The role of recruitment agents in the internationalisation of higher education

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Introduction

Although universities have placed great emphasis on the role of agents in attracting international students from the perspective of quantity and quality of intake, there has been little recognition of the agent's possible influence on student choice, expectations and subsequent experience of academic engagement. In research with international Masters students (self reference, 2013), we learned that agencies and agents played a significant role in filtering information from UK universities, filling in application forms and translating or even writing personal statements. It became apparent that the agent was involved in a two-way process of conveying information provided by universities about their courses, and also mediating the student's interactions with the university. However, for academics involved in the admissions process, the agent's role as mediator was often invisible. Much of the research literature on student decision-making also fails to take account of the agent's presence – for instance, Hemsley-Brown (2011) analyses international students' personal statements in terms of how they reflect applicants' reading of university websites, without any suggestion that a third party might also be involved in the application process.

Based on the initial findings of a scoping project, this paper argues that the presence of education agents is consistent with the neoliberal commodification of higher education. Although questions have been raised about agents' sometimes unethical practices, we suggest that these concerns have diverted attention from the process of commercialising education which led to the need for agents in the first place. This means that little critical attention has been paid - in policy or research agendas - to the variety of agencies that are now fixtures in the HE recruitment landscape and the range of services they provide. As a consequence, little is known about how agents might impact on teaching and learning and student engagement. This scoping project set out to reconceptualise the role of agents within the HE internationalisation policy agenda by mapping the recruitment agency landscape. The paper is based on initial findings from a literature review, interviews with agents (by Skype) and UK university international office staff, and analysis of agency websites.

Agents: a necessary evil or 'unnecessary tax'[1]?

Often portrayed in the media as unscrupulous, bartering for ever higher commission fees, in the academic domain there has also been concern about the potentially unethical practices of education agents (Baas, 2007; Hagedorn and Zhang, 2011; Lewin 2008). Reisberg and Altbach (2011) even call for the eradication of education agents, arguing that by 'outsourcing recruitment, institutions are putting their reputation and vital communication with students to a third party'. However, in the context of HE marketing and recruitment, agents are seen as crucial in competing for international students in a competitive education industry. Hulme et al. (2013:7) note a change from when agents were regarded with suspicion (before Prime Minister's Initiative 1 (PMI 1)) to the current 'free for all situation' where 'agents become embedded in the strategies of international offices' and UK universities develop partnerships with dedicated in-house agents. A report commissioned by the British Council (Krasocki 2002) identified agents as crucial to meeting the recruitment targets set by PMI 1. Agents are now relied upon not only to help prospective overseas students with the process of being admitted to and attending universities, but also to help identify new markets and predict future trends (see for example, ICEF, 2013; Austrade Bangkok, 2013).

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[1] Hulme et al 2013, page 10

Much of the policy-focused literature takes the stance that agents cannot be eradicated as 'middlemen', focusing instead on regulating their practices. In 2005, UNESCO called for codes of practice pertaining to recruitment, positioning universities as responsible for the agents that act and inform on their behalf (Hallak and Poisson 2005). Several policy initiatives have since been developed (see American International Recruitment Council[2], Education Service for Overseas Students in Australia[3]). The most recent attempt to regulate recruitment agents and protect the interests of students is the London Statement[4], though significantly it focuses on the agents' accountability to students, rather than advising on university practice and responsibilities. There is now increasing recognition of the need for UK universities to develop greater transparency around their relationships with recruitment agents (such as publishing details of commission given) and the QAA (2012) guidance on International students is currently being updated to respond to such issues.

In contrast to the stereotype of agents as a necessary evil, Collins (2012) argues that agents are filling a niche left when the state withdrew from regulating mobility and educational provision in the 1990s. Exploring recruitment agencies through the conceptual lens of migration and mobility offers some insights into their practices, networks and roles within internationalisation of HE (see Baas, 2007, Collins, 2012, Hulme et al 2013). However, empirical studies on the operation of recruitment agencies appear limited by a lack of data - Collins (ibid:142) notes that only two agents agreed to be interviewed for his study - indicating the inevitable difficulties in researching this sensitive field.

Initial findings and future directions

Our research for this SRHE scoping project has so far revealed a diversity of agency practices, for example, in terms of their origins, breadth and nature of institutions for which they are recruiting and types of services offered. It also points to a complexity of relationships between the different players. Too often within university policy strategy, 'internationalisation' is taken as synonymous with 'international recruitment'. Drawing on the concept of literacy broker to analyse the agent-client relationship and on migration studies to explore student mobility, we propose to develop a wider perspective on internationalisation, which embraces the curriculum and intercultural learning in order to bridge the gap between HE international recruitment offices and the academics responsible for teaching and learning. A critical investigation into the role of education agents is important not just for marketing reasons, but for insights into the ways that HE is being transformed due to commercialisation and the implications for student experience, admissions processes and internationalization policy.

[994 words without references]

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[2] http://www.airc-education.org/about-airc

[3] https://aei.gov.au/Regulatory-Information/Pages/Regulatoryinformation.aspx

[4] London Statement is shorthand for Statement of principles for the Ethical Recruitment of International Students by Education Agents and Consultants. http://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/press/landmark-international-code-ethics-education-agents

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