

Imperial College
London

Case study: adapting communications strategies in response to COVID-19

Higher Education and Further Education Marketing and Communications Event - 9 June 2021

Vickie Sheriff
Director of Communications



What I'll cover



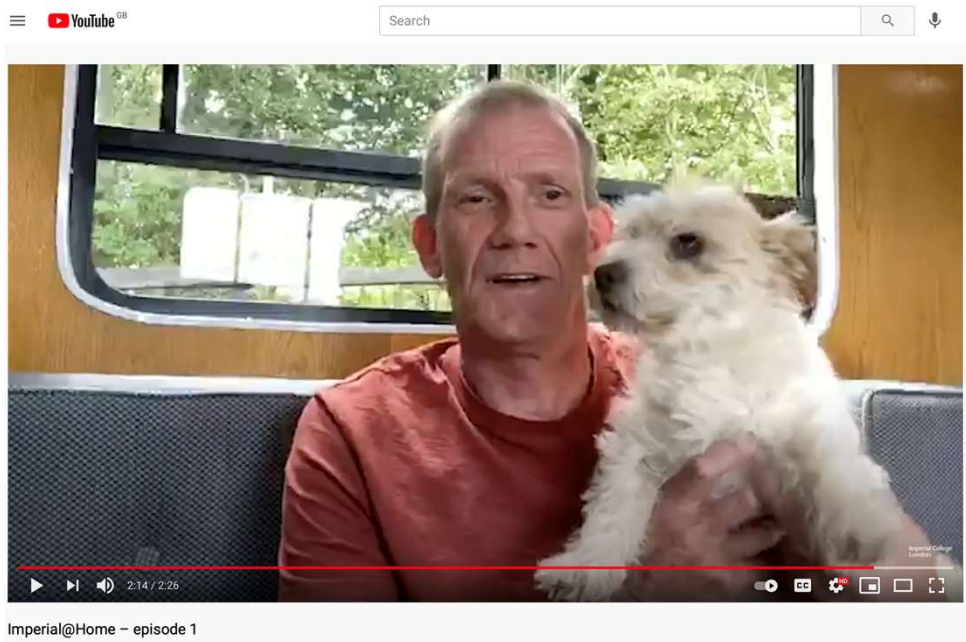
- Imperial's communications landscape
- Comms strategy reprioritisation
- Our lived experience of the new strategy:
 - Community
 - COVID-19
 - Recruitment
- What we have learned

Communications landscape at Imperial

- Central team (c.30):
 - Community communications (internal and social media – main channels)
 - Media relations (issues and research)
 - Design and editorial (incl brand)
 - Digital (content strategy, apps and products)
- Decentralised communications model
- Student Recruitment & Marketing separate
- Communications Network: c.140



From 7 broad themes to 3 priorities => clear focus and direction for a team with a wide-ranging remit



- 1. Community:**
 - maintaining a sense of community among staff and students, wherever they are
- 2. COVID-19:**
 - providing factual information and reassurance, promoting our research and supporting our researchers, and providing expert commentary
- 3. Recruitment:**
 - supporting home and international student recruitment, and remaining attractive to current students

Challenges

Getting the right information to the right people at the right time when it kept changing

Shared themes (safety, wellbeing, support) – but different execution relevant to our audiences

Staff specific

- Professional staff all working from home
- Some academic and service staff on campus
- Major organisational restructures continued

Student specific

- Wide-ranging community from UGs to PGRs, some hard to reach
- Speed of switching and adapting to remote teaching and assessment longer term
- Creating a parity of experience – globally spread community
- Student experience deficit – from clubs and societies to graduation

Approach

Information:

- Email – a timely bulletin to our whole community
- Senior leaders' messages – at key moments
- Website - COVID-19 specific web pages = single source of truth and resources

Behaviours:

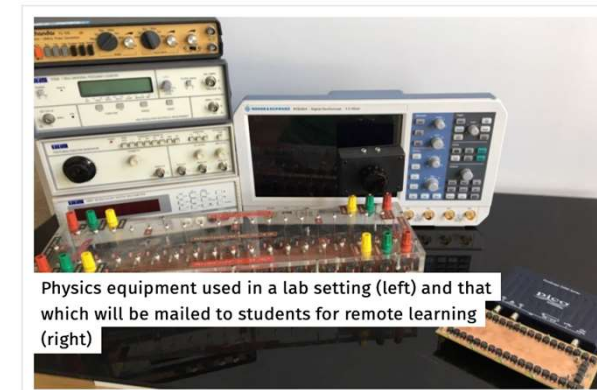
- Campaigns to engage and influence
 - Imperial@home – a campaign to connect people and share tips
 - Protect and Respect – to promote safer behaviours

Pride in our community's response:

- Community news stories
- Education innovation stories

Physics students and staff develop 'Lab in a Box' experiments for home study

by *Murray MacKay*
22 September 2020



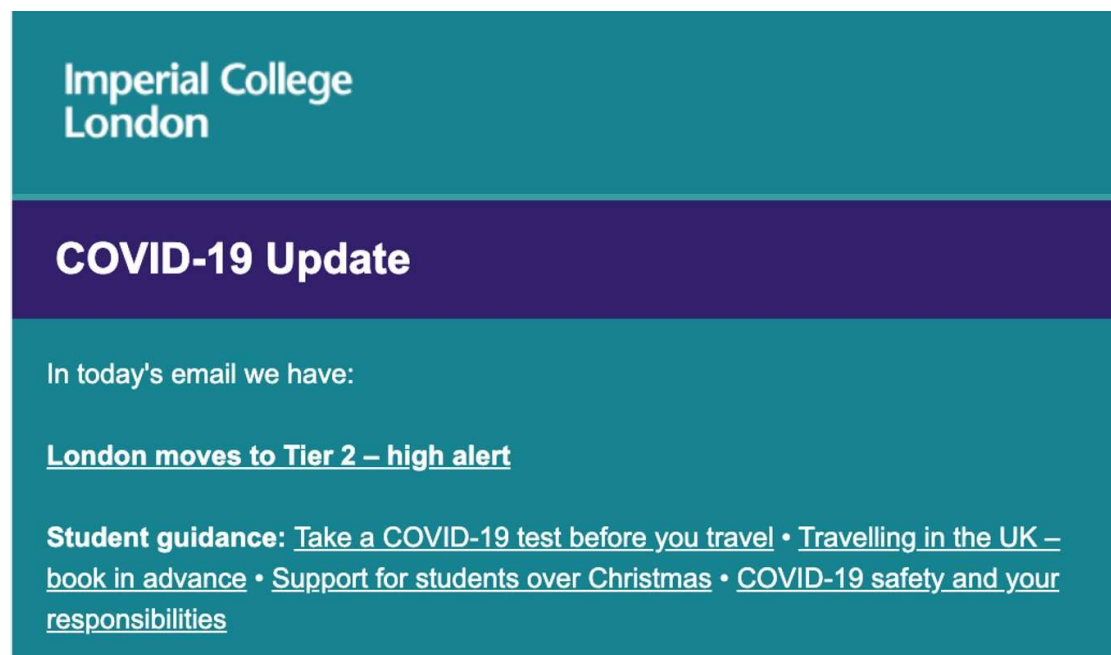
- Share this
- Tweet this
- Share on reddit
- Share on LinkedIn
- Print this story

FEATURED

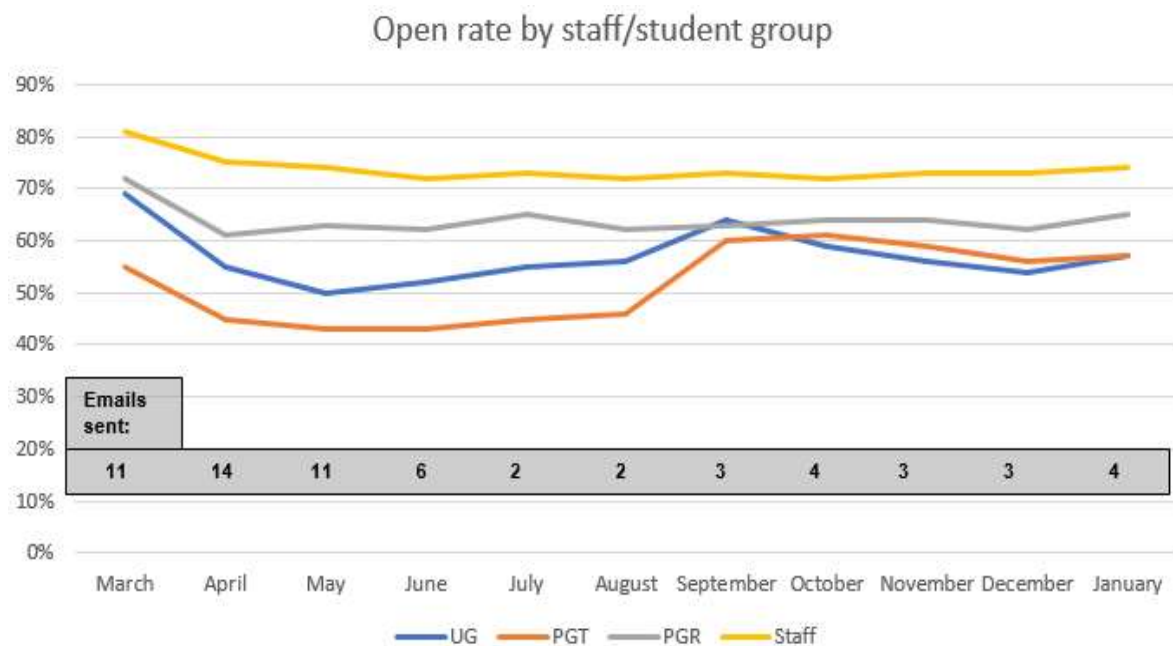
Professor David J Colling

The 'what you need to know' email bulletin

- COVID-19 Update emails sent to all staff and students since March 2020 (built in Poppulo)
- Contain the latest information relating to COVID-19 - general and audience specific
- Frequency of emails has changed - now generally one per week



COVID-19 Update email bulletin open rates (2020/21)



- Staff and PGR open rates show similar pattern; as do UG and PGT students
- Staff are most engaged audience and PGT are least engaged
- PGT and UG students see rise in engagement at start of new academic year
- No obvious connection: number of emails and engagement
- Knock on: engagement with other College-level newsletters also increased

Note: average open rate for newsletters across Imperial is 65% - above the national average for UK unis (48%)

Protect and respect – safety campaign

Aim: to encourage positive behaviours and compliance with safety measures – deliberately different from the stark instructional signage

What?

- Animations
- GIFs
- YouTube peer-to-peer videos
- Protect and Respect graphics

Where?

- Safety COVID-19 webpages
- Social media channels
- Email (incl. Newsletters)
- Digital screens on campuses

Outcome: drove 500% increase in website safety page visits; high levels of impressions/reach and engagement on social; high recognition rate



Community news

Britain's first astronaut shares her thoughts on confinement and isolation

by Hayley Dunning
30 March 2020



5 comments

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Print this story

Helen Sharman shares what she learnt when living and working in space, and how those lessons could apply to isolation during the coronavirus outbreak.

Helen Sharman became the first British astronaut in 1991 when she travelled to the Mir space station and undertook scientific research.

Imperial students provide over 350 free meals to NHS staff

by Martha Salhotra
01 April 2020



1 comment

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Imperial staff share their tips on working from home with children around

by Elizabeth Nixon
14 May 2020



A child at Imperial's Early Years Education Centre, which is currently closed.

With schools and nurseries closed and the majority of staff working from home, Imperial staff share their tips on remote working without childcare.

Imperial has amended its HR policies to support staff [staff login] and Imperial's leadership have recognised that staff may not be able to work as much as normal.

Be the first to comment

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MORE

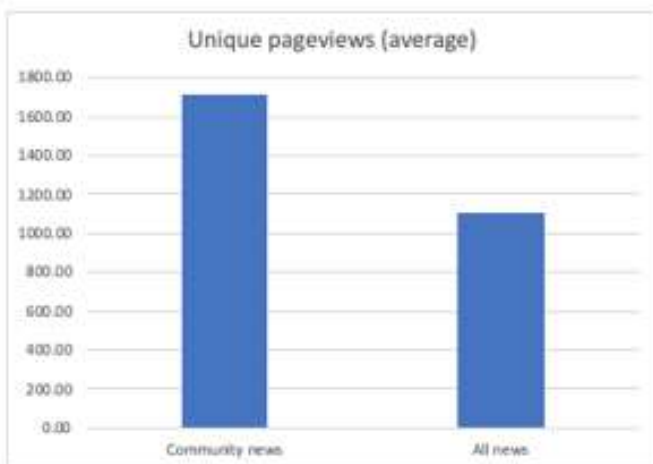
College and campus

- Fifty-one community-focused news articles were published on our website last year (2020).
- Articles aimed to inform, motivate and comfort staff and students, by providing a platform for voices from across the College, as well as raising the visibility of inspirational work.

Community news

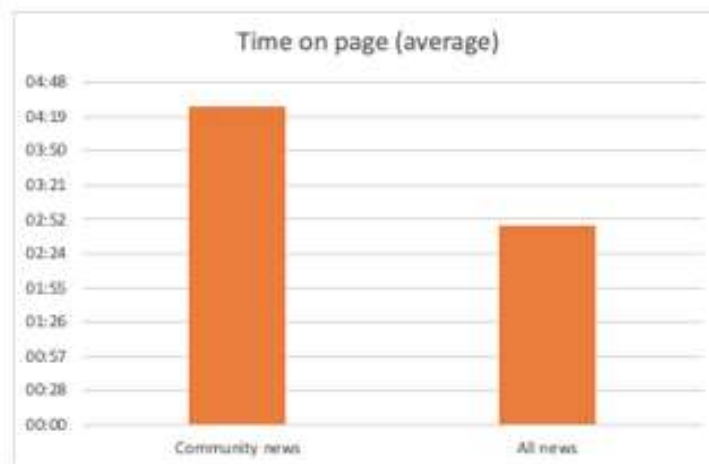
Community news was very popular

Unique pageviews were 43% higher for Community news than average (i.e. all news)



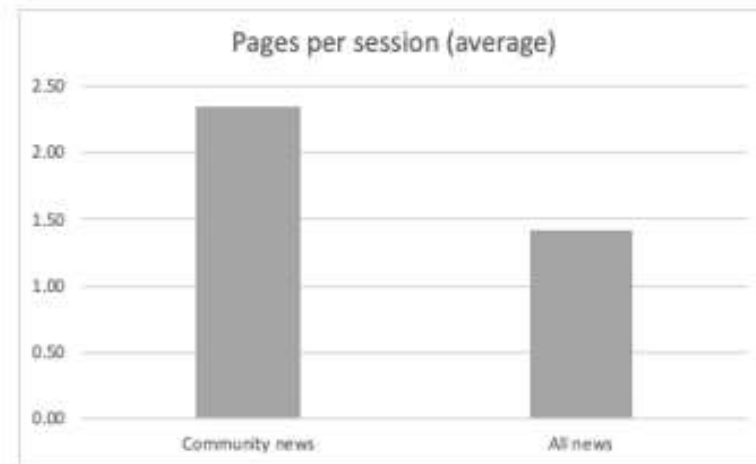
It was read for longer

The time on page was 1min 40 seconds longer for Community news than average



It encouraged more onward reading

The pages per session were 49% higher for Community news than average



Priority no.2

Providing factual information and reassurance, promoting our research and supporting our researchers, and providing expert commentary

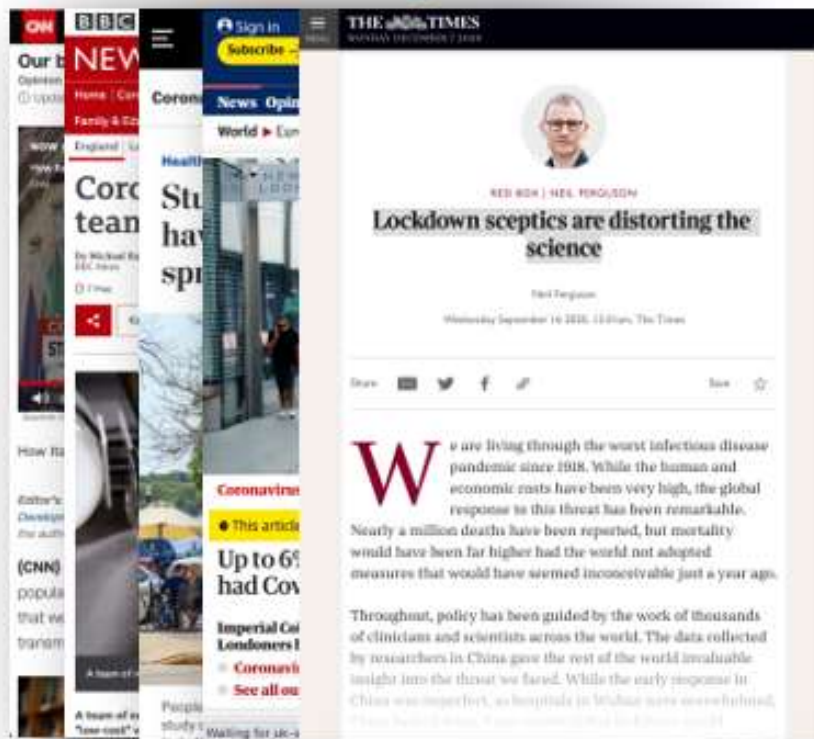


Challenges:

- Moving into the spotlight (and all that goes with it)
- Increased volume and visibility of research outputs
- Vastly increased global media interest
- Documentary requests
- Vile social media
- Deliberate misinformation
- Threats on our researchers



Media coverage



More than 1,558 pieces of Imperial College London media coverage related to coronavirus were published in the time period. Articles aimed to provide factual information and reassurance for audiences, as well as promote our research globally and support our researchers, and provide expert commentary.

Read all about it:

[CNN Online, 22 Mar](#)

[BBC News, 7 May](#)

[Washington Post, 22 May](#)

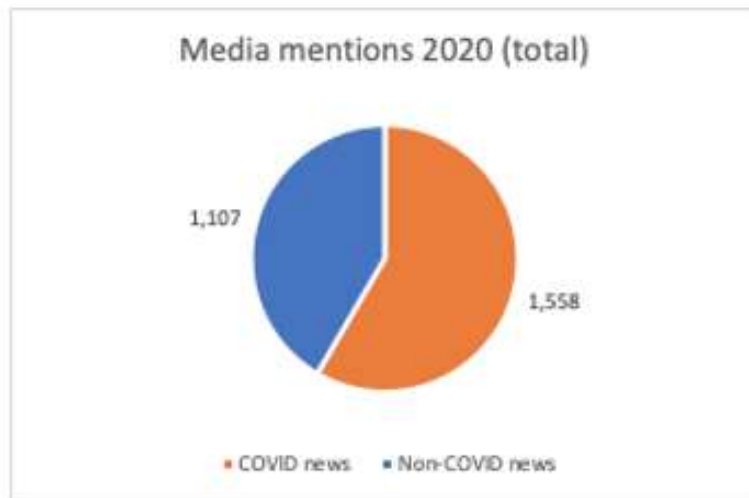
[Guardian, 13 Aug](#)

[The Times, 16 Sept](#)

Media coverage

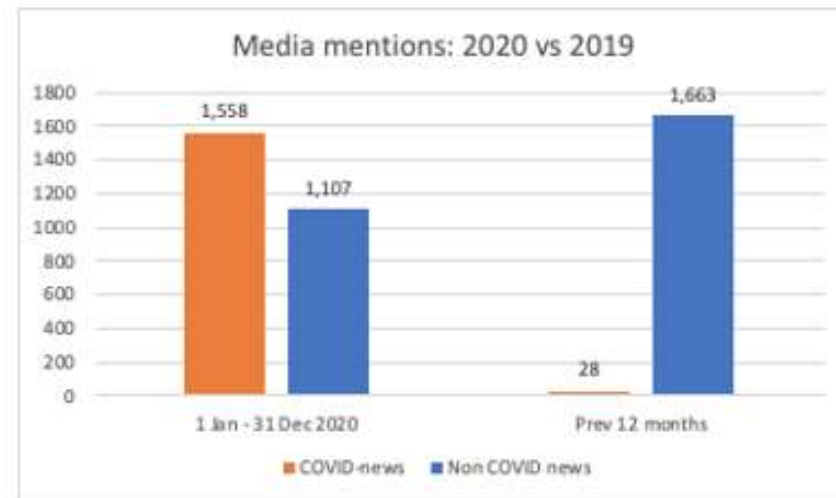
COVID media mentions dominated in 2020

Fifty-eight percent of top-tier articles published about Imperial in 2020 were COVID-related.



Media mentions almost doubled in 2020

Media mentions in 2020 were 45% higher than 2019, with COVID mentions alone (1558) almost beating the total of 2019 mentions (1691).



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Case study – Securing funding for vaccine trials

- Professor Robin Shattock approached CPA to create publicity to secure the funding necessary to take the vaccine to clinical trials.
- We targeted top tier media to raise awareness of the vaccine team's capability to rapidly produce a Covid-19 vaccine, and gain the attention of potential funders – particularly UK Government.
- Tools used included: pitches to journalists, press releases, online news stories, infographics, video and audio interviews, Twitter threads and Reddit's Ask me Anything.

How close are we to a Covid-19 vaccine?

Prof Robin Shattock is in charge of Covid-19 vaccine trials at Imperial College London

22 April 2020

🕒 9 minutes

Opinion Disease control and prevention

Philanthropic funding must fill the urgent coronavirus research gap

Donors can unlock multiple, sometimes radical approaches while tolerating failures

ALICE GAST [+ Add to myFT](#)

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Outcomes – Securing funding for vaccine trials

- We secured a Today programme interview and ITV news package, as well as extensive other UK coverage
- The Government announced **£22.5m** investment, followed by an additional **£18.5m** on 17 May. There have also been over **£4m** in philanthropic donations.
- The launch of the trial was the lead story on the BBC News at Six and at Ten, and it featured in other UK outlets such as The Times and Guardian
- Also picked up internationally including by the New York Times, CNN and the Times of India
- More than 6,000 people putting themselves forward

UK 'throwing everything' at search for coronavirus vaccine, with human trials set to begin

Government will give £22.5m funding to Imperial College London to support clinical trials, and £20m to Oxford University

By Anna Mikhailova, DEPUTY POLITICAL EDITOR
22 April 2020 - 6:02am

Imperial COVID-19 vaccine team secures £22.5 million support

By Andrew Scheuber, Ryan O'Hare
22 April 2020



Professor Robin Shattock is leading efforts to develop a self-amplifying RNA vaccine against COVID-19

4 comments

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VOLUNTEERING FOR THE
VACCINE TRIALS

Imperial College
London

Raising academic profiles



News pages: overview

March news traffic was unprecedented

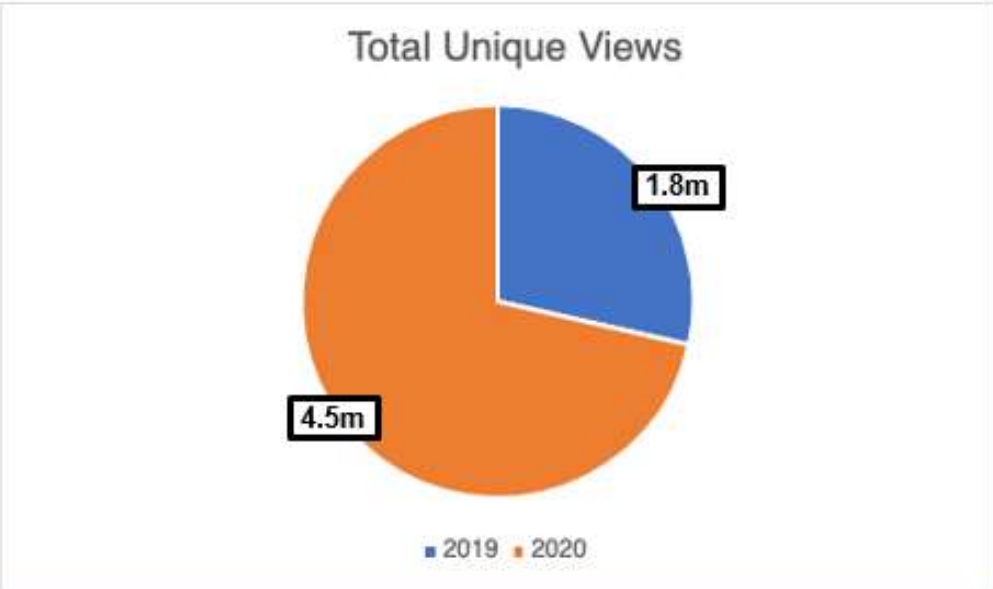
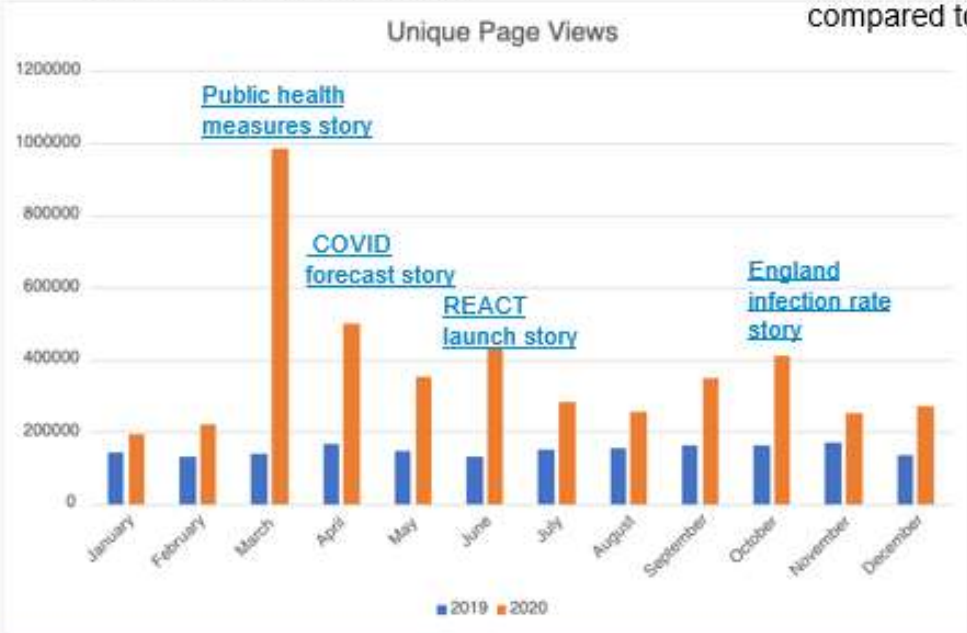
March 2020 news traffic was more than 600% higher than March 2019

2020 beat 2019 hands down

Unique views of news articles in 2020 were consistently higher for each month compared to their 2019 counterparts

News visits tripled

Total unique visits to the news pages from 1 Jan – 31 Dec 2020 were over double that of the equivalent time period in 2019



COVID-19 Webpages: overview

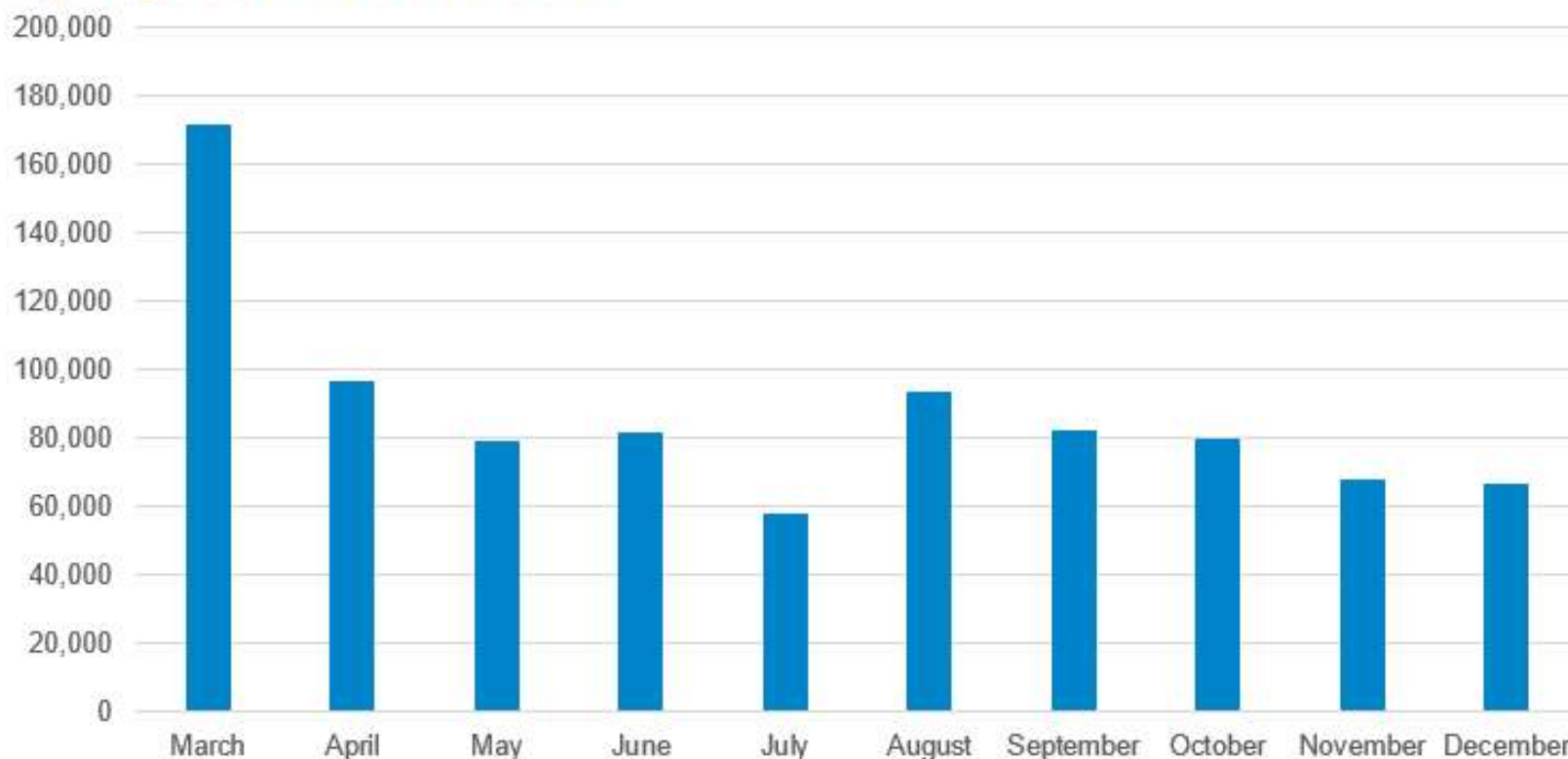
Unique page views (2020)

March peak

March had over 170,000 unique visits to the webpages. The second highest number of views came in April, but with still only 56% of March's total.

Students and testing

The most popular pages over the year were the homepage, student's pages and testing scheme. These accounted for 73% of traffic to all pages over the year.



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Social: at a glance

Instagram most engaging

We saw the greatest level of engagement in 2020 on Instagram as people sought out 'nice' content.



June followers

Unexpectedly our largest increase in followers on our social channels took place in June.



Most new followers on YouTube

YouTube saw a 63% increase in total followers from 2019 to 2020. When you consider the increase as a percentage it was still the most improved channel.

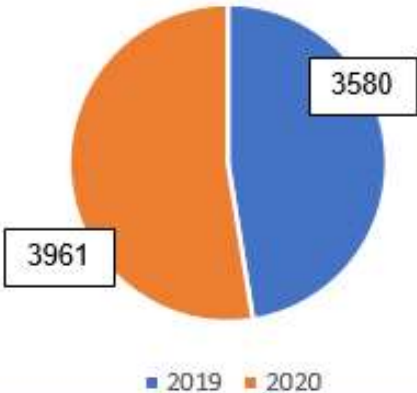


Social: engagements

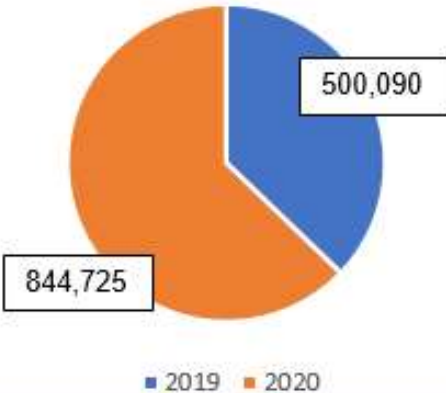
Increased engagement across social

Despite the number of posts across our social channels only increasing by 11%, the increase in engagement was 69%. Indicating our content was a lot more efficient at engaging with our audiences.

Posts 2019 vs 2020



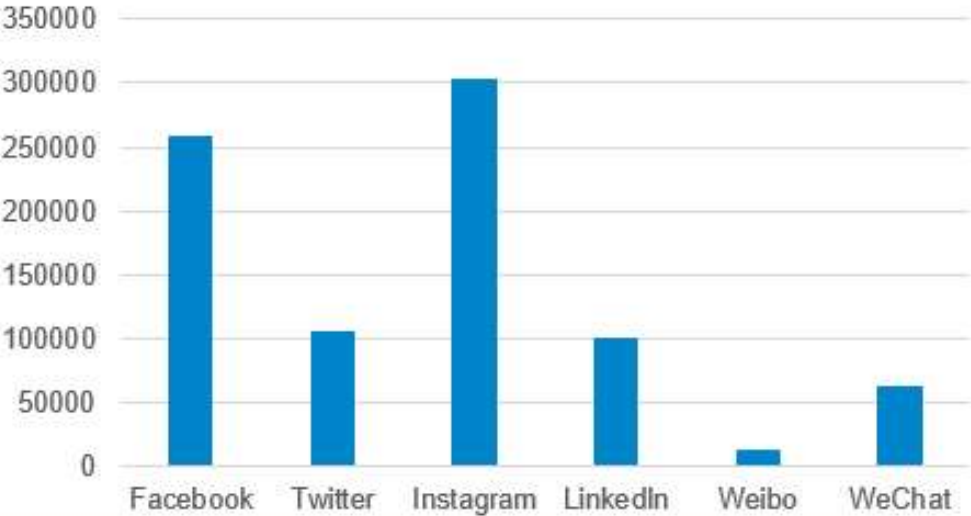
Engagements 2019 vs 2020



Instagram most engaging

Instagram is the most engaged platform over 2020, closely followed by Facebook.

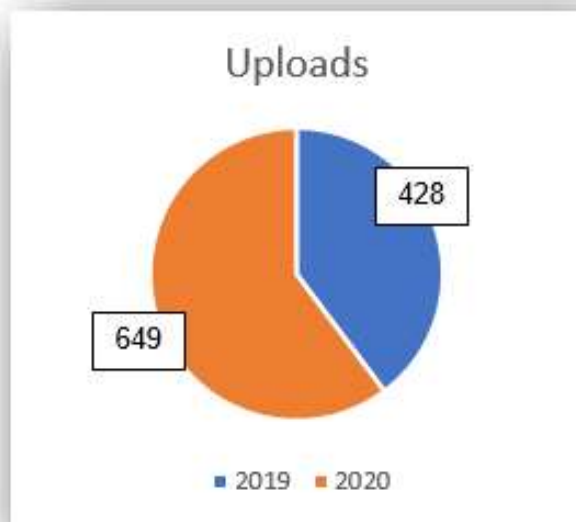
Total engagements 2020



Video - YouTube

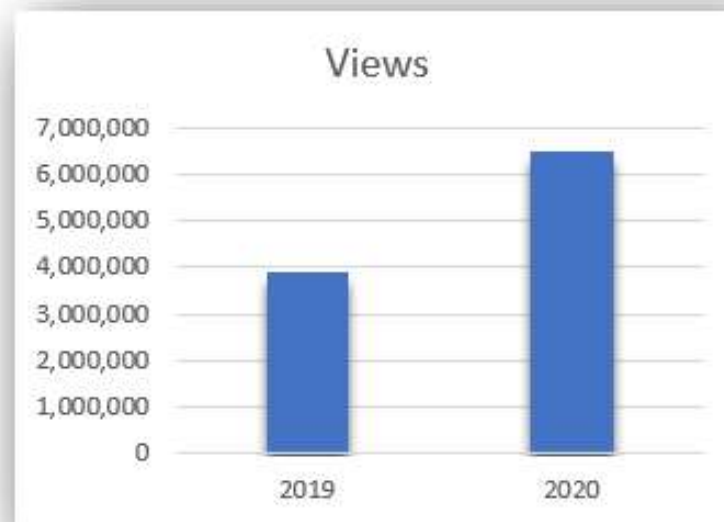
Rise in production

Over 50% increase in number of videos uploaded to College's YouTube account.



Watched even more than before

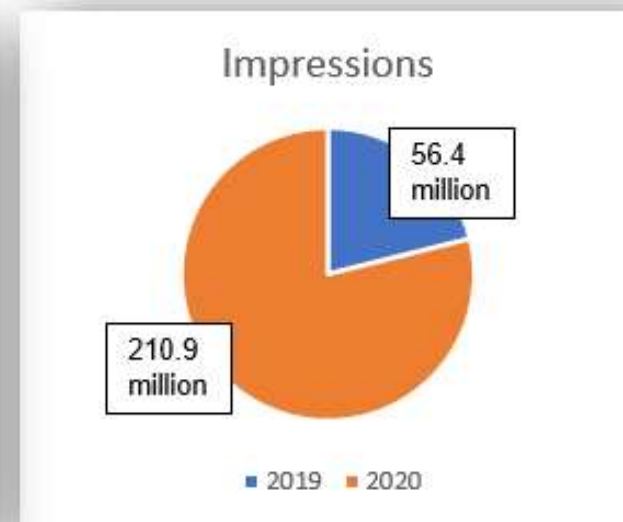
66% increase in views of videos on YouTube.



Evaluation period: January - December
2020

Reaching new audiences

Our YouTube videos were seen by more people with over 270% increase in impressions.



Imperial College London

Photography

College images used widely in COVID media

Increase in external College photography exposure with our images featuring prominently in major global media outlets.

One day College images of Neil Ferguson were in every major paper.



Professor Neil Ferguson

Internal demand for Covid assets

College asset library saw ~120,000 asset views over the year and 39,128 user sessions. 'Covid' was searched 1381 times.

35 COVID-19 related shoots were undertaken producing 1370 images.



Most popular shoot from Robin Shattock's lab

Photography blog soared in popularity

The College Photography Blog saw users up 700% with an average page time for 'Imperial's 2020 in pictures' at 13 minutes.

5,200 unique users read ['how to look better on video calls'](#).



'How to look better on video calls'

Evaluation period: January - December 2020

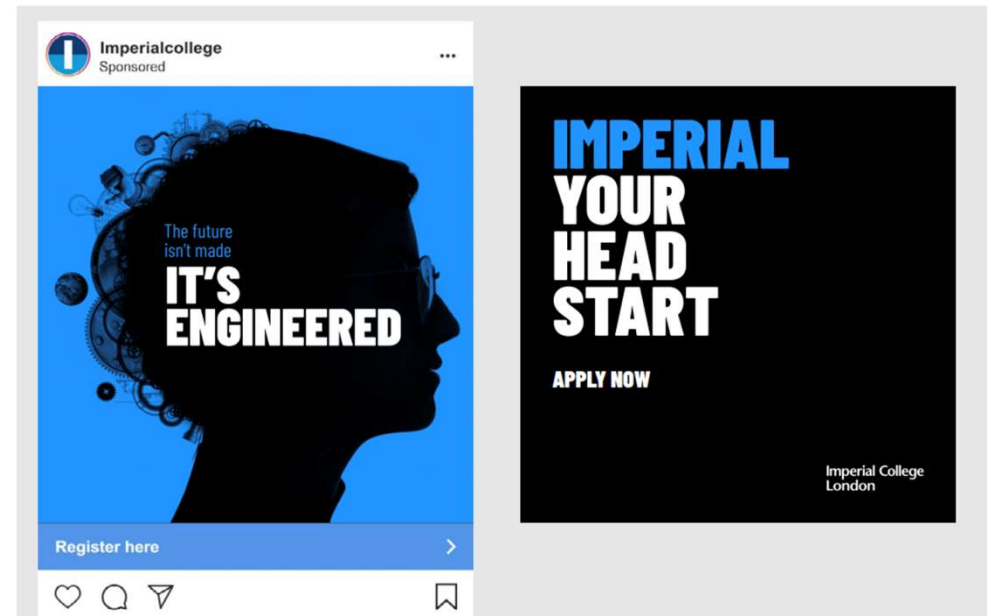
Priority no.3

Supporting home and international student recruitment, and remaining attractive to current students

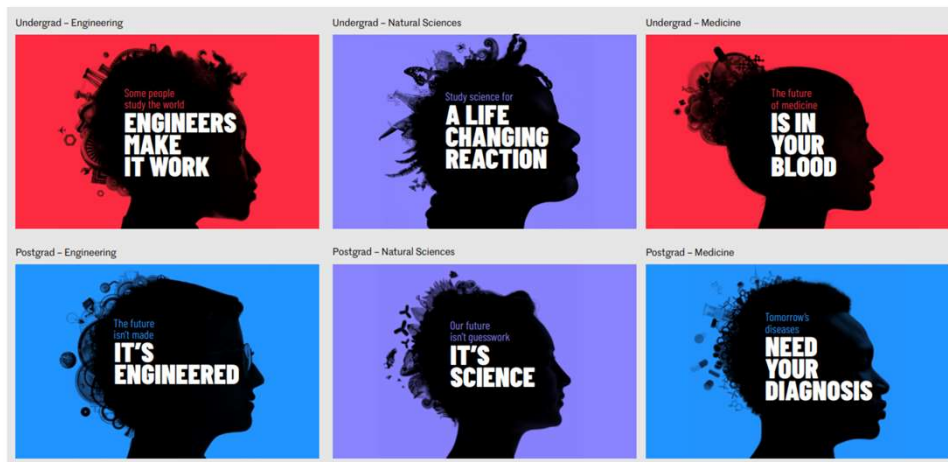


Challenges (summer 2020):

- Encouraging our current students to return for Academic Year 20/21
- Moving from passive to active recruitment
- 'Immediate Marketing Group' established
- Recruitment campaigns for PG courses – Imperial's first 'brand' campaign
- Supporting a major improvement in communication with offer holders and applicants by departments
- A level exams fiasco



Recruitment marketing



Outcome of PG campaign in Autumn 2020 for under-recruiting courses included:

- 15% increase across the Faculty of Medicine
- 9% increase in applications for Engineering courses in the campaign

UG and PG 2021 recruitment campaign sees a new campaign approach and in more diverse target markets

News pages – Recruitment and retention news

The screenshot displays a news page with the following content:

- Imperial virtual** by Murray M 23 April 2020
- Imperial executive** by Laura S 13 May 2020
- Academic mode!** by Murray M 01 June 2020
- Imperial internships** by Murray M 18 October 2020
- Lab-in-a-box and remote experiments: Education news from Imperial** by Elizabeth Ahearne 20 November 2020

The main article, "Lab-in-a-box and remote experiments: Education news from Imperial", includes an image of a lab setup and text stating: "From bespoke portable lab-in-boxes for undergraduates to remote access to lab equipment, here are some education highlights from the College."

Other visible snippets include:

- "As part of five MSc programmes..."
- "The Bushier programme digital skills..."
- "Autumn term reopened, all of in-person..."
- "International scholarship..."
- "Here's a round up of education updates from across Imperial..."
- "Lab-in-a-box: The Department of Chemistry has dispatched hundreds of bespoke, portable lab-in-boxes to undergraduates across the globe..."

At the bottom, there is a "FEATURES" section listing:

- Dr Luke C Deane, Department of Chemistry
- Dr Jabul L. Radzicki, Department of Surgery & Cancer
- Dr Ivan Hernandez Estrella, Department of Physics

Forty-three recruitment and retention-focused news articles were published in the time period. Articles aimed to reassure prospective home and international students of Imperial's ability to pivot its educational offer to the new climate without losing quality of educational excellence.

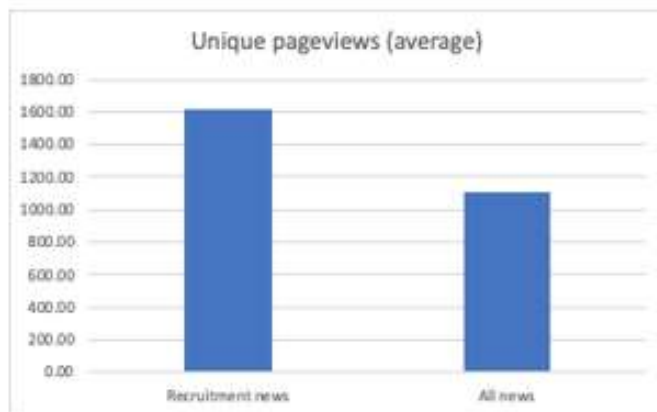
Stories reported on new developments, demonstrated our strength in online education, and showcased the fact we were listening to the concerns of the target audiences.

Read all about it:
 Virtual geoscience - [read the story](#)
 Online learning - [read the story](#)
 Academic year 20-21 - [read the story](#)
 PhD scholarships - [read the story](#)
 Education innovation - [read the story](#)

News pages – Recruitment and retention news

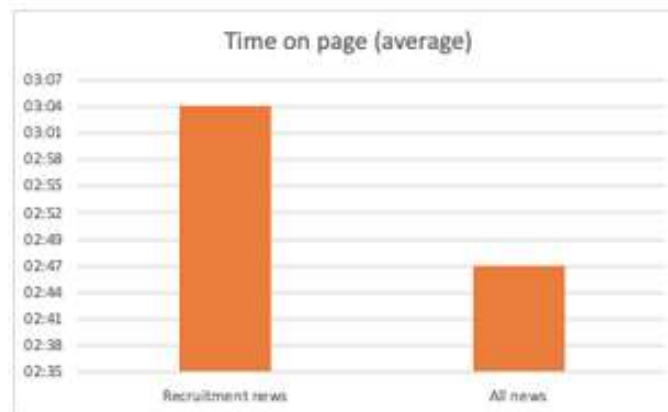
Recruitment news was very popular

Unique pageviews were 38% higher for Recruitment news than average (i.e. all news)



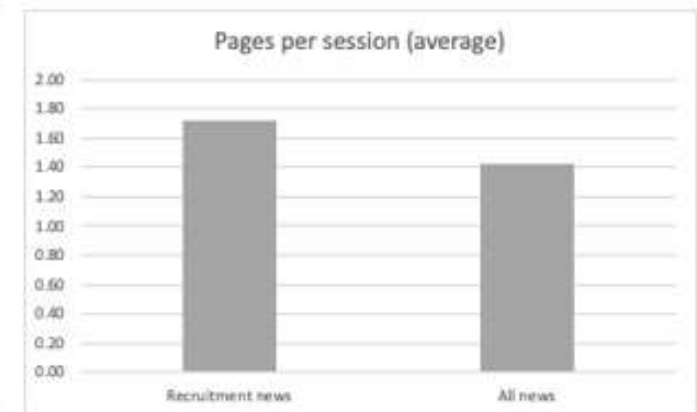
It was read for longer

The time on page was 19 seconds longer for Recruitment news than average



It encouraged more onward reading

The pages per session were 19% higher for Recruitment news than average



- Created an opportunity for a decentralised organisation to work more effectively together
- Value of good comms demonstrated and appreciated
- Beware the website monster
- Shift to better resourced recruitment and improve communications amongst non-comms staff
- Brand appreciation
- Focus on three priorities but BAU never really went away
- Data has proved its worth in comms
- Clarity of the COVID comms strategy lives on





Virtual tour – Imperial360

Launched in July 2020: 360-visit.imperial.ac.uk

360° content and on-demand content (student chat)

- UG subjects
- Campus facilities
- Accommodation
- Jan–June 2021 – new features, content and visual improvements
- Used platform created by [Revolution Viewing](#)
- Complemented by:
 - ‘day in the life’ videos
 - virtual tours of halls of residence

Imperial College London

Welcome To Imperial360: Virtual Tour And Open Day

Explore Imperial student life from every angle

Let's get started →

Imperial College London

Visit Study website ↗ Request a prospectus ↗

← Back Menu ☰

Bioengineering

Bioengineering brings together knowledge from pure and applied sciences to create new devices, algorithms, processes and systems to dramatically transform people's lives. Our neurotechnology researchers combine robotics with the repair of pathways in the brain to create new prosthetics. Our Centre for Blast Injury Studies is improving treatments and recovery for people who've been injured in explosions.

You'll learn about a vast range of topics including mechanics, nanotechnology, biomaterials, physiology, programming and design. And you'll be able to use our state-of-the-art facilities to contribute to real-world projects, like the second year student project that was used by athletes at the Rio Paralympics in 2016.

Explore our courses ↗

Why Imperial

Watch where it all begins - #OurImperial

Image gallery

Explore 360° Chamber

Maria
Undergraduate
Molecular Bioengineering MEng (4YFT)

Want to find out more about student life? Chat with our student ambassadors and ask any questions you have.

CHAT WITH OUR STUDENTS

Live and on-demand events

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Virtual Open Days – Imperial360 Live

Webinars hosted on a dedicated platform

First event 13–18 July 2020:

- 11,885 pre-registrations
- 6,662 attendees across 18 live webinars
- Session recording sent to all pre-registrants
- 63 academic staff and 49 student panellists took part

Repeated over two weekends in September

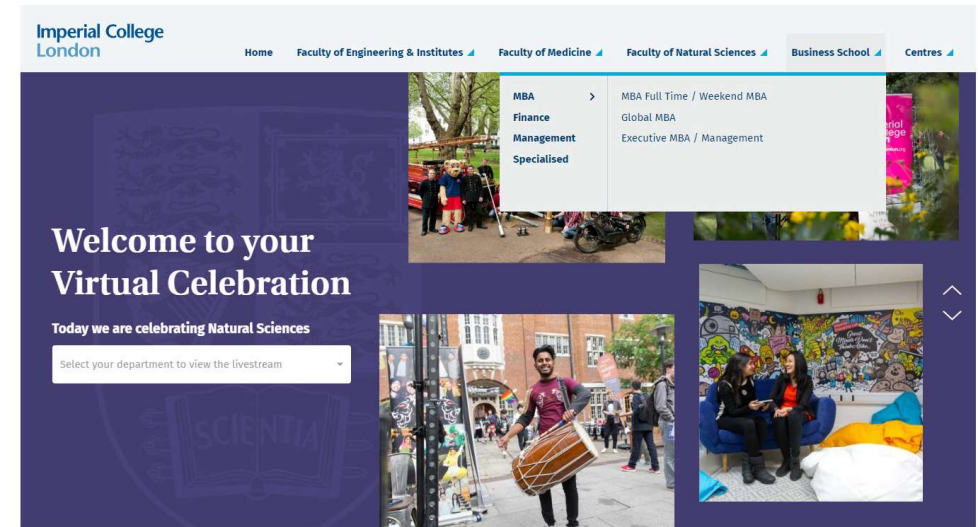
Complemented by:

- 40+ virtual fairs Sept–Nov 2020
- Advisor & influencer engagement
 - Virtual conferences
 - Newsletters



Virtual graduation ceremony

- Graduations for PG (May '20) & UG (Oct '20) cancelled
- Survey with students carried out
- Graduation committee formed (staff and students reps)
- Commitment to an in-person graduation remains
- Online ceremonies created for 28 x departments (Dec '20)



- Bespoke platform built incorporating video messages from senior leaders and student leaders and all students' names read out
- Incorporated chat function allowed the cohort to communicate in real time during the celebration

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