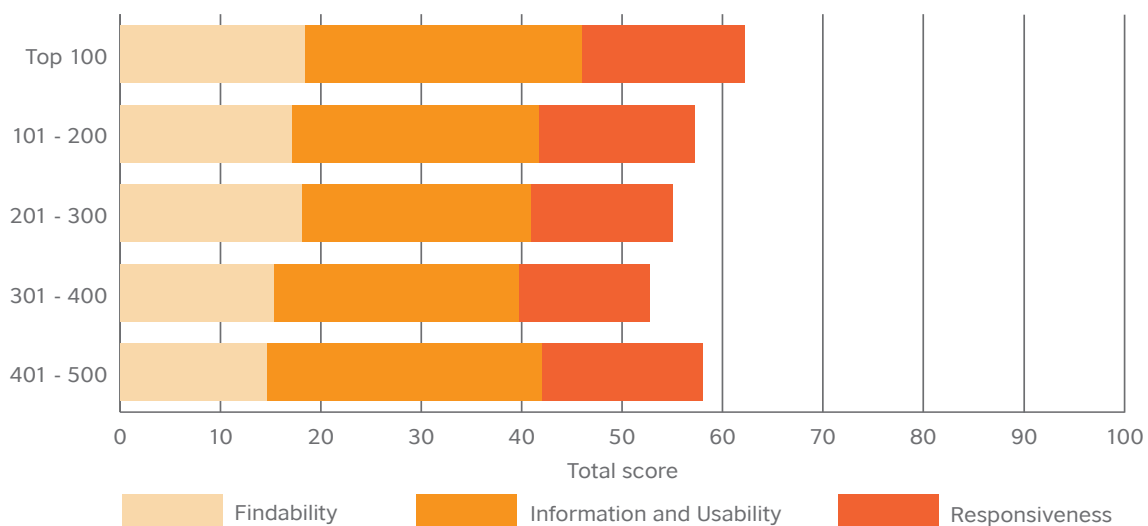
In Figure 6, we can see the differentiation of Student Eyes Rating scores across the world's top universities. Universities in Benelux and Scandinavia receive the highest overall scores, followed by Australia and New Zealand, and then universities in UK and Ireland. The US and Canada are lagging behind in 5th place due to lower scores in terms of website information and usability as well as responsiveness to student inquiries.

**Figure 6. Student Eyes Rating - Score Breakdown by Regions (Top 1,000 World)**



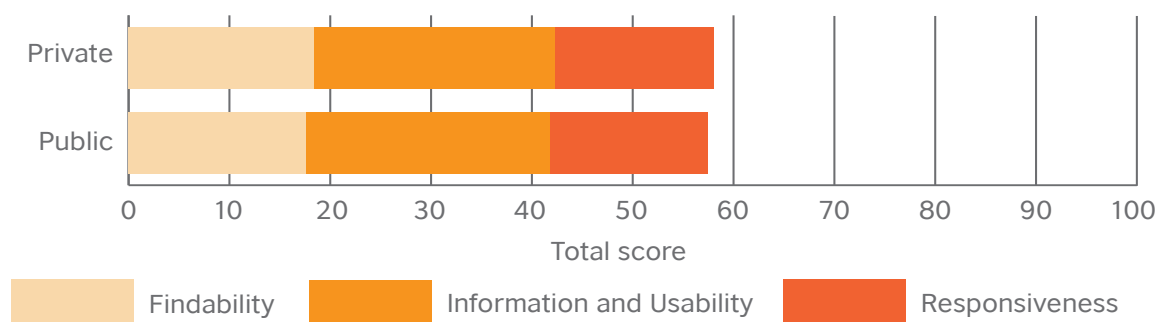
We also looked at whether the scores differ between the top 500 US and Canadian universities. The top 100 universities in the US and Canada are performing better overall, but surprisingly, the universities with lower ranks (Top 401-500) are catching up and outperforming higher-ranked universities. This change in performance might come from the increased competitiveness these universities face, and the need to be increasingly attractive and recruit international students.

**Figure 7. Through Student Eyes – Score Breakdown (Top 500 US and Canada)**



Within US and Canadian universities, we also examined potential differences between private and public non-profit universities, but could not identify any significant variations. The top 500 US and Canadian universities performed equally across the three Through Student Eyes categories regardless of their funding type.

**Figure 8. Through Student Eyes – Score Breakdown for Private and Public Universities (Top 500 US and Canada)**



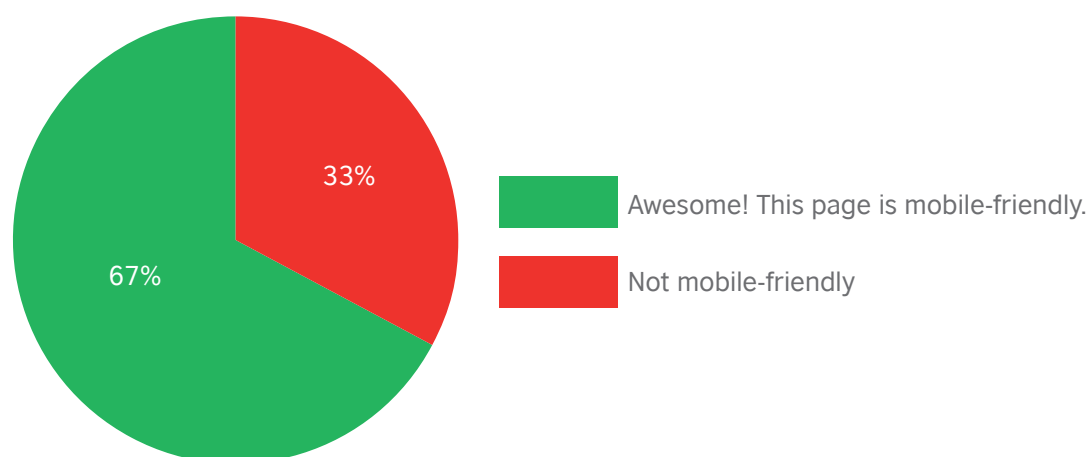
## Mobile Readiness

The use of mobile devices has grown dramatically in recent years and is expected to continue to grow. People not only use their smartphones and tablets for entertainment, but also to find critical information to help with making important decisions. Moreover, Google favors more mobile-friendly pages when browsing with a mobile device (when the results are of the same relevance in a search). This puts more pressure on universities to invest in mobile-friendly pages that are both findable and usable by prospective students.

Young people also frequently use social media to refer interesting findings to their friends. As social media is to a large extent used on mobile devices, it is very important that links to interesting pages that are sent to a friend will look and work great on either a phone or a tablet. This prevents site visitors from leaving and never returning to a website (or that university) because the website isn't usable in a way that's comfortable for them.

We found that 33% of the surveyed US and Canadian universities do not have mobile-friendly websites (according to Google). With more universities switching to mobile-friendly formats, the universities that lag behind are in danger of losing visitors to institutions that are willing to meet students on all platforms. The number of universities not having a mobile-friendly website has decreased from 44% in 2014, showing that more universities in the US and Canada have understood the importance of having a usable website across the different platforms that students browse from. This trend is also reflected in the mobi.Ready scores for university websites, which is currently averaging 3.6 on a scale from 0 to 5, with 0 representing the lowest level of user friendliness and usability, and 5 the highest level.

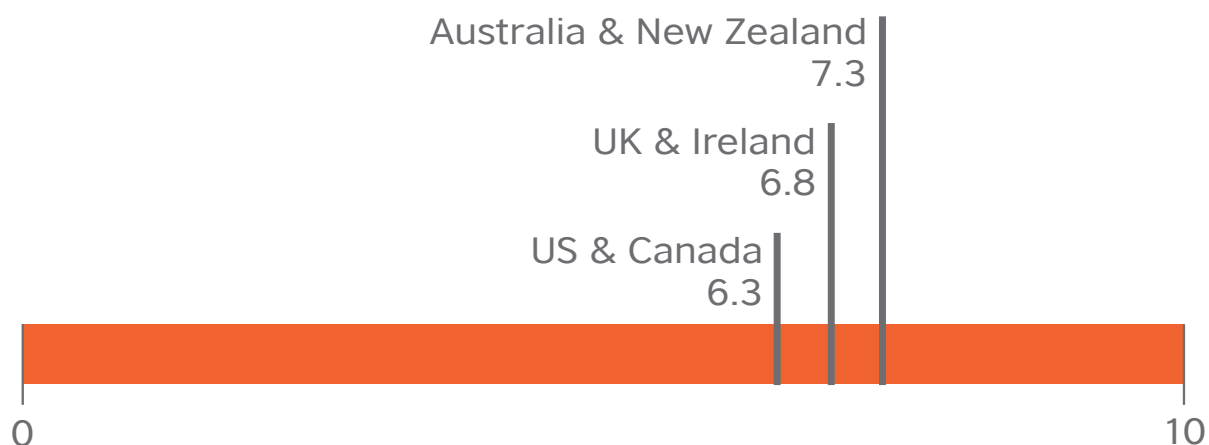
**Figure 9. Google Mobile Friendliness Scores for the Top 500 US and Canadian University Websites**



On the StudyPortals website, nearly 30% of visits come from mobile devices. Even though study choice is often seen as a desktop research activity, the analytics reveal that browsing for this kind of life-changing decision is occurring more and more frequently on mobile devices.

At the moment, the findability of universities' websites is good (which is to be expected), although our student researchers were based in Europe, which can lead to search results that favor "local" results. Most of the researched universities score very high on Google PageRank, which essentially shows how high up the website will appear in a relevant online search. However, US and Canadian university websites scored an average of 6.3 and are being outranked by universities in the UK and Ireland (6.8) and universities in Australia and New Zealand (7.3).

**Figure 10. Google Page Ranking Scores Breakdown**



## Providing Information Students Need

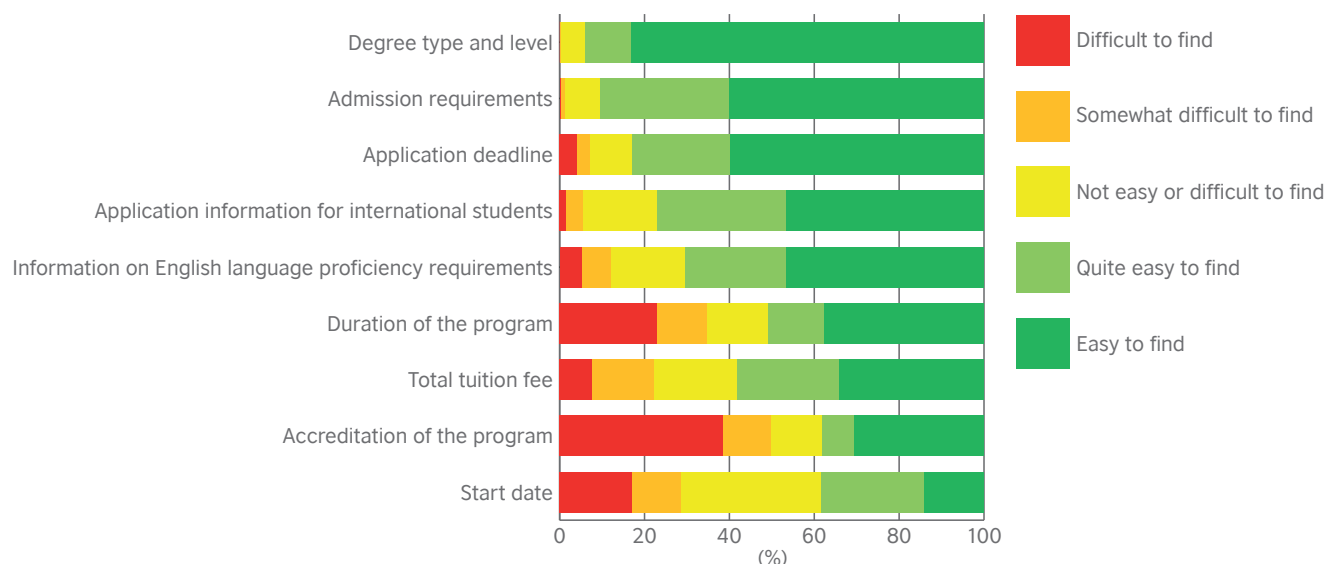
When prospective students begin their online research for their future education, they are often looking for important information such as program details, application requirements, application deadlines, and costs (tuition and fees as well as scholarships, living costs, etc.).

In this study, information was collected on nine 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 information. All program websites from the US and Canadian top 500 universities were assessed on a five-point scale, from very difficult to find

(1) to easy to find (5). Figure 11 illustrates the ease with which students could find each data point within the website of a particular US or Canadian university.

In general, this type of basic information was considered easy to find across all university websites, although certain key information was missing in a large number of cases.

**Figure 11. Ease of Finding Key Information on Top 500 US and Canadian University Websites**

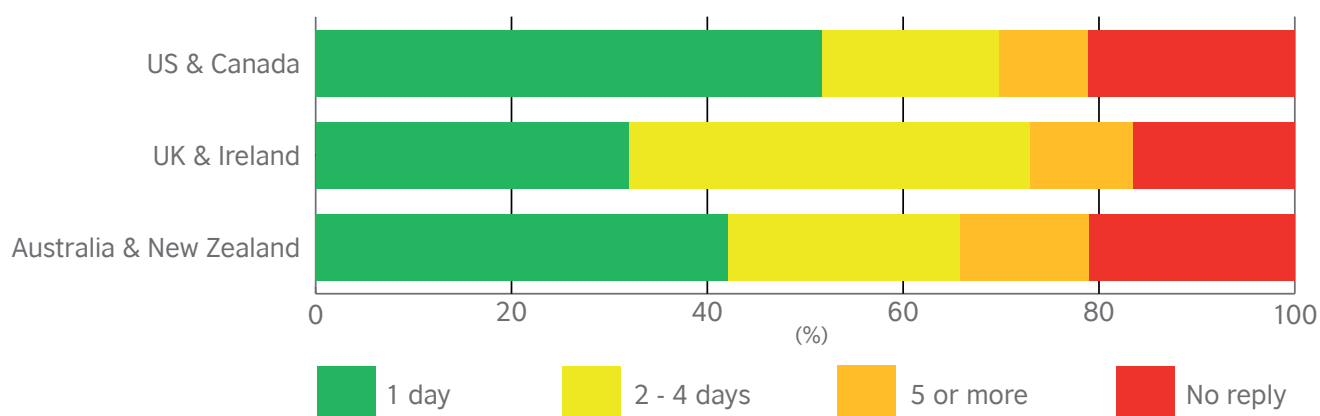


Universities generally made it easy to find information about the type of degree and student-directed deadlines or requirements (admission requirements, application deadlines, application information for international students, etc.). However, students had a more difficult time finding information concerning program accreditation, study duration, and even the start date. This information is crucial in helping students form a favorable opinion about the quality of the program, estimated enrollment, or future graduation timeline.

## Interactions with Prospective Students

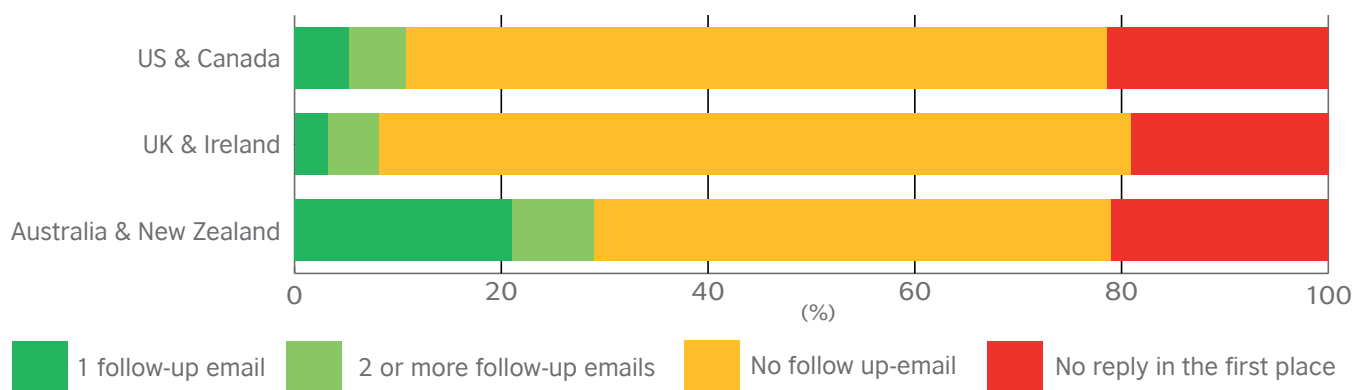
Our research team located the point of inquiry on the university websites for each program analyzed, and sent a message (via email if a form was unavailable) containing specific questions on admission criteria and language requirements. Each response was time-stamped, and any follow-up to the original correspondence was recorded in our database.

Our analysis showed that, overall, 52% of the top 500 universities in the US and Canada replied to student inquiries within a day. This is a remarkable number, especially since for universities in other English-speaking countries, the number is lower (42% for Australia and New Zealand, and 33% for the UK and Ireland). However, the data also revealed that 21% of these US and Canadian universities did not respond at all to student inquiries. This number raises concerns about the commitment of some universities towards their prospective students. The number of universities not replying to student inquiries in the UK and Ireland is slightly lower, with only 13% of universities not replying to emails or contact forms that students submitted to their university.

**Figure 12. Time Universities Took to Reply to Student Inquiries**

In general, US and Canadian universities prove to be the fastest to respond to student inquiries, but the benchmark of not replying can surely be improved.

Similar to the process of domestic recruitment, ongoing communications and multiple touch points with international prospects is critical in international recruitment. Figure 13 shows that only 10% of the top 500 universities in the US and Canada followed up with students who demonstrated an interest in their university. Furthermore, only a very small proportion of universities sent more than one follow-up email. Some of the universities in our sample sent a disproportionately high number of emails to our mystery-shopping students. However, quantity does not always mean quality, and we would advise universities to refrain from sending more than five follow-up emails to students.

**Figure 13. Number of Follow-up Emails Sent by Universities**

# Conclusions

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With more and more talented students being interested in studying abroad, universities now have their pick of top students not just from within their national boundaries, but from across the world. We know that prospective international students, on average, apply to four different universities when choosing a new study program. Ensuring that talented students can easily find universities offering relevant programs, have access to the relevant information to submit an application, and can directly communicate with the universities they are interested in, are three key aspects that determine whether a student will choose one university over another. The goal of our research was to provide insights into how the top 500 universities in the US and Canada can improve how they choose to communicate with prospective international students.

Our findings highlight that international students sometimes have different informational needs, and universities can easily answer these needs by providing information on study accreditation, program start dates, and estimated study duration. While these aspects may be obvious for domestic students who learn about universities from peers, high-school guidance counselors or the news, international students mostly need to rely on the university's website for such information.

Additionally, the communication needs for prospective international students may be higher, and with some universities requiring an application fee, students may be more selective about which universities to apply to. In this case, students sometimes choose to directly contact a university via email to make sure they receive the appropriate information they need for a successful application. Ensuring that these emails are properly answered and that universities follow-up with students who are clearly interested in submitting an application is therefore very important.

Overall, we hope that our findings help universities increase the transparency with which they present their programs online, and help them better communicate with prospective international students. The individual reports accompanying this research are also useful for understanding how each university in our research measures against peer institutions, and offers tips and actionable steps for universities wanting to improve. These reports are being distributed to the universities in confidentiality.

If you want to know more about the Through Student Eyes research, please contact us at [intelligence@studyportals.com](mailto:intelligence@studyportals.com).

If you would like to receive your university's personalized report, please contact us at [intelligence@studyportals.com](mailto:intelligence@studyportals.com).

# About StudyPortals

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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 choose the institute, program, and environment that fits them best (choose education).

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

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

Our quality approach has allowed us to build a unique experience on how to find university programs and present them effectively to prospective students. Currently, more than 1,800 universities from 48 countries participate, thus enabling transparency across 45,000 study programs. This empowers students worldwide to easily find and compare their ideal education, while universities benefit from well-informed, well-matched prospective students.

We have already almost fully covered the dynamic of the European market for on-campus education: 96% of European ranked universities (private and public) participate in our website, and our global visitor base exceeds 3.5 million visits per month. Since the end of 2013, we have started expanding the global coverage of our platform, with the goal of having all top 1,000 universities listed by the end of 2015.

<http://www.studyportals.eu/about/video/>



# About British Council IELTS



The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organization for cultural relations and educational opportunities. The 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 2.5 million tests taken in the last year. IELTS is developed by some of the world's leading experts in language assessment, and is accepted by over 9,000 organizations 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. Therefore, we welcome this research initiative for three reasons:

- To support the decision-making processes of international students.
- To assist universities in 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 organizations.

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](mailto:ielts@britishcouncil.org).

