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# **Higher Education Institutions' Websites: Attracting to Study or Homogenously Boring?**

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## **Abstract**

The key for any website in the first place is the content. It has to be at least relevant, recent, entertaining and aesthetically written and presented, while also providing useful information. Software and technology go next with gamification, leading the way. Companies are currently evaluated by their websites, and this procedure often takes a couple of minutes, if not milliseconds. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are no different. With a decreasing population of eighteen-year olds entering HE, the everchanging financial situation, both in the UK and worldwide, and an increasing number of universities, creating a unique position in the HE market to achieve the required student recruitment is essential for survival. This paper presents the outcome from the thorough qualitative evaluation of websites for the selected five Post-92 institutions in the South East of England over four years. The work indicates general features noted on all HEI's websites, user experiences and issues. Finally, the paper suggests some key actions to potential strategic improvement.

**Keywords** – Digital Content Strategy, Content Marketing, Content Analysis, Big data, Higher Education

## 1.0 Introduction

Severe competition in a complicated market situation requires higher education institutions (HEIs) to adapt to the new digital marketing position, as the websites are currently the first point of information for prospective students [1]. Recent national and international experiences of continuous periods of lockdown emphasise the importance of the quality content presented on the educational website even more. The HEIs are presented in the situation, when each of them is viewed, evaluated and judged marginally and often merely on the basis of the quality of the online data, the presentation/design and the actual content. In the majority of cases, prospective students access universities via Home and Course pages. Technologically savvy users require modern software and technology; powerful social media presence; original, educating and entertaining content; hence, overall – a new way of digital thinking for organisations. This directly relates to the HEIs' quality online presence, particularly in terms of the brand image, reputation and student recruitment objectives; and despite the significant research efforts, institutions are struggling to keep up with the pace [1]. Thus, it is crucial to ensure the content on these pages is relevant, recent, exciting and valuable to the target audience.

## 2.0 Methodology

The research objective was to investigate if there was a digital content strategy in the design and presentation of content on HEIs' websites, as well as to identify, where possible, if there were any processes, procedures, roles and responsibilities, related to content creation and management at the selected higher education institutions.

The researchers had been collecting the online data during a four-year period, 2017-2020. Every week, on Mondays, the researchers accessed Higher Education Institutions' websites and took print screens from these websites of the home pages only. This primary data collection included ten HEIs, i.e., equally from Post-92 and Russell Group institutions, using 'Snipping Tool' software. The study was targeting Post-92 institutions, although the data from the other HEIs allowed the researchers to additionally compare the received results, when/if required. Thus, the data for the latter group had been added after year one of the collection, i.e., from 2018. Additionally, the researchers were taking an HTML copy of the actual page for every university, saving the page electronically. This also assisted in the quick search on the received pages, when/if it was necessary to use.

To investigate the phenomenon of educational digital content strategy required the researchers to consider using mixed methods approach to ensure the analysis was conducted through a variety of lenses in order to reveal multiple facets of the phenomenon [2]. The methods included Case Study, Thematic Analysis and Content Analysis.

**Case Study** research here had been selected to ensure the real-time phenomenon was researched in its natural settings, rather than relying on "derived" data [3], i.e., "investigated within its naturally occurring context" [4, p.388].

Therefore, among other features, case study approach “assumes that examining the context and other complex conditions related to the case(s) being studied are integral to understanding the case(s)” [5, p.4]. The case studies method had not been selected randomly, the researchers opted instead for the “intentional form of selection” [6, p.27] of the competing universities.

**Content Analysis** was used to evaluate the actual content on the website pages, as it delivers systematic and objective way of explaining and quantifying phenomena [7, 8]. The process comprised of three main phases: (1) *the preparation phase* involved data collection for content analysis; and (2) *the organisation phase* covered “open coding, creating categories and abstraction” [9, p.109]. The latter allowed the formulation of a general description of the research topic through generating categories [10, 11, 12]. In the final, (3) *the reporting phase*, the results were defined “by the content of the categories describing the phenomenon using a selected approach” [13, p.2].

**Thematic Analysis** was used for “identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” [14, p.6]. This descriptive method assisted in reducing the collected data in a flexible way and efficaciously conformed with other data analysis methods [15]. The process included such stages as: familiarisation with, coding, reviewing, generation, defining and naming the themes. The first stage included a thorough overview of all the received data, prior to the actual analysis, comprehensive familiarising with all the collected data. Then the data had been labelled and coded. The researchers subsequently grouped and collated it in accordance with the themes as a condensed overview of the main points of content. This inductive approach allowed for the data to determine the themes from the patterns, not offering preconceived themes, based on theory or existing knowledge. The process evaluated two types of content categories, i.e., (i) the themes, which had been revealed by the researchers during the research process, when evaluating the websites, and (ii) the standard sections of the pages, categorised by the actual pages’ creators. The final stage of defining and naming the themes involved formulation of succinct and clearly explicable names. The researchers had to repeat the whole analysis four times to ensure the evaluation brought the same results, as repeating of the evaluation process is recommended by experts for the internal consistency [16, p.100, 17, p.812]. The final stage included the researchers’ analytical conclusions from the data presented as codes and then themes.

The researchers had been evaluating five UK Post-92 institutions (The University of Brighton, Solent University Southampton, The University of Chichester, The University of Portsmouth and The University of Winchester) in the South East and summarised the following.

## The Findings

### 3.1 Topics under the identified categories

To present the data in the evaluated tables, the researchers grouped the topics into eighteen categories (**Table 1**), which were self-explanatory, where, for instance, the *Partnerships* topics reflected all the data related to the universities' business and social partnerships with HEIs, businesses and/or other social groups/entities. The examples here could be working together with several other Higher Education Institutions in the UK on a conference or community project, business partnerships and collaborations with other international universities in other countries.

The *Entertaining/developing content*, for instance, delivered the topics for entertaining, though not marketing, content (apart from the Virtual Reality tours, which were also included here), as well as/or developing articles. The latter educated the user, without advertising, for the purpose of enjoyment. There was, for example, an article, called 'Five TV sitcoms to help get you through lockdown' during the lockdown. This category also included any thought-provoking articles with interesting topics for discussion, i.e., for instance with experts, though non-event related. The *Funded projects (for students)* described the opportunity received by the existing/current students with the financial support from the university towards the possibility of creation/accomplishing their current projects, whereas the *Funding for studies* indicated scholarships, which were available, at the time of the research, to prospective students.

**Table 1:** Topics on the websites

CATEGORIES
Apprenticeships
Partnerships
Courses/New courses
Entertaining/developing content
Events at university
Facilities
Final-year student secure employment
Funded projects (for students)
Funding for studies
Funding for university
Graduates/Alumni (projects/achievements)
Official accreditations/awards (incl. TEF)
Research at university
Students' employment experience
Students' projects/experience/awards
Teaching excellence/projects/awards
University's participation in an event
University's response to an event

The *Official accreditations and awards* category included articles written on any awards and achievements, received by the university itself, e.g., TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework) and THE (The Higher Education) awards. The *Students' projects/experience/ awards* category indicated, for instance, an example of a student's (or student group's) participation in an external event as an attendee of a conference or as the event organiser. The *University's participation in events* highlighted such topics as the university's staff and students' participation in the London Marathon; while the *University's response to an event* indicated university's position, reflecting and/or participating in events like Coronavirus (COVID-19) and 'Black History Month'.

The researchers must recognise that, taking the circumstances, the topic *Universities' response to event* might be higher during the period selected for evaluation, due to Coronavirus (COVID-19), when every HEI chose to participate, as well as other organisations with social and public responsibilities.

The information mentioned in such categories as *Research at university* and *Events at university* both could have been divided into two: (1) advertising research and (2) entertaining and developing data regarded as research. There was a number of exciting articles on a variety of topics, which could have been interesting to the prospective students, particularly the applied research experiences and environment-related research articles. The events also contained many Postgraduate pieces of content, which, most likely, would have not been of any interest to potential Undergraduate students. The *Apprenticeship* and *Graduates/Alumni (projects/achievements)* categories included other fields, which could have been positioned, under other categories, for instance, under *Events at university*, etc. The researchers, however, intentionally kept the data separately, to avoid the irrelevant implications to the research aims. The researchers also decided not to use 'Other' section, as in their opinion, it is never clear what categories could stand behind the notion, thus it would not be satisfactory for any discussions.

### **3.2 Main sections and compulsory data on the home pages**

There was an obvious similarity in the overall attitude to the display of the information online for all five institutions. Generally, there were standardised information fields positioned on the footer of the page and on the header as a menu. The middle part always contained university-/course-related information and news, though presented differently. It could be summarised that the main sections contained the following:

- (1) Main menus, which were located at the very top of the page
- (2) Then usually there was a banner carousel with image(s), typically changing with regular time laps in seconds, or a video, automatically played on the page opening
- (3) On the footer of the page, there was standardised information about an institution, namely: information for different parties (partners, media, conference organisers, Alumni), social media, A-Z options, contact details, freedom of information, sitemap, full address, about the site, log in options (if the site was used as an entry to the staff and/or students intranets), other websites, buildings and facilities, awards, nominations, recognitions and official memberships.

The rest of the space was divided into other fields, i.e.,

- (4) Research activities
- (5) Courses (including direct links to Postgraduate and International) and the course search
- (6) Marketing data (new buildings, 'Why this University?', Clearing, information about the university, accommodation and similar)
- (7) Some contained an events section, which was typically separate from the news, it included internal events at university, e.g., Open Days

- (8) News related to university as an external entity and external events
- (9) News at university.

The researchers noted that the compulsory information provided on the main page mostly related to the legal requirements, e.g., sections like ‘about the university’, ‘freedom of information’, legal registration, i.e., privacy and cooking policy, full institutional address, the contact telephone number and email, etc. Some of the institutions also decided to display their awards, achievements, accreditations and professional memberships, e.g., Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) Gold, Silver and Bronze, ‘Disability confident employer’ and ‘Armed forces covenant’. Particular professional memberships and accreditations, related to courses/fields only, were normally displayed on the actual Course pages. The institutions also mutually agreed to display belonging to social media accounts as a compulsory data. It was voluntary, not legally compulsory to display this information.

Any statistical data was not necessarily compulsory, but would be expected from the users, when the courses/institutions were evaluated. It supposed to provide the description and opinion of the courses and was expected to be on the Course pages. The data was either displayed by the institution itself or projected automatically in agreement with the National Student Survey (NSS) results from their system. In the first years, the universities were displaying all the data – positive and negative; while later, despite using the same system to display the statistics from the NSS system directly, the institutions could choose to display only selected data, obviously the one which illustrated the institutions in the good light, e.g., 100% of students are satisfied with the course overall, 90% of students agree that the lecturers are good at explaining things, 85% of students are in a professional/managerial job at six months, and similar. This would normally be displayed on the Course pages only.

### **3.3 Calendar, news and events**

As would be expected from a Higher Educational Institution, most of the time, the content on their websites was clearly based on the UCAS key deadlines, e.g., Clearing and results publication, as well as an Academic Calendar, e.g., Freshers’ welcome week and Graduation. This was relevant to all institutions. On the Home website pages, the researchers had also noticed some celebration of particular historical events, e.g., anniversary of Higher Education, ‘Black History’ month and ‘D-day’ (National British Military Celebration).

The rest of the calendar events were based on the national events related to universities, e.g., National Student Survey (NSS) preparation and results, league table and awards, again related to higher education. Likewise, the institutions, unsurprisingly, were writing more about successful cases, e.g., about received national and community awards, nominations and/or other achievements.

Some of the events were planned community and university events, such as ‘Pride’ or LGBT (the promotion of the self-affirmation, dignity, equality and increased visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people as a social group) and

'Volunteers' week', i.e., the events their staff and/or students participated in and/or planned to attend. This was anything from industry-related activities to art installations and festivals. The institutions were also writing about the final-year events, which indicated successful student projects and invited businesses and potential employers to attend, based on the subjects/courses offered by the institutions. Some of the content, nonetheless, was reactive, being only partially (if at all) planned with no knowledge of the potential outcomes, e.g., negative/positive mentioning of the institution in any media sources and outcomes of the political elections, etc. Some of the reviewed HEIs also had regular publications on their home pages, for instance, 'Monthly research roundup' and 'Highlights of the year'.

The News area was an essential part of the Home page, as it was the only one providing live content, as the rest of the content was marketing material. News Industry practitioners emphasise that "The homepage communicates what a brand is. The basic idea is...to provide a service to readers besides being an index of everything the site has published..." [18].

**Figure 1** indicates the allocation of the News articles among the identified categories for two reviewed periods. Among the biggest categories were *Events at university*, particularly in the second year, to which HEIs allocated nineteen per cent in the first year and twenty per cent in the following year. The issue, however, had been in the quality of presented content, as, in the majority of cases, it had been related to the invitations to the Open Days and Clearing, which was disappointing, particularly in comparison to Russell Group institutions, who offered a wide variety of lectures, seminars and other exciting events. Moreover, none of the universities advertised live events, seminars, webinars, external events live attendance and broadcasting these. This was only done after the events.

The next big category was *Official accreditations/awards (incl. TEF)* category, particularly in the first year, receiving 18% in the first and 13% in the second reviewed year. The issue was that, in the main, it had only been related to the mentioning of the TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework) award, and some rare statistics.

The *Entertaining/developing content*, which was the third most popular category, received fourteen and twelve per cent, respectively. The category, nonetheless, sounded more thrilling than it actually was. The researchers had to take into account any possible attempts of the entertaining content, which, in reality, had not actually been there. The category mostly included banner videos, available on the Home pages and some rare articles, which could be seen as such.

Another category, which fully deserved attention, was *Students' projects/experience/awards*. The articles accounted for eleven per cent in each year, with a slightly smaller number of the actual pieces of content during the second reviewed year, i.e., seventy-nine and seventy per cent, respectively. The researchers enjoyed reading these articles. Despite this, the quality of the articles could had been more entertaining and detailed.



It is obvious that the aim of the headlines is expected to be attention-grabbing, while the details could be, and often are, taken to another page, where there is enough space to tell the full story. This was the case for all the reviewed institutions (with some rare exemptions).

There, however, had always been a sense of reporting in these articles that was not thought-provoking and/or developing content for the reader. The articles did not intend to create an engagement, but a one-way conversation – we have been there, achieved this and that, etc. Even when the readers were contributing to the discussion, no one was there to support the conversation. It would be fair to mention that, nonetheless, that was the only institution offering an opportunity for feedback.

Furthermore, the stories are often expected to be quite short, punchy and shareable, following new trends with adolescents' attachment to social media and their own positioning in the world. If prospective students, when seeing content on a university's website, agree with the institution, i.e., in terms of the official statements, actions, values and opinions, these students would be happy to be associated with this HEI and be more likely to share this content, which would further create the necessarily engagement, which would, eventually, lead to the final purchase, i.e., becoming a student there.

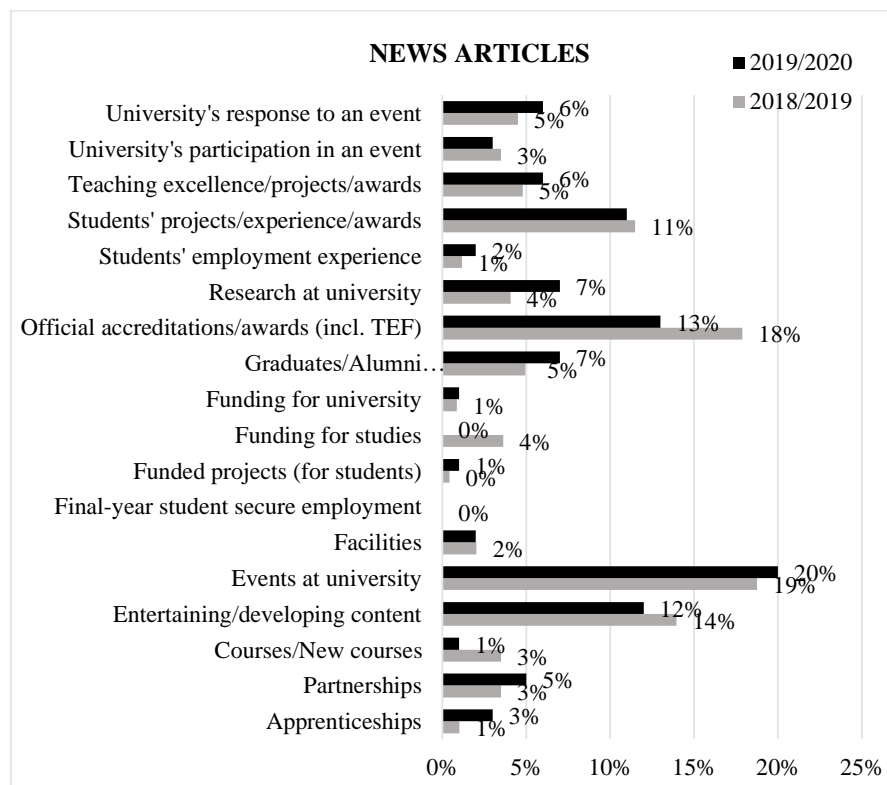


Figure 1: Allocation of articles in the News sections, 2018/19 and 2019/20

### 3.4 Homogeneity in the content

There was, however, clear homogeneity in the appearance and content of the reviewed institutions' websites. Apart from the main sections and the content listed in the above-mentioned categories, there was also other content, which had been published on all universities' websites.

All the HEIs, for example, invited prospective applicants to visit their institutions on Open Days, to find a course and similar options, based on the Academic Calendar.

On all the websites, universities also asked the readers to consider/imagine being at their city and university.

Another topic, repeated on the Home pages, was the invitation to identify the reasons for selecting this place and the institution, called 'Why [*city/university*]?' The text was again often used on a banner with a link to another page.

One more topic encouraged the prospective students to act to become a part of these institutions, i.e., selecting the HEI for studies.

Similarly, these Higher Education Institutions altogether suggested to see/acknowledge them as special and interesting places, creating an interest for the users to be there.

The market changes forced modern Post-92 universities to use commercial marketing more and more often. This section, in particular, suggested a number of examples, applied by the selected universities on their Home pages. Every institution at some point, particularly during the Clearing period, offered various messages, from 'Applying for [*year*] entry?' and 'Last chance to apply' to 'It's not too late to apply'.

The researchers also noticed that during the selected period, all the institutions had been advertising their facilities, in particular their new buildings.

The researchers summarised some of these topics in the below **Table 2** to highlight the evident homogeneity in the content of the Home pages.

In terms of technical points, the homogeneity continued in the visual presentation. As such, during particular time periods, institutions followed similar methods, and there were clear tendencies in their approaches to presented content. 2018, for instance, indicated the change, when a number of institutions started to use several banners as a carousel at the beginning of the home pages.

**Table 2:** Repeated topics on the Home pages for all universities.

<b>HEI</b>	<b>TOPIC: Consider being at this CITY and at this UNIVERSITY</b>
<b>a</b>	'Belong at Brighton' and 'EXPLORE 2020: a place where you'll belong'
<b>b</b>	'At the heart of the city' and 'Explore Solent'
<b>c</b>	'Picture yourself at Chichester' and 'Picture yourself here' and 'Chi Life'
<b>d</b>	'Take a virtual tour of Portsmouth. Explore the city and the University from wherever in the world you are'
<b>e</b>	'Winchester, simply one of the best places in the UK' 'Picture yourself at Winchester. Campus and city life'
<b>HEI</b>	<b>TOPIC: Identify the reasons for 'WHY THIS CITY/ UNIVERSITY?'</b>
<b>a</b>	'A place like no other. Start your adventure. Choose Brighton'
<b>b</b>	'Why choose Solent?'
<b>c</b>	'Why Chichester?'
<b>d</b>	'Why Portsmouth?'
<b>e</b>	'Why Winchester?'
<b>HEI</b>	<b>TOPIC: ACT to select this institution</b>
<b>a</b>	'Plot your course. Start your adventure. Choose Brighton'
<b>b</b>	'Start your story at Solent Open Day'
<b>c</b>	'Call our Clearing Hotline'
<b>d</b>	'It's your chance to explore the University and the city this year, so book now'
<b>e</b>	'Be the difference'
<b>HEI</b>	<b>TOPIC: Think that this HEI is a SPECIAL and INTERESTING place</b>
<b>a</b>	'Things look different from here. Talk to us about Clearing'
<b>b</b>	'Get inspired at our [ <i>month</i> ] open day. Book now' and 'Ambitions you can believe in'
<b>c</b>	'Chichester changed my life'
<b>d</b>	'Student life in Portsmouth'
<b>e</b>	'Explore Winchester. Take a virtual experience tour'
<b>HEI</b>	<b>TOPIC: COMMERCIAL MARKETING</b>
<b>a</b>	'Be here this year'
<b>b</b>	'Last chance for Clearing. Apply now'
<b>c</b>	'It's not too late to apply' and 'There's still time to apply'
<b>d</b>	'Get ahead of Clearing. There's no need to wait until Clearing opens - talk to us today about how to apply' and 'It's not too late to apply for [ <i>year</i> ]/ There is still time to apply. Apply now'
<b>e</b>	'Is what you're doing today getting you closer to where you want to be tomorrow?'
<b>HEI</b>	<b>TOPIC: ADVERTISING OF THE NEW FACILITIES</b>
<b>a</b>	'Open Day. Falmer Campus. Brighton. Date. Book now'
<b>b</b>	'Our new sports complex'
<b>c</b>	'Explore Two Beautiful Campuses' and 'Tech Park officially open'
<b>d</b>	'See the plans for our new building. Take a virtual tour of our new 13-storey building and find out more about the winning architects'
<b>e</b>	'Opening Spring 2020. Explore our new building'

NB: a = The University of Brighton  
b = Solent University Southampton  
c = The University of Chichester  
d = The University of Portsmouth  
e = The University of Winchester

As such The University of Brighton displayed three images; The University of Chichester, Solent University and The University of Portsmouth all offered 4-6 images each, while The University of Winchester already presented a video. At later stage Solent University moved to having only one banner image and The University of Chichester presented a video, throughout mostly the whole period of this research. Another example was in the homogeneity in displaying of news items. During 2018, The University of Portsmouth and The University of Chichester had four pieces of news in the allocated area. Solent University and The University of Brighton soon followed this tactic. A worse situation was presented by The University of Winchester, which merely allocated two pieces in this area. The University of Portsmouth, however, displayed incredibly disappointing tactics by removing the news section off the Home page for a period of almost one year, then returned it for several months, and in 2021 again removed it, allowing only marketing material to lead the way.

### 3.5 Technical points

Institutions did not replace their website designs often, approximately every two to five years. This was also evidenced in the Russell Group's institutions, as Imperial College London, King's College London, The University of Oxford and The University of Cambridge also had not significantly changed their institutional websites since 2018. The researchers can state this, as during the same period they collected the data for five Russell Group institutions alongside the Post-92, though the received data is not attached here, due to not being directly related to the topic of discussion. Throughout the whole period, only one Post-92 institution changed their website software and appearance completely; and another institution also made this change, just six months before the print screens were initially taken, i.e., in 2016.

**Tracking/conversion leads.** This part, preferably, would have provided a review of the conversions, leads, click-through rate, open rate, cost-per-sale and other available metrics through 'Google Analytics' and/or any other programmes/systems/software. The evaluation, unfortunately, was not possible from the external access, as this information was strictly confidential and not accessible, due to highly sensitive data. The researchers can confirm, however, that each institution requested cookies to be accepted before using their sites and used 'Google Analytics' (including 'Google Tag Manager') for the tracking and evaluation of the digital data. This was a highly positive move, as the data was available for tracking the customer behaviour and could be used for the user research.

**Accessibility and screen adaptivity.** The accessibility of the content was one of the key parts of this evaluation. The researchers attempted to access the data from the various devices, i.e., PC, Tablet, iPad and Apple and Android mobiles, using different browsers (Chrome, Explorer, Firefox and Safari), to ensure all information was accessible, readable and adaptable to the requirements of the device user. In the majority of cases, the content was easily accessible and searched through. Regrettably, in some cases, the information was incorrectly displayed, when minimised.

There was also an issue with accessing videos, as some universities offered an image banner instead, when a user accessed the university's Home page from their mobile. It was not really useful, as the young generation not only seem to express their visual preferences as the key, but also would be more likely to be looking for the choices on their mobiles.

**The use of images and videos in the banners.** The majority of institutions prefer to offer a carousel of banners on their home pages, near the top of the page. The similarity was evident in the visual and technical parameters, i.e., several large images displayed at a speed of seconds in sequence at the top of the page and located just after the main menu header. The difference was in the actual number of images in the carousel (**Tables 3 and 4**). As an example, a university had a carousel of six banners, and, within a month, changed them to three, four or five banner images. Later in the year, the HEI had removed the whole carousel and replaced it with a video or one banner image, e.g., 'Clearing is now open'. Next week (or the week after) the previous settings were returned back to the page. There seemed to be no logical explanation for the strategy here (apart from the Clearing period). Not only was the quantity different for different institutions, but also the number of banners in the carousel was different within the same institutions.

The researchers also noticed that institutions tend to re-use the same images in the carousel, though in a different order. During the review, this practice was evidenced throughout the websites of every institution, not only for the images in the banners. The Russell Group institutions also offered a video as one (or two) of the five or six carousel banners, e.g., The University of Oxford. The video, nonetheless, was not automatically played but allowed the user to decide if to play it. This approach would be preferred by the researchers, as it not only allows the user to choose to watch (or not) the offered material, but also does not delay the page download. The images were also used in other places on their own or as part of a group.

Most of the images and videos seemed to be professional, none of which, however, were created using user generated content (UGC), which could be created by users and/or students themselves. There were also clear issues, on some HEI's websites, with the banner images presented online, as some of them were not adaptable to the screen size changes, i.e., when the screen size was made smaller, the text and everything else on the page became smaller, though not the images. Some of the text was also incorrectly displayed in these cases, i.e., the text was only partially seen. Two institutions had also changed their logos during the reviewed period, though had not managed to change them at the top of the websites' tabs for weeks. Some of the videos were also of much poorer quality or at least contained parts of a video of lesser quality.

The length of the proposed videos differed, one of the universities, on certain dates, was placing short videos (nine seconds each); whereas the other institution had much longer videos (twenty-five seconds). Apart from the banners, there was no tendency of using videos in other places on the Home pages. It was no different on the Course pages.



**Table 4: Images and videos in the carousel banners. Abbreviations used in Table 3**

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TABLE			
Abbreviation	Meaning	Abbreviation	Meaning
X	Data not collected	V	Video (one only, automatically played, no banners)
1+	Arrows available, though not possible to use	V1, Vg <i>etc</i>	Different types of videos
1**	Coronavirus		
<i>Italics</i>	This type indicates a change, e.g., the quantity remained the same but the banner image has been replaced with a new one	V-	Video with a note: e.g. 'We are open for Clearing' (overtaking all, as notes on Coronavirus)
<sup>1</sup>	New website	Vg	Graduation video
4v	4 banners, where one of them is video	Vo	Open Day video
1u	'University of the Year' shortlisting	Vs	Short video

**Banners' image speed and flexibility.** Carousels of banners often contained the options for the users to go through the images at their own pace. This way, one university was allowing the users to select a particular banner image or move to the next slide; while on the other universities' pages, the Home page user had to wait to see a particular image, as the system did not allow making a choice and did not even indicate the total quantity of these banners. One of the institutions seemed to offer this option, as it was visually seen, though in reality only one of the options was actually available, i.e., backwards and forwards buttons did work, and it was not possible to select the required one, e.g., image two of four or three of five, etc.

There are no official standards in the industry for the speed with which banner images in the carousel should be expected to change. Even though the universities usually offered the change (from one banner to the next) within seconds, the difference for the banners ranged from four to fifteen seconds (**Table 5**). The average speed was approximately 6.8 seconds. The carousel banners on one of the institution's website, despite looking like the others, had not changed at all (the researchers were waiting from thirty minutes to one hour), unless the user clicked on the arrow themselves. This was the worst-case scenario. The researcher would not recommend doing this, as the approach could cause unfortunate user frustration.

**Length of Home pages.** The length also significantly differed – no standards again. During 2019-2020 Academic Years, the Home pages for The University of Oxford, The University of Chichester and The University of Portsmouth had six main sections on their websites; while Imperial College London, King's College London, Solent University, The University of Brighton and The University of Cambridge already had seven. The University of Winchester and The University of Southampton had the biggest number, i.e., eight and ten, respectively. The length of the website pages had also been changing with time, i.e., it happened when the institutions changed their software into a new one, presenting new websites. Surprisingly, the tendency was not similar, as the Course page of Solent University became longer and the page of The University of Portsmouth, contrariwise, became shorter.

**Table 5:** The speed in carousel banners for various universities, 04/01/2019

Nr	HEI	Times in changing images
1	Imperial College London	10 seconds
2	King's College London	8 seconds
3	The University of Oxford	15 seconds
4	The University of Southampton	35 seconds video
5	The University of Cambridge	6 seconds
6	The University of Brighton	Do not change, only by clicking
7	Solent University Southampton	N/a, the movement of circles: 4 seconds
8	The University of Chichester	4 seconds
9	The University of Portsmouth	4.5 seconds
10	The University of Winchester	25 seconds video

**Search Engine Optimisation (SEO).** Previous market research suggests that the digital journey to the required content has to be quick and short, particularly for the user from the key target audience. The lower the number of steps and the time (measured in seconds) to get the required data, the better. That is why, the leading role should have been allocated to the navigation and SEO (search engine optimisation). From this point, the navigation had become exceedingly significant, in terms of time and logical location. The primary search for the key target audience is finding a course to study. Therefore, the researchers additionally undertook a test on the home pages of the selected five institutions in September 2017, and the results clearly indicated SEO issues for all the institutions but one. There were two types of experiments.

(1) *Intuitive search.* In the first experiment, the researchers were making a search for a word 'computing' in slow motion, waiting to see if, during the typing in the search field, an educational website started to offer any options related to the search. This test revealed that only one institution offered intuitive search, where the results revealed all the relevant and available courses before the completion of typing, i.e., the HEI provided a list of undergraduate and postgraduate courses, containing the searched item in the names of these courses. The results even included a list of courses, where the searched item had not even been included at the beginning of the name for the course. Furthermore, in addition, the options offered the courses, whose names did not contain the searched item at all, although they were related to the field of computing, e.g., *CISCO Accreditation*. The institution indicated high professionalism in this matter, highlighting the in-house software engineer's work in this field, as this online facility was not merely offered as a part of the purchased software.

(2) *Searching for a part of a word.* In the alternate experiment, the researchers typed a part of a word, e.g., 'comput', and clicked on the 'Enter' button to see what results would have been provided. Here the results indicated a better outcome. Three out of five HEIs, displayed what was required.



The other two universities, unfortunately, did not show any results at all. Even when the search requested the word ‘computer’ (written in full).

Furthermore, one of these universities’ results was clearly not focused on the key target audience’s needs, as it resulted in anything, which contained this word, rather than offering only relevant and available courses, making the received results quite complicated for processing.

Similar searches in other fields – ‘sport’ and ‘social work’ – revealed the same results. The researchers repeated both experiments in March 2020. Surprisingly, the results still indicated the same issues for most of the searches. One of the latter institutions, however, started to offer the intuitive option. The search, nonetheless, did not present any results in the second experiment, only asking ‘Did you mean *computer?*’ which added an additional step in the search for the users. If the user, nevertheless, was still there to click on the option, the received results were pleasantly neat, which was not ideal but still much better adapted to the needs of the key target audience. The other two institutions had already suggested a list of the relevant and available courses for this incomplete search. Three out of five HEIs, nonetheless, still did not, regrettably, offer intuitive search provision.

There had also been an issue for mobile phone users with finding a course on one of the universities’ websites. After requesting a search, the mobile user had to scroll down three times to get to the button labelled ‘Undergraduate’. This seemed to create major inconvenience.

Moreover, if clicked on, the search presented courses in alphabetical order, likewise, the results displayed only some courses. There was no opportunity to view all the courses or at least an A-Z list. When the search was conducted for the word ‘computer’, although being intuitive, the system only offered the courses containing this word, not related courses, i.e., *BSc (Hons) Computer Aided Design*, not *BSc (Hons) Software Engineering*, which were actually available at the same time.

The received results also provided a long page, although there was no easy to choose list, rather excessive amount of information, related to each of the options, making it hard to go through the available options. The search for ‘computing’, nevertheless, provided all the required results.

To add, some of the data presented at the very top of the results, i.e., that, which was not relevant to the course list, should have been sorted differently. It could be simplified, though it again required additional click on ‘courses’ to filter these results.

The researchers need to emphasise that users have to go through a number of institutions’ websites to make their choices; and making it harder would not bring the HEIs desired outcome, i.e., student recruitment.

### **3.6 Other significant issues and findings**

The issues relating to all universities can be summarised very briefly below.  
Apart from the other points, mentioned in this work, there were/was:

Poor quality content, whereas the Russell Group institutions managed to present much richer text and offered wider variety of the events

Published news articles did not change for weeks

No changes in the websites' software for years, hence – no Content Audit

Uses of the TEF awards and similar in one of the News spaces for weeks

Duplications in the News sections of the data from the head banners

Hardly any videos on the Home and Course pages, apart from two head banner videos used by two institutions

Mistakes in the written information, including repetitions and punctuation and inconsistent spelling, even within the same document

No user generated content (UGC) and opportunities to feedback

Uses of the same images for different courses and topics, not necessarily related, and often positioned immediately next to each other

Negligence in the updating of the outdated information, inviting to act on the events, which occurred in the past, i.e., no longer existed

Re-use of the same images for years (even after the reviewed period)

Barely any student views, feedback and/or citations, with some institutions even re-using the citations in 2021 from 2017 (including the same images)

Almost no photographs of the relevant facilities and students using them

Unchanged content since 2018 on most of the Course pages. Excessively long Course pages, overloaded with text blocks, most of which was hard to process and barely any infographics, graphs, tables or other ways to simplify the data (apart from the basic tabs, which, in some cases, still displayed the rest of the information when selected)

The creation of engagement between the prospective students and the university was not the priority for the institutions

Mutual data replication among HEIs, monitoring the competitors' changes.

## **Evaluation and Discussion**

Following the evaluation process, the researchers could summarise the following points.

### **3.7 No long-term Digital Content Strategy**

The overall review of these home pages indicated the absence of the strategic long-term digital content planning. There had been merely selective publishing during the small periods, reflecting particular events, such as, for instance articles on apprenticeships during the National Apprenticeship Week in February, which did not really indicate quality planning. Apart from the actual visual similarity, the researchers noticed that none of the five reviewed institutions offered much content, which would have presented creative text and images by the means of gamification. This would also be highly relevant for younger generations, which HEIs should also start to consider targeting, at a much earlier age, possibly, with access to a separate website from the main Home pages. This approach could have attracted the users to visit the website again and again, until the final university selection. The news articles also did not really differ, mostly consisting of pretentious advertising and marketing, i.e., from informing the webpage visitors about the new facilities (i.e., newly built buildings), invitations to “discover” new courses and Open Day visits, guaranteeing accommodation, some “flashy” statistics and institutional awards. Even those articles, which appear to show university’s concern and participation in various research topics/findings, in reality appear to be mostly related to the marketing of these institutions.

Moreover, the accountability of the news and the institution could be under question, if there are only grandstand materials, creating the need for the website visitors not to trust and, possibly, to search further for realistic information. The content on the webpages, in general reminded one of the business approaches, i.e., a transaction with the list of what is on offer and to be expected, rather than opening an exciting world of higher education, which could welcome those, who are adventurous enough to join. In the UK HE market institutions explain ‘Why us?’, while the prospective students are making a choice. Surprisingly, the actual things, which would be the key for prospective students, were rarely presented, e.g., real-life student projects, graduates’ employment; connections and projects with the local and key National businesses; wider opportunities than merely ordinary jobs, that they would expect to get after graduation; more information about facilities and their industry requirements/fulfilment; as well as exciting experiences during studies and the meeting of key industry professionals. It should be essential to provide more images; as well as real persons speaking; real persons’ contribution to the website; and authentic feedback on studies and other experiences. It would also be useful to invite the readers into various discussions, e.g., at least environmental and societal issues (which are currently so popular among the targeted Generation ‘Z’) to identify their opinions and to propose the position of the university in relation to these, ensuring that there is a two-way dialogue and encouraging feedback and suggestions.

### **3.8 Quality content, sequency, regular and limited publications**

Most of the reviewed institutions did allocate a significant amount of data to the *Entertaining/developing content*, the issue, however, was with the actual content. There could have been more development offered in the areas of sequent publications and gamification. Throughout the years 2017-2020, the HEIs presented some interesting articles, though, normally, these would be unconnected pieces of content. There were some good quality items, though no sequence or unfinished material to encourage the user to return. If there was a content strategy, the universities would not only write about the key topics, thus engaging the interest of the key audience and ensuring timely delivery, but also have more space for these articles and this would have been done regularly. Amongst other data, there, for instance could have been articles relating to the students' social and academic life. The choice of the data being videos, audio or text could depend on the type of course and the produced material, though a number of adolescents currently prefer videos.

The key for this data would not only be in the introduction of new knowledge, specific to academia, but also in the sequency of publications, in order to "hook" the website user and in the non-availability of all the data in one go, by inviting the readers to return to the site to read more on a regular basis. This way, potentially, creates a feeling of attachment to this institution, and possibly the habit of regularly visiting their webpage with the growing intention of being a part of this experience and this institution, and to, eventually, act on the desire to apply. Only one institution presented an exemplar of content project, where every week the university offered to do a task, preparing prospective students for applying to join a Higher Education institution. The project provided exciting material, information about events and useful external links, videos and informative knowledge. Despite being outstanding, this, however, was still not enough for productive publishing. Time is also essential here. "For a website, time is a more indirect cost, because users don't get paid to surf the Web. But still, life is short, and you only have so many hours in the day. ... users... are still conscious of their time and don't like wasting it" [19]. Thus, the information needs to be easily accessible from all devices, easily found, read and processed. The HEIs should also consider preparing the data for skim readers, as the prospective students will have to read through a number of educational websites.

### **3.9 Digital Marketing of HE in Social Media**

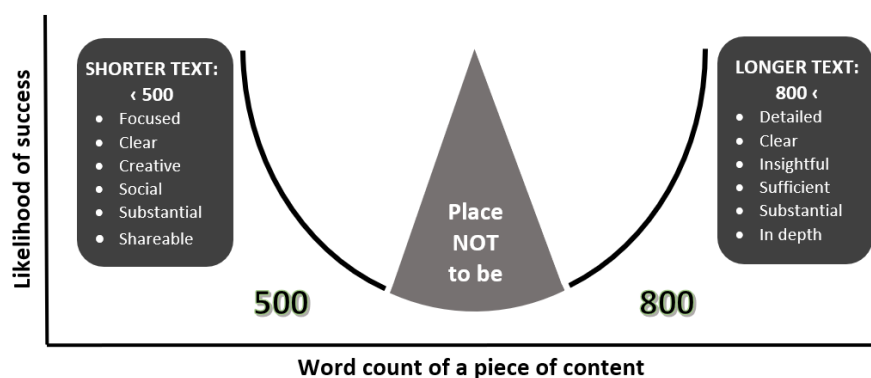
Social media is a new source for brand discovery, enhancing awareness and credibility. "More than a quarter of users follow brands they're thinking of buying something from" and "are willing to have branded content on their newsfeeds" [20, p.23]. This area could also be considered for development and involvement of relevant influencers, providing the resources are available and not just an indication of SM memberships. The original research included a thorough review of this matter, though it is omitted here, due to the size of the paper.

### 3.10 Data visualisation and ‘Quartz Curve’

Data visualisation is another issue here, as graphs, tables, charts, images and interactive solutions can simplify the perception of large and/or complex online data. Online presentation of content is also the key, as “Developing and popularising useful and attractive new formats could make news stories more recognisable when aggregated and consumed on other platforms, and provide more compelling reasons for people to visit the source sites and apps” [21]. This, in particular, relates to the long articles on the Home and Course pages.

In terms of the length of the news articles, Nielsen Norman Group, already in 2007, suggested via “information foraging” sort of “diet selection”, i.e., to have mixed news articles, mixing short and long stories, as the readers in this case will get the most “benefit” [19]. The website visitors prefer reading “shorter stuff that’s focused, creative and social with a really good headline. It doesn’t mean it’s unsubstantial. It just means it’s really clear about what’s interesting and focuses on that” [18]. Additionally, website users appreciate lengthier and more analytical pieces with a depth of topic, which are also suggested by the News Industry professionals [22].

Among other innovative ideas, the 800-word article styles, however, still dominate amid the news prepared forms. On the other hand, the research, conducted by ‘Quartz’ (online global business news), presented in 2014, evaluated the negative direction of the impact of the legacy of print on digital storytelling, i.e., the study revealed that there was a correlation between the word count for a piece of content and the reader’s willingness/desire to engage with the story, i.e., to share this content via social media accounts. The research introduced so called “Quartz Curve” phenomenon (**Figure 2**) and found that the format for digital articles’ size between five hundred and eight hundred words is not the best one to use. The content in this case gets less attention, as these articles are either too short to go into sufficient detail, or excessively long to be read fast [23].



**Figure 2:** “Quartz Curve” adapted from the Kevin Delaney, ‘Quartz’ Co-Founder, 2015

In evaluating the Home pages, the researchers discovered that the length of the articles for different institutions varied significantly. The researchers took one week as an example for the review, which suggested the following word numbering. The results revealed a wide spectrum of numbers 296, 297, 395, 405, 410, **553, 626, 657, 731, 745, 798**, 892 and 1,184-word stories. This wide-variety spread had been representative throughout the studies. Amending the articles to the suggested lengths would be also beneficial.

Overall, experts also suggest considering various other points instead, i.e., if a piece of content is smart, brings new information, provides a payoff and if it is worth sharing [22]. It had been suggested to “Start with overviews and short, simplified pages. Then link to long, in-depth coverage on other pages” to ensure the text serves both type of the readers, [19].

Further research, however, emphasised that Generation ‘Z’ preferred reading “a story all in one place”. These recent findings, among others, also suggested that these readers “want to skim, but dig deeper when they’re interested”, which supports the idea of having a mixture of different-length pieces of content. The work also highlighted the biggest issue for this generation, as “young people are trying to navigate a difficult path between information overload and FOMO (fear of missing out)”. The news on the universities’ websites become essential in this respect, as it is, realistically, the only space and opportunity for the HEIs to publish live material, which, more than others, requires creating an engagement. Digital news specialists also suggested that the consumption of this content is also heavily based on the gamification – “And anecdotally, the more playful we made our prototypes the more engaging our participants found them — even if we didn’t always get the interaction quite right”. The majority of the Generation ‘Z’ readers prefer getting news via text, though it depends on the context and the story. Surprisingly, the research also found that “video was consumed more at home”. The research additionally revealed several other useful points, which should be subsequently used by the HEIs. The Generation ‘Z’ participants, for instance preferred having an option of embedded text, as it assists in clarification of something unfamiliar. The participants also liked having the option of watching a video, a short or long story to read or the ‘skip’ option. The participants also highlighted the need for help in creating an opinion, thus the option with both sides of opinions with videos had also been appreciated [24].

The researchers here could suggest placing different videos for the courses, whereby the students/staff members would suggest having selected a particular path for the course, and the other person would be more comfortable with the other life destination. As an example, Open University’s website offers several different videos for several different research methods (questionnaires, interviews, experiment, etc.) to choose from, where staff members explain the pros and cons of each of these, leading the reader to choose the one most suitable for their studies.

Overall, additional research would be required to find out the real situation, based on the UK and its prospective students.

### **3.11 “Cool” design with no pressure for “hungry” consumers**

A number of website developers were still under the impression that the customers could be confused, if something was changed on the HEIs’ websites. The key audience for these providers, nonetheless, are adolescents, who are normally in the search for the data, being “hungry” for new and exciting information. It is the responsibility of the HEIs to keep up, researching and finding interesting new data, as well as presenting this information in the most attractive way. It is the key to being playful, rather than pressuring, to avoid the probable sense of the burden of continuous education, rather than suggesting a continuous experience at a different level in life, which would additionally bring financial stability and new opportunities of self-identity. The universities have to be aware of the recent trends in their subject fields, as well as the preferences of the new generations, e.g., the current preference for the personalised data by the ‘Generation Z’. The technical part of the website designs is also significant, particularly for modern students, who see various designs elsewhere and require these developed designs to be on the HEI’s website at least to prove that these technological advances are not only present on the home pages, but taught by experts, using available professional equipment.

### **3.12 More video material and gamification**

There is also the need for offering much more video material relating to the information about the courses, student experiences and the university itself. Preferably, the video should not be automatically played, as it could slow down the page download (currently where those HEIs used videos played on PC, they automatically disadvantaged mobile users, who did not get the video but a banner, which replaced it), but also allowing the viewer to decide for themselves, if there was the need and desire to watch them. Moreover, other ethical institutions also provided text around these videos, explaining what was included, added subtitles and provided some more information.

The website developers should also consider gamified content, relevant to this industry, in particular to the prospective students as the key target audience (this could be identified via an additional research). The games could be, for example, preparing a student for independent living, so one of the tasks could be collecting a suitcase to take to the Halls of Residence and getting five points when collecting a pair of warm socks and ten points for packing a mug. The same could be with the preparation of the essential stationery, ideally, specified to the course requirements, as well as the protective uniform, etc., whatever is relevant. The key point here is again the regularity of the publications and the content that is not available in one go, but a game of getting the items on the regular basis, thus gaining points and eventually receiving a badge (surprisingly, individuals like collecting electronic badges and often do things to achieve as many as possible, exhibiting addictive behaviour) or whatever the research identifies as valuable for the prospective students.

### **3.13 The need for stories and a feeling of accomplishment**

Following on, a couple of other points worth mentioning would be, firstly, the need for stories as the easiest and currently acknowledged as most acceptable form of delivering information, according to Content Marketing Institute. Secondly, the need to create a feeling of accomplishment when using a website. In the life of adolescents (or adults), it is relatively rare to achieve a long-term goal; thus, “even small wins can boost inner work life tremendously”, evoking positive reactions, according to Harvard Business Review [25]. That is why, small elements of the achievement, even via the offered gamification could potentially increase the probability of the positive attitude of the students towards the HE and this HEI, as well as leading to the decision to join.

### **3.14 Content written “by a human being to a human being”**

Despite the fact that the selected universities would not be in position to compete with the Russell Group institutions, due to a number of financial and social factors, the Post-92 institutions could gain more advantage by their attempts being different from their direct competitors, i.e., offering a non-marketing approach to the data planning and publishing. The facts highlighted on the main page – statistics, achievements and institutional awards – would deliver some positive results, as prospective students appreciate short and clear facts, expressed in awards and numbers, while the actual content is much more important.

A good quality article could not only highlight the institution from the crowd of similar institutions, but also build up these potential customer relationships, which would lead to the ‘transaction’ of becoming a student. The aim would be to produce articles, which are written “by a human being to a human being”, not someone neutral with only marketing in mind. The articles with personalised content, relevant to the target audience at this time, would be much more successful. The emotions behind the texts could reveal a human being with doubts and sometimes not yet formed obvious and strong opinions, attitudes and beliefs. Hence, vlogs interviews could be one of the answers, e.g., where a person with no background knowledge is not afraid asking questions, which others could view as “silly”.

### **3.15 Work together for the content**

Universities might consider having difficulties in generating quality content. Having the articles for publications, however, does not have to be necessarily achieved using merely Marketing/Digital/PR/Content teams at the university.

The developed internal communications within the institutions could provide the materials prepared by various departments and, in particular, by the lecturers and actual students.



This would have not only added entertaining and developing data for the prospective students to come back to and enjoy reading, but also indicated the level of the knowledge for the university, i.e., indicating their expert position in the field, and updated views for the schools/in their students' modern and changing lives.

Having a lecturer, who is interested in the dynamic changes in their subject/field and the students, who are taught the latest technologies/tendencies, besides classic knowledge, would gain much higher competitive advantage than just a clean and attractive website design or any marketing materials.

### **3.16 The reasons to be back**

The universities need to create the reasons for the occasional user to be interested in returning to the site and becoming a regular visitor. This approach would assist the HEI, using it, at least to achieve being in the evoked set of universities, when prospective students are thinking about higher education, and in the best-case scenario – to achieve the regular followers (or even ambassadors), who would in time become their students.

This is particularly significant, though might be challenging and requires careful consideration, following students studying remotely, as recent events of lockdown and self-isolation could become a regular experience.

Thus, having merely marketing/promotional material on the home page would not only be homogeneous, but also be seen as boring or even annoying to prospective students as the institution, which could be (i) either seen as not bothering to do anything for their potential students (sadly, they would not be in position to offer anything when they became students) or (ii) just as the HEI, which needs to get numbers, i.e., to achieve the large quantity of students, playing on marketing.

The universities, on the other hand, on a regular basis, not only had their marketing information boxes/spaces unchanged, but also the live news articles, which did not change for weeks, or even for months on some institutions' websites.

Overall, in the researchers' subjective opinions, there had been a sense of homogeneity in the information presented online for all the Post-92 institutions, such as having so called "must have" parts for the Home pages. The images/videos varied slightly, though not significantly, as there seemed no attempt by the institutions to stand out and to be different. The researchers understand that there are expected fields for the pages to contain. Despite this, Russell Group institutions had been managing to achieve the individual presentation of their HEIs, without being lost in the crowd of so many similar institutions.

Continuous effort and contribution are necessary from the universities, i.e., in time and resources, and would eventually allow them to become unique. Despite the potential expense, this approach would be more profitable in gaining students in the long-term.

### 3.17 Content to be

To summarise, the institutions need to, at least, consider ways of inviting the Home page visitors to enjoy thought-provoking articles and dialogues on the topics of the recent events and research within the academic subjects/fields to avoid the selling/buying attitude of education, and, possibly, offering master courses from Industry specialists. The researchers would also suggest considering the quality of the actual pieces of content and summarised the following recommendations for each piece to be successful and achieve the desired result, i.e., an action from the targeted audience (**Table 6**).

The work on the content does require significant contribution, whereas, at the same time, modern website users are accustomed to free information. These website users would most likely want to evaluate the potential value of the knowledge from HEI specialists and often wish to experience what they are buying prior to the purchase. The institutions, therefore, should still always consider, if the required resources are available to ensure successful application and to apply any effort possible producing a high level of content via the latest technology.

**Table 6:** Suggestions on successful content

<b>CONTENT to be successful has to...</b>
Be engaging with the ideas to share and discuss
Invite the call to action
Have an attractive and triggering headline
Deliver new information or a modern view of the old topic
Be written using a good language and writing style
Preferably consist of regular episodes/series/videos/publications
Hook to create the reason to return with something unrevealed/undiscovered/unclear/incomplete
Be relevant
Be timely
Aim at the target audience
Provide excellent images, not necessarily professional but relevant and engaging
Contain immaculate formatting with the consistency of the styles
Present the availability of the latest Technology
Adapt to all devices
Gamify to provide a joy of reading/viewing and/or a joy of an achievement of accomplishment
Be timely presented, updated, replaced and/or removed/archived

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The researchers can conclude that, disappointingly, the homogeneity of the content in the reviewed Post-92 institutions was evidently obvious. The current content on the home pages risks neither attracting prospective students to study at their institutions, nor to higher education in general. In order to resolve the aforementioned issues and to achieve the unique position in the market, the universities should at least have a Digital Content Strategy in place, based on the Content Calendar and regular Content Audits, alongside quality inspirational and sequential articles on the home pages, with no commercial implications and free expert advice, as a bare minimum.

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