



# THE IMPACT OF THE **CORONAVIRUS** ON GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION

Exclusive QS survey data reveals how prospective international students and higher education institutions are responding to this global health emergency



<https://www.qs.com/contact/>

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# Introduction

The global higher education landscape has dramatically changed in the past few months due to the spread of the coronavirus (otherwise known as COVID-19).

To inform and support the higher education sector, QS established ongoing surveys to take the pulse of prospective international students and higher education institutions throughout this crisis.

Our prospective international student survey has attracted approximately 11,000 respondents since it was established in mid-February.

In this white paper, we'll explore the findings of this survey and showcase how these responses have shifted over time as the coronavirus continues.

An accompanying survey that targeted higher education professionals in universities across the globe has attracted more than 400 respondents.

We'll explore these findings, including the impact on student recruitment, online learning offerings, campus management, and a range of other areas.

Please read on to discover these insights and discover how the higher education sector is adapting to this new normal we're all facing.



*By monitoring the disruption that the coronavirus is causing to prospective international students we hope that our latest research can help institutions plan more clearly for the next academic year. The data still suggests that the impact of coronavirus is likely to be an issue of timing, it is therefore vital that universities remain flexible on application deadlines and start dates during this uncertain period.*

*It's our priority to provide institutions with the most up-to-date information possible as the situation evolves. We hope that our insights will allow universities to mitigate the worst impacts of the virus on their students and staff as we continue to play our role as a responsible partner to the higher education sector.*

**- Nunzio Quacquarelli,  
CEO of QS**





# How are students responding to the coronavirus crisis?

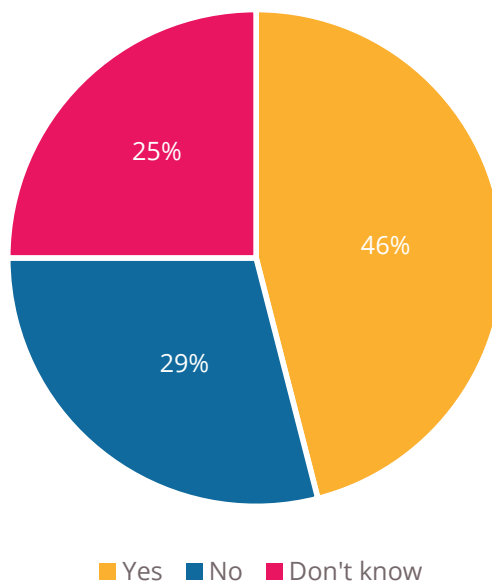
Students across the higher education sector have been dramatically impacted by the spread of the coronavirus, from travel restrictions to social distancing, isolation measures, quarantines, campus closures, and border closures.

In mid-February, QS introduced an ongoing survey of prospective international students to understand how they were responding to the global health emergency, and how this changed over time.

Below, we've detailed the trend data around changes in prospective international student decision making and what this means for your institution.

## How the coronavirus has impacted study plans

In our survey of prospective international surveys, we asked respondents whether the coronavirus had impacted their plans to study abroad. Here are the total percentages across the life of the survey:



Each week, we examined how these responses shifted as the crisis escalated.

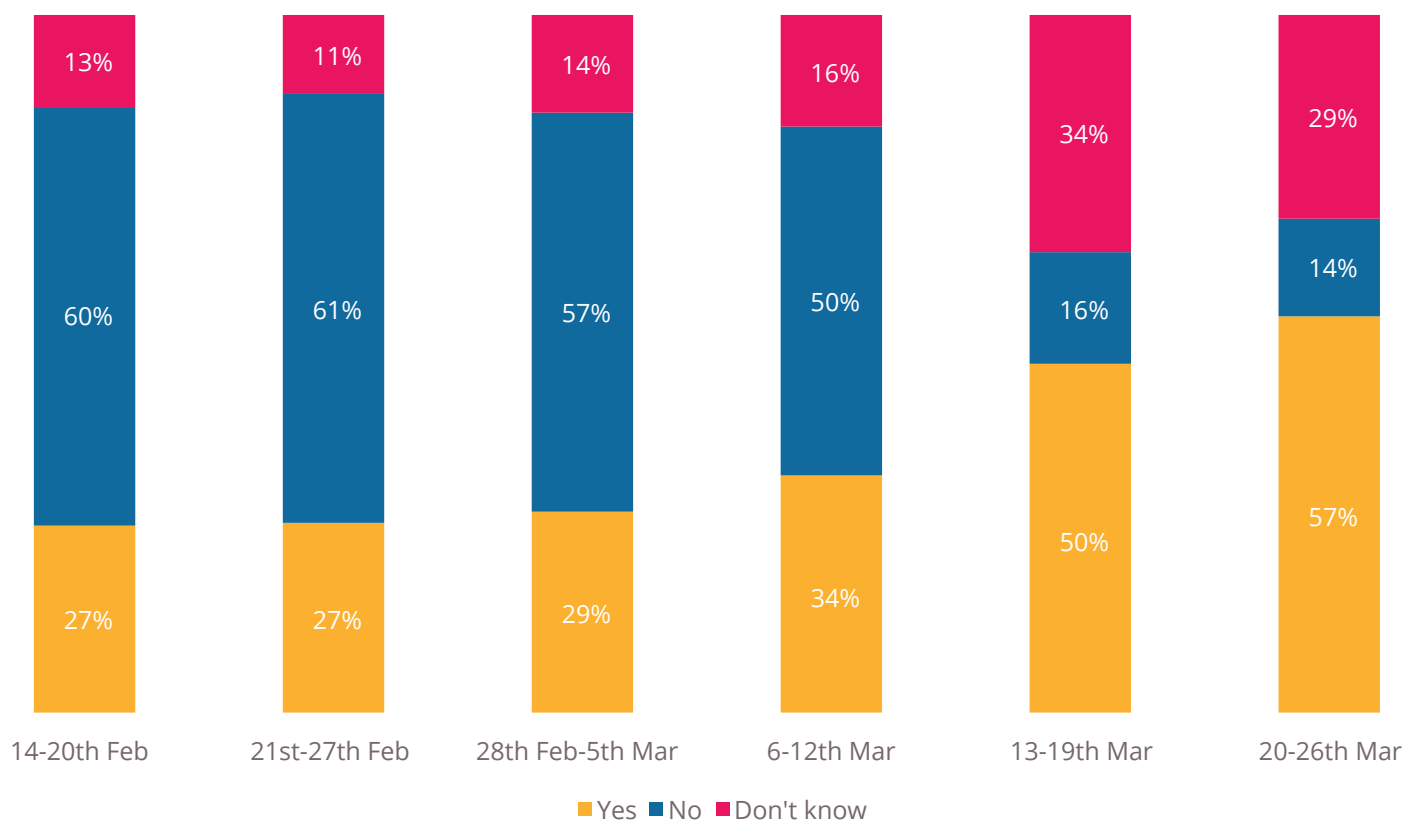
Below, it's clear that more and more respondents have changed their plans to study abroad as a result of the coronavirus.

Interestingly, the week of the 13-19th of March saw the biggest dip in those respondents who said their study plans hadn't been impacted and the biggest rise in those who said they had.

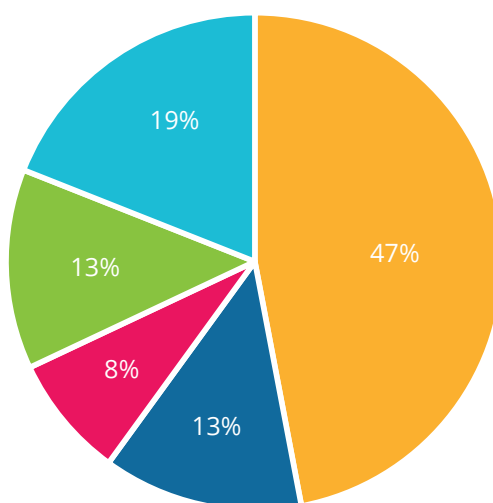
It's also the point at which greater numbers of students faced growing uncertainty about their travel plans, with a significant increase in those who claimed they 'don't know' whether the crisis has affected them personally.

This significant shift is probably due to the fact that this week saw the number of cases and deaths grow at its fastest rate, demonstrating a dramatic escalation of the coronavirus.

### Has the coronavirus impacted your plans to study abroad: Shifts in answers over time



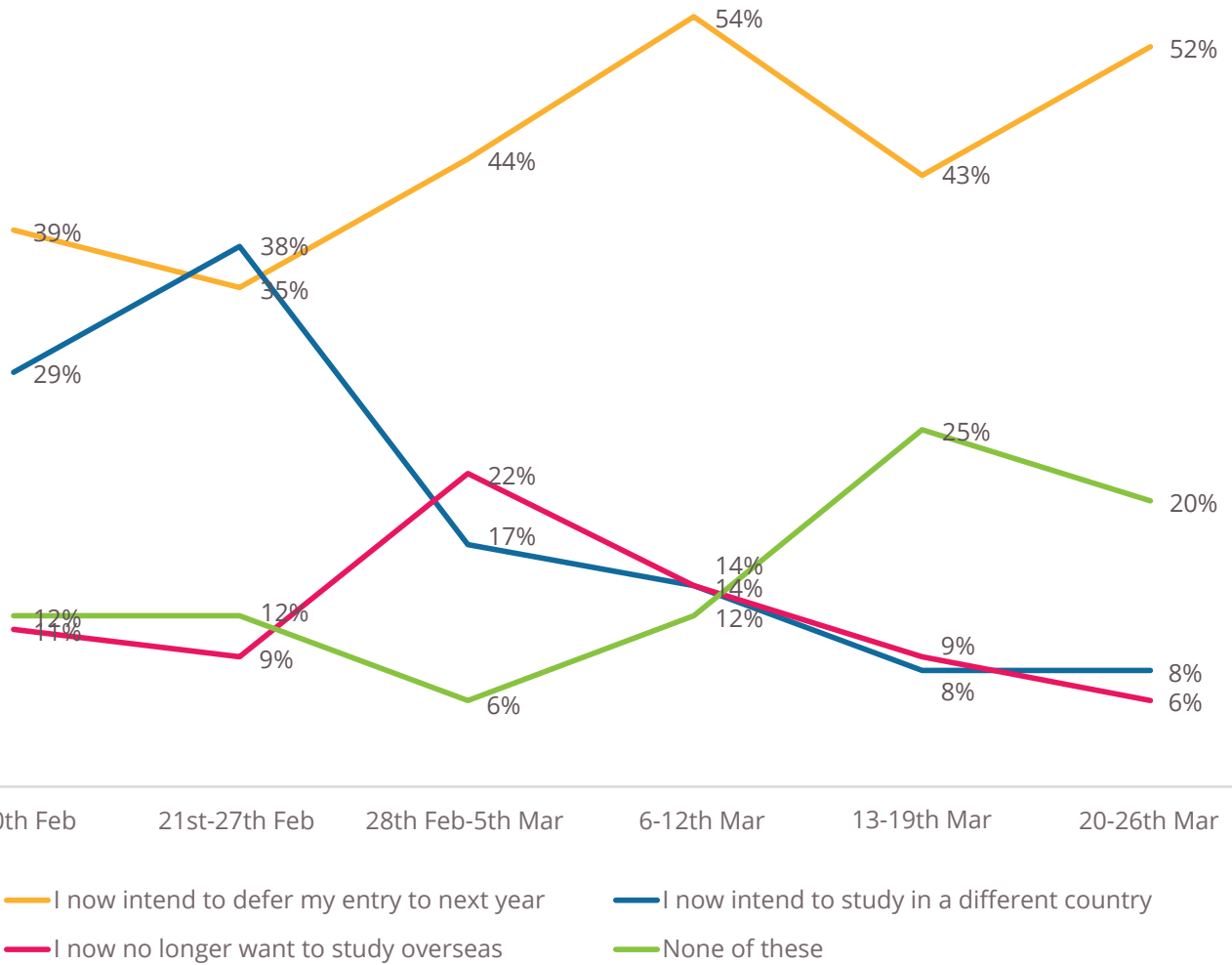
QS also asked prospective international students how the coronavirus had changed their plans to study abroad, whether they had deferred entry to next year, decided to study in a different country, no longer planned to study overseas, other reasons, or none of these.



- I now intend to defer my entry until next year
- I now intend to study in a different country
- I now no longer want to study overseas
- Other
- None of these



Understandably, these responses also shifted significantly over time. See below for the trend data:



Prospective international students were also asked why the coronavirus had impacted their plans to study abroad, in their own words.

Many spoke about travel restrictions; university closures; flight cancellations; difficulties with obtaining scholarship interviews, visa applications, or language tests; exam cancellations or postponements; and health concerns.

Below is a selection of the responses from prospective international students:

*“Because of COVID-19, many of the exams that I needed, in order to apply, were cancelled or rescheduled. So, I missed the opportunity to study abroad.”*

*“My family member is in quarantine, which is why I won’t be able to accept and pay on time so I will need an extension on my offer letter.”*

*“All institutions are closed, and travel is banned. Admissions are affected and my current degree is also put on hold.”*

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*“I am unwilling to pay deposits now for the study year of 2020/2021 because I am worried that the coronavirus will not be over and that all classes will be online. I don't want to pay thousands to only get online tuition. I am also unable to book flights in this uncertainty.”*

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*“COVID-19 has spread across the globe and so the airlines have stopped the incoming and outgoing of passengers of all countries. My family is now scared to send anyone anywhere, be it a foreign nation or just a trip to the grocery store! I'm now sticking to online study platforms for my studies.”*

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*“I am afraid of going abroad nowadays. The world is going to face an economic collapse. So, education could become costly. That would be unbearable for my middle-class family, as well as for me. Almost every country has stopped taking foreign students. That will create a long line of scholarship candidates. That scares me because I don't have extraordinary result or merit. All I have is the mentality of hard work and a dream to do something.”*

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*“Because of the coronavirus, my GMAT test was cancelled. Not sure when or how I can complete the test. Not sure whether I can apply to the shortlisted universities on time, or whether I can make it out to get my F1 visa.”*

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*“I don't know when the borders are going to be open again.”*

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*“The coronavirus is spreading too fast in nearby countries. My parents are scared to send me abroad.”*

These quotes demonstrate the many fears and concerns that prospective international students have. Universities need to work quickly to allay these concerns and answer some of these pressing questions, particularly around flexibility with application deadlines and funding.



## How students feel about changes in educational delivery and the rise of online learning

As the crisis continued, QS added a question to the survey about whether prospective international students would be interested in studying their degree online due to the coronavirus.

As of the 26 March, 58% of prospective international students expressed some interest in studying their degree online due to coronavirus restrictions, while only 42% stated that they had no interest in studying online.

Additionally, 51% of prospective international students surveyed said that they expected universities to move more of their lectures online.

QS recently interviewed currently enrolled Italian university students to understand their perspectives on online learning under quarantine.

Sveva, a third-year languages student at the University of Turin, says the university was quick to impose strict measures, including suspending classes and closing libraries.

She said: *"I think [university staff] are doing the best they can. PowerPoints, course summaries, pre-recorded lectures are all very effective ways to help."*

*"In my case, because I study languages, I was given different translations to do at home, and now instead of turning them in in class, I send them to my lecturers via email and they send them back to me graded. It's a very efficient system."*

## What students want to hear from universities during this crisis

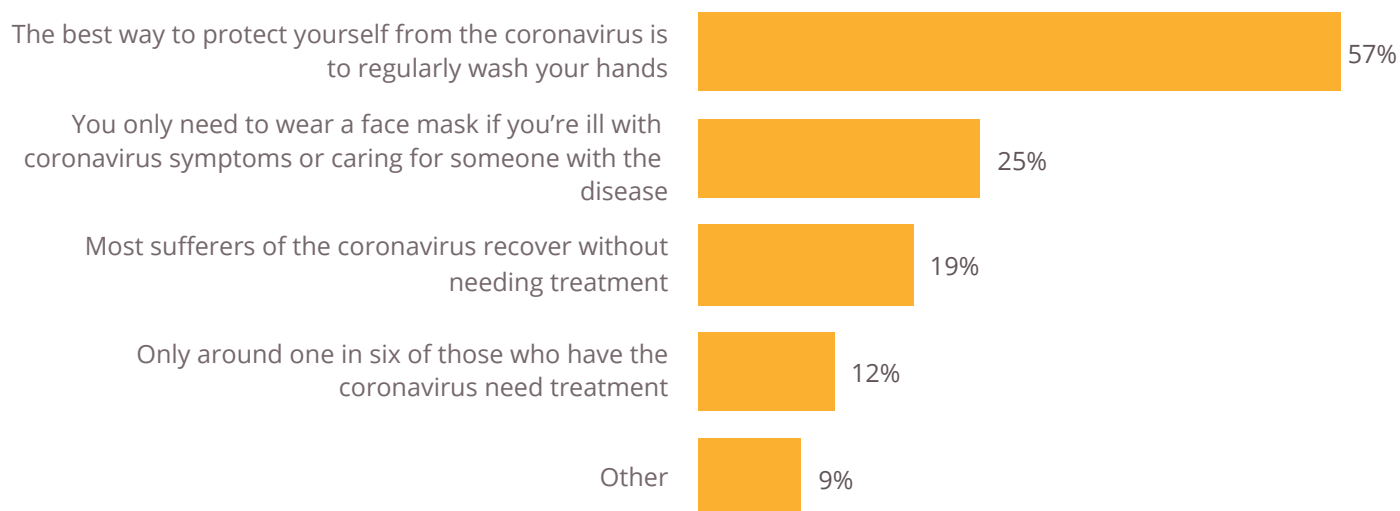
When discussing what messaging and communications students want to see from universities, Umberto, a fifth-year medical student at the University of Bologna, believes that universities can play an important role during this crisis.

*"I think that universities need to keep communication open with the students and give them adequate advice and reassurance during this difficult time. I also think they have a duty to share important scientific information with faculty and students, who in turn can inform their families. The real solution to this virus is behavioral change, and schools need to educate people as much as possible."*

Sveva states that clear communication is essential: *"I expect my university to give us more information on exams and graduation procedures. However, I also know this whole situation is new to everyone, and no one really knows how to properly face it. They're doing the best they can."*



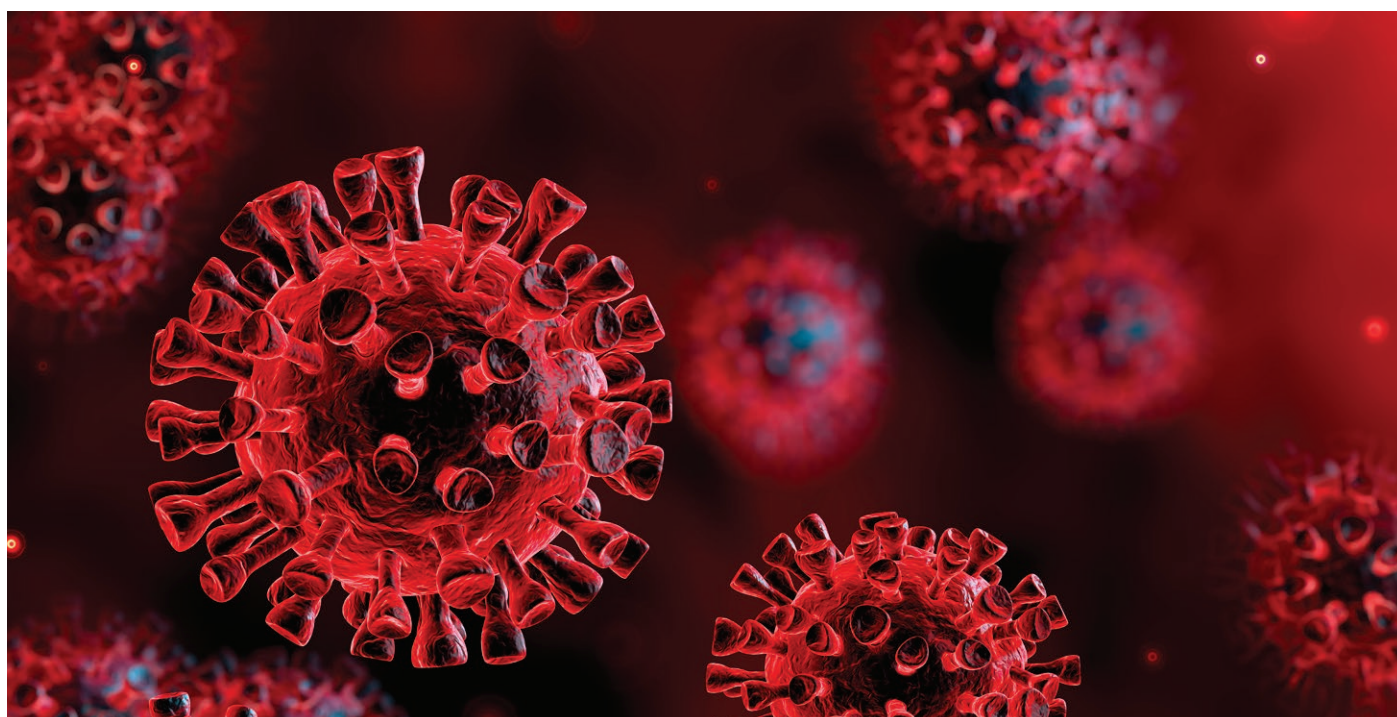
In the QS survey of prospective international students, respondents were asked to rank which statements most reassured them about the impact of the coronavirus:



When communicating with students, universities should keep these messages in mind and prioritize the ones that offer the most reassurance to students.

Additionally, 52% of respondents believe that universities should set up a 24-hour helpline for students.

In the next section, we'll explore how universities are communicating with students, changing their operations, and responding to the continuing threat of the coronavirus.





# How are institutions responding to this global health emergency?

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Universities across the globe have been forced to close campuses and switch to online learning and digital tools in the wake of the coronavirus.

QS is conducting an ongoing survey of higher education institutions to better understand how they're responding to this global health emergency.

By doing so, QS aims to share insights and lessons from universities across the globe and support those institutions who are struggling in these uncertain times.

Read on to discover how universities are rethinking their educational offerings to better serve students and adapt to this new normal.

## What challenges are institutions facing during this crisis?

Universities are facing unprecedented challenges as a result of the coronavirus outbreak.

Many are struggling to navigate this crisis while maintaining consistent course delivery, ensuring strong student recruitment numbers, and providing clear communication to staff and students.

As part of QS's ongoing survey, we asked university representatives to share the biggest challenges facing their institution right now.

Here are just a few of the responses we received:

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*“Keeping our current students, faculty, and staff safe and healthy while also trying to keep normal operations running. We are also very concerned about enrollment for summer and fall.”*

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*“The biggest challenge is not being able to know what information is true and what information is not. In addition living in a country like Honduras, where the health system is not trustworthy, it's difficult to say that our institution is ready for a crisis.”*

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*“Our biggest challenge was how to move from traditional education to e-learning and how to overcome the problem of practical courses and training.”*

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*“The biggest challenges are continuity planning, communications, and uncertainty.”*

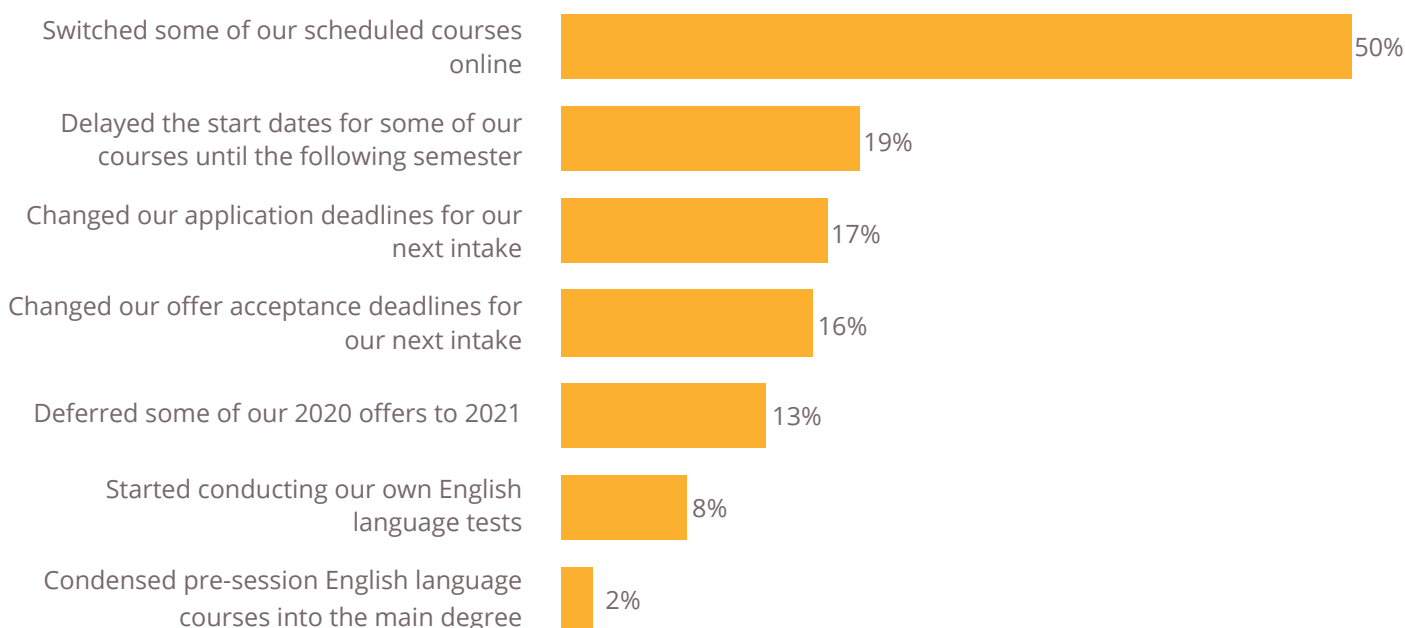
*“The impact on student numbers has been significant, which means that there's pressure to reallocate funding to address shortages that have arisen. There are also communication and distance study options issues that are creating ongoing problems as we iron out the details of who needs what information or which resources.”*

*“Our biggest challenges are keeping students and staff safe and well; avoiding panic; maintaining educational progress with innovative educational solutions, like going online; the financial hit of fewer students and expenditures on coronavirus-related necessities; and keeping our international students coming.”*

## What tactics have universities adopted in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak?

In the face of these challenges, universities have implemented a range of measures to adapt to this new normal.

To get an idea of what tactics they'd started to introduce, QS asked survey respondents if they'd implemented the following measures:



We'll be exploring some of these tactics in further detail below.

## How universities are embracing online learning

While 50% of the survey respondents had switched some of their scheduled courses online, this number is only set to increase as the coronavirus continues.

As mentioned earlier in the white paper, 58% of prospective international students expressed some interest in studying their degree online due to coronavirus restrictions, while only 42% stated that they had no interest in studying online.



Additionally, 51% of prospective international students surveyed said that they expect universities to move more of their lectures online.

To help universities across the globe, edtech companies like iTeach.world, Rafr, Aula, and Intergreat are offering remote teaching tools and online platforms free of charge.

Jean-Pierre Guittard, CEO and founder of iTeach.world, states that: *“The biggest challenge I’m seeing for some students is internet bandwidth. So, everybody is being put online but, in some countries, and some areas, the internet just isn’t what it should be for this type of thing. This is affecting some students’ and teachers’ experience.”*

*“I think what is going to change here is that schools are being forced to make the change that they need to make because in the background there’s been this huge market shift where people have realized that we have these communication tools... This is waking people up and making them modernize their approach to instruction.”*

This sentiment is something that Robert Hsiung, China CEO of the online educational company EMERITUS, agrees with:

*“The massive move to online is forcing the education system to figure out how to drive engagement at scale in their courses. This has created a special window for us to leverage our experience in supporting these schools.*

*“I believe that the coronavirus will force educators to revolutionize the way they teach, moving from a lecture-listen model to an interactive, learn-by-doing model. We are well suited to capture the wave.”*

## How universities are addressing student recruitment

Many of the challenges listed above mention the pressing concerns that university professionals have around hitting student recruitment targets.

For many universities, international students bring much-needed revenue each year. With travel restrictions and closed borders, universities are coming to terms with the fact that this revenue may be significantly reduced in the next academic year.

In our QS survey, 50% of respondents believed that the coronavirus would have a detrimental impact on the number of student applications they received at their institution.

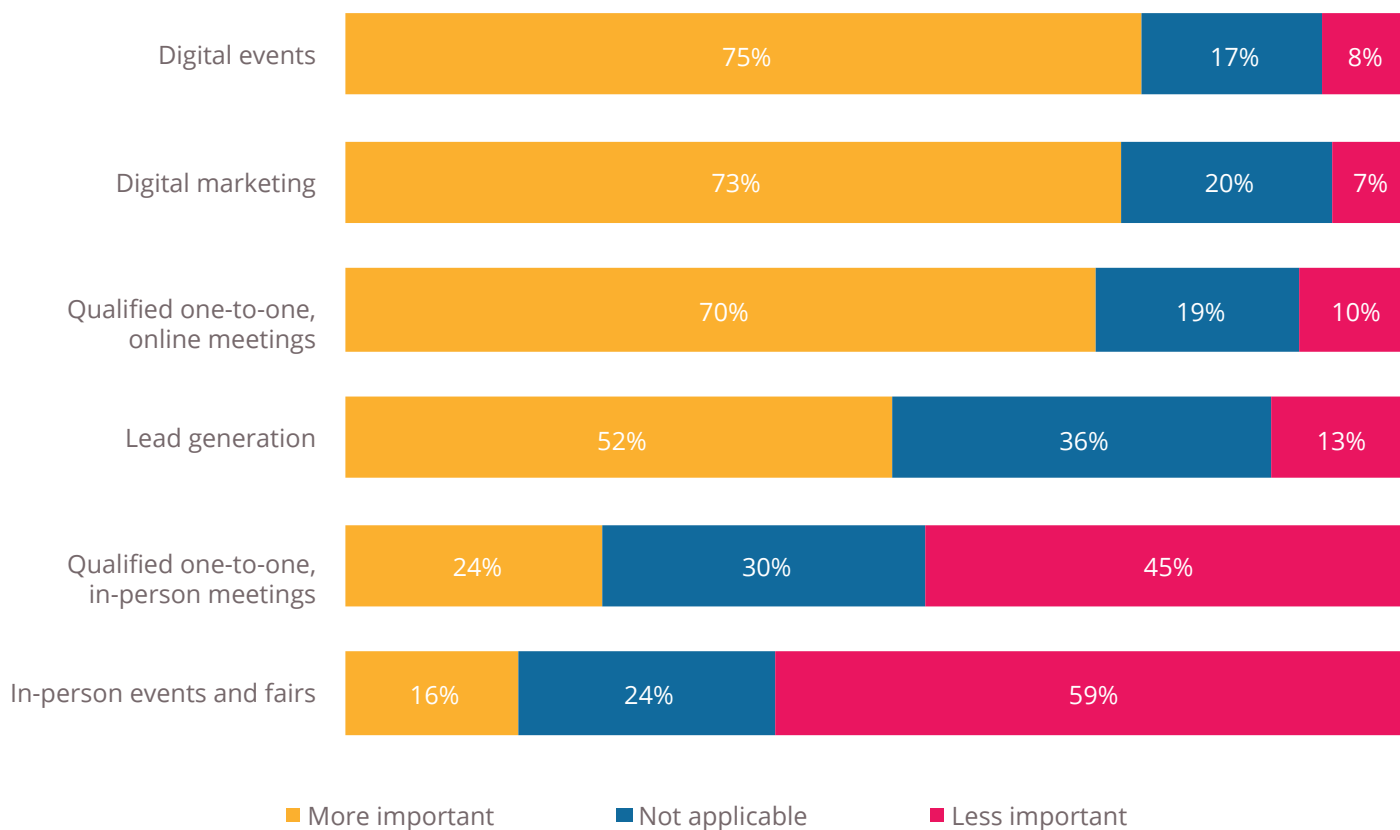
In contrast, 26% thought the number of student applications would stay the same, 6% said they would increase, and 18% didn’t know what the impact would be.

To address these shifts in student recruitment, 34% of respondents were currently looking to diversify the source countries which they relied on for recruitment purposes.

However, 30% of respondents were still considering this change, 20% weren’t looking to diversify, and 16% didn’t know.

Institutions are considering a wide range of markets to expand their recruitment activities into: Brazil, Colombia, France, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, Mexico, Pakistan, Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Vietnam are all mentioned as new territories.

When asked what student recruitment activities had become more or less important as a result of the coronavirus, institutions gave the following responses:



Unsurprisingly, digital and online methods are becoming more vital as the coronavirus forces students and institutions to meet and communicate through digital means.

When discussing the language requirements for international students, 39% of institutions said they wouldn't be admitting students who hadn't completed the required language tests, due to coronavirus restrictions.

In contrast, 17% stated that they would be admitting these students and 27% said they were still considering this change.

[It's been recently reported](#) that more than 1,000 US institutions are now accepting language test results from the Duolingo English Test (a language learning app), either as supporting evidence in conjunction with other English proficiency measures or as stand-alone proof.



## How universities are shifting their student mobilities and international partnerships

The mobility of students and staff has clearly been impacted by the spread of the coronavirus.

International offices across the world are rapidly shifting operations as they adapt to a very different higher education landscape.

According to our analysts, 52% of respondents said student mobilities were receiving more attention, 37% said there had been no change, and 11% said they were receiving less attention.

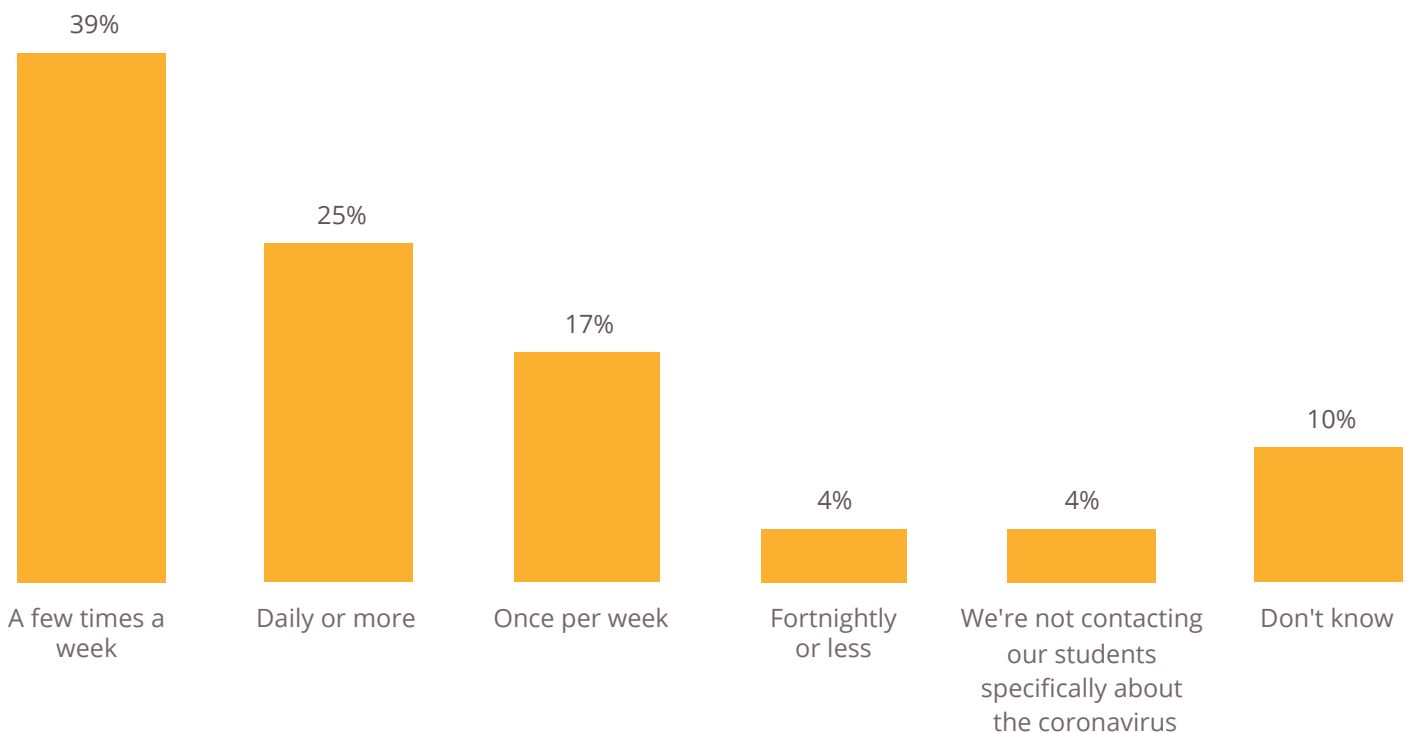
Thankfully, locating and communicating with mobile students and staff is easy for most institutions with 28% stating that it's very easy, 42% saying it's moderately easy, and only 8% admitting that it was moderately difficult.

When it comes to international partnerships, 44% of respondents said that they were receiving more attention, while 46% said there had been no change, and 11% said they were receiving less attention.

More than ever before, consistent, clear communication will be a critical component of any international partnership in the months to come.

## How universities are communicating with international students

Given the uncertainty many international students are facing right now, QS asked institutions how often they were in contact with current international students with news or updates related to the coronavirus. These were the results:



It seems that while the majority are frequently reaching out to international students with coronavirus-related updates, some are missing out on key opportunities to inform and reassure their international students.

The majority of institutions are using email to communicate coronavirus updates (87%), while almost half are using social media (44%), some are using phone calls (24%), and some are using WeChat (17%) for communications with Chinese students.

When asked whether the satisfaction and retention of international students had been discussed in planning discussions as a result of coronavirus, 25% said it had been, 36% said it hadn't, and 39% didn't know.

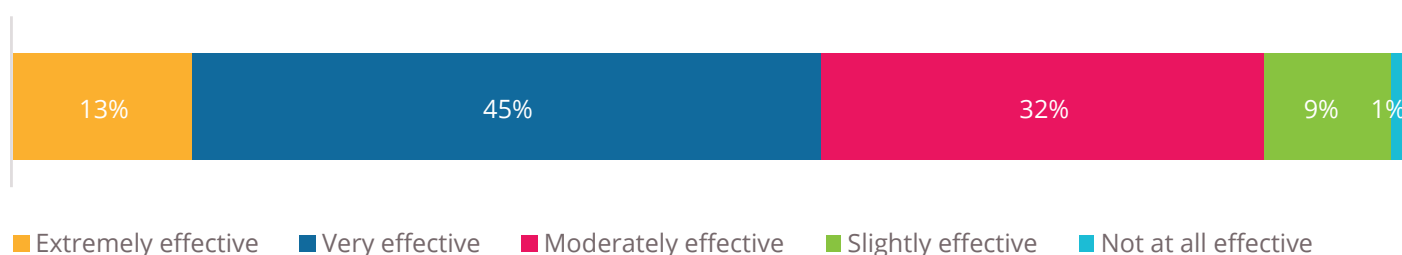
For those who had discussed the satisfaction and retention of international students, many emphasized the importance of online learning tools, training those with limited English proficiency on these tools, reassuring international students, and addressing their concerns promptly.

## How universities are rethinking their crisis management plans

In conjunction with our ongoing survey of university representatives and their response to the coronavirus, QS also initiated a survey of more than 300 academics and university professionals to better understand their approach to crisis management.

Of the institutions surveyed, 73% have a crisis management plan, 25% don't, and 2% didn't know if their institution had a plan.

When asked their opinion on the effectiveness of their institution's crisis management plan, the responses varied:



This demonstrates that the majority of institutions understand the importance of crisis management, have implemented a crisis management plan, and view it as effective (albeit for some they only see it as 'moderately effective'). This will only become more important as the current global health emergency continues.

Already, 85% of surveyed institutions had implemented crisis management strategies or plans to deal with the spread of the coronavirus.



When asked for their thoughts on the higher education sector's approach to crisis management and the coronavirus, many respondents emphasized the importance of:

- Online learning
- International coordination and collaboration
- Proactive, preventative measures
- Strong university leadership
- Flexibility for assessment deadlines and exams
- Stricter sanitation initiatives
- Clear communication from university leadership and administrators

One engineering professor in the US stated that: *"Higher education should lead the way in showing a calm and measured approach to crisis management while remaining decisive and effective without minimizing or dismissing credible risks."*

An administrator and functional manager in China had this to say: *"Higher education institutions are quite vulnerable in the face of such a crisis like the coronavirus, as most universities are big community groups that once affected will lead to great spreading. However, with the support of the internet and related technologies, it gives universities a chance to reconsider how to actively use technology to develop their courses via online methods."*

Finally, an Australian research specialist had this to say: *"Institutions are always poor at working up likely scenarios and tend to be reactive rather than prepared. Many Australian institutions responded to the coronavirus pandemic by putting courses online - and this may, or may not, have resulted in quality educational materials. The motivation was generally associated with the income that may be lost if students did not continue their engagement with their courses, rather than the well-being of the students."*

As the coronavirus crisis continues, it will be up to institutions to continually review and improve their crisis management strategies and initiatives.

It's important to remember that flexibility and the ability to quickly adapt to changing crisis conditions will serve higher education institutions well in the coming months.



# Conclusion

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While these are uncertain times, universities can continuously strive to deliver high quality teaching and consistent communication to students.

To do so, it's imperative that institutions listen to students' needs and concerns and leverage the latest technological tools.

Our ongoing QS surveys and research will aim to support institutions in this endeavor and provide them with the most up-to-date insights on what their peers are doing and how students are responding.

Consistently adapting to this new normal will be crucial in the months to come and QS is determined to partner with institutions during this crisis.

Please reach out to the QS team at <https://www.qs.com/contact> if you have any questions or concerns.

**For any media queries, please contact** [qspressoffice@qs.com](mailto:qspressoffice@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** supports higher education institutions to maximize their student recruitment with a range of specialist services, from data-driven insights and high-quality lead generation to optimized 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 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.

