

● BY CHARLOTTE WEST

Going So



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Social media is a key component in international student recruitment.

JUST AS UNIVERSITIES INCREASINGLY USE social media tools to both recruit and evaluate applicants, prospective students also use social media to evaluate and select institutions. It is no longer a question of if higher education institutions should have a social media presence but rather what that presence should look like. In the last decade, social media has become an integral part of the marketing mix and is seen by many recruiters as an essential element of their outreach strategies, best used in combination with more traditional forms of marketing such as e-mail, print collateral, and in-person recruiting activities. Experts argue that students look to social media platforms for relevant, personalized content that engages them with their prospective universities.

From New Kid on the Block to Full Member of the Marketing Mix

Social media stalwarts such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have been joined by newer channels such as Instagram, Snapchat, and Whatsapp in recent years. "Social media is a loose term that refers to the many platforms that students choose to access content and engage with educators," says Anthony Lee, digital marketing director of the U K-based Study Group.

Jessica Winters, team lead of student recruitment at Utrecht University in the Netherlands, says that the use of social media in international higher education recruitment has professionalized in the last decade. "In many cases institutions have hired experienced social media managers. Social media is no longer the new kid on the block but a full member of the marketing mix, next to fairs, brochures, website, online tools, etc. Whether we should advertise on social media is no longer a question we ask ourselves, but something we just do, because it works, if done right," she says.

Nannette Ripmeester, director of consulting firm Expertise in Labour Mobility, based in the Netherlands, concurs that a social media presence is no longer optional: "The days are gone that social media was a nice to have addition to your marketing campaign. As a university you need to be where your prospective students are. And they are on social media."

Julio Ronchetti, president of FFP EDU Media, sees it as vital for universities to be active on social media: "With so many options today for students to choose from to study, it is vital to be present in the virtual world. Now, more and more information and opinions are shared. The trend is to favor the honest and the best as it is the most creative."

Lee argues that social media requires expertise and investment: “There is no such thing as a free lunch—social media requires investment both in terms of specialty resources to manage and maintain the presence.”

He adds that social media strategies should be built on careful analysis of data rather than “on a hunch.” “Look at the markets you are trying to reach and evaluate the right channel mix for your intended audience. Identify what are the most pertinent messages for that audience and be prepared to invest in some media spend, and evolve and learn.”

“Social media has changed the way we market. It hasn’t changed the fact we have a budget and targets to meet,” Lee adds.

Benjamin Waxman, chief executive officer of Intead, says that a successful global marketing effort cannot be accomplished with a \$10,000–15,000 budget, a price point many institutions can afford. “In our experience, a successful global marketing effort cannot be accomplished with that small a budget. This work takes persistence over time. It takes smart, incremental investments that are tracked and evaluated every step of the way. As successful campaigns are launched, put a larger share of your marketing budget into them. Where results are not present, divert those funds to other options,” he advises.

Strong Content, Student Engagement, and Personalized Messaging

At the heart of using social media is an attempt to connect and interact directly with prospective students. “Providing the opportunity to connect and converse with staff, faculty, and other students can underpin a student’s positive experience with an institution. Engagement is key—being as human as possible will make international students feel like it is a real possibility to study at your institution,” says Jemma Davies, international education marketing manager at UK-based recruitment communications agency SMRS Ltd.

Authenticity is also an important aspect of social media marketing. Lee adds that “it’s more important than ever to be telling authentic stories and giving prospective students access to compelling informative content.”

One of the ways that many universities are currently packaging content is through the use of photos and video, which according to Mandy Reinig, director of study away at Virginia Wesleyan College and founder of social media consultancy firm Mandy’s Mashups, are more effective than text-heavy posts. “(Students respond really well) to anything that showcases where they would live, what they would do, etc., so doing some behind-the-scenes type things or a day in the life profile is great,” she says.

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Reinig says that Instagram, a popular photo sharing site, is a great tool that institutions can use to showcase their campuses. "Students love the visual aspect," she explains. "We do hashtag campaigns on Instagram to gain their attention."

Davies adds that some institutions use selfies, a self-portrait often taken with a camera phone, to highlight campus life.

Ripmeester says that the current generation of students is no longer satisfied with generic content, and is looking for potential returns on its educational investment and information on career-related outcomes. "Posts now need to include useful information about what the university has on offer and what you gain if you decide to attend that institution as an international student. Saying that you provide 'good education' and that you have a 'beautiful campus' will no longer do the trick. Prospective international students want to see what is the added value of that particular institution," she says.

Reinig points to a trend toward using more personalized message platforms such as Whatsapp, a mobile application that allows individual and group messaging. "Students want the personalized touch," she says.

She says many students turn to Whatsapp and other messaging services when they have difficulties reaching universities through more traditional channels. A 2015 report from topuniversities.com on global trends in students' use of online resources found that students' preferred method of direct contact with universities is by e-mail.¹ Winters has witnessed a similar development. "With some channels

becoming so mainstream and big, it is interesting to see that the one-to-one or small group chat channels, like WhatsApp and WeChat, are also becoming more important. There is a need to also have more 'intimate' talks next to the more public channels," she explains.

When students do engage prospective universities via social media, institutions should respond quickly—and that means within two hours. "Respond personally and thoughtfully, not just sending a link to your homepage. If you don't engage at a human level, you are not in touch with this communication channel," Waxman says.

Social Media Complement Traditional Recruitment Tools

Despite all of the recent attention about the importance of social media, it has not replaced more traditional marketing methods such as print collateral, university websites, or college fairs. Topuniversities.com reported that students consider online and offline resources to be equally important. Students use official websites to find information on courses and admissions processes, and use social media to generate ideas and compare options. The report's findings suggest that international students use social media to gain insights from peers, and that social media complement less official and less personal sources of information.²

Some experts argue that social media is a complementary—not primary—recruitment tool. According to Richard O'Rourke, associate director at the University of Illinois-Chicago Office of

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Admissions, the most important thing institutions can do is invest in their website and e-mail marketing strategies.

"However, when used in conjunction with other digital outreach tools, social media can be very effective and offer high returns. Your website and e-mail communications strategy must be primary, relevant, timely, proactive, and friendly toward international students. If they are, students will be more likely to engage with your social media efforts," he says.

As Reinig mentioned, many students prefer e-mail over social media for direct communication. "E-mail is

still a primary communication channel, and it is preferred by most students. However, mobile apps are a great alternative to an actual phone call for the smaller number of international students who want to speak with you," O'Rourke reiterates.

"Spend a lot of time on your e-mail strategy and website content first. Then, target your social media content at students who are very interested and would otherwise come for a campus visit," he adds.

Lee says that social media and website marketing should be integrated and complementary. "Your social

Advice From the Field

USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN RECRUITMENT EFFORTS

Jessica Allen, social media coordinator at University of British Columbia, and Kellie McMullin, international learning associate at Nova Scotia Community College, share insights from their experience in developing social media campaigns targeting students:

■ Ensure the tone of your copy is on-brand with your institution, but still appropriate for the channel:

"A more formal brand voice may be appropriate when detailing admissions requirements, but on a channel like Snapchat this could feel like a bucket of cold water to students. I've found it's important to balance your overall brand voice with the different tones found in social media channels. For example, on Facebook we use a helpful, friendly tone, Twitter tends to be more factual, and Snapchat is playful and casual." *-Jessica Allen*

■ Start a conversation, not a speech:

"Social media needs to be a two-way dialogue, not a broadcasting platform. It's important to encourage conversations with your followers, ask questions, and show that you care about what they say. If students feel you don't care about their opinions or questions, or you fail to reply in a timely manner, engagement will decrease. For example, on Snapchat we ask our student followers what stories they'd like to see and ask them to send us questions for student Q&As." *-Jessica Allen*

■ See what works:

"When running ad campaigns in different international markets, it's important to note that what works in, say, Brazil, might not be as effective in Norway. Cultural differences, along with general preference and online behavior, factors into the way we write headlines, select photos, and whether ads are run on desktop or mobile devices

only. By running several variations of ads (i.e., tweaking just the headline copy, or switching out an image) we can determine what's working best in the first few days of a campaign. At that point, we're able to pause underperforming ads and focus on directing the rest of our ad spend into proven winners. This can make a big difference in the ROI and overall result of your campaigns." *-Jessica Allen*

■ **Show your human side:** "For prospective students, communicating with a large university can feel intimidating. To help combat this, and to lay the groundwork for a positive relationship early on in the recruitment cycle, we try to infuse as much empathy as possible into student interactions. Good, supportive, friendly interactions can help ease the anxiety that we know students experience as they are making the life-altering decision to attend university. For example, I try to match the tone of the student, acknowledge their feelings, and sign off with my first name in every interaction so they know who they're speaking to. For example, on Snapchat we've received questions from student followers with concerns about campus life, or requests for certain content. When we reply, students are sometimes shocked that a real person is running the account and responding!" *-Jessica Allen*

■ **Identify your audience:** "To effectively engage with your audience you need to know who they are. Demographics of gender, age, and location help when choosing content to post

and also social media channels to use. If you have a younger audience you will look at a platform like Instagram or Snapchat. An older audience may like to use Facebook or Twitter. Also if your audience is other businesses as well as students, potential students, parents, or community you need to consider that when posting content. The location of your audience can help identify your channels but also the timing of your posts. There are several tools out there including several within social media platforms such as Facebook that can help you identify your audience." *-Kellie McMullin*

■ **Identify your content:** "What content will your audience engage with the best? The key to a strong social media strategy is to not focus on the quantity of fans or people following you but on how much engagement your posts receive. Does your audience prefer pictures, videos, interesting articles, or humorous posts? If you can identify what your audience relates to you will be more likely to have them respond and be engaged." *-Kellie McMullin*


■ **Identify your channels:** "One major challenge for all institutions when considering a social media marketing strategy is finding the staff and the time to be active. Choosing specific social media channels and not trying to "do it all," is an important strategy. Now that you have identified your audience and your content, you can best choose what social media networks you should use." *-Kellie McMullin*

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media content should drive traffic to your website and e-mail communications, and vice versa,” he says.

Different Markets Require Different Platforms and Local Knowledge

Effective social media marketing also requires knowledge of local markets as well as the target audience’s preferred platforms. “Any recruitment strategy must have an active presence on multiple platforms to maximize the effectiveness of outreach efforts,” Davies says.

This includes presence across different types of platforms, as well as tapping into local channels in target markets and developing culturally appropriate content. “Apart from having different channels, institutions should also think about adapting their social media content depending on the region. Different cultures value different types of information and like different styles of communication,” Ripmeester says.

“For instance, a German student may prefer a straightforward message where a British student favors a

Using Social Media to Recruit Chinese Students

SINCE 2009 the Chinese government has blocked access to many foreign websites and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Google as part of its Internet censorship policies. In response, students have flocked to local providers. Recruiters and marketing experts say that it’s necessary for institutions wanting to reach Chinese students to have a presence on local networks such as messaging app WeChat, microblogging site Weibo, and video site Youku.

“Social media is not the only channel that the Chinese students and families are using to choose foreign institutions, but it is very important at the initial decisionmaking stage to learn about what’s out there. With the numbers of (high-school age) students declining in China, social media adds to the points of contact for overseas schools to connect with the students,” says Angela Zhao, senior project manager at Arizona State University. “In China social media must be used in combination with other recruiting methods, such as in-country visits and long-term relationship development.”

Many Chinese social media sites are similar to their foreign counterparts, but managing Chinese platforms requires local expertise. “Within China a different platform is required to reach and attract your target audience, swapping out YouTube for Youku, etc., but then there are platforms like WeChat that offer a unique set of functionality and a

subsequent challenge in terms of resource, content, and the ability to react in real time with local language-speaking staff,” says Anthony Lee, digital marketing director of the UK-based Study Group.

“As the two main established social media platforms in China, Weibo and WeChat offer great potential opportunities for Chinese student recruitment. WeChat has more than 650 million monthly active users, whereas Weibo has 468 million,” adds Jemma Davies, international education marketing manager at SMRS Ltd in Manchester, United Kingdom.

She says that WeChat is considered to be the most sought after social media platform for Chinese students on a day-to-day basis because it allows them to remain in contact with their parents: “As a result the parents who in some capacity will financially support the students use the platform.”

She adds that being active on WeChat and other platforms can help foreign institutions build a reputation within China. “Creating an official presence on WeChat enables a university to build its brand awareness among the family members of the prospective students. This is especially useful because, except for the very top universities, the brand awareness many universities enjoy in the West does not exist in the Far East,” Davies says.

The University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver, Canada, has created a Weibo channel where students can ask questions about UBC and join a community of their peers. They are also active on Youku, where students can view their videos. Jessica Allen, social media coordinator in the UBC Office of Recruitment Marketing and Prospective Student Engagement, advises engaging current students in social media efforts.

“The channels are run by a student employee who can read and write in simplified Chinese characters, who works with our advisers to translate their answers to complex admissions questions,” she says.

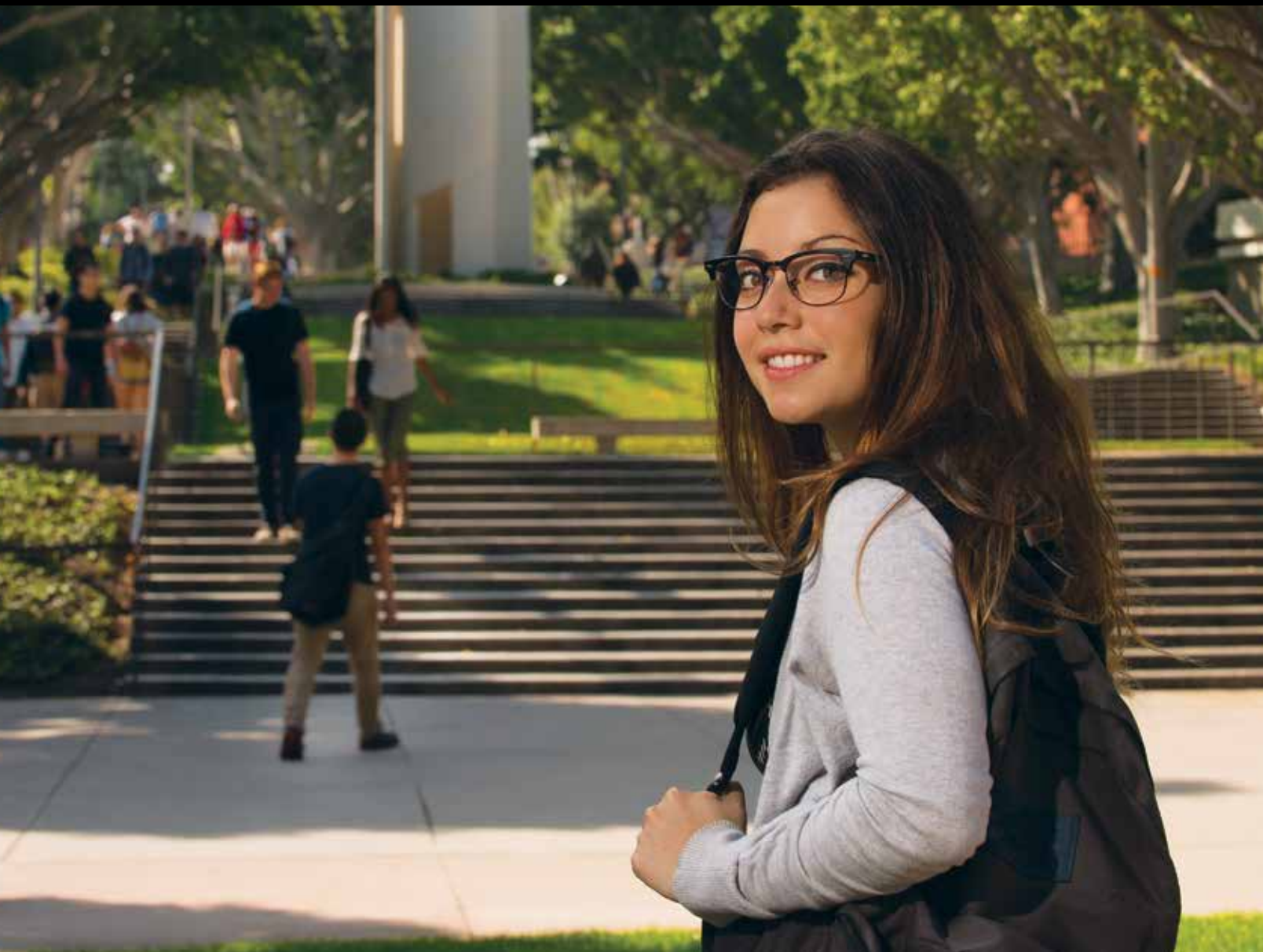
In addition to social media platforms, Quick Response (QR) codes, which can be scanned by a smartphone, are still popular in China. According to Zhao, institutions can use them to collect student data. They also allow students to easily capture an institution’s webpage.

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tongue-in-cheek message...However, although there is a great truth in cultural stereotypes, the current generation of international students prefers to see themselves as global citizens, hence the cultural distinctions need to be brought in in a subtle way and this requires a good understanding of the cultural values of your main target markets,” she elaborates.

Winters says that in many regions Facebook is still to the go-to network, but it depends on the market. “If you want to use social media to its fullest, it is wise to do research before you enter a market. Local channels like VKontakte in Russia and Weibo in China work so much better than Facebook. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are blocked in China, so entering this market through social media must be done by the extremely popular local social media channels,” she explains.

In countries like the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, with high Facebook adoption rates, young people are attracted to alternative, less saturated channels. “‘MomBook’ (i.e., Facebook) won’t be the way to capture their hearts. Instead you have to get creative on SnapChat or Instagram. Social media, although used worldwide, is not one-size-fits-all. It’s actually the opposite,” Winters says.

Social media can play an especially important role in decisionmaking for international students who do not have the possibility to physically visit the campuses of prospective institutions. “While an actual campus visit may be



COURTESY OF REX (ZHEN YANG) CHNG

Rex (Zhen Yang) Chng, student ambassador at Green River College

challenging for international prospects, social media helps them better envision the academic and social environment from afar. Social media is particularly important for yield when admitted international students are deciding where to make their final commitment,” O’Rourke says.

It’s one way institutions can replicate the campus experience. “Social media plays a crucial role to those who can’t physically visit the campus—it’s a great way to showcase the institution’s personality,” Davies says.

Use Current Students or Alumni to Engage Prospective Students

The most relevant, personalized content often comes from the students themselves, as Green River College (formerly Green River Community College) discovered

with the launch of its social media ambassador program earlier this year. As a student ambassador, Zhen Yang Chng, an applied mathematics major from Malaysia, is responsible for promoting student activities and documenting events such as orientation and visits to the nearby city of Seattle on social media. “I am personally quite addicted to Snapchat,” he says.

Previously, social media at Green River College was coordinated by marketing assistants and there was a lag between when an event happened and when it was posted on social media. “In terms of immediacy, we could not instantly share pictures or videos to current students, or prospective students, on our social media platforms. Having international student



Social media ambassadors at Green River College

REX (ZHEN YANG) CHNG



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ambassadors join our social media allowed us to engage with students faster,” Chng says.

He used social media in his own research of universities in the United States: “I think a school should focus on its strengths, and cover something they usually don’t mention, such as diversity.”

Chng suggests that if institutions are posting in English, they can personalize messages to prospective students in target markets. “If a school sends greetings for Lunar New Year or Eid, they can add Chinese or Arabic to that post,” he says.

Web and social media specialist Lansing Bryan, who manages the Green River College social media ambassador program, says that the best content is student generated. “It is so much more engaging because students know what will appeal to their age group and are so comfortable using various platforms,” she says.

“What works for social media marketing? Authentic and quality content. My ambassadors give me this all the time, which makes my job a lot easier. They create great content that can also be used to promote the college. I have built social media campaigns based on some of the images and videos that students have created,” Bryan elaborates.

Green River also hires international students as student marketing assistants to boost

their recruitment efforts in countries such as Korea and China.

“Students, both past and present, are the best ambassadors for any school, because they can speak candidly from the perspective of a student, not an administrator. Students can help guide prospective students by honestly answering a wide variety of questions about every aspect of student life whether positive or negative,” says Stephanie Scoby, senior director of international marketing.

“Their familiarity with the culture and fluency in the language reassure prospective students and their parents. The training is basically that students be open, authentic, and responsive and engage students.”

Lee reiterates the value of engaging current students and alumni in social media efforts. “Students create more compelling and authentic content than any agency or internal marketers, and prospective students trust user-generated content,” he says.

Ripmeester adds that international students can also help you assess your institution’s social media strategy. “Listen to your current students,” she advises.

University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver, Canada also uses student-created content. “By re-posting user-generated content on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, with the proper permissions, we can

show our followers authentic experiences from current students at UBC,” says Jessica Allen, UBC social media coordinator.

Best Practices for Using Providers

For some markets, especially those that require local foreign language expertise, institutions might outsource their social media marketing efforts. O’Rourke recommends “sticking with reputable student search services that comprehensively represent all higher education options regardless of who is paying them.” “These are the digital college search services that students are more likely to use as well,” he says.

On the other hand, Winters prefers to keep social media management in-house by dedicated staff members. “I understand that due to time issues or geographical reasons (i.e., China), institutions choose to outsource it. You have to make sure the company truly represents who you are in tone, in answers, in information flows. You have to make sure you keep control of your channels. What you don’t want is a company disappearing on you, and leaving you without access to your channels. It happens,” she says.

Reinig advises including something in any contract with third-party providers about what happens if a student comes to you through social media but made initial contact through them.

Davies suggests asking vendors for their track record in higher education. “Specifically ask for case studies around the subjects you want to promote or in the countries you want to be visible in. There are a few marketing agencies that specialize in student recruitment and they’ll be able to supply this information to you and provide you with an idea of what you can get for return of your investment,” she says. **IE**

ENDNOTES

- 1 “Students Online: Global Trends” Page 7. <http://www.topuniversities.com/publications/students-online-global-trends-report-2015>
- 2 Ibid, pages 8, 14

CHARLOTTE WEST is a freelance writer in Lima, Peru. Her last article for *International Educator* was “Designing Solutions” in the July/August 2016 issue about global learning in art, design, and architecture programs.



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