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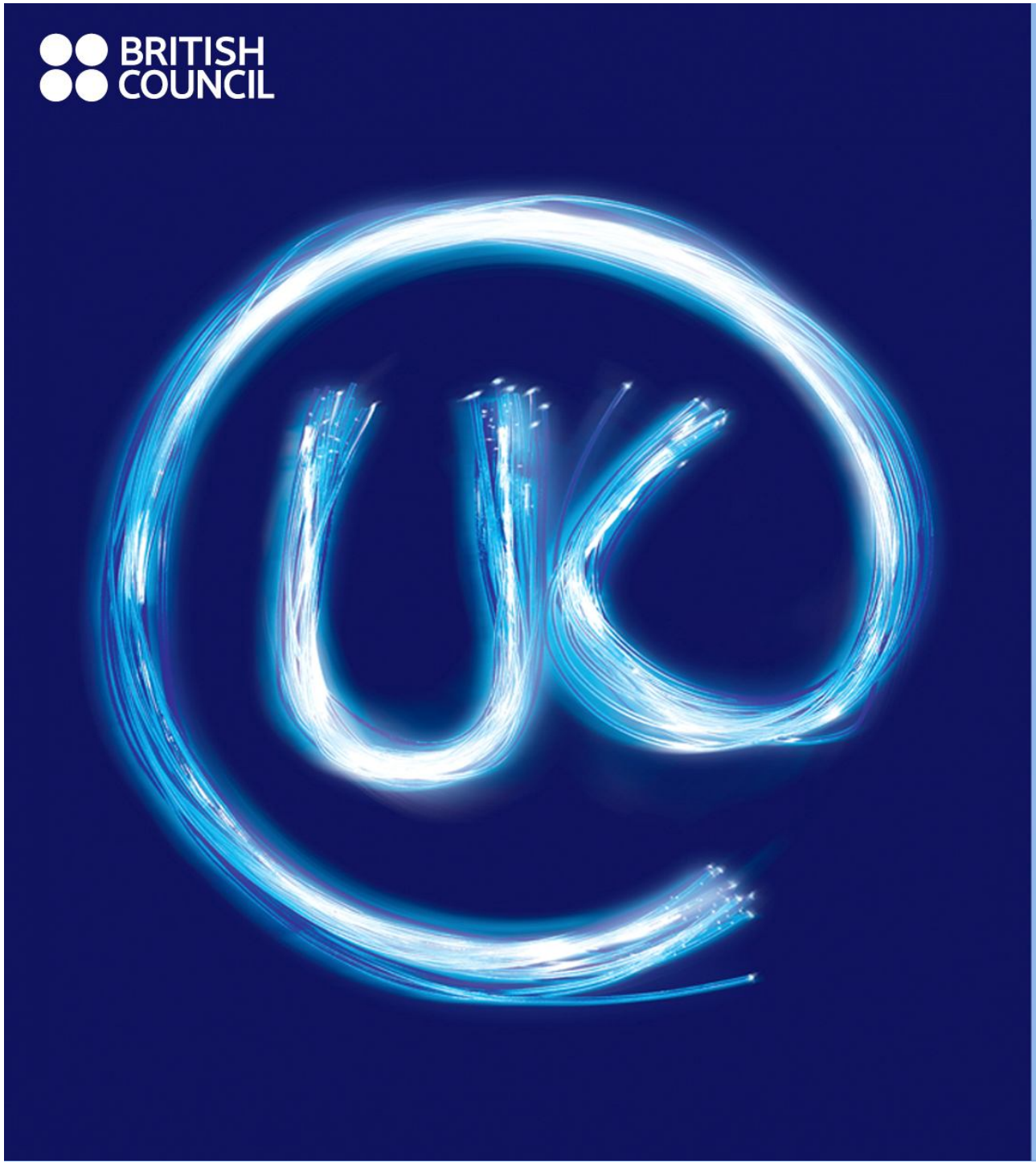

Working With Agents

Chris Chang
Director
Brunel International

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Role of Agents

The role of agents in international recruitment is now clearer than it has been in the past. Their role includes:

- Raising the profile of UK education and your institution;
- Marketing – promotion and marketing of your courses and your institution and includes preparing marketing material;
- Market intelligence;
- Conversion activity – fairs, follow up, interviews, pre-departure etc;
- Customer relationship management;
- Visa applications;
- Some act as regional offices for institutions – some have staff in the agency;
- Supporting students and alumni and staff who visit the country.
- Assisting in establishing academic partnerships.

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Role of Agents

- What is their role in respect of PBS – possible vetting role? – verifying documents, financial aspects, weeding out fraudulent applications. Importance of getting trusted agents
- Essential for them to be providing accurate advice – what role do they play vis a vis your institution in the light of confusing information on PBS in-country?
- Consequences of giving wrong advice.
- Involvement in the issue of CAS?
- Caution in respect of immigration advice which is more than Level 0.

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Selecting agents

- Methodical Approach:

  - evaluation of market needs and agent skills/expertise.

  - understanding how agents operate in the respective markets – not a one size fits all approach – different approach of agents in different countries eg Brazil as compared to India.

  - understanding your institution/school and how effective agents will be for your institution.

  - be realistic and pragmatic.
- Safeguarding reputation of institution – due diligence and constant review/monitoring
- BC Role – not an accreditation role but one of facilitation
  - Agent Zone
  - In-country offices
  - Training course for agents and Institutions
  - inward missions of agents
  - Trusted agent Scheme – India!

Agents and their role within the institution's plans

Institution's Role

- Marketing Planning
  - Decisions as to how institution will work with the agents Identifying and evaluate market opportunities
  - Role for agents operating locally – different roles
  - Selective or non-selective
  - Costs and budget implications – Return on investment, VAT
  - Link to reputation, profile and image

Remember that the activities of the agent can damage the reputation of the institution and vice versa.

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Institution's role in evaluating agents

- Ensure that there is a system or process in place for evaluating agents and their ability to deliver institutional needs. Be clear as to what you expect from your agents and whether you can meet their expectations,
- What criteria do you use?

  - Person/agency specification as in staff recruitment or more general?

  - Reputation and previous successes or potential?

  - Recommendations?

  - Staff who completed BC training?

  - A member of a National Association (Taiwan, Thailand, Pakistan, Malaysia, HK) or specific scheme eg TP Scheme?

  However, should be prepared to be flexible.
- Training – what training do you expect the agent or its staff to have undergone?
  - whether experienced or less experienced agent;
  - institution specific, consortium or BC general training;

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Selecting agents

Issues for institutions

- Is a large or small agency right for your institution?
- Experienced or inexperienced agent?
- Specialist agent – for example Boarding schools may want to focus on agents specialising in their markets.
- Large or small number of agents?
- What is their USPs?
- What are their expectations?
- Link to pathway programme provider?

Don't be afraid to be different <u>but</u>

<u>Be clear about objectives and do your homework!</u>

Above all remember that you do need to take proper due diligence checks and an appropriate audit trail to protect the institution's reputation and image.

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Evaluating the relationships with Agents

Agent related problems –

- Inadequate background research (lessons for the future).
- Changing management/staffing.
- ‘Cherry picking’ – focus on popular courses.
- Training or relationship management issue?
- Management of expectations.
- Management of relationship with agents – who does it and risk management.
- Agents’ understanding of the Educational system

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Development of agent relationship

Important issues to developing the agent relationship

- Training of agents – either in-country or via Familiarisation trips;
- Marketing support including advertising costs, stand assistance, interviews at agents;
- Supporting student conversion activity;
- Referral of enquiries to agents for follow up if there is none within the institution;
- Key contact for particular agent (whether through the IO or Administrator dedicated to agent support);
- IT/ Web support – tracking of applications and ease of obtaining information;

Evaluating the Relationships with Agents

Agent related problems –

- Agent failing to deliver to expectations despite best efforts of the institution:
  - how long do you keep relationship going?
  - review and probation periods linked to targets.
  - on going discussions with agents on ability to deliver targets and possible realism on institution's side.

- **Exit strategy**

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Evaluating the Relationships with Agents

Institution-related problems in working with agents

- Lack of strategic planning and support at senior level
- Lack of systematic marketing planning
- Inadequate agent selection criteria/process
- Failure to manage the relationship with the agents
- Risk management – dependent on one IO in managing agents in specific countries.

Evaluating the Relationships with Agents

Institution-related problems

- Internal processes for responding to enquiries and applications – service levels;
- Annual review of agents;
- Level of investment in:
  - Promotional activities
  - Developing agent relationships

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Due Diligence

Importance of undertaking due diligence prior to appointment of agents:

- protection of University/institution/school against potential liability;
- accountability – internal audits;
- risk management;
- Reputation and image in country;
- ability to deliver institution expectations and effect on credibility of International operations within the institution and personal reputation.

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Due Diligence

Degree of investigation will depend on level of investment and risk implied by the proposed relationship, but minimum checks:

- Does the agency meet local legal requirements?
- Individual, partnership or company?
- Premises and where they operate from.
- Reputation of local agent?
- Reputation of individuals involved with agency?
- How long operating, and how long from existing premises?
- How familiar are they with UK Education?
- Track record and institutions they work with.
- Number of staff who have undergone BC training for agents.
- Financial aspects – accounts etc – not always possible to obtain.
- Remember to take into account local practices eg Brazil and Japan

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Due Diligence

- Once information obtained – who evaluates this?
- How do you verify the information?
- Decision on whether to appoint the agent – individual or committee?
- Keeping records of the information obtained for future reference – audits etc.
- Review and evaluation.
- What happens when information is subsequently discovered which affects the information obtained during due diligence – what should you do?

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Q and A