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University Website Functionality and Student Recruitment Strategies

Evidence from 76 websites of universities, IT companies and online education platforms

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Universities compete for applicants online

Demographic decline sharpens competition with other universities, including foreign ones, and with online education platforms. The website is one of the first channels through which an applicant meets a university.

JOB 1 · FOR INSIDERS

Reference desk

Timetable, news, regulations and announcements for current students and staff.

JOB 2 · FOR APPLICANTS

Recruitment channel

Needs two-way interaction: regular content, reviews, enquiries, a personal account.

Existing approaches rate a website with one score

Functional typologies

Information, communication and transaction functions

Huizingh, 2000; Palmer & Griffith, 1998

Stage model eMICA

Promotion → interaction → transactions; applied to Chilean universities

Cerpa et al., 2007

Maturity studies

381 Portuguese SMEs: most websites stop at the promotion stage

García-García et al., 2021

Missing: **which audiences** a website supports, and **whether its functions fit** the institution's marketing strategy.

AIM OF THE STUDY

To assess how well university website functionality fits the strategies of attracting applicants and retaining students, and to locate typical areas of functional deficit.

Each website is described by 29 binary elements

29

elements of functionality and content

Each coded 1 if present on the website, 0 if absent

6

stakeholder groups

Clients, regular clients, job seekers, partners, employees, the public

3

technology levels

Web 1.0: 17 elements
Web 2.0: 11 elements
Web+AI: 1 element

Coverage index = share of implemented elements addressed to a stakeholder group or a technology level (0 to 1)

Data collected automatically with a Python tool; manual check of 7 websites gave 96.6% agreement.

Sample: 76 websites from education and IT

25
Universities

26
IT companies

25
Online education platforms

Shared subject area, different types of institution: a commercial company, a formal education institution and a commercial non-formal education platform. 45 Ukrainian and 31 foreign institutions.

With 25 websites per group, a difference in shares is reliable from about 28 percentage points.

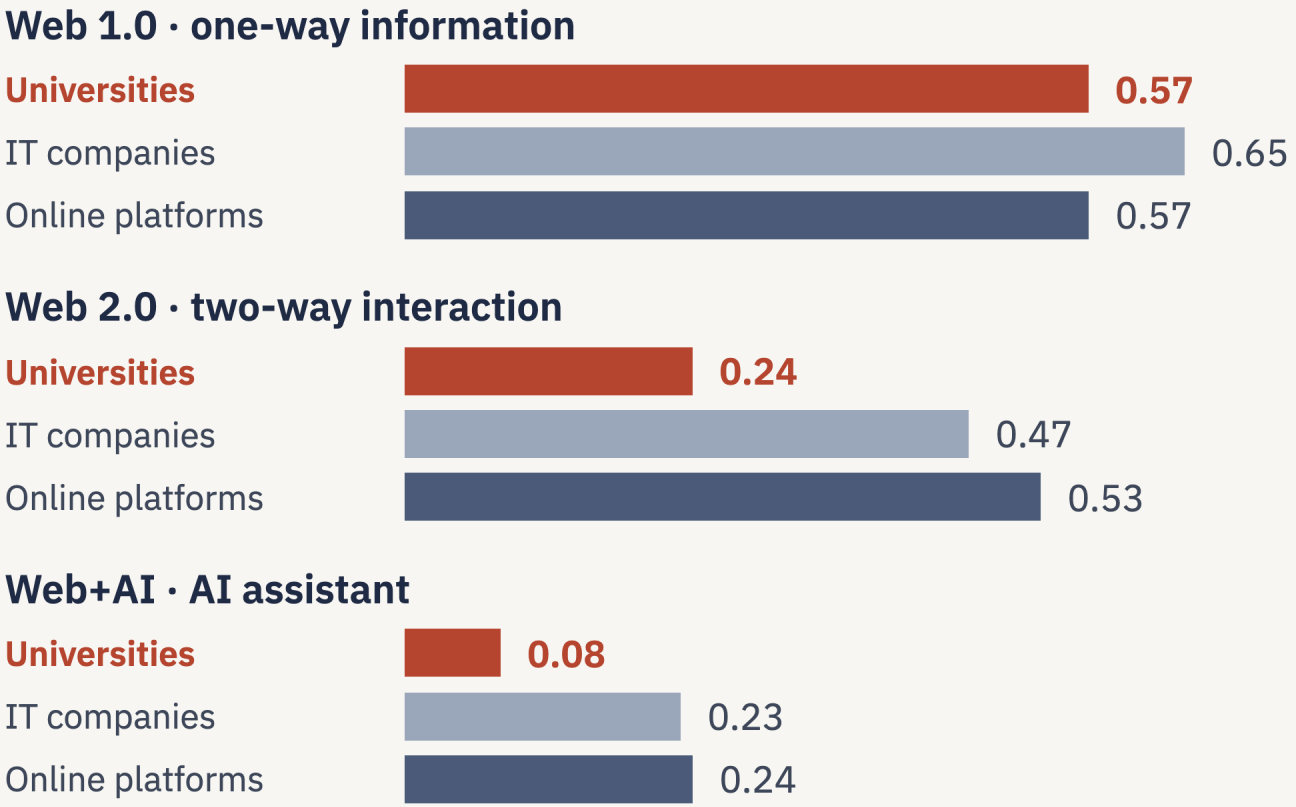
University websites implement the fewest elements

Mean number of implemented elements, out of 29



Medians: 16, 15 and 12. The question is **which** elements are missing.

The gap lies in two-way interaction (Web 2.0)



×2

University websites implement Web 2.0 elements about half as often as the other groups.

Coverage index by technology level

Universities inform well but rarely invite dialogue

Share of websites with the element, %

Element	Universities	IT companies	Platforms
Blog / regular content	28	96	88
Online tests	28	38	72
Online payment / ordering	20	50	60
User-generated content	0	46	4
Personalisation / recommendations	0	35	20
News	96	69	52
Site search	88	42	60

Shaded rows: the only elements where universities lead. Both serve **insiders**, not applicants.

Against marketing strategies, this is a functional deficit

Strategy	What the website needs	Min. level	Coverage: universities vs others
Attracting applicants	Regular content, reviews, success stories, enquiry form	Web 1.0–2.0	0.45 vs 0.57–0.61
Retaining students	Personal account, personalised communication	Web 2.0	0.38 vs 0.51–0.55

Coverage of the stakeholder groups “clients” (applicants) and “regular clients” (students); the strategy matrix is part of the dissertation research.

FUNCTIONAL DEFICIT

Implemented functionality does not support the marketing goal the institution pursues. Outwardly the site looks complete: it has news, documents and search.

The deficit is not about audience size

Median Tranco domain rank (lower = more popular)

78.7k **Universities**

108.7k Online platforms

265.7k IT companies

Spearman correlation with the number of elements, universities

Metric	rs	Result
Tranco rank (n = 25)	−0.15	not significant
Open PageRank (n = 25)	+0.26	not significant
Website size (n = 14)	+0.65	significant, α = 0.05

The most popular websites implement the fewest elements. Functionality follows the institution's tasks, which agrees with García-García et al. (2021).

Conclusions

1

University websites match other institutions on one-way information but implement two-way interaction about half as often: the **promotion stage** in eMICA terms.

2

Measured against the strategies of attracting applicants and retaining students, this is a **functional deficit**.

3

First fixes lie at Web 2.0 and need no AI: regular content, alumni stories and reviews, admission steps, an applicant account.

NEXT STEPS

A formal model linking marketing strategies to website functionality · clustering websites by coverage profiles · a larger sample of Ukrainian universities

Thank you

Questions and comments are welcome

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