

Engaging with Education Agents in International Student Support

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Abstract

Education agents are a significant group in delivering education and services to international students. They are contracted by providers with responsibilities under the ESOS Act to ensure information, advice and professional behaviour meet quality standards. Agents are frequently involved in liaising with parents and providers after a student has commenced study, and are therefore valuable stakeholders in the student support process.

One of the Australian Government's Study in Australia 2010 initiatives announced in March 2009 was to deliver sector support by strengthening engagement with education agents through a collaborative project between AEI and Professional International Education Resources (PIER). This involved workshops and focus groups involving around 1142 education agents across six countries between May-August 2009.

The focus group sessions considered student experience in Australia including safety and security; accommodation and cost of living issues; working with Australian education providers and identifying areas for improvement; and developing methods to showcase excellence in Australian education both of individuals and providers.

Keywords

Education agents, student support, professional partnerships

In June 2009 the Australian Senate conducted an inquiry into the welfare of international students in Australia. The inquiry invited submissions from across the international education industry relating to “the roles and responsibilities of education providers, migration and education agents, state and federal governments, and relevant departments and embassies, in ensuring the quality and adequacy in information, advice, service delivery and support”¹ across a range of student-related areas. Including education agents in the group of stakeholders relevant to international student welfare was an important step for a number of reasons.

Firstly, education agents are integral to the international education industry, and to the many dimensions of the student experience. Education agents are used by most education providers in their recruitment activities and by over 60% of students coming to Australia, compared with 19% in the UK and only 3% in the USA (International Student Barometer data 2007/2008). Given that Australia outperforms its competitors in terms of recruitment of students from overseas—Australia’s higher education sector has the highest proportional intake of international students amongst OECD countries (Universities Australia, 2009)—it is reasonable to argue that education agents are fundamental to the industry’s continued success, and should be regarded as a valued partner to Australian providers.

Secondly, education agents act on behalf of education providers; this means they are responsible for advising students about the functions and amenities—including student support services—of those providers. As the first contact many students have in the process of choosing a study destination, and as the individuals who assist in

¹ Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee 2009.

interpreting documents, advise on study choices and provide pre-departure information, education agents might be seen as natural allies to international student advisers.

Thirdly, education agents are not just active at the point of enquiry and application; many take an interest in and responsibility for liaison with students and families to protect student welfare, and offer ongoing support. They are also represented in many countries by highly organised agent associations with their own communication networks and codes of practice, thus sharing current concerns and information about the Australian education environment, student welfare and other issues.

In spite of this, education agents attract bad press and criticism from within the industry itself. When a minority of unscrupulous individuals engage in poor and/or unprofessional behavior in their recruitment activities, education agents collectively present an easy target, and for the most part are unable to publicly defend themselves.

What the Australian media thinks of education agents

Most of us are aware of the recent interest the Australian and international media has shown in international education matters, particularly incidents relating to violence, student accommodation and, somewhat oddly, education agents. Given that international education is less familiar in the public domain than other industries such as tourism, a media flurry about ‘dodgy’ education agents has been surprisingly persistent and provocative.

Amongst the media comments are the role education agents play in the “cheap and dirty route to permanent residency” (The Australian, 21/08/2009), “countless” students being “duped, fleeced or blatantly misled by offshore education agents” (The Age 23/05/09), and the practice of agents and providers of “reaping substantial profits by supplying false documents for potential visa applicants” (Sydney Morning Herald 27/07/09).

We need not dwell on what the papers say, but we do need to be clear about our own perceptions, knowledge and attitudes towards education agents, and how international education can be protected and strengthened, whatever the media might do to confuse the issues.

What the industry thinks of education agents

The recent submissions to the Senate Education Employment and Workplace Relations Committee provided a timely opportunity for the industry to speak its mind. We now have a snapshot of what the industry is, who operates within it, and what the key issues are. When one considers at least 20 percent of the 124 submissions came from non-education specific groups and individuals such as community groups, unions, and external service providers, we have an insight into the industry’s scope and relevance.

A general consensus about major issues was evident across the submissions which included concerns about accommodation, advocacy, social inclusion, work opportunities and public transport matters. Many submissions generally agreed that greater regulation was needed to monitor and control education agents, and that agents were viewed in the context of regulation and compliance, rogue practices and frequently the source of unfortunate student experiences—which to a degree can be demonstrated. In a sense, they appeared as external, and problematic to the industry.

The Senate Committee released its report in late November, and among its sixteen recommendations was that “providers deal exclusively with education agents who have successfully completed an appropriate course such as the EATC and that this requirement be phased in over the next three years” (recommendation 15). Not only was this seen as increasing professionalism and accountability, but reinforced government and provider obligations for agents “to access authoritative information regarding studying in Australia” (recommendation 13). There is an irony here for those working in institutions with international students. While international student support professionals may identify some similar responsibilities as education agents in terms of student welfare, there is no such requirement or even coherent industry position that international student advisers, for example, be professionally qualified.

While measures to address the work of educational agents are a positive move towards raising professional standards, we should question the assumption that greater regulation will eliminate poor agents or improve agent behavior. Some evidence exists that underground migration agent activity even after de-registration, and that a voluntary code of conduct existing now for migration agents “hasn’t stopped unscrupulous behavior” (The Australian 19/0809). It should also be remembered that education agents are already regulated through the ESOS Act (National Code 2007, Standard 4), although it may be that “institutions which are highly reliant upon

income derived from the students recruited by these agents have no incentive to monitor the behavior or cancel a contract when unscrupulous behavior occurs” (Go8 Senate Committee submission, p9).

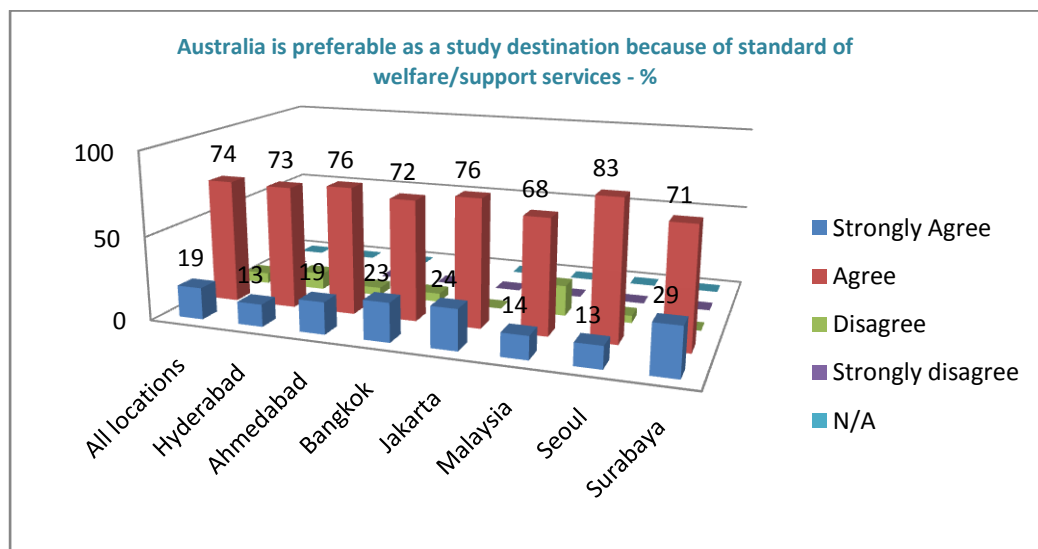
Nevertheless, it is important to consider education agents as industry stakeholders or perhaps as business partners, and as “a valuable part of the industry” (Navitas Senate Committee submission p.13). If we want to understand and improve student experience, upon which the Senate Committee set its focus, then perhaps a less ‘industry’ and more ‘human relationships’ approach might be warranted (University of Sydney Senate Committee submission). We also need to acknowledge that many education agents take responsibility for their own behavior – through membership of agent associations, relationship building with education providers, work with alumni groups and by undertaking the Education Agent Training Course. This proactively was recognised and supported in a number of submissions, including those from English Australia, the Law Institute of Victoria, ACPET, Navitas and International Education Services.

What education agents think of Australian education

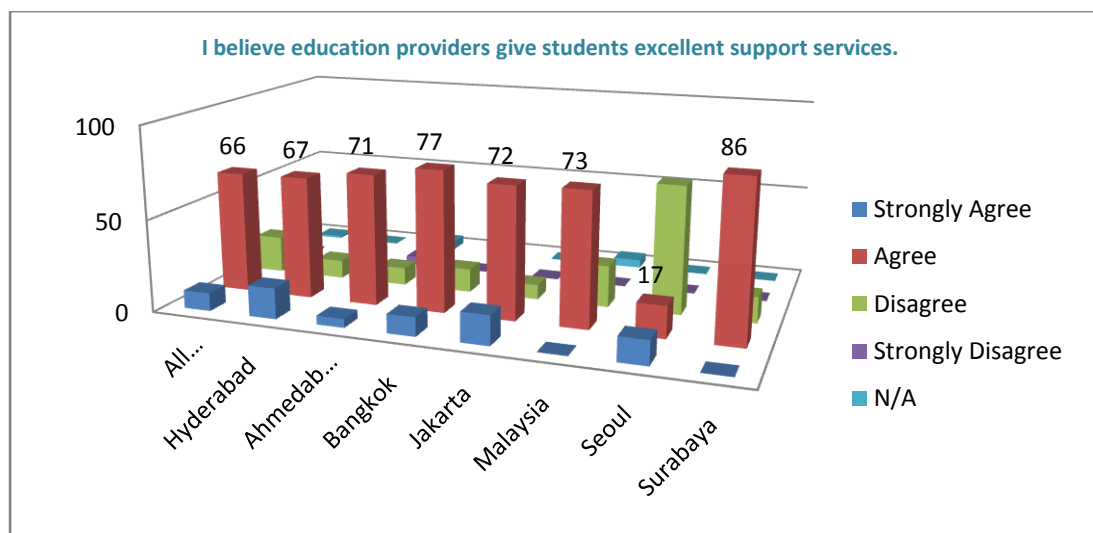
Part of the Australian Government’s *Study in Australia 2010* initiative announced by Education Minister Julia Gillard in March 2009 was the commitment of resources to activities aimed at improving student experience, and Australia’s international reputation for education provision. This included addressing training and quality issues relating to education agents. Resources were allocated to International Education Services through its division Professional International Education Resources (PIER) for the development and delivery of a series of 20 workshops and focus groups in 13 locations across 6 countries between May and August, with participation from around 1140 individuals, 177 of these in focus groups.

Workshops were held in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Chengdu and Shenyang in China, and in Kuala Lumpur, Ahmadabad, Hyderabad, Jakarta, Surabaya, Seoul and Bangkok. The focus groups were held in each location except in China. Among the findings of a detailed focus group survey and discussions were the following:

1. Education agents agree that Australia is a preferable study destination to other countries, and rated highly in its quality of education, education standards, support services and the overall student experience. On the question of whether Australia was a preferable study destination because of its support services, 93 % of the focus group participants agreed or strongly agreed with this position. This information is shown in the graph below:



Moreover, while there are some significant differences across locations in the views about student support services, most agents (82% overall) were satisfied or very satisfied with the level of welfare and learning support.



2. On teaching and research, agents also felt there was a very good level of support for students. Ninety-one percent of individuals were satisfied or very satisfied with teaching and learning support and 88% expressed satisfaction with research supervision.
3. While most agents believed that the cost of living for students is reasonable, they were concerned about rising costs, including visa and tuition fees.
4. Education agents strongly support the ESOS Act and the National Code of Practice as regulatory and protective mechanisms.
5. In general, education agents find the student visa regime clear, transparent and more straightforward than regimes in other countries.
6. Relationships between agents and providers are important to education agents, and most are satisfied with these relationships.
7. Education agents are very conscious of the value of best practice information and examples, and want to do more to have this information shared between agents and providers.

Throughout the discussions and the written data collected it was evident that most agents play a student advisory role, with 97% of the sample saying they advised student to seek help and pastoral care support. In particular, agents in Ahmadabad, Hyderabad, Jakarta, and Bangkok were consistent in their advice to students about help-seeking strategies, and expectations about the study experience. This advice included:

- Informing students what is expected of them; being independent, obeying Australian laws and being honest in their dealings;
- Attend orientation week;
- Contact student associations and clubs;
- Contact your Embassy;
- Accept the Australian culture, food and lifestyle;
- Ask questions;
- Contact international student services;
- Contact career advisory services for help with resumes;
- Do not rely on part-time work to cover living costs especially in the first year;
- Join the student union;
- Participate in local community events such as churches, clubs etc;
- Build networks;
- Study hard.

As professionals, the agents generally felt that they had a responsibility to ensure student expectations were met, although one group in Jakarta thought their responsibility was limited to informing and advising students “how to meet their expectations.” For the others, the following responsibilities were identified:

- Matching goals to appropriate courses;
- Explaining the nature of part-time work, and the balance between work and study;
- Ensuring counselors are alumni of Australia;
- Ensuring that students understand their own responsibilities;
- Checking to see if the staff are well-trained;
- Knowing exactly what students need and expect;
- Ensuring the quality of the product;
- Ensuring truth and honesty in dealing with students;
- Providing information to parents, and following up student progress.

Other data collected showed that the synergy between offshore education agents and onshore international student advisors and service providers could be exploited if communication networks and information sharing was encouraged. For example, most agents (86%) are generally interested and informed about issues relating to student experience, including social inclusion and cultural adjustment. At the same time 97% wanted to be better informed about these issues.

From the issues raised in the focus groups, and the interest agents were showing in international student support, it seems fairly clear that education agents are committed to a shared responsibility for quality, capability and reputation.

This information is relevant because as professionals working together for the benefit of international students we should consider the potential of forming partnerships, including an education agents' special interest group (SIG) of ISANA: International Education Association, developing stronger links with agents on a level that goes beyond marketing and recruitment, and providing education agents with practical information about student experiences before the study period commences.

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