Optimizing English-Language Websites for International Audiences

Top 10 Insights from a Series of Website Analyses
OPTIMIZING ENGLISH-LANGUAGE WEBSITES FOR INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCES

Top 10 Insights from a Series of Website Analyses

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Overview

Websites are one of the most powerful tools a higher education institution can use to present and market itself to international audiences. In fact, a website is often the first (or only!) encounter international audiences have with a university. It is nearly impossible to imagine someone making a decision about even a short study or research abroad period without looking at the university’s website and showing it to friends and family. It is therefore critical that websites targeted at international readers be easy to use and understand, contain all of the necessary information visitors may be looking for, and align with the university’s overall goals and key messages.

In order to help German higher education institutions optimize their English-language websites for international audiences, GATE-Germany commissioned The Brenn-White Group to conduct analyses of selected pages from the English-language websites of German higher education institutions. The Brenn-White Group works with higher education institutions on marketing and strategy services around internationalization. The results in this report are primarily based on 30 audits conducted in late 2013, as part of a special offer from GATE-Germany.

Each participating institution or academic faculty was asked to choose three pages from their website that they would like to have reviewed, as well as to complete a basic questionnaire about their goals and target audiences for each page. The Brenn-White Group then conducted an evaluation of the various aspects of the webpages, including content, navigation, appearance, language, and usability, and made recommendations for improvement.

While reviewing the various university webpages, a variety of recurring themes emerged. This paper addresses the ten areas that were most commonly marked as needing improvement on the pages reviewed. It also provides some practical tips for improving any institution’s website that is aimed at international readership, particularly when used for international student recruitment. Note that in sensitivity to participants, no direct examples or screenshots from German university websites are used in this paper.

1 Lack of Clearly Defined Goals and Target Audiences

The responses to the pre–website check questionnaires revealed that a number of universities did not have clearly defined goals or target audiences for their webpages.

Clearly defined goals and target audiences can significantly impact the usefulness and effectiveness of a website. Pages we reviewed that had weak goals and unclear target audiences often displayed one or more of these issues:

- Poorly organized content
- Equal emphasis given to all information so that important details were easily missed
- Page titles that did not match the content on their respective pages
- No indication of who the provided information is relevant to (e.g., current vs. prospective students)

Goals and target audiences can help determine:
- What information to include on a page
- How it should be presented
- Which details should be highlighted
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weak Goal</th>
<th>Strong Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To inform</td>
<td>To provide interesting and useful information about student life at our university in order to ultimately convince prospects to apply.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Unclear Target Audience**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Clear Target Audience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Prospective bachelor’s-level students from our partner institutions worldwide (primarily Europe and the US) interested in exchange programs taught in English in all areas of study; secondary audiences may include parents, study abroad advisors, and partner institutions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## 2 Inconsistencies with Language and Terms

### A British vs. American English

Many web pages intermingled British English and American English rules of grammar, spelling, word choice, and style. The two regional language variations have significant differences, so it is important that one variation of English is used consistently throughout all of a university’s published materials to avoid confusion.

One of the most common instances of inconsistent style we noted was regarding title capitalization. We often found inconsistent capitalization styles being used for navigation menu options and titles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capitalization Style</th>
<th>Example of Correct Usage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>British English</strong></td>
<td>“Funding your studies at the University of Hamburg”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only the first word in a title is capitalized (unless there are proper nouns, which are always capitalized).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>American English</strong></td>
<td>“Funding Your Studies at the University of Hamburg”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All words in a title are capitalized except prepositions, articles, conjunctions, and the “to” in infinitives (when in the middle of the title).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### B Translated Terms

On some websites, important terms were translated inconsistently. This can be confusing for both native and non-native English speakers, especially when some words have different meanings in British and American English.

- Example: On some websites, “Studienprogramme” was alternatingly translated as “courses,” “study programmes,” and “degree programmes.” In this case, we would recommend using “degree programmes” (“degree programs” for American English) because it is an internationally understandable term and will not be confused with the American English usage of “courses,” which translates as “Kurse” in German.

### Common Higher Ed Terms: British vs. American English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>British English</th>
<th>American English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course</td>
<td>Degree program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Module/unit</td>
<td>Course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching staff</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3 **Missing “Calls to Action”**

Many pages reviewed were missing clear “calls to action” that encourage visitors to take the next step: to obtain more information, to apply, to enroll, etc. As a result, site visitors may not know what they are supposed to do on a page or where they should go next.

Ideally, every page on a website should lead site visitors to the next page or the next step in the process. By creating these “pathways” for your visitors to follow, you will make it as easy as possible for them to continue moving through the website toward an end goal (e.g., submitting an application, enrolling, etc.).

4 **Poor or Awkward English**

While the quality of English was excellent on some webpages reviewed, others had a number of grammatical errors, poor word choices, and German grammar used in the English text. Quality of English sometimes even varied from one page to the next within one website.

Having poor and/or awkward English on your university website could cause a prospective student to have doubts about the overall quality of a school or to worry about the ability of the institution to deliver instruction in English, if applicable. Not to mention, native and non-native English speakers alike will likely have great difficulty comprehending the information provided. This issue can impact the readability of navigation menus as well as page content.

We recommend having all content edited by a native English speaker before posting it online. Creating a style guide for usage, punctuation, and formatting would help enforce stylistic unity within the pages, especially as the content may be managed by more than one person.
5 Images That Don’t Give a Good Sense of the University

Images can help website visitors picture themselves at your institution, and so should be carefully chosen to cast your university in a positive light. Photos are especially important to international students, who may not be able to visit your campus before applying or enrolling.

On the pages reviewed, we came across these photo issues:

- Too few images
- No photos of campus, or photos of empty campuses (with no students present)
- Photos that are too small
- Stock photography
- Poor quality photos (bad lighting, blurry, appear outdated, etc.)
- Images that show unattractive buildings, bad weather, etc.
- A lack of student diversity (i.e., all students look German)

University websites should feature photos that give a good sense of the institution and the people who work and study there. We recommend using large, high-quality photos of students and faculty, the campus, and the town or surrounding area throughout the site. Images should feature smiling faces, lively scenes on campus or in town on sunny days, and students of diverse nationalities.
Outdated Web Design

A few of the websites reviewed used overall website designs that were rather outdated. Web design standards have risen sharply over the past few years, and users today expect websites to look professional, modern, and clean. While a university website does not need to have the latest features in web design, if a website looks as if it has not been updated for years, it is likely that students will have doubts about the professionalism and quality of the institution. In such cases, we recommend engaging professional web designers for website redesign, ideally designers who have experience working with higher education websites.

Modern Web Design

It is also important to keep in mind how a site will look on a mobile phone or tablet, as international students are likely to access online content this way. We visited each page under review from mobile devices to check for overall content appearance, formatting irregularities, and inaccessible content (e.g., flash animations, dropdown navigation menus, etc., that could not be accessed). Most sites appeared the same on the mobile devices we tested them with (such as an iPhone, iPad, and Blackberry) as they did on a computer. However, because of the small font size displayed on the mobile devices, the websites were often not as user friendly when accessed via smartphones.

In order to provide an optimal viewing experience across a wide range of devices and screen sizes, we recommend using responsive web design. Websites designed with responsive web design adapt the appearance of the website to the size of the screen being used, eliminating the need to build and maintain a different website for each device. As the user switches from their laptop to iPhone, the website automatically switches to provide the best resolution, layout, image size, font size, etc., for that device. Alternatively, another option is to create a dedicated mobile version of the website. Mobile sites are typically even more user friendly (because they are designed specifically for mobile devices), but require that you build and maintain two separate sites – which can be difficult and time-consuming.
7 **LARGE BLOCKS OF TEXT**

Some of the webpages reviewed featured large blocks of text, which would be daunting for anyone to read – both native and non-native English speakers alike. When important details are buried within large amounts of text, it is likely that site visitors will not read them.

We recommend reducing the amount of text whenever possible, as well as using design elements to break up long blocks of text into smaller, more digestible pieces, making it easier to scan pages for specific information.

**BREAK UP TEXT USING THESE TECHNIQUES:**

- Use **section headers** throughout the text to clearly indicate what topic is discussed in the paragraph(s) beneath.

- Use **bullet points** and **numbered lists** to make long lists easier to scan.

- Use **bold font** for particularly important details.

- **List facts succinctly in call-out boxes.**
  E.g., instead of “The period of study for the programme is three semesters,” try “Duration: Three semesters.”
8 Missing or Confusing Key Information

On some of the pages under review, key information that the target audiences would likely be looking for was either difficult to find, not featured, or presented in a confusing manner. In some instances, site visitors would need to click through many pages to find important details.

The details that would be considered “key information” for any given page will of course depend on its goals and target audiences. For instance, prospective international students will typically want to find answers to these questions quickly (depending on where they are in the recruitment funnel: doing online research about programs, applying, deciding where to enroll, etc.):

- What language of instruction is used / which programs are available in English?
- Am I eligible to participate?
- How and when to apply?
- What is the cost?
- What jobs do international alumni take?
- How many people from my country are there?
- Who can I talk to about my question regarding…?

All key details should be easy to find in as few clicks as possible, featured on pages that are clearly labeled in the navigation menus, and written using grammatically correct English in a way that is straightforward and easy to understand. Design elements such as those listed in #7 above can be used to present these details clearly and make them stand out.
9 **Usability Issues**

Many websites exhibited one or more of the following issues, making them difficult for site visitors to use:

- Vague or misleading titles for pages and navigation options
- Numerous clicks to reach important info
- Words or navigation menus in German on pages in English
- Links on pages in English leading to German content
- Error messages
- Confusing naming and categories
- Few in-line links

Each of these issues can make it difficult for site visitors to find important information – and potentially cause them to become frustrated and leave your site.

• Example: *On the website shown below, the English language option has been selected. The body text appears in English, but the navigation menus do not – making it difficult to navigate the website if you don’t speak Portuguese. Additionally, some of the navigation options lead to pages in English, and others lead to pages in Portuguese.*
**Generic or Lack of Promotional Text and Content**

A number of the websites reviewed lacked promotional text and content that would serve to highlight the unique and desirable aspects of studying, working, or conducting research at the institution. When pages did feature promotional text, it was often so generic that it could be used to describe any university (e.g., “Our dynamic institution offers innovative courses in a wide range of fields, taught by top-notch professors.”)

To engage target audiences, website text should describe how the institution’s unique features are benefits for the targeted audiences, focusing on the aspects that are important to those audiences. Instead of just stating facts about the university, the university’s features should be framed so that it is clear how they are advantageous for prospects and why they make the university desirable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features of an Institution</th>
<th>Described as Benefits for Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Located in a small city with 37,000 inhabitants.</td>
<td>“Our small, picturesque city offers an intimate setting in which you can become part of the local German community.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City has an active industrial sector.</td>
<td>“Our city’s dynamic industrial sector provides many opportunities for exciting hands-on internships and work experience.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Located 25km from the Atlantic Ocean.</td>
<td>“With the Atlantic Ocean only 15 minutes away by bus, our students enjoy a variety of beach and water sports, including surfing, beach volleyball, and rowing.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another way to provide unique content about your institution is to include “personal voices” in the form of narratives or testimonials from alumni, current students, faculty, etc., throughout the website (preferably alongside their photos). Including direct quotes from real people will not only give visitors the opportunity to develop a connection with your university on a more personal level, but it will also lend the website authenticity and diversity.
**IMPRINT**

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