

# THE ROLE OF EDUCATION AGENTS IN THE MARKETISED INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

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# EDUCATION AGENTS

They are a person or organisation that recruits international students and refers them to education providers. They are not employed by overseas education providers but are private entities contracted to deliver a range of services to potential students and the provider.

To a student, these services would ordinarily include education counselling, such as course and institution matching, and assistance with academic and visa applications.

To a provider, services usually include marketing and promotion services and support in identifying qualified students. (BUILA, 2021, P.14).



# WIDE USE OF EDUCATION AGENTS

ICEF Monitor (2021)

Year	Host country	Universities	International students
2021	The UK	Almost all	45-55%
2022	The USA	Around half	22%
2018	Australia	Almost all	75%
2018	Canada	not mentioned	50%

Education agents are also popularly used in many non-English speaking countries: HEIs from several European countries, Malaysia, China and South America are known to work with commercial agents (e.g. FH Aachen; IEC online ; Lund University; SNY Cosmos ) (Nikula & Kivistö, 2018).



**74%** of Chinese international students used education agents to apply to programmes overseas (New Oriental & Kantar Millward Brown Group, 2018)



# THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF EDUCATION AGENTS

Non-EU individual contribution in 2018/2019: £116,500

Non-EU students in 2018/2019 (HESA): 203,890

% through education agents (HESA & HEPI): 45-55%

(total students x % through agents) x individual contribution = agent contribution to UK economy

**“Education agents contribute approximately £11.88 billion to the UK economy each year.” (BUILA, 2021)**

Source: BUILA (2021), *A route to a UK Quality Framework with Education Agents*.

<https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/uploads/files/1/Policy%20and%20lobbying/BUILA%20UKCISA%20Research%20Report%20FINAL.pdf>



# COMMISSION PAYMENT

- The commission is paid on the basis of a student's first year's tuition fee, typically ranging between 10% and 15% (Nikula, Raimo, & West, 2023).

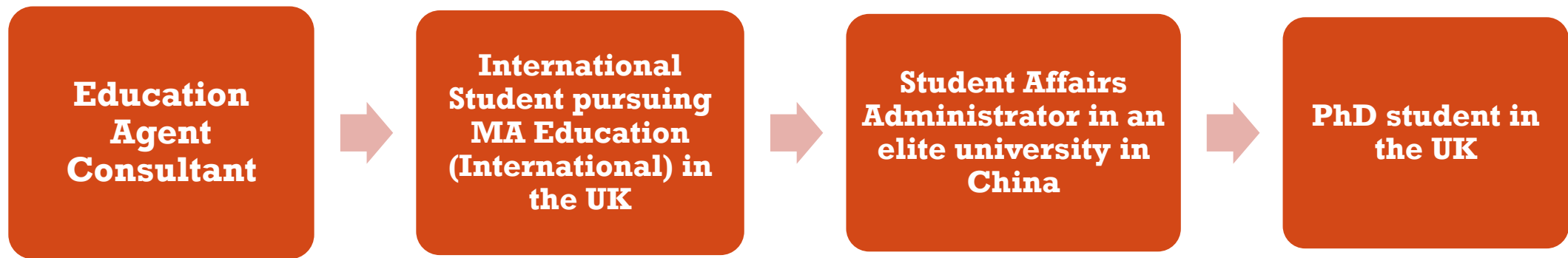
The London university paid an average of **£8,235** in agent fees per student (The Guardian, 18 Nov 2023)



**Education agents play an increasingly important role in the international higher education sector, which cannot be disregarded in the debates on international higher education and international student mobility.**



# FROM AN INSIDER TO AN OUTSIDER





# OVERARCHING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What were education agents' services to Chinese agent-user students?

2. To what extent and in what ways were Chinese agent-user students affected by education agents in their application to international programmes?

3. What did Chinese agent-user students' application experiences imply for the international higher education sector?



# RESEARCH DESIGN

Study	Research participants	Methodology	Method of data collection	Time
Study 1: A study of Chinese students' application to UK universities in uncertain times from the perspective of education agents	16 education agent consultants	Qualitative research	One-off online interviews	05/2020
Study 2: Giving voice to Chinese international students: the application experience to UK universities via education agents in an uncertain time	10 Chinese agent-user students (who applied for UK PGT programmes commencing in September 2021)	Interpretative phenomenological analysis	Four rounds of online interviews  Member checking	i. 11/2020 – 12/2020 ii. 01/2021 – 02/2021 iii. 03/2021 – 04/2021 iv. 06/2021 – 07/2021  v. 05/2022 – 07/2022



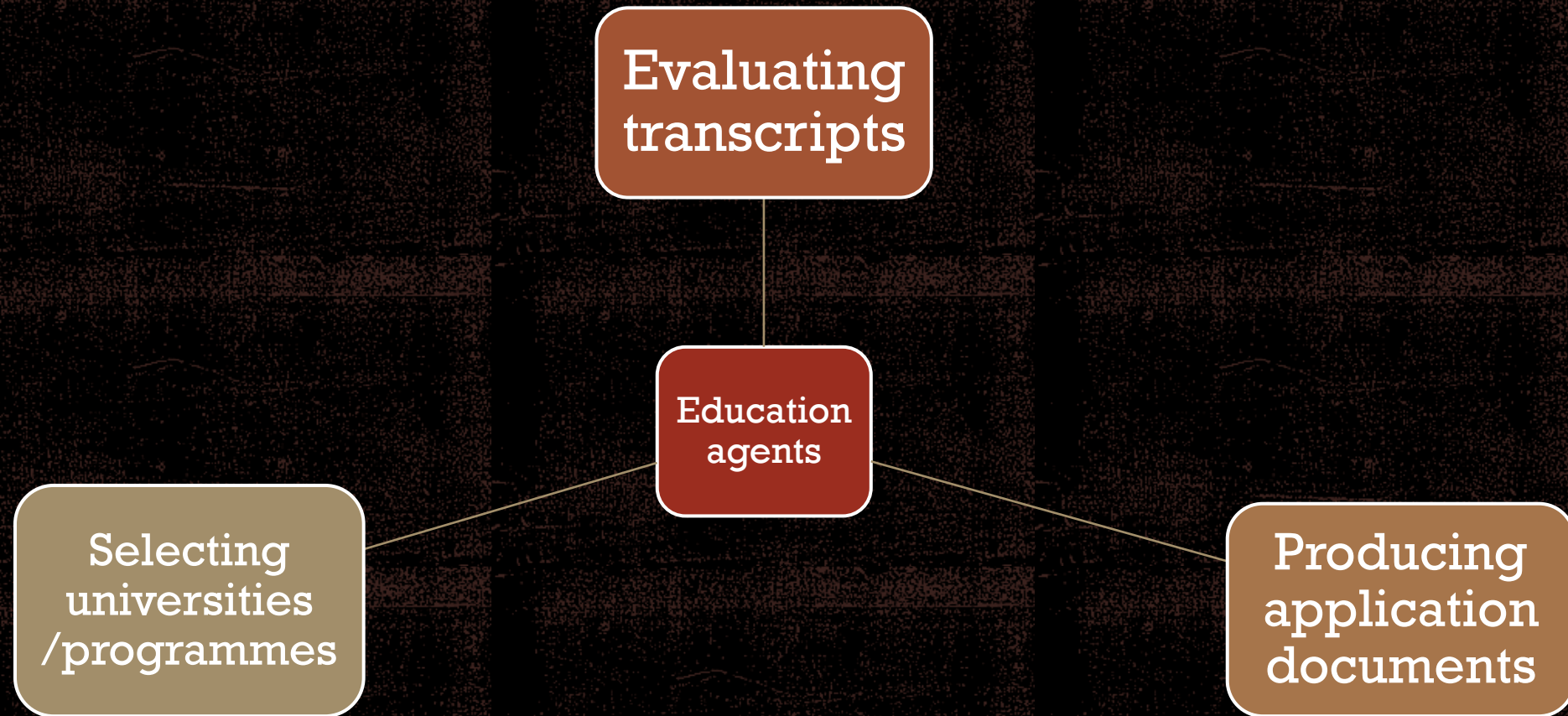


**Most valued  
services**

**The germ of  
uncertainties**

**Students'  
reflexivity in their  
position taking**

# MOST VALUED SERVICES



# EVALUATING TRANSCRIPTS



- **Grade point averages (GPAs) and first-degree awarding universities play a significant role in the admission assessments by overseas universities, particularly PGT programmes in the UK.**
- Participants expected education agents to provide critical comments on their profiles through honest evaluations of their university backgrounds, subjects studied, overall GPA, and individual course grades.
- Early preparations allow students to adjust their strategies in regard to maintaining a high GPA or (re)taking courses beneficial to their future plans.
- Admission requirements on university websites tend to be ineffective in assessing applicants' competence (Yang et al., 2023).



# SELECTING UNIVERSITIES / PROGRAMMES

- Agents as alternative labour to glean effective information about admission requirements, universities and programmes (Liu & Wen, 2021)
- Agents as a signpost to navigate large amounts of information and identify pertinent areas to focus on.
- Using agents as a form of insurance for being accepted to an overseas programme (Yang et al. 2023)





# PRODUCING APPLICATION DOCUMENTS

- Uncertain of their ability to develop these documents appropriately in English
- Time-consuming
- Lack of outstanding experience for the applications
- Documents such as personal statements, CVs and reference letters play a limited role in the application process, especially for high-performing students.

How to evaluate the quality of application documents that education agents produce ? ?



**What can we learn from these?  
What do these imply?**





# THE GERM OF (UN)CERTAINTIES

## Uncertainties:

- To many Chinese students, uncertainties are consciously and unconsciously interwoven in their choice-making process.

What do they need to know?

Where do they glean reliable and effective information?

How do they interpret the relevant information and position themselves in the application competition?

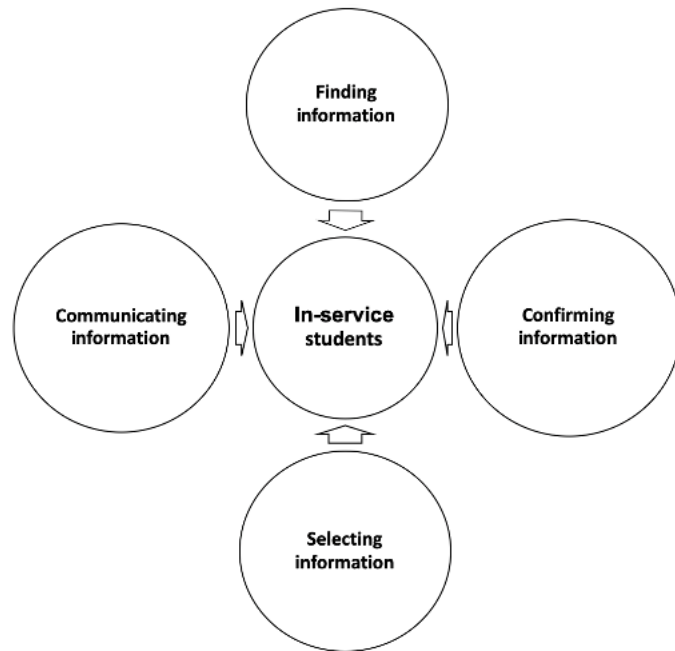
- UK universities are conditioning uncertainties in the international students' admission process.

UK universities do not depict their products clearly.

- The COVID-19 pandemic generated severe uncertainties and challenges (Yang et al., 2021)



# THE GERM OF (UN)CERTAINTIE



(Yang, Lomer, Lim, & Mittelmeier, 2021)



Uncertainties typify the very nature of the international students' application and recruitment. Education agents seemingly effectively function as information brokers prompting certainties.





# THE GERM OF (UN)CERTAINTIES

- Education agents, playing as a pioneer, constantly exploit possibilities in applications and admissions, which however is uncertain, especially in terms of advice on extracurricular activities.

How do UK universities evaluate the quality of such experiences?

How do Chinese students consider whether it is necessary to take part in activities of this kind?

How do education agents ensure the programmes or projects are helpful in the application competition?

**Education agents are unclear and uncertain whether these activities will be recognised by UK universities until they accumulate a certain number of application results.**





# THE GERM OF UNCERTAINTIES

- Cut-throat horizontal and vertical competitions between education agents condition their disposition to prioritise their business ambition over Chinese agent-user students' long-term interests, which breeds uncertainties in international students' applications and recruitments.



# THE GERM OF UNCERTAINTIES

- Education agents inadvertently homogenise themselves along with moulding and patterning Chinese agent-user students, which implies their need for demonstration of the distinction in the market competition.



Education agents themselves are analogous to the embodiment of uncertainty in international students' application and recruitment.





# **CHINESE AGENT-USER STUDENTS' REFLEXIVITY IN THEIR POSITION TAKINGS**

- Many Chinese agent-user students prepare their application for overseas programmes early, proactively court information in relation to studying abroad through different channels, carefully choose a “good” education agent, actively negotiate with their agent about potential programmes to apply for and take an active part in every detail of applications with their education agent.





# CHINESE AGENT-USER STUDENTS' REFLEXIVITY IN THEIR POSITION TAKINGS

- Many Chinese agent-user students who apply for PGT programmes abroad are almost independent of their families in terms of choice-making, which contradicts the findings of previous research that mixed students pursued different levels of education together.

The do-it-yourself characteristic of Chinese agent-user students is indicative of the need for education agents in their application.



# CHINESE AGENT-USER STUDENTS' REFLEXIVITY IN THEIR POSITION TAKINGS

- Many Chinese students tend to approach education agents early in their undergraduate career. The tendency for early preparations for overseas applications is accompanied by developing their ability to reflect on the rules of the application competition and desired position takings.



# CHINESE AGENT-USER STUDENTS' REFLEXIVITY IN THEIR POSITION TAKINGS

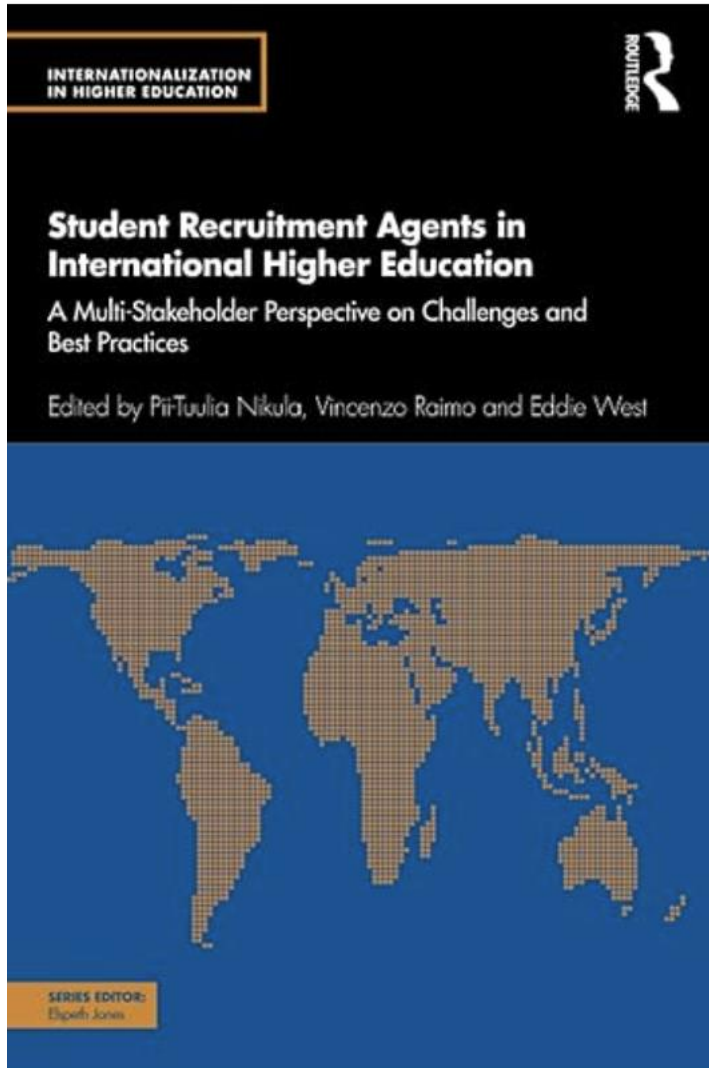
- Education agents' intervention facilitates the development of Chinese agent-user students' personal power of reflexivity to court the scope for their choice-making.



# FUTURE RESEARCH

- How do universities reflect on the current admission policies of UK universities and the value of education agents in this recruitment campaign?
- How do education agents potentially function in underrepresented groups of students' access to international higher education? How do education agents influence social inequality in access to international student mobility?
- Who are education agents?





Thank you!

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