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

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Introductions

• Lindsay Addington, Director of Global Engagement, National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC)

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• 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
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

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

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

- Good agent management
- High quality agents
- Good practice

Due diligence, contracts, training, financial, monitoring, corrective action, termination

Integrity
Transparency
Professionalism

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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.

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.

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)
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....
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.

Next: Protecting students’ interests
Per-Capita Commissions Vary, Often Significantly

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

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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?

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

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?