# BUILDING A USER-CENTRED ONLINE PRESENCE: CONSOLIDATING WEBSITES FOR MAXIMUM IMPACT

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# Building a user-centred online presence: Consolidating websites for maximum impact

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by:

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*Around the world, universities and colleges of all sorts are facing similar challenges (and opportunities) when it comes to the dramatic increase in international student mobility. GATE-Germany has commissioned eight case studies in 2011 to provide a snapshot of how certain institutions are approaching various aspects of international marketing and recruitment from using data to improve their website to creating a dedicated office for funded students from abroad. Each of the case studies reflects a particular national and international context, as well a particular moment in time; what each of these institutions will be undertaking in 10 years could very well depend on how mobility flows change – or their senior administrators! The intent of these studies was not to provide a step-by-step guide on how to do what they have each done, but to help the reader get a sense of what their colleagues are doing globally, as well as to inspire new ideas for ways to improve activities at home. We are extremely grateful for all of the interviewees who shared honestly and openly for this project, and wish everyone happy reading!*

## Introduction

With university staff and students increasingly sourcing information online, it is becoming even more important for university websites to act as a key marketing tool and a single source for information. Understanding user behavior and structuring information accordingly is a critical factor in making websites both accessible and engaging for users. However the sheer size of many institutions and their respective web presences makes governance and the ability to update information considerably complex.

For many users, particularly domestic and international students searching for universities online, the web is the way they find information. International rankings are important, but how universities are portrayed through their websites, and how they bring their strengths to life, are influential factors affecting student choice. Similarly, university staff seek to showcase their research capabilities and outputs on the university website as well as use it to access important internal information. The ability for universities to structure their content appropriately has an impact on their engagement with these key audiences that cannot be overstated.

This case study focuses on how a consolidation and revision of a web presence for a university can have an extremely positive impact on its engagement with key audiences, as well as create positive change. With the right governance and training frameworks to accompany the technical and process changes, Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia has successfully brought its offer to life online.

To do so, Macquarie University reconfigured its web presence, bringing together disparate sites and eliminating unnecessary pages, updating information, and introducing a new content management system at the same time as revising its information architecture and structure to be more aligned to the needs of its users. By undertaking user research, the web team identified priorities, segregated content and rolled out a comprehensive migration plan for the university's myriad sites.

| | Macquarie University |
|---:|:---|
| Type of Institution: | Public University |
| Location: | Australia |
| Number of Students: | 31,286 |
| Percentage of International Students: | 34 % (10,691) |
| Web Address: | www.mq.edu.au |

## Background

Macquarie University is consistently ranked in the top 10 in Australia and the top 200 universities worldwide. It has the largest student exchange program in Australia and a high percentage of international students. The university launched a strategic plan to enhance research, teaching, infrastructure and academic rankings by its 50th anniversary in 2014.

As part of the 'Macquarie@50' vision, the university positioned itself as a leader in sustainability, with a global outlook and a prime position in a business hub, with several leading research centers, schools, and institutes. These are important aspects of its reputation as a research intensive institution and also provide the context for its branding.

In 2008-09, the university introduced a new brand strategy termed "One Voice One Vision" to bring to life its key attributes – ambitious, contemporary, and friendly – and aligns key marketing tools and events. The aim was to help bring consistency across the visual, verbal, behavioral, and other aspects of its brand expression. A new web strategy formed part of this brand refresh, based on comprehensive research, competitor analysis, and stakeholder consultation.

The Macquarie web vision was to use its online presence to create positive experiences for staff, students, and other communities, moving towards the objectives of Macquarie@50. However an audit revealed that the Macquarie university online presence actually consisted of 370 individual websites and in excess of 750,000 web pages. Although these were conceived of by the public as one presence, in reality, there were multiple owners, multiple host servers, and multiple sources of information on the same topic. The 'site' was actually a diverse environment, technically static, using multiple applications for different audiences, with heavy duplication of content, some of which was out of date. This is a common situation facing many universities around the world.

Macquarie undertook **user research** to reveal that the information pathways to find key information were deemed to be cluttered and unclear. User research also revealed three key audiences: staff, students, and the general public. The research further identified priorities with respect to information types or "groupings". From this, a major web consolidation project was developed by the web team.

## *IMPLEMENTATION*

Based on user research, the web team worked with stakeholders to develop 'three presences' to group information by audience: staff, students, and public. It created a new information architecture that reflected the search priorities identified through user testing. Part of this framework entailed taking ownership of all university websites and establishing an appropriate governance framework to oversee the online presence, across faculties, departments, and business units. Universities seeking to undertake such an effort should be aware of the enormity and complexity of this task.

The overall project objectives for **new information architecture** were to: separate existing content into three target audiences, assist target audiences locate required information as easily as possible, and indicate pathways so audiences could navigate effectively and efficiently. These were all deemed important aspects of a positive user experience.

Due to the large number of sites and pages involved, the web consolidation project was broken into **phases**. Phase one was based around understanding audience needs, developing an overarching information architecture, aligning pages into three separate audiences, identifying site owners and approving these through the web steering committee. It also included an initial round of migrating a series of pilot sites into a new content management system.

Phase two of the web project was to roll out the approach across all remaining websites over a two year period, breaking up existing sites, migrating all information into the new content management system, and focusing on creating single sources of information for content re-use.

An **in-house team** was mostly used to implement the project, with additional consultants brought on board to assist with change and project management. The team included an information architect, graphic and web designers, information analysts, programmers, web content coordinators, and a project manager. A key part of the project was working with other initiatives occurring concurrently, such as the implementation of a new comprehensive search tool and a new integrated course finder tool. With the new information architecture, a new design was created for the home pages of pilot sites, and some of the content had to be updated and rewritten.

The governance was built around engagement with and approval of a Web Steering Committee, representing a senior leadership tier of the university. Concurrently, regular information sessions were held with web coordinators across faculties and departments. However as time went on, it became apparent that a more detailed and comprehensive governance policy and structure had to be developed to manage and guide content, manage approvals, and create some consistency across the three presences and their composite sites.

One of the issues identified was the diverse skills and experience of web coordinators some of whom had a technical background, compared to others who had more marketing and communications backgrounds with limited technical skills. They also worked with a number of different web hosting platforms and their existing sites were coded in different ways. This created an additional degree of complexity for the project team working with them.

Another issue facing the project team was the need to obtain approval at different stages – such as home page designs – within a top-down governance structure. Determining the right stakeholders to engage at different times had a critical impact on the project timeframes and critical path delivery.

A high degree of engagement across multiple levels of the organization was critical to the success of this project. Clear and ongoing communications were found to really lay the groundwork for staff engagement during the project implementation. An initial "road show" (where the project was explained) across campus provided initial information to different constituencies, and prior to the launch a video message from the Deputy Vice Chancellor of Development and International reinforced the importance of the web project in working towards the vision for the institution. A video message from the Vice Chancellor was placed on the site when it launched to reiterate the big picture and priorities for Macquarie@50 and engage staff, students, and the public.

There were also important **branding aspects** for the project. Although Macquarie University had a large marketing team and an in-house Online Communications Manager, they also outsourced some aspects of communications design to an external agency. A key challenge was developing online brand guidelines as the project progressed, including templates and a style guide for the web.

To bring together One Voice One Image online, Macquarie University had introduced a **new content management system** across the campus with the migration of several pilot sites in the first instance. The aim was to enable content experts with the capacity to author and authorize their own content. **Gatekeepers** were also identified through the governance policy, which spoke to content ownership, access, security, standards and processes. Having clear roles and responsibilities mapped out in the governance policy and for stakeholders as a key challenge. Phase two therefore involved introducing new staff into key positions and upskilling existing staff to deal with new requirements associated with the content management system.

For example, many staff were not used to updating web content on a regular basis. For academic staff, such pieces of work were just one of many other tasks that did not contribute to their research rankings, outputs (teaching and publications), and perceived productivity. For marketing staff, being able to answer questions about the project and using the content management system for their internal clients (other staff) was a key challenge.

A **training program** was therefore devised to help staff understand the content management system. This included face-to-face delivery as well as online training built into modules that addressed core competencies. However a broader **cultural change** was identified as a medium term goal to help drive project success. Placing information online through a wiki, and responding to questions as well as providing explanations for staff were important steps taken to increase transparency and share information internally.

Another part of this culture change was using the mandate of a 'single source of truth' in creating information and content that could be centralized and linked to from different parts of the site or three presences, within the one content management system. This was to increase accuracy and avoid duplication. It also meant real-time changes were automatically made to linked content. Factoring in web lifecycle management and metadata tags were also important aspects of content management. Google Analytics (a popular tracking tool) was also applied across the site to enable continuous tracking of user behavior. These changes all signified behavioral change for staff using the new web presence.

By bringing together a new content management system, new information architecture, an audience focus, training, and governance, Macquarie University was able to successfully launch its new website. Acknowledging the culture change, approvals, and gaps in knowledge and skills of the existing team enabled a robust framework and phased planning to be developed for project implementation.

### Summary and Findings

- Websites are an important branding tool and form of engagement, particularly with international audiences.

- Many universities struggle with the complexity and diversity of their web content – which is not always optimized with an audience focus.

- Regular user research can help identify areas of improvement.

- Consolidating content through a centralized content management system is an enormous undertaking but can greatly improve web content quality.

- Web project plans should include milestones but also factor in approval times and significant stakeholder consultation, engagement and communications to help drive culture change.

- Having a far-reaching message from a high level can help project implementation and audience engagement.