Research Article

OJED
OPEN JOURNALS IN EDUCATION

Volume 12, Issue 3 (2022), pp. 565-586
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
doi: 10.32674/jis.v12i3.3777
ojed.org/jis

A Study of Chinese Students' Application to UK Universities in Uncertain Times: From the Perspective of Education Agents

Ying Yang[1]
Sylvie Lomer
Miguel Antonio Lim
Jenna Mittelmeier
The University of Manchester, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

A large number of Chinese applicants use education agents to apply for overseas programs, and agents are one of the most significant influence factors on Chinese international students' choice of overseas programs. However, there is limited research around agents' experiences within the existing information landscape of international higher education. For example, information asymmetries between agents and universities may have an impact on the advice and guidance provided for international applicants. This research investigates agents' practices with in-service Chinese applicants to UK universities in the context of information asymmetry. COVID-19 serves as a backdrop as an illustrative case of a period of high information uncertainty, which has generated severe challenges for the international higher education sector and for Chinese applicants' plans to study overseas. This study reports on the findings from in-depth interviews with 16 Chinese agent consultants undertaken in nine cities across China in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic (May 2020). The findings indicate that education agents attempt to mitigate the information asymmetry and emotionally reassure applicants through a four-step information management process. Our contribution generates a new understanding of the role that education agents play in international students' applications and mobility, voices that are often ignored but

[1] Corresponding Author.

essential for international students' decision-making processes and existing university recruitment services.

Keywords: Chinese international student, education agents, information asymmetry, international higher education

INTRODUCTION

On March 11, 2020, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization. Soon afterward, in the international higher education sector, most in-person activities on campus were cancelled and the majority of courses were moved online. This resulted in many university staff and faculty working around the clock to deal with the unplanned and unprepared shift to distance teaching and learning. In addition, international students' university applications, including their visa applications and English language tests, were impeded by the high level of uncertainty caused by COVID-19 (Yang *et al*., 2020). An ongoing QS survey (2020) indicates that, in April 2020, 53% of international offer holders have had their plans to study abroad impacted by uncertainty during COVID-19. Thousands of Chinese international students in the United Kingdom attempted to leave during the spring 2020 semester and, in some cases, even tried to charter airplanes home (The Guardian, 2020). In this sense, COVID-19 can serve as an illustrative case of a period of high information uncertainty. Amid this backdrop, severe challenges for the international higher education sector have been generated (Fischer, 2020). International student mobilities and enrollment in a time of great uncertainty have become top concerns for international higher education providers, policy makers, and researchers.

Indeed, considerable attention has been devoted to exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international students' experiences and intentions (QS, 2020; Siczek, 2020; Tran, 2020). However, a scarcity of research investigates these issues from the perspective of education agents, who are key actors in the international student recruitments (Falcone, 2017) and play a significant role in international students' choice of overseas programs (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Yen *et al*., 2012). This means a number of questions about agents' practices during this period remain, namely: How did education agents interact with students during COVID? How did agents perceive their role in this particular time? Understanding these issues will bring fresh and valuable insights into international students' decision-making processes at times of uncertainty, which identifies insightful implications for international higher education during and beyond COVID-19.

This paper commences by exploring the context of this research, including the marketization of international higher education, information asymmetry in the international higher education market, and education agents. It then illustrates the methodology of this research involving participants and setting, data collection, analysis approach, ethics, and limitation. It ends with key findings and a

discussion, and it identifies important implications for international higher education outside COVID-19, along with proposing the future research questions.

THE MARKETIZATION OF INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

In the wake of globalizing neoliberalism, the discourses of marketization emerged within the higher education sector worldwide, which is associated with the exponential growth of international student mobility (Arkoudis *et al*., 2019). Recent research outlines both demand and supply factors in this particular quasi-market to stimulate international student mobilities (Findlay *et al*., 2017; Lomer, 2018). From the perspective of the demand side, international students are framed as consumers (Marginson, 2013) who intend to make "rational" economic choices and expect to improve their employability in an increasingly competitive global job market through international higher education (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). From the perspective of the supply side, as public funds to higher education were shrunk in many host countries, universities compete for prestige to attract students and expand the recruitment of fee-paying international students as an alternative source of income (Foskett, 2011).

As a result, as in other markets, many intermediaries get involved in the international higher education market, such as education agents who provide recruitment services for both international students and universities (Findlay et al., 2017). The size of the education agent sector in China (Zhang & Fumasoli, 2019) and growth in recent years is also an indicator of overt marketization. This particular quasi-market displays characteristics that are distinct from a pure market system led by the relationship between seller and buyer on the basis of the price mechanism (Tomlinson, 2018). For example, higher education (HE) is a post-experience and an invisible product whose value is reflected via long-term impact (Tomlinson, 2018) with limited opportunity of repeat purchase (Foskett, 2011) or exchange. Competition in this market is not oriented by "orthodox economic bottom lines" (Marginson, 2013, p. 357), but it is constrained by government intervention, though economic rewards coincide with success in this competition. In this sense, the considerations of both international students (buyers) and overseas universities (sellers) in this special market context are, by their very nature, more complicated.

INFORMATION ASYMMETRY IN THE INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION MARKET

In neoliberal terms, information for consumers to make decisions about purchases is a key prerequisite for a pure market. Government agencies and the media produce information with the intention of guiding students to make comparable judgments, such as institutional rankings and league tables. Many governments require the publication of institutional metrics, programs, curricula, services, tuition fees, and so on; they seek to make the information transparent through the audit and inspection of governments or quangos (Foskett, 2011). However, in fact,

such measurements and metrics have limitations, such as a lack of transparency of how to weigh those indicators. In some domestic contexts, such as the United Kingdom, information is associated with teaching satisfaction; for instance, the Teaching Excellence Framework omits international students' perspectives (Hayes, 2019).

One continuing issue is whether international students, as potential consumers, can access and understand sufficient information to help them make choices. For international students, geographic distance and language barriers may hinder acquiring enough information about higher education abroad (Coffey, 2014), as well as likely cultural differences. Some international students encounter great information asymmetries before their arrival, leading to apparent deficits in preparedness for their course (Marginson et al., 2010; Sá & Sabzalieva, 2018). Therefore, there is an issue of information asymmetry between potential international students and universities abroad.

Information asymmetry is a concept drawn from economic literature that explains, as Stiglitz (2003) describes, how some information is initially possessed by one party involved in a purchase rather than all the parties involved. Issues arise among actors in specific markets (Akerlof, 1970; Rothschild & Stiglitz, 1976; Spence, 1973), which are likely to lead to adverse selection (Akerlof, 1970), meaning that potential buyers are unhappy if they perceive that sellers possess more information, resulting in the potential to feel "cheated," and therefore they decide not to buy the product.

Applied to international HE, in the rational decision-making process, pronounced information asymmetry is likely to give rise to adverse selection where international students will not choose to go abroad for study if they do not have sufficient knowledge of courses and universities. On the other hand, however, in the less rational decision-making process, to some extent, information gaps contribute to the formation of a fad of study abroad. Constrained by limited information, some international students may base their choices simply on the current trend of studying abroad and/or personal feelings. In addition, Wankhade and Dabade (2006) differentiate between two kinds of information asymmetry. One is general information asymmetry, referring to potential buyers lacking full information about products in the particular market. The second is product information asymmetry, such that sellers do not effectively depict their product to the potential consumer. In the international HE market, typically universities (sellers) set out their information on websites, such as admission requirements, course description, and tuition fees. However, this information may be difficult for international students to interpret, for example, students still feel confused about how to prepare documents up to admission criteria (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011). Therefore, there is significant general information asymmetry in the international market.

To address information asymmetry, in pure markets, Akerlof (1970) suggests that counteracting institutions could mitigate quality uncertainty effectively, such as product guarantees, brand names, and chains. Subsequently, using "signals" such as education credentials (Spence, 1973) and "screening mechanism"

(Rothschild & Stiglitz, 1976) are also identified as effective approaches to filling information gaps. In practice, however, there does not appear to be much research indicating a uniform institution or effective measures to resolve these issues in the international HE market so far.

EDUCATION AGENTS

In recent years, education agents have emerged as an active part of international recruitment and university applications (Collins, 2012; Nikula, 2020). Agents are organizations and/or individuals who provide a range of services in exchange for a fee from their service users, including overseas higher education institutions and/or students who will study or are studying abroad (Krasocki, 2002; Nikula & Kivistö, 2018). Recent research indicates that a large number of universities in top host countries, such as the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, rely heavily on agents' services to secure advantageous positions in the competition of international student recruitment (Nikula, 2020; Raimo et al., 2014). At the same time, a large quantity of international students, especially from China, use agents to apply to overseas programs (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Universities UK, 2017). In this regard, education agents are listed as one of the top five factors influencing undergraduate international students' choice of study destination (Universities UK, 2017). Therefore, the role of education agents cannot be overlooked in the studies of the international higher education market.

Applications to programs at the postgraduate level involve similar steps within most universities in the popular host countries. They accept applications via their individual application system and require similar application documents for international applicants, including online application forms, academic transcripts, reference letters, English language test scores, and personal statement (motivation letter). Some programs may have their specific requirement, such as scores of GMAT[2] or GRE.[3] Finally, the application results will be released on the due date or on the rolling basis. Hagedorn and Zhang (2011) suggest that lots of Chinese international students who use agents possess less knowledge about the application processes, universities in other countries, as well as visa application, which results in difficulties in choosing programs to apply to. Preparing the application documents is another typical dilemma, particularly writing personal statements that is new to them. Completing application forms makes some students frustrated because of the repetitive information collection. Further, preparing standardized English language tests is also challenging, as it is hard to achieve the necessary English language entry requirement in a short time (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011).

[2] Graduate Management Admission Test.

[3] Graduate Record Examination.

Education agents provide an attentive "one-stop shop" for potential international students (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Pimpa, 2003; Robinson-pant & Magyar, 2018), which can be categorized into five main services:

1. Providing full-range information regarding countries, cities, institutions, application documents, etc.;
2. Advising services on selecting countries, institutions, or programs;
3. Assisting with applications, including preparing personal essays, references, and certificates; filling in application forms; and tracking application status;
4. Visa-processing services, including document translation, interview training, filling in visa application forms, and making visa appointments;
5. Pre-arrival services, such as pre-departure training, alumni connections, pick-up and drop-off services, accommodation application, and deposit payment.

In China, since the early 2000s, the Ministry of Education has promoted market-based education reform aiming at diversifying education revenues and improving the quality of education, in keeping with many of the global trends toward neoliberal practices. In this context, international education in both the public and private sectors sprang up within China, along with the burgeoning trend of study abroad (Liu, 2020). More and more prospective Chinese international students, struggling with information gaps about overseas education, reached out to the third-party education agents for help, such that the industry of education agencies mushroomed in China's market (Ma, 2020). The Chinese Bureau of Supervision and Administration of Foreign Affairs in Education [CBSAFA] (2019) reports that there are 555 registered private education agents across 30 provinces in China. However, there are no systematic data about the number of agents of different types. Individual agents or agencies, analogous to school counselors in the international divisions of China's school (Ma, 2021), organize their work by dividing labor into two key roles: communicators and processors (Yang *et al*., 2020). Communicators, similar to navigators, are primarily responsible for promoting overseas universities and advising about the choices of schools and programs alongside informing about the application progress. Processors, in contrast, similar to nannies, take care of every detail of application operations, visa processing, and pre-arrival services.

Education agents' services play a significant role in bridging the information asymmetry gap between students and universities. However, despite their utility, there are concerns and criticism related to some agents' unethical practices, such as providing students with false or inaccurate information, overpromising students, breaching the bribery registration, forging documents, writing personal letters on behalf of students, and so on. These issues may give rise to issues such as accepting unqualified students, which may damage the image of institutions or the host country as a high-quality education destination by definition (Nikula & Kivistö, 2018; Raimo Humfrey & Huang, 2014).

Currently, during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, various discussions, concerns, and uncertainties arise among key actors of the international HE market. We assume that information asymmetries have been exacerbated alongside such a great uncertainty in this particular market. In light of the widespread use of education agents among Chinese applicants and the great influence of education agents on Chinese applicants' choice of programs in the United Kingdom, we aimed at exploring education agents' practices during the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, this research aims at using information asymmetry to investigate education agents' practices with their in-service students, who were in the process of applying to UK universities during the pandemic. We had two research questions:

- How did education agents work for their in-service students during the COVID-19 crisis?
- How did education agents perceive the impact of their practices on their in-service students during the COVID-19 crisis?

Building on these two questions, we explored a new information landscape where education agents play an important mediating role in the relationship between Chinese students and UK universities.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Setting

Our research aim was to develop deeper insights into the practices of education agents during a period of great uncertainty. As such, the approach for collecting data involved semi-structured interviews. Given travel restrictions during the pandemic, all interviews took place online by using video calls. As the primary researcher previously worked as an education agent, we initially approached participants within this existing network; then, we relied on a snowball method to recruit other agent consultants who worked at different education agencies. Between May 1 and 15, 2020, 16 agent consultants who were specifically responsible for UK cases participated in this research, including 13 communicators and 3 processors (see Table 1). They were from 16 different education agencies located in 10 cities across China. Among these education agencies, 14 agencies were large enterprises (i.e., agencies with branches located in different cities); two agencies were small companies (i.e., agencies without branches consisting of several members).

Table 1: Snowball recruitment

Item	Description	Method of data collection	Number	Total
Agent consultant	Communicator	Online interview	13	16
	Processor		3	

Data Collection Process

The interview questions were developed in reflection of the literature, based on the steps that in-service students go through with agent consultants after signing the service contract (Yang, 2019). During the interviews, participants were asked questions about their work modes, consulting services, application services, students' inquiries and concerns, information sources, and delivery, particularly in light of the COVID-19 crisis. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and audio-recorded, lasting approximately 1.5 hrs each time.

Analysis Approach

Throughout the interviews, nearly all the participants categorized their professional roles across four themes: tracking application statuses, forwarding information, counseling, and processing follow-up work. As we wished to develop a reflective understanding of experiences within each of these categories between interview participants, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyze the data. In the first phase, familiarization with the data was developed by transcribing all interviews and conducting multiple in-depth readings. In the second phase, initial codes were developed to categorize key and recurring concepts. There were 38 codes generated in total. In the third phase, the main themes were developed by collating the coded lines and/or paragraphs in an additional in-depth read of the data. In the fourth phase, with the concepts of information asymmetry and information management in mind, the developed themes were reviewed several times by checking the codes in detail, new extracts were included, and similar codes were integrated. In the fifth phase, the four themes—"finding information," "confirming information," "interpreting and selecting information," and "elaborating and communicating the selected information"—were identified and finalized, based on the steps of participants' information processing and management. Then, all the relevant codes were reorganized and assigned to the corresponding themes. Finally, based on the four themes, agents' information practices with in-service students during the COVID-19 crisis were examined through the lens of information asymmetry.

Ethics

The invitation letter, consent form, and information sheet of the research project were emailed to each participant. After receiving participants' consent, each interview was scheduled. In the course of the interviews, none of the questions were seen as personally sensitive or controversial topics. All the personal identifiable information had been anonymized or deleted.

Limitations

First, this research solely investigated education agents' reflections on their work practice with students and UK universities during the COVID-19 crisis; this influences the understanding of the actual effect of their practices on both their in-service students and UK universities. Second, the length and type of work experience in this industry is likely to influence perceptions, and precisely how these experiences shape agents' perceptions could not be explored in sufficient detail here. We recommend that future work extrapolates from this insight and incorporates this into the sampling strategy and research design.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This research finds that the information asymmetry between many Chinese applicants (potential buyers) and UK universities (sellers) was heightened during the COVID-19 crisis. Education agents attempted not only to mitigate the asymmetries through four-step information management but also to reassure their in-service students. Because the themes and processes are complex, we have introduced the data and interpreted it briefly in this section, before extending this into the conceptual framework in the final section.

Information Asymmetry Heightened

Participants' accounts indicate that applications for pre-sessional language courses, which is supposed to be the most important area of work in spring, became particularly burdensome.

The majority of Chinese applicants had not yet taken an English language test or did not have satisfactory English language scores when applying for the programs abroad (by the end of 2019). The IELTS test centers closed in mainland China after the COVID-19 outbreak in January 2020, which directly impacted many Chinese applicants' plans to take the test in February, causing great anxiety. Many students had no idea about how to overcome these obstacles and turned to agents with inquiries about English language tests and pre-sessional courses early in the COVID-19 crisis.

> Since February, lots of my students have been panicking, because there is no place for the IELTS test in April. The whole industry stayed in a panic because of no place for English tests. Students can't take English

> language tests. UK universities did not release any policy to deal with this issue at that point. That was a time of panic. (Communicator 3)

Students' applications were impeded by the uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic for a significant period. Students did not know how UK universities would deal with this situation, as UK universities did not give prompt responses, which enlarged the information asymmetry. As a result, their university applications were temporarily stalled.

> Now the volume of inquiries from in-service and post-service students increases sharply. They inquired mainly about whether UK universities would reopen this fall or what to do next in terms of IELTS language tests. … lots of questions are around this. (Communicator 5)

> Particularly in April, there has been a constant stream of inquiries and confirmations about UK university policies from my in-service students. (Communicator 10)

Again, it shows that in uncertain times, for many Chinese applicants, the information gap regarding intended programs appears to be heightened, which can be characterized as general information asymmetry (Wankhade & Dabade, 2006). At the same time, students as potential buyers intend to confirm information and expect more information before making decisions, which chimes with Akerlof's information asymmetry theory (1970), which states that buyers tend to use the market statistics to measure the value of the goods, although the sellers have richer knowledge of their goods.

Moreover, during the COVID-19 crisis, UK universities appeared to lack information about their prospective international students. The participants reflected that UK universities contacted their offer holders more frequently and closely than earlier. Various surveys regarding offer holders' plans for the coming academic year were received by their in-service students continuously while these students were invited to join university welcome WeChat groups during the pandemic.

> A few students have received calls from UK universities. … Asked them whether to come if classes were postponed to the spring term. It's indicated UK universities are taking measures to know their students' plans now. They may be concerned that universities cannot reopen in September. (Processor 2)

> I feel that UK universities recognised that Chinese students may not go to the UK. So, lots of them launched surveys in which there are four or five options for each question. These surveys were directly sent to students' university email boxes. (Processor 4)

> UK universities worried about the shortage of students this year and the surplus of students next year like us. Last week, British Council did some surveys for UK universities and also collected our views on these

> issues … I felt UK universities appeared more anxious than us" (Communicator 4)

In line with product information asymmetry (Wankhade & Dabade, 2006), UK universities (sellers) themselves were uncertain about their policies and services and could not release their information explicitly. Further, as university services and policies were entwined with international students' choices, it seems that UK universities needed their prospective students' information to inform decisions and policies. In this sense, during the COVID-19 crisis, there appeared to be a reciprocal information asymmetry and even information absence between UK universities and prospective international students, which differs from the one-way information asymmetry identified in previous literature.

Strategies That Education Agents Adopted During the COVID-19 Crisis

Confronting the heightened information asymmetry depicted earlier, education agents employed a four-step information management approach (see Figure 1): (1) for in-service students in four steps of information management: (1) finding information; (2) confirming information; (3) selecting information; and (4) communicating information. In this way, agents attempted to mitigate information asymmetry as much as possible, apart from comforting their in-service students.

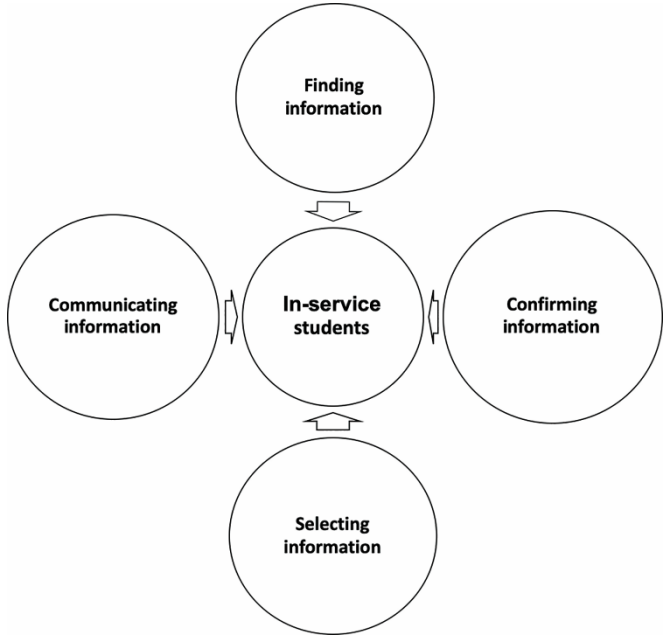

Figure 1: Education Agents Service during the COVID-19 Crisis.

1) Finding information

During the COVID-19 crisis, education agents proactively took measures to understand their in-service students' needs while managing students' applications.

Interviews indicate that communicators made regular calls to their in-service students to understand students' learning status and any changing thoughts on study-abroad plans. They made notes of each student's test plans and checked up their study progress whenever necessary. Some participants said during the interviews that they were required to call their students at least once every two or three days, or once a week. By contrast, some participants argued that it should depend on the progress of students' cases and characteristics. On some occasions, frequent contacts could be counterproductive, annoying students. The approach to checking could be flexible.

> When I saw the students' WeChat moments saying delicious food, good sleep, travel to some town, I know they must take effective precautions and protect themselves well. In contrast, as for the moments about cancelling flights, I would become alert and search for the flight information … (Processor 4)

Education agents, as noted earlier, similar to nannies, kept a close eye on their students' progress and learned their students' needs during the COVID-19 crisis, thereby providing feasible solutions in a timely manner. Therefore, education agents have access to in-depth information of students during uncertain times.

Participants described a common practice to manage in-service students' applications: checking through the work-in-progress form, which captured and consolidated information about each stage of each student's application. It was an essential tool to follow up on progress and help students consult admission offices for further information when necessary.

> It took me much time to update the work-in-progress form every single day. The first thing I did every morning was to read through the form and sort out urgent cases. Whether the offer has expired? If so, how could I deal with it? Argue with the admission office to get the offer back? Seriously, everything was possible during the pandemic. (Processor 4)

In addition, a common view among participants was that universities in the United Kingdom had regular times when they would update application statuses, which updates of the work-in-progress forms would highlight. If necessary, they would follow up with admission offices before students asked them to do so. For example, Processor 5 mentioned,

> Like I have four students applying for the same programme, three of whom have received the results. I would be sensitive to how many students did not receive the result at this point. I would email the university to inquire about the status before students ask me.

Students may not get a sense of the timing of university applications, which is likely to influence necessary decision making or steps to be taken in a timely manner. In this regard, education agents help students to fill this knowledge gap and recognize the particular points in time in terms of university applications, which contributes to progressing students' applications.

2) Confirming information

Participants reflected that during the COVID-19 crisis, information associated with admission requirements and policies of UK universities spread far and wide. Education agents confirmed the validity of the information as soon as they received it. As for information from social media or other students, education agents would contact the university admission offices for confirmation. For the information directly emailed by universities or circulated by university representatives, education agents would not verify it, but they may ask for further information to clarify the guidance.

> Our first priority is to ensure information accuracy. … But the information I circulated must be 100% correct and important. In terms of timeliness, it is at most one-day lag. … Delivering accurate information helps build up students' trust in you rather than causing complaints. (Communicator 2)

> Information on the internet really influences my work. For example, XX university lowers the admission requirement for some programmes as a result of COVID 19. You know, some information may be for specific purposes on certain platforms. Students cannot tell the news is true or not. (Communicator 4)

> For example, students sent me a screenshot of information on an unknown website or official account of a cyber celebrity. I would contact admission offices to confirm the information. (Communicator 4)

In such uncertain times, the proliferation of information caused confusion as inaccurate or false information conflicted with accurate updates. Education agents help students to ignore any misleading information by confirmation of guidance with universities.

3) Selecting information

Due to the pressure generated by a large amount of information and uncertainty, education agents evaluated and selected only the most relevant information to send to their students. This included information from the universities where their students applied or decided to do their in-service studies.

> For example, if student A decided to go to university A and his other offers expired, then I would only deliver the information of university A to him. However, if the student applied for five universities and only

> had an IELTS test score of 5, which was ineligible for the pre-sessional courses of any five universities, I would inform him of the language policies of the five universities while watching any possible alternatives for him. (Processor 4)

> At present, a large amount of application information is out there. This easily causes pressures to students. I'll tell them the most relevant and important. (Communicator 1)

Education agents appear to evaluate the importance of information, and to filter overwhelming information and select only key points. The interviewed participants highlighted that they would also provide comments and opinions on the key information. In addition, if any information was likely to negatively influence students' motivation for studying abroad, they neither disseminated it nor even brought it up of their own accord. However, they would discuss this information in their own words if students raised such questions with them.

> I never spread any information that likely lowers students and their parents' motivation or expectation of study abroad or makes them panic on my initiative, because of my role. But I would respond to these issues when they ask me. (Communicator 11)

This also demonstrates that education agents are trying to cut off conduits of commentary and/or subjective negative information about overseas education. In this sense, education agents may guide students and their parents to think about overseas education in a particular direction that is not being driven by the consideration of students' best interests. Precisely, students and their parents potentially receive only part of the information, and may be misled by the incomplete picture, which echoes the public's concern on agents' unethical practices (Raimo et al., 2014).

4) Communicating information

One key strategy during the COVID-19 crisis, particularly for large enterprises, was to maintain consistent broadcast information updates. They continued holding regular webinars and online education fairs, and they carefully posted and circulated "generally valuable information" through WeChat moments and WeChat client groups. In participants' words, valuable information refers to policies released by UK universities, measures being taken by the UK government, as well as reports published by important organizations such as British Council. This sort of "generally valuable information" supplements the specific information targeting in-service students, contributing to students' access to market information.

For in-service students on an individual basis, during the COVID-19 crisis, education agents typically elaborated on the selected information one to one via WeChat or phone; then, they edited formal notices, briefly translating the original information into Chinese and underlining the deadlines and related requirements; and finally, they delivered them by email or WeChat. Agents proposed possible

options for specific issues and detailed their pros and cons, respectively, as well. Some participants argued in the interviews that they had to consider their own livelihood and should lead students to make the decision to study abroad; we characterize these as "hard sellers," who were typically financially motivated. While communicating with students, they would emphasize the value of study abroad and potential opportunities emerging in the pandemic, to encourage students to study abroad.

> Absolutely, we should direct students towards particular ways by addressing the temporality of this pandemic. It will be gone sooner or later. You still need to move forward … your plan may be delayed for one and a half year at most…it is not a big thing as opposed to your whole life. (Processor 2)

By contrast, other participants addressed that they solely explained the issues in detail and fully respected students' considerations or decisions, and they would not ask them to make any decision in this unusual time, as they felt that current issues and decisions involved students' health and safety, about which they should be very cautious. These agents can be characterized as "information providers," who are motivated more by students' welfare and agency.

> I always believe my job is to tell students the possible routes and risks before their decision-making themselves. They are not idiots. … We needn't to do more and actually we are not able to get involved that much. (Communicator 9)

This suggests that education agents have different perceptions of their work, which may influence their strategies of guiding students to interpret the information. For the financial-motivated agents, they are very likely to solely convey positive information and even exaggerate the value of overseas education, to influence students' understanding of the situation and decision making. In contrast, other agents appear less interest-led and adopt an ostensibly neutral position in transmitting information. Although this research does not point out agents' reflections on their possibly misleading behaviors, as mentioned earlier, the information delivered by agents is likely to be oriented toward producing desired outcomes rather than increasing students' understanding of UK universities, which creates opportunities for agents' unethical conduct.

Frequently, however, participants reported feeling at a loss, unable to answer many questions raised by students and their parents. In terms of advice on studying abroad, agents felt themselves less capable during the pandemic than earlier.

> They continuously asked questions about universities' policies, like the open date of schools, whether the admission office is open. We didn't know either. The main thing we did was to reassure them by telling them that UK universities must take measures very soon and encouraging them to prepare the tests at home. (Communicator 1)

> This year, as a result of COVID-19, students might worry about more issues than before that we did not know, decide or predict either. Therefore, under this condition, the only thing we can do is to comfort them. Perhaps they just needed comforts. They were very anxious during that period. (Communicator 9)

The information that education agents possessed in a quickly changing situation was also limited, which constrained their potential to circulate valid information from universities to their students. In this case, they tried to chat with students and spread positivity to reassure students and retain their positive attitudes toward study abroad.

Apart from delivering information to in-service students, education agents also helped students reflect issues to UK universities in the hope of getting solutions.

> We wrote emails for our students to universities about IELTS problems. Meanwhile, we also explained to students that universities needed time to discuss these issues. There is a procedure. We needed patience to wait for universities' replies. (Communicator 3)

Agents' active contacts with UK universities are helpful to inform universities of their prospective students' problems and situations to implement timely solutions. Further, while waiting for universities' responses, agents explained the universities' situations and arranged feasible work for students, which actually also helped fill in the students' information gap on what universities were doing during the pandemic. In this sense, we highlight a significant role that education agents play in reciprocally circulating information between Chinese applicants and UK universities. During this process, however, education agents may not have consistently or fully expressed students' concerns, as they may not have fully reported on universities' policies or the decisions that students would react negatively to. Education agents could, therefore, invisibly influence the decisions of both students and universities.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This section connects education agents' information practices during the COVID-19 crisis to the conceptual framework of information asymmetry, and it explores a different role of education agents in prospective Chinese students' applications to UK universities in uncertain times. In the context of the international higher education market, information asymmetry (Akerlof, 1970) assumes that prospective Chinese students are very likely to choose not to study in the United Kingdom, when they do not have enough information about their intended programs.

Our research demonstrates that it was reciprocal information asymmetry and even information absence that occurred between UK universities and Chinese applicants during the pandemic. The majority of agents' in-service students, indeed, had not at this point made a decision to study or not for the coming

academic year. We discuss education agents' four steps of information management, which reveals the agents' efforts to bridge the information gap between both parties and to enable their in-service students to get access to their university places. Our findings contribute to previous literature related to education agents by unfolding a new picture of their information practices and outlining different positions within the information landscape for agents, Chinese applicants, and UK universities during a time of great uncertainty (see Figure 2).

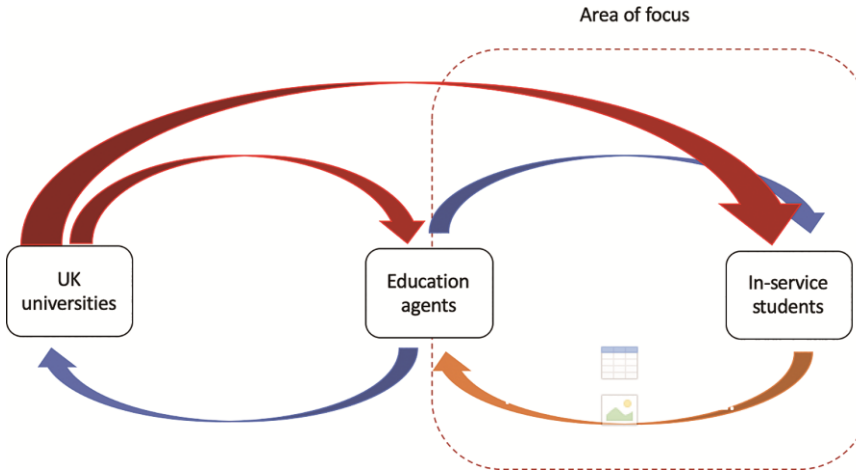

Figure 2: Information Landscape Within and Between UK Universities, Educations Agents, and Service Students During the COVID-19 Crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic created increasing uncertainty about UK universities for international applicants. The included questions were about when universities would reopen, the format courses would take, how travel would work, how language could be assessed, how rules and norms for socialization would work, and what a university experience would look like. Confirmed information was in high demand for many Chinese applicants, which led them to reach out to their agents for advice. Many in-service students tended to rely on agents to contact UK universities. In the meantime, education agents discerned that UK universities were uncertain about their policies and services for the forthcoming academic year and also needed much information about their prospective students' intended plans. At times, UK universities bypassed agents and proactively approached their prospective students by themselves in the forms of surveys and emails, while still keeping in touch with their agents. It is clear that students and universities were in need of others' information during the pandemic, but both parties did not appear to get in touch with each other effectively.

In this case, as Figure 2 indicates, during the COVID-19 crisis, education agents played a profound role as information brokers in managing flows between their in-service students and UK universities, particularly in information circulation with their in-service students. This differs from previous research

showing that education agents primarily provide operational application services for their students (Raimo et al., 2014; Thomson et al., 2014). Through proactively seeking students' information and continuously receiving inquiries, education agents acquired students' information in a prompt and timely manner. At the same time, agents delivered students' information to UK universities in an attempt to access further inside information or possible solutions. In effect, agents did receive UK universities' responses and the latest policies, but this sort of information was often still inexplicit and subject to continuous revision, as the university policies and decisions were developed and changed in response to the changing COVID-19 pandemic. In their interactions with students, education agents selectively conveyed university information to their in-service students, confirming, selecting, and communicating this information. Despite the absence of university information in many cases, agents kept explaining the situation of UK universities to their in-service students to temporarily reassure students. In this way, information continued to flow between UK universities, Chinese applicants, and education agents during the COVID-19 crisis. The design of this study relied on agents' own accounts of their practices, which may understate unethical behaviors.

This case study creates insights into information flow within and among three key actors in the international higher education market during the COVID-19 crisis, namely students, universities, and agents. It identifies three important implications for this specific market beyond COVID-19. First, the issues of information lag and gap are built into the international higher education market, which should draw the close attention of international higher education providers and policy makers, as it has caused temporary suspensions of university applications in uncertain times. Second, UK universities' decisions and policies largely depend on prospective international students and vice versa, which points to the significance of effective connections between UK universities and international students, especially in the time of great uncertainties. Above all, this research highlights the value of education agents in filling in the information gap and circulating information between prospective international students and UK universities in this particular market. However, the information circulated to students by education agents is selective and filtered, which is potentially problematic. For example, agents may only transmit information in their interest to students, which would mislead students' decision making. Agents are also likely to partially reflect the students' situation to universities, resulting in inappropriate decisions made by universities. In light of this, future research could cast light on the context of China's neoliberal education, how Chinese international students and universities perceive these practices, and how education agents interpret information they possess and select information for their service users (including prospective Chinese international students and universities overseas).

REFERENCES

Akerlof, G. A. (1970). The market for lemons: Quality uncertainty and the market mechanism. *Quarterly Journal of Economics, 84*, 488–500. https://doi.org/10.2307/1879431

Arkoudis, S., Dollinger, M., Baik, C., & Patience, A. (2019). International students' experience in Australian higher education: Can we do better?. *Higher Education, 77*(5), 799–813. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0302-x

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psych*ology, 3(2), 77–101. 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

British Universities' international Liaison Association (BUILA). (2020). A route to a UK quality framework with education agents. https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/Research--Policy/Policy-and-lobbying/A-Partnership-for-Quality-a-route-to-a-UK-quality-framework-with-education-agents

Chinese Bureau of Supervision and Administration of Foreign Affairs in Education. (2019, June 26). *List of self-funded overseas education services agents (自费出国留学中介服务机构名单).* http://jsj.moe.gov.cn/news/1/147.shtml

Coffey, R. N. (2014). *The influence of education agents on student choice making in the Canadian postsecondary search process*. PhD. Michigan State University.

Collins, F. L. (2012). Organizing student mobility: Education agents and student migration to New Zealand. *Pacific Affairs, 85*(1), 137–160. https://doi.org/10.5509/2012851137

Falcone, S. (2017). International student recruitment: Trends and challenges. *Journal of International Students, 7*(2), 246–256. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v7i2.379

Findlay, A. M., McCollum, D., & Packwood, H. (2017). Marketization, marketing and the production of international student migration. *International Migration, 55*(5), 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12330

Fischer, K. (2020). Confronting the seismic impact of COVID-19: The need for research. *Journal of International Students, 10*(2), 211. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i2.2134

Foskett, N. (2011). Markets, government, funding and the marketisation of UK higher education. In R. Scullion, M. Molesworth and E. Nixon (Ed.), *The marketisation of higher education and the student as consumer* (pp. 25–38). Routledge.

Hagedorn, L. S., & Zhang, L. Y. (2011). The use of agents in recruiting Chinese undergraduates. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 15*(2), 186–202. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315310385460

Hayes, A. (2019). *Inclusion, epistemic democracy and international students: The teaching excellence framework and education policy*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Krasocki, J. (2002). Education UK: Developing the UK's International Agent Network. *Promotions and Partnerships (ECS).* The British Council.

Liu, S. (2020). *Neoliberalism, globalization, and "elite" education in China: Becoming international*. Routledge.

Lomer, S. (2018). UK policy discourses and international student mobility: The deterrence and subjectification of international students. *Globalisation, Societies and Education, 16*(3), 308–324. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2017.1414584

Ma, Y. (2020). *Ambitious and anxious: How Chinese college students succeed and struggle in American higher education*. Columbia University Press.

Ma, Y. (2021). Educating the elites: School counselors as education nannies in Urban China. *Comparative Education Review, 65*(3), 493–512. https://doi.org/10.1086/714869

Marginson, S. (2013). The impossibility of capitalist markets in higher education. *Journal of Education Policy, 28*(3), 353–370.

Marginson, S., Nyland, C., Sawir, E., & Forbes-Mewett, H. (2010). *International student security*. Cambridge University Press.

Nikula, P. T. (2020). Education agent standards in Australia and New Zealand–Government's role in agent-based international student recruitment. *Studies in Higher Education, 47*(4), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1811219

Nikula, P. T., & Kivistö, J. (2018). Hiring education agents for international student recruitment: Perspectives from agency theory. *Higher Education Policy, 31*(4), 535–557. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-017-0070-8

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2020). What is the profile of internationally mobile students? https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/974729f4-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/974729f4-en

Pimpa, N. (2003). The influence of peers and student recruitment agencies on Thai students' choices of international education. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 7*(2), 178–192. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315303007002005

QS. (2020, April 16). *How international students are responding to COVID-19*. https://www.qs.com/how-international-students-are-responding-to-covid-19/

Raimo, V., Humfrey, C., & Huang, I. Y. (2014). *Managing international student recruitment agents: Approaches, benefits and challenges*. The British Council.

Robinson-Pant, A., & Magyar, A. (2018). The recruitment agent in internationalized higher education: Commercial broker and cultural Mediator. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 22*(3), 225–241. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315318762485

Sá, C. M., & Sabzalieva, E. (2018). The politics of the great brain race: Public policy and international student recruitment in Australia, Canada, England and the USA. *Higher Education, 75*(2), 231–253. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0133-1

Siczek, M. (2020). International student agency in the face of a global health crisis. *Journal of International Students, 10*(4), vii–ix. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i4.2424

Spence, A. M. (1973). Job market signalling. *Quarterly Journal of Economics, 87*, 355–374. https://doi.org/10.2307/1882010

Stiglitz, J. E. (2003). Information and the change in the paradigm in economics, Part 1. *The American Economist, 47*(2), 6–26. https://doi.org/10.1177/056943450304700202

Rothschild, M. E. & Stiglitz, J. E. (1976). Equilibrium in competitive insurance markets. *Quarterly Journal of Economics, 90*, 629–649. https://doi.org/10.2307/1885326

The Guardian. (2020, March 27). *Students try to flee UK by chartered plane for 'safer' China'*. https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/mar/27/students-try-to-flee-uk-by-chartered-plane-for-safer-china

Thomson, A., Hulme, R., Hulme, M., & Doughty, G. (2014). Perceptions of value: Assessing the agent/commission model of UK higher education recruitment in Africa. *Africa Review, 6*(2), 105–120. https://doi.org/10.1080/09744053.2014.914638

Tomlinson, M. (2018). Conceptions of the value of higher education in a measured market. *Higher Education, 75*(4), 711–727. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0165-6

Tran, L. T. (2020). Teaching and engaging international students: People-to-people connections and people-to-people empathy. *Journal of International Students, 10*(3), XII–XVII. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i3.2005

Universities, U.K. (2017). *The UK's Competitive Advantage 2017.* https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/International/UUKi-Competitive-advantage-2017.pdf

Wankhade, L., & Dabade, B. M. (2006). Analysis of quality uncertainty due to information asymmetry. *International Journal of Quality & Reliability Management, 23*(2), 230–241. https://doi.org/10.1108/02656710610640961

Yang, Y. (2019). *The effect of education agents on Chinese undergraduates' motivations to study PGT programmes in the UK*. Present at China and Higher Education conference, The University of Manchester, UK, 9–10 December.

Yang, Y., Mittelmeier, J., Lim, M. A., & Lomer, S. (2020). Chinese international student recruitment during the COVID-19 crisis: Education agents' practices and reflections. *HERE@Manchester*. https://www.research.manchester. ac.uk/portal/en/publications/chinese-international-student-recruitment-during-the-covid19-crisis(be489a37-107c-480e-82c4-4583bc3dfeeb).html

Yen, D. A., Yang, Hsiao-Pei, S., & Cappellini, B. (2012). Ranking gives power: Relationships between UK universities and Chinese agents. *Journal of General Management, 38*(1), 23–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/030630701203800102

Zhang, M., & Fumasoli, T. (2019). *Scale and scope of Chinese education recruitment agents: A mapping exercise.* Presented at China and Higher Education conference, Manchester, UK, 9–10 December.

YING YANG is a PhD candidate doctoral researcher in the Manchester Institute of Education at The University of Manchester. Her research interests focus on internationalization of higher education, international students' motivations, mobilities, and experiences, as well as international student recruitment. Email: ying.yang-3@manchester.ac.uk

Dr SYLVIE LOMER is a senior lecturer in Policy and Practice in the Manchester Institute of Education at the University of Manchester. Her research interests focus on international higher education, specifically the policies, pedagogies, and recruitment practices related to international students in the United Kingdom. Email: sylvie.lomer@manchester.ac.uk

Dr MIGUEL ANTONIO LIM is a senior lecturer in Education and International Development in the Manchester Institute of Education at the University of Manchester. His research expertise focuses on internationalization strategies in higher education and higher education policies, particularly in East and Southeast Asia. Email: miguelantonio.lim@manchester.ac.uk

Dr JENNA MITTELMEIER is a lecturer in International Education in the Manchester Institute of Education at the University of Manchester. Her area of research expertise focuses on international students' transition experiences and broader aspects of internationalization in higher education. Email: jenna.mittelmeier@manchester.ac.uk