



Leaders in International Higher Education

2021 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

*Leading Internationalization in
a New Era: Collaborating for
Global Solutions*

The Art and Science of Working with Education Agents: Quality Assurance and Partnership Strategies

- Lindsay Addington, NACAC (US)
- Pii-Tuulia Nikula, Eastern Institute of Technology (NZ)
- Eddie West, San Diego State University (US)

Introductions

- Lindsay Addington, Director of Global Engagement, National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC)
- Pii-Tuulia Nikula, Senior Lecturer, EIT
- Eddie West, Assistant Dean, International Strategy and Programs, San Diego State University

Agenda

- Current Landscape: NACAC Agent Flash Survey Findings
- Research Perspective: Partnership Management and Quality Assurance
- Research to Practice: NACAC Best Practices
- Practitioner Perspective: Protecting Stakeholder Interests & Long-Term Partnership Development
- Discussion/Q&A

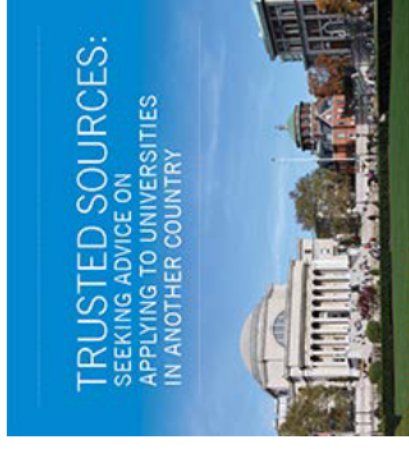


NACAC Engagement on Agents

- 2011-2013 Commission on International Student Recruitment
- Evolving code of ethics and now best practices guidance
- 8 years of research and resources
- Responsible practice increasing

Institutions should hold agents to the same ethical standards as they do their staff members.

- NACAC Guide to Ethical Practice in College Admission



NACAC
National Association for College Admission Counseling

RESEARCH BRIEF USE OF COMMISSION- BASED AGENTS IN THE RECRUITMENT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

INTRODUCTION

However, NACAC members have recently expressed their interest in exploring the use of commission-based agents to recruit international students as part of a multimodal plan. It is always important to evaluate an agency-based strategy relative to the institution's current enrollment management practices, campus readiness, and alternative recruitment approaches.

Commissioned agents allow institutions to establish a local presence in strategic regions abroad, and to meet growing enrollment goals for many families & countries that lack a significant presence of school-based college counselors, independent educational consultants, and college fairs.

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COMMISSIONED AGENTS AND NACAC'S CODE OF ETHICS SERIES

A series of six periodically released resources aimed at guiding NACAC members in the responsible use of commissioned agents in international student recruitment.

Current Landscape

- 49% currently partnering with agents; 5% actively exploring
- Consistent practice during COVID....
 - 93% continue to work with agents
 - 5% stopped working with agents
 - 2% began working with agents
- ...with adjustments
 - 34% increased number of agent partners
 - 9% decreased number of agent partners
 - 6% increased agent compensation
 - 2% decreased agent compensation

<https://www.nacacnet.org/news--publications/Research/fact-sheet-partnering-with-international-recruitment-agents/>

NACAC

Research in collaboration with:



FACT SHEET: Partnering with International Recruitment Agents During COVID

The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) and the American International Recruitment Council (AIRC) collaborated on a brief survey to learn more about how colleges are partnering with international student recruitment agents during the COVID-19 pandemic. All NACAC and AIRC college members were invited to participate in the survey. A total of 204 valid responses were received.¹

Prevalence of Agent Partnerships

Almost half (49 percent) of survey respondents indicated that they currently partner with agents, and five percent reported they are actively exploring agent partnerships as a result of the pandemic. Private colleges were more likely than public colleges to have agent partnerships (60 percent vs. 42 percent, respectively).

Percentage of Survey Respondents That Partner with Agents Based on Degree-Seeking Status of Students

	Percent
No, have not partnered with agents immediately prior to or during the pandemic	46
Yes, for degree-seeking students only	20
Yes, for both degree-seeking and non-degree seeking students	22
No, but actively exploring agent partnerships as a result of the pandemic	5
Yes, for non-degree seeking students only	1

N = 204. Note: Respondents who partner with agents for non-degree seeking students only did not respond to any additional survey questions.

Status of Agent Partnerships Before and During COVID-19 Pandemic

Survey respondents that currently partner or had recently partnered with agents were asked a series of questions to learn more about how those partnerships may have changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Only five percent of respondents reported that they stopped working with agents as a result of the pandemic and five percent started agent partnerships due to the pandemic.²

Agent Partnerships Before and During the Pandemic

	Percent
Partnered with agents prior to the pandemic and continue to work with agents during the pandemic	63
Partnered with agents prior to the pandemic but stopped working with agents as a result of the pandemic	5
Began working with agents as a result of the pandemic	2

N = 142.

¹ At least one admission officer staff member at 1,344 institutions received the survey. When multiple responses were received for one institution, duplicates were removed randomly. Reporting institutions were 50 percent private, four-year; 36 percent public, two-year and one percent private, two-year.

² Institutions that ceased or stopped or started working with agents as a result of the pandemic were asked to indicate reasons for these decisions, but results are not included because fewer than 10 responses were received.

Current Landscape – No Partnerships

Why do institutions not partner with agents?

Institutions have staff dedicated to recruitment travel (55%) or armchair recruitment (45%), or have ethical concerns (54%)

Among Survey Respondents Citing Ethical Concerns, Percentage that Ranked Each Option as Top Concern

	Percent Citing as Top Concern
Do not support per-student commission model	47
Concern with potential for agents to provide inaccurate information about my institution	23
Concern with agents steering students to particular institutions based solely, or primarily, on commission incentives	18
Concern that agents will charge both students and institutions	7
Concern that agents will not verify authenticity of student records of achievement, finances and statement of purpose	5

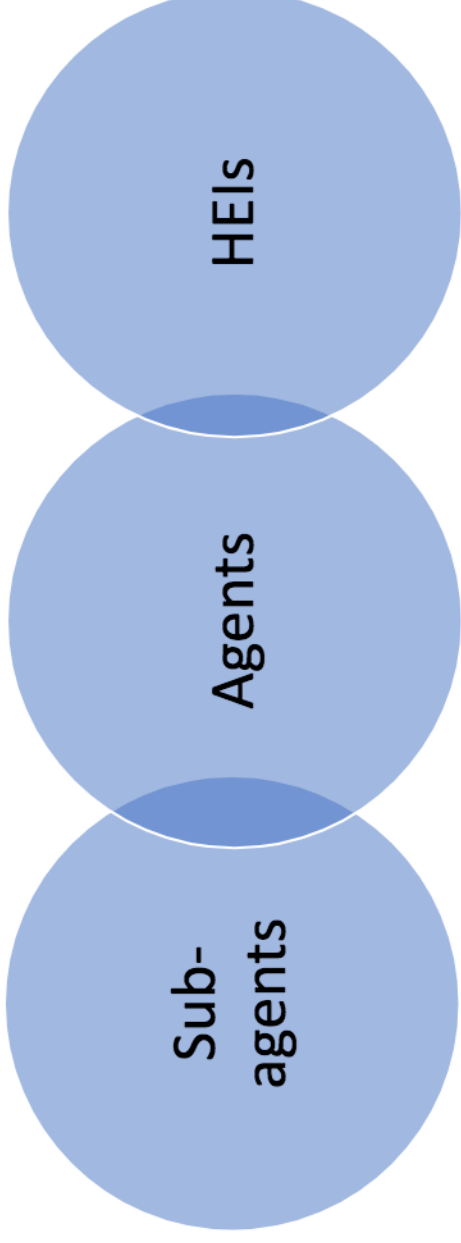
N = 61.

Research perspective

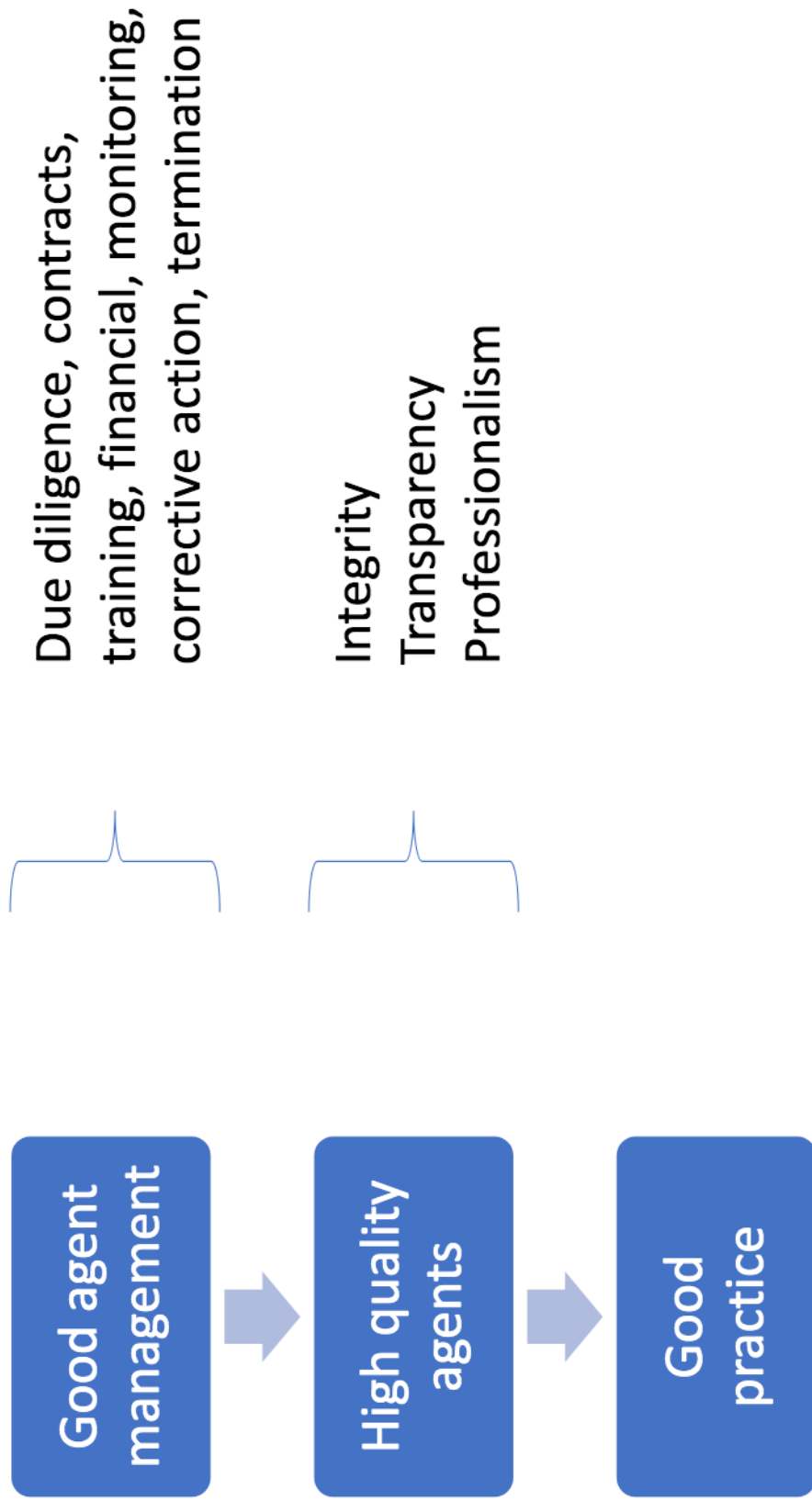
- HEI – agent relationships
- Defining ‘good practice’
- Relationship building
- Trust but verify: quality assurance

HEI – agent relationships

- To what extent do the interests of HEIs (as principals) and agents align?
- How can HEIs reduce information asymmetries?



Industry good practice?



Protecting the interests of

International students

- Accurate information
- Professional service
- No financial misconduct
- Transparency

Higher education institutions

- Accurate (and favorable) representation
- Effective in recruiting students
- Integrity in the application process
- Confidentiality, no unauthorised subcontracting etc.

Sources: Altbach & Reisberg, 2013; Australian Government, 2010; Bridge Education Group, 2016; Coco, 2015; Coffey & Perry, 2013; Di Maria, 2014; Galbraith & Brabner, 2013; Guest & Gregory, 2017; Huang et al., 2016; ICAC, 2004, 2015; Marcus, 2013; Marsh, 2016; Newell & Watt, 2012; Patingale, 2007; PhillipsKPA, 2005; Productivity Commission, 2015; Raimo et al., 2015; Reisberg & Altbach, 2011; Roy, 2017; Stecklow & Harney, 2016; Tamar, 2008; Tan, 2015; West & Addington, 2014

Agents as trusted partners

- Long-term strategic partnerships vs. transactional relationship
- Quick response to inquiries and applications
- Information & training
- Relationship building

(e.g., Agent Barometers; O’Connel, 2012; Scoby, 2017; Di Maria 2014)

Trust but verify: quality assurance

- Comprehensive due diligence before signing contracts
- On-going quality assurance using different monitoring techniques
 - Application/student data analysis
 - Prompting to assess understanding/knowledge
 - Marketing audits
 - Field audits
 - Applicant/student feedback
 - Mystery shopping
 - Peer review

Key insights

- Strategic partnerships (not transactional relationships)
- Resources required (vis-à-vis the number of agents?)
- Effective quality assurance practices
 - A wide range of techniques to collect information
 - Accepting that the true behaviour cannot be fully detected -> importance of other tools, such as financial incentives, contracts and relationships

NACAC Best Practices

Significant resources are necessary to ensure commission-based agents recruit students who are a good fit for your institution. Once your institution has vetted, selected, and contracted with agent partners, the hard work begins to ensure that the partnership is mutually beneficial. Developing a strategy that combines contractual and relationship management is the key to success when working with agents.

- Commissioned Agents and NACAC's Code of Ethics Series (2019)

Percentage of Colleges with Various Agent-Related Policies

	2017-18 (N=57)	2016-17 (N=52)	2015-16 (N=101)
Require Recommendations	44.0	53.8	35.6
Require Formal Contract	94.2	94.3	73.3
Provide Training Manual	58.8	48.1	32.7
In-person Training Sessions	58.8	59.6	40.6
Assess Students Recruited by Agency	78.8	75.0	59.8
List on Student-Facing Website	28.0	17.3	5.9

Protecting Stakeholder Interests, & Long-Term Partnership Development

- Other considerations for universities
- The regulatory environment in the US
- Protecting students' interests, continued
- In country representatives

Other considerations for universities

- A Laissez-faire approach to agent engagement is most likely to lead to poor outcomes
- An institution's "market power" influences its optimal agent engagement strategy
 - Responsive communications are often more important than lucrative commissions

Considerations for universities, *continued*

- The importance of staff training
- Rewarding agents for performance beyond sheer enrollment metrics

Next: The regulatory environment in the US

U.S. Federal prohibition of incentive-based compensation in student recruitment

34 CFR § 668.14 - Program participation agreement

(b)(22)(i) [The institution] “will not provide any commission, bonus, or other incentive payment based in any part, directly or indirectly, upon success in securing enrollments or the award of financial aid, to any person or entity who is engaged in any student recruitment or admission activity, or in making decisions regarding the award of title IV, HEA program funds.”

(b)(22)(i)(A) “The restrictions in paragraph (b)(22) of this section do not apply to the recruitment of foreign students residing in foreign countries who are not eligible to receive Federal assistance”

1992 HEA Conference Report Language

Conference report makes it clear that jurisdiction, as opposed to affirmation, explains the international recruitment exemption:

“The conferees have provided a limited exception permitting the use of commissioned sales representatives for the recruitment of foreign students to U.S. institutions on the basis that such students are not eligible for Title IV assistance. Recruitment of such students falls beyond the scope of federal interest in preserving the integrity of student aid programs and are therefore not relevant to the granting of institutional eligibility under the Act.”

(House Report 102-630, June 29, 1992)

EducationUSA – Then

ECA's Office of Academic Programs does not permit advising centers that receive support from ECA to become involved with commercial recruitment agents for the following reasons:

- A. Commercial recruitment agents represent only those universities that pay them a fee, and commercial agents recruit exclusively for those universities. These commercial agents do not represent the breadth of the US higher education system, nor can they represent US universities equitably.
- B. Commercial recruitment agents restrict the options available to foreign students in the US, a restriction that may lead students to choose a college or university that will not meet their needs. As a result, these students may have a less than satisfactory experience in the U.S., with lifelong ramifications for their educational and professional activities and views of the United States.
- C. Commercial recruitment agents understandably direct their students to students with the ability to pay. EducationUSA center association with commercial agents would undermine our public diplomacy message of outreach to well-qualified students throughout society, including underserved sectors
- D. Since EducationUSA centers....

The following policy guidance for EducationUSA centers receiving USA support for their Office of Academic Programs (OAP) is intended to help centers understand the requirements for OAPs and to ensure that centers are providing the highest quality of service to students. This guidance is intended to be used in conjunction with the requirements of the Higher Education Act (HEA) and the Department of Education's (DOE) regulations. The following information is provided for informational purposes only and does not constitute a contract. The Department of Education reserves the right to modify this guidance at any time without notice.

The official standards to which an EducationUSA center agrees to adhere as a condition of receiving USA support are the standards set forth in the Department of Education's Office of Academic Programs (OAP) Policy Guidance. The Department of Education reserves the right to modify this guidance at any time without notice. The Department of Education reserves the right to modify this guidance at any time without notice. The Department of Education reserves the right to modify this guidance at any time without notice.

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- C. Commercial recruitment agents understandably direct their students to students with the ability to pay. EducationUSA center association with commercial agents would undermine our public diplomacy message of outreach to well-qualified students throughout society, including underserved sectors
- D. Since EducationUSA centers support from U.S. taxpayer funds, they should avoid any appearance of favoritism or special treatment. EducationUSA centers may be required to disclose information to the public regarding their activities. Centers should avoid any appearance of favoritism or special treatment. EducationUSA centers may be required to disclose information to the public regarding their activities. Centers should avoid any appearance of favoritism or special treatment.
- E. The ability to pay is the primary factor in determining which students are accepted for admission to a university. EducationUSA centers should avoid any appearance of favoritism or special treatment. EducationUSA centers may be required to disclose information to the public regarding their activities. Centers should avoid any appearance of favoritism or special treatment.

At each U.S. embassy, the Public Affairs Office is responsible for providing information to the public regarding EducationUSA centers and their activities.

EducationUSA – Now

Working with Commission-Based Agents

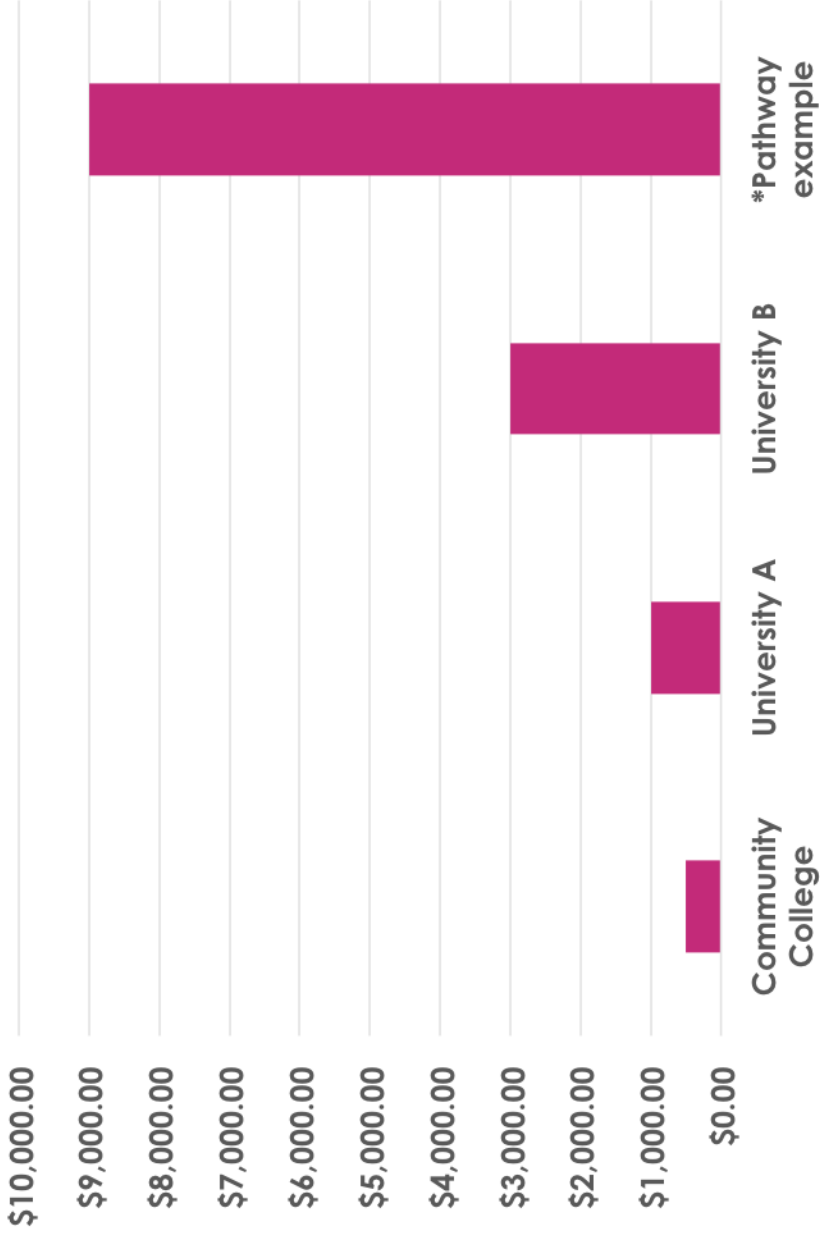
EducationUSA advisers may engage with recruitment agents and incorporate them into relevant advising center activities, including public events, information sessions, and consultations, as capacity allows. EducationUSA advising centers adhere to strict ethical practices in promoting all accredited U.S. colleges and universities and advancing students' interests in identifying the institutions at which they are best positioned for success. It is incumbent upon each organization or individual seeking access to EducationUSA programming to verify their relationship to one or more accredited U.S. higher education institutions and adherence to ethical standards.

Working with Commission-Based Agents

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Next: Protecting students' interests

Per-Capita Commissions Vary, Often Significantly



* Redden, E. "Commissions and Incentives". Inside Higher Ed, June 20, 2018

Transparency to Protect Students

Find an overseas representative

You can apply for study and manage your application directly with the University. You can also get assistance from our official overseas representatives (education agents) in your country.

[Who can provide assistance?](#) >

[What services do they provide?](#) >

[Are there fees and charges for using an education agent?](#) >

[What can I do if I'm having issues with my education agent?](#) >

[Education agent nomination and authorisation form](#) >

[Disclosure](#) >

[Search for a registered education agent in your country*](#) >

What can I do if I'm having issues with my education agent?

If you're having problems or issues with your education agent, you can make a complaint or lodge a grievance under the University Student Complaints and Grievances Policy.

[How to lodge a complaint or grievance](#) >

[University Student Complaints and Grievances Policy](#) >

Disclosure

- The University and its education agents are subject to the requirements of the [ESOS Act](#) and related laws.
- The University pays overseas representatives a fee for the services they provide to applicants.

<https://study.unimelb.edu.au/how-to-apply/find-an-overseas-representative>



Transparency to Protect Students

Our expectations for overseas representatives

Our representatives must:

- act with integrity, honesty, reliability, good faith and professionalism at all times
- provide accurate, clear and unambiguous information to students at all stages of the application process
- maintain accurate and comprehensive records of any applicants they assist
- comply with all reasonable and lawful instructions of the University
- obtain all necessary permits, licences, permissions and approvals necessary and advisable for their business in the country or countries in which they operate
- comply with all applicable laws and regulations within their countries of operation as well as any UK laws relating to their interactions with higher education providers in the UK
- establish and maintain a good working relationship with the British Council (where applicable) for the promotion of UK education and culture
- keep up-to-date information and materials on UK higher education and on the University of Nottingham
- conduct their business in accordance with the UK's Bribery Act 2010

Our representatives must not:

- make offers of admission on behalf of the University
- enter into any contract or agreement on behalf of the University
- misinform or mislead applicants, even by way of omission
- defame or inaccurately convey the reputation or interests of any higher education institutions
- allow any interests to conflict with their responsibilities towards the University
- charge any fees to applicants for counselling, applications or visa services without the prior agreement of the University of Nottingham
- disclose any confidential information (as defined by the University of Nottingham) to any third party
- assign any of their duties, as agreed with the University, to any third parties, including the provision of student accommodation

International students

Study with us

Explore

Our courses

Why study with us?

Student experience

International students

Why study in the UK?

Why study with us?

Country-specific information

Scholarships and fees

Scholarship fees and



Our expectations

Counselling and guiding our international applicants is an important responsibility, so we have high standards and expectations for our official representatives.

The University of Nottingham selects overseas representatives carefully and will only work with companies and individuals who meet our high standards of professionalism and service. The guidelines below summarise our expectations, which are outlined in more detail in our Memorandum of Understanding with appointed representatives.

For further guidance, please also refer to the British Council's guidance for agents, the UKCISA Code of Ethics and the

<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/studywithus/international-applicants/contact-us/representatives/expectations.aspx>

In-Country Representatives

Pros, compared with the traditional agent model

- A less transactional strategy; a longer-term, relationships-driven strategy
- Bulwark against vulnerability to a commissions arms race-dynamic

Cons

- Must have sufficient market power and political support for longer-term engagement, and for longer lead time to results
- Closer integration with internal enrollment management processes means potentially more complications and greater investment of time

Additional Resources

- *Monitoring of Education Agents Engaged in International Student Recruitment: Perspectives from Agency Theory*
- *Education agent standards in Australia and New Zealand – government’s role in agent-based international student recruitment*
- *Governance of agents in the recruitment of international students: a typology of contractual management approaches in higher education*
- *Managing International Student Recruitment Agents: Approaches, Benefits and Challenges* (British Council)
- <https://www.nacacnet.org/knowledge-center/international/>

Discussion

What changes might be needed at your institution to have more meaningful relationships with your existing education agents during and post covid-19?

- What quality assurance processes have you introduced to verify the quality of your agents?
- What support do you provide to your existing agent partners?
- If looking to create new partnerships, what might you do differently?

