GATE Germany
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OPTIMIZING ENGLISH-LANGUAGE WEBSITES FOR INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCES

Top 10 Insights from a Series of Website Analyses

Optimizing English-Language Websites for International Audiences

Top 10 Insights from a Series of Website Analyses

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

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

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

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

## 1   *Lack of Clearly Defined Goals and Target Audiences*

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

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

Goals and target audiences can help determine:

- What information to include on a page
- How it should be presented
- Which details should be highlighted

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

Weak Goal	Strong Goal
☞ To inform	☝ To provide interesting and useful information about student life at our university in order to ultimately convince prospects to apply.
Unclear Target Audience	**Clear Target Audience**
☞ Students	☝ Prospective bachelor's-level students from our partner institutions worldwide (primarily Europe and the US) interested in exchange programs taught in English in all areas of study; secondary audiences may include parents, study abroad advisors, and partner institutions.

2 INCONSISTENCIES WITH LANGUAGE AND TERMS

A BRITISH VS. AMERICAN ENGLISH

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

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

Capitalization Style	Example of Correct Usage
British English Only the first word in a title is capitalized (unless there are proper nouns, which are always capitalized).	*"Funding **y**our **s**tudies at the University of Hamburg"*
American English All words in a title are capitalized except prepositions, articles, conjunctions, and the "to" in infinitives (when in the middle of the title).	*"Funding **Y**our **S**tudies at the University of Hamburg"*

B TRANSLATED TERMS

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

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

| Common Higher Ed Terms: British vs. American English	
British English	**American English**
Postgraduate	Graduate
Course	Degree program
Module/unit	Course
Faculty	Department
Teaching staff	Faculty

3   MISSING "CALLS TO ACTION"

Many pages reviewed were missing clear "calls to action" that encourage visitors to take the next step: to obtain more information, to apply, to enroll, etc. As a result, site visitors may not know what they are supposed to do on a page or where they should go next.
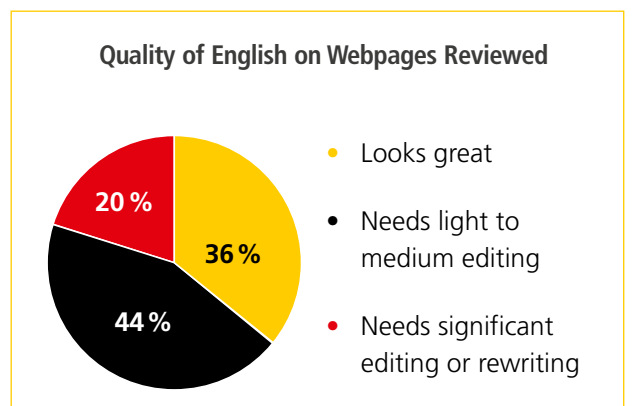
Ideally, every page on a website should lead site visitors to the next page or the next step in the process. By creating these "pathways" for your visitors to follow, you will make it as easy as possible for them to continue moving through the website toward an end goal (e.g., submitting an application, enrolling, etc.).
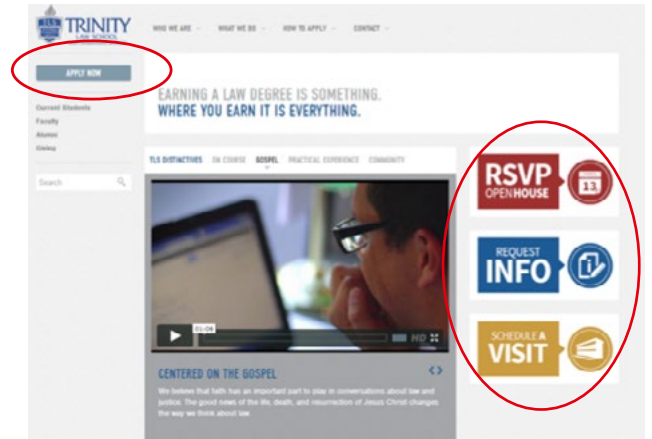
4   POOR OR AWKWARD ENGLISH

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

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

Quality of English on Webpages Reviewed

- Looks great
- Needs light to medium editing
- Needs significant editing or rewriting

20 %
36 %
44 %

We recommend having all content edited by a native English speaker before posting it online. Creating a **style guide** for usage, punctuation, and formatting would help enforce stylistic unity within the pages, especially as the content may be managed by more than one person.

5   IMAGES THAT DON'T GIVE A GOOD SENSE OF THE UNIVERSITY

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

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

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

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

6   OUTDATED WEB DESIGN

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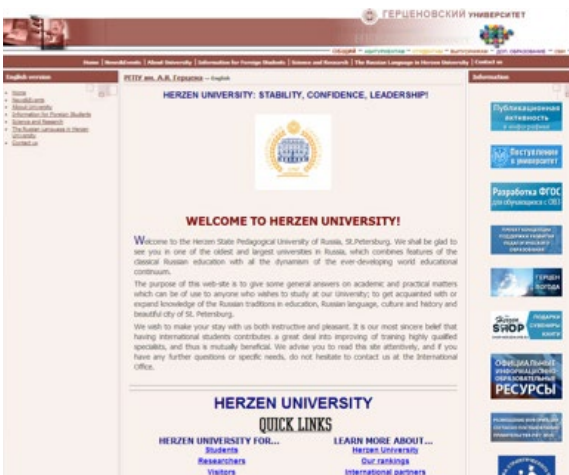
Outdated Web Design   Modern Web Design
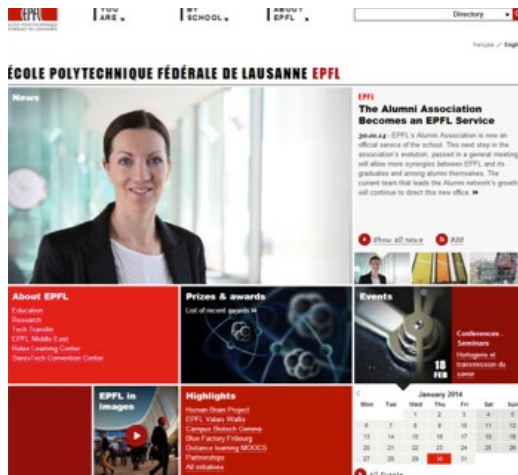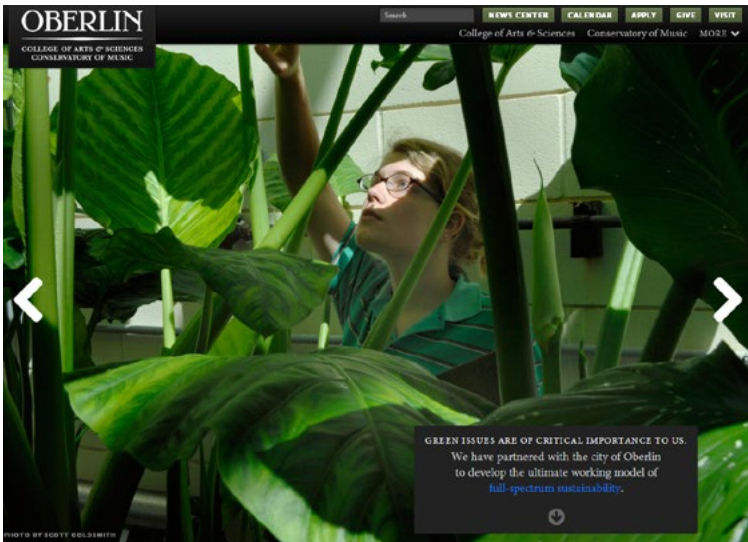

It is also important to keep in mind how a site will look on a mobile phone or tablet, as international students are likely to access online content this way. We visited each page under review from mobile devices to check for overall content appearance, formatting irregularities, and inaccessible content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

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

Appearance on Computer Screen   Appearance on Smartphone
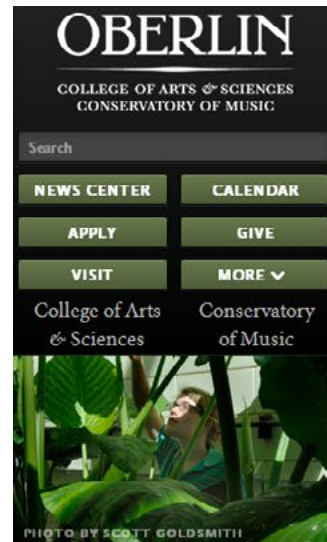
7   LARGE BLOCKS OF TEXT

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

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

BREAK UP TEXT USING THESE TECHNIQUES:

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

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

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

- **List facts succinctly in call-out boxes.**
  E.g., instead of *"The period of study for the programme is three semesters,"* try *"Duration: Three semesters."*

Instead of this…   Try this…

International Cooperation

The very foundation of the University was directly linked to international academia. Some of the University's first leading teachers were German professors such as Johann Bartels, Franz Erdman and Christian Fren. The famous German professor Karl Fuchs, who was both the founder of the Kazan Medical School and the first European researcher of Tatar history and culture, became the University's rector in the 1820s and was awarded the title of Honorable Citizen of Kazan. Kazan University has since had one other international rector, professor Ivan Braun from Austria.

Today the University continues to be one of the leading Russia's HEIs in the area of international cooperation, being rated among 600 best world universities according to QS Ranking.

KFU has partner agreements with approximately 100 partner universities in more than 35 countries of Europe, America, and Asia. Thanks to long-term fruitful cooperation with the Justus-Liebig University of Giessen (Germany), the Superior Institute of Materials and Advance Mechanics, ISMANS (France), research center RIKEN (Japan) and other partners Kazan University participates in various joint programs, to include "double" diploma initiatives and cotutelle agreements.

Each year more than 700 KFU students, postgraduates and faculty members visit foreign universities and research centers, take part in international conferences. KFU hosts more than 800 international students participating in major educational, exchange and short-term programs. Every academic year the University hosts 1500 foreign specialists who participate in various scientific events, develop and introduce new courses, deliver lectures and master classes, etc. Eighteen visiting professors employed by the University on a regular basis teach Chinese, Korean, Farsi, German, Spanish, English, etc.

Each year the University runs about 30 international team projects. Its postgraduates, researchers and teachers win on average 60-70 individual grants from well-known organizations and foundations, such as DAAD, DFG, Volkswagen Foundation, European Commission, CRDF, Carnegie Foundation, etc. KFU enjoys support from the national funding bodies of Belgium, France, Germany, Sweden, Japan, China, and other countries.

Since 2006 the Republic of Tatarstan runs a unique budget-financed scheme in support of training, re-training and upgrade of qualification of staff at Russian and foreign educational and research institutions. This is the first initiative of this sort in Russia. It is aimed at the education and support of intellectual elite of Tatarstan. Each year about 50 KFU students and faculty members receive governmental support for study abroad. No other republican HEIs can boast of such high performance.

Research and study in an international organization

Internationalization is one of the University of Groningen's strategic policy spearheads and an important instrument in improving quality, innovation and diversity. The University of Groningen has a strong international reputation and a good, swiftly climbing position in the international rankings list.

Degree programmes

In 2011, the University of Groningen was assessed by the International Student Barometer as 'the best university in the Netherlands'. The University of Groningen offers a wide, international curriculum, with over 80 English-taught Master's degree programmes and PhD programmes, as well as 20 English-taught degree programmes at Bachelor's level.

Many degree programmes work intensively with international partners. Examples include the 8 prestigious Erasmus Mundus programmes and a swiftly increasing number of Double degree programmes.

Internationalization policy

The University of Groningen already has 4000 international students with over 120 different nationalities – we hope to reach 5000 international students in 2015. 20% of the staff and 60% of all PhD students are from abroad. The University of Groningen is proud that the European Union has accredited it with both the Diploma Supplement and the ECTS label.

Student and staff exchanges form an important part of the internationalization policy. By 2015, the University of Groningen wants half of all its students to have gained experience abroad during their studies, and it has made incentive funds available to this end.

Strategic partners

There are many types of international cooperation in both teaching and research. Strategic partners and networks at the University of Groningen include the U4 network with Uppsala, Göttingen and Ghent; the Coimbra network; Talatra…

8   MISSING OR CONFUSING KEY INFORMATION

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

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

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

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

9   USABILITY ISSUES

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

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

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

• Example: *On the website shown below, the English language option has been selected. The body text appears in English, but the navigation menus do not – making it difficult to navigate the website if you don't speak Portuguese. Additionally, some of the navigation options lead to pages in English, and others lead to pages in Portuguese.*
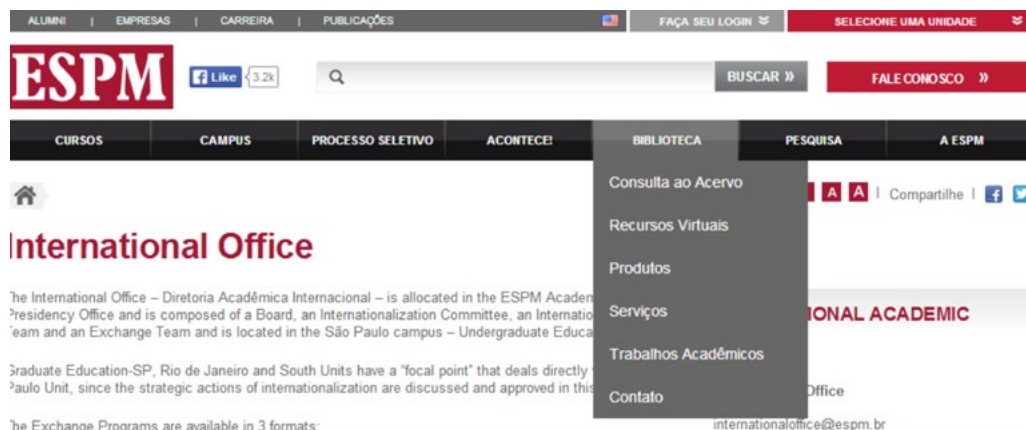
10   GENERIC OR LACK OF PROMOTIONAL TEXT AND CONTENT

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

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

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

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