INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION, Number 73 Fall 2013
Pages 2-4

The Pursuit of International Students in a Commercialized World

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Global student mobility creates big business. Approximately 3 million students are studying abroad, contributing more than US$75 billion to the global economy. There are multiple reasons for choosing to study abroad, among them a desire to increase employability in the home labor market, the inability to find relevant study opportunities at home, and the desire for migration.

The motivations of countries and universities recruiting international students are equally complex and increasingly commercial. Many countries and institutions depend on international student enrollments to balance academic budgets. In some cases (Australia, for example), government policy has identified international higher education—including foreign study in Australia, branch campuses, and other initiatives as a significant income stream for higher

education. The United Kingdom similarly views international education as a source of income, charging non-European Union foreign students higher fees. Increasingly, American universities also see international education as an income stream. At least two states, Washington and New York, are considering higher tuition for international students.

Recent research shows that international students constitute the large majority of students in some science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields in a number of key developed countries, including the United States. Thus, a recent study noted that more than 95 percent of graduate students in electrical engineering and computer science are international students at some key American universities. Many American universities have become dependent on international students to serve as graduate teaching and research assistants.

GETTING INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE

Traditionally, when a student wanted to study abroad, he or she elected a destination country, researched academic institutions, locations, degree availability, and costs and applied directly to an academic institution. In the past, most people seeking foreign study were looking for graduate or professional qualifications and were typically from families with some international exposure. As long as the numbers were modest, this informal system of obtaining

information through personal networks worked reasonably well. Additionally, prospective students could acquire additional information and support from a number of government and university-sponsored agencies—such as, EducationUSA, the British Council, Campus France, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), and others. These organizations maintain centers in major cities around the world and provide objective information about academic opportunities in the country that sponsors them. With the rise of the Internet and university Web sites, it became easier to search for universities directly from their respective Web sites.

As numbers of mobile students have grown and diversified during the past decade, this independent approach to researching opportunities ceased to meet the needs of less cosmopolitan students and families from the burgeoning middle classes, particularly in countries such as China and India, who seek study opportunities abroad.

There are private professional admissions consultants in many major cities who provide advising services to orient prospective students to appropriate opportunities abroad. These consultants may also guide their clients through the unfamiliar terrain of the admission process. The most professional consultants develop a broad knowledge of overseas institutions and admission practices and seek to match a student's needs, academic abilities, and objectives to an

appropriate overseas destination. They receive a fee from the student for this service. Although they may develop relationships with admissions officers around the world, in order to remain up to date with current information, there are no contractual agreements with any foreign universities. Many of these consultants belong to professional organizations—such as, the Association of International Graduate Admissions Consultants—to collect data, share experience, and define ethical standards of practice.

AGENTS AND RECRUITING SHORTCUTS

Perhaps the largest and certainly the most controversial recent development is the emergence of agents and recruiters who work for specific universities and funnel students their institutional clients. Agents and recruiters hired on a commission basis have become big business in China and India, but they exist throughout the developing world. No one knows for sure how many agents are operating in the world—no statistics are available—and their activities are unregulated. Most agencies are staffed by entrepreneurs who may or may not have any knowledge about higher education in the countries to which they are sending students other than the information supplied by their university clients. There are a few large agencies with international branch offices and international events—such as the International Development Programme, an Australian-based

company with operations worldwide—but most are smaller shops with limited staff.

In essence, agents work for a limited number of universities where they receive a commission for each successful placement. The commission paid varies but often falls in the range of 15 to 20 percent of the first-year fees—this can amount to US$4,000–6,000 or more. Obviously this is an attractive incentive for agents to push specific institutions. Some US universities use large numbers of agents. For example, the University of Cincinnati lists more than 120 agents on its Web site, including 46 in India alone.

QUESTIONS RAISED

However, no one doubts that the task of researching study-abroad opportunities is daunting. The question is how to acquire the information and support needed and how to recognize the risks. Agents are appealing shortcuts for students as well as for universities that wish to enroll international students, but using agents present a number of dilemmas.

First, there is no way to guarantee whether the institutions recommended by agents are the best choices for the student client. Frankly, it is difficult to imagine that if agents earn their living from commissions from institutions A, B, and C that they will recommend institution S, when it offers a particularly

appropriate program for a student. In fact, it is doubtful to imagine that the agent will know about programs other than those at A, B, and C.

Further, it is difficult, if not impossible, to know exactly what takes place between the agent and student, periodic inspections not withstanding. Anecdotal reports suggest that many agents "help" clients by doctoring academic records, writing essays, preparing letters of recommendations, and providing other kinds of dubious "assistance." It has been estimated that 80 percent of applicants helped by agents include faked credentials.

In some cases, agents are reported to charge both the student and the university, a practice of questionable ethics.

WHO DETERMINES WHAT IS ETHICAL?

The American International Recruitment Council (AIRC), a nonprofit organization, was launched in 2008 to represent the interests of the agent community and the universities that employ them, and later began to certify agents that meet that council's ethical standards. The process is expensive, beginning with a US$2,000 nonrefundable application fee, a US$5,000 precertification fee, and followed by the travel costs of the evaluation team and a first-year member fee of US$3,000. Membership must be renewed annually at an

additional cost of US$2–3,000. This puts the cost of certification beyond the budgets of many smaller agencies.

One of many concerns about AIRC is that this organization is entirely self-validating; its members are universities and agents who benefit from the ethical cover that certification provides. AIRC was created to validate the employment of agents on the supposition that ethical practices could be assured. There is no independent corroboration of the effectiveness of the methodology or results.

In June 2013, after two years of study, the National Association of Collegiate Admissions Counsel (NACAC), the American organization of professionals in the field of college and university admissions established in 1937, issued a report on agents and recruiters. After considerable pressure from AIRC members, that document backed away from a previous statement that a NACAC member "could not" work with agents to a gentler "should not" work with agents. The NACAC national conference in fall 2013 will consider the report.

The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers has also created a task force to consider professional standards for recruitments and other activities related to international activity.

Universities are being asked to disclose that they work with agents and with whom they work. This is, at a minimum, a basic ethical obligation. Yet, agents also need to disclose to students and families that they are contracted by

universities, and that they are providing information to students on behalf of only those specific universities and *not* pretend that they are professional admissions consultants, who are described above.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

From our perspective, agents and recruiters should not be condoned in the admissions process for domestic or international students. Thus, students should have a full range of information about the universities to which they are most suited and when agents have a vested interest in limiting options to the small number of universities that pay commissions. Further, the possibilities for corruption of the admissions process seem great and widely evident.

The choice about where to study overseas is an important commitment of family resources and student time. Students and their families need to take a proactive role regardless of how difficult the task and not leave their fate to agents or others who might not have their best interest in mind.

International student mobility reflects a mass phenomenon, and a multifaceted approach is needed. Many are already operating but need strengthening.

- Universities have the responsibility to provide informative, honest, user-friendly Web sites with clear information about academic programs, admissions procedures, graduation requirements, costs, and student services.
- Universities must assign staff to respond individually to prospective students, with information and assistance, during the admissions process. This will not be inexpensive, but if some of the budget now on agents can be redirected to this task, the funds will be well spent.
- University and other academic associations in the receiving countries or regions should provide Web sites with clear and complete information about academic systems and study opportunities open to international candidates.
- Governments must increase support to education information centers in the primary sending countries to provide on-site information with well-trained professional staff who can offer workshops and guidance to prospective students.
- Professional education consultants, who provide objective information about study opportunities and carefully assess the needs of potential applicants to match them to appropriate academic programs without the influence of commission, should be distinguished from agents.

- Universities should discourage students and their families from turning decisions over to agents, much as Cornell University has done.

Conclusion

Without question, global student mobility is of great importance—for countries, academic institutions, and perhaps most crucially for individual students. Key to this enterprise is ensuring that the student is matched with the best possible study opportunity.