Reputations are built primarily on the foundation of high-quality activities, outputs and achievements, but professional communications, marketing and stakeholder engagement can play an important role in building a clear and distinctive identity and a compelling narrative for the University.
The best universities in the world harness digital communications tools to support their strategic aims, to build awareness of their high-quality outputs and proudly differentiate their mission.

Our analysis has shown that investment made by the global powerhouse university brands included within this report guarantees them huge engagement in their digital content.

The highest volume of website visits, per year, amongst this group reaches almost 60 million. Several million more than typical B2B or B2C digital platforms.

Website optimisation strategies recoup extraordinary return on investment, equivalent to millions of USD of investment in paid advertising when successfully implemented.

Content is tailored to audience, whilst maintaining and retaining the exclusivity and authority created by each of these world class institutions.

Strategies to engage stakeholder audiences via social media vary across the world’s best known higher education providers.

If successful use of social media is measured by the volume of engagement, successful strategies amongst this high performing group includes linkages between a variation of social media channels and external content sources, culminating in extremely high link velocity.
A university reputation is built on the awareness of, and engagement with, the exceptional outputs and achievements of all staff, students and stakeholders associated with that institution. The perception held by future students, partners and collaborators of a universities’ reputation is based in the impression formed in their minds via engagement with data and information obtained through interaction with the university, and communications about that university (Cole and Bruch, 2006).

Based on this understanding of the formation of a university’s reputation, we can assert that the creation of a comprehensive communications strategy is a very important task for all universities globally. A university communications strategy plays a vital role in strengthening the development of a positive reputation and increasing awareness of an institution’s outputs and achievements.

An examination of the key strategic components of universities’ communications strategies suggests that, by and large, they are comprised of several common objectives.

These objectives can include attracting and retaining world class academic staff; sharing ground-breaking research outputs; clear communication of the institutions’ mission and values; facilitating increased and positive external stakeholder engagement; attracting external investment; highlighting their world class status; supporting the recruitment of students and highlighting the community and societal impact of the university’s work.

These objectives are constructed to support the successful achievement of the institution’s unique mission.
Digital communications tools play a crucial role in helping to achieve the goals set out in a university communications strategy. They enable timely and cost-effective communication with multiple stakeholder audiences locally, regionally, and across the world. Supporting increased awareness of and engagement with the exceptional outputs and achievements of all staff, students and stakeholders that is associated with the positive growth of a university reputation.

Leveraging the use of several digital monitoring and intelligence tools, Times Higher Education Consultancy team have created a Digital brand diagnostic tool. These analytical tools produce over 70 digital metrics that provide dynamic real time insight into the power behind a university brand.

Our digital diagnostic process utilises eight digital monitoring and intelligence tools. The resulting data is presented in six analytical categories, within which each of the digital metrics provide insight into the content profiled and strategies employed as part of universities’ communications strategies. Using these tools, we can measure the overall website traffic to an institution’s website, by origin and source; a university’s social media penetration and analytical performance; the pay per click (PPC) use and PPC strategies used to increase web traffic, the most engaging and frequently shared content might read better, search engine optimisation strategies used, and the equivalent financial saving gained via a well optimised website.
Driving consistent and high volumes of traffic to a university website, so that key stakeholder audiences can engage with the exceptional outputs and achievements of the institution, thus supporting positive growth of their reputation, is central to a communications strategy.

An October 2020 study carried out by THE Consultancy team asked our panel of prospective international students, THE Student Pulse, the primary sources of information they used to find out about a university. Results from this study showed that a University website remains the most important source of information for this audience, gaining the largest number of responses (586).

Ever since the introduction of Google Search in 1997, the worldwide market share of all search engines has been dominated by this search engine. Google has dominated the search engine market, maintaining an 86.86 percent market share as of July 2020.

In July 2020, online search engine Bing accounted for 6.43 percent of the global search market, Chinese search engine Baidu’s market share was 0.68 percent.

It is therefore vital to understand how your university’s website performs when searched by potential future students, partners, and collaborators around the world. Understanding the performance of your university’s website is the starting point for THE Digital brand diagnostic tool; analysing the power behind global powerhouse university brands.

**Sources of Information Used to Find Out About a University, Driving Judgement of Institutional Reputation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University Websites</td>
<td>586</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rankings</td>
<td>501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media</td>
<td>320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher or Careers Advisor</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Media</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family or Friends</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print Brochures</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent/Guardian</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Consultancy team selected 15 powerhouse university brands to take part in this global digital diagnostic exercise. We identified a wide range of universities that are featured within the Times Higher Education 2021 World University Ranking, and 2020 World Reputation Ranking. Institutions selected represented a broad global geographic spread, including universities from Australia, Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong, South Korea, China, Taiwan, Denmark, Germany, Canada, Switzerland, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The global powerhouse university brands selected for our analysis are listed in Table 1, below.

### TRAFFIC ANALYSIS

Analytics of the traffic generated by our 15 global powerhouse brands sets the foundations of investigation. Source of website traffic are defined as:

- **Direct**: Any traffic where the referrer or source is unknown, such as direct entry of URL into browser
- **Referral**: Traffic that occurs when a user finds you through a site other than a major search engine
- **Organic**: Traffic from search engine results that is earned, not paid
- **Paid search**: Traffic from search engine results that is the result of paid advertising via Google
- **Social**: Traffic from a social network, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, or Instagram
- **Mail**: Traffic from email marketing that has been properly tagged with an email parameter
- **AdWords or another paid search platform**
- **Display ads**: Traffic from banners or other advertising formats made of text, images, flash, video, and audio placed on internet websites and apps.

### 15 GLOBAL POWERHOUSE UNIVERSITY BRANDS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNIVERSITY</th>
<th>WORLD UNIVERSITY RANKING '21</th>
<th>WORLD REPUTATION RANKING '20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Oxford, UK</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanford University, USA</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETH Zurich, Switzerland</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tsinghua University, China</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peking University, China</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Tokyo, Japan</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Nanyang Technological University, Singapore</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Sydney, Australia</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HKUST, Hong Kong</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McMaster University, Canada</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Tübingen, Germany</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Taiwan University (NTU), Taiwan</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aarhus University, Denmark</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### GLOBAL POWERHOUSE BRANDS: TRAFFIC ANALYTICS *

Extended Table: 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNIVERSITY</th>
<th>Direct %</th>
<th>Referral %</th>
<th>Organic Search %</th>
<th>Paid Search %</th>
<th>Social %</th>
<th>Mail %</th>
<th>Display Ads %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HKUST, Hong Kong</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image4.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image5.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image6.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image7.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanford University, USA</td>
<td><img src="image8.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image9.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image10.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
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<td><img src="image13.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image14.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Oxford, UK</td>
<td><img src="image15.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image16.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image17.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image18.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image19.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image20.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image21.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Athens, Australia</td>
<td><img src="image22.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image23.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image24.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
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<td><img src="image27.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image28.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tsinghua University, China</td>
<td><img src="image29.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>Peking University, China</td>
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<td><img src="image38.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
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<td><img src="image40.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image41.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
<td><img src="image42.png" alt="Graph" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our analysis shows that some universities achieve the largest volume of website traffic from direct search. Approximately a third of these institutions, for example HKUST 50.8%, THE University of Sydney 51.6%, Tsinghua University 55.7%. However, the dominance of organic search traffic is clear, particularly for the highest ranked institutions within the group selected; Stanford 57.9%, University of Oxford 53.4%.

SOCIAL PENETRATION
Facebook and YouTube are most widely used social media channels by this group of universities. Peking University attracts the largest proportion of website traffic originating social media from Facebook (91.45%). They have a large Facebook following of 2.5 Million people and have a very active from social media, specifically from Facebook presence promoting topics such as the World Day of Social Justice, International Mother Language Day and Lunar New Year. Shanghai Jiao Tong University attracts the most social media originating-website traffic from YouTube. They have a very active presence on this social media channel, and regularly post videos that obtain thousands of views.

Universities with the highest proportion of website traffic originating from social media are Nanyang Technological University, ETH Zurich, McMaster University, and the University of Oxford. The approach taken to social media by these institutions varies with one consistent characteristic, they implement highly strategic connectivity between a large variety of social media channels and external content sources, culminating in extremely high link velocity. A fundamental SEO technique that provides significant benefits.
CASE STUDY

ESTABLISHED INNOVATOR

GLOBAL POWERHOUSE UNIVERSITY BRANDS

SECTION 5

SOCIAL PENETRATION: % OF WEB TRAFFIC COMING FROM SOCIAL MEDIA

- 34.02%
- 27.06%
- 6.85%
- 17.73%
- 3.88%

TOPICS COVERED ON FACEBOOK 2020
- #Covid19 vaccine
- Covid-19 test, Oxsed RaViD Direct
- DeepMind, Oxford’s thriving AI community
- The Michael Dillon LGBT+ Lectures
- 2020 Romans Lecture
- Oxford Net Zero Programme to tackle global carbon emission
- We must change what we eat to solve the climate crisis
- UK enters lockdown 2.0

The University of Oxford gains the largest proportion of social media generated website traffic from Facebook, 34.02%. The university has 4.29 million Facebook followers.

19,500

Content analytics: Referral domains: The number of domains that put the link to their most popular piece of content in the last year

$760,000 USD

The estimated cost of their organic traffic if they paid for it in Google Ads

2,900

PPC: Display ads (global): The number of banners, text, images, flash, video, and audio ads placed on internet websites and apps

49,992

Social analytics: Tweets Article Shares From Website (1 year): The number of articles shared by website visitors via Twitter plugin directly on the website

The University of Oxford gains the largest proportion of social media generated website traffic from Facebook, 34.02%. The university has 4.29 million Facebook followers.
CASE STUDY

TECH HIGHFLIER

Stanford University gains the largest proportion of social media generated website traffic from YouTube, 23.7%. The university has approximately 1.2 million Youtube channel subscribers, 3790 videos on YouTube, and 174 million life time views.

SOCIAL PENETRATION: % OF WEB TRAFFIC COMING FROM SOCIAL MEDIA

- 18.9%
- 20.7%
- 8.33%
- 23.73%
- 3.4%

(ppc display ads (global): The number of banners, text, images, flash, video, and audio ads placed on internet websites and apps)

- 50,000

Content analytics: Referral domains: The number of domains that put the link to their most popular piece of content in the last year

- 31,000

SEO: estimated monthly organic search saving: The estimated cost of their organic traffic if they would need to pay for it in Google Ads

- $11.1m USD

Social analytics: Tweets Article Shares From Website (1 year): The number of articles shared by website visitors via Twitter plugin directly on the website

- 21,000
University of Sydney attracts 42% of its social media originating website traffic from YouTube, and 33.4% from Facebook. The university has approximately 23,000 YouTube subscribers. They have a far smaller volume of website traffic originating from Twitter and LinkedIn. The university’s social media content focuses on the institutional values, highlighting the importance of leadership in post COVID19 society.

SOCIAL PENETRATION: % OF WEB TRAFFIC COMING FROM SOCIAL MEDIA

- 33.45%
- 5.50%
- 4.94%
- 42.02%

Content analytics: Referral domains: The number of domains that put the link to their most popular piece of content in the last year

$70,000 USD

SEO: estimated monthly organic search saving: The estimated cost of their organic traffic if they would need to pay for it in Google Ads

4,100

Social analytics: Tweets Article Shares From Website (1 year): The number of articles shared by website visitors via Twitter plugin directly on the website

The University of Sydney

PPC: Display ads (global): The number of banners, text, images, flash, video, and audio ads placed on internet websites and apps

531

51-60th

Total website visits (last 3 months) 14.6 million
Total monthly website visits 1.3 million

51st

Total monthly website visits 1.3 million

THE WORLD UNIVERSITY RANK 2021

THE WORLD REPUTATION UNIVERSITY RANK 2020

51-60th

Social penetration: % of web traffic coming from social media

33.45%

5.50%

4.94%

42.20%
CASE STUDY

GLOBAL POWERHOUSE UNIVERSITY BRANDS

ASIAN GIANT

SOCIAL PENETRATION: % OF WEB TRAFFIC COMING FROM SOCIAL MEDIA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Social Media Traffic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>52.94%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Nanyang Technological University attracts the largest proportion of social media generated website traffic from YouTube, 52.94%. The university has 10K YouTube subscribers, and 3.9 million life time views on this social media platform. Their YouTube content is designed to target several different audiences, with channels including: Research and Innovation, Undergraduate admissions, Student Life, Visitors to NTU, Beautiful Campus and Virtual Tour.

4,700

PPC: Display ads (global): The number of banners, text, images, flash, video, and audio ads placed on internet websites and apps

8,600

Content analytics: Referral domains: The number of domains that put the link to their most popular piece of content in the last year

$108,000 USD

SEO: estimated monthly organic search saving: The estimated cost of organic traffic if they would need to pay for it in Google Ads

7,000

Social analytics: Tweets Article Shares From Website (1 year): The number of articles shared by website visitors via Twitter plugin directly on the website

THE WORLD UNIVERSITY RANKING 2023
47TH

THE WORLD UNIVERSITY RANKING 2020
51-61TH

Total website visits (last 3 months) 9.3 million
Total monthly website visits 800 million
How to Communicate a World Class University

- Research carried out by Times Higher Education consultancy team, via our global panel of prospective international students THE Student Pulse, shows that your university website remains your most important communications tool when disseminating information to one of your most important stakeholder audiences, students.

- Global powerhouse university brands attract consistently large volumes of traffic to their institutional websites, university brands selected for analysis in this report attract between one and 58 million total visits to their websites in a 12-month period.

- Direct and organic traffic are the largest sources of website views, highlighting the importance of investment in improving SEO functionality. The largest estimated financial saving via SEO increased organic traffic if funded by Google Ads was estimated at $11.1 million (USD).

- The percentage of website traffic from social media sources ranged from 0.2% to 4.7%. The institutions with the largest volume of social media generated web traffic employ strategic connectivity between a diverse range of social media channels used.

- Our global powerhouse brands also engage with significant quantities of external digital sources, culminating in extremely high link velocity. A fundamental SEO technique that provides significant benefits.

Interested in the data presented in this report?
THE Consultancy team can conduct this analysis for any university in the world.

If you would like to enquire about the Digital Brand Diagnostic tool, please contact us at consultancy@timeshighereducation.com.