



WORKING WITH AGENTS



**WORKING WITH EDUCATION AGENTS TO GROW AND DIVERSIFY
YOUR INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ENROLMENT**

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WORKING WITH EDUCATION AGENTS

Globalisation has propelled the demand for overseas education to an unprecedented level. More students than ever wish to study abroad. Growing wealth and emerging middle classes in many economies are allowing larger numbers of students to do so.

With the increasing number of students, the competition among educators has grown. International student recruitment is becoming a bigger priority for institutions all over the world as new study destinations compete fiercely for market share and educators look for ways to bring their offerings to overseas markets.

The most cost-effective way of establishing your institution in a specific market on a long-term basis is to outsource your student recruitment to education agents. The agents' knowledge will help you penetrate the market, find new student sources, and help you increase your student intake quickly and effectively.



WHAT IS AN EDUCATION AGENT?

An education agent is an individual, organisation, or company that provides education support and placement services to students who are interested in studying abroad. An agent advises students and their families when selecting an institution, study programme, and study destination based on their individual needs.

TYPES OF AGENTS

Education agents and referral representatives

This type of agent represents a limited number of educational institutions, often specialising in particular programmes and destinations. Usually, an agreement has to be in place before agents in this category will start representing an institution.

Study abroad advisors

These professionals work from international advising centres, providing general information about study abroad opportunities, often under the umbrella of a public organisation.

Travel agents with an education division

These agents will sell educational programmes in addition to other travel packages. Although many educators initially shy away from working with travel agents, they do make good educational representatives. Travel agents often have a solid and wealthy customer base, offices in good locations, good English speaking skills, familiarity with visa administration, and international currency transactions. Low profit margins in the competitive travel industry give them an incentive to invest in educational departments as a means of expanding their business.

WHY WORK WITH EDUCATION AGENTS?

Professional educational advising is increasingly seen as a must-have service. In many countries, it is common practice for prospective students to use an education agent when seeking placement in an educational institution abroad. In some countries, 60–80% of international students are assisted by education agencies and advisors.

Agents who understand the local market can be your point of contact and act as an extension of your recruitment team. As a direct link to the students and their families, agents can answer any questions, reassure and guide them along the entire admissions process, and provide visa application support. Agents are best equipped to maximise the usage of social networks in their home countries and know best how to reach and recruit potential students.

WHAT CAN AN EDUCATION AGENT DO FOR YOU?

- Provide fast and direct access to specific local territories with their market and language knowledge as well as cultural familiarity
- Provide innovative suggestions for promotion suited to the target country
- Recruit students efficiently and with local expertise
- Considerably reduce your admissions department's workload by taking on significant recruitment duties without being a burden on your HR budget
- Help you diversify your enrolment across a number of countries without having to spend a considerable amount of money to market your programmes in each country
- Provide in-country support and thus reduce the need for frequent travel to markets
- Help you improve the quality of student applicants by using specified criteria to target appropriate students
- Help generate applications for less popular programmes
- Represent you on a year-round basis
- Provide you with local infrastructure
- Provide you with local student feedback



ADVANTAGES OF RECRUITING STUDENTS THROUGH EDUCATION AGENTS

Agents are a low-risk, low-cost way of increasing international student enrolment. Both your institution and students can benefit from the many advantages of outsourcing student recruitment to agents. Once a good network of agents is established, it will cost relatively little to service.



An agent is an accountable local person in whom students and their parents can confide and contact easily in their own country and language. This is especially important to students who are choosing a long-term study programme.



The agent will be familiar with both your institution's strengths and course offerings and the student's profile, needs, expectations, and abilities. They should be able to suggest a good match.



Agents offer useful value-added services to students such as assistance with application forms, travel arrangements, insurance, accommodation, exam preparation, and visa applications.



Agents also give valuable counselling, saving students' time and helping them make their decision, as well as provide them with useful pre-arrival information (e.g., about the city, local transport, cost of living, climate, social etiquette, cultural and social life, food, etc.)



If needed, agents can provide telephone and email support to students and their families once they are overseas.

Choosing where to study abroad is one of the most important decisions that students make in their lifetime. It also represents a considerable financial commitment often funded by their families. Moreover, travelling and living in a foreign country is not always easy even for the most seasoned of professionals, and for students who are shy or coming from rural areas, it can be an overwhelming experience.

As parent and student expectations continue to increase, the role of student recruitment agencies has changed and evolved beyond the admissions process to include additional services surrounding visas and travel, as well as the counselling process.

Most educators do not realise the prevalence of agent use in major sending destinations. Students need the services that agents provide and use them even if the agent does not have a formal agreement with a particular institution. Quite simply, students rely on agents for their expertise.

HOW TO WORK WITH AN AGENT?

Agents and educators should work hand in hand. It is important that you supply agents with required information at all times, so they can represent you competently. Please remember that agents must face parents and returning students and if their placements turn out poorly, their reputation and consequently their business will suffer. It is therefore fair to say that your success is their success, and vice versa.

You will achieve the best results by building solid and long-term partnerships with the agents with whom you choose to work. You should take the same approach to agents as you do to any one of your staff members.

STEP 1 – FINDING AND VETTING AGENTS

Starting the journey of working with agents can be daunting. However, there are many resources available to you. It is essential that you do proper due diligence and ensure that the agents you are working with have been vetted and are reputable. Having a set procedure and criteria for finding and selecting agents is key.

STEP 2 – PROVIDING TRAINING AND MARKETING SUPPORT

It is important to sign a contract with agents and provide them with training and marketing support. This will help your agents better understand your institution's key selling points and have the appropriate knowledge of your programmes and admissions process.

STEP 3 – BUILDING SUSTAINABLE AND LONG-TERM PARTNERSHIPS

Successful relationships between schools and their agent partners are key drivers in meeting institutional (and consequently national) recruitment targets, in terms of the number, diversity, and quality of students. Relationship management begins on day one and needs to continue throughout the course of the agreement. It is crucial for agents and education partners to work collaboratively, clarify responsibilities, and have ongoing, open communication and re-training processes.

Remember, it may take a considerable amount of time for an agent to start sending students to your institution. That is why it is important to focus on long-term relationships and stay patient.

As the use of agents increases, new questions and ideas are arising regarding best practices in agent-educator relationships and how to protect the interests of students. International education is clearly taking steps towards greater transparency and improved practice, and it seems likely that the expanded use of education agents will only accelerate this process.

WHERE CAN YOU FIND RELIABLE AGENTS?

Many educators believe that agents should approach them. Unfortunately, this is an ineffective strategy as competition is tough and agents are constantly offered different incentives to sell programmes for many institutions around the world.

- You may meet education agents at various international fairs or conferences, but there is no way to be certain that the quantity or quality attending will meet your standards. You can visit agents in their home country offices. However, this can be a very costly and time-consuming effort involving extensive travel and preparation time without any certainty that the agent you are visiting is an appropriate partner.
- You can use the internet to find agency names and information. The contact details for qualified agents may be found on the ICEF website (www.icef.com/icef-agent-training).
- You can attend ICEF events where you can meet carefully screened and selected education agents from around the world in one convenient location. ICEF events offer the most time-efficient and cost-effective way of meeting large numbers of high-quality agents face-to-face. Even if only one agent sends students to your institution, you will have more than covered your participation investment.

FOCUS ON FIT: the more agency agreements you have, the more challenging it becomes to manage your network. A shotgun approach to signing agent contracts is not effective. When looking for agency partners it is essential to do your due diligence. Signing contracts for the sake of having contracts can actually be detrimental. It is far better to focus on those agencies that are best suited to your institution and with which you have a real opportunity to grow for the long term.

HOW TO SIGN A CONTRACT WITH AN AGENT?

For your mutual benefit, always make sure you have a written agreement in place that both parties clearly understand and agree upon. Your agreement should be a legal document valid in both countries. The following list is by no means complete but gives you an indication of considerations that should be included in a contract with an agency that wishes to represent you abroad.

- **Define respective roles and responsibilities:** What should the agent do on your behalf? How often and in what quantities will you supply promotional materials to the agent?
- **Review business plan:** What marketing strategy will the agent follow? What budget will be required, if any? How many students does the agent plan to send to your institution?
- **Give key performance indicators:** Specify the number of students you expect the agent to refer to your institution and also the quality of student you are looking for.

- **Payment terms:** Make sure these are spelled out clearly and in detail. What is the level of compensation? Are there reimbursable expenses? Who will cover the bank charges? When are payments and deposits due?
- **Exclusivity:** Some agents will request market exclusivity for your institution. You should be cautious before agreeing to such a request and only consider offering agents exclusivity once they have proved they can produce a large volume of business, and that they are reliable partners. Grounds for termination of exclusivity should also be clearly stated and agreed upon.
- **Dispute resolution guidelines:** The agreement should clearly outline how disputes will be resolved, including jurisdiction, process, and timelines.
- **Duration of contract:** Your initial agreement should be for a set period of time (e.g., one year). Make sure to include how the contract can be terminated and whether it will be prolonged automatically if not terminated by one of the two parties. Remember to have the contract validated by your institution's legal expert before you sign it.



KEEP IT SIMPLE

Keep it simple: complicated legal agreements and administrative requirements will do nothing to ensure performance or advance your standing with a new agent. Simple and straightforward agreements, with reasonable terms and clear opt-out provisions, are a much better foundation for a productive relationship.

AGENT COMPENSATION

As in any other business arrangement, terms and compensation can vary with agents. In general the amount of commission – which is the most common form of compensation for agents – varies according to the type and duration of courses. The percentage commission paid for university or college courses is lower than for shorter language programmes mainly offered during vacation time and often to groups rather than individuals.

However, some universities and colleges are not able to offer a commission. This should not be a problem as alternative ways of compensation can be arranged between agents and educators.

MOST WIDELY USED FORMS OF COMPENSATION

Commission-based: when the education agent receives a percentage commission on the tuition fee. As a benchmark, the average is 10% on the first year's tuition fees for boarding schools, vocational or university programmes, and 15-25% for short-term programmes such as language courses or summer school programmes. If a group of students is put together, it is not unusual to offer a free place for a set number of students. The advantage of commission-based payment is that if the agent does not perform, he or she will not get paid. Many educational institutions (particularly those offering language programmes) offer performance-based incentives with the capacity for increases for reaching targets.

Fee per head: when the agent receives a set fee per head as a marketing allowance. As an additional incentive, you could offer a bonus that is payable once a certain number of enrolments has been achieved.

Retainer fee: when the agent is paid a retainer fee over a specified period of time to represent you abroad and recruit students on your behalf.

Advising fee: when the agent charges the student an advising fee. The agent will work with your published fees and build them into a package offered to students that can also include travel, insurance, accommodation, and visa arrangements.



WHY COMMISSION WORKS

Based on years of experience, we consider a per-head commission to be the most effective and transparent form of compensation of the various structures that are in use around the world today. By offering commission-based remuneration, educational institutions can expect and demand agent accountability, transparency, and ongoing student support.

Specifically, a per-student commission model ties the agent's interests directly to those of the institution and the student. If the agent is not able to refer students that are well matched to the requirements and standards of the receiving institution, this will quickly become apparent to all concerned and the agent's relationship with the institution – and the income they derive from that relationship – will be at significant risk.

Similarly, if a strong majority of students referred by the agent are not (1) satisfied with the agent's service and (2) successful in their studies, this will quickly become apparent to all concerned as well – including both the receiving institution and prospective students – and the agent's ability to continue to generate referral commissions will again be placed in jeopardy. These are powerful levers in the agent-institution relationship which reinforce a shared focus on student welfare and success.

MEASURING AGENT PERFORMANCE

There are a number of considerations and options for institutions in establishing a framework for evaluating agent performance. As with student performance, there are a number of objectively measurable characteristics that can help assess an individual agency. For example:

- Number of students referred
- Yield – number of applications vs. number of enrolments
- Student feedback
- Industry accreditation or association membership(s)
- Return on direct investment
- Industry qualifications such as QEAC, ITAC, etc.

Once such elements are being reliably tracked within an agent evaluation framework, institutions are able to observe patterns for individual agencies. Similarly, it becomes easier to correlate agency performance with student performance factors to observe relationships between the two. For example, an agency that referred several students who did not adjust well or did not perform well academically or, conversely, an agency whose students consistently perform at a high academic standard.

On the qualitative side, providers can also assess agencies based on their readiness to participate in familiarisation tours and in comparable institution-initiated or cooperative promotional ventures.

BEST PRACTICES

To be successful and build a relationship with the agents you work with, you have to actively engage, train, and support them on a regular basis. Education institutions make the common mistake in believing that agents' number one concern is commission. This is not the case. Agents' primary concern is effective and transparent processes and strong support. So institutions that strongly support agents are the ones that are going to be able to recruit students.

PROVIDE A FACE TO YOUR INSTITUTION

When educators provide agent training, they spend a good deal of time explaining their programmes, tuition costs, and accommodation options. This is all important information, but so too is introducing agents to your staff who handle admissions, student services, and housing. Make sure the agents know the names of the people who will be helping and supporting them, include pictures of them in your briefing materials.

EDUCATE AND ENGAGE ALL STAFF MEMBERS

Let the staff from student services, admissions, and your international office know how they are expected to interact with agents. Explain the importance of keeping communication channels open and responsive.

TREAT AGENTS AS AN EXTENSION OF YOUR TEAM

Give them the tools they need to succeed and ensure that proper supports are in place. As with any team, communication is essential.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Take a personal interest in the people you work with, including asking them about their lives and families. As one very experienced recruiter said to us: “Agents send students to educators they like and feel comfortable with. If they know you, if they trust you, they are more likely to send you students.”

Agents are responsible to students and their families for the experience students have at your school. They gain the confidence to choose your institution when they know that their students are going to be taken care of and have a positive experience. You need to be that institution that is supportive, that has a good trustworthy relationship with them. Sitting back and doing armchair recruiting will not allow you to do that.

TRAIN THEM FACE-TO-FACE

There is no better way to market and to train agents than face-to-face. The best way you can train agents and maximise your return on investment is by doing familiarisation (FAM) tours where agents visit you. Agents will find it much easier to market an institution they have seen for themselves. Also, consider visiting agents in their own country when you have the opportunity. Conduct training with other agency staff present to make sure everyone knows how to best represent your institution.

RESPOND PROMPTLY TO AGENT ENQUIRIES

Remember that agents have students and their families calling and visiting their office to get answers. If you are not providing timely responses, your competition probably is. WhatsApp, Line, and WeChat all are tools that agents use to communicate.

PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS

Produce an agent manual containing relevant contact information, programme descriptions, accommodation options, details of student services, and financial details. Ensure that the agent’s promotional materials are regularly updated and, if possible, produced in the representative’s language.

ARMCHAIR RECRUITMENT IS NOT EFFECTIVE

Get on the road. Visit your agents to do training and meet with prospective students. Do not overlook social interaction. Invite agents for lunch or dinner and get to know them better.

LISTEN TO YOUR AGENTS

Agents can provide valuable market intelligence. Ask them for their insights regarding product development, which courses are in demand, and how to have an effective presence in a market.

KEEP IN TOUCH

Keep your institution’s profile a priority in the agent’s mind by sending regular updates, video links, email blasts, and newsletters. Keep in touch with regular communications: email, social media, apps, and phone. One senior recruiter once told us that every day they would have their staff reach out to agents on Skype to simply say hello. The recruiter noted how important this daily Skype routine was to nurturing relationships with agents.

ABOUT ICEF

ICEF connects educators, education agents, work and travel professionals, and industry service providers to key markets and networks worldwide, supporting the growth and development of international education and global student mobility.

Through ICEF's various services, education institutions are able to achieve results and efficiencies in growing their international student enrolments. Thousands of industry professionals choose ICEF for its longstanding reputation of quality and commitment to nurturing and accepting only the highest calibre of student recruitment agent and to providing excellent events and marketing solutions.

ICEF EVENTS

ICEF events occur annually around the world and are renowned for their organisation and sophistication – and most importantly, for the quality of business relationships they facilitate. Our events offer the most time-efficient and cost-effective way to meet and keep in regular contact with the world's top education agents, who will increase your international student enrolments.

Since 1991, ICEF has led the global education industry in the creation of new standards for agent professionalism. All agents who attend our events are carefully selected and are required to pass ICEF's rigorous screening process. Agents must provide multiple references from current business partners, as well as proof of ethical business practices and a track record of successfully placing students into relevant institutions.

Visit www.icef.com/events to see the full list of ICEF events.

ICEF SOLUTIONS

ICEF offers tailored solutions to build your brand globally and grow your international student enrolment.

ICEF solutions include:

- **ICEF Monitor** [🔗](#) – the industry's #1 resource for news, market intelligence, and research on topics related to international student recruitment.
- **ICEF Insights** [🔗](#) – an annual publication featuring in-depth articles, research, and opinion for education professionals.
- **ICEF Media / Virtual Reality** [🔗](#) – outstanding video content and interactive virtual reality experiences developed by education media professionals to help you attract more students and grow your brand globally.
- **ICEF Alumni** [🔗](#) – a custom tailored service to help institutions to identify, build, and grow their global alumni networks.

- **ICEF Professional Development** [🔗](#) – strategic consulting and training for international educators to help enhance their ability to grow and succeed in our increasingly complex and dynamic industry.
- **ICEF Agent Training** [🔗](#) – practical training courses that help education agents increase their industry knowledge, learn more about specific study destinations, and demonstrate their professionalism.
- **Qualified Education Agents (QEA) app** [🔗](#) – a mobile app that contains the names of more than 10 000 qualified agents worldwide – a valuable resource for educators seeking to partner with expert agencies.
- **ICEF Agency Recognition Programme** [🔗](#) – a formal recognition programme, acknowledging agents who have met ICEF’s strict standard of quality.
- **ICEF i-graduate Agent Barometer** [🔗](#) – an annual agent survey that aims to discover why students choose specific destination countries and institutions, and what support agents expect from their educator partners.
- **ICEF Education Fund** [🔗](#) – an initiative that helps disadvantaged young people around the world to access education by providing donations and support for selected causes.

Visit www.icef.com/solutions to learn more about ICEF solutions.

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