



# HOW TO NAVIGATE THE CHALLENGES OF **AGENT MANAGEMENT IN 2021**

Discover the latest agent trends and how to address the potential student information gap, which arises in the era of restricted travel.



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# Introduction

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COVID-19 and the dramatic restrictions to international mobility that stems from it has forever changed international student recruitment. One of the most significant areas of change, and one that requires the most evolution, is how international offices maintain and nurture their relationships with student recruitment agents.

Agents have played a major role in student recruitment for years, often being the first point of in-country contact for many prospective students around the world, while providing cultural awareness and regional market intelligence that universities rely on.

This potential need has led AgentBee to conclude that “the use of education agents will soar” in the coming years. Indeed, QS Enrolment Solutions’ data reveals a greater reliance from prospective students on agent recommendations than ever before.

With travel budgets cut, agents are an obvious solution to help fill that gap for recruitment teams who cannot travel. It is not a simple process and not all agents (or agent relationships) are made equal.

It is clear that agents will continue to play a necessary role in student recruitment, and yet what kind of university information they provide to prospective students is often less clear, as this white paper will explore.

As universities look ahead to a very different recruitment landscape in 2021, reassessing how and which agents they work with will be an important element in their student recruitment strategy.

This white paper will examine current global trends with agents, look at the best ways to manage these relationships, and consider how in-country representatives can supplement the work agents do and address information gaps which arise for prospective students.

Read on to discover how your institution can navigate the challenges of agent management in 2021 and boost your international student recruitment.





# Understanding agents

The [2019 ICEF Agent Barometer](#) showed a very confident agent market with the 2,065 agents surveyed placing 548,610 students into programmes. The report states that: "Agents are less troubled than at any other point in the past decade by the global economic and political environment in terms of their ability to refer student to foreign institutions."

The *QS International Student Survey* also shows an increase in the number of prospective international students who are already using an agent, up from 19% in 2019 to 22% in 2020.

		2020	2019	2018
Are you planning to, or have you already used an international education agent?	Have used an agent	22%	19%	14%
	Planning to use, but haven't yet	17%	23%	17%
	Not planning to use an agent	42%	36%	49%
	Unsure	19%	23%	22%

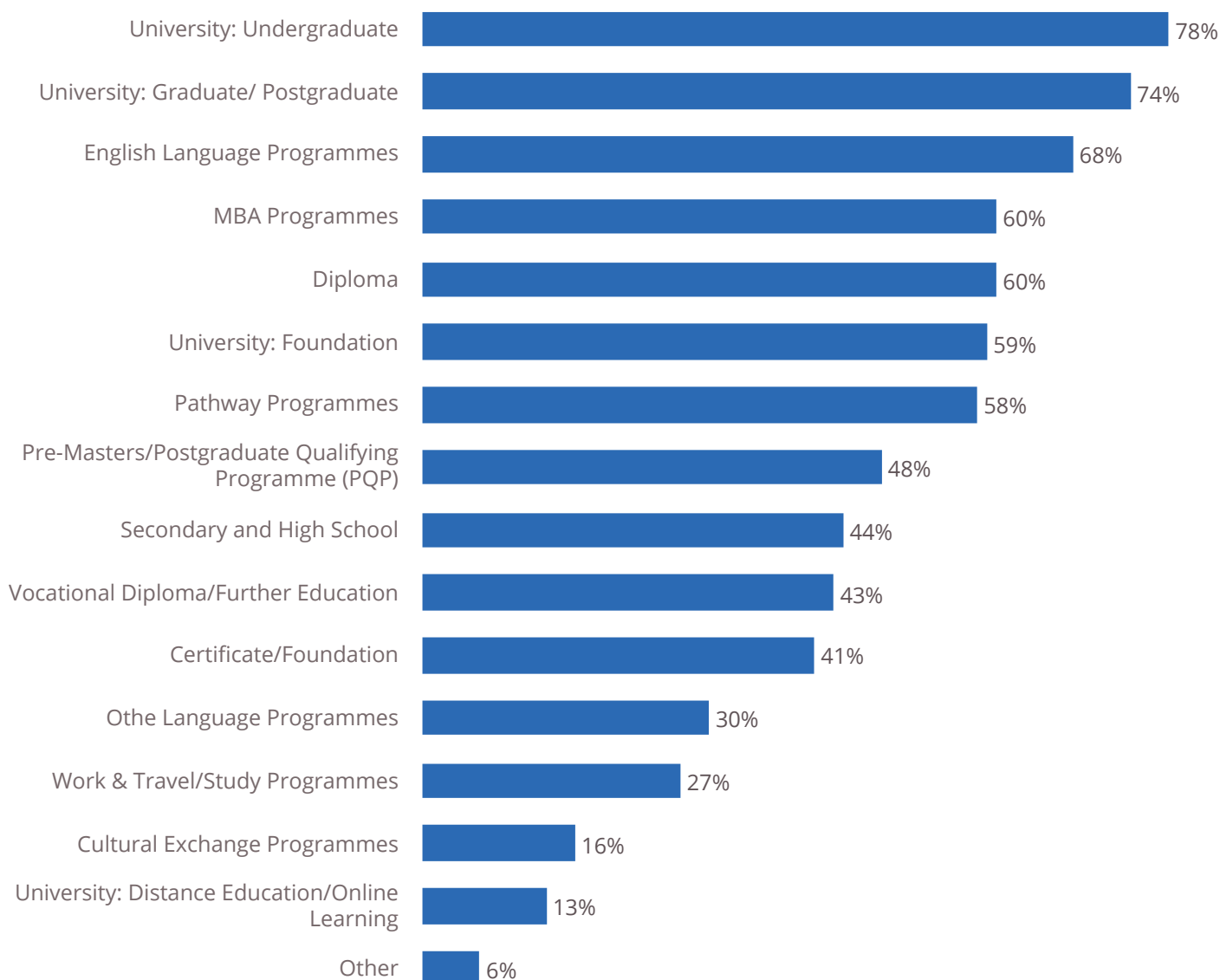
Student recruitment agencies were growing rapidly, and while COVID-19 has presented the same challenges to agents as it has to higher education institutions, some experts believe this growth in agent use will continue.

A recent AgentBee article suggests that agent use is primed for growth in four of the five key study destinations, with only Australia (with 75% of international students recruited by education agents) close to saturation. They expect New Zealand, Canada, the UK, and the US to all increase their reliance on agents in coming years.

In fact, when QS Enrolment Solutions compared the reasons students accepted their offer of enrolment to an Australian university for Semester 1 2020 to Semester 1 2021, they found that agent recommendation had an increase in influence of over 7.8%. With less access to other traditional sources of student recruitment like fairs, prospective students may see their local agents as a reliable way to make connections with universities.

Reason for Accepting Offer	S1 2020	S1 2021 (so far)	Variance (2021 vs 2020)
Reputation of the institution	30.4%	40.4%	+10%
Course selection	30.3%	34.0%	+3.7%
Location	9.6%	9.4%	-0.2%
Agent recommendation	1.1%	8.9%	+7.8%
Course Costs	3.9%	2.7%	-1.2%
Friends/relatives previously studied there	11.1%	3.2%	-7.9%

Meanwhile in the 2019 report, ICEF found that the most popular programmes that agents referred international students to were undergraduate and postgraduate programmes (78% and 74%, respectively), followed by English-language programmes (68%); MBA and diploma programmes (60% each); and university foundation and pathway programmes (59% and 58%, respectively).



What all this points to is that agents are set to remain a major force in international student recruitment in the coming years and that universities must continue to build strong relationships with them in order to expand their international student recruitment in the future.

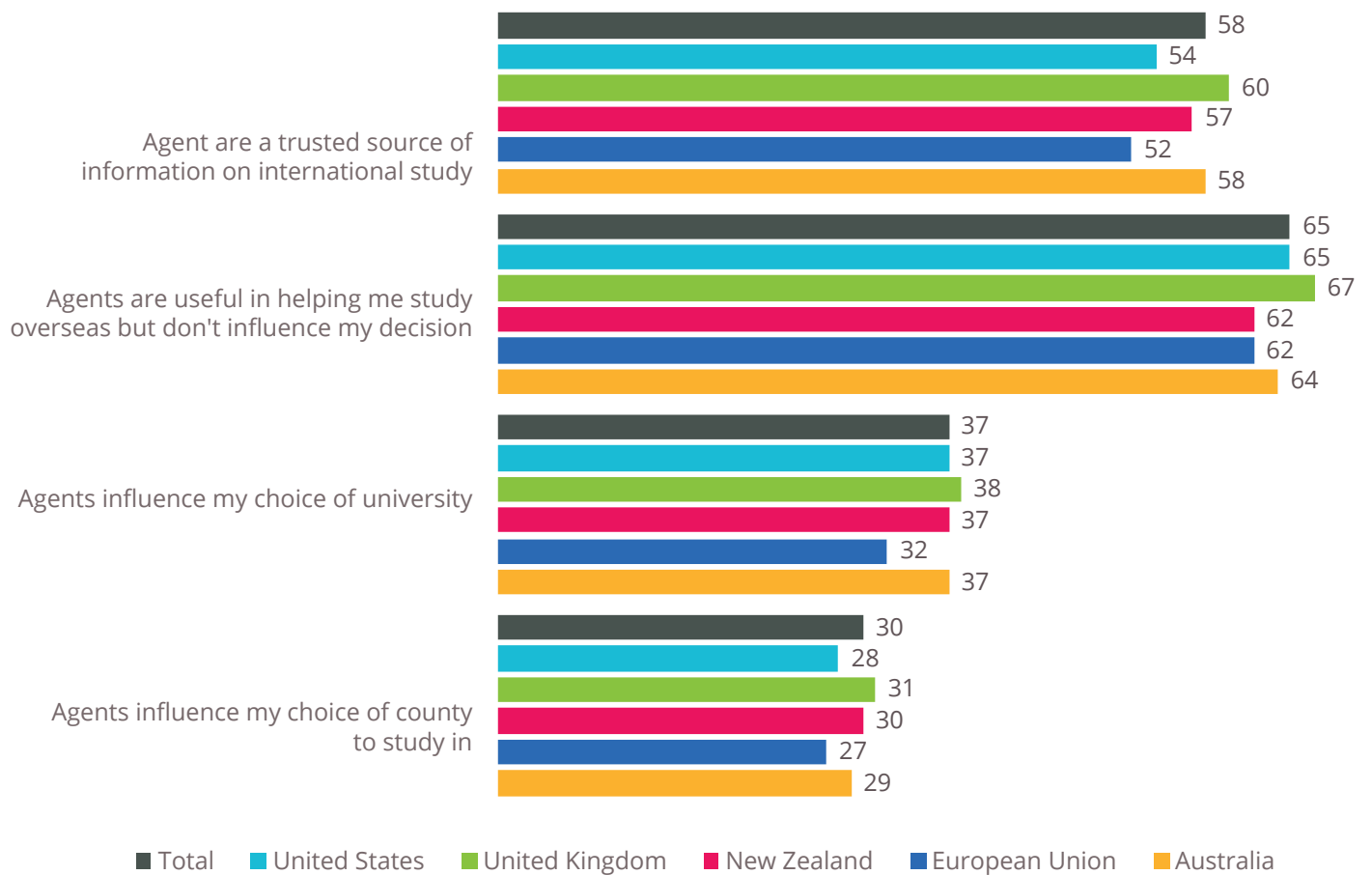


# The agent-student information gap

Understanding what information students rely on agents for is important in both understanding student motivations for reaching out to agents and ensuring your institution can effectively plug any gaps in information between agents and students.

In the *QS 2020 International Student Survey, Volume 2, Information and Influence*, 65% of prospective students said that they believed agents to be useful in helping them study overseas.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about international education agents



These numbers, compiled from close to 80,000 responses, show the broad, global range of influence that agents have on future students. While only 37% state that an agent will influence their choice of university, the majority of students trust agents to have accurate and up-to-date information about their desired universities.

As a reflection of students' views about the reliability of agent information, there was an assumption in the sector that agent offer holders should require less one-on-one communication from institutions compared to direct offer holders. QSES investigated more than 100,000 distinct communication data points from successful enrolments between 2016 to 2018 to investigate this assumption.

Surprisingly, careful analysis of these communications found that agented offer holders are more likely to engage in phone conversations than direct offer holders. Additionally, 10% of all communications with agented offer holders were phone calls, compared to 8.6% for direct applicants, as detailed here:

Average Comms			Preference of Comms Channel				
	Inbound	Outbound	Total Comms		Email	Phone	Webform
Agented	0.8	2.9	3.6	Agented	88%	10%	2%
Direct	1.2	3.3	4.5	Direct	89%	9%	2%

Figure: Agented vs Direct Offer to Enrol: Average number of 1-1 communications and % of total by channel

It is clear that agented students still need to be communicated with carefully and thoroughly about all major aspects of a university. When that information is not correct or no longer timely, the 65% of students that trust agents for that information could take that incorrect information at face value.

Up-to-date information about intake start dates, course offerings, fees, scholarships, or policy changes are critical to student decision making, particularly in a year where there is so much movement and so many unknowns. QSES data demonstrated that there was a 33% increase in conversions when agent-managed students are engaged with directly throughout their decision-making journey.

The real information gap, then, comes when the student is unable to speak to the university directly. Universities remain the most credible and valued source of information about themselves, and this is important. Ultimately, for all of the influence that agents may play, one trend that the most recent wave of QS International Student Surveys consistently point to is that most students believe themselves to be the final decision makers.

While influences like recommendations from friends, parents, and agents play some role, they are ultimately only a small factor in the decision-making process, when compared to a prospective student's own research and discussions with a potential institution. Although universities seek to make the best connections with agencies, they must do this while also seeking other avenues of communication with potential students in all target markets.



# Best practices for agent management

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As complex and varied as agent relationships are, agent management strategies can make the process more efficient and effective, now and in the coming years of renewed growth.

## Research the agent or agency

This goes beyond a standard internet search—universities should examine the agent’s activity on social media (especially Facebook, which is still the major platform in most global markets, excluding China).

They should be asking: how does this agent represent other clients; are they actively promoting other universities; is there a risk they may post anything which harms my institution?

Furthermore, this research must continue as universities pursue a relationship with an agent—seeing first hand how they (or how they do not) promote their institutions is critical.

## Keep detailed reporting on performance and market intelligence

Ensure that marketing and outreach campaigns have the same performance transparency as they would for internal campaigns. Data-driven decision making for future campaigns will be a decisive factor in the success of campaigns in that region.

Market research applies to both internal and external intelligence about that agency, and university representatives must ask questions like: what does that agent tell me about the market dynamics; what do other agents say about this agency; what do my agents tell me about other universities actively recruiting in this region?

## Work to the recruitment cycle

It is no surprise that agents work to the same cycle as the enrolment periods for the universities that they place students in.

As such, universities must ensure they reach out to agents, as well as provide marketing budgets, at the appropriate times and with enough notice.



## Cultivate good working relationships with agents

As agents are often the first (and even final) point of contact for a student with their desired university, it is essential that those agents show enthusiasm and an eager desire to partner with a university in reaching the right students. Some of the key things that will motivate an agent include:

- **An attractive compensation package:** Setting out a system of clear, achievable targets will encourage them to recruit more students to increase their earning potential.
- **Turnaround times:** If universities can ensure a quick turnaround time for key enrolment stages, agents will feel more confident in being able to move quickly to get their client the right students.
- **Marketing budget:** Giving agents the budgets to be able to adequately leverage digital or physical channels in their local market will increase a university's digital footprint in the market.
- **Flexibility:** With many student decisions made last minute, the more a university can be flexible on things such as test scores, qualifications, or deadlines, the more agents will be able to work with them to effectively enrol future students.





# Solutions when travel budgets are constrained

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Agent management comes with numerous complexities, which are made even more difficult this year due to restricted travel. As much as universities may try to manage agents remotely or alleviate the distance with a few recruitment trips to the region per year, there are still significant challenges.

Managing regional markets remotely, however careful and informed those strategies and operations are, cannot replace the keen regional awareness and long-term data insights customised to the university's needs and the nuances of the specific market.

A system of in-country representatives who act on the university's behalf can be an efficient, thorough, and often cost-effective solution to the issues of restricted global travel.

## Agent relationship management

In-country university representatives and recruitment teams can build and nurture relationships with agents. They can strengthen rapport and gain an agent's trust, which is key when fostering a positive working relationship. This in turn will enhance open communication, feedback, and positive results.

As those relationships are nurtured, they can review and evaluate an agent's potential and their dedication to recruiting for the institution, employing the methods listed on page three to determine if the agent is suitable to represent the institution.

They can train and equip agents with the strong knowledge they need to sell the institution, providing the most up-to-date information (thus eliminating the issues that arise with outdated information, as listed on page five and six).

This extends to the marketing and promotion strategy they provide and implement with the agent, ensuring the budget is optimised to attain a high return on investment.

## In-person representation

With trusted representatives acting as extensions of the university, institutions can drastically reduce the overhead of potentially sending someone over from the university itself. Instead, these representatives will act as the university's presence at education fairs, meeting potential leads and following up with the ones determined to be top-quality.

Responding to the restrictions this year, in-country representatives can run digital meet and greets or webinars, where the representative hosts culturally sensitive sessions that can best speak to the prospective students from that country.

## In-country, in-language, and in their time zone

In-country representatives can manage a university's social media accounts and create relevant content to resonate with the local market.

Building a network in-country is an important element to widen recruitment opportunities. They nurture links with educational partners, including schools, colleges, universities, government organisations, and employers.

Finally, by connecting with in-country alumni, these representatives can give future students the invaluable opportunity to hear first-hand what makes that university so special.

## Strategy and planning

By collecting market insights, in-country representatives can also establish a go-to market plan based on that intelligence, complemented by a careful understanding of historical trends.



# Conclusion

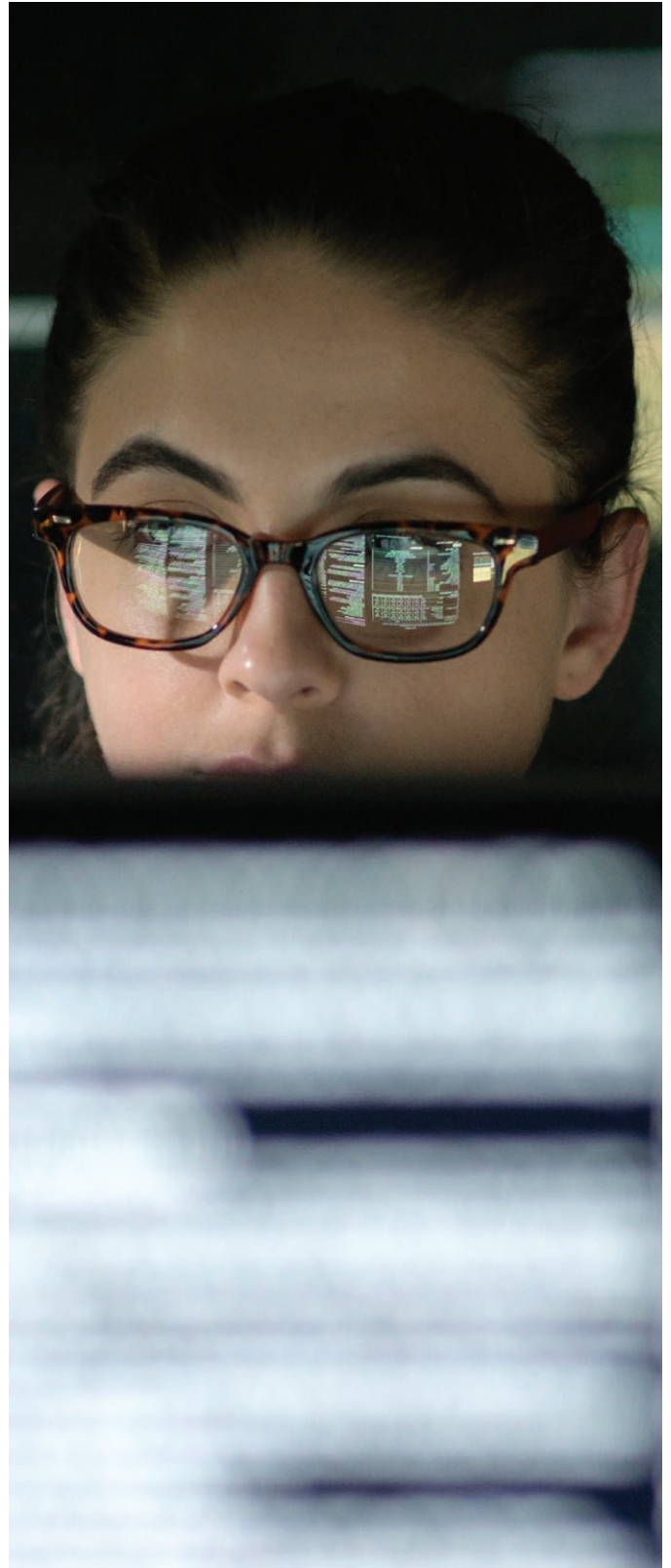
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Agents will continue to play an important role in international student recruitment in the coming years. To continue to expand and identify the right international students, universities will need to cultivate close relationships with agents and agencies.

However, that does not mean that agents should determine all aspects of that relationship, universities must decide who they work with and how they work together in a proactive fashion. This must be informed by data and regional awareness. There is no better time to reconsider the way forward with agent management.

In his introduction to QS' UK *International Student Survey*, former Education Minister Jo Johnson writes that to thrive in the new, virtual landscape of the post-COVID-19 world, "higher education institutions will need to rely more heavily on international student recruitment through a completely digital process."

Agent management will become more and more digital in the coming years, making trust and a thorough best practice policy even more critical than in the past. As such, effective agent management will prove to be a significant factor in the success of a university's student recruitment in the future.



# About QS Enrolment Solutions' Regional Recruitment Services

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## ENROLMENTSOLUTIONS



At QS Enrolment Solutions, our Regional Recruitment Services provide universities with a white-labelled, dedicated team based in-region anywhere across the globe.

Our Regional Managers work for your institution as your in-country representative and are the presence in local markets you need.

This offers cultural and market awareness that lead to nuances in the way we operate, effectively manage agents, and develop strategic campaigns.

Each Regional Recruitment partnership is bespoke, underpinned and further enhanced by data-detailed reporting. Data transparency is at the heart of all QS Enrolment Solutions' offerings and universities can access their data via live and interactive reporting dashboards.

To find out more about QS Enrolment Solutions' services and how we can partner to enhance your agent management or regional representation, please contact, [qses.sales@qs.com](mailto:qses.sales@qs.com).



# About QS

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QS Quacquarelli Symonds is the world's leading provider of services, analytics, and insights to the global higher education sector. Our mission is to enable motivated people anywhere in the world to fulfil their potential through educational achievement, international mobility, and career development.

Our QS World University Rankings portfolio, inaugurated in 2004, has grown to become the world's most popular source of comparative data about university performance. Our flagship website, [www.TopUniversities.com](http://www.TopUniversities.com) – the home of our rankings – was viewed 149 million times in 2019, and over 94,000 media clippings pertaining to, or mentioning, QS were published by media outlets across the world in 2019.

## QS portfolio

- **QS Digital and Events** provides prospective undergraduate, graduate, and MBA applicants with independent guidance throughout their search and decision making. Our world-class digital platforms include TopUniversities.com, TopMBA.com, and QSLearn.com which support search and inform applications to programs matching their profile and aspirations. In parallel, prospective students can meet, either virtually or face-to-face, with admissions officers of international universities and business schools. For universities and business schools, it offers effective and innovative digital and off-line student recruitment and branding solutions.
- **QS Enrolment Solutions** partners with higher education institutions to maximize their student recruitment, enrolment and retention strategies with a range of services that leverage data-driven insights to optimize communications and student conversion. With over 20 years of experience QSES has an unequalled understanding of international student decision-making. Our international office locations (UK, Romania, India, Malaysia, and Australia) enable us to operate across time zones to deliver high value to our partners and exceptional services for applicants.
- **The QS Intelligence Unit** is a leading originator of institutional performance insight drawing on unique proprietary datasets gathered in pursuit of its published research. Best known for the widely referenced QS World University Rankings, today comprising variants by discipline and geography, the unit also operates a sophisticated, multi-dimensional quality standard; a comprehensive analytics platform facilitating advanced benchmarking; and an in-demand consulting team. Our insights both inform and are informed by frequent presence and digital conferences for educators, university leaders, and policy makers.
- **QS Unisolution** is dedicated to developing SaaS technology solutions to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of international mobility, relations, and recruitment functions within education, positively impacting the educational experience for the students, staff, and partners we serve.



For more information about the QS services, please visit [www.qs.com](http://www.qs.com) or contact [b2bmarketing@qs.com](mailto:b2bmarketing@qs.com)

To continue empowering motivated individuals and institutions across the world alike during the coronavirus outbreak, QS's response has included:

- Moving its [student recruitment events online](#), ensuring that universities and talented potential applicants across the world are still able to achieve high-quality personalized engagement.
- Expanding its range of digital marketing offerings, empowering student recruitment teams as they seek to maintain outreach and enrolment efforts.
- Launching a webinar series designed to enable university faculty and administrators alike to share best practices as they transition their educational offerings into the virtual classroom.
- Ongoing surveys of prospective students and institutions globally to analyze how the COVID-19 crisis is impacting them.

In 2019, as part of our commitment to sustainability, [QS became a certified CarbonNeutral® Company](#), reflecting our efforts to reduce our impact on the environment through a range of efficiency initiatives and offsetting unavoidable emissions through a verified carbon offset forestry project in Brazil.

