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International Recruitment in Canadian Higher Education: Factors Influencing Students' Perceptions and Experiences with Education Agents

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**International Recruitment in Canadian Higher Education: Factors Influencing
Students' Perceptions and Experiences with Education Agents
Recrutement international dans l'enseignement supérieur canadien : facteurs
influençant les perceptions et les expériences des étudiants avec les agents
d'éducation**

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Abstract

Education agents, also known as college counsellors or third-party recruiters, have been used extensively by Canadian higher education institutions (HEIs) to recruit international students. Unfortunately, little research to date has focused on international students in Canadian HEIs regarding agent practices. This study investigated Canada-bound international students' perceptions of and experiences with education agents. A survey consisting of two scales was used to gather data. A total of 385 participants representing 59 countries responded to the survey. Findings revealed that nearly half of the participants used education agents during their application, but their general perceptions of and specific experiences with agents were less than satisfactory. This study also identified a few characteristics of international students that might help Canadian HEIs improve the efficiency of their recruitment practices and policies.

Résumé

Les établissements d'enseignement supérieur (EES) canadiens ont beaucoup recours à des agents d'éducation, également connus sous le nom de conseillers collégiaux ou les recruteurs externes pour recruter des étudiants étrangers. Malheureusement, peu de recherches à ce jour ont porté sur les étudiants étrangers dans les EES canadiens concernant les pratiques des agents. Cette étude portait sur les perceptions et les expériences des étudiants étrangers à destination du Canada à l'égard des agents d'éducation. Une enquête composée de deux échelles a été utilisée pour recueillir des données. Un total de 385 participants représentant 59 pays ont répondu à l'enquête. Les résultats ont révélé que près de la moitié des participants ont utilisé des agents d'éducation lors de leur demande, mais que leurs perceptions générales et leurs expériences spécifiques avec les agents étaient moins que satisfaisantes. Cette étude a également identifié quelques caractéristiques des étudiants étrangers qui pourraient aider les EES canadiens à améliorer l'efficacité de leurs pratiques et politiques de recrutement.

Keywords: international student recruitment; education agents; international student market; higher education policy; internationalization

Mots clés : recrutement d'étudiants étrangers; agents d'éducation; marché international des étudiants; politique de l'enseignement supérieur; internationalisation

Introduction

In recent years, the internationalization of higher education has been gaining momentum. One aspect of this trend is the growing enrollment of international students (Guo & Chase, 2011). In 2016, there were 971,000 international students in the United States, 432,000 in the United Kingdom, 336,000 in Australia, 245,000 in France, 245,000 in Germany, and 189,000 in Canada (OECD, 2018). In 2018, the number of international students in the United States reached a million (Morris, 2018), while the total number of international students in Canada also increased to 572,415 (Hoult, 2019).

The many benefits, especially the economic benefits, added by international students are increasingly noticed by scholars and the host countries. International students in Canada contributed \$12.8 billion to Canada's gross domestic product in 2016 (Global Affairs Canada, 2017). In addition, international graduates are considered ideal potential immigrants to enhance the employment sector in countries such as Canada who has a declining population, particularly in rural areas (Dauwer, 2018).

Due to the fierce competition and the many benefits associated with international students, collaborating with education agents in international recruitment has become highly prevalent in top destination countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada that without agents, the recruitment process of international students would be very difficult (Brabner & Galbraith, 2013; Roy, 2017). Meanwhile, students from certain regions, such as Asia, are experienced in using education agents for overseas studies rather than applying directly to higher education institutions (HEIs) (Bista, 2017; Roy, 2017; Tuxen & Robertson, 2018). Past literature has focused on education agents' role in Canadian education system and international students' in-depth encounters with education agents (Coffey, 2014; Coffey & Perry, 2013). Unfortunately, little research to date has explored international students' perceptions and experiences regarding education agents in the Canadian context.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to survey international students in Canada about their perceptions and experience regarding education agents. The outcome of this study will be of use to HEIs' recruitment services by knowing the extent to which education agents were used among the surveyed participants, and what international students think about education agents. Further, the grouping of international students based on common characteristics allows for comparison between groups of students, their agent-use behaviours, and their perceptions and experiences. In light of the gap in research, the research question posed in this study was: What are the factors influencing international students' perceptions and experiences regarding education agents?

The great demand for education agents from both international students and HEIs boosts the expansion of education agent business, which has outgrown the development of regulatory frameworks or monitoring systems. Consequently, this has led to heated debate (Brabner & Galbraith, 2013), which are synthesized in the following literature review.

Literature Review

Education agents have played an important role in bridging HEIs and international students, as well as exerting subtle and lasting influences (Bista, 2017; Dunstan, 2011; Kauppinen et al., 2014; Newcomb, 2017; Raimo, 2013; Raimo et al., 2014; Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018; Tian, 2017; Tuxen & Robertson, 2018; Yu, 2016). In Dunstan (2011)'s study of

agents in the context of Australia, she noted that agents were an indispensable part of Australian international education since over 60% of international students were recruited through agents. Dunstan (2011) reported that agents were potential allies to the Australian education system because of their continuing service to the students in terms of support and liaison provided before and after students' enrollment. Robinson-Pant and Magyar (2018) analyzed the commercial broker and cultural mediator role of education agents through two studies conducted between 2012 and 2015 in the United Kingdom. Education agents were recognized as necessary middlemen as well as cultural mediators between the admission requirements and the applicants.

However, not all scholars held such positive views of education agent roles. Transparency issues in the agent-HEI relationship were reported frequently in relevant literature (Raimo, 2013; Raimo et al., 2014; Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018). In one such study, research had been conducted with international office staff and it was found that there was an absence of transparency in the agent-HEI relationship as well as commission arrangements where agents were compensated for their work in recruiting students to a university (Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018). Fraudulence was another recurring issue noted in agent practices (Bista, 2017; Kauppinen et al., 2014; Newcomb, 2017; Tuxen & Robertson, 2018; Yu, 2016). Newcomb (2017)'s interview with eight undergraduate admission officers who assessed international students at highly selective HEIs in the United States revealed examples of inaccurate descriptions in applicants' resume, falsified documents, and fraudulence in standardized tests. HEIs may tolerate agents' unethical behaviour if the economic profit is significant enough (Hulme et al., 2014), which perhaps is one of the biggest concerns related to the use of agents.

Although Altbach (2013) forthrightly stated that "agents and recruiters are impairing academic standards and integrity and should be eliminated or severely curtailed" (p. 129), other researchers argued for education agents and explored ways to manage them (Brabner & Galbraith, 2013; Chang, 2013; Coco, 2015; Tuxen & Robertson, 2018; Yang & Akhtaruzzaman, 2017). There have been studies that focused on the agent-HEI relationship, such as the five types of management mechanisms based on the use of power (coercive; non-coercive; hybrid) and control measures (performance-driven; income-driven) (Huang et al., 2016). For HEIs who collaborated with education agents, multiple strategies were used to maintain the relationship including on-site/distance training, meeting at conferences organized by the aforementioned professional associations, and assessing the performance of agents by keeping record of student achievement (Coco, 2015).

Roy (2017) noted that international students' opinions were needed to make more informed decisions about agent practice. Particularly, topics such as differentiating international students for recruitment purpose, exploring international students' experiences with education agents, and examining the vulnerability of international students in the student-agent-HEI relationship have attracted a lot of attention (Choudaha et al., 2012; Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Roy, 2017; Tuxen & Robertson, 2018; Zhang & Hagedorn, 2014). In Choudaha et al.'s (2012) research on prospective international students of HEIs in the United States, they grouped approximately 1,600 survey respondents into four segmentations according to their financial readiness (F) and academic competence (A): strugglers (low F/low A; 21%), strivers (low F/High A; 30%), explorers (High F/Low A; 25%), and highfliers (High F/High A; 24%). It was noted that one sixth

of the respondents used agent service and that explorers had the highest rate of using agents (i.e., 24%). In addition to academic competence and financial stability, factors such as countries of origin and socioeconomic status also contributed to international students' segmentation (Roy, 2017; Tuxen & Robertson, 2018). Regarding level of satisfaction, three quantitative studies revealed that 83% of U.S.-bound international students were satisfied with education agent services (Roy, 2017), 71.5% of Chinese international students in the United States were satisfied with education agent services (Zhang, 2011), and 85% of New Zealand-bound international students were satisfied with education agent services (Generosa et al., 2013). Results from qualitative studies, on the other hand, revealed more nuanced results including students' special needs and mixed feelings towards agents (Bista, 2017; Coffey, 2014; Hulme et al., 2014; Yang & Akhtaruzzaman, 2017; Yu, 2016). For example, some Chinese students suffered from limited internet access to overseas HEI websites therefore required agent assistance to finish the application process (Yu, 2016). Bista (2017)'s study revealed that many students found it difficult to gather visa documents therefore solicited education agent services. The increasing awareness in international students' vulnerability in the student-agent-HEI relationship indicates a growing interest in the well-being of international students (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Robison, 2007). Robison (2007) found that students were vulnerable individuals as they had little control over the application process when working with agents, while recruitment officers had the power to terminate the relationship because they held the written contract with agents. Hagedorn and Zhang (2011) also noted that students (and parents) were individual clients who had limited knowledge and skills to balance the power dynamics in a relationship with agents; therefore, they had difficulty discerning irresponsible agents or protecting their own benefits.

This student-agent relationship is understudied in Canada in spite of its role as one of the top receiving countries of international students and the most attractive country for education agents (ICEF Monitor, 2019). Students' perceptions and experiences regarding educational services can have an impact on school policies, which help HEIs adjust their practices (Gruber et al., 2010; Kandiko, 2010). Therefore, the contribution of this study is bifold. First, it fills a research gap in the Canadian context regarding agent practices in international student recruitment. Second, it adds international students' voice in the student-agent-HEI relationship, thus provides a better understanding of recruitment practices in Canadian HEIs.

Research Methodology

The research methodology utilized in this study was a quantitative design with a qualitative component. A survey was distributed to international students in Canada measuring their perceptions of education agents and their experiences with them.

Survey

The survey consisted of 37 items including: six demographic items; three self-assessment items measuring English competence, academic competence, and financial preparedness (i.e., whether students can afford the tuition and living costs in Canada). An additional three items documented agent company names used by the participants, agents' relationship with the HEIs students enrolled in, as well as the service fees paid to the agents. 22 items focused on the perception of the agents and experiences with them, and one item

surveyed students about the reasons for not using education agent services. The qualitative component consisted of one open-ended question, providing an opportunity for students to express their experiences in detail, which would not be otherwise captured in the survey.

A 5-point Likert scale was used to capture participants' responses to the survey items measuring their perception of and their experience with education agents, with 5 being the most positive option and 1 being the least positive option. Of the 22 items, the first 11 items constituted the perception scale which measured agent-users' and agent-knowers' general perception of the education agent business. The remaining items constituted the experience scale which measured agent-users' specific experience with the education agents.

Both online and paper surveys were used to collect feedback from international students studying in Canada. The online survey was administrated through Google Forms under the license of the researcher's institution. Personal information or IP addresses were not collected.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited through a variety of methods in the autumn of 2019 which included non-random and random sampling. The majority of participants were contacted through campus-wide recruitment emails (i.e., non-random) distributed by international offices of three HEIs, all from Atlantic Canada. Potential participants were self-selected to complete the survey. Other non-random recruitment techniques included soliciting participants through personal connections at three HEIs outside of the Atlantic region as well as Chinese international students groups such as Facebook, WeChat, and online forums. Random sampling was used to solicit participants in-person at two HEIs where random students in common areas were approached and asked if they were an international student and if so, if they would participate in the study by completing the paper version of the questionnaire. The participants in this study were all international students in Canada; specifically, there was greater representation of participants from the Atlantic Canada region, and therefore, we are cautious not to overgeneralize our findings.

Analysis

Data analysis included descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive analysis included frequency, percent, mean, and standard deviation for scale items and items measuring participants' self-assessment of their English and academic competence as well as their financial preparedness. Independent sample *t*-test and analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to identify differences between the grouping variables (i.e., nationality, faculty, source of income, parents' highest degree, etc.) and the scales that measured general perceptions of and specific experiences with education agents. Independent sample *t*-test was used when the group had two categories, while ANOVA was used when there were three or more categories in each group (Field, 2013; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Normality checks and Levene's test were completed and the assumptions underpinning the *t*-test were met. The three assumptions of ANOVA (i.e., independent observations, homoscedasticity, normal distribution) were also met (Bewick et al., 2004). In the event of a significant difference, eta squared (η^2) was calculated as a measure of effect size to determine any practical significance (Norouzian & Plonsky, 2018). To determine which of the three or more groups were significantly different, a post hoc analysis was required using Tukey's

Honestly Significant Difference test (Green & Salkind, 2004). The analysis of the open-ended item was informed by the work of Patton (2002) and Creswell (2014). Key points were highlighted to identify common themes.

Findings

Demographic Items

The analysis of participants' regional representation revealed that Asia had the strongest presence (70%) while America and Africa each had 13%. Only 3.4% of the participants self-identified as European. Specifically, nearly half (47%) of the participants were from China. Other countries that had strong representations include Vietnam (5%), United States (4%), Nigeria (4%), and India (4%).

Participants came from a variety of HEIs. Specifically, 77% of participants were from Atlantic Canada, 13% from Central Canada, 1% from Prairie Canada, and 7% from Western Canada. Regarding the level of institution, 89.6% were from universities while the balance were college participants. Common academic disciplines pursued by international students included Arts and Science (29%), Education (27%), and Business (18%). For the majority of participants (73%), their main source of income for overseas study was from their parents or relatives. Personal savings was the second most common source of income (14%) for overseas study. As for the question that asked them about their parents' highest degree, a little over half (52.7%) of the participants identified that their parents have a bachelor's degree or college certificate, while almost a quarter (23.4%) indicated that they were first-generation postsecondary students. It is important to note that we are cautious not to overgeneralize our findings beyond the participant characteristics represented in this sample.

Three Self-Assessment Items Measuring Competences

The three self-assessment items surveyed participants about their English competence, academic competence, and financial preparedness. Most participants rated themselves highly in terms of their English ($M = 4.37$; $SD = 0.88$) and academic competence ($M = 4.20$; $SD = 0.86$). The third item (S03 I can afford the tuition and living costs in Canada) ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.18$) revealed that 20% of the participants strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement while slightly over a quarter of the participants remained neutral. Based on these items, international students in Canada appear to be comfortable with their English and academic competence but reported a shortfall in their financial stability.

Agent-Use Related Findings

As shown in Table 1, participants can be grouped into agent-users, agent-knowers, and non-agent-users/knowers. Particularly, 61.2% of Chinese participants indicated using agents in comparison to 33.7% of non-Chinese participants who reported using agents.

Table 1: Participants Distribution

	Description	No. (Percentage)
Agent-Users	Used education agent services	180 (46.8%)
Agent-Knowers	Didn't use education agent services but have heard of the agent business	104 (27%)

Non-Agent Users/Knowers	Didn't use education agent services nor heard of the agent business	101 (26.2%)
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Regarding service fee paid to agents, only 12.2% of all agent-users reported receiving free agent service; however, it is unknown whether the expense was covered by the HEIs. The distribution of fee paid by the participants is as follows (in Canadian dollars): less than \$1,000 (16.7%), \$1,000 to \$3,000 (24.4%), \$3,000 to \$5,000 (22.2%), over \$5,000 (17.8%). In particular, 62.9% of Chinese participants paid over \$3,000 while only 9.5% of non-Chinese participants paid the same. A further analysis revealed that a greater number of Chinese students paid higher fees in comparison to non-Chinese students who paid less for their agent services (Table 2).

Table 2: Fees Paid by Nationality

	Free	Less than \$1,000	\$1,000–\$3,000	\$3,000–\$5,000	Over \$5,000
Chinese ($n = 105$)	1%	5%	31%	35%	28%
Non-Chinese ($n = 63$)	33%	40%	17%	5%	5%

104 out of the 180 agent-user participants identified the name of the agent company they used. The top five companies used by students include 4 Chinese companies and one Australian company. The large number of Chinese companies is reflective of the higher representation of Chinese students in our study, which is also reflective of the large number of Chinese international students in Canada in comparison to students from other countries. Of the participants who did not use an agent (53.2%), the top reasons given were self-confidence (27.7%) and excessive cost (22.8%).

Comparison of Scales (i.e., Perceptions and Experiences) and Grouping Variables

As shown in Table 3, responses on the experience scale were fairly positive; however, participants' overall perceptions of agents were more towards the negative end of the scale. When reviewing the histogram showing the distribution of participant responses on these two scales, responses to the perception scale were distributed around the mean. In comparison, responses to the experience scale had a wider distribution of responses. Since we expected that negative perceptions of agents would be influenced by negative experiences with agents, the wider distribution of responses on the experience scale was likely washed out in the calculation of the mean score for this scale.

Table 3: Mean of Perception and Experience Scale

Scale	Sample (Size)	M (SD)
Perception Scale	Agent-users & Agent-knowers ($n = 263$)	2.88 (0.62)
	Agent-users ($n = 170$)	2.98 (0.62)
	Agent-knowers ($n = 93$)	2.69 (0.55)
Experience Scale	Agent-users ($n = 167$)	3.20 (0.78)

The majority of agent-users (61.9%) strongly agreed or agreed that their agent significantly influenced their choice of their Canadian college/university (item Q15). However, when asked whether the agent improved their efficiency in the application process (item Q17), over half of the agent-users (54%) strongly disagreed or disagreed with

the statement, indicating that the agents were not of much help in the application process. Scale results by national region revealed that Chinese students had poorer experience and weaker perceptions of their agents than non-Chinese students (Table 4).

Table 4: Mean of Two Scales by Chinese vs. Non-Chinese

	Chinese			Non-Chinese		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Perception Scale	151	2.76	0.51	112	3.03	0.72
Experience Scale	105	2.98	0.64	62	3.59	0.84

Inferential Statistics

Independent Sample t-test Results. Several independent sample *t*-tests were performed using the grouping variables with two categories and the perception and experience scales. Assumptions for *t*-tests were checked and only those that met all assumptions were presented in this section. It was revealed that nearly half (45.7%) of Chinese students ($n = 105$, $M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.64$) had negative experiences with education agents in comparison to non-Chinese students ($n = 62$, $M = 3.59$, $SD = 0.10$) and this difference was statistically significant [$t(103.014) = -4.943$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -0.848$]. The effect size for this analysis ($d = -0.848$) was found to exceed Cohen's convention for a large effect ($d = .80$), indicating a rather large effect of this grouping difference (Huck, 2012).

Another statistically significant difference with the experience scale was related to students' discipline of study. Participants from the Faculty of Education ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.69$) had a less positive experience with education agents in comparison to participants from other faculties [$M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.79$, $t(161) = -3.369$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -0.542$]. The effect size for this analysis ($d = 0.542$) also exceeded Cohen's convention for a medium effect ($d = .50$), indicating a practical significance for this grouping variable (Huck, 2012).

ANOVA Results. The ANOVA were performed using several grouping variables including the six demographic items, three self-assessment items, and two items related to specific agent use (i.e., service fee and recognition of HEI-agent relationship). The findings included here were those that met the assumptions and had practical significance.

The three grouping variables that resulted in a significant difference between the perception and experience scale were: service fee, financial preparedness, and recognition of HEI-agent relationship. Two separate ANOVA tests were conducted to compare service fee with perception towards education agents as measured by the perception scale and experience with education agents as measured by the experience scale. The grouping variable, service fee, included three categories: free, less than \$3,000, and over \$3,000. The dependent variables were the scales measuring perception and experience. The descriptive statistics of the two ANOVA tests can be found in Table 5. Each of the three groups differed significantly from each other on the perception scale, [$F(2, 158) = 22.092$, $p = 0.000$]. The practical significance was measured using eta squared, η^2 , and was found to be strong, given that the service fee accounted for 21.9% of the variance of the perception scale (Huck, 2012). For the experience scale, the ANOVA was also significant, [$F(2, 158) = 19.727$, $p = 0.000$] and each category was statistically significant from the other. The effect size of this difference, as assessed by η^2 , was

strong, with the service fee factor accounting for 20% of the variance of the experience scale (Huck, 2012).

Table 5: ANOVA Descriptive Statistics (Service Fee)

Service Fee	Perception Scale			Experience Scale		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Free	21	3.6710	.70622	21	4.0043	.72868
Less than \$3,000	70	3.0117	.59561	70	3.2571	.72661
Over \$3,000	70	2.7286	.50307	70	2.9104	.67863

The next one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences in experience with education agents between the three groups separated by financial preparedness (unprepared, neutral, prepared). The dependent variable was the mean score on the experience scale. The descriptive statistics of the ANOVA tests are presented in Table 6. Among the three financial preparedness groups, there was a significant difference in experience with education agents, $F(2, 163) = 6.859, p = 0.001$. The effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.078$) of financial preparedness on the experience scale with education agents was considered medium (Huck, 2012). Post hoc tests revealed that participants who were unprepared financially had less positive experiences with their education agents in comparison to those who were financially prepared.

Table 6: ANOVA Descriptive Statistics (Financial Preparedness and HEI-agent Relationship)

Grouping Variables	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Financial preparedness			
Unprepared	33	2.8320	.70202
Neutral	44	3.1364	.81181
Prepared	89	3.3892	.74400
Recognition of HEI-agent relationship			
Connected	62	3.4545	.79900
Not connected	28	2.9123	.64448
Unknown	74	3.1597	.73344

The last one-way ANOVA indicated that there was a significant difference in experience with education agents between the three groups separated by recognition of HEI-agent relationship (i.e., connected, unknown, not connected), $[F(2, 161) = 5.686, p = 0.004]$. The effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.066$) of this had a medium practical effect (Huck, 2012). The descriptive statistics of the ANOVA tests is presented in Table 6. Post hoc analysis revealed that those who knew that their agent was connected with HEIs had a more positive experience with their agent in comparison to the participants who knew that their agents were independent agents.

Response to the Open-ended Item

Of the 385 survey participants, 69 provided comments for item 36 (Please share any other experiences with agent services (good or bad). You can write in English or Chinese) and 66 comments were considered valid input (three comments were discarded because they were not related to the item). Twenty-three comments were in Chinese and later translated

into English. The comments can be grouped into four themes: agent's professional competence, agent's benefit orientation, financial issues, and student's independence.

Agent's Professional Competence. Fifty participants mentioned their agents' professional competence, among which 35 were negative comments. For example, participants complained about the accuracy of the information agents gave, the low quality of the application essays, and the unprofessional attitude of agents. In terms of accuracy of information, participants stated: the "agent provided wrong and unverified information that affect[ed] my choice of program," "agent did not give correct information regarding tuition," "agents usually give false information," "my agent didn't provide me with accurate information about the program and the university."

Agents' professional competence varied greatly, based on the participants' comments. Some participants were satisfied with their agents with comments such as: "efficient," "friendly and very helpful," "always provided me necessary application information." On the other hand, some participants expressed strong dissatisfaction with the agents by commenting: "she insulted my parents many times," "didn't quite understand individual situation," "didn't care about the compatibility between students and the universities they recommended to students," agents "lost my certificates," and "changed attitude after received the payment."

Agent's Benefit Orientation. Given that 16 participants questioned the agents' benefit orientation, it appears to be an important issue in the student-agent relationship. Participants commented the following regarding the agents: "sometimes they just care about the business, not the future of the students," "may do something which benefits themselves," "only to fulfil the contract so that they don't need to refund," "recommend only the top tier school instead of considering students' individual situation," "limit student choices within Canadian universities and make student choose only the universities agents work for," and "I highly suspect that agents recommend schools based on commission rate."

Another participant talked about similar experiences stating: "I did not know I could go directly at [university name]. I did not know about [pathway program] even though my agent was applying for it, for me. I had to ask them many times to find out about [pathway program]."

Financial Issues. Financial issues were raised 15 times in the comments. Participants believed that agents "ask for too much fees" and "cost more money" in comparison to applying independently. Others stated that it was a "waste of money" to hire agents, and they had "false promises and high prices." A few participants felt shocked by agents' attitudes before and after the payment, saying that agents "changed their service attitude completely right after the payment" and "stopped calling after payment." Others wrote that "this business is overpriced" and "some of the agents are very, very expensive to have." One particular comment was on the language school operated by agents that has connection with the academic program the participant eventually enrolled in. The participant indicated that the language school graded students low intentionally to keep students longer in the English program.

Student's Independence. Of all the comments, 13 recognized the importance of being independent in the student-agent relationship or encouraged students to apply on their own instead of using agents. Quotes similar to “we cannot rely on the agent services too much,” “students shall make the decision by themselves,” “do your own application if you have time,” and “apply it by yourself” appeared frequently in participant responses. One participant expressed frustration by saying, “I like to apply by myself but I don’t know how to facilitate it,” while another said, “I believe that student is totally capable of doing all the things the agent had done, costing less time and money than agent charged.” One student noted that it is important that students do not rely totally on agents they had already contracted given that “when the agent has too many cases, they don’t have priority and often need the student to remind them. If the student wasn’t really paying attention, things could go very wrong.”

Discussion

International Student Segmentation

Participants highly rated their English and academic competence in comparison to their financial preparedness which they rated slightly lower. This finding is different from what Choudaha et al. (2012) reported about U.S.-bound international students who distributed more evenly in each of the four categories separated by academic ability (i.e., high or low) and financial ability (i.e., high or low), which ranged between 21% to 30%. In this study, a great percentage of students self-reported being high on academic ability and financial ability.

International student segmentation can be used for HEIs to develop better recruitment strategies (Choudaha & Chang, 2012; Choudaha et al., 2012; Kauppinen et al., 2014). The percentage of students in each segmentation provides a percentage indicator of the student characteristics HEIs can anticipate which can be useful in tailoring recruitment strategies. In addition, the segment information can also be used to design support systems. For example, HEIs can provide strivers with more information regarding financial aid, scholarships, and on-campus employment opportunities. While for strugglers, academic workshops, training sessions, and tutoring services can be provided to help students with their academic work.

Factors Influencing Perceptions of and Experiences with Education Agents

As reported in the findings section, participants’ perceptions of and their experiences with agents were, for the most part, far from being stellar. In particular, there were more variances in response on the experience scale than the perception scale, suggesting a wider range of experiences with some students having better experiences than others. Responses to the open-ended item and inferential analyses provided more insights into interpreting the scale results.

Open-Ended Items. The open-ended items provided rich explanation into participants’ perceptions of and experiences with education agents. It should be noted that since participants were able to respond to this item in English or Chinese, it is possible that this data is more representative of Chinese students’ perceptions and experiences given the ease in communicating in their mother tongue in comparison to other second language writers.

It is also reasonable to have more Chinese responses since Chinese students make up a large proportion of all international students in Canada.

The open-response item revealed that 35 out of the 66 comments mentioned agents' absence of professionalism given that they had not been as informed as they should be about available scholarships, programs, HEIs, and Canadian life. Another five students stated their agents were not efficient in responding to their inquiries. The absence of professionalism was also found in the comments of three participants (all Chinese) who mentioned that the application essays written for them were of poor quality. Interestingly, these students did not question the ethical issues of this practice. According to the three students, the agents' poor English writing ability was to blame. This finding corroborates with previous literature regarding forged essays by education agents (Bista, 2017; Newcomb, 2017; Raimo et al., 2014; Roy, 2017). One participant provided evidence that agent offered ghost writing using templates to help students write their applications. This study confirms the same practice reported in a previous study (Kauppinen et al., 2014); however, to gain a better understanding of the magnitude of this practice requires further research. In the meantime, HEIs should consider other ways to validate students' ability, such as interviews or timed writing tasks (Leshem, 2012; Hudson et al., 2013).

Participants also mentioned that agents who were representatives of HEIs or language schools were more likely to direct them to a specific HEIs/programs instead of institutions/programs that students preferred. Two participants described being sent to a language school instead of the language program hosted by the HEI they would eventually attend because of the benefit connection between the agent and the language school. Previous literature has also reported that agents worked for their own profit such as persuading students to choose a certain program or HEI where they would receive a commission (Roy, 2017; Su & Harrison, 2016).

Characteristics that Have an Impact on International Students' General and Specific Attitudes Towards Education Agents. Nationality, discipline, service fee, financial preparedness, and recognition of HEI-agent relationship were grouping variables where participants in the different groups differed significantly on the perception and experience scales. Future research is needed to examine factors that lead to one group responded more positively over another as this area has not been previously studied.

Additional findings revealed that nearly half of the participants used education agent services while applying to Canadian HEIs. However, of the agent-users, 45% were unaware of the relationship between their agents and the HEIs they applied to. This absence of understanding might have caused a difference in their perceptions and experiences regarding agents as they may have expected better services such as receiving detailed information about the HEI. It was also revealed that approximately two thirds of agent-users paid \$3,000 or more, while only 13.1% of agent-users received free services from an agent. These findings are in line with research reported in other countries where students paid between \$3,000 and \$5,000, and where higher fees were more common among Asian agent-users (Roy, 2017; Zhang, 2011). Chinese students particularly spent more on agent fees in comparison to non-Chinese students, and therefore, not surprisingly, their overall perception and experience regarding agents were significantly lower than that of non-Chinese students, possibly because they expected more in return for the higher fees.

Another group of participants who scored significantly lower on the perception and experience scale were students from the Faculty of Education. The reason behind this finding is largely unknown to the academia. The high concentration of international students, especially Chinese students, in graduate-level education programs (international cohorts) at Canadian HEIs has been reported by several researchers (Iliev et al., 2015; Li et al., 2012; Li & Tierney, 2013; Liu, 2016). The phenomenon in which Chinese students outnumber other international students could be partly because of the large population base in China, but it could also be because the admission requirements, career outlook both in Canada and in China, and immigration prospects of these programs were used by education agents as selling points to influence students' decisions in choosing universities. Consequently, there is a large percentage of students in such programs who have used agent services and have varied experience.

Additionally, participants who paid the most expensive service fees (over 5,000 Canadian dollars) scored significantly lower on both scales in comparison to those who paid less. This finding resonates with a study which examined 5,880 U.S.-bound international students where the level of dissatisfaction with education agents increased proportionately as the service fee increased (Roy, 2017). It is suspected that there is a gap between expensive agent services and the actual services experienced. In addition, students' lack of knowledge regarding agents' benefit orientation has likely influenced students' perceptions of and experience with agents. This finding calls for HEIs to be more vigilant in paying education agents, thus steering agents' focus towards the well-being of the student and the university rather than the profit itself. This transaction relationship among HEIs, agents, and international students influences recruitment numbers as well as students' level of satisfaction.

Regulatory Framework

The unethical agent practices revealed in the findings necessitate a regulatory framework to balance the power dynamics among agents, international students, and HEIs. A regulatory framework would ensure that agents are qualified professionals who follow ethical guidelines. It would also provide a mechanism for disclosing whose interest the agents represent thereby minimizing issues related to double-dipping. Such a framework would also hold agencies and agents responsible for what is promised in the agent-student transaction. The framework would also provide an avenue for students to register complaints against agents similar to the ombudsman found in the Australian regulatory framework (Jaschik, 2012).

First of all, information exchange and a transparent environment would contribute to the building of such framework. Actions can be taken to compile information about existing control mechanisms of education agents in Canadian HEIs and to promote information exchange among institutions so that Canadian HEIs can better scrutinize and manage education agents. Second, a transparent environment where HEIs' selection, training, and management of their contracted agents is made public would be of great importance for relevant parties to build a regulatory framework (Brabner & Galbraith, 2013; Bridge Education Group, 2016; Raimo, 2013; Raimo et al., 2014; Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018). As one participant mentioned, their agent pretended to be a HEI representative but in fact they only know a professor from the undergraduate admission office of that HEI. In the end, the participant had to do everything on their own. With a

transparent system or information sharing site, students would gain access to legitimate agents that are endorsed by HEIs. HEIs would also benefit from such regulations as it would make the effort of discerning unofficial education agents easier, thus protecting the universities' reputation from being damaged by unethical agent practices.

As discussed in the literature review, several top receiving countries of international students, such as the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom all have different mechanisms to regulate agent practices. For Canada, introducing this regulatory mechanism should be a mutual effort among government, HEIs, and self-regulatory organizations. Provincial governments could develop an official system to regulate education agents. An example would be The Guide to the Code of Practice and Conduct Regulation for Manitoba Designated Education Providers, Their Staff Recruiters, and Contracted Agents (The International Education Branch of Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning and the International Education Act Working Group [IEAWG], 2015). In addition, self-regulatory organizations, such as the Canadian Consortium for International Education (CCIE), can be further developed or given resources needed to regulate unethical agent behaviours and build a healthy international student market.

Limitations

The limitations of this study center around the sampling procedures and the design of survey items. First, the survey sample was not entirely random as survey participants self-selected to complete the online survey out of personal interest. This could have caused a response bias as participants who have more extreme experiences (positive or negative) may be more interested in sharing their experiences. Second, the majority of participants were Asian students, especially Chinese students, attending universities in Atlantic Canada. Recruiting participants using WeChat, a popular communication app among Chinese students, certainly contributed to the high proportion of Chinese participants but fell short on recruiting students from other cultural backgrounds. In hindsight, better networking with international students from other cultural backgrounds would have improved the representation of participants in each of the grouping variables and revealed more group specific characteristics. Finally, survey items could be better designed to solicit a wider range of responses. Several items from this survey had a large number of participants selecting the middle or neutral option on the scale.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to survey international students in Canadian HEIs about their perceptions of and experience with education agents. Findings were based on a survey of 385 international students representing 59 countries. Data revealed that both international students' perceptions and experiences differed by participants' nationality, discipline, recognition of HEI-agent relationship, financial stability, and service fee paid to education agents. Further research is needed to explore the reason behind these variances as well as to replicate the study with a more diversified sample since students from different groups (e.g., college students versus university students) might have different experiences. We propose that perceptions and experiences are related to the general image of the agent business, which are under the influence of factors such as profit orientation, transparency, and regulatory framework, as well as the discrepancy between what students expect from agents and what they receive.

About half of the participants surveyed in this study used education agents to complete their postsecondary applications, which affirms the necessity for Canadian HEIs to collaborate with education agents for international recruitment. However, HEIs are advised to shoulder more responsibility in monitoring agent practices so that the institutional reputation and the well-being of international students can be protected from unethical agent practices. The international student segmentation information derived from the self-assessment items of the survey can be used to develop diversified approaches to attract targeted students.

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