

Technology Enabled Admission Process in Indian Higher Education

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Abstract: *The advent of computer and internet technologies presents demanding and refreshing challenges in the higher education scenario. Unlike the earlier decades, access to every aspect about the institution and its ambience are available digitally, which can be accessed by the prospective students and other stakeholders. Digital revolution in recent years has enabled the students to opt for an institution of their choice among the widest choices presented at the tip of the finger. This paper presents the avenues of utilization of the available technologies to influence the prospective students as well as the other stakeholders, facilitate and enhance not only the student enrolment and engagement in Indian higher education but also the associated activities such as marketing, branding, recruitment etc.*

Index Terms: Admission, Digital Marketing, Entrance Examination, Counseling.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the published by India Brand Equity Foundation [8] in 2018, and also as per the report of All India Survey on Higher Education of year 2017-18 [2], Ministry of Human Resource and Development, India, about 36.6 million students are enrolled in higher education in about 49,964 institutions across the country under various streams. At undergraduate level, maximum number of student enrollment is in Arts / Humanities / Social Sciences (36.4 %) followed by Science (17.1 %), Engineering and Technology (14.1 %) and Commerce (14.1%). Encouraging trends are being observed with admissions to institutions of higher education across the states of the nation as well as in the institutions abroad. To attract large population of student community, the educational institutions have to go digital not only in general information and related activities but also in the activities associated with admissions, and investments in these are inevitable in the ensuing years.

University Grants Commission (UGC), India, had also issued directives to institutions emphasizing the online admission systems. They have been initiated and implemented either in total or partially in the institutions of higher education as well as in the higher education boards of the state / central

government. This paper analyses the effectiveness of online tools / provisions in the admission process of Indian institutions offering higher education.

II. THE ADMISSION PROCESS

The life cycle of the admission processes stretches over a year and administered by dedicated teams. The stages of admission process include both online and on-campus activities as listed in Fig. 1, and implemented depending on the affiliation and norms prescribed. With institutions using different software packages during the entire cycle of the admission process, the seamless data integration is obviously doubted. Additionally, universities and institutions prefer cloud based software solutions, which support pay-per-use model, to avoid huge investment on hardware and server licenses. Also, they look forward end-to-end solutions, use multiple channels, track the impact and adjust their strategies accordingly.

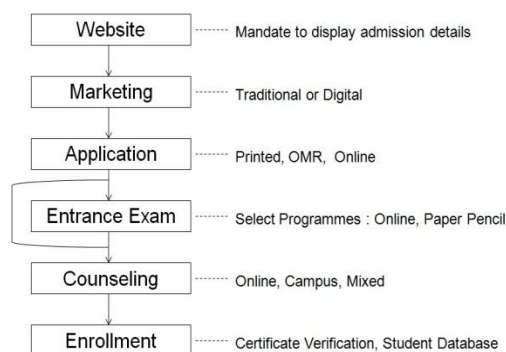


Figure 1. Stages of Admission Process

III. WEBSITE OF THE INSTITUTION

One of the surveys [1] indicates that the website of the institutions plays a vital role and hence the institutions compete to attract students through their websites, since students and parents firmly believe that the website of the institution as a resource to gather the relevant information. Most of the institutions have provisions in the homepage of their websites for submission of online applications. A lucid but attractive and responsive website design with easy and comfortable navigation, supporting view on multiple devices and platforms, is highly recommended. The websites of the institutions receive maximum hit rate and improve their web ranking during the announcement of semester results and admission process as shown in Fig. 2. The state level engineering university which conducts common counseling for more than 500 affiliated colleges recorded higher hit rate during application submission and counseling (between May and August).



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National level medical counseling website, which has higher hit rate during under graduate (in the months of June, July, August) and post graduate (in the months of October and November) medical counseling.



(a) State level Engineering University



(b) National level Medical counseling Website

Figure 2. The observation of website ranking using Alexa analytics

UGC insists on listing approval & recognition of various courses and their details, eligibility norms mandated, fee structure and refund policy, along with the detailed information on the overall selection process. In addition, if the website contains updated details of placement record, achievements, awards, infrastructure facilities, human resources, research & development facilities, online inquiry form, frequently asked questions, and testimonials of successful alumni in the recent past or over a decade etc., then, the users can swiftly do the decision making. The effectiveness of website is examined and resulted as follows

- Website design optimization is the leading priority of all the institutions [15].
- The institution's website is the most sought after one for admission related information compared to all other media closely followed by the search engines [4]. The decision is based on searching the details in the order of placement record, accreditation and ranking, faculty profile, student support services and alumni information.
- The website which is developed with high clarity of the content reduces the load on the query handling [22].
- The optimized content on the website and link popularity promote search engine visibility [9]. However, most of the websites of the institutions lack on fulfilling the web accessibility standards and guidelines and need to be improved.
- The website contents of private institutions could be voluminous but the users expect the websites to have minimal listings that provide comfortable navigation links and useful contents [14]. Also, the cached content of obsolete and inactive web pages, which were already indexed in search engines, are to be removed to avoid legal issues (especially when the web content is highlighting policies and fee structures)

There is comparatively weaker web connectivity among the top Indian universities with both Asian and World universities [10]. It is suggested to host quality learning materials, sharing research outcomes, extend the academic cooperation to improve the visibility of website in turn to enhance the global presence of Indian universities and qualify in webometric analysis for ranking purposes.

IV. DIGITAL MARKETING

Institutions are using variety of digital marketing tools as the most preferred means of reaching aspiring candidates. Most of them follow a hybrid approach to digital activities with both in-house and external expertise. The admission team of an institution should realize that most of the digital tools are easy to promote and allocates budget based on utilization and affordability as listed in Fig. 3.

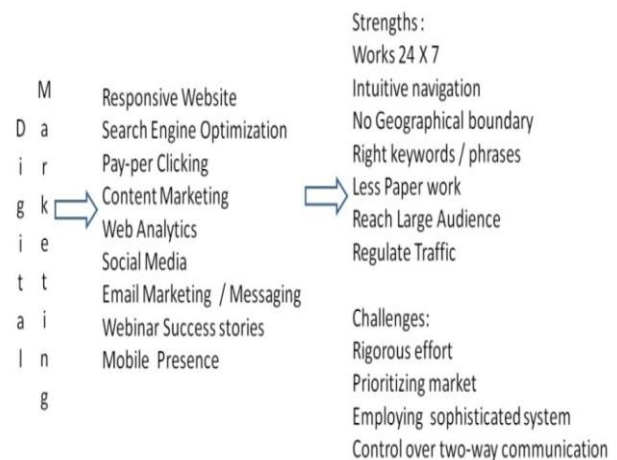


Figure 3. Benefits and challenges of Digital Marketing

Messaging and mail services have relatively higher responses and conversion rates and can also be customized easily [18]. Some of the institutions also host interactive webinars to connect students with alumni and faculty members and archive them for subsequent references. Educational institutions should borne in mind that most of the internet users hardly care to go beyond the first few pages of the results obtained using a search engine to look for the required information [17]. For better Search Engine Optimization (SEO), improvements in the quality of the contents, and appropriate keywords are essential, as an organized search results in relevant information. The frequently asked questions shall answer almost every query that pop up in the minds of the prospective applicants and create a feeling of having direct interactions for their doubts clarification. The online advertisements and effective usage of social media surpass the conservative and traditional advertising methods, provide instantaneous feedback that is easy to interpret and analyze [12]. A major factor that hinders the institutions is the apparent lack of control over the two-way communication in social media networks like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube and WhatsApp applications [3,6]. However, the impact of social media in admissions is considered less effective for decision making when compared to the other admission tools and processes available [16].

There are several third party career guidance websites that explore the selection processes and admission related details of thousands of colleges and courses, reviews, examination calendar of all career exams, rank predictions etc. In fact, the third party career guidance websites are more attractive with updated contents and extend support on mobile phones as well. The sample screen shot from one of the career guidance website is given in Fig. 4. They voluntarily provide information about popular entrance examinations conducted by governments, serve as online coaching centre for competitive exams, and provide question banks and mock tests. Their services are extended to private institutions on payment basis. The admission process of arts, humanities and professional courses of affiliated institutions are captured only in the regional career guidance websites and also limit their budget on digital marketing for these courses.



Figure 4. Attractive career guidance webpage found in third party Website [19]

The third party career guidance websites also provide bulk leads and connect prospective candidates to institutions by hosting virtual counseling sessions through the social media. The institutions who collect leads from different sources including events, schools, coaching centres, direct inquiries and through third party have established dedicated call centres with trained academic counselors to convert the same into potential applicants. Though the direct campaign is permitted, both institutions and candidates are warned on approaching middle man for admissions.

The private institutions which target PAN-India and global audience concentrate on technology based branding and extensive use of digital marketing. As competition intensifies, private deemed universities spending huge amount on promotion and brand building through digital marketing is increasing, which could consume more than 50 % of their admission budget. The effectiveness of digital marketing in global universities of the year 2016 found the priority list in the order: web design and optimization, partnerships (mobile, search engine optimization, content marketing, virtual fairs, banner advertising, video & webinars), mail and messaging, social media, skype calls and pay per click model [15].

Despite the increased digital activities, institutions still continue the traditional methods as the impact of outreach with print advertisements in leading news papers of regional

and national, open houses, campus visits and other events which promote direct communication with prospective students [7]. There are no proven studies in India to analyse the impact of digital marketing and usage of social media in the effectiveness of the prospective candidates getting admitted. The biggest challenges in digital marketing are tight budgets (especially for regional institutions), lack of innovation in digital marketing usage, tracking return on investments, expectations of quality-led generation and content creation. Some systems are designed to enable the users to avail reports not only on the current data but also compare the same with the previous records to provide useful information on the trending business strategies.

V. APPLICATION MANAGEMENT

Institutions are benefited through online applications as they attract more number of prospective students across the country and globally with the support of instant messaging and online payment gateways. The in-built decision support system which facilitates segregation of applications as per the request, estimation of cut-off score and rank, demographic analysis, and other dynamic reports make the institutions to take swift and appropriate decisions on widening the branding and advertisement as shown in Fig. 5 [21].

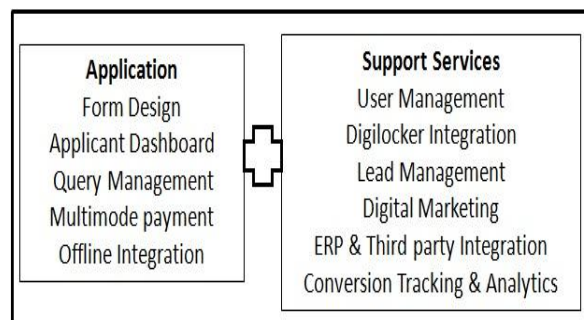


Figure 5. The expected collective services of Application Builder

Apart from institutional benefits, the online facility enables the candidate to submit the application just-in-time. They must be given prior instructions, especially on filling data such as Aadhar Number (unique identification issued by Government of India), results of qualifying examination, and uploading photo & signature. It is also recommended to gather minimum but mandatory information to ease filling of the application form thereby increase the accuracy. Although most of the institutions have online applications made available, there are still a few institutions that still have the offline applications in the form of pre-printed manual and optical mark recognition (OMR) formats. In the offline, the OMR application form is preferred to hand-written one, since the data gets scanned automatically. The OMR applications are collected in bulk through coaching centres, schools and distributed during event promotions. As the Indian young generation move towards digital literacy, one can expect the application mode to be completely online.

When the Tamil Nadu Engineering Admission [20] implemented online registration for engineering admission in the year 2018, more public representations popped up with comments that such online methods will affect students from poor families and rural areas. Though the internet penetration across the regions is high, connectivity and speed issues constitute the major impediments. The dedicated centers across the states have been identified to help the students carry out online registrations. Additionally, awareness campaigns conducted by the leading print media with the support of experts, sponsored mainly by the private institutions, provided the clarity required on the choice of a branch, eligibility and cut-off marks, career opportunities etc. Also, a few private institutions have set up dedicated call centers with trained academic counselors to address the queries of the students and also provided guided demonstrations.

VI. ENTRANCE EXAMINATION & MERIT LIST PREPARATION

The criteria for admissions are based on one of the following: an entrance examination or the qualifying examination or a combination of both. In most of the institutions, for arts, science and humanities courses, the merit list is based on the qualifying examinations while the selection for management courses involves qualifying marks, entrance examination /group discussions and / or an interview. Some of the national level entrance examinations conducted at undergraduate (UG) programmer level and the mode of conduct of such examinations are listed in Table 1.

JEE and NEET are the two most popular nationwide examinations and considered most important by the Indians as there are large number of candidates who appear in these two examinations. NEET 2018 had maximum attendance with approximately 1.3 million candidates appearing and JEE Main was attended by about 1.05 million candidates. The NEET examination was conducted in paper pencil mode while the results were announced online with the facility of online review of individual scores. The government has the planned to conduct NEET through online mode as well in the years to follow. Though the online examinations can announce the scores immediately, they defer to announce the result on a later date so as to consider the issues and reviews, and apply normalization wherever required. JEE, NEET and other government bodies announce the results in the form of score and percentile ranking, all India overall rank, and category-wise rank / cut-off. Computerization helps in speeding up the process of evaluation to obtain merit list with cut-off scores and ranks, including random number generation, considering all the criteria and equating methodologies. Online examinations reduced the costs associated with the stationery, associated transportation, time required for result processing and offered immunity to the leakage of question papers as well. Impersonations expected in online examinations are addressed through biometric based authentication of the candidates.

Table 1. National level Entrance Examinations conducted for UG admission

Paper- Pencil : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NATA (National Aptitude Test for Architecture) - Paper pencil from year 2018 onwards • KVPY (Kishore Vaigyanik Protsahan Yojana) for Bachelor of Science • NEET UG (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test – Undergraduate) for Medical – Planned to conduct online mode also from year 2019 • NDA and NA (National Defence Academy and Naval Academy entrance exam) • LSAT (Law School Admission Test) • AILET (All India Law Entrance Test) • NIFT (B.Design admission in National Institute of Fashion Technology) • NID (B.Design admission in National Institute of Design) • NCHMCT JEE(National Council for Hotel Management and Catering Technology Joint Entrance Exam) for hotel management • CACPT (Chartered Accountant Common Proficiency Test)
Online: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • JEE (Joint Entrance Examination) Main Paper 2 for Architecture • JEE Advanced for Engineering • AIIMS Entrance Test (All India Institute of Medical Sciences Entrance Exam for MBBS) • JIPMER Entrance Test(Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research for MBBS) • IMU CET (Indian Maritime University Common Entrance Test) • CLAT (Common Law Admission Test) • AIEEA (All Indian Entrance Examination Agriculture)
Both Online and Paper-Pencil : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • JEE Main Paper 1 (Engineering) - Single day for paper-pencil and two days for online

While the admission based on entrance examination is laborious year – long process considering the volume of students, merit list preparation based on the qualifying examinations and combining both entrance & qualifying examination(s) etc., and thus pose variety of challenges. For example, TNEA 2018 has followed online mode for both submission of application and counseling subsequently, while the certificates verification had taken place at designated TNEA facilitation centers prior to publishing the merit list. In future, the manual process can be transformed into online verification with the help of DigiLocker facility, provided the boards issue documents digitally and partnered with Digital India initiative as shown in Fig. 6 [5].

Several state and central boards of school education have become members of DigiLocker and made board mark sheets and certificates digital. CBSE is issuing passing certificates and migration certificates through DigiLocker in addition to marksheets. Though the DigiLocker authorizes the correctness of information, the prime challenge of universities however is on online validation of the subjects studied, eligibility scores etc., as each board has different pattern, evaluation and award of grades to prepare the cut-off marks.

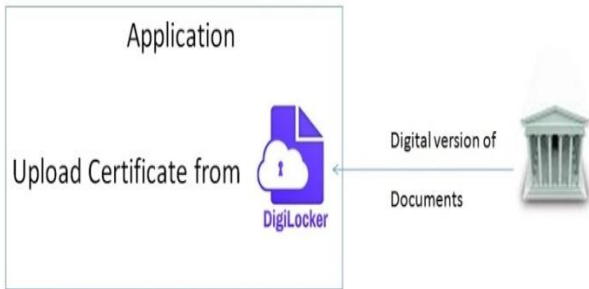


Figure 6. Digital Certification through DigiLocker

VII. COUNSELING

Counseling at national level institutions in engineering, medical and law, is managed completely through online. The JEE counseling permits candidate to be familiar with online counseling by hosting two rounds of mock allotment rounds prior to first round of seat allocation. Also the time assigned for seat allotment and reporting acceptance is scheduled within a short-span to speed up the process to accommodate several rounds of counseling. JEE counseling permits the candidates to select freeze (do not want to participate in further rounds), float (better preference in subsequent rounds) and sliding (better preferences in the same campus) options [11] to look for preferred campuses and / or branches.

In national level medical counseling, the upgradation options are available for the candidates who have been selected in the counseling rounds. For the medical programme, the counseling process scheme is given in the form of flowchart to provide awareness [13]. As NEET is mandated in all medical and dental institutions, the synchronization of counseling schedule and seat allocation between state and central Institutions would ensure transparency and ease the institutions to fill all the allocated seats against the existing vacancies before the last day stipulated for admissions.

For successfully handling online counseling, effective combination of all options, error free automated software and thorough knowledge about the system by both administration and student community is essential, else, the process could lead to vacancies. TNEA is hosting online counseling for the first time and has prepared guidelines for the processes that include course selection and allotment, the displays are in both English and regional language (Tamil) as shown in Fig. 7. The online counseling saves travel time, and provides the flexibility to attend more counseling sessions on same day, at the same time also.

Allotment

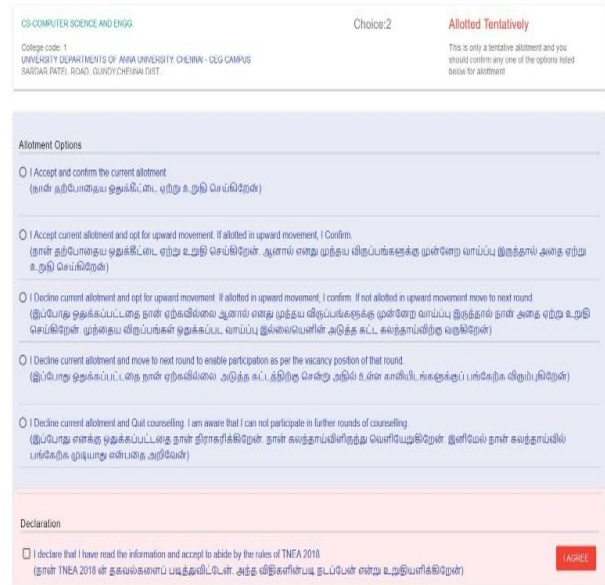


Figure 7. Screenshot of Course Allotment in regional language [20]

VIII. ENROLLMENT

While all the previous processes can be managed online, enrollment has to be done in the institutions' campuses wherein the process includes certificates verification, payment & issue of fee receipt for the payment, preparation of identity card, confirmation of admission of provisional allotment, and creation of the student database for the candidate. The waiting time delay is avoided by encouraging them to do pre- online enrollment wherein the necessary details are filled in and the grade cards & Aadhar documents are fetched from DigiLocker.

IX. OBSERVATIONS

The comparative results of technology and online support in the various stages of the admission process for different categories of institutions are summarized in Table 2. As per our study, the types of Indian higher education institutions have been grouped into four categories with respect to the admissions, as listed below:

- 'A': National level public institutions
- 'B': State level public institutions
- 'C': Affiliated institutions (Government, Government – Aided, and Self-Financing)
- 'D': Universities (Private - Deemed to be universities and State universities)

Table 2. Usage of Technology in Admission Process

SN	Description	A	B	C	D
		National Public	State Public	Private Affiliated & Autonomous	Private University
Website with direct / indirect information related to admission					
1	Course, Faculty, Infrastructure, Library and Transport Facilities	++ -	++ -	+++ +	+++
	Student Achievements, Placement and Internships			++	+++
	Student Campus Exchange Programs	-	-	-	+
	International alliances, Research, Accreditation, Rewards and Recognition	+++	+++	-	+ +++
	Admission Process, Fee Structure, Frequently asked questions	++-	++-	+ +	+ +
Responsive Features					
2	Easy Navigation, Mail and Messaging	+ -	+ -	++	++
	Enquiry forms, Lead Management, Call Centre	+++
	Link to Social Media, Webinars, Mobile presence	- -	- -	+ - +	+ - +
	Search Engine Optimization, Third party website, Web Analytics	- -	- -	- -	+++
Software Support					
3	Online, OMR, Manual Application	+..	+.	..+	+ +
	Online, Paper-Pencil Entrance Examination	++	-	..	+
	On-Campus counseling, Multi-venue, Online Counseling, Program Sliding	..+++	-+	+...	+++.
	Online Enrollment Process, Fee Payment, Refund	-	-	-	+++
Note : Symbol Indication : '+' : Majority of institutions, ' ' : Partial, '.' : Limited or Nil					

Admissions to category 'A' institutions take place through a national level counseling process. For category 'B' and Government seats of category 'C', institutions admit students either through a common state level counseling process or independently. For admissions in the management quota of category 'C' institutions and all the category 'D' institutions have their own selection processes to admit the students independently. The study is made on observing a total of 35 institutions as sample with the distributions in each category includes 'A': 5, 'B': 5, 'C': 10 and 'D':15 institutions. The variation of sample size in each category is due to their presence in the admission process and usage of technology in various stages. The category 'A' and 'B' institutions are the most preferred and are considered as a matter of pride to secure an admission in those institutions. They do not spend on digital marketing, and their technological support is limited to the stages of sale of online application, merit list preparation and counseling process and is centrally administered by a joint committee. There are numerous career guidance websites which volunteer at free of cost through which candidate could predict the admission prospects of category 'A' and 'B' institutions. The admission processes of management seats in affiliated institutions are conducted in a small scale with semi-technological support, where the common counseling process is carried out by either at state or national level institutions. The category 'C' institutions depend on the print media, advertisement through hoardings and leading news papers and coverage in regional websites. Technology is invariably used in every stage of the admission process in the case of category 'D', in both private

universities and state universities as their admission process is completely independent and number of seats has to be filled on their own. They establish Memorandum with more than one technological partner, utilize SEO and even some of them prefer paid-search model. Their presence in social networks is also high so as to cover a large student community.

The study has also done a survey with prospective candidates and their parents with total of 200 responses, who seek admission in various undergraduate programmes. The survey received inputs at various stages of admission and ensured demographic coverage. The summary of survey findings with top priority are listed in Table 3.

Both parents and students seek website of the institution as valid input for decision making. They expect the website to clearly mention the admission process, fee particulars and refund policy. Parents tend to search placement track record of the institution, pass percentage, placement training, programme accreditation, infrastructure, quality of faculty etc. Students look forward to the semester abroad programme, foreign language courses, campus life with hobby clubs, international collaborations to support higher studies as additional attractions for choosing an institution and a programme. The institutions with good placement record are viewed as an outcome of better infrastructure, faculty resources and accreditation. Though institutions maintain web pages on all the listed decision factors, they lack on content clarity and updated information.

Table 3. Course and Institution selection in Admission process by Students and Parents

Description	Students	Priority	Parents
Source of information	Website of the institution	↑	Website of the institution
	Testimonials of alumni & current students		Testimonials of alumni, current students & their parents
	Career websites for entrance exam dates & guidance		Educational Exhibitions to identify prospective institutes
	Educational exhibitions for career opportunities in programme choice		Career websites for consolidated entrance exam dates & tips
Decision factors on Website	Past Placement Record & Brand value	↑	Past Placement Record & Brand Value
	Semester Abroad programme		Pass percentage
	Foreign language courses & International alliance		Accreditation, Quality of faculty & International alliance
	Campus life & higher studies		Infrastructure & higher studies
	Pass percentage		Bank support on educational loan
	Accreditation & Quality of faculty		Fee structure, Refund policy
	Infrastructure, Fee structure		Location & accessibility
Digital marketing tool in Admission	SMS & Whatsapp	↑	Email & Call Centre services
	Email		SMS & Whatsapp
	Facebook, Twitter & Call centre services		Facebook
Expectations of Online in Admission process	Online application with limited fields and minimum uploads	↑	Mode of online fee payment in application submission & counseling
	User friendly software on course / institution selection with sliding and floating options		SMS / Email updates at various stages of admission (alerts, course & payment confirmation)
	Usage of social media tools to update counseling process, student achievements and events		

X. CONCLUSION

Even though India has a distributed student market, access to education beyond higher secondary schooling is limited among the university age population. Due to this, seats are vacant in professional courses including India's top national institutions. This has increased the competition among higher education sectors to expand the digital sphere in the admission process to address and attract the prospective students. One of the greatest challenges for the institution is empowering the existing team to understand and adapt to the demand-driven digital marketing strategies when compared to the career path websites. The study recommends the institutions to understand the expectations of prospective candidate to develop holistic thinking and strengthen the base such as providing updated website, simplified application form, course catalogues, proper and proven keywords to enhance SEO, standardized common test tool that covers all the education boards, seamless process flow in admission activities, quick response and reach large audience through social networks etc.

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