

Education agents or educational agents? Bridging the gap between recruitment and education



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This briefing paper is based on a scoping project which took place from 2014 – 2015. The full report on 'The role of recruitment agents in the internationalisation of higher education' is available to download here:

<https://www.uea.ac.uk/education/research/care/research/current-research>

Education agents or educational agents? Bridging the gap between recruitment and education



UK universities' commission payments to overseas recruitment agents have topped £86 million after rising sharply in recent years... Data obtained from 158 higher education institutions under the Freedom of Information Act reveal that all but 19 elite or specialist institutions now use agents to enrol non-European Union students.

Times Higher Education, 19.2.2015

Education agents are playing an increasingly central role in recruiting international students to the UK. Just how significant this role is for students became apparent to us through interviewing students about their 'journey' from making the decision to study abroad, to entering a Masters programme of study, through common milestones such as getting the required IELTS score or attending a pre-sessional English language course. From the institutional perspective, the role of the agent ends once the student registers their presence on their chosen course. But as academics, we were interested in how this important initial relationship with recruitment agents might influence the student's educational expectations and later experience and what we might learn from this as educators.

We conducted a scoping study on recruitment agents to explore in more depth and from the perspectives of the agents and international office staff, the role that recruitment agents might play in the student experience of UK higher education. Specifically, we wanted to know more about:

- who the agents are and what they do;
- what role they play in the educational decisions that international students make.



Who are the agents and what do they do?

The role of the agent can be seen as two-fold:

- the agent offers a range of service including advising, guiding and supporting the student with the application process, visa and travel arrangements;
- the agent often filters information from universities and communicates with the university on behalf of the student.

In an earlier project, we found that at the initial stage of applying to study abroad, the majority of students interviewed had sought help from an agent in their home country, rather than obtaining the information directly from university websites. The students used agents in a variety of ways – some had been advised on which university to go for (on the basis of their exam scores or predicted exam scores and ranking of their university). Others just used the agent for the visa application and to ensure they had the right paperwork. Some students had not looked at university websites at all. Many of them were still undergraduates, with more imminent examination deadlines to consider and for many perhaps, reading website information in English is a daunting prospect.

We do help for all the above things, counselling them according to their grades and the funds available. Translation of documents is done by the government authorities therefore we guide them how to do it but do not get it done on our own as it is legally not allowed. In personal statement we do guide them about the points which they should mention to explain their interest and skills.

Interview with agent in Pakistan

Some had been advised on, or helped to write the application (including the personal statement) based on information they provided to the agent. Sometimes this was given in their own language then translated by the agent into English.

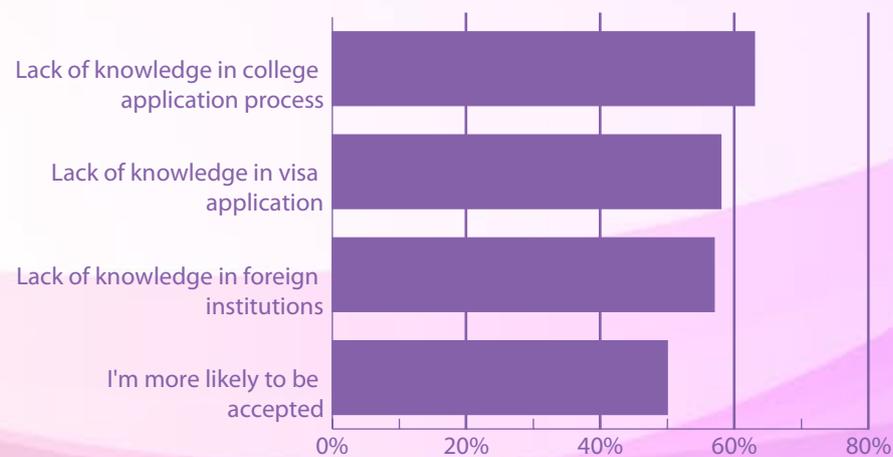
In relation to the student's subsequent academic experience, the service offered by the agent has three implications which we consider are significant:

- The student may only have a partial and/or limited view of the host university's academic culture and the course they will attend – both in terms of the explicit demands and expectations of the course and the implicit academic conventions and teaching/learning practices.
- The agent influences the view that university staff will have of the student before arrival, through assisting with or writing their application forms, leading to assumptions about their language proficiency which may not be borne out in practice.
- The quasi-parental role the agent plays during the application process can set up a relationship of dependency which then creates expectations in the student that this level of support will continue once they begin their studies in the UK university.



The norm now is that agents apply on behalf of the student – the student just gives the agent all the information and they also receive the emails and forward them to the students – mostly they are very good at this and translate the university’s messages to the student because the messages can confuse the student, especially if they are international.

Interview with HEI international officer



Reasons given by Chinese students in the US for using an agent

Source: Hagedorn, L. and L. Zhang (2011) The use of agents in recruiting Chinese undergraduates, *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 15(2), 186-202

What role do the agents play in students’ decisions about where to study?

An International Officer told us: *‘Some agents tell you they have all kinds of sway over the student. Other agents tell you they avoid influencing the student at all in terms of where to study.’*

The following extract from an interview with an international Masters student illustrates how an agent had an influence on the student’s decision-making: *‘[the pre-session course] made me choose [this university]. The agent told me that it offers a three month course with an exam at the end which is much easier than IELTS. [It] has a good reputation in this regard’.*



While student decision-making has been investigated quantitatively with the purpose of informing marketing and recruitment strategies, our interest was in *how* students use agents and the implications this might have for students' experience of studying in the UK. Clearly, agencies' education counsellors do not simply provide information and a range of services but also engage with students in making decisions. We know this from our interviews with students and from talking to a number of agents.

The student's financial situation, their grades or estimated grades, coupled with institutional rankings, will determine the student's choice to a great extent:

We try to hear what the student is looking for – how long they want to stay, how much money they have to invest. Sometimes students want a specific university. Sometimes the student only wants to go to London – or maybe the student is on a budget.

From interview with agent in Brazil

From the perspective of the agents, or to be more precise, the 'counsellors' or 'education counsellors' we spoke to, they saw their role as less about recruitment (the individual counsellors are not necessarily the ones who are paid the per student commission fee) and more as about advice and guidance with a strong educational dimension. An agent in Taiwan explained how she saw her role as helping clients to think more about the implications of making multiple applications:

Many clients tend to shop agencies and submit more than 15 applications. I hope that I could educate my clients a healthy concept about pursuing international higher education.

Agent in Taiwan

An agent in Japan, comparing his own experience of applying for a UK university many years ago, felt that applicants needed his help to navigate and interpret the vast amount of information now available on the Internet:

Now applicants are faced with too much information and they need to study it carefully.

Agent in Japan

Several agents complained about their clients' 'over-dependence' on them, and the expectation that they as agents would read emails from the university and write the responses:

The kids these days are too much dependent on us. Sometimes they don't even read the emails from the university and expect the agent to do everything. I tell them "you are going to study abroad, you need to read all the information yourself". It is totally different from my time. I had to do things for myself, the counsellor did not help that much.

Agent in Thailand



In many respects, the agents were not only selling UK universities and ‘hand-holding’ prospective students. They could also help their clients make the transition to another country and HE system, through informally sharing their cultural insights and experiences (often they had also been international students in the UK). We also learnt that in the case of larger agencies who employ counsellors – to work face to face with the student – they were often poorly paid and for this reason, there was high turnover of staff.



Conclusions and recommendations

Most of the research about recruitment agents addresses policymakers, HE leaders and those responsible for marketing and recruitment within higher education institutions. The aim of our enquiry was to see what could be learnt about agents in relation to teaching and learning in higher education. Our scoping study shows that recruitment agents can and do play an important educational role in the application process. In order to promote this role to the benefit of the international student experience, we propose the following:

- The counselling/educational role of agents should have stronger recognition as a distinct service.
- A session on advice and counselling in the specific context of agent-client relationship could be built in to briefing and training programmes for education agents. This could include discussion about writing collaboratively (particularly the personal statement) and approaches to actively involving their clients in searching, filtering and interpreting information on HEIs and relevant courses.
- ‘Good practice’ among education counsellors could be highlighted and disseminated widely (for example, by inviting counsellors to share their insights as informal educators through Higher Education policy and discussion forums with British Council and UKCISA).

We believe these measures would highlight and enhance the educational aspects of the application process, thus creating a bridge between recruitment and the student’s later educational experiences in the UK.





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