

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Panorama of Chinese education recruitment agents (CERAs): A typology of business models

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**Research Domain:** Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

### **Abstract:**

Given the undeniable importance of the role CERA play in global higher education and their continuing expansion in terms of profits and market share, one would expect it to be studied extensively. However, there is still little and scattered academic research on this topic. Against this backdrop, the aim of this paper is to explore the emergence and development of the Chinese education recruitment agents via mixed method comprising document analysis and 44 interviews. To do this, this study drew on legitimacy theory (Meyer et al 1981, Schofer & Meyer 2005, Meyer et al 2007) to understand the organisation characteristics of CERA. According to the legitimacy paradigm, this study tested the expectation that CERA have devoted themselves to gain legitimacy and have been compellingly reconcile themselves with 'societally legitimated rationalized elements. This study discusses the implications of our findings in terms of theories of globalization in higher education, with regard to Chinese higher education and to the implications for universities and quality assurance.

### **Paper:**

#### **Introduction**

The pivotal role, with regards to intelligence, economics, culture, and diplomacy values (Raimo, Humfrey & Huang, 2016), that Chinese education recruitment agencies (CERAs) play in global higher education has been increasingly prominent and gradually approbated by both academics and educational marketers over last two decades (Buck Sutton & Obst, 2012; Lee 2014; EAIE, 2014; The observatory on Borderless Education, 2014; Raimo, Humfrey & Huang, 2016; Maringe, Foskett & Woodfield, 2013; Goi, 2015). The concept of 'one-stop shop' can be considered as metaphor for education recruitment agency (ERA), which articulates the function of CERA in the process of international student recruitment as a whole. CERAs share the similar business operating mode as 'one-stop shop', more specifically, they offer consulting services in respect of academic courses, countries selections, applications and visa-processing services, and assist prospective foreign students undertake further study abroad. Post-consulting services such as arranging airport pick-up, travel and accommodation services also account for a multiplicity of the working capacity and content of CERAs industry. CERAs can be categorised as three interlinked sections in the higher education industry chain: language training schools as customer source, consulting service and post-consulting service as profit source from student customers' service fee and oversea universities commission (Times Higher Education, 2016; EducationQQ, 2014; EducationSOHU, 2018). It can be argued that the burgeoning of CERA industry since the beginning of the century has been led by

economic growth identifiable with China's entry into the WTO in 2001, and the two subsequent economic peaks in 2006 and 2008 (MoE, 2019). Nevertheless, in spite of the global financial crisis and the general slowdown of the pace of economic growth, the CERA sector has continued to thrive and flourish.

### **Aim of the paper**

Given the undeniable importance of the role CERA play in global higher education and their continuing expansion in terms of profits and market share, one would expect it to be studied extensively. However, there is still little and scattered academic research on this topic. Against this backdrop, the aim of this paper is to explore the emergence and development of the Chinese education recruitment agents via mixed method comprising document analysis and 44 interviews. To do this we draw on legitimacy theory (Meyer et al 1981, Schofer & Meyer 2005, Meyer et al 2007) to understand the organisation characteristics of CERA. According to the legitimacy paradigm, this study tested the expectation that CERA have devoted themselves to gain legitimacy and have been compellingly reconcile themselves with 'societally legitimated rationalized elements. This study discussed the implications of our findings in terms of theories of globalization in higher education, with regard to Chinese higher education and to the implications for universities and quality assurance.

### **Methodology**

The lack of previous studies and systematic recording on the company activities of CERAs has caused difficulties in data collection on CERAs. This study used two open databases (web-based research): Tianyancha (Skyeye), which comprises 140 million of Chinese businesses, and the database of the Chinese Bureau of Supervision and Administration of Foreign Affairs in Education (JSJ). Information such as company name, date of establishment, geographical location, organisational form, staff structures, and internal structure etc. were collected systematically from JSJ and Skyeye, and grouped into two separate data sets (dataset A and dataset B) for the purpose of data accuracy. The relevant figures from industry reports on international student recruitment were also utilised supplementing to dataset A and B. Final datasets were analysed in order to provide detailed descriptive statistics, as well as a regression analysis.

Furthermore, Given the preliminary findings from the research phase one, in total 44 semi-structured interviews with managers and staffs were conducted to collect in-depth qualitative data on their business models in the context of higher education. Qualitative data from web-based research were synthesized with interview data, which were analysed thematically.

### **Findings, conclusion and implications**

In this study, the aim of the present research was to explore the emergence and development of the CERAs by testing the expectation draw from legitimacy paradigm. The investigation of CERAs has have evidently supported the hypotheses in relation to structural evolvement of CERAs, to be specific, CERAs have been gradually evolving and converging into a model of rationalized bureaucratic structure, of which a typology of business models were discovered. This study explores the organisational evolvement of CERAs with a focus on organisational legitimacy of ERAs, providing new insight into the emergence of CERAs as global actors in higher education.

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