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# 10 QUICK TIPS

FOR WORKING WITH **INTERNATIONAL**  
**STUDENT RECRUITMENT AGENTS**

**W**ith the rising number of globally mobile students in recent decades, the competition to attract and retain the most talented individuals from around the world is intensifying. Even though the United States is the leading host country for international students, currently annually hosting over one million<sup>1</sup>, each educational institution in the U.S. must independently pursue innovative and diversified recruitment strategies to attract and enroll international students. A well-tested and financially low-risk strategy for many institutions involves the use of international student recruitment agents.

In some countries, it is common practice for prospective students to consult an agent when applying to university or college abroad. In some countries, it is said that as much as 60 to 80% of students are assisted by agents. Consequently, there are hundreds of agents operating globally, with most offering a variety of services centered on recruiting, advising, and supporting qualified students for enrollment in degree-seeking academic programs abroad, both at the graduate and undergraduate levels.

While various types of agents exist, the majority usually represent a select number of educational institutions, specializing in specific disciplines or destination countries. Collaborating with agents offers U.S. colleges and universities a relatively straightforward strategy that typically doesn't demand the initial allocation of new institutional resources. Instead, institutions typically compensate agents through a per-student commission, ranging from 10-30% of the first-year tuition, payable only upon the successful enrollment of students.

Partnering with agents offers numerous advantages, including greater recruitment efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Agents serve as a trustworthy local source, enabling institutions to more effectively market and recruit in diverse regions of the world. Their local knowledge and cultural understanding facilitate seamless communication for students (and their families) in their native language. Agents possess valuable insights into students' profiles, needs, expectations, and abilities, allowing them to recommend suitable program matches. Additionally, agents contribute to a positive student experience by assisting with program selection, application forms, entrance exam preparation, etc. They extend their support to immigration matters and providing counseling and advice on various aspects of student life, including travel, insurance, accommodation, language learning, and more.





The concept of commission-based recruitment is not without concern. A central question pertains to whether agents will act in the best interests of students or prioritize their own financial motives. The known cases of unethical practices and deliberate misrepresentation of institutions underscore the need for institutions entering this space to carefully review best practices, higher education ethics and applicable laws. NAFSA: Association of International Educators offers helpful resource on working with agents.<sup>2</sup> The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) approves the use of commissioned agents in international student recruitment. The Association of International Enrollment Management (AIRC) focuses solely on issues relating to ethical, standards-based international student recruitment and offers certification of recruitment agents based on a rigorous accreditation model.

## HERE ARE TEN

timely, reasonable, and worthy tips to assist institutions in maximizing partnerships with international student recruitment agents.

### TIP 1 DEVELOP A STRATEGY FOR SELECTING AGENTS.

Identifying appropriate agents for your institution demands a thorough grasp of your leadership goals, enrollment objectives, and institutional capacity. Prioritize agents with proven reputations, verified credentials, and successful track records with recruiting students in your targeted markets. Establish a transparent and efficient protocol for selecting agent partners, possibly employing a standard template for consistent agreement negotiations. Your annual evaluation rubric should encompass assessment of each agent's compliance with local laws, adherence to ethical recruitment standards, and alignment with your institution's values. ICEF provides regular events each year that focus on connecting institutions and international student recruitment agents.

<sup>1</sup> Institute of International Education (IIE), *Open Doors*, <https://opendoorsdata.org/>

<sup>2</sup> *Working with Agents*, [www.nafsa.org](http://www.nafsa.org)

## **TIP 2 CREATE A BALANCED AGENT PORTFOLIO.**

Agents encompass a broad spectrum, ranging from localized smaller operations to expansive agencies with well-staffed offices spanning various regions worldwide. They differ in the scope of their recruitment services; some provide a comprehensive range of services for students across all disciplines studying around the world, while others focus on specific markets like the U.S. or specific disciplines such as business or engineering. There are agents that concentrate solely on intensive language programs or international high school and boarding school placements. Some specialize in pathway programs designed to aid students transitioning to university studies. Craft a well-balanced agent portfolio that intentionally aligns with your enrollment objectives.

## **TIP 3 KNOW WHAT YOUR INSTITUTION HAS TO OFFER.**

Different institutions appeal to different audiences. Universities, colleges, language schools, boarding schools, vocational and technical institutes each attract specific student demographics. Factors such as institutional reputation, ranking, location, size, cost of attendance, and availability of financial aid and scholarships play a significant role in the decision-making process. Identify the attributes that differentiate your institution and select agents capable of making authentic connections with prospective students. Agents can be extraordinarily helpful with navigating the complexities of international student recruitment and with figuring out how best to position one's institution in this competitive landscape.

## **TIP 4 SEE YOUR AGENTS AS RECRUITMENT PARTNERS.**

Many agents are privately owned businesses comprised of hard-working, dedicated, and trustworthy individuals. Establishing respectful and open communication with your agents is fundamental to successful and enduring partnerships. Treat your agents as authentic partners in the recruitment process, taking the time to understand their values and priorities. Express gratitude for their contributions. Keep them updated on important developments. Maintain a schedule of regular meetings. In moments of challenge, these relationships become the foundation for effective problem-solving and crisis management. Ultimately, if trust and respectful communication is lacking with your agents, it's a signal that the partnership may not be the right fit.

## **TIP 5 EMPOWER YOUR AGENTS AND BOLSTER THEIR EFFORTS.**

Clear and prompt communication is essential for streamlining the application process and bolstering an agency's credibility with its students (and their families). Providing thorough and timely responses to agent questions can significantly influence whether or not a student decides to apply to your institution and accept admission. Provide clear application timelines of the application cycle. Implement a system to identify agent applications early on and track each throughout the admissions cycle. Consider establishing a dedicated scholarship for agents, empowering them to connect with underrepresented populations within the target market. Provide agents with relevant print materials and promotional swag to bolster their outreach efforts. Consider featuring your agents on your institutional website for prospective students to see.





## **TIP 6 MAINTAIN THE INTEGRITY OF YOUR ADMISSIONS PROCESS.**

With the constant pressure to increase enrollment, admissions and enrollment management professionals often face situations where they are asked to waive eligibility criteria or bypass established admissions protocols and standards. Historically, agents have been known to seek such accommodations or exceptions. When flexibility is feasible, communicate it clearly; when not, provide transparent reasons. Students placed by agents should adhere to the same eligibility criteria and follow the same admissions processes as all other applicants. While it is imperative to safeguard the integrity of your admissions and enrollment process, it is similarly important to ensure the process is efficient and attuned for international applicants. And remember to retain a firewall between recruitment and admission personnel.

## **TIP 7 PROVIDE APPROPRIATE OVERSIGHT AND STAFFING.**

While engaging with agents may be financially efficient, it requires an investment of staff time. Negotiating and maintaining contractual agreements, implementing quality control measures, monitoring and evaluating performance, and continually updating and training agents represent key aspects of sustaining a successful and enduring partnership. Each of these components demands a considerable amount of time and attention. Therefore, determining the ideal number of agents should be closely aligned with the time commitment you are prepared to invest in fostering and managing these partnerships. This balance ensures that the quality and effectiveness of each partnership are upheld, contributing to the overall success of your institution's international student recruitment efforts.

## **TIP 8 ESTABLISH A PAYMENT STRUCTURE THAT WORKS FOR YOUR INSTITUTION.**

There is significant variability in how agents are compensated, with the majority relying on per-student commission payments tied to a percentage of first-year tuition. Alternatively, some institutions offer a flat commission, particularly for non-degree programs. Others opt for retention-based incentives, with payments staggered across enrolled semesters (e.g., \$1,500 for semester one, \$500 for semester two, \$500 for semester three). Graduated enrollment-based commissions are utilized to reward agents for sending numerous students (e.g., \$2,000 for 1-9 students, \$2,500 for more than 10 students). Conduct regular reviews and updates to your compensation structure to ensure its fairness and alignment with your enrollment goals and budget considerations. And remember to develop a payment schedule to compensate agents promptly, acknowledging they often working lengthy periods of time with students without direct compensation.

## **TIP 9 BUILD A RECRUITMENT ECOSYSTEM.**

Seek real-time connections with your agents by dedicating funds for regular office visits and active involvement in their recruitment events. Utilize traveling faculty and staff to extend these visits, and tap into the willingness of internationally-based alumni to engage with agents, attend local recruiting events, and interview prospective students. Allocate resources for periodic campus visits by agents and support when possible their participation in major conferences like AIRC and NAFSA. Collaborate with agents to bridge the gap between prospective and current students through modern communication platforms, virtual campus tours, and other innovative initiatives, creating a dynamic and inclusive engagement strategy.

**AND REMEMBER, ITS NOT ALL ABOUT NUMBERS.**

Your task is to recruit the best and brightest students from around the world. To do this, your institution must employ various strategies, and partnering with reputable international student recruitment agents may be central to that effort. After all, agents are just as motivated to support exceptional students with realizing their educational aspirations. In your collaboration with agents, avoid conflating methodology with your ultimate objective. While the emphasis may seem centered on boosting enrollment, your true objective is to empower students from around the world to pursue higher education abroad and ultimately graduate with a deep understanding of their chosen disciplines and the knowledge and experience to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world.

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**



**Anthony C. Ogden**  
Founder & Managing Director  
Gateway International Group

Dr. Ogden is the founder and managing director of Gateway International Group. He is a respected scholar-professional with 25+ years of experience in international higher education. Ogden has held senior leadership positions at renowned institutions such as Pennsylvania State University, the University of Kentucky, Michigan State University, and the University of Wyoming.



**Mr. David Adler**  
CEO & Co-founder  
Ustudy Global, applywave

Mr. Adler is the founder & CEO of Applywave and is considered one of the most innovative leaders in international student mobility & recruitment. He has long been an advocate for the development of new technologies to support international enrollment management. Adler serves on the Board of Directors of the Association of International Enrollment Management (AIRC).



## THE BIG 10

Do not collaborate with non-certified agents.

Do not delay in responding to agent inquiries.

Do not compromise admissions criteria standards.

Do not disrespect or disparage your agents.

Do not allow payment processing to be delayed.

Do not assign the task of collecting tuition or payments to agents.

Do not rely on agents for student retention.

Do not engage with agents without first ensuring adequate staffing at your campus.

Do not expect immediate results in student recruitment.

Do not forget the importance of education in all operational aspects.





# AGENT REVIEW PROCESS

Below are several questions, grouped thematically that can be compiled into a checklist for the selection of international student recruitment agents:

## COUNTRY SPECIFIC

- ✔ Does the agent have a thorough understanding of the US higher education system?
- ✔ Which countries does the agent most actively represent?
- ✔ Has the agent ever placed students in the U.S.? If so, where?
- ✔ Does the agent have advisers that have studied in the US or do specific staff members specialize in the U.S.?

## INSTITUTION SPECIFIC

- ✔ Does the agent specialize in certain types of institutions? Will the agent recruit for Intensive English Program, graduate programs, and non-degree programs?
- ✔ How many institutions does the agent represent?
- ✔ What types of institutions does the agent represent and what are some? Does the agent have preferred institutions in the U.S.?
- ✔ Why would this agent want to work with my institution?
- ✔ Will the agent seriously and appropriately market my institution or just add the institution to their portfolio of institutional offerings?
- ✔ Do any of our peer institutions work with this agent? If so, what has been their experience?
- ✔ Is the agent prepared to make a campus visit? How frequently would they visit?



## AGENT SPECIFIC

- ✔ Is the agent reputable, having proven to be financially viable for a number of years?
- ✔ Will the agent provide references, including students and partner institutions in the U.S.?
- ✔ What services does the agent provide (e.g., placement, recruitment, job placement, credentials evaluations, translation, travel services, etc.)?
- ✔ Does the agent hold seminars or education abroad fairs through which our promotional materials can be displayed or at which our representatives can be present?
- ✔ Does the agent have high-quality, well-distributed publications and an on-line presence through which our institution can be represented?
- ✔ What training do the staff have and what are their backgrounds?
- ✔ Is the agent willing to develop new programming in partnership with our institution or market short-term educational programs?
- ✔ Does the agent communicate well (i.e., reply to inquiries quickly, provide complete responses)?
- ✔ Will the agent support students for admission to institutions outside of those institutions with which it has contractual agreements?
- ✔ Is the agent open to working with students that are interested in studying at universities where the agent does not have a commission-based partnership?

## STUDENT SPECIFIC

- ✔ How many students does the agent recruit each year?
- ✔ What are the target demographics? Are these data available?
- ✔ Can the agent provide evidence of student success (i.e., retention and persistence)?
- ✔ How does the agent charge students and if so, how much? Are fees transparent and incremental with services offered?
- ✔ Does the agent provide the students with helpful advice about international travel, medical insurance, accommodation options, prearrival information, etc.?
- ✔ To what extent does the agent assist students with the U.S. immigration process? What has been the success rate of their students receiving a U.S. visa?
- ✔ Does the agent offer support services to students once placed abroad? To what extent and at what cost?