

The Ambiguities of Working with Third-Party Recruiters:
Essential Dilemmas

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International student mobility is big business. Approximately, 2.8 million students study abroad, distributing at least US\$50 billion around the globe annually. Most international students come from developing or middle-income countries, the majority from East and South Asia, and most are self-financed. They contribute major revenues to the institutions and countries where they study and of course represent a key part of the internationalization of universities.

The number of students pursuing opportunities abroad is expanding and no longer limited to individuals from elite backgrounds. This larger pool has less international exposure and fewer personal sources of information than earlier generations of mobile students. This new group of students is looking for help

and willing to pay for it. Universities now see these students as important sources of revenue as well as contributors to diversity. Competition for international students has increased greatly. As a result, new enterprises have appeared to address the demands of this growing market.

Recruitment agents are not new operators in higher education, and their participation in the university admissions process has always been controversial. The “agents” category often mixes individuals hired by universities to recruit students to the sponsoring institution with those hired by the student to help choose institutions to apply to and guide them through the admissions process, but there are important differences. No data are available about how many companies or individuals engage in either activity, but their presence is growing and an increasing number of universities are using these services. For now all available information is anecdotal, since no research exists on this topic.

RECRUITMENT AGENTS’ DEEDS

Recruitment agents typically serve as local salespeople for one or more universities overseas. They are *not* university employees; they are field recruiters. Their presence on the ground ensures that the institutions hiring them are more accessible to students interested in going abroad. They act as local promoters and a conduit of international applications for their university client(s). For this job they are typically paid a commission that ranges from 10 to 15 percent (but may go as high as 25%) of the first year’s tuition, although some receive an annual fixed fee. The agents may but do not necessarily receive any professional training from their university clients, nor are formal mechanisms generally in place for keeping them current on programs or policies.

Agents may also act as guidance counselors, helping students sort through the overwhelming amount of information available on the Internet. However, their motivation does not consist of providing impartial information but rather to steer students to specific institutions—something that may not be entirely clear to a student who consults them.

The primary client for agents is the institution that hires them. In order to be successful, they must deliver an acceptable number of students to their sponsoring institutions. It is not known how frequently agents accept payment from students as well as universities and colleges, although anecdotal evidence indicates that this does happen. The key here is that the extent of their activities, source of their fees, and propriety of their services lack transparency, particularly to students.

It is not possible to confirm the extent of services provided, but they include activities required to match student clients with university clients. Many universities suspect that agents sometimes complete applications and write essays for their student clients. Although it is not possible to generalize, sufficient anecdotes have been reported to cause concern.

OTHER INFORMATION SOURCES

Another service available to internationally mobile students is offered by a growing number of private independent advisors. This service is hired by students to provide guidance in matching their goals, objectives, and academic profile to appropriate institutions overseas. Private consultants do not have contractual agreements with any university that would influence the advice they provide.

To be successful, these professionals must cultivate a local reputation for providing excellent service to students, not institutions; they must be well informed with current knowledge about a wide range of colleges and universities, academic programs, and admissions requirements throughout the world. They welcome contact with institutions, meet with traveling representatives, contact alumni, and often visit campuses abroad. In fact many universities seek out these advisors and provide them with information to share with their student clients; this “triangle” of communication works to everyone’s advantage.

Also, advisors and extensive information are accessible to students in many countries at nonprofit advising centers operated by the British Council, the US State Department, and other governments and associations that provide a basic orientation to higher education in their respective countries and guide students to helpful resources. Yet, staffing at these agencies is inadequate to serve the growing international student market.

PERVERSE INCENTIVES

The dynamic between an intermediary, an institution, and a student is inevitably influenced by the incentives and rewards that shape it. A recruitment agent’s income depends on directing students to specific institutions. While this action may result in a good match for the student, the incentives are not set up to ensure the *best* match for the student or, for that matter, to work in the student’s best interests.

Agents are entrepreneurs who earn their income from providing a service to two entities whose best interests may, or may not, be the same. The rewards

arise from the relationship between the agent and the institution that hires him or her, not from the service provided to the student, presenting a potential conflict of interest that no professional standards or guidelines can eliminate. In fact, as long as the incentives favor the interests of the institution and agent over the interests of the student, professional standards will have limited effect.

No conflicting incentives exist for private consultants or nonprofit advising centers. The work is unambiguously directed toward the best interest of the student.

FALSE ARGUMENTS AND LOST OPPORTUNITIES

Most of the arguments in defense of overseas agents appear somewhat hollow—such as, students cannot be expected to sort through vast amounts of data on opportunities abroad on their own; small institutions do not have staff or resources to launch effective international marketing campaigns; since agents are not going to take leave, standards should be set for their behavior; and the market will weed out unscrupulous recruiters.

Given the investment and consequences of the procedure, students should be required to participate actively in the research. It is too risky to have someone else make their decisions or even influence them, if the students lack the knowledge needed to judge advice fairly. It is inappropriate that a recruitment agent, motivated by economic gain, should be the source of all information.

While it is easy to commiserate with overwhelmed students who turn to agents for help, it is harder to sympathize with the inclination of institutions to do the same. International students enrich every campus, and hosting them requires a great deal of responsibility. When institutions work through agents,

they sacrifice the benefits that result from the direct engagement of university administrators and faculty in recruitment, which ensures a necessary flow of information—about foreign cultures, foreign education systems, and international student needs. Similarly, direct communication with institutional representatives helps students receive accurate and up-to-date information.

Many alternatives are open to colleges and universities. College administrators can travel with a number of companies that organize international recruitment trips, at a range of costs; they can participate in overseas education fairs. Institutions with limited budgets have found creative ways to increase their visibility overseas and to reach out to potential applications. Numerous examples of recruiting successfully exist through students on study-abroad programs, faculty who travel, or combining efforts (and budgets) of multiple offices such as admissions, alumni relations, and development to send a single administrator abroad to represent the institution, Webinars (Web-based seminars) and other online events. Also, as mentioned above, many private consultants and advisors (professionals hired by students) welcome contact with international institutions.

Not knowing what agents actually tell their clients leaves students (and universities) very vulnerable. It is unrealistic to expect that “the market” will regulate quality or that unethical agents will be unsuccessful. The “market model” assumes that students (as consumers) have the knowledge and experience necessary to choose the best-quality service, and that is unrealistic. Adequate oversight is impossible, and professional certification will only provide “ethical cover” and a false sense of security to the institutions and students alike.

CONCLUSION

New enterprises have responded to opportunities that have arisen from growing international student mobility. Still, not all businesses that have found markets for their services should be welcomed. The use of recruitment agents by universities and colleges is clouded by many factors. Their activities cannot be adequately monitored to guarantee that student interests are protected. No international standards can guarantee local activity or that the relationship between an agent and a university will be entirely transparent to the student. Furthermore, the incentives and rewards do not depend on ethical behavior. One might also ask why, if the use of agents is forbidden in the United States for domestic recruitment of students, would it be acceptable for overseas recruiting?

Some universities do invest time and resources to ensure close communication with the agents they hire. Some are participating in a process to certify agents who adhere to ethical standards. Yet even then, ethical behavior is interpreted differently in various cultures. Who will provide the oversight and mediation to create compliance with standards as they are intended? By “outsourcing” recruitment, institutions are putting their reputation and vital communication with students to a third party, and this is a serious mistake.

A combination of good information available on the Web, the availability of impartial advice from experienced professionals and nonprofit agencies, and well-informed and user-friendly services by the host universities can address student needs. Paid recruiters are simply not necessary and, furthermore, work to the detriment of the process by standing between the direct exchange of information among students and institutions.

Perhaps most significantly, prospective students must take an active role in this research, ask good questions, and make informed decisions about where to study. Alumni of foreign universities can help them. The Internet is a good tool; visits to education information centers or education fairs can help; and direct contact with staff at prospective universities is essential.

There is no debate that agents are a strong presence in many countries. However, the issue of employing agents merits more public discussion, and it would be most unfortunate to forego the debate and proceed on the basis of “if you can’t beat them, join them.”