GUIDE TO USING LIVE CHAT AND WEBINARS TO RECRUIT INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS
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Guide to using live chat and webinars to recruit international students
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Preface

Breaking through the noise with live chat and webinars

International student recruitment has become a top priority for many institutions, but recruiters and prospective students alike can face information overload. At the same time, there is a lack of well-structured information, creating a growing demand for personalised and reliable information.

You’ve likely been invited to use live chat on large shopping websites or have seen companies offering training for their own staff or clients using webinars. These tools have become increasingly popular among universities in countries including the US, Australia, and the UK, as demand increases for more measurable recruitment results.

Early adopters of webinars and live chat in the higher education sector are using them for different purposes, such as training library users, providing IT support, and tracing alumni. These tools are also useful in conducting joint study courses, marketing study programmes, and recruiting international students. Their use in student recruitment is a recent phenomenon, and the level of professionalism varies across institutions and even individual academic programmes and departments.

This guide presents key pointers to enable higher education institutions to successfully develop and use live chat and webinars for international student recruitment. We developed the guide for readers with varying backgrounds and experience, readers who have responsibilities in marketing, recruitment, and admissions within higher education institutions.

EduCoach

In 2012 nine international partners joined forces in the EduCoach project to learn how interactive online recruitment tools such as live chat and webinars can help prospective students and PhD candidates considering study and research in Europe. The goal was to improve the quality of their decision-making process on where and what to study, and to help institutions reach these students more effectively. As a result of this project, StudyPortals, the Academic Cooperation Association, and the Brenn-White Group created this guide to share experiences and best practice tips gathered during EduCoach.

EduCoach Experience

Across this guide you will find blue boxes containing EduCoach experiences. These experiences will give you hands-on insight on the struggles we faced and how we and our partners coped with certain situations.
1. Defining live chat and webinars

Live chat and webinars are real-time, interactive, and synchronous virtual meetings. For student recruitment purposes, presentations are generally given by one or more speakers with mixed backgrounds, e.g. recruitment/marketing staff, programme coordinators, academics, students/alumni.

Both live chat and webinars use software applications that are either integrated into university websites or operated through an online platform offered by a service provider. Many applications enable the option of recording and archiving the live chat or webinar history for later playback. Some universities also publish the tagged and archived dialogue records as Q&A for prospective students.

1.1. One-to-one or one-to-many

Although live chat is more often used for one-to-one dialogue and webinars for one-to-many virtual meetings, one-to-many live chats on a pre-announced topic are not uncommon in the higher education setting.

1.2. Modes

Live chat and webinars can be offered as text, video, or audio – or a mix of all three. A text chat may be most efficient for answering general enquiries concerning recruitment and admission, while a video chat may be more suitable for interviewing applicants or handling specific follow-up questions from candidates. Some universities offer only text chat for webinar participants to avoid technical issues related to audio or video input from their side. Video presence of the speakers, compared with displaying a static photo, is usually chosen for a stronger personal connection with speakers and participants.
1.3. Synchronous online recruitment tools

1.3.1. Live chat

Universities are integrating chat and instant messaging functions from a variety of websites and applications including Skype, Facebook, and Google+ into their websites to support prospective students. This can be as simple as publishing usernames and available time slots. Dedicated customer support live chat systems also integrate with existing admissions or customer relationship management (CRM) software, generating additional value for tracking and analysing the profiles of prospective students.
1.3.2. Webinars

In a webinar – a web seminar – presentations are delivered through a platform equipped to share the slides or other content, along with video or audio of the speaker, while allowing for audio or text chat from the viewers. Some platforms provide limited video sharing options; they instead focus on audio and slide sharing. The value of a webinar lies as much in the real-time online interactions as in presentations by the speakers. This marks the major difference between a webinar and a webcast or a pre-recorded online video.
1.4. Potential benefits and challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Suggested Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>One-to-One Text Chat</strong></td>
<td>✓ Personalised responses for individual questions</td>
<td>✓ Difficult to balance personal opinions and standardised answers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Direct responses from individual students</td>
<td>✓ Training presenters to handle diverse questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Easy to track and relate the backgrounds of the students and their specific needs</td>
<td>✓ Need to develop a knowledge base for answers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>✓ High perceived value for question clarification</td>
<td>✓ High staff and time inputs to meet large demands</td>
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<td></td>
<td>✓ Least dependence on good internet access</td>
<td>✓ Early orientation phase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>One-to-Many Text Chat</strong></td>
<td>✓ Personalised responses for a group of students with similar questions</td>
<td>✓ Matching a chosen chat topic with target students and the time zone for delivery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Direct interactions between the students and the presenter</td>
<td>✓ Filling the chatroom with like-minded students</td>
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<td>✓ Possibility for prospective students to socialise online</td>
<td>✓ Managing different expectations of the students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Easy to tailor follow-up plans for specific groups</td>
<td>✓ Dealing with group dynamics in the chatroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>✓ High perceived value for question clarification and networking</td>
<td>✓ Matching a chosen webinar topic with target students and the time zone for delivery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Webinars</strong></td>
<td>✓ Visualised presentation and personalised responses</td>
<td>✓ Matching a chosen webinar topic with target students and the time zone for delivery</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>✓ Real-time interactions between the students and the presenter</td>
<td>✓ Filling the webinar with prospective students (minimizing no-shows)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Possibility for prospective students to socialise online</td>
<td>✓ Dealing with group dynamics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Easy to track webinar participants and tailor follow-up plans</td>
<td>✓ High demand on internet access for good video and audio quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Option to reuse webinar content for further promotion</td>
<td>✓ High risk of technical failures</td>
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</table>
2. How to use interactive online tools for student recruitment?

There are three major stages when adapting interactive online communication tools for student recruitment purposes. During the conceptualization phase, the recruitment goals are defined and the technology is selected based on those goals. Once expectations are managed, the implementation begins. To ensure high quality of delivered services, an evaluation phase should follow the implementation. Only when the necessary adaptations have been made should the reinforcement stage be initiated.

2.1. Conceptualization stage

During the conceptualization stage you must consider:

2.1.1. Know your goals and context

- **Evaluate whether live chat or webinar would be cost-effective in reaching your recruitment goals.** The use of live chat or webinar can certainly reduce travel cost and travel time for recruitment activities, but it is essential that universities consider how these tools can directly support goals – as well as their relative value compared with other online or offline recruitment options.
- **Research internet use and language choice in your target countries.** This information is essential to deciding whether to offer live chat or webinars. Internet use and language choice are also key to choosing and configuring the software, finding suitable speakers, and scheduling events.
- **Set a budget (financial and time) for offering live chat or webinars.** Software may come at a low cost, but there will certainly be an initial and ongoing investment of staff time to set up and offer the services in a professional manner.
2.1.2. Know the technology

- Evaluate whether you’d like to integrate applications into your university website or offer them through a third-party website. The availability of in-house technical support and the critical mass of visitors to the website must be considered. Some online education information platforms such as StudyPortals offer webinar tools and additional technical and content support services that can be especially helpful for inexperienced users.

- Define the primary requirements for your recruitment purposes and target groups. This could include examining how the applications work with different operating systems, e.g. Windows, Mac, Linux, or mobile devices such as smart phones and tablets. Consider how applications tie into CRM systems, which characters they display for different languages, customisation possibilities, and technical support options.

- Evaluate the options for live chat and webinar applications and decide which tool(s) you prefer based on your requirements and your budget.

2.1.3. Know your limits

- Don’t mistake the global reach of the internet as barrier-free access to webinars and live chat for all prospective students. Universities must consider time zones, language barriers, technological barriers, and other factors when planning the live chat or webinar support.

- Limit the duration of the live chat or webinar in the invitation – and leave sufficient time for questions and answers. A webinar rarely lasts longer than an hour and can be as short as 30 minutes (20 minutes of presentation and 10 minutes of Q&A).

- Consider capacity limits of the applications such as maximum number of participants or activities that may slow the process, such as viewing websites live or uploading files.
EduCoach Experience

When selecting software for the EduCoach project several hardware and software requirements were taken into account. Questions we asked ourselves were:

- **Usability and easy access**: How easy is it to use the software? Is the software intuitive? Is it necessary for users to install plugins or not? Can you access the software from mobiles?
- **Quality**: Does the software provide good sound and image quality? Does it work reliably or are there regular outages?
- **Features**: Does the software provide all features we need? (For example: Can we prioritise questions? Can we see the contact and user data of participants? Is file sharing supported?)
- **Localisation**: Are different scripts for events in different languages supported?
- **Integration**: Is an application programme interface (API) available for easy integration with existing services? Can we download the user data as .csv files?
- **Support**: Is a support contract available? How accessible is the technical support? Who will I contact in case of problems?
- **Scalability and pricing**: Will the software still work properly in case we have twice or triple the expected number of participants? How do prices increase if usage increases?

To decide on the best tool for the EduCoach project we created a matrix, with the software requirements and software. Each software was rated for each requirement based on the experience gained through trial accounts as well as the promises made on the website and by the sales representatives. Online comparison websites were used to get a feeling for whether a software would be suitable. EduCoach has finally decided for LiveAgent as a Chat Software mainly because of its usability and the possibility to track topics of conversations via tags. We also needed an API for integration with existing services which was provided by LiveAgent. The platform EventPartner offered by Commpartners was found suitable as a Webinar solution as it is easy to use for participants. It requires no installing of plug-ins, supports several character sets, and provides good quality streaming.
2.2. Implementation stage

When you begin the implementation process, consider the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implementation</th>
<th>Preparing for the event</th>
<th>Promoting the event</th>
<th>Hosting the event</th>
<th>Follow up</th>
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### 2.2.1. Preparing for the event

**Create your strategy and project plan**
- Define your goals for the event and your method to measure results.
- Schedule all important steps, including deadlines and who is responsible for what, from the launch of the online event to follow-up actions.

**Prepare the content**
- Decide on the date/time, topic/theme, target regions, language, and tone in relation to your recruitment goals.
- Review, and if necessary, modify presentations to fit style and design guidelines.
- Anticipate popular themes and challenging or commonly asked questions related to international student recruitment on topics such as scholarships, accommodation, or types of degrees.
- Create a catchy title and a strong opening and concluding message.
- Prepare any handouts you plan to send participants before or after the webinar (lists of resources, upcoming events, programme brochures).
- Include calls to action at the points where you want students to take action. Make sure they know where to access the application form and how to proceed after the online information session. This can be done in the live chat text, the webinar presentation, and/or in follow-up emails.

**Prepare your resources and staff**
- Define and clearly communicate the roles of all parties in delivering the live chat or webinar
  - On stage: moderator (generally responsible for introduction, fielding questions for the Q&A, wrap-up) and presenters/speakers (responsible for core content presentation and answering questions).
  - Backstage: technical support staff to handle hardware and software issues, and if necessary a second backstage moderator to answer questions in text chat for large online events.
- Decide whether to include live video or a simple photo of each speaker for the event.
- Decide who will serve as technical support for the event itself and whether you need additional staff to answer questions in text chat.
Testing and technical training

- Test your tools such as webcam and microphone. Speakers should wear headsets so their voices don’t create echoes.
- Test the chosen software for problems or compatibility issues.
- Provide technical training and demos for technical and support staff, speakers, and moderators.
- Provide training on online presentation skills (e.g. interaction with the camera and the audience, use of polls and pointers) for presenters and chat staff. Guidelines can help with handling standard situations.

Registration: balance data needed with data wanted

- Decide whether and when registration will be required.
- Balance information gathering with user friendliness of the registration by conducting usability tests. Consider how the data can and will be used before collecting them.
- Create incentives for participants to register or submit information in advance, such as receiving a link to the archived chat or webinar.

EduCoach Experience

To train the EduCoach Chat experts, the partners defined the 9 most important rules when it comes to chatting with prospects one-to-one. These rules are the basis for training new chat experts and can always be referred back to when evaluating the text chat:

1. Always be helpful and polite
2. Never leave a question unanswered (instead, look it up and follow up later, or refer to another source)
3. Always be objective, not influenced by commercial interests
4. Know the StudyPortals websites – use the helpful articles in the Knowledgebase
5. Always use Tags to help analyse the chats
6. Restrict the answers to the scope of the website
7. Do not talk about specific universities or cities
8. Always answer within 2 minutes and stick to a maximum of 15 minutes chatting
9. Have access to basic knowledge level about all higher education systems and admission requirements in Europe

EduCoach Experience

When providing a free service such as live chat and webinars, registering may be a barrier for students to use the service. In EduCoach, fewer students joined when registration details were requested. During live chat the registration can also come at the end, when the service has been delivered and the student wishes to stay in contact. It’s important to keep your goal in mind here: Do you want to focus on increasing the service to students or do you want to use the tools mainly to collect leads? Answering this question may help you decide whether and when you want your prospects to register.
2.2.2. Promoting the event

Filling your online chatroom

✔ Make sure the event or service is prominently featured on the university’s own website, preferably on the front page.
✔ Highlight the benefits of the online live chat or webinar (e.g. direct contact with academics, students, or alumni, immediate responses to questions, networking with other prospective students).
✔ Manage expectations by being specific about the topics to be discussed, the duration of the event, system requirements, and other factors of interest.
✔ Announce events well in advance and send multiple invitations – one invitation or announcement is likely to be overlooked.
✔ Catch the attention of a critical mass of new prospects by offering live chat and webinar services through portals or online recruitment fairs.
✔ Align online promotion with offline marketing or recruitment events. You could, for example, host a webinar to promote a fair, or you could invite those who cannot attend to a webinar.

EduCoach Experience

Promoting your webinars or live chat offerings the right way is the first step towards getting good results. There are several ways to promote your live online events. Don’t stop at your existing mailing lists but think further by:

✔ promoting your online events with partner institutions
✔ asking current students or alumni to help promote the events
✔ announcing the event on your homepage and social media networks
✔ buying advertising space or external mailing lists
✔ promoting your event through third parties such as study information portals or online recruitment fairs

EduCoach Webinars were usually promoted one to two weeks before they took place while EduCoach Chats were promoted without interruption on StudyPortals pages. If you promote specific time slots for your chats, make sure that your chat agents are online on time.

Pre-event communications: clarity and consistency

✔ Reduce no-shows by sending reminders with URLs and log-in information to the registered participants 15 minutes before the event occurs. Calling registrants or sending SMS reminders can also help, but might in turn reduce the number of registrations, as students may be hesitant to leave their phone number.
✔ Clarify the rules of the chatroom or webinar (e.g. information-sharing among the participants and with the public, the scope of questions to be fielded), etiquette (e.g. the use of language, respect for other participants), practical information to access the chatroom or webinar (e.g. URL, passwords, date and time, time zone, technical requirements).
2.2.3. Hosting the event

Follow a plan but be prepared for the worst

- **Make sure speakers are not disturbed.** Ask speakers to display a “Do Not Disturb” sign outside the room where the event will occur; make sure there won’t be any major construction or other noisy activities that could disturb the event.
- **Test your systems with all speakers at least one hour** before the event. Make sure technology is working, cell phones are off, and the backgrounds behind speakers are simple and professional (if using video).
- **Announce the recording and the intended public sharing** of the event to the participants, if applicable.
- **Add clarity for participants** by explaining how to get help with technical issues and how to ask questions (and when questions will be addressed).
- **Engage the audience** with questions they need to answer in the text chat, polls, or other activities.
- **Assign a separate moderator to summarize comments and questions** for the primary speaker if the event attracts large numbers. Some applications have specific tools to do this; a simple option would be an open Google Doc that the moderator and speaker(s) can see.
- **Have an emergency plan** in place in case of technical issues (e.g. unexpected power failure, system updates, server crashes), speaker cancellations, poor video or audio quality, or slow internet speed. You can always reschedule the webinar or live chat in the event of serious problems, particularly if you have acquired email addresses during the registration process. Stay calm and communicate promptly with the participants.
- **Expect between 30 and 50 percent of your registered participants to take part in the live event.** Particularly for events that are free, there are low barriers to registration and many people simply don’t show up, or they wait to watch the archived event if that is offered as an option. Attendance rates also depend on the time zones of the participants, as the timing of a webinar is usually only ideal for a limited number of time zones.
- **Ask participants to fill out a satisfaction survey immediately after the event** – display the URL of the online survey at the end of the presentation or immediately send a follow-up email.

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**EduCoach Experience**

When hosting a webinar it can be difficult to engage the audience. During the EduCoach webinars the following tools proved useful to make the presentation livelier:

- Use Polls to find out where your audience is from, what they are interested in or what their opinion on certain topics is
- Show images and videos to make the presentation visually interesting
- Use text chat to gather feedback during the webinar and reply to the questions in the text chat
2.2.4. Follow-up

Keep and use the new contacts and content

- Analyse the profiles of the participants and undertake your follow-up communications plan.
- Remember that the value of the contacts and content can be multiplied with strategic follow-up activities such as email promotion campaigns or invitations to other related online/offline events.
- Share the recording of the chat or webinar with everyone who registered within 24 hours of the event. You can ask them to forward it to friends as long as you initially acquired participants’ permission for sharing.
- Announce the recording via your regular online channels, publicise it on your website, and send it to partners or new prospects. Make the most of the event. (Be sure you get permission from everyone involved as part of the registration process.)
- Organize the archived chat history or recordings – for example, by using clearly understandable tags (by discipline or by theme) that can be used for online searches.

2.3. Evaluation and reinforcement stage

2.3.1. Know what has been achieved

- Regularly gather feedback from participants on the usefulness of the content provided and the user friendliness of the tool(s). Some applications come with automatic evaluation functions.
- Examine the data gathered to identify high-potential groups for further contact or recurrent themes to address in future marketing and recruitment activities.
- Monitor the outcome of the online events to observe whether they generate quality leads or improve the conversion rate of enquiries into actual enrolments.
- Measure return on investment (ROI).

2.3.2. Know how to continue

- Expand the service, in terms of breadth or depth, when the user profile is clear.
- Provide more systematic support and training to staff regularly involved in the live chat support or webinar.
- Build a knowledge base of recurrent topics, commonly asked questions, and reference materials for answering enquiries.
- Make good use of the data accumulated in the back-end database for tracking trends, forecasting growth, or sharpening the focus of the recruitment strategy.
3. **Disclaimer and code of conduct**

- **Assess the risk and liability** arising from the sharing of third-party sources (information shared by other participants, personal opinion of the speakers, external reference sources) and publish a privacy policy and disclaimer.

- **Advise users on personal data protection measures** (e.g. the display of real name, buddy name, or username, the sharing of confidential or personal information in the chat or webinar sessions), especially if the recordings are intended for public dissemination.

- **Seek consent of participants for sharing their contact information** with other participants or using the data from the live chat or webinar for other follow-up activities.

4. **Conclusion**

The suggested guidelines here are in no way intended to be an exhaustive or prescriptive list of must-dos. Rather, they suggest a wide range of actions for universities to consider before using live chat or webinar for international student recruitment. To summarise we conclude with five tips to help you run successful online events:

1. **Know your goals and target group**: Define your goals clearly before you decide whether to host a webinar or live chat. Knowing what you hope to achieve will help you determine whether a webinar or live chat is the right tool – and help you decide how to develop, promote, and manage the event.

2. **Prepare thoroughly and test the technology**: To keep the attention of your participants in a remote environment, you and your colleagues must develop a professional presentation, be familiar with the technology, engage participants, and carefully set up the presentation room if you use video and audio. You should maximise opportunities to interact while minimising distractions.

3. **Plan to promote the event via different channels**: An online event can be promoted through social media, newsletters, or online platforms – you may even consider purchasing advertising to draw in new prospects. Think creatively about how your partner universities, students, or alumni can help promote an event.

4. **Engage your audience, be flexible, and smile**: Ask participants for their input in the text chat or through feedback buttons or polls. In webinars, solicit questions. Make sure you smile and minimise your own distractions during the event – even if you won’t be on video, it makes a difference!

5. **Follow up with everyone who registered**: 30 to 50 percent of registrants attend a live webinar. In live chat you will not always be able to immediately reply to every question. However, everyone who registered can be considered a qualified lead for your institution. Create a follow-up plan with clear calls to action for everyone who registered.
Annex 1  Frequently asked questions in EduCoach live chats

Undergraduate and master’s studies
✓ Which the BEST university (for studying discipline X)?
✓ I WANT TO (study in Country X), could you tell me…?
✓ I would like to study discipline X. Could you find a programme FOR ME?
✓ I am stuck with X and Y. Which one should I CHOOSE?
✓ WHAT is (e.g. GPA; the difference between IELTS and TOEFL)?
✓ Can I apply without IELTS or TOEFL? There are no such tests in my country (e.g. Africa).
✓ Please TELL ME WHY I (e.g. CAN’T find a scholarship; am not accepted; do not get an answer)?
✓ Who should start the VISA application process? The university or me?
✓ Is it difficult to find a PART-TIME job as a foreign student?
✓ Could you tell me how to ESCAPE from my country (in war zones)?

Doctoral training
✓ What is the BEST…?
✓ Where/how can I APPLY for a PhD programme?
✓ Where/how can I apply for FUNDING to do a PhD (sometimes with questions on specific funding schemes)?
✓ Could you advise me on DISTANCE-LEARNING PhD programmes?
✓ Which SUBJECT AREA should I choose when doing a PhD?
✓ Which TYPE of PhD (programmed) should I choose?
✓ I have completed (e.g. a bachelor’s in XX; a master’s in YY), CAN I GO ON to (discipline XYZ) for PhD?
✓ I am not good (enough) academically, am I ELIGIBLE to study / do a PhD abroad?
✓ Is PUBLICATION important for PhD in (e.g. biological sciences)?
Annex 2  How to respond to challenging questions?

Challenging questions encountered in EduCoach can be grouped into three major types: THE BEST questions, very specific questions, and irrelevant questions.

‘The best’ questions: the enquirers may have no idea about where they want to study or what they want to study, but they want to know where and what is the ‘best’ for them to study in. For this kind of questions, it is necessary to clarify with the enquirers what they mean by the ‘best’. Advisors can coach them to reflect on what is most suitable for them and where to find more information about options that may fit their interests and aspirations, rather than giving definite answers.

Very specific questions: some enquirers may expect live chat counsellors to perform the job of commercial recruitment agents and serve them with spoon-fed information. There may be abundant online information that is readily available to answer their specific questions. But instead of searching for the answers themselves, they come with their requests to the live chat counsellors and ask them to search the information for them. In some EduCoach cases, the enquirers requested the counsellors to do the applications on their behalf. For these questions, the counsellors will advise the enquirers to follow the relevant links to their questions and clarify the scope of assistance offered through the live chat service.

Some very specific questions are legitimate, however, largely due to the bad designs of university websites where essential information (e.g. tuition fees, application methods, deadlines, etc.) is unavailable, outdated, or not readily visible to enquirers. In such cases, the enquirers may be encouraged to take a proactive approach of contacting the institutions with their specific questions.

Irrelevant questions: for live chats that are open to all without prior registration, chance is that some enquirers log in to chat without specific purposes. They may raise irrelevant or personal questions. To limit the damage of such chats, the counsellors should be trained to terminate chats initiated by such enquirers in a professional manner (e.g. stating the purpose and scope of the chat service), while filters and blacklists may be created to screen out repeated chats from these enquirers.

There are no standard ways to deal with challenging questions raised by the enquirers. But by clearly defining the purpose and scope of the live chat service and communicating such limits to the enquirers upfront, false expectations can be managed in advance. Other than that, technical filters may be applied to screen out spammers and irrelevant target groups for the chats to serve the pre-defined target users. Most importantly, the chat counsellors need to be trained to deal with unexpected circumstances in a professional manner. Institutions must bear in mind that live chats are not just for information provision purpose but also for relationship and image building!
Annex 3  Advising different types of enquirers

Undergraduate and master’s level vs. PhD level

Based on the feedback of the live chat advisors in the EduCoach project, enquirers for PhD and non-PhD programmes often raised similar questions about what is the best, how to get funding support, whether it is possible to work during the study, etc. The questions may be similar, but the answers to these questions and the counselling approach are substantially different with regard to the different student groups.

The difficulties in advising PhD students, in particular, lie on the lack of a uniform doctoral training system across Europe. Doctoral training is organised differently among different European countries or even within one single institution. In some countries, doctoral training starts with the identification of a thesis supervisor and the acceptance by a supervisor. In others, it starts with the application to a specific doctoral school or doctoral programme. Closely related to this is the choice of disciplines for the doctoral training, which depends on either the affiliation of the supervisor or the doctoral school or programme. Similarly, funding availability is often associated with project positions that the supervisor or doctoral school may be able to offer to the doctoral students rather than a centralised stipend/studentship system for all as in some English-speaking countries.

The kind of decentralised approach in the offer of doctoral training opportunities across Europe leads to a lot of seemingly basic questions from potential doctoral candidates about “what” should they study and “where” should they find or apply for a doctoral position. The lack of clearly presented, up-to-date (English) information on university websites additionally creates confusion among potential applicants.

In the EduCoach experience, advising enquirers at doctoral level turned out to be high on demand for the above reasons. Whereas enquiries of undergraduate and master’s studies may be directed to readily available information on existing websites of the universities, information portals or national agencies dealing with the promotion of higher education in Europe, enquiries of doctoral students require often clarification of the need in the first place, followed by explanation of the system differences, and by coaching the enquirers to reflect on what is the best fit for them and to be proactive in approaching the academics and programmes that they are interested in.

European vs. non-European

Also based on the EduCoach experience, some distinct differences were found among European and non-European users of the live chat service. European enquirers asked more often fact-finding questions to clarify certain pieces of information they may have found, whereas non-European enquirers asked more often abstract questions concerning personal advice or the opinion of the advisors. They may or may not have the basic information in hand to make a decision. Very often, they expected to be spoon-fed basic
information, which is readily available online, and be told what is the best, such as which rankings should they refer to, which country are the best to study in, which subject will lead to the best jobs, etc. At times, the EduCoach live chat counsellors were mistaken as recruitment agents and were requested to submit applications on their behalf.

Comparing the demands made by European and non-European enquirers in the project, it is clear that non-European users of the live chat service expected more than just information and advice. In addition to those, they are seeking reassurance and are expecting additional services that are provided by commercial agents. Knowing that non-European students, especially those from countries that are geographically and culturally distant from Europe, are more likely to engage commercial recruitment agents than European students, this is perhaps not a big surprise.
Annex 4  Case sharing

Domus Academy (DA)

Personalised online advising tools are part of a comprehensive marketing package at Domus Academy (DA), Italy. DA has been using live chat and webinars for student recruitment since 2012. It does not only provide these online tools to its academic departments to promote their study programmes but also centralized services to support the planning and delivery of such services, in particular, the webinars.

How were the Personalised online advising tools introduced into DA?

Use of these tools was initiated by the digital marketing team when the Digital Marketing Manager joined the institution. The initiative was met with an open-minded management which supported the development of the tools. Initially, some work was needed to involve the academics who were unfamiliar with the use of the tools and were “shy” (in front of the camera). To overcome this problem, the presence of technical staff and marketing staff was found helpful in easing their worries and in building up their confidence in handling the technology. Over time, the benefits of using webinars in student recruitment (from the statistics of visitors and applications) further increased the academics’ involvement in the whole webinar campaign.

How was the software chosen?

DA tested both free software (SlideShare) and paid software (Adobe Connect, WebEx, GoToMeeting) for the webinars. The final decision (Adobe Connect) was based largely on the availability of the function ‘registration form’ and ‘presentation templates’ (templates of reminders, videos recording, and branded email). It was decided not to use freeware, but to avoid using the more expensive webinar provider.

For live chat, DA tried both free software (Skype for one-on-one meetings, and Google Hangout for small group meetings) and paid software (Live Chat Inc.). A mix of these tools, both free and paid, were used for different purposes along the recruitment process.

Skype chats

DA has been using Skype for admission and counselling purposes, from imparting application information through converting potential students into applicants to providing advice on the admission process.

A typical composition of presenters for a skype conference call for admission purpose is: an admission officer, a programme director, and/or a teacher.
The Skype conference calls are used more often for the admission of undergraduate students. Calls for the admission of post-graduate students are arranged only on request, for example, when a programme director needs to interview an overseas candidate in the selection process. It is noted that Skype calls are used more often on candidates who need a visa to study in Italy, i.e. non-EU/EEA candidates.

DA recruits students via agents. In the case when the candidates have no access to the technology for the calls, the candidates can use the facilities of the agents. Some Skype calls are arranged by/via the agents.

*Integrated ‘live chat’ function on the official website*

Personalised online advising tools – live chat and webinar – were integrated into the institution’s website in a pilot project in summer 2012. The live chat service is offered to visitors of the website from 10am to 6pm (CET). The live chat box is available around the clock on the institution’s website, however. Visitors may leave offline messages through the website using the pop-up chat box. At the time of the site visit, DA also indicated the plan to outsource the chat service to trusted education advisors (agents) in specific countries to overcome the time zone barriers.

The number of live chats per day could reach 30-40. DA does not set any time limit for a chat. The duration per chat could range from 5 to 40 minutes depending on the type of questions (e.g. questions about scholarship, admission, programme information, career opportunities) which can take up very different amount of time. The purpose of live chat is to offer Personalised counselling, so there is no intention to set a time limit to the chats.

Commonly asked questions in the live chats are on the following topics:
- Student fees
- Course information
- Application procedures
- Enrolment requirements
- Accommodation
- Life as a foreign student
- Visa (esp. in returning chats)

*Webinars*

In May 2012, a webinar series about study programmes in DA was launched in the same pilot project. The project resulted in 27 webinars as of June 2014.

Typically a webinar is the outcome of shared work between (digital) marketing staff, communication staff, and academics in DA. For example, for a webinar on a contest for scholarships, the digital marketing team will initiate the event and invite the academics and the communication team to participate as presenters. They will then create ‘inviting’
presentation slides for the webinar based on the input of the other two teams and conduct basic training for the speakers on the use of the webinar tool.

A webinar usually lasts for less than an hour with 20 minutes of presentation by the speaker(s) and 20-30 minutes of Q&A.

Normally, a webinar takes place at around 2pm (CET) for reaching the largest pool of target recipients worldwide. For countries that cannot be reached at this time, webinars are held while staff members from DA are attending fairs in that specific region (e.g. Latin America). This is possible because the webinar system used is a web-based tool. DA’s staff members can use a personal computer and log onto the system to deliver the webinars. The web-based system also allows multiple speakers to log onto the webinar platform from different countries.

On average, the number of registrants for a webinar is between 70 and 100, while around 50 participate ‘live’ during the webinar (30-50% no-show). Apart from organising webinars to ‘introduce’ individual study programmes, DA also uses webinars to promote ‘competitions’ organised by the study programmes (indirect marketing).

How to get participants for the webinars?

- The webinars are advertised at least 10 days in advance, followed by a reminder five days before, and another reminder one day before the event.
- Invitations are sent to those who enquired about the study offers before and to new target audience via the institutions’ own online platforms, social network media, online PR portals, etc.

The experience of DA tells us that it is important to note that webinars are not a replacement of traditional marketing activities. To reach the target audience, it is necessary to spread the word through established marketing networks of the institution.

What are the follow-up actions after the webinar?

- Everyone who registered will receive a message with the video recording of the webinar. This includes prospects who participated and who didn’t participate in the webinar.
- The video will also be edited and posted online (e.g. DA’s YouTube channel) and be openly accessible to the public.

In which language(s) are the webinars delivered?

Study programmes offered by DA are in English. Webinars about the study programmes are delivered in English as well. However, if the regional director feels the need to do so, they will be offered in specific languages for different regions. If the webinars are
delivered in languages other than English, the language choices are dependent on in-house expertise (e.g. Russian, Spanish, Portuguese, which are languages spoken by some of the staff and students in the institution).

**What are the common technical problems encountered?**

Connectivity and audio-visual quality are the major problems. Some suggestions to tackle this problem are:

- to advise the participants to use cable internet rather than wireless connection
- to advise the participants to use headset to avoid feedback
- to allow only questions by text chat, not by voice chat function
- to allow only one speaker to talk at a time and only switch on the microphone of that particular speaker while s/he talks. Other speakers are told to ‘mute’ the microphone when they are not speaking.

**Where do the webinars take place?**

A webinar “corner” in an open plan office is set up with the following equipment:

- A spotlight (to prevent ‘pale’ faces on the screen)
- A video camera.
- A round table for 2-3 persons (speakers) with a laptop computer and a standalone microphone
- Another table for the technician (outside the frame of the screen) to moderate the chats
- The video camera is connected to the technician’s computer, which is connected to the internet, for streaming the webinar.
- A backdrop with visuals and information about the institution and the study programme
Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e) & University of Vaasa (UV)

Eindhoven University of Technology, the Netherlands, and the University of Vaasa, Finland, both tested the webinar tool of the EduCoach project. Unlike Domus Academy, their experience was with a webinar provider (StudyPortals in this case) who provided them with a webinar platform and supported them technically in the delivery of the webinars. Both universities were first-timers in the use of webinars for recruitment and were happy to have explored the new technology, thanks to the EduCoach project.

Motivation for testing webinars for recruitment purpose

Both TU/e and UV were exploring alternative, interactive, ‘digital’ means of marketing and promotion. They were attracted to test the technology by StudyPortals’ promotion of the EduCoach webinar service. Both universities used their webinars to promote Master’s programmes taught in English, but their programmes differ significantly in terms of tuition fee levels. At the time when the webinars were delivered, UV’s programmes were free of charge, whereas TU/e’s cost around EUR 13 000+/year for non-EEA students who were the prime target group identified for the trial webinar. The webinar technology provides a good platform to get in touch with qualified students worldwide. Therefore, it is an interesting way to reach potential fee-paying students globally. However, we also see in this case that universities not charging tuition fees venture into the new technology for the purpose of recruiting qualified students worldwide.

Lessons learnt by the first-timers

Both TU/e and VA tried the webinar tool, not because of institution-wide planning, but initiatives of individuals in the communication department and the international office respectively. The use of an external webinar service provider, in both cases, was proven to be a good choice because in-house expertise in hosting webinars was very much under-developed. For both universities, part of the ROI lay in the learning experience for all parties involved (including administrators, academics, students and IT support staff).

As first-timers, the two universities found it more relaxing and reliable to use a shared webinar platform hosted by a third-party service provider which has the experience and expertise in handling the software and in promoting the webinars to an audience beyond their reach. The advice offered by the EduCoach webinar team, gathered through the organisation of a series of webinars in the project, helped the new users structure the content of their webinars, prepare in-house support, and manage their anxiety and expectation in the use of the technology.

Despite all that, their experiences were not problem-free. One of the problems was a luxurious problem encountered by TU/e. Its webinar attracted over 200 participants, who were all very keen to raise their questions through text chat function of the webinar. The influx of the questions from all directions caught the chat moderators unprepared even though they had anticipated similar kinds of questions in advance (e.g. jobs during and
after the study, scholarships, deadlines, etc.). The lesson learnt was therefore: to coordinate, in advance, among the moderators who will be answering which type of questions and open different chat boxes/sessions for different types of questions if the software allows for this.

The other commonly encountered problem in webinars is technical hiccups. Interrupted internet connectivity on the receiving end is one of the hiccups which neither the service provider nor the presenting universities can solve during the webinar. Shortly before the webinar takes place, it is, however, advisable that a technical run be conducted with all the participants and speakers/moderators to ensure that their audio-visual set-up and internet connectivity are ready for the delivery and reception of the webinar. Some technical problems may be pre-empted and solved before the online event takes place (see sub-section 2.2.3 above).

With regard to the composition of the speakers in the webinar, the experience of TU/e shows that the involvement of students as presenters, in addition to academics and recruitment staff, is a very smart decision. A large number of the enquiries were directed to the student presenters, who have first-hand experience studying in the institution. Prior preparation, including the selection of ‘presentable’ students who are not shy in front of the camera and are fluent in the language of presentation, may take extra time and planning, but from the positive impact of the mixed composition of the presenters, it is considered worthwhile doing so.

Another lesson learnt by the two first-timers is that webinars are not a replacement of traditional marketing activities. The promotion of webinars relies still on other established marketing networks of the institution built up through fairs, social media, mass-mailing, etc. Those are the specific target groups that third-party webinar providers may not have access to. The use of shared webinar platforms, specifically those dedicated to the promotion of study programmes, is nevertheless a convenient way to explore new target groups in different world regions. TU/e, for example, was much satisfied with the number of new leads generated by the trial webinar, which was on par with leads generated by a study fair but with a much lower cost.

**Future planning**

With the closing of the EduCoach project in April 2015, the webinar team of the EduCoach consortium is also planning to sustain the service of the webinar platform with its own investment. The two universities have not decided whether they will launch their own webinar series or continue to subscribe to the shared platform, but they are both interested in continuing and extending the use of webinars for the promotion of different study programmes after the trial sessions.
Some of the obvious benefits of a shared platform are the availability of external advice and technical support (esp. when in-house IT support is inadequate or not available), enlarged student catchment area (esp. for universities that are exploring new markets), and low start-up as well as maintenance cost (esp. for universities that use webinars occasionally and seasonably). On the other hand, universities that are resource-rich and technically well-equipped and well-supported, and are in need of using the webinars often, building up an institutional webinar platform may be more cost-effective in the long-run. The choice of universities to build up its institutional webinar platform or subscribe to a shared webinar platform therefore depends on multiple considerations specific to each institution.
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