Recruitment of International Students in Canadian Higher Education: Factors Influencing Students' Perceptions and Experiences

by

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Abstract

Working with education agents is common for many Canadian higher education institutions (HEIs) to recruit international students due to the key role education agents play in bridging the international students with foreign HEIs. The purpose of this study was to explore international students' perceptions and experiences with education agents, thus collecting feedback from international students, revealing potential issues, and suggesting improvements in HEIs' recruitment strategy. An online survey combined with a paper format survey was distributed to current or recent international students across Canada. Two scales were used to measure participants' perceptions and experiences with education agents. A total of 385 participants completed the survey. Findings revealed that nearly half of the participants used education agent services during their application to Canadian HEIs. However, their perceptions and experiences with education agents were not positive. Participants described practices of double-dipping by agents and the more participants paid agents, the less satisfied they tended to be. The outcome of this study highlights issues in the recruitment of international students, identifies strategies to regulate agents' practices, and strategies to better support international students. These findings can be used by Canadian HEIs to improve their recruitment strategy and create a better working relationship with education agents to support the transition of international students to Canadian HEIs.

Key words: international recruitment, education agents, international students, perception, experience, higher education, Canadian universities

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List of Abbreviations

CCEA	Canada Course for Education Agents
CCIE	Canadian Consortium for International Education
DLI	Designated Learning Institution
ECAN	Educational Consultancy Association of Nepal
ESOS	Education Services for Overseas Students
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
IEAWG	International Education Act Working Group
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
LINC	Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In recent years, the internationalization of higher education has been gaining momentum. One aspect of this trend is the growing enrollment of international students (Guo & Chase, 2011). For example, in 2014, there were 974,926 international students in the United States, 493,570 in the United Kingdom, 301,350 in Germany, 269,752 in Australia, and 268,659 in Canada (Institute of International Education, 2015). By 2019, the United States was still the most popular destination, hosting over a million international students. At the same time, the total number of international students in Canada also increased to 435,415, moving Canada from the 7th place to the 4th place in terms of international student enrollment (Institute of International Education, 2019). At Cape Breton University in Eastern Canada, the international student enrollment had skyrocketed resulting in an international enrollment of 68.8% as of January 2019 (Association of Atlantic Universities, 2019a; 2019b).

Although the area of internationalization in the Canadian context is not well studied, the benefits brought by international students are increasingly being noticed by scholars and host countries. International students can boost enrollments at higher education institutions (HEIs), enrich the social and cultural diversity in the host institutions and cities, offer different perspectives, and help HEIs establish connections with oversea institutions (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013; Jin & Schneider, 2019; Suarez, 2019; Trice, 2003). Another benefit is that international students generate huge economic resources for the host countries (Global Affairs Canada, 2017; Open Doors, 2018; Suarez, 2019). For example, in 2017, $42 billion USD was created by international students in

the United States alone (Open Doors, 2018). In 2016, international students in Canada contributed $12.8 billion CAD to Canada's gross domestic product (GDP), despite not having a handle on the factors influencing the efficiency of the recruitment process (Global Affairs Canada, 2017). Further, international graduates are ideal potential immigrants for countries who rely on immigrants, such as Canada, to support a declining workforce (Siddiq, Baroni, Lye, & Nethercote, 2012). Given the importance of international students to the internationalization of Canada and Canadian HEIs, this study explores ways for Canadian HEIs to improve their efficiency in recruiting international students through examining factors influencing their perceptions and experiences.

Motivated by the benefits associated with international students, HEIs often work together with domestic governments to increase enrollments (Brabner & Galbraith, 2013; Kauppinen, Mathies, & Weimer, 2014). The conceptual model of international student market was developed by Kauppinen et al. (2014), which envisioned HEIs/governments and international students to take on the role of buyers or sellers and complete a transaction process known as enrollment. As sellers of higher education, HEIs promote their educational products such as English language preparation and degree programs, and subsequently set international student fees. As buyers of international students, HEIs try to enlist more international students using incentives such as scholarships and immigration policies as well as various recruitment strategies such as creating an overseas recruitment office or providing the service of education agents (Kauppinen et al., 2014).

Students, on the other hand, come from a variety of backgrounds with varying skill levels. It has been documented that international students are not a homogenous

group (Choudaha, Chang, & Schulmann, 2013; Tuxen & Robertson, 2018; Zhang, 2011). Choudaha et al. (2013) identified four kinds of international students based on their financial readiness (F) and academic competence (A): Strugglers (low F/low A), Strivers (low F/high A), Explorers (high F/low A), and Highfliers (high F/high A). Strivers were the group that had the least use of education agents while explorers had a much higher rate of using education agents during application. Other researchers such as Tuxen and Robertson (2018) also worked on differentiating international students but proposed a binary model: elites and strivers. Regardless of which category students belonged, they tended to overextend their abilities to gain acceptance into top ranking universities or colleges (Kauppinen et al., 2014).

Just like HEIs that devise recruitment strategies to compete with other HEIs as well as bargain with student customers, students also make strategic moves based on their own situation so that they can land at the university or provincial jurisdiction they want most. Among the many stakeholders that influence international students' decision-making process of studying abroad, education agents play an important role in providing information as well as persuasion towards certain programs (Pimpa, 2003). Education agents, also known as the middleman, education agency, college admission advisors/counsellors/consultants, or third-party recruiters, work as individuals or with an organization to help students with their study abroad process (Roy, 2017). Agents create mutually beneficial situations when they successfully support students' enrollment at their preferred HEI. They also create conflict of interest problems when they act in their own interest instead of the HEI' or students' interest. Subsequently, agents have always been a subject of controversy (Coffey, 2014; Reisberg & Altbach, 2015; Roy, 2017).

Despite this controversy and variations based on students' characteristics and regions, a great number of students have been using education agents when applying to overseas schools (Choudaha et al., 2013; International Consultants and Educational Fairs Monitor, 2012; 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019; Roy, 2017).

The fierce global competition for international students drives HEIs to solicit the services of education agents to meet their enrollment targets (Brabner & Galbraith, 2013; Chang, 2013; Raimo, Humfrey, & Huang, 2014). As a result of demands from both international students and HEIs, the number of education agents has increased world-wide (Brabner & Galbraith, 2013; Bridge Education Group, 2016). The growth of agent businesses is similar in pace to the growth of the international student market (Brabner & Galbraith, 2013). It has been estimated that there were 16,000 education agencies globally (Bridge Education Group, 2016).

The thriving agent business is out pacing the development of regulations and evaluation of agent services, which has led to various problems (Brabner & Galbraith, 2013). It is important to first note that education agents make a huge contribution in facilitating the recruitment of international students for HEIs and students' applications for international study (Brabner & Galbraith, 2013; Bridge Education Group, 2016; Chang, 2013; ICEF Monitor, 2012; 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019; Raimo et al., 2014; Roy, 2017). Previous studies have provided valuable data in terms of agent types, service, as well as the opinions from HEIs and international students (Coco, 2015; Coffey & Perry, 2013; Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Huang, Raimo, & Humfrey, 2016; Hulme, Thomson, Hulme, & Doughty, 2014; Roy, 2017; Tian, 2017; Tuxen & Robertson, 2018). The predominant argument is that the education agent industry should be

sustained so that both HEIs and international students can benefit from their service (Brabner & Galbraith, 2013; Coco, 2015; Kirsch, 2014; Huang et al., 2016; Sarkar & Perenyi, 2017). However, there have been disagreements made by those who were seriously concerned with the unethical practices of agents as well as a potentially negative long-term impact on higher education or international students (Coffey & Perry, 2013; Huang et al., 2016; Hulme, et al., 2014; Reisberg & Altbach, 2015). These studies offered valuable insights for relevant parties such as the national or provincial education departments and HEIs to oversee the agent industry or strategically work with education agents.

What is missing is research that examines the international recruitment practices undertaken by education agents in the Canadian context since Canadian HEIs are increasingly working with and relying on education agents for foreign student enrollment. Particularly, there lack studies that attempt to add students' voice to the student-agent-HEI relationship. Voice of international students is of great importance because: (a) the international recruitment practice is shaped by a variety of actors, among which international students' role should not be neglected, and (b) international students, education agents, and HEIs interact with each other and raise various conflict of interest issues, which is the core issue in typical agent-principal relationship as stated by the agency theory (Nikulaa & Kivisto, 2018). By exploring international students' perceptions and experiences with education agents, this study will bridge this gap in research.

The remainder of this chapter presents a synthesis of additional information about the context of this study which includes education agents' proliferation in the

international market, prevalence of agents in top receiving countries, policies relating to agent practices, types of agents, services provided by agents, and the current debate related to agent practices. Next, a contextualization of education agents provides a background of agent practices in Canada. Following is the statement of the research problem and presentation of research questions. Last, I present my positionality as a former education agent and provide a list of key terms used throughout this thesis.

Education Agents

Education agents place themselves between HEIs and students to facilitate or influence the application/recruitment process. Collins (2012) examined the development of agents in New Zealand in his analysis of student mobility. Starting from 1980s, New Zealand shifted its focus on internationalization of education from a means of aid to for-profit export. Legislation was passed to encourage domestic HEIs to promote themselves in overseas markets and retain the profit for development. The broad background of this shift and following reforms was neoliberalism, which was characterized by the idea of free market and deregulation (Bourassa, 2019). This resulted in the withdrawal of governments from financing and managing public education. As international students were identified as a source of income, New Zealand HEIs developed entrepreneurial approaches to attract students, during which education agents emerged to connect students and HEIs. From the perspective of HEIs, it was believed that the strategic recruitment of international students by HEIs and distinctive roles of education agents led to agent practices in HEIs (Raimo et al., 2014). For international students, the main role of agents was to provide knowledge about overseas education institutions, application process, and the education system (Roy, 2017). As a result of rapid growth in this area,

education agencies are now a multimillion-dollar business worldwide (Nikula & Kivisto, 2018).

Size and Region of Education Agency

The size of education agencies has varied from multinational corporations to one individual (ICEF Monitor 2013; Nikula & Kivisto, 2018). For example, there are big companies including IDP Education Limited, which has their headquarters in Australia and collaborates with the Australian government and the British Council as well as Kaplan Incorporated, a traditional preparatory exam giant that has a share of international education market. IDP Education Limited started providing counselling service for international students in 1986. In 32 years, they have developed into a multinational enterprise with an annual revenue of $250.7 million (in Australian dollars) in English language testing, $103.4 million in student placement services, and $21.2 million in English language teaching in 2017 (IDP Education Limited Annual Report, 2017). Alternatively, education agencies can be studios with a handful of employees, or even an individual. A large-scale survey that reached 1194 agents published in 2013 revealed that nearly three quarters (71%) of the surveyed agents were from small organizations with less than 10 employees (ICEF Monitor, 2013). In addition, the size of the agency positively correlated to the number of clients. The surveyed agencies with over 20 employees constituted only 10% of the survey sample and were responsible for almost 40% of student placements (ICEF Monitor, 2013). Another survey of 312 international student recruitment agencies also showed that less than a quarter of the sampled companies (23%) were medium to large size but could send over 200 students per year to overseas institutions (Bridge Education Group, 2016). As for the regions where

education agents are active, the 2016 data showed that Asia (South and South East) accounted for almost half (49%) of all participants (Bridge Education Group, 2016). The remainder of the sampled agents were scattered across other continents. Unfortunately, data regarding the active regions of education agents were very limited. The various sizes of education agent companies make it hard for stakeholders to keep a record of the development of the business.

Prevalence of Agent Practices

Partnering with education agents to recruit overseas students is a well-established practice in HEIs all over the world (Altbach, 2013; Bista, 2017; Coffey & Perry, 2013; Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Huang et al., 2016; Hulme et al., 2014; Olsen, 2014; Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018; Roy, 2017; Zhang, 2011). With more than 20 years of experience working with education agents (Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996), Australia provides an official guide on a government website (e.g., Study in Australia) and encourages international students to apply through agents. A government report revealed that in 2018, 75% of international student enrollment was facilitated by education agents (Department of Education Australia Government, n.d.). The United Kingdom is another top receiving country of international students. In 2012, over 100 U.K. HEIs used agent services to recruit international students (Matthews, 2012, as cited in Huang et al., 2016), and by the year of 2016, almost one in three U.K. international students had used agent services (Times Higher Education, 2016, as cited in Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018). The United States had a delayed trajectory of international student recruitment but is now parallel with other top receiving countries. After 2013 when The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) lifted the ban on using for-profit

international education agents, the number of U.S. HEIs who use agent service soared to almost 50% in 3 years (Roy, 2017). In China, the top sending country, over 50% of students used agent services to facilitate the international application process (Zhang, 2011).

The situation in Canada is similar to other countries. In a survey of 145 Canadian school administrators and representatives of government agencies, 78% of respondents confirmed the use of education agents in recruitment (Coffey & Perry, 2013). However, this proportion varied from province to province. In Quebec, only 25% of the sampled institutions admitted using education agents (Coffey & Perry, 2013), while eight out of the 13 major universities in Atlantic Canada, including Dalhousie University, Memorial University of Newfoundland, University of New Brunswick, Saint Mary's University, Cape Breton University, University of Prince Edward Island, Mount Saint Vincent University, and Acadia University, all have connections with education agents (Donovan, 2019; Kelly, 2018; Our Partners, n.d.). Further research regarding the details of the HEI-agent connection is needed to draw a broader picture of agent practices in a Canadian context.

Policy Environment

In many countries, there exist policies or frameworks to regulate the use of agents and guide the development of this industry. In 2011, there was a ban placed by the U.S. NACAC on commissioned agents that was later lifted in 2013; even so, commissioned agents cannot operate in the *domestic market*, which means that it is still forbidden for education agents to work for *domestic* students (Wiggins, 2016). The Australian government has a much more progressive approach to recruitment including the

Education Services for Overseas Students Act (ESOS Act) to regulate activities of agents to ensure the industry remains under control (Coffey & Perry, 2013). The Statement of Principles for the Ethical Recruitment of International Students by Education Agents and Consultants is an additional regulatory framework, which was jointly developed by the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland but it has no legal effect (Coffey & Perry, 2013; Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018). Similarly, the Educational Consultancy Association of Nepal (ECAN) Code of Conduct set by Educational Consultants Association of Nepal provides guidelines for agent practices but it is not binding either (Thieme, 2017). China, one of the biggest sending countries of international students, also one of the most flourishing markets for education agents, cancelled the accreditation process on education agencies in 2017, making it a zero-barrier entry industry (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2017).

Types of Agents

Based on a compensation model, there are two types of agents: independent agents (paid by students/parents) and institution-sponsored agents (Roy, 2017). In practice, the situation is more complicated given that many institution-sponsored agents also charge money from students/parents, resulting in a double-dipping situation (Roy, 2017; Kirsh, 2014; “Report of the Commission”, 2013). Regarding credentials, there are agents that obtained qualifications by completing training or courses provided by higher level authorities such as the British Council, The Canada Course for Education Agents (CCEA), or by registering themselves in a larger organization such as ECAN. There are also agents that have no qualifications (Thieme, 2017). It is difficult to keep a record of certified or non-certified education agents given that practicing agents often use sub-

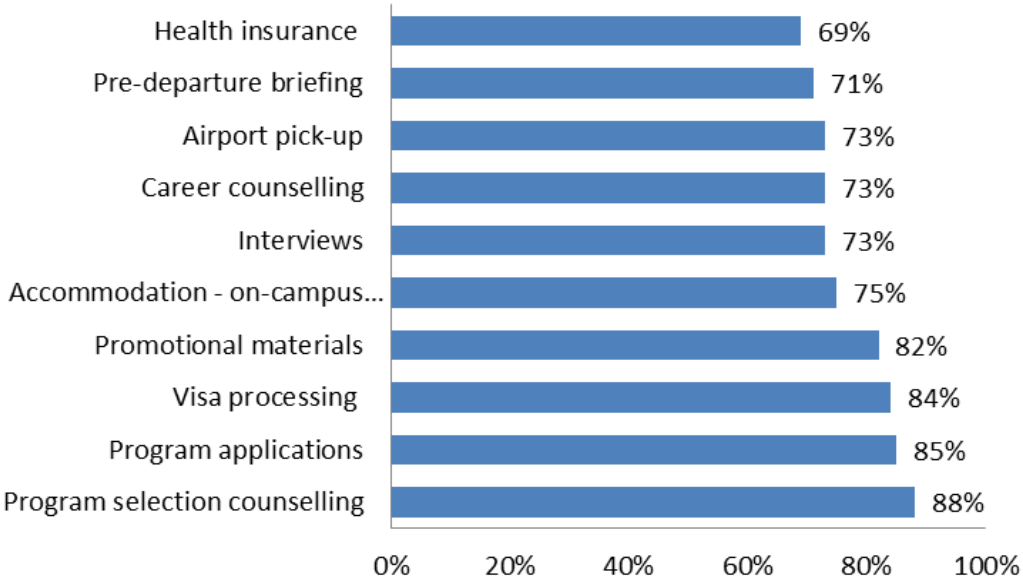
agents who may also use sub-agents; many of whom are not certified nor are they listed as part of an agent business (Coffey & Perry, 2013; Crace, 2019).

Services Provided by Agents

Education agents provide a wide range of services that can be categorized into three stages: preparation stage, application stage, and departure stage (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Hulme et al., 2014; Tian, 2017; Tuxen & Robertson, 2018). There have been studies on agents worldwide that provide a snapshot of the common agent services, and region-specific studies that described the services received by students in that area. For example, the 2017 Agent Barometer survey (ICEF Monitor, 2017) listed 10 most common services which are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Common Agent Services in 2017 (Adapted from ICEF Monitor, 2017)



In terms of region-specific services, international students in the United Kingdom reported some basic services provided by agents included course/program selection, school application assistance, and visa application assistance (Hulme et al., 2014).

Students from Nepal were provided with more services in the departure stage, such as visa interview training and travel/accommodation arrangements. In comparison, research by Hagedorn and Zhang (2011) and Tuxen and Robertson (2018) showed that Chinese and Indian students received a much wider range of services. Chinese students commonly reported having, in addition to the aforementioned services, language training, preparation of application documents, and essay writing and translation services (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011), while Indian students received specific guidance on tuition and cost of overseas study, entrance test coaching, and career counselling (Tuxen & Robertson, 2018). In addition, the service provided for Indian students featured 24-hour assistance and Skype meetings. These findings suggest the needs of students may vary from country to country.

A study on services provided by Chinese agents was conducted by Tian (2017), a master's student at University of British Columbia, who had ten years of experience working as a senior education agent in China. Her research consisted of a document analysis and interviews. The outcome of her study revealed several ways of classifying agents' services, including the three-stage classification used in this study, focus of services (e.g., language training versus application assistance), and service packages based on the involvement of students (e.g., one-stop nanny style service versus one-time workshop for more independent students), time range (long-term package versus short-term package), and price range (premier service versus non-premier service). Basically, the one-stop nanny style service meant that agents would work on behalf of the students for everything students asked for, as implied on the webpage of these education agents. Tian reported that the one-stop package was losing popularity as more students were

choosing to attend a one-time do-it-yourself workshop. In addition, long-term packages were gaining popularity and the target consumers were typically in but not limited to students in grade nine. Another important trend in this industry was that agents were extending post-application services, such as providing academic support to enrolled students in foreign universities. Although, Tian reported that agents had developed a complete service chain for international students and had become dedicated informal educators, her argument about the reconceptualization of the role of education agents needs careful scrutiny as she drew conclusions based on the opinions of education agents only. It should not go unmentioned that education agents, because of their for-profit nature, would avoid disclosing any information that might damage their image and hinder the future of their business.

Debate over the Agent Practice

Agent practices have been a subject of much debate in top receiving countries of international students (Altbach, 2015; Bista, 2017; Brabner & Galbraith, 2013; Coco, 2015; Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Huang et al., 2016; Nikula & Kivisto, 2018; Reisberg & Altbach, 2015; Roy, 2017; Tuxen & Robertson, 2018; Yang & Akhtaruzzaman, 2017). There is a plethora of research about the benefits as well as the concerns of using education agents, which is further expanded in the literature review section. For HEIs, the benefits of using agents include geographic and linguistic flexibility, market intelligence, liaison role, and low cost compared with sending university staff overseas for recruitment purposes (Dunstan, 2009; Kirsch, 2014; Raimo et al., 2014.; Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018). For students, agents provide the knowledge of foreign schools, education systems, application processes, visa applications, and more trivial services that

are difficult to classify (Bista, 2017; Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Hulme et al., 2014; Tuxen & Robertson, 2018).

There has also been negative feedback towards agent practices, which has focused mainly on the unethical behaviors and the agents' relationship with HEIs (Coffey & Perry, 2013; Huang et al., 2016; Hulme, et al., 2014; Raimo et al., 2014). Unethical behaviors such as information asymmetry, forging documents, and misleading students have been frequently mentioned by students and HEIs in relevant studies on education agents (Bista, 2017; Newcomb, 2017; Raimo, 2013; Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018; Tuxen & Robertson, 2018; Yu, 2016). Meanwhile, HEIs are subjected to agent practices (Coffey & Perry, 2013; Huang et al., 2016; Hulme, et al., 2014; Raimo et al., 2014). Studies on the partnership between HEIs and agents revealed that high profits (for both the agent and HEIs) and the responsibility leeway due to different culture, language, and geographical locations make some stakeholders including HEIs turn a blind eye to the unethical behaviors of education agents (Coffey & Perry, 2013; Huang et al., 2016; Hulme, et al., 2014). In the United Kingdom, researchers claimed that the prevalence of unethical agent practice in HEIs reflected the strong financial impact made by international students; in other words, the goal of increasing institutional revenue may override the concerns related to agents' unethical practices and drive U.K. HEIs to expand their collaboration with education agents (Raimo et al., 2014). As a result, the integrity and reputation of HEIs may be distorted (Trilokekar & Kizilbash, 2013).

HEIs that rely too much on agents have been criticized for foregoing the responsibility and power of recruitment (Altbach, 2013; Coffey & Perry, 2013). Despite the call for eradication of education agents from some scholars, most scholars kept a

neutral opinion and explored ways to improve agents' positive impact on the recruitment of international students (Brabner & Galbraith, 2013; Coco, 2015; Huang et al., 2016; Kirsch, 2014; Sarkar & Perenyi, 2017). Sustainable internationalization of higher education requires strategic planning and recruitment (Pashby & de Oliveira Andreotti, 2016). As the trend of internalization continues, the negative impact of certain practices needs to be discussed and corresponding measures should be taken into consideration to tackle the problems described above. This topic is very much under studied in Canada, who is one of the top receiving countries of internationals students and most attractive country for education agents. Thus, more research is needed in this area of internationalization of Canadian HEIs, in particular, the value and implications associated with collaborating with agents.

The Canadian Context

In focusing this discussion on the Canadian context, there is an increasing number of international students who select Canada for further education (Chira, 2013; Cudmore, 2005; The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2011). As previously stated, the number of Canada-bound international students increased from 268,659 in 2014 to 435,415 in 2019 (Institute of International Education, 2015; 2019). Some popular provinces included Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia (The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2011). The percentage of HEIs that recruited international students saw a huge increase as well (Cudmore, 2005). During the 1960s, only 10% of Ontario colleges admitted international students. This number reached 100% in 30 years (Cudmore, 2005). Meanwhile, Atlantic provinces are catching up with international student enrollment to benefit from its attractive partnership with academic

programs and immigration advantages (Chira, 2013). The ratio of international students at University of Prince Edward Island was approaching 30% in 2019, while over half of Cape Breton University enrollment was comprised of international students (Friesen, 2019; UPEI View Book 2019-2020, n.d.). This trend is likely to continue as the Canadian government aimed to double international enrollment by 2022 for the benefit of retaining graduates for globalization (The Conference Board of Canada, 2015).

In addition to international recruitment, the Canadian government policies were also strongly embodied in other educational practices that marked Canada as an ideal destination for international talents. For example, Clark, Haque, and Lamoureux (2013) revealed that including financial independence of newcomers as one of the goals of the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program resulted in an emphasis on career-related English over broader linguistic capability in the curriculum and practices. In addition, Canadian HEIs also tailored a series of programs for international students based on national visa policy and provincial immigration policy (Cudmore, 2005; Ilieva, 2010). With such a strong support from the Canadian government, HEIs are gaining ground in the international student market.

Given the government support, Canada is benefiting from international students economically and culturally. On a national level, international students are generating approximately $12.8 billion CAD to GDP and supporting 152,700 jobs (Global Affairs Canada, 2017). Regions where international students concentrate are especially seeing huge economic return. There were approximately 14,000 international students in Atlantic Canada, creating nearly $800 million CAD in output (sales) and 6,731 jobs (full-time equivalents) (Gardner Pinfold Consultants Inc., 2018). After graduation,

international students have become ideal potential immigrants to Canada, which is critical to the Canadian labour market and welfare system as its birth rate is far below the replacement rate in recent years (Ortiz & Choudaha, 2014; Plumb, 2018; Siddiq et al., 2012). Besides economic impact, international students are supporting Canadian goals of innovation, science, and technology and are acting like knowledge diplomats (Advisory Panel on Canada's International Education Strategy, 2012). Unfortunately, current articles that focus on the impact of international students are mostly from an economic perspective.

Agent practice is a wide-spread phenomenon in Canadian HEIs, but more studies are needed to better interpret the trend. Current literature has sometimes been contradictory resulting in a muddied understanding of the relationship between HEIs and agents. For example, the study by Coffey and Perry (2013) showed that 78% of the 145 surveyed institutions confirmed that they used agents, among which 69% of surveyed post-secondary institutions noted the use of agents. Interestingly, a report published by the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (as cited in Tamburri, 2014) noted that respondents from Canadian research-intensive public universities all denied the use of agents. In contrast, education agents have been increasingly recognizing the attractiveness of Canadian HEIs. According to the ICEF Monitor (2018), on a survey on 1,300 education agencies from 101 countries, Canada was the most attractive country for education agents. The popularity of Canada as a destination country has been growing steadily since 2014, while the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand all experienced some fluctuations regarding their attractiveness from the education agents' perspective (ICEF Monitor, 2018). Nonetheless, more studies

measuring the scope of agent practices in Canada are required to capture actual practices and provide insight on the need to regulate, or not, this industry in Canada.

Alternatively, as Canadian HEIs rely on the recruitment of international students and their resources to fill the void left by decreased government funding and reduced domestic student enrollment, they become more subjected to market influences exerted by education agents (Raimo et al., 2014). For-profit education agents, by its nature, put business profit first and may behave unethically in some cases especially when there are no clear or immediate consequences (Brabner & Galraith, 2013; Nikula & Kivisto, 2018; Robison, 2007). HEIs do not want to be linked to unethical education agents but to what extent HEIs can tolerate agents' unethical behavior is still to be discovered.

Current literature in the Canadian context that focused on agent-practices was extremely limited, which poses a challenge for relevant parties to make more informed decisions regarding the collaboration and regulation of education agents. The prevalence of agent practices among Canadian education system has been studied and it was concluded that it was common to use agent services (Coffey & Perry, 2013). Research was also conducted to explore perspectives from university recruiters, international students, as well as education agents (Coffey, 2014; Qu, 2018; Tian, 2017). Coffey (2014)'s research revealed several push and pull factors in 23 international students' decision making process during agent-assisted application. Qu (2018)'s research provided the perspectives from university recruiters about collaborating with education agents. Tian (2017)'s research explored the role of education consulting and its impact on students based on perspectives of education agents. However, larger studies are needed to capture trends in the Canadian population such as the population of

international students to gain an understanding of their perceptions and experiences with education agents (Creswell, 2014).

Conceptual Underpinnings

This section presents the conceptual underpinnings related to the international student market that informed this study. I begin with academic capitalism as the theoretical background, followed by an introduction of the international student market model developed by Kauppinen et al. (2014), where education agents play a role. Next, a detailed analysis of the roles of education agents, HEIs, and international students play in this model is presented.

Theoretical Background

The international student market is an empirical example of academic capitalism (Kauppinen et al., 2014), which has its roots in neoliberalism and globalization. With an emphasis on the role of free market over government interference and private interest over public good (Bourassa, 2019), neoliberal trends contribute to the privatization, commercialization, and corporatization of HEIs (Kezar, 2004). Push from governments in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada greatly facilitated the development of science and technology programs in HEIs so that their national economies can benefit from the intellectual resources produced by HEIs (Rooksby & Pusser, 2014; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). For example, the Bayh-Dole Act in the United States permitted HEIs to own patents, which led to over 12,000 patent applications from HEIs, 1.8 billion USD profits gained by HEIs, and the establishment of more than 600 start-up companies with the help of HEIs (Blumenstyk, 2012). Meanwhile, as the funding from government to HEIs reduces, HEIs turn to

business corporations for external funding and develop other market-like behaviors to meet financial targets, such as increasing tuition income (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). For countries where the population is declining, such as European countries and Canada, it is necessary to enter the international market for the recruitment of foreign students. In return, the benefits brought by international students drove HEIs to step-up the competition with each other and develop more aggressive marketing strategies. HEIs' success in international recruitment cannot be achieved without globalization.

Globalization greatly facilitated the internationalization of higher education in several ways (Altbach & Knight, 2007). First, to handle the updated competition brought by globalization, governments have been increasingly pressured to include knowledge production into the political agenda, thus shifting the function of HEIs from "knowledge factory" towards business industry; a transition from a training center of graduates to a bargaining chip of global influence (Valimaa, 2014). In addition, neoliberalism inserts "market ideology and business practices" (p.157) to the general progress of globalization (Kandiko, 2010). The free-trade context (e.g., the General Agreement on Trade in Services by World Trade Organization) is ideal for international academic mobility, be it branch campuses, online education, exchange programs, or joint degree programs (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Under the influence of globalization, there emerged trends outside and inside HEIs that heightened the presence of internationalization. Specifically, the internationalization of higher education includes educational activities and services such as recruiting international students, partnering with overseas institutions, sending students abroad, and opening overseas campuses (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Tarc, Mishra-Tarc, Ng-A-Fook, & Trilokekar, 2013). The rapid unfolding of internationalization is

part of the transition HEIs go through to thrive in the current economic and political environment (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Kandiko, 2010; Radice, 2013; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997)

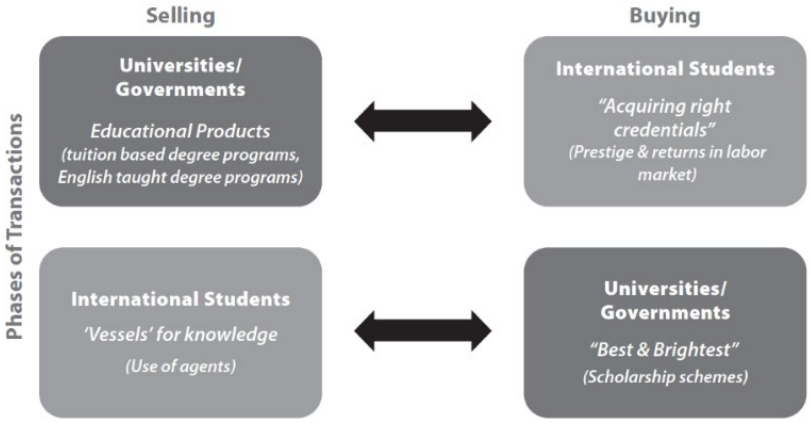
Neoliberalism, globalization, and government policies laid the foundation for academic capitalism to develop within HEIs. Academic capitalism was first defined as the "institutional and professorial market or market-like efforts to secure external moneys" (p.8), since profits generated from market-related research can subsidize the reduced government funding and relieve the fiscal stress experienced by HEIs (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). From this economic angle, Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) further discussed marketing activities in other departments such as instruction and curriculum design, student recruitment, human resources, and distance education in U.S. HEIs. In *Academic Capitalism in the Age of Globalization*, Cantwell and Kauppinen (2014) compiled articles that deepened and widened the scope of academic capitalism. Topics such as retheorizing academic capitalism, examining academic capitalism in a historical perspective, conceptualizing international student market and tracing academic capitalism in Greater China were included to structure academic capitalism as a theory to make it more applicable to the age of globalization. Academic capitalism has been widely utilized for conceptualizing the transitions of HEIs in the current knowledge society (Coco, 2015; Jessop, 2017; Kauppinen, 2013; Mendoza, 2012; Metcalfe, 2010). The adoption of academic capitalism in HEIs as previously noted has relieved the financial stress of HEIs but has also led to problems including faculty stratification and the commodification of higher education (Kauppinen & Kaidesoja, 2014; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997).

The International Student Market

Academic capitalism promotes knowledge as commodity and international students as consumers (Kauppinen et al., 2014). In the international student market model developed by Kauppinen et al. (2014), students and HEIs/governments negotiate the transaction based on what they can offer and afford. Their roles are fluid rather than fixed, since both can be the seller and the buyer (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Conceptual Model of International Student Market (Kauppinen et al., 2014)



In the first cycle, HEIs/governments act as sellers and international students as buyers. HEIs/governments sell various educational programs to international students, which will eventually become credentials for international students who pay a price in the form of tuition fees to get enrolled. Even with concerns over the huge cost of recruiting international students (Knight, 2004), this transaction cycle was believed to be lucrative with more countries implementing international student fees and the growing market for English language skills including training classes and examinations (Kauppinen et al., 2014). International students as buyers of overseas education and factors influencing their decision-making process have been the subject of many studies (Coffey, 2014; Jiang,

2015; Kauppinen et al., 2014). Despite the diverse rationales used by international students to choose where and what to study, including academic, cultural, economic, and social reasons, it is primarily the social capital they already possess that influences their final decision, as manifested in international students' focus on career development after graduation and the prestige of the HEIs and programs (Kauppinen et al., 2014).

In the second cycle, the roles changed. International students package themselves as knowledge containers for sale, while HEIs/governments compete with each other and pay a price in the form of scholarships or other recruitment incentives for top students (Kauppinen et al., 2014). On a national level, there are scholarships such as Eiffel Excellence Scholarship in France, Chevening Scholarship in the United Kingdom, Swedish Institute Study Scholarship in Sweden, the Endeavour Awards in Australia (Kauppinen et al., 2014; Trilokekar & Kizilbash, 2013), and favourable immigrant policies provided for the international students to come and stay. On an institutional level, scholarships are created for international students and various immigration assistance (i.e., workshops, career services, etc.) are also available. International students present themselves as the ideal candidates to be educated by emphasizing the different qualities they have and employ education agents to optimize their application profiles (Kauppinen et al., 2014).

Increasingly, governments of the sending countries of international students are trying to avoid losing talented students to receiving countries, and if unavoidable, enable the lost talents to contribute to the original countries from afar (Gribble, 2008). In this sense, they are trying to weaken the push factors for their students to go abroad (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Though not included in the conceptualization of

international student market, governments of the sending countries also play a role in the transaction cycles (Kauppinen et al., 2014). For example, Saudi Arabian government provides scholarships to qualified students who pursue overseas studies, which directs students' focus away from financial concern when choosing where and what to study. Consequently, tensions between countries may result in the leaving of international students supported by domestic government scholarship (e.g., Saudi Arabian students withdrawing from Canadian HEIs in 2018). Factors like this will certainly influence students' decision-making process during the application phase.

Education agents as the middleman between HEIs and international students take a powerful position that sometimes overrides the best interests of the other two parties. Students of different social economic status and academic competencies have individual criteria and purposes in choosing HEIs (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Education agents, too, behave differently based on whose benefit they prioritize and what kind of regulations they work within. In addition, HEIs adopt different scrutiny and monitor systems when collaborating with education agents (Huang et al., 2016). Therefore, it is necessary that this study consider all these factors so that informed connections can be drawn between students' choices of and experience with education agents and their other characteristics (Huang et al., 2016; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Tuxen & Robertson, 2018).

Statement of the Problem

Despite being the fourth biggest receiving country of international students (The Power of International Education, 2018) and promoter of internationalization of higher education for many years (Anderson, 2015; Cudmore, 2005; The Conference Board of Canada, 2015), Canada has few relevant studies that have investigated the agent practice

in comparison to the large volume of research in other receiving countries. There is clearly a research gap in the Canadian context regarding education agent practices, be it the scale of the business, or its impact on HEIs and international students. Existing studies are relatively recent and scattered, and rarely explored international students' perspectives. Coffey and Perry (2013) have examined the role of education agents in Canadian education systems by surveying 145 respondents mainly representing educational institutions. Later, a qualitative study was conducted on 23 international students studying at Canadian HEIs about the experience with education agents and it was concluded that internationals students' experience with education agents varied from person to person (Coffey, 2014). However, there is little understanding of the general opinions of international students towards education agent practices and consequently, few studies have provided data for related parties such as Canadian HEIs to improve their recruitment strategy.

In addition to international students' contribution to Canadian economy and culture, researchers also started paying attention to their experience beyond academic and institutional settings as well as perceptions toward education services since students' perceptions often inform institutional policy (Bedenlier, Kondakci, & Zawacki-Richter, 2018; Gruber, Fub, Voss, & Glaeser-Zikuda, 2010; Kandiko, 2010; Siddiq et al., 2012). Therefore, exploring international students' perceptions and experiences with education agents would contribute to the improvement of institutional recruitment policy of international students. Roy (2017) also argued that student perceptions provided a broader picture of the agent business, especially the practices that are unknown to the HEIs. With better understanding of the agent practice and international students' needs,

Canada will be able to retain its advantage in attracting international students and maintain the benefits of an internationalized society. However, the landscape of agent-use among Canadian HEIs has not been explored sufficiently and the prevalence of agent-assisted applications among Canada-bound internationals students remains unknown. This study will address this vacuum of information by surveying international students' perceptions and experiences with education agents.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of Canada-bound international students with education agents. The outcome of this study will reveal the extent to which education agents were used among international students in Canada as well as the characteristics of students who chose to use or not use education agents. The grouping of international students based on common characteristics (i.e., nationality, university attending/attended, faculty enrolled in, age range, source of income, parents' highest degree) will allow for comparison between groups of students and their agent-use behaviors and satisfaction. In particular, nationality, source of income, and parents' highest degree were included because they were proven to be useful in predicting international students' agent-use behavior in previous studies (Roy, 2017; Zhang, 2014). University, faculty, and age range were also included to provide a distribution of international students among different faculties and level of education in Canadian HEIs.

Research Questions

In light of the gap in research, the over-arching research question in this study is, to what extent do international students perceive education agents as being useful in their application and what are their experiences with agents? The specific questions are:

1. What are the characteristics of international students using (or not using) education agent services?
2. What is the prevalence and factors influencing agent use among international students in Canada?
3. What are international students' perceptions and experiences with education agents and what factors influence their perceptions and experiences?

Given that it is expensive for international students to attend Canadian HEIs, it is likely that students who are more financially secure are more apt to use an agent, yet it is also possible that students who are unaware of the admission process, regardless of financial wellbeing, require the services of agents to gain entrance into HEIs. Also, based on agent use in other countries, it is feasible that agent use in Canadian HEIs is very prevalent. Last, given the widespread use of agents in other countries and absence of transparency, it is likely that the students are misinformed about the services provided by agents and the cost of agent services which will influence students' perceptions and experiences.

Positionality of the Researcher

It is necessary to disclose information regarding myself, to ensure transparency and ensure that the arguments presented in this paper can be interpreted with scrutiny. I came to Canada in 2016 as an international student and I am currently enrolled in a Master of Education program at the University of Prince Edward Island. Prior to becoming a Master of Education student, I worked as an education agent for two years under one private agency that served Chinese international students who wished to enroll in major destination countries including but not limited to the United States, United

Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and Japan. I have worked directly with international students who were interested in studying in Canada and with a few cooperating companies that were active in a similar context. After leaving the agency, I did not maintain contact with the company, nor did I work as a free-lance agent. Further, I did not use an agent service for my application as I was well aware of the application process. This background as an agent has provided considerable insight and experience behind what is published in scholarly articles and has been a source of information for this study as well as the catalyst to conduct this study.

Definition of Terms

Higher Educational Institution (HEI): The higher education institutions in this study refer to the post-secondary institutions including public or private universities and colleges.

Globalization: Globalization is the flow of people, knowledge, money, and values across borders (Knight, 1997; Rhee & Sagaria, 2004).

Neoliberalism: Neoliberalism promotes the idea that individual entrepreneurship and skills lead to progress in human well-being in a context that values private property rights, free markets, and free trade (Harvey, 2005).

Internationalization: Internationalization refers to the multifaceted integration of global dimensions into the planning, operating, and delivering of higher education (Knight, 2004).

Commodification: A process that turns an object into a transactable entity – can be bought or sold in markets such as shoes, food, or books (Kauppinen et al., 2014). In

the context of HEIs, degree programs, research findings, and other educational services are being turned into goods.

Academic Capitalism: Slaughter and Leslie (1997) defined academic capitalism as the market or market-like behaviors of HEIs and faculties to secure external money.

Double Dipping: This practice occurs when an education agent is being paid by both the HEIs and international student (West & Addington, 2014).

Pathway Program/College: Designed for students who are not qualified for direct entry into the university program, pathway programs/colleges provide a nurturing environment for international students to improve their language competency and grades normally in smaller classes and with other international students (Adams, Leventual & Connelly, 2012).

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

In this chapter a systematic review of the role of education agents from the perspectives of researchers and HEIs is provided first. Next, I move to the differentiation of international students and a synthesis of studies about international students' experience with education agents, and then the focus shifts to highlight current research within the Canadian context to identify gaps in research.

The Role of Education Agents: Perspectives of Researchers and HEIs

Education agents play an important role in bridging HEIs and international students (Bista, 2017; Dunstan, 2009; Kauppinen et al., 2014; Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996; Newcomb, 2017; Raimo, 2013; Raimo et al., 2014; Robinson-Pant &Magyar, 2018; Tian, 2017; Tuxen & Robertson, 2018; Yu, 2016). Dunstan (2009) advocated for education agents as "a significant group in delivering education and services to international students" and "valuable stakeholder in the student support process" (p.1). She noted that first, agents are an indispensable part of Australian international education since over 60% of international students were recruited through agents; second, agents shouldered an important responsibility in helping students become enrolled in overseas institutions; third, they are potential allies to the Australian education system because of their continuing service to the students in terms of support and liaison before and after the enrollment. Dunstan (2009) focused not only on views from media but also on formal government reports and the opinions from the education agents themselves. In this early study, she concluded stating that "education agents are committed to a shared

responsibility for quality, capability and reputation", thus should be involved in the process of supporting international students (Dunstan, 2009, p.5).

In addition to the direct impact made by education agents on students and HEIs, their more subtle and lasting influences were explored by other researchers (Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018; Tian, 2017). Robinson-Pant and Magyar (2018) analyzed the commercial broker and cultural mediator role of education agents through drawing on two studies conducted between 2012 and 2015 in the United Kingdom; one is about international students' experience of transitioning and the other is about education agents' role in recruitment. Agents' role was recognized as a necessary middleman as well as cultural mediators between the admission requirements and the applicants. Agents connected students with HEIs through interpreting the admission requirements and helped students present their competence in a context that was different from their home country. Meanwhile, the services provided by education agents were not contained in counselling students in the three stages that have been discussed previously but rather extended to advising, teaching, and navigating students in their overseas academic and personal life (Tian, 2017). However, it that should be kept in mind that Tian (2017)'s study collected feedback from education agents only, which might lead to biased arguments regarding the role of education agents.

Issues

The transparency issue in the relationship between education agents and HEIs appeared frequently in related literature and leads to conflict of interest problems (Raimo, 2013; Raimo et al., 2014; Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018; Su & Harrison, 2016). Raimo (2013) argued that highlighting only the profits of working with education agents led to

an oversight of the huge fees paid to agents and that the deal between HEIs and education agents should be more transparent. In a qualitative study involving 57 participants from 20 HEIs in the United Kingdom regarding the management of agent-institution relationship, researchers ascribed the issues with agent practices to inherent problems such as "partial goal incongruence and information asymmetry in the forms of 'hidden information' and 'hidden action'" (Raimo et al., 2014, p. 1349). It was believed that to sustain agent practices, there should be greater transparency in the HEI-agent relationship in terms of commission and other payments (Raimo et al., 2014). Research has also been conducted with international office staff and it was found that despite the concerns about education agents and the existence of ethical codes of conduct such as the Statement of Principles for the Ethical Recruitment of International Students by Education Agents and Consultants (known as the London Statement), there was an absence of transparency in the HEI-agent relationship as well as commission arrangements where agents were compensated for their work in recruiting students to a university (Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018). Less scrupulous agents may take advantage of international students who are unaware of the benefit connection between HEIs and the agents by directing them to HEIs that pay the highest commission (Su & Harrison, 2016).

Fraudulence was another reoccurring issue noted in agent practices (Bista, 2017; Kauppinen et al., 2014; Newcomb, 2017; Tuxen & Robertson, 2018; Yu, 2016). Newcomb (2017)'s interview with eight undergraduate admission officers that assessed international students at highly selective HEIs in the United States revealed "examples of exaggeration of skills and experiences, falsified documents" (p. 78), and tests that were written by someone else. Kauppinen, et al. (2014) mentioned this agent issue when

discussing the international student market model. They reported that in certain countries, students depended heavily on agents to secure enrollment in the HEIs' recruitment targets. They criticized agents for complicating the fraud committed by international students when applying to foreign universities. What they neglected to mention was that some HEIs were not innocent in these fraudulence cases given that they enrolled the unqualified students while being cognizant of existing fraudulence practices, likely for the purpose of increasing international student enrollment and thereby satisfying their financial targets.

HEI-Agent Relationship

HEIs appreciate the role of education agents in facilitating international recruitment but control mechanisms and incentives are needed to keep the collaboration relationship working properly (Raimo et al, 2014, Yen, Yang, & Cappellini, 2012). As shown in Figure 3, there are five types of relationships between HEIs and institution-sponsored agents based on the type of power and control measures HEIs adopted (Huang et al., 2016). In Huang et al. (2016)'s study, 57 participants from 20 United Kingdom universities provided insights into the existing control mechanisms used by HEIs and issues of agent practices. Regarding the issues of agent practice, the researchers discussed the manifestation of two inherent problems in agent practice; goal conflict and information asymmetry. Concerns caused by the two inherent problems were expressed by participants. Some participants claimed they had low confidence in agents in terms of their understanding and performing of the contract. Others commented on the unethical behaviors including dishonesty and low standards that agents engage in to increase students to raise their commission. Still, recognizing the relationships between HEIs and

education agents in the form of power and control mechanism helps HEIs to learn about the nature of this collaboration and be aware of the associated risks and shortcomings.

Figure 3

Power and Control Mechanisms (Huang et al., 2016)

Use of power	Control measures: Performance-driven	Control measures: Income-driven
Hybrid (coercive and non-coercive power)	**Strategic Investor** • Selective and reactive • Work with medium high number of agents • Standard commission based starting point but willing to be flexible and invest in supporting joint marketing activities • Proactive management and prevention of misbehaviour • Realistic targets	**Market Trader** • Work with high number of agents • Standard rate but prepared to make exceptions • Minimum investment in support and enforcement • Set targets • Tough in negotiation
Non-coercive power	**Mutual Enterprise** • Work with medium number of agents • Enhanced levels of commission, bonus and other incentives • Prepared to invest in joint marketing activities • Strong relationship with agents and support • Agents seen as key to achieving volume targets	**Flexible Friends** • Not many agents (due to difficulty of getting agents interested) • Friendly and flexible • May pay high commission • Happy for one or two students sent by each agent every year as long as they are getting something from the agents
Coercive power	**Tough Banker** • Very selective with small number of agents • Trial periods • High level of support for agents • Standard or below standard commission rate • Targets • Tight watch of agents' behaviour and enforcement of codes of conduct • Zero tolerance of misbehaviour	

HEIs utilized a variety of powers to balance their relationship with education agents but it has been noted that those with less power became dependent on education agents (Hulme et al., 2014; Yen et al., 2012). In Yen et al. (2012)'s study, ten participants from the international offices from HEIs in the United Kingdom were interviewed to solicit insights regarding the HEI-agent relationship about the dimension

of ranking system. It was revealed that HEIs of top rankings exercised their power with ease while those of low rankings tended to draw power from various sources to manage their relationship with education agents. The lower the ranking, the more dependent HEIs became on education agents for international recruitment. In addition, HEIs may tolerate agents' unethical behavior if the economic profit is significant enough (Hulme et al., 2014). Hulme et al. (2014)'s research provided a cross-section snapshot of the views from three types of HEI employees based on familiarity with education agents, all of which decided that it was best for HEIs to keep working with education agents for the economic return, in spite of the misbehavior of education agents. Education agents were appreciated for their fulfillment of recruitment goals and were left room for unscrupulous practices given the financial return agents brought. It was noted that ethical issues emerged when HEIs collaborated with education agents to operate in a business model (Hulme et al., 2014; West, Addington, & Lambert, 2018).

Regulatory Framework

Although Altbach (2013) was forthright in stating that "agents and recruiters are impairing academic standards and integrity and should be eliminated or severely curtailed" (p. 129), other researchers argued for education agents and suggested a regulatory framework (Brabner & Galbraith, 2013; Chang, 2013; Coco, 2015; Tuxen & Robertson, 2018; Yang & Akhtaruzzaman, 2017). A study by Kirsch (2014) on the experience of senior international educators with education agents provided a summary of the HEI views towards the use of agents in the United States. The respondents were mostly senior admission officers with years of experience working in this field. It was revealed that "out of the 119 total respondents, 94 (78%) either do work with agents or are willing to"

(p. 36). Kirsch (2014) concluded that education agents were integral to the internationalization of higher education and that a more regulated environment would likely help late adopters see the benefit of the practice. A qualitative study reached a similar conclusion where a standard control mechanism was called for to regulate what they termed the "wild west" environment in which education agents operated (Coco, 2015). Coco (2015)'s study consisted of interviews with 32 individuals including university administrators, international students, and education agents as well as the analysis of documents and records of the institutions and observation data gathered within the HEI environments. For HEIs who collaborated with education agents, multiple strategies were used to: (a) maintain the relationship with agents including on-site/distance training, meeting at conferences organized by the aforementioned professional associations, and (b) assess the performance of agents including keeping record of student achievement (Coco, 2015). This research shed some light on agent practice as it was currently operating without any guidelines and insufficient control mechanisms, financial agreement, intuitional preference, or industry review while at the same time, growing rapidly and involving more and more parties such as professional organizations, local governments, and private education companies.

Summary

The studies discussed above identified both the positive and negative impacts of education agents, but international students' opinions are also needed to make more informed decisions about the agent practice (Roy, 2017). Huang et al. (2016) analyzed the power and control mechanisms used by HEIs in the United Kingdom to maintain their relationship with education agents. Despite the many existing mechanisms or guidelines,

concerns were expressed by participants who believed that some agents paid little attention to understanding or following the contract. This made exploring international students' experience necessary as they are another important user group of agent service. Students' voice has played an important role in informing higher education policies (Gruber et al., 2010; Kandiko, 2010). In the following section, studies related to the experience of international students with education agents is discussed.

Differentiating International Students

Researchers have found that it was necessary to differentiate international students since they are a diversified group and the process would help HEIs improve their recruitment efficiency (Choudaha, Orosz, & Chang, 2012; Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Tuxen & Robertson, 2018; Roy, 2017; Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011).

In Choudaha, et al. (2012)'s research on prospective international students to HEIs in the United States, they grouped approximately 1,600 survey respondents into four segmentations according to their financial readiness (F) and academic competence (A): Strugglers (low F/low A), Strivers (low F/high A), Explorers (high F/low A), and Highfliers(high F/high A). It was noted that one sixth of the respondents used agent service and that explorers have the highest rate of using agents (i.e., 24%). Another large-scale study also differentiated international students, but in this study, students were differentiated based on their regions and countries (Roy, 2017). This study gathered data from 5,880 prospective international students at American institutions from five geographic regions (East Asia, South-Central Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America/Caribbean, Europe), representing over 50 countries. The data showed that on average, 41% of students from East Asia used agents while in Sub-Saharan Africa, agent-

users were only 12%. East Asian students also spent a lot on agents where 69% of them paid over $1,000 USD to agents in comparison to 14% of South-Central Asian students who paid over $1,000 USD. Within a region, the situation varied from country to country. 48% of Japanese students reported using agents, while only 18% of Korean students used agents (Roy, 2017). It was suggested that HEIs' recruitment strategies and support services should be designed to meet the needs of different segments of international students. Directing the suitable group of students to education agents would save HEIs' effort in providing long-term support. Meanwhile, students who do not intend to go through agents should be able to apply directly to the HEIs, which could save HEIs commission cost. In addition, if HEIs plan to keep relying on agents to recruit international students, these findings can help them better prepare themselves for a predictable number of incoming students to have the features of explorers – high financial readiness and low academic competence – and provide students with the needed support.

There are a number of qualitative studies on this topic, which provided more specific information regarding students' country-related and social economic status (SES) (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Tuxen & Robertson, 2018; Zhang, 2011; Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011). One study that examined the class difference of international students from India consisted of 80 interviews with education agents and international students (Tuxen & Robertson, 2018). Researchers examined international students from two classes (elites and strivers) and analyzed the class nuances of student mobility in India, where the caste system has been deeply rooted and directly influenced students' overseas study decision-making process. It was revealed that suburban students with less resources relied heavily

on agents for guidance, while elite students went to agents to extend their existing knowledge of overseas study. Research has also been conducted examining the background of Chinese international students to explore the correlation between demographic factors and the use of agent services, where it was revealed that certain features, such as low English competence, were related to students' tendency of using education agents (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010; Zhang, 2011; Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011). A similar study on prospective international undergraduates from China involved 471 high school students who completed a survey and 60 participated in a follow-up interview (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010). Three features, including low English competency, high SES background, and no intention of taking the Chinese College Entrance Exam were shared by two thirds of students who chose to use an education agent. Their second study involved Chinese undergraduate students who were already studying at American universities and colleges (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011). The percentage of students who used agent services during application was 57%, slightly lower than the previously mentioned study on prospective students. The characteristics of students who used agent services remained similar, confirming the researchers' previous results.

Previous studies showed that differentiating international students is necessary for a better understanding of their perspectives, which subsequently inspired this thesis to analyze international students' background information and draw connections between their characteristics and their choice of using education agents in the Canadian context. A certain group of students, due to their unique features or larger population in a host environment, may attract more attention of researchers, but not limiting the participants to a certain nationality or education level would help reveal the features of students from

various backgrounds. Chinese international students are frequently studied probably because of their larger population in comparison to the smaller population of international students from other nationalities. It was suggested that future research focus on international students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds instead of Chinese only to obtain a full understanding about agent practices as well as agents' role in a broader context such as recruitment of graduate students (Roy, 2017; Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011). Therefore, this thesis aims to investigate students from all nationalities so that it includes a broader spectrum of students' characteristics.

Students' Experience with Education Agents

Contemporary studies indicated that international students in general were satisfied with the agent services they received (Bista, 2017; Coffey, 2014; Generosa, Molano, Stokes, & Schulze, 2013; Hulme et al., 2013; Roy, 2017). Three quantitative studies revealed that the level of satisfaction with education agents of unspecified international students was 83% (Roy, 2017), Chinese international students in the United States was 71.5% (Zhang, 2011), and international students in New Zealand was approximately 85% (Generosa et al., 2013).

Special Needs

As a growing number of researchers recognized the influence of education agents in the decision-making process of international students, factors such as international students' lack of knowledge about studying abroad, language barrier, and limited time were identified as having led international students to seek help from education agents (Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996; Pimpa, 2003; Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018; Tuxen & Robertson, 2017; Yu, 2016; Zhang, 2011). In addition, some studies revealed more

nuanced findings including students' special needs and mixed feelings towards the agents (Bista, 2017; Coffey, 2014; Hulme et al., 2013; Yang & Akhtaruzzaman, 2017; Yu, 2016). For example, some Chinese students suffered from limited internet access to the websites of overseas HEIs, therefore they were in need of an agent to finish the application process (Yu, 2016). Yu (2016)'s research highlighted that the limited internet access in mainland China was an important reason for students to apply through agents. This limitation was the result of China's internet censorship policy, which was an extensive and complicated system built within the internet infrastructure by the Chinese government (Human Rights Watch, 2006). Breaching the system would lead to legal consequences. Therefore, mainland Chinese students often hire agents because they are unable to look for information online themselves. For students from Nepal, on the other hand, using education agents was partly because of a policy that required students to provide certain financial documents for the application of a United States visa (Bista, 2017). For example, Bista (2017)'s study revealed that many students found it difficult to gather such documents and therefore went to education agents for help. This policy was cancelled in 2016 to facilitate the visa application process as well as reduce the incidents of forging such documents (Bista, 2017). In contrast, Canada was still deemed by education agents as the most difficult destination regarding visa applications (ICEF Monitor, 2019). Similar concerns with obtaining Canadian visa were reported in other studies (Houshmand, Spanierman, & Tafarodi, 2014; Jiang, 2015) as experienced by Asian students. Presumably, barriers in obtaining visas from the Canada government, which is a high-stakes procedure for many families, would steer international students to education agents who often advertise their extensive experience in visa application.

The above studies collected information from international students of particular groups, such as international students from China and Nepal, regarding education agent practices and discovered distinct characteristics of those students, thus adding to the previous studies that involved a larger number of participants from various backgrounds but did not further explore certain traits of the participants. It can be assumed that there are numerous reasons in other parts of the world, that have not been studied, that direct students to agents. These reasons need to be discovered so that more informed decisions can be made on international recruitment through education agents. The experiences and needs of the participants from previous studies conducted in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia may not apply to the international students in Canada. Therefore, this thesis is intended to examine the experience of international students from a Canadian perspective to add to the current literature, as well as provide insights for policy development in the recruitment of international students through the use of agent services.

Unethical Agent Behaviors

Researchers have documented some unethical agent practices based on the feedback of international students and have subsequently proposed ways to regulate the unethical behaviors (Bista, 2017; Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010; Redding, 2013; Robison, 2007; Roy, 2017; Tuxen & Robertson, 2018; Yang & Akhtaruzzaman, 2017; Yu, 2016). The first common issue was forged documents including school application documents and visa application documents. A study on 80 students from India and education agents revealed that some education agents wrote admissions essays for a fee (Tuxen & Robertson, 2018). In Yu (2016)'s study on 18 Chinese international students, the author cited a 2010 Zinch China report which stated that "90% of all Chinese students'

recommendation letters, 70% of application essays, and 50% of transcripts were composed by their study abroad agents" (p.5). Yu (2016)'s interview data partially confirmed the scope of fraudulence, showing that only two participants wrote their own application essays; the others used agents to do some or all of the writing work. Additionally, Bista (2017)'s interview of 112 Nepalese students reported agents' directly or indirectly helped in forging bank statements so that students can obtain a visa easier.

Bista (2017) also criticized the trust issue in agent practices. He argued that the trust issue was serious since barely half (49%) of the students trusted their agents and 25% of students had been provided false information by agents. In follow-up interviews, participants discussed agents' unethical behavior in detail, such as providing inaccurate information about tuition fees (Bista, 2017). When focusing on Chinese students, the top reason cited by students to avoid using agents was also related to mistrust (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010). Moreover, international students in New Zealand also acknowledged that information mismatch and misleading information was a major concern (Yang & Akhtaruzzaman, 2017).

Double-dipping is another common problem related to agent practices (Nikula & Kivisto, 2018; Roy, 2017; West & Addington, 2014). In Roy (2017)'s study with 5,880 participants, 23% used agent service, of which, 70% reported using independent agents while only 16% reported using institution-sponsored agents. Of those who used institution-sponsored agents, two thirds also paid the agents for their services, resulting in the double dipping problem as the agents were also paid by the HEI. Further, there was a different focus of concern between the independent agent-users and sponsored agent-users. Students who used independent agents were more concerned with quality control

issues, such as untimely feedback, unclear fee structure, and misrepresented information, while those who used sponsored agents worried more about issues related to conflicts of interest, such as "unrealistic expectations about on-campus jobs and/or scholarship opportunities" (para. 12) and agents' persuasion of students to apply for certain universities. Students might not be aware of the double-dipping situation, thus feeling confused by agents' strong recommendation of one HEI over another and frustrated by an unfulfilled guarantee or promise of gaining admission to other HEIs (Roy, 2017). Roy (2017) noted that insufficient research on independent agents resulted in a lack of recognition and regulation of agent practices. This also highlights the necessity for Canadian HEIs to learn more about education agent businesses from the perspective of international students to compare it with what is reported based on the agents' perspectives.

Vulnerability of International Students and Proposed Solutions

The vulnerability of international students in the students-agents-HEIs relationship has been mentioned a few times in previous studies, thus indicating a growing interest in students' wellbeing in this dynamic relationship (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Robison, 2007). Hagedorn and Zhang (2011) reported that prospective Chinese international students (and parents) were individual clients who had limited knowledge and skills to balance their relationship with agents and had therefore experienced difficulty in discerning irresponsible agents or protecting their benefits (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011). Coinciding with the argument made by Hagedorn and Zhang (2011) is a study by Robison (2007) whose study involved two case studies that consisted of interviews with recruitment offices and international students, as well as a survey and

document analysis. Robison (2007) reported that students were vulnerable individuals identified as having little control over the application process when working with agents in comparison to recruitment officers who had the power to terminate the relationship because they held the written contract with agents.

To balance the power dynamics among students, agents, and HEIs, researchers proposed various solutions and recommendations (Brabner & Galbraith, 2013; Robison, 2007; Roy, 2017). Robison (2007) argued that HEIs had the responsibility to ensure students' benefits in the agent practice "because students are powerless in the equation of student-agent-institution" (p. 190). Robison also proposed that harmony can be achieved based on three-way communication among students, HEIs, and agents. On the other hand, unethical practices could still happen if the agent controlled all information and blocked the other two parties. Other studies also provide recommendations for HEIs to improve their collaboration quality with education agents. In Roy (2017)'s study on the international students' experience with education agents, four recommendations were provided including understanding the student-agent relationship, developing regulations on institution-sponsored agents, educating independent agents, and providing information about agent business models to parents and students. Brabner and Galbraith (2013) discussed two possible regulatory options with one relying on HEIs and the other a sector-wide regulatory framework. Their focus was on the latter option as the first one was seen as a minimum expectation for HEIs who have connections with education agents. A self-regulatory organization, together with an arbitration system and a higher level of transparency in the HEI-agent contracts was advocated to regulate agent practice (Brabner & Galbraith, 2013).

Researchers in other top receiving countries have built the foundation for further study of the agent-HEI connection, international students' experience with education agents, and the development of a regulatory framework. However, such foundation is missing from the Canadian context, thus limiting researchers to provide recommendations regarding the future of collaboration between HEIs and education agents. In Canada, the rapidly increasing number of international students, driven by the widespread collaboration between Canadian HEIs and education agents, result in large economic benefits, diverse perspectives, and labour force. Meanwhile, education agents to some extent facilitate the transition process of international students to the Canadian academic and life environment but hinder the benefits of HEIs or international students when they act in their own interest. Based on an absence of literature, there is a call for more research in this area so that stakeholders can make informed policy decisions. In the next section, studies relevant to the agent practice in Canada will be discussed to provide an introduction to what is known about the current student-agent-HEI relationship in the Canadian context and identify gaps in research.

Research on the Agent Practices in Canada

There have been scattered yet recent studies in the Canadian context about education agents, but the volume of literature is far smaller than studies in other countries as noted previously. Coffey led two studies, one quantitative, one qualitative, exploring agent practices and provided a snapshot of agent-use in the Canadian education system as well as some in-depth perspectives from international students' situation (Coffey, 2014; Coffey & Perry, 2013). Jiang (2015) conducted a study on the impact of education agents on Chinese students' decision-making process of overseas study. Tian (2017)

explored Chinese education agents' viewpoints and examined their roles critically. There are other studies with a different focus but also touched on agent issues (James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017; Li, Dipetta, & Woloshyn, 2012; Li & Tierney, 2013; McCartney & Metcalfe, 2018; Qu, 2018).

A study in 2013 documented the use of education agents among Canadian HEIs using a mixed method study consisting of 145 survey responses from employees in the education sector and 12 interviews with HEI administrators and government officers (Coffey & Perry, 2013). Given that 78% of respondents from various education sectors affirmed the use of agents, it was concluded that agent use was common in the Canadian education system. However, due to the multi-jurisdictional nature of the Canadian education system where a centralized education department does not exist and each province oversees their own education, efforts to regulate agents would require the commitment of multiple parties. Coffey and Perry (2013) noted there was no standard guide for HEIs to collaborate with agents since costs, management methods, and dependence level on agents varied from institution to institution. Most interview respondents believed that agents were necessary in the recruitment of international students, but it was also noted that the reputation of HEIs was a critical factor in whether to use agents or not. The only exception in the internationalization of Canadian HEIs was Quebec who had the lowest use of education agents because of its French environment, which prevented it from tapping into the huge demand for English classes and the policy of using international education as a means of aid, not trade. Coffey and Perry (2013) argued that over-relying on agents for recruitment weakened HEIs' power in regulating agents from misbehaving, while information sharing activities among HEI admission

officers and surveying the enrolled international students would help HEIs identify problems. It was suggested that future studies should explore international students' experience with agents to assess the value of agents as well as inform admission officers and policy makers about creating better recruitment strategies (Coffey & Perry, 2013).

In a 2014 study, Coffey conducted a qualitative study with 23 international students from seven Canadian HEIs to explore their experience with education agents and decision-making process. The findings identified that several push and pull factors such as interest in migration, limited domestic opportunities, and overseas study experience as well as reference groups such as parents and peers influenced students' decision-making process. Students used agents for their knowledge about and ability to complete their higher education application. The shortfalls of using education agents identified in this study were: limited knowledge, unethical behavior, and high cost. Once an agent became employed by the students, they soon became a powerful influence in students' decision-making process. Guided by their for-profit orientation, education agents used a variety of strategies including arranging on-site admission sessions to persuade students in choosing the agents' preferred institution. Not all students checked the accuracy and value of their agents' recommendations; those who did tried reference group networks, social media, and search engines to gather information. Mismatching and undermatching between students and schools were unavoidable but it had little effect on students' general satisfaction with education agent services. Some students intentionally picked less prestigious HEIs because they valued other factors more than ranking. For example, an offer from a one-year diploma program at a less known college might cause great frustration for a competitive and young candidate from an affluent family but would

otherwise be considered suitable for students who had limited finances, time, and wanted to secure employment and immigration status quickly.

Perspectives from Chinese international students and education agents were also explored by Jiang (2015) and Tian (2017). Jiang (2015)'s study consisted of interviews and a survey on 25 prospective Chinese international students recruited from one education agency, while Tian (2017)'s research employed a document analysis of agency websites and interviews with four education agents from independent education agencies. The extent to which education agents' suggestions can influence Chinese students' decision-making process was explored by Jiang (2015), who noted that agents exerted different levels of influence on Chinese international students' three-step decision making process: selecting country, selecting institution, and selection a program of study. Students who had little knowledge about overseas studying tended to follow education agents' country/institution/program recommendation, while those who had acquired a some knowledge about overseas studying focused more on agents' assistance in procedural details such as the application process of institutions and student visas (Jiang, 2015). Tian (2017)'s research, on the other hand, greatly enriched knowledge about education agent services as well as education agents' capacity in bridging HEIs with international students and proving long-term support to international students. Tian (2017) recommended that agent businesses transform its babysitter style services into student-led services and achieve sustainable development through systematic regulations. HEIs were also encouraged to examine their students' experience with education agents, provide support and training to education agents, develop joint efforts between admission offices and academic staff to monitor students' post-enrollment performance, and reach-

out to students who cannot afford agents' services for the purpose of addressing inequality.

Some recent studies focused on other issues but also touched on the role of education agents (James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017; Li et al., 2012; Li & Tierney, 2013; McCartney & Metcalfe, 2018; Qu, 2018). The importance of education agents as a reference group in international students' decision-making process has been mentioned in three studies: one quantitative study on 242 international students about their choice of country and HEIs (James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017), one quantitative study on 38 international students within one international Master of Education program (Li & Tierney, 2013), and one qualitative study on nine international students from an international Master of Education program (Li et al., 2012). The three studies revealed that the recommendations from education agents on HEI/program selection were important for Canada-bound international students. Particularly, Chinese international students relied more heavily on agents than other students (James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017). In addition, certain programs hosted in Canadian HEIs stood out because of their large enrollment of internationals students. In both studies led by Li, it was revealed that education agents directed international students into the international Master of Education programs where the majority of students were Chinese (Li et al., 2012; Li & Tierney, 2013). Similar findings on the concentration of Chinese international students in education programs were noted in a study on a Teaching English as Second Language program provided in one Canadian HEI (Ilieva, Li, & Li, 2015). This raised concerns regarding the correlation between student composition in certain programs and the influence of education agents. With the recognition that education agents greatly

influence international students and are able to direct them into certain programs, researchers and HEIs should also be cautious about the potential issues associated with high concentration of students from one ethnicity background in these programs, such as social integration and classroom diversity (Liu, 2016; Su & Harrison, 2016).

Other studies provided insights from HEIs. Qu (2018)'s study was about an Ontario university's recruitment practices. Through interviewing five recruiters from three faculties, it was discovered that recruiters held a critical view towards collaborating with education agents. Nonetheless, properly trained agents would help Canadian HEIs achieve their recruitment goals. In another study conducted by McCartney and Metcalfe (2018), the role of education agents was mentioned as relevant to the development of pathway programs, which had an impact of commercialization on Canadian HEIs. The more profit-oriented model and independence from the HEIs' academic governance made pathway colleges an ideal place for some agents to send students to for maximum benefits and minimum risk. Pathway colleges provided international students with an alternate route to gain entrance into their preferred university or college by offering them English training and academic preparation classes. The negative aspect of pathway colleges may create a loophole for unethical agent behavior to proliferate in Canada, as there is a lack of regulation on the agent practice but a growing number of collaborations between education agents and organizations directly or indirectly related to Canadian HEIs.

Summary

Findings from the research on education agents in the Canadian context resonated with insights from research conducted in other contexts but also highlighted the

uniqueness of the Canadian case, such as the multi-jurisdictional nature of the Canadian education system as noted by Coffey and Perry (2013), the newly emerged pathway programs that might be used as a shortcut by education agents to send international students to Canada (McCartney & Metcalfe, 2018), the immigration prospective after graduation (Coffey, 2014), the difficulty in visa applications (ICEF, 2019; Jiang, 2015), and the lack of research that examines international students' perspectives on agent practices (Coffey, 2014; Tian, 2017). Though researchers in other top receiving countries of international students have examined international students' experiences with education agents, it may not apply to the Canadian context as international students are not from a homogeneous group.

It is striking that despite the commonality of education agent practices and the vast presence of international students in Canada, there is little literature that explored international students' perceptions and experiences with education agents. It makes it difficult for researchers to provide suggestions or for policy makers to make informed decisions that ensure the international student market grows vigorously. With a growing need and competition of recruiting international students, it is necessary to investigate the agent practice and gather feedback from international students in Canada. Students' perceptions and experiences with educational services can have an impact on institutional policies, thus helping HEIs adjust their practices (Gruber et al., 2010; Kandiko, 2010). Therefore, the contribution of this study is two-fold. First, it fills a research gap in the Canadian context regarding agent practices in international student recruitment. Second, it adds international students' feedback in the student-agent-HEI relationship, thus providing a better understanding of recruitment practices in Canadian HEIs.

CHAPTER THREE

Research Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore Canada-bound international students' perceptions and experiences with education agents and thus suggest directions for Canadian HEIs to improve their recruitment efficiency. The outcome of this study will reveal how common the use of education agents is among international students in Canada as well as the characteristics of students who chose to use or not use education agents. The relationship between students' characteristics and their perceptions and experience with education agents is also explored.

In this section, the research design and participants will be introduced and is followed by an explanation of the survey instrument and data collection process. Next, a detailed description of data analysis is provided including descriptive, inferential, and qualitative analysis based on the responses to the open-ended item. This section ends with ethical considerations related to collecting and storing research data.

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative design. A survey with 37 items, including one open-ended item, was distributed to international students to collect information about their demographic characteristics, self-identified competencies, and general perceptions and specific experiences with education agents.

A survey was selected as the data collection instrument as it aligns with the purpose of the study in that a survey can capture the general opinions or trends in a certain population (Creswell, 2014). It will also add quantitative data to the current literature about education agents in the Canadian context which consists of mainly

qualitative studies. According to Creswell (2014), a survey design describes the trends in or opinions of a sample population in numbers that can be generalized to a wider population. Thus, the findings of this study have the potential to be used by researchers and HEIs in other Canadian jurisdictions.

Data Set

Three distinct sets of data were gathered in this study. The first data set was from the online survey administered through Google Forms and collected by the researcher. The second data set is from hardcopies of the survey distributed by the researcher at two HEIs in Atlantic Canada. The third data set is from hardcopies of the survey distributed by a research assistant at one HEI in Western Canada, which was later sealed and mailed to the researcher via Canada Post.

Recruitment

The link to the online survey was distributed to international students who were encouraged to share the link with their friends. In addition to the affiliated university where the researcher is from, another 21 HEIs across Canada were contacted and ethics approval was obtained from eight of the 21 institutions. International offices of these eight institutions were contacted to assist in distributing the survey to their international students. This resulted in three international offices who agreed to distribute recruitment emails to help with the solicitation of participants.

Hardcopies of the survey were distributed on campus at three HEIs; one college and two universities. The three campuses were chosen to maximize sample diversity as well as geographical convenience. Participants were given the survey and asked to complete the survey while the researcher or research assistant waited.

Participants

The targeted population was current international students or recent international graduates in Canada with or without previous experience dealing with education agents. Students who have not started their study in Canadian HEIs were not included because of their lack of experience of studying in Canada. Presumably, international students develop different views toward the agent services they used after they arrive in the hosting institutions because previous information asymmetry that may have been caused by communication barriers and geographic distances no longer existed after their arrival.

Participants were recruited through a variety of methods, involving both non-random sampling and random sampling. The majority of the participants came from campus-wide recruitment emails distributed by international offices of three HEIs, all from Atlantic Canada. Potential participants self-selected to complete the survey. Another large proportion of participants completed the paper survey on campus. Students were randomly approached in the campus common area and asked to complete the survey. The remainder of participants were solicited in different ways including personal connections, social media platforms, and distribution through the international offices' listserv. I also reached-out to international students through personal connections at a few HEIs as well as Chinese international students' groups such as Facebook groups, WeChat groups, and online forums.

At the beginning of the survey, participants were asked to read the consent letter and if they agreed, they would complete the survey. Participants were also encouraged to forward the survey to other international students to increase the sample size.

Survey Instrumentation

Upon reviewing related literature, there was no survey instrument commonly used to survey international students. Therefore, a survey instrument was created that adapted a few items from three pre-existing surveys in studies on related topics. Survey one was used by The State University of New York to explore students' satisfaction with their agents ("Agent satisfaction survey", n.d.), survey two was from a study on international students' experience with education agents in New Zealand (Yang & Akhtaruzzaman, 2017), and survey three was a study on the use of agents in recruiting Chinese international students (Zhang, 2011). Specifically, two items from the survey one, two items from the survey two, and two items from survey three were adapted to the survey used in this study.

Survey Design

The survey (see Appendix A) consisted of a total of 37 items. Six demographic items (i.e., nationality, university, faculty, age range, source of income, and parents' highest degree) were positioned at the start of the survey and were used to collect information about participants' background. Participants were then asked to self-assess their English competence, academic competence, and financial preparedness. An additional item documented whether participants used agent services or not. Next, for agent-users and agent-knowers, there were 11 items that measured international students' perceptions toward agent businesses that constituted the Perception Scale. Next, three items that documented the name of the agents, agents' relationship with the HEIs students enrolled in, as well as the range of service fees paid to agents were included to solicit more information from participants about the agent service they received. Another set of

11 items measuring experience with education agents constituted the Experience Scale that surveyed agent-users' specific experiences with agents. At the end of the survey was one question that asked participants about reasons for not using education agent services and one open-ended question to provide participants with space to express their experiences in detail that was not otherwise captured in the survey items.

The demographic items were also used as grouping variables to conduct independent sample *t* tests and Analysis of Variances (ANOVA) to test for significant differences in the mean scores based on the Perception and Experience Scales. The self-assessment items were used to document Canada-bound international students' segmentation, as well as determine whether their self-assessed competencies have any impact on their agent-use behavior as well as their perceptions and experiences with education agents.

A 5-point rating scale anchored at each end with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree was used in the survey. This scale was used for three self-assessment items as well as the Perception and Experience Scale items because of its simplicity and efficiency in increasing response rates (Dawes, 2008; Sachdev & Verma, 2004). The Perception Scale measured agent-users and agent-knowers general perception towards the education agent business and the Experience Scale measured agent-users specific experience with the education agent they used during their application process. Seven negatively worded items were included in the survey to correct for acquiescence which is a tendency for a participant to respond favourably to an item without giving much thought to the item (Colosi, 2005).

The survey was designed so that before responding to the 22 items measured using a 5-point response scale, participants had three options based on their individual situation. Agent-*users* were directed to answer all items. Agent-*knowers* only needed to respond to the Perception Scale items. For participants who have never heard about agent businesses, they were to skip all 22 items. Responses from participants who never heard about agent businesses were still valued because they could provide insight into their experiences in applying for overseas HEIs without the support of an agent.

Survey Validity and Reliability

To increase validity of the instrument, the survey was reviewed and revised based on the recommendations of an expert faculty member trained in survey design as well as a doctoral student specializing in quantitative statistics. In addition, the survey was piloted over a week period during which friends and academic peers were asked to give feedback regarding length of the survey and wording. Minor changes were made before the survey was distributed to the larger population of international students.

Reliability of the Perception Scale and Experience Scale were tested using Cronbach's alpha. An alpha coefficient is between 0 and 1; the higher the coefficient, the more reliable the scale (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). This measure of internal consistency resulted in coefficients of 0.767 (Perception Scale), and 0.840 (Experience Scale). Subsequently, the two scales were considered reliable given the minimum coefficient is 0.7 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Data Collection

The survey remained open from October to early December 2019 and resulted in a total of 387 responses from participants across Canada. Two participants left the

survey completely blank. Therefore, the number of participants included in the data analysis was $n = 385$. It was difficult to determine the response rate because the survey was promoted via multiple platforms. However, a sample of 385 participants considered a good sample size at the 95% confidence level (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970).

Data Preparation

Raw data collected via Google Forms was downloaded to an Excel file and then uploaded into SPSS v.25. Additional responses from the paper surveys were entered directly into the SPSS file. The file was named Original Data and was saved as a record. A copy was created to conduct data preparation and other analysis. The raw data were then cleaned ensuring that responses fell within the acceptable range (i.e., 1 – 5). A few items were regrouped to increase sample size in each category. For example, responses to D01 (What is your nationality?) included a variety of countries, among which there were countries that had only one sample (i.e., Turkey, Syria, Singapore, etc.). When using D01 as a grouping variable to conduct inferential analysis, answers were regrouped into broader categories (i.e., Asia, Africa, Americas, Europe, or Unspecified) to increase the sample size in each grouping variable. A list of the variables that were regrouped can be found in Appendix B.

Data Analysis

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were calculated on all items. First, frequency and percentage of the demographic items including participants' nationality, university, faculty, age range, source of income, and parents' highest degree were computed to provide a general participant profile. Following, the mean and standard deviation of the

three self-assessment items measuring participants' self-reported English competence, academic competence, and financial preparedness were calculated to provide information about segmentation of Canada-bound international students. The frequency and percent were also calculated for items measuring: students who used agent services, students who did not use agents but have heard about the business, and of students who have never heard about agent businesses to examine the prevalence of agent-use among Canada-bound international students. In addition, descriptive information about the education agents was calculated based on three items: name of the agent's company, agent's relationship with the colleges/universities applied for, service fees paid to agents. For those who did not use education agents, an additional item surveyed their reasons of not using agents. Frequency and percent of all scale items (see Appendix C) were also computed as well as the mean (*M*) and standard deviation (*SD*) for all response scales.

Inferential Statistics

The seven negatively worded items were reverse coded before calculating the Cronbach's alpha for the Perception and Experience Scales. Both scales had coefficients higher than 0.7, indicating strong internal consistency in the scales (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Next, inferential statistics were calculated using several independent sample *t*-test and one-way ANOVA.

An independent sample *t*-test was used to compare the mean scores of two different independent groups (Green & Salkind, 2004). To perform *t*-tests, two variables are used: one grouping variable which divides the groups into a maximum of two independent groups and one dependent variable representing participants' responses to a group of items measuring a specific construct (Creswell, 2014). In this study, *t*-tests were

performed multiple times using various grouping variables (Table 1). The outcome of a *t*-test determines whether there is any statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the two groups (e.g., whether agent-users and non-agent-users differ significantly in their perceptions towards the education agents). There are three assumptions to be met so that *t*-test results can be trusted: normal distribution of dependent variable in the two groups, equal variances of the normally distributed dependent variable, and random sample and independent groups (Green & Salkind, 2004). These assumptions were checked and met using the explore function in SPSS and survey design.

Table 1

Variables for Independent Sample t-Tests

Grouping Variables	Dependent Variables
Agent-users/agent-knowers	Perception Scale
Asian students/Non-Asian students	Perception Scale, Experience Scale
Atlantic students/Non-Atlantic students	Perception Scale, Experience Scale
Family supported/Non-family supported	Perception Scale, Experience Scale
Education students/Non-education students	Perception Scale, Experience Scale

The null hypothesis for independent sample *t*-test was that would be no significant difference between the two groups regarding the dependent variable. When the *p* value is smaller than the chosen alpha level (i.e., 0.05), the null hypothesis should be rejected, meaning there is a significant difference between the two groups. Effect sizes for any significant results in independent sample *t*-test were computed using Cohen's *d*, Cohen's $d = (M_2 - M_1) / SD_{pooled.}$ Cohen (1988) suggested that 0.2 indicated small effect size, 0.5 indicated a medium effect size, and 0.8 represented a large effect size.

ANOVA was then used to compare the variance or variability measured using the perception and experiences scales between the groups with the variability within each of the groups (Field, 2013; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Several ANOVA were selected over the more complex multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), which allows for the comparison of more than one dependent variable, given that the sample size was not likely to meet the assumption underpinning MANOVA. This assumption requires a minimum of 20 responses in each cell given that some groups were underrepresented in comparison to others (e.g., there were far more participants from Asia than other countries and more participants in the younger age groups than older age groups) (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Although MANOVA would have been the preferred statistical analysis because it controls for inflated Type I errors (Huck, 2012), the same comparisons can be made using several ANOVA with a more stringent alpha value. Using a technique known as the Bonferroni adjustment involves dividing the alpha value by the number of separate ANOVA tests. For example, the alpha value of 0.05 was divided by 2 (0.05/2 = 0.025) for analysis involving the two dependent variables (i.e., Perception Scale and Experience Scale). The new alpha value of 0.025 is then used as the cut-point to determine whether the comparisons were significant or not whereby *p* values less than 0.025 would be considered significant.

The ANOVA computes an *F* ratio which is the variance between the two groups divided by the variance within the groups. A large *F* ratio indicates there is variability between the grouping variables which is influenced by the independent variable as measured using the perception or experiences scale. ANOVA requires a minimum of two

variables: the grouping variable (with three or more groups) and the dependent variable. There are several assumptions underpinning significance testing.

The first is *levels of measurement* which requires the dependent variable(s) to be interval level meaning there is an equal distance assumed between the levels of measurement (i.e., on the 5-point rating scale, 5 is one larger than 4 which is one larger than 3 and so forth). It also requires that response scale be a continuous variable (i.e., 1 to 5) rather than discrete categories. The second assumption involves a *random sample*; however, this is often not the case when the sample is large (Creswell, 2014) but the assumption is still met given that the data is considered robust. Although the sampling technique used in the online survey began with a stratified component to reach participants in different geographic regions in Canada, it can also be characterized as a snowball sample given that participants were asked to forward the request to complete the survey to their friends. The in-person survey was a random survey given that the survey was given to random people in a common area on campus. The third assumption is *independent observations* which required participants to complete the survey independently of one another and thereby not allow for groupthink. The fourth assumption is *normal distribution* of the dependent variable for each group which is checked using the explore function in SPSS and is typically met when there is a large sample size (n = 385) (Bewick, Cheek, & Ball, 2004; Green & Salkind, 2004). Skewness statistic and kurtosis statistic were also examined as tests for normality and if both are smaller than the absolute value of 2.0, normality can be assumed (George & Mallery, 2010). The last assumption underpinning ANOVA is *homogeneity of variance* which assumes that the degree of variance in one group is the same as the degree in the

comparison group. Given that the participants surveyed were all international students studying in Canada it is likely that the degree of variance in their responses is the same. Levene's test for equality of variance was used to test for this assumption. In this case, the test must be greater than 0.05 to indicate the variance between groups is the same. The null hypothesis for the ANOVA was no statistically significant difference among the groups being examined (Green & Salkind, 2004).

When examining the ANOVA results, if the *p* value was smaller than 0.05 or 0.025 when there were two dependent variables, the null hypothesis would be rejected. If there was a significant difference, follow-up tests were conducted to determine if there is any practical significance using a post-hoc analysis (Green & Salkind, 2004). The post-hoc analysis used in this study was Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference test. In the event there was a statistically significant difference, the effect size was calculated using eta squared (η^2), $Eta^2 = SS_{effect} / SS_{total,}$ to determine any practical significance (Norouzian & Plonsky, 2018). Cohen (1988)'s classification system was applied: 0.01 = small, 0.06 = medium, and 0.14 = large to interpret the degree of the effect.

In this study, the ANOVA was conducted to find significant differences on the Perception Scale and Experience Scale using several independent variables (Table 2).

Table 2

Variables for ANOVA

Grouping Variables	Dependent Variables
Nationality Region	Perception Scale, Experience Scale
University Region	Perception Scale, Experience Scale
Faculty	Perception Scale, Experience Scale
Age Range	Perception Scale, Experience Scale
Source of Income	Perception Scale, Experience Scale
Parents' highest degree	Perception Scale, Experience Scale
English competence	Perception Scale, Experience Scale
Academic competence	Perception Scale, Experience Scale
Financial preparedness	Perception Scale, Experience Scale
Recognition of Agent-HEI relationship	Experience Scale
Service fee paid to agents	Experience Scale

Qualitative Data

The analysis of the open-ended item was informed by the work of Atkins and Wallace (2012) and Creswell (2014). The responses to paper surveys were added to the Excel file generated by Google Forms, which has all the responses collected online. All responses were then read by the researcher to identify common themes. In the case of Mandarin responses, the researcher translated the comments that were presented in the findings into English. The emerging themes were then selected based on four characteristics: illuminative (help answer research question), indicative (suggest something important), representative (reveals commonality in data), and illustrative (fully depicts the idea conveyed by the qualitative data) (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). Coloured coding was used for data visualization, which was efficient given the small volume of qualitative data collected from the one open-ended item. All responses were read several times to ensure the accuracy of the coding. Selected themes and supporting quotations were then presented in the qualitative findings.

In the interpretation process of the data, the three directions provided by Creswell (2014) included the researcher's personal interpretation based on their own knowledge, comparison between findings and previous literature, and suggesting unforeseen questions, were frequently referred to. My perspectives as a former education agent were used to understand the data. Themes that resonated with literature review were highlighted and discussed. New questions were raised to provide future research directions.

Validity and reliability of the interpretation of the qualitative data were paid attention to as well. As noted by Creswell (2014), a few strategies could be implemented to increase validity. In this study, the researcher triangulated the qualitative findings with personal experiences and previous literature. As for reliability, the transcripts and themes were checked several times to discern mistakes.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher has undergone the required ethical training according to institutional guidelines. Ethical approvals were obtained before requesting institutional resources from participating HEIs.

Data Storage

The survey data collected using Google Forms were stored temporarily on Google server during the open period of the survey. Once the survey was closed, data was downloaded to a password-protected desktop that belongs to the researcher's affiliated university and will be destroyed after a 5-year period of storage. The cloud-based data was deleted. The hardcopies of the paper format survey are stored in a secured cabinet in

an office located at Faculty of Education of the researcher's affiliated university. It will be destroyed after five years.

Consent and Anonymity

Participants were asked to read the consent form and the act of engaging in the survey was their consent to participate in the study. The front page of the online survey asked participants if they agreed to participate in the survey to press the "next" button, which took them to the survey items, otherwise, the survey terminated. No information that could have be used to identify the participants was collected.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

This section is organized into descriptive findings, inferential findings and qualitative findings. The descriptive section contains a description of participants' demographic characteristics and patterns in responses related to the scales measuring their perceptions and experiences with education agents. The inferential findings were drawn from independent sample *t* tests, which were used to compare difference between two groups, and ANOVA which was used to compare difference among three or more groups. The qualitative data extracted from the open-ended item was themed and coded manually into four emerging categories.

Descriptive Findings

In this section, descriptive findings were provided for demographic items (i.e., nationality, university region, faculty enrolled in, age range, primary source of income, and parents' highest degree), three self-assessment items (i.e., English competence, academic competence, financial preparedness), agent-related items (i.e., name of the agent, service fee, recognition of HEI-agent relationship), and scale items (i.e., Perception Scale and Experience Scale).

Demographic Items

Nationality

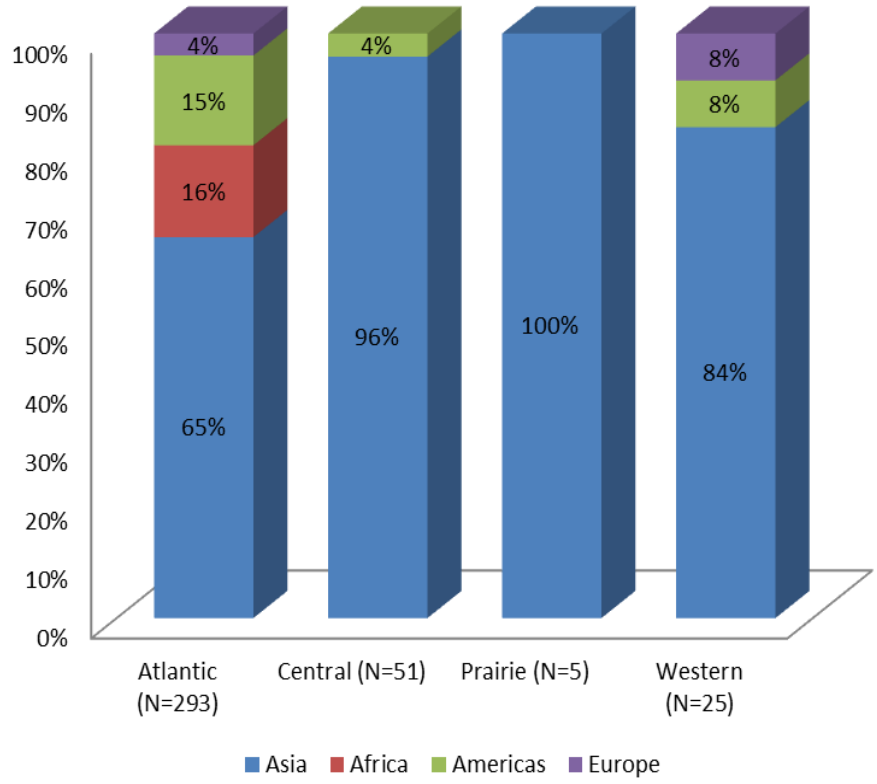
Nearly half (47%) of the participants were from China. Other countries that have strong representations included Vietnam (5%), United States (4%), Nigeria (4%), India (4%), Bahama (3%), and Japan (3%). In terms of regional representation, Asia had the strongest presence (70%) while Americas and Africa each had 13%.

University Region

Participants came from a variety of HEIs, representing four regions of Canada. Specifically, 77% participants were from Atlantic Canada, 13% from Central Canada, 1% from the Canadian Prairies, and 7% from Western Canada. A further breakdown of the distribution of participants in each region by their nationality region can be found in Figure 4. Due to the strong participation rate in Atlantic Canada, students' nationalities in this region are more diversified given the larger sample. Nationally, Asian students constituted 70.6% of all participants while African students (12.7%), students from the Americas (13%), European students (3.4%), and unspecified (0.3%) constituted the rest of the participants.

Figure 4

University Region by Nationality Region



Faculty

Common academic disciplines pursued by participants included Education, Business, Arts, Science, and Mathematics and Computer Science. A detailed description of the distribution of participants in each faculty can be found in Table 3.

Table 3

Distribution of Participants in Faculty

Faculty	Frequency	Percentage
Education	100	26.7%
Business	67	17.9%
Arts	36	9.6%
Science	35	9.3%
Mathematics and Computer Science	29	7.7%
Agriculture and Animal Science	22	5.9%
Engineering	14	3.7%

Age Range

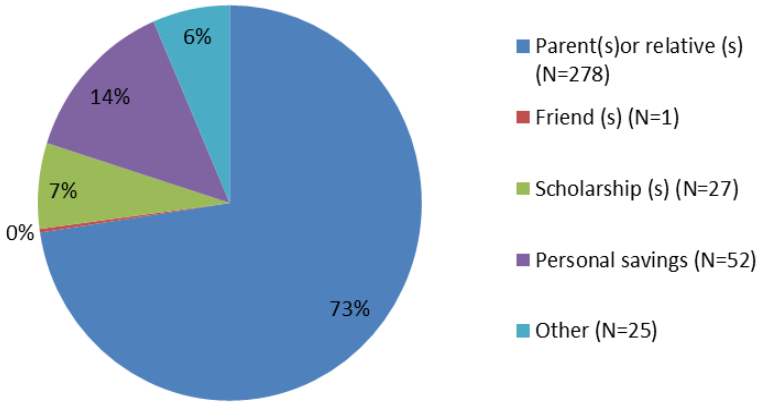
41.5% of the participants were in their early 20s, followed by those who were less than 20 years old (29.7%) and those who were between 26 and 30 years old (15%). The remainder was participants who were over 31 years old. These age ranges are aligned with typical age ranges found in undergraduate (i.e., in their 20s), graduate (i.e., 26 – 30), and second career students (i.e., 31 and older).

Source of Income

As shown in Figure 5, the majority of participants (73%) indicated that their main source of income for overseas study was their parents or relatives. Personal savings came second with 14% of participants identified it as primary source of income.

Figure 5

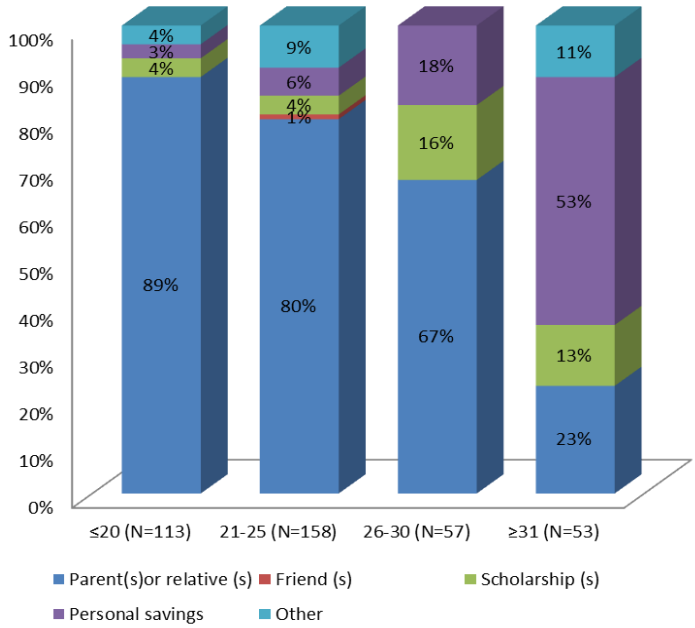
Source of Income



A crosstab of participants' age range and source of income showed that younger participants were more likely to rely on parents as sources of income. On the other hand, participants who were over 31 years old tended to use their personal savings to study abroad suggesting an investment in a second career (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Source of Income by Age Range



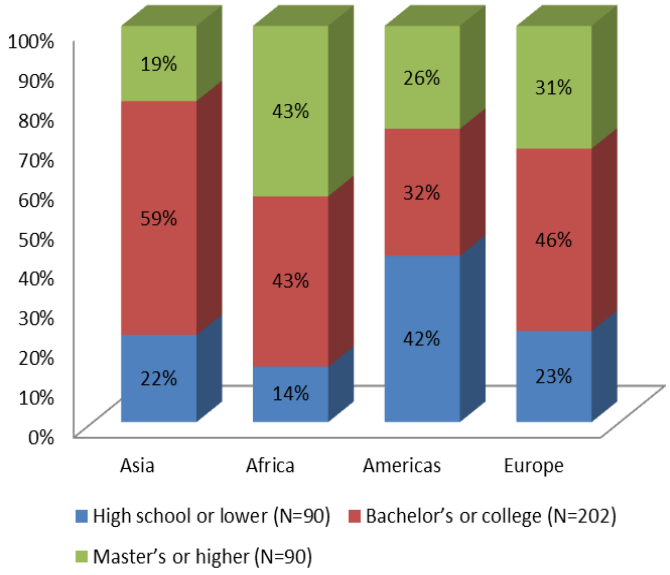
Parents' Highest Degree

When reviewing participants' answers to item 6 surveying the highest degree obtained by students' parents, responses revealed that slightly over half (52.7%) of the international students' parents held a bachelor's or college degree, while almost a quarter (23.4%) of the international students were first-generation college/university students. The remaining participants came from families with a Masters' degree or higher level degrees (i.e., 23.4%).

A crosstab of the national region and parents' highest degree level was conducted to examine regional differences. The findings (Figure 7) showed that African students had the highest ratio (43%) of parents with master's or higher degrees and lowest ratio (14%) of parents with high school or lower degrees, while participants from Americas had the highest ratio (42%) of parents with high school or lower degrees. In comparison, 59% of Asian students have parents with bachelor's or college level degrees.

Figure 7

Parents' Highest Degree by Nationality Region



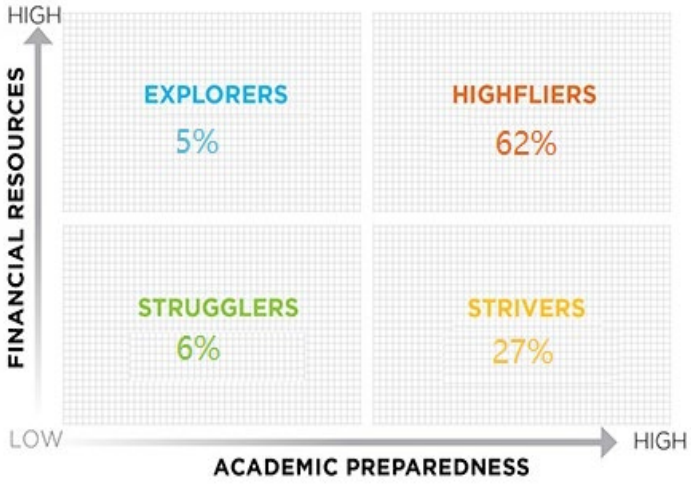
Self-assessment Items

Most participants rated themselves highly regarding their English competence (M = 4.37; SD = 0.88) and academic competence (M = 4.20; SD = 0.86). The third item (S03. I can afford the tuition and living costs in Canada), however, deserved a closer look as it has the lowest mean of 3.51 and highest standard deviation of 1.18 in comparison to the other two items, indicating weak agreement and varied opinions. A further breakdown of the data revealed that 20% of participants strongly disagreed or disagreed with this statement while 26% of the participants remained neutral. The data suggests that international students in Canada are comfortable in their English and academic ability but hold a less positive opinion regarding their financial preparedness. However, it should be noted that self-assessment has certain subjectivity and subsequently, participants' assessment of the English and academic competency might not be as strong as participants indicated.

As shown in Figure 8, based on the assessment items that ask students to rate themselves regarding financial preparedness (F) and academic competence (A), a large part (62%) of the participants are what Choudaha et al. (2013) classified as highfliers (high F/high A). Strivers were the second percentage of participants with 27% of participants self-identified as having high academic competence but low financial preparedness. Strugglers (low F/low A) counted for 6% while explorers (high F/low A) counted for 5%.

Figure 8

Segmentation of Canada-bound International Students



Regarding English ability, the distribution of participants who considered themselves as having low, middle, or high English competence in Atlantic Canada, Central Canada, and Western Canada, was surprisingly similar and positive. On average, around 85% participants in each region rated themselves as highly competent English users.

When examining the distribution in terms of region of origin, it was discovered that participants from the Americas (98%) and Europe (100%) almost unanimously rated themselves as highly competent English users probably because English is a first or commonly spoken language at home. In comparison, the ratio for Asian participants is 82% and African students 84%. Upon checking the tendency of using education agents by region of origin with an added layer of English competence through a crosstab, it was revealed while 57.6% and 43.9% of competent English users in Asia and Africa used agent services, only 8.2% and 7.7% of competent English users in Americas and Europe used agent services. It is possible that Asian and African participants' English ability is

not as strong as reported, which has led them to rely on the support of agents or it could also be that students from Asia and Africa do not have access to the information required to apply to overseas programs because of issues with internet restrictions.

Agent-use among International Students in Canada and Agent Fee Paid

Nearly half of all participants (46.8%) used agent services in the completion of their college/university application. Of the participants who did not use an agent, 27% of them indicated they had heard of agent businesses but did not use agent services and 26.2% of the participants had never heard of the agent businesses. Among the 46.8% of agent-users, 17.5% of participants knew that their agents worked on behalf of the HEIs they applied to, 7.5% indicated that their agents had no connection with the HEIs they applied to, and 21.8% did not know about the relationship between their agents and the HEIs they applied to. When studying the agent fee range, about a quarter (24.4%) of participants reported paying between $1,000 and $3,000[1] to their agents. 22.2% of participants paid $3,000 to $5,000, while 17.8% paid over $5,000. In comparison, 16.7% paid less than $1,000 to their agents while 12.2% received free agent service whereby the agent fee was most likely paid by the HEI. Of those who received free services (n = 22), 13 were aware that their agents had contracts with the universities they applied to, while nine did not know the relationship between their agents and the universities they applied to. Next, examples of the agents used by participants are provided, followed by an explanation of the group differences regarding agent use by nationality, faculty, age range, source of income, parents' highest degree, and self-assessed competencies.

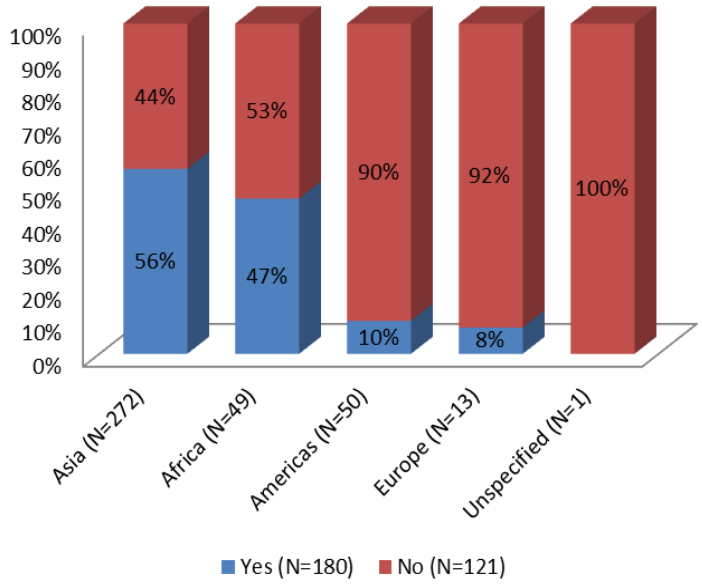
[1] Currency used in this thesis is shown in Canadian dollars

Examples of Education Agents. 104 agent-users provided 52 company names of their agents, among which five companies were used by five or more participants. The five companies were: New Oriental Education and Technology Group, Inc. (n = 17), EIC Education (n = 10), JJL Overseas Education (n = 9), Shinyway Education (n = 8), and IDP (n = 5). The first four companies are Chinese companies while the last company is based in Australia. It appeared that Chinese agencies had a large market share among the participants in this study, the majority (70%) of whom were Asians. In addition, five participants provided the names of two agencies, indicating the use of sub-agents.

Nationality. Figure 9 shows that among the participants of this study, Asian students had a higher tendency to use education agents while students from the Americas and Europe used much less agent services. Specifically, Vietnamese (75%), Chinese (61%), and Japanese (60%) were frequent agent-users, while Americans (10%) and Bhamians (8%) were much less likely to use agents during application.

Figure 9

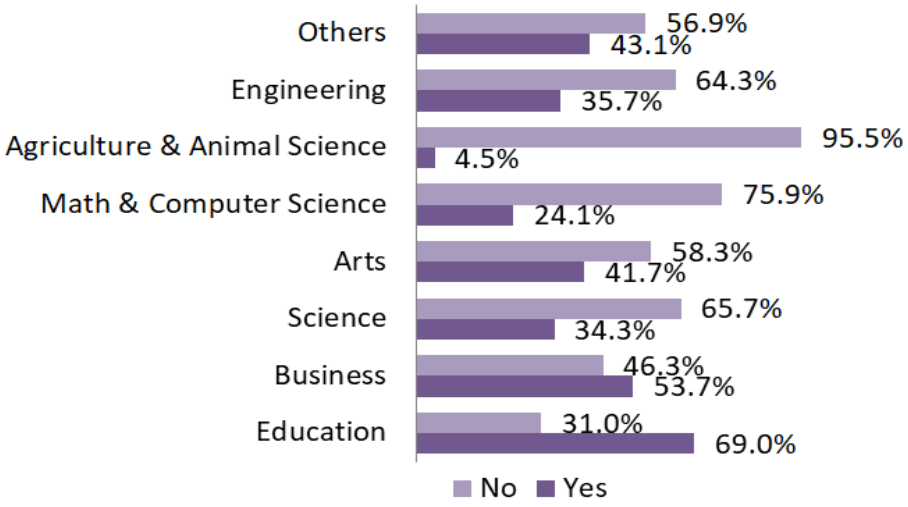
Agent-use by Nationality



Faculty. A further breakdown of the agent-users and non-agent-users in terms of faculty representation showed that, participants from the Faculty of Education had the highest rate (69%) of using education agents, while students from Agriculture and Animal Science (4.5%) had the lowest rate of using education agents (Figure 10).

Figure 10

Agent-use by Faculty



Age Range. A crosstab of age and agent-use revealed that the highest ratio (60%) of using agents existed among participants of 26 to 30 years old while participants over 31 years old were the least likely group (34%) to use education agents (Table 4).

Table 4

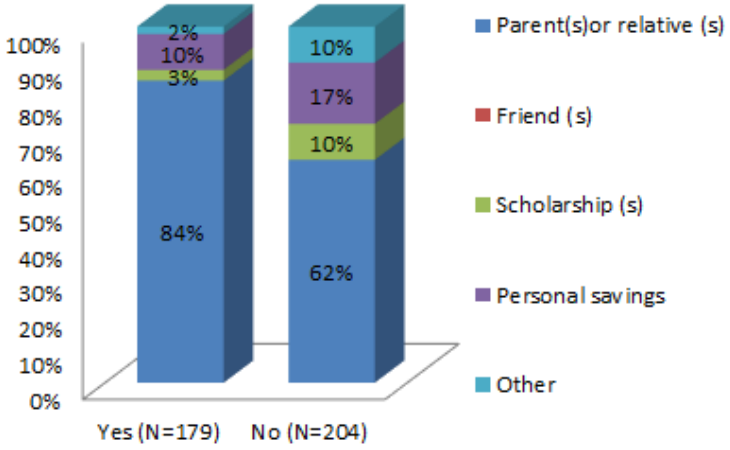
Agent Use by Age Range

Age range	Agent-users (n = 179)	Non-agent-users (n = 202)
≤ 20 (n = 113)	44%	56%
21-25 (n = 158)	49%	51%
26-30 (n = 57)	60%	40%
≥ 31 (n = 53)	34%	66%

Source of Income. Figure 11 showed that participants who did not use education agents during the application process had a more diversified source of income in comparison with participants whose primary source of income was their parents or relatives.

Figure 11

Agent-use by Source of Income



Parents' Highest Degree. Table 5 revealed that over half of the participants who came from families whose parents held a Bachelor's degree or higher used education agent services during application, while this ratio for participants from other two types of families with High school or lower educational level and Master's or higher education level was lower.

Table 5

Agent Use by Parents' Highest Degree

Agent use	High School or lower (n = 90)	Bachelor's or College (n = 203)	Master's or higher (n = 90)
Yes (n = 179)	40%	53%	40%
No (n = 204)	60%	47%	60%
Total (n = 303)	100%	100%	100%

Upon checking the distribution of participants in each level of English competence, academic competence, as well as financial stability, it was revealed that participants from families with high school or lower degrees tended to rate themselves lower while participants from families with master's or higher degrees tended to rate themselves higher (Figure 12; 13; 14). This suggests that students from families with higher social economic status tend to have (self-reported) higher English and academic competence and greater financial preparedness.

Figure 12

English Competence by Parents' Highest Degree

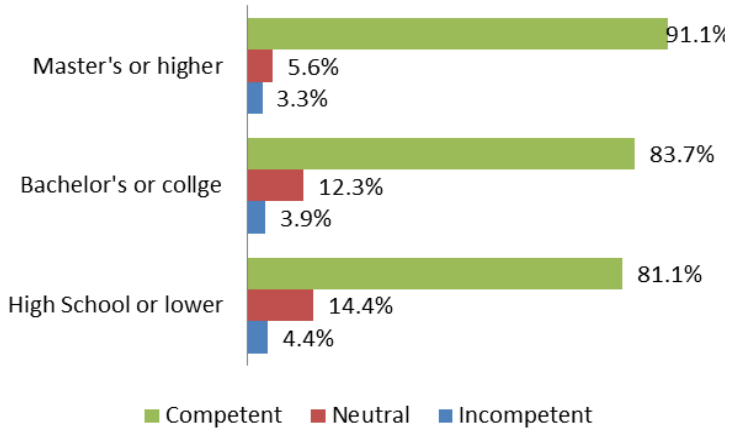


Figure 13

Academic Competence by Parents' Highest Degree

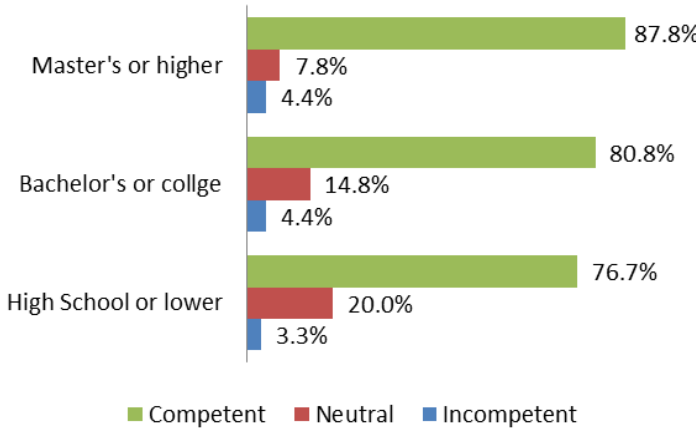
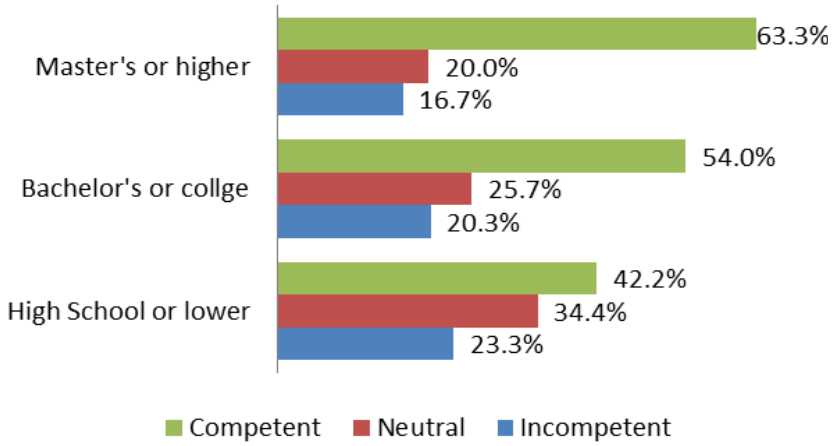


Figure 14

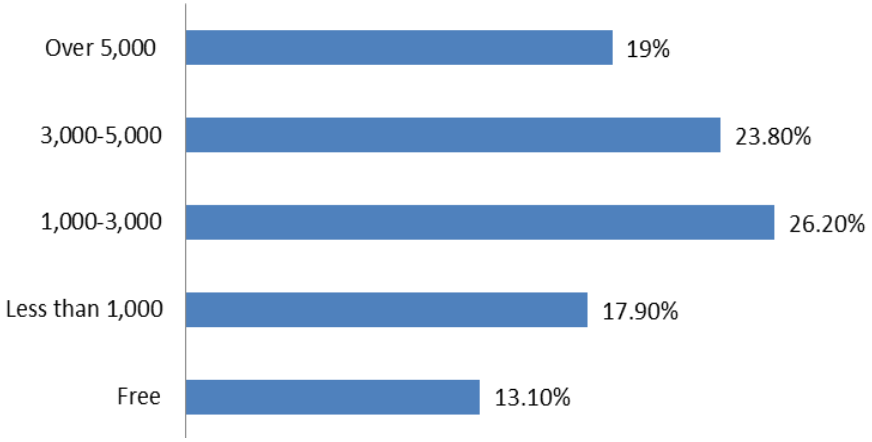
Financial Preparedness by Parents' Highest Degree



Service Fee. The findings in this study regarding the service fees paid for education agent services revealed that around two thirds of agent-users paid over $3,000 while only 13.1% received free services (Figure 15). This is in line with previous literature which suggested that paying over $3,000 or even over $5,000 was common among agent-users, especially for Asian students (Roy, 2017; Zhang, 2011).

Figure 15

Service Fee Range



Recognition of HEI-agent Relationship. Upon examining item Q13 (What was your agent's relationship with the colleges/universities you applied for?), it was revealed that 37.4% of the agent-users were aware of the connection between their agents and the HEIs they applied for; 16.1% indicated that the two were not connected; 46.6% admitted that they did not know the connection between their agents and the HEIs they applied for.

A crosstab of service fee range and recognition of HEI-agent relationship revealed that it was not uncommon for participants to pay institution-sponsored agents for their services (Table 6). In comparison to the other two groups, participants who used institution-sponsored agents had a lower proportion (35.5%) in spending over $3,000 on agents. In addition, none of the participants who hired independent agents received any free service. There were, however, agents whose relationship with HEIs was unknown to the participants but offered free services to participants. It is suspected that agents who provided free services were actually institution-sponsored agents but did not disclose the relationship to the participants; however, further research is needed to corroborate this hypothesis.

Table 6

Service Fee Range vs. Recognition of HEI-Agent Relationship

	Connected (n =62)	Not connected (n = 27)	Unknown (n = 76)
Free (n =22)	21%		11.80%
Less than $3,000 ($n$ = 74)	43.50%	55.60%	42.10%
Over $3,000 ($n$ = 69)	35.50%	44.40%	46.10%

Perception Scale and Experience Scale. The Perception Scale had an overall mean of 2.88 (SD = 0.62), indicating a slightly negative general perception towards

education agents. Experience Scale received a slightly higher than neutral feedback (*M* = 3.2; SD = 0.78), indicating participants' experiences was not overly favourable.

In terms of group difference (Table 7), agent-users (*n* = 170; *M* = 2.98; *SD* = 0 .64) had a slightly more positive perception towards agents than non-agent-users (*n* = 93; *M* = 2.69; *SD* = 0.55). Specifically, for Q01 (It is better for international students to use education agents rather than applying directly to Canadian colleges/universities), Q02 (Education agents are more accessible than the admission offices of Canadian colleges/universities due to time zone issues, language problems, cultural differences, etc), Q07 (Students' well-being is protected in the student-agent relationship), Q08 (Education agents have great influence on international students' choice of overseas study), and Q11 (I would recommend others to use education agents), agent-users all rated higher than non-agent-users while for Q03 (Agents' service fees are too high), Q05 (Education agents are not trust-worthy), and Q10 (Canadian colleges/universities should not work with education agents), agent-users showed higher disagreement than non-agent-users.

Table 7

Mean Score of Perception Scale items

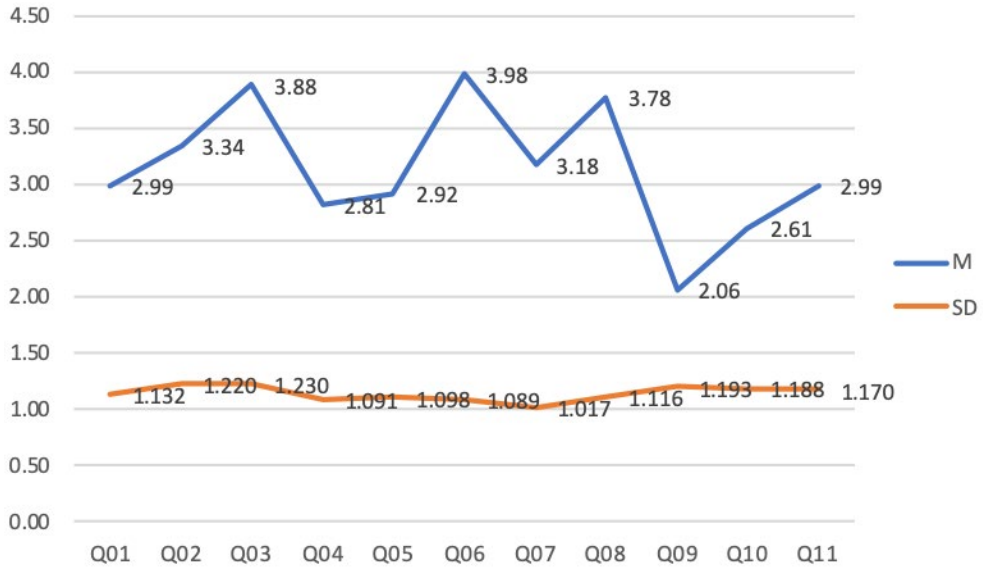
	Agent-users (n = 170)	Agent-knowers (n = 93)
Q01. It is better for international students to use education agents rather than applying directly to Canadian colleges/universities.	3.25	2.52
Q02. Education agents are more accessible than the admission offices of Canadian colleges/universities due to time zone issues, language problems, cultural differences, etc.	3.51	3.06
Q03. Agents' service fees are too high.	3.83	3.96
Q04. Agents' services are worth the price.	2.89	2.68
Q05. Education agents are not trust-worthy.	2.87	3.01
Q06. The education agent business needs more regulation.	3.99	3.96
Q07. Students' well-being is protected in the student-agent relationship.	3.34	2.88
Q08. Education agents have great influence on international students' choice of overseas study.	3.91	3.53
Q09. Education agents should replace admission offices of Canadian colleges/universities.	2.10	2.00
Q10. Canadian colleges/universities should not work with education agents.	2.50	2.80
Q11. I would recommend others to use education agents.	3.17	2.67

The line graph in Figure 16 provides pictorial representation of participants' responses to the perception scale as measured using items Q1 to Q11. Participants agreed on Q03 (Agents' service fees are too high), Q06 (The education agent business needs more regulation), and Q08 (Education agents have great influence on international students' choice of overseas study). The item that received the lowest agreement is Q09 (Education agents should replace admission offices of Canadian colleges/universities),

suggesting that there is a place for education agents in the recruitment of international students for HEIs.

Figure 16

Mean and Standard Deviation of Perception Scale items



Similarly, Table 8 shows the mean and standard deviation of items that measure participants' specific experience with education agents. Although, the Experience Scale (n = 163; M = 3.2; SD = 0.78) had a slightly more responses, the mean scores were not at the positive end of the response scale (i.e., 5 = strongly agree) indicating little satisfaction with the services they received. Q15 (My agent significantly influenced my choice of Canadian colleges/universities) had the highest mean of 3.61 (SD = 1.365) while Q17 (My agent did not improve my efficiency during application) had the lowest mean of 2.50 (SD = 1.171), indicating a recognition of the importance and helpfulness of education agents' services.

Table 8

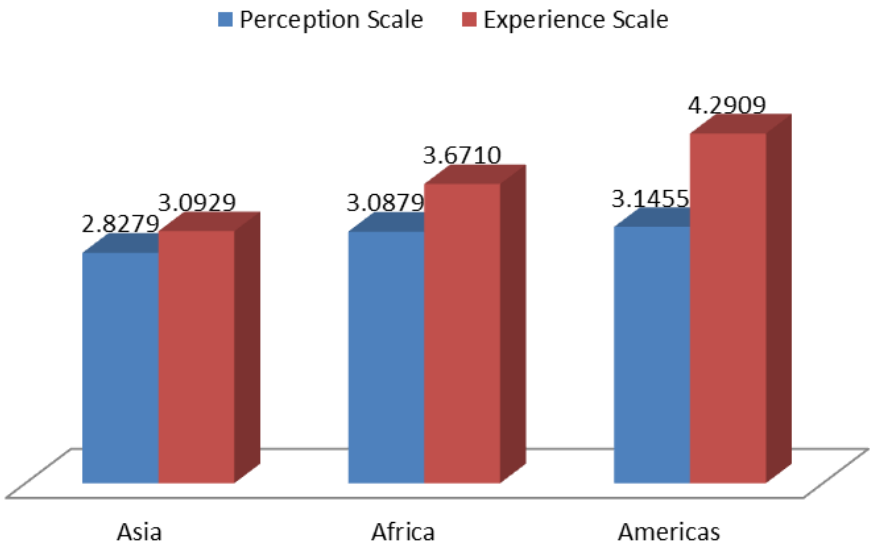
Mean and Standard Deviation of Experience Scale items

	M	*SD*
Q15. My agent significantly influenced my choice of Canadian colleges/universities.	3.61	1.365
Q16. My agent provided me services that the admission offices of Canadian colleges/universities were unable to provide.	3.05	1.166
Q17. My agent did not improve my efficiency during application.	2.50	1.171
Q18. My agent did not increase my chance of being accepted into Canadian colleges/universities.	2.81	1.264
Q19. My agent gave me accurate information regarding the academic experiences (programs, courses, assignments, etc.) in Canada.	3.12	1.200
Q20. My agent gave me accurate information regarding the life experiences (housing, shopping, commuting, etc.) in Canada.	2.92	1.229
Q21. I am concerned with some unethical practices of my agent.	2.65	1.325
Q22. I am satisfied with the work competence of my agent.	3.25	1.210
Q23. I am satisfied with the price of my agent's services.	2.91	1.342
Q24. Overall, I am satisfied with the services provided by my agent.	3.34	1.234
Q25. I would recommend my agent to a friend.	3.10	1.409

When examining the mean scores of the Perception Scale and Experience Scale grouped by nationality region, it was revealed that participants from the Americas had the highest mean scores on both scales while Asians had the lowest mean scores, indicating that participants from the Americas had more positive perceptions and experiences with education agents in comparison to Asian participants (Figure 17).

Figure 17

Mean Score of Scales by Nationality Region



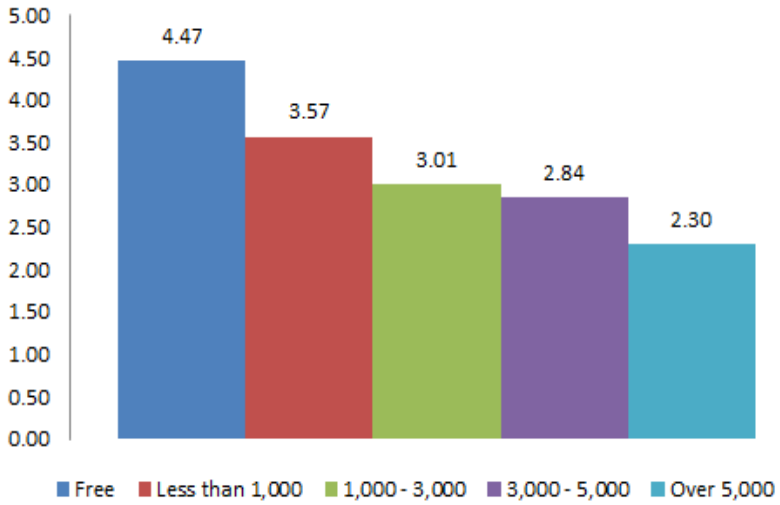
Satisfaction. Among the 385 participants, 180 participants noted that they used education agents during the application process. The mean score on the Experience Scale revealed that agent-users on average only had a slightly more positive experiences (M = 3.2; SD = 0.78). The mean score (M = 3.14, SD = 1.16) computed by adding up a set of four items surveying satisfaction with agents (i.e., Q22. I am satisfied with the work competence of my agent; Q23. I am satisfied with the price of my agent's service; Q24. Overall, I am satisfied with the services provided by my agent; Q25. I would recommend my agent to a friend) and then divided by 4, further confirmed the low satisfaction with education services. Only half (49.7%) of the agent-users had a mean score greater than three which indicating the dissatisfaction by the remaining 50% of participants.

In addition, participants who paid the highest service fees (over $3,000) had the lowest mean (M = 2.73; SD = 0.50) on the Experience Scale while those who paid less than $1,000 had a much higher mean of 3.67 (SD = 0.70). Upon checking the four items

that explicitly examined participants' satisfaction with education agents, it was found that the more the participants paid to education agents, the lower the mean scores. The four items were totaled and then divided by four, resulting in a new mean score. Detailed mean scores of participants who paid various amounts to education agents can be found in Figure 18. This finding resonates with a study on 5,880 United States bound international students, which reported that dissatisfaction with education agents increased as the service fee increased (Roy, 2017).

Figure 18

Satisfaction Level by Service Fee



Reasons for not Using Education Agents. Of the non-agent-users (n = 205), 184 provided a reason for not using agent services. Self-confidence was the top reason for not using agent services, with over a quarter of participants (27.7%) selected this response. Issues related to cost was the second most recognized reason for not using education agents, with 22.8% of participants selected this option.

Inferential Findings

Independent Sample t-test Results

Several independent sample *t* tests were performed using the grouping variables with two categories and the perception and experience scale. Assumptions for *t* tests were checked and only those that met all assumptions were presented in this section. It was revealed that Asian students ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 0.74$) had a less positive experience towards education agents in comparison to that of non-Asian students and this difference was statistically significant [$M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.72$, $t\ (165) = -4.626$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -0.972$]. The effect size for this analysis ($d = 0.972$) was found to exceed Cohen's convention for a large effect ($d = .80$), indicating a rather large effect of this group difference (Huck, 2012). Another statistically significant difference with the Experience Scale related to the faculty where participants were from. Participants from Faculty of Education ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.69$) had a less positive experience with education agents in comparison to participants from other faculties [$M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.79$, $t\ (161) = -3.369$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -0.542$]. The effect size for this analysis ($d = 0.542$) was found to exceed Cohen's convention for a medium effect ($d = .50$), indicating a medium effect for of this group difference (Huck, 2012).

ANOVA Results

ANOVA results revealed a few grouping variables that contributed statistically significant differences in the mean scores of different groups on the Perception Scale and Experience Scale. ANOVA tests were performed using several grouping variables including the six demographic items, three self-assessment items, and two items that related to specific agent use (i.e., service fee and recognition of HEI-agent relationship).

The findings included here were those that met the assumptions and had practical significance as measured by η^2. Follow-up tests were conducted to evaluate pairwise differences among the means using Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference, a test that assumes equal variances among the three groups (Green & Salkind, 2004).

Four grouping variables, including service fee, age range, financial preparedness, and recognition of HEI-agent relationship, resulted in significant differences on the Perception Scale and Experience Scale. The sample used to compare the mean scores among different age range groups on Perception Scale was agent-users and agent-knowers, while the remainder of the tests used agent-users as the population.

Service Fee. Two separate ANOVA tests were conducted to compare service fee with perception towards education agents as measured by the Perception Scale and experience with education agents as measured by the Experience Scale. The grouping variable, service fee, included three categories: free, less than $3,000, and over $3,000. The dependent variables were the Perception Scale and Experience Scale. The descriptive statistics of the two ANOVA tests can be found in Table 9. Each of the three groups differed significantly from each other on the Perception Scale, [F (2, 158) = 22.092, p = 0.000]. The practical significance was measured using eta squared, η^2, and was found to be strong, given that the service fee accounted for 21.9% of the variance of the Perception Scale (Huck, 2012). For the Experience Scale, the ANOVA was also significant, [F (2, 158) = 19.727, p = 0.000] and each category was statistically significant from the other. The effect size of this difference, as assessed by η^2, was strong, with the service fee factor accounting for 20% of the variance of the Experience Scale (Huck, 2012).

Table 9

ANOVA Descriptive Statistics (Service Fee)

Service Fee	Perception Scale			Experience Scale		
	n	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*
Free	21	3.6710	.70622	21	4.0043	.72868
Less than $3,000	70	3.0117	.59561	70	3.2571	.72661
Over $3,000	70	2.7286	.50307	70	2.9104	.67863

Age Range versus Perception Scale and Experience Scale. One-way ANOVA tests were computed to compare the mean scores on the two scales across the four age groups of participants, including ≤ 20 years old, 21 to 25, 26 to 30, and ≥ 31 years old. The dependent variable were the two scales. The descriptive statistics of the two ANOVA tests are reported in Table 10. There was a significant difference in perception towards education agents between the four groups, [F (3, 257) = 5.938, p = 0.001] where only participants who were 20 years or younger had statistically significant differences from the other three age groups. The effect size (η^2 = 0.065) was considered medium (Huck, 2012). The four age groups also differed significantly on levels of experience, [F (3, 162) = 4.291, p = 0.006] where the 20-yearolds or younger held statistically different (i.e., more positive) experiences than two other groups: 21 to 25, 26 to 30. The effect size (η^2 = 0.074) was considered medium (Huck, 2012).

Table 10

ANOVA Descriptive Statistics (Age Range)

	Perception Scale			Experience Scale		
	n	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*
≤ 20	71	3.1268	.65834	46	3.5257	.84195
21-25	106	2.8045	.58295	74	3.0663	.66214
26-30	44	2.7335	.52878	29	3.0063	.76174
≥ 31	40	2.7568	.62524	17	3.2460	.86767

Financial Preparedness versus Experience Scale. A one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences in experience with education agents between the three groups separated by financial preparedness (yes, neutral, no). The dependent variable was mean score on the Experience Scale. The descriptive statistics of the ANOVA tests can be found in Table 11. Among the three financial preparedness groups, there was a significant difference in experience with education agents, F (2, 163) = 6.859, p = 0.001. The effect size (η^2 = 0.078) of financial preparedness on the experience with education agents was considered medium (Huck, 2012). Post hoc tests revealed that participants who were unprepared financially had a less positive experience with education agents in comparison to those who were financially prepared.

Table 11

ANOVA Descriptive Statistics (Financial Preparedness and HEI-agent Relationship)

Grouping Variables	*n*	*M*	*SD*
Financial preparedness			
Unprepared	33	2.8320	.70202
Neutral	44	3.1364	.81181
Prepared	89	3.3892	.74400
Recognition of HEI-agent relationship			
Connected	62	3.4545	.79900
Not connected	28	2.9123	.64448
Unknown	74	3.1597	.73344

Recognition of HEI-agent versus Experience Scale. A one-way ANOVA indicated that there was a significant difference in experience with education agents between the three groups separated by recognition of HEI-agent relationship (i.e., connected, not connected, unknown), [F (2, 161) = 5.686, p = 0.004]. The effect size (η^2 = 0.066) of this had medium practical effect (Huck, 2012). The descriptive statistics of the ANOVA tests can be found in Table 11. Post hoc analysis revealed that those who

knew that their agent was connected with HEIs had a more positive experience with education agents in comparison to the participants who knew that their agents were independent agents.

Responses to the Open-ended Item

Of the 385 survey participants, 69 provided comments for item 36 (Please share any other experience of agent services (good or bad). You can write in English or Chinese) and 67 comments were considered valid input. The other two responses were discarded because one is "oh" (participant 15) and the other is "I did not use agents" (Participant 11). Based on the selection criteria proposed by Atkins and Wallace (2012), the comments can be grouped into 4 themes: (a) agent's professionalism, (b) whose interest do agents serve, (c) money issues, and (d) student's independence. The four themes captured the overall picture of and represented the common ideas conveyed by the qualitative data, as well as shed light on research questions by presenting the salient points emerged within.

Agent's Professionalism (50)

50 participants referred to their agents' professional competence, which were mostly negative comments. For example, participants complained about the accuracy of information agents offered them, the low quality of the application essays, and the unprofessional attitude of agents. Regarding the accuracy of information, participants wrote "agents provided wrong and unverified information that affect[ed] my choice of program" (Participant 5), "agent did not give correct information regarding tuition" (Participant 19), "agents usually give false information" (Participant 35), "my agent didn't provide me with accurate information about the program and the university"

(Participant 55). Other issues also occurred repeatedly in participants' comments. Participant 3 referred to agents' English ability as "extremely bad" with "basic grammar errors", while participant 9 believed that education agents were no better than students in terms of English ability. Participant 34 noted that most agents "had no overseas study experience at all and used only templates to prepare documents". Participant 13 also commented that "it would be better if the agents could be more professional in terms of editing application documents".

Some of the participants (11 out of 67) expressed satisfaction with their agents' work, using comments such as "responsible" (Participant 62), "friendly and very helpful" (Participant 43), and "always provided me necessary application information" (Participant 26). Particularly, Participant 32 summarized his/her experience with:

> Agencies like New Oriental can provide information to me from students who have successfully gotten the offer and study permit (allowed by students themselves of course). How should I prepare for [English language class]? What should I pay attention to when signing a house renting [lease]? etc. Before I came to [Canadian city name], I had known some good people here introduced by my agent. With their help, I find it easier to settle down and dedicate to classes. We are helping each other: from familiarizing traffic rules to ordering foods, and I am willing to help other students from my agent, which leads to a positive cycling.

In comparison, many other participants expressed strong dissatisfaction with agents by commenting "she insulted my parents many times" (Participant 30), "didn't quite understand individual situation" (Participant 53), "didn't care about the compatibility between students and the universities they recommended to students" (Participant 34),

agents “lost my certificates” (Participant 47), and “changed attitude after received the payment” (Participant 60). Participant 9 commented:

> Agents recommended universities to me because those universities were easy to get in. They ignored my own will. The suggestions about study abroad preparation and oversea life sound useful, but you learned that they were useless when you’re actually overseas. Those suggestions [were useless] because the agent had no oversea study experience. In my opinion, agents are just taking advantage of the dependence mindset of students and parents, or students’ lack of confidence in English ability. I later obtained my application essays [from the agents] and believed I could totally do it myself. It’s just that I wasn’t confident in doing it well. If one knows the application process and the required documents, I think, one can do the application independently.

Another participant (56) claimed that the agent they hired did nothing to help them.

> My agent claimed that they have connection with the school, but in fact they only knew a professor who was in charge of recruitment in the undergraduate level. It had nothing to do with graduate level application. I had to contact the school by myself during the whole application process. They basically did nothing for me.

Whose Interest do Agents Serve (16)

With 16 participants questioning whose interest agents serve, it appears to be a large issue that calls for the protection of students’ interests and more transparency in the HEI-agent-student relationship. Participants commented that agents “sometimes they just care about the business instead of the future of the students” (Participant 54), “may do something which benefits themselves” (Participant 1), “only to fulfil the contract so that

they don't need to refund the students" (Participant 3), "recommend only the top tier school instead of considering students' individual situation" (Participant 4), "limit student choices between Canadian universities and make him choose only between the universities they are work for" (Participant 21), and "I highly suspect that agents recommend schools based on commission rate" (Participant 10). In particular, one participant (63) said:

> My agent did not tell me about [program name] program at [University name]. My IELTS is 7.0 but writing skills is 6.0. They informed me that [the name of a language preparation school] is the only way to get into MEd program. It's not authentic! Later, I knew that I had an [language preparation school name] email which was used to contact with [University name]. It means that I was put into another agent indeed. I am upset because they weren't true in term of educational aspect!

Another participant (67) commented on a similar experience saying "I did not know I could go directly at [university name]. I did not know about [language preparation school] even though my agent was applying for [language preparation school name] at this time. I had to ask them many times to find out about [language preparation school name]."

Issues with Fees Paid to Agents (15)

Issues with fees paid to agents were raised 15 times in the comments, pointing to a belief that agent services are over-priced for many international students. Participants believed that agents "ask for too much fees" (Participant 28) and "cost more money" (Participant 47), that it was a "waste of money" (Participant 3) to hire agents, and they

had “false promises and high prices” (Participant 21). A few participants felt shocked by agents’ attitudes before and after the payment, saying that agents “changed their service attitude right after the payment” (Participant 60) and “stopped calling after payment” (Participant 30). Other participants wrote that “this business is overpriced” (Participant 24) and “some of the agents are very very expensive to have” (Participant 40).

One particular comment was on the language school operated by agents that has connection with the academic program the participant eventually enrolled in. The participant (59) indicated that the language school graded students lower than standard on purpose to keep students longer in the English program [to make more money].

Student’s Independence (13)

Of the 67 comments, 13 recognized the importance of being independent in the agent-student relationship or encouraged students to apply on their own instead of using agents. This offset the role of agents in facilitating international recruitment and gives HEIs something to contemplate. Quotes such as “we cannot rely on the agents services too much” (Participant 1), “students shall make the decision by themselves” (Participant 2), “do your own application if you have time” (Participant 3), and “apply it by yourself” (Participant 50) showed up frequently. While one participant (39) expressed frustration by saying “I [would] like to apply by myself but I don’t know how to facilitate it”, another (Participant 16) said:

> I believe that student is totally capable of doing all the things the agent had done, costing less time and money than agent charged. For anyone who has some English ability, intends to communicate with the schools [they want to apply for],

> or even is able to visit schools to communicate [with admission officers] in person or over phone, the education agent service is of very low value.

Even for those who are already in contract with education agents, it is important to not rely on agents too much as noted by one participant who stated: "when the agent has too many cases, they don't have priority and often need the student to remind them. If the student wasn't really paying attention, things could go very wrong" (Participant 24).

Summary

Overall, the responses provided by students were grouped into themes that were mostly negative, with only a few (i.e., 11) participants who commented positive with education agents. The positive comments affirmed the role of education agents in helping international students in the application process as well as in providing long-term support as argued by some researchers (Bista, 2017; Noewcomb, 2017; Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018; Tian, 2017; Tuxen & Robertson, 2018; Yu, 2016). As a former education agent, I also witnessed many cases where education agents helped international students with application planning, school selecting, and kept providing support for students who already enrolled in overseas schools. Despite some positive comments that supported the role of education agents and their importance, the negative comments were much more prolific, which reflected participants' general dissatisfaction with the agent services they received.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

The over-arching research question in this study was: To what extent do international students perceive education agents as being useful in their application and what are their experiences with agents? The specific questions were:

1. What are the characteristics of international students using (or not using) education agent services?
2. What is the prevalence and factors influencing agent use among international students in Canada?
3. What are international students' perceptions and experiences with education agents and to what extent do students' characteristics influence their perceptions and experiences with education agents?

Research Question One: What are the Characteristics of International Students Using (or not using) Education Agent Services?

Based on the findings of this study, there were a few characteristics that separated agent-users from non-agent-users, including nationality, faculty, and age range. Participants from Asia (56%) and Africa (47%) had a much higher tendency for using education agents during their application, in comparison to participants from the Americas (10%) and Europe (8%). It was suspected that this tendency had a latent connection with participants' English competence, as participants from the Americas and Europe almost all rated themselves as highly competence users of English, while participants from Asia and Africa had lower self-rated competence in English.

Regarding faculty, 69% of participants from a Faculty of Education had used education agents while only 4.5% of participants from Agriculture and Animal Science indicated they used agents. Given that within the participants from the Faculty of Education in this study, a majority were from an education program of a particular university, this finding implies that agent-use is particularly common within that program. Further research can be conducted on the characteristics of this group of participants as a case study to explore in detail about why there is such a large clustering of agent-users in one Faculty of Education and what influenced participants decision to use education agents. A further analysis showed that Faculties of Education also had the highest ratio of Asian students (95%) while Agriculture and Animal Science only had 36.4% Asian students. The small number of Asian students in the Agriculture and Animal Science may have influenced the small number of agent-users in the Agriculture and Animal Science program.

This high concentration of international students, especially Chinese students, in education programs at Canadian HEIs was previously reported by several researchers and this study confirms the research of other scholars (Ilieva et al., 2015; Li et al., 2012; Li & Tierney, 2013; Liu, 2016). More research is needed to examine the entry requirements of such programs and its popularity among certain Chinese students. Knowing that Chinese students are a magnet for Faculty of Education, HEIs could use this knowledge to target their recruitment initiatives as well as provide support and resources that meet their needs of this group of international students. It is also important to keep in mind that if HEIs were unable to increase domestic enrollment or tap into a different international student market (i.e., recruit students from countries other than China), there is a need for HEIs to

rely on agents to recruit a more diversified group of international students if the goal of the institution and jurisdiction is to enhance internationalization.

This group of international students, who often share the same cultural or language background, may encounter potential problems related to social integration and classroom diversity in a foreign environment (Liu, 2016; Su & Harrison, 2016). Speaking from my own understanding of the agent business and international student market, this concentration of students from a certain country or area also leads to a question as to what extent can education agents influence the student composition in certain programs in Canadian HEIs, thus changing the nature of these programs from educational to commercial. Once a program has been deemed by education agents as easy-entry for international students, it could potentially be used as a shortcut to fulfil contracts with international students, which often state that no refund can be made once the student has been accepted by one program which would rule-out students' chance of gaining entry into their first or second choice of programs. As education agents are for-profit individuals and companies that often represent private capital, their growing influence on HEIs may further promote academic capitalism in higher education, starting from the commercialization of recruitment practices and certain programs. Therefore, such phenomenon might reflect HEIs' greater dependency on education agents and less power of discourse in the general process of the commercialization of higher education.

When examining group differences from the age dimension, it was discovered that participants who were between 26 to 30 years old were frequent agent-users where 60% noted that they used education agents, while only 34% of the participants who were over 31 years old received help from education agents. As the relationship between

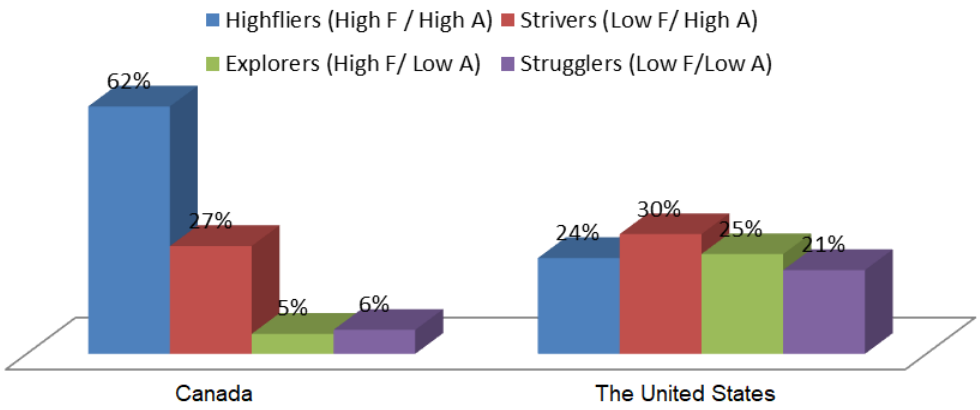
agent-user and the applicant's age has not been explored in previous studies, no comparison can be made to other data sets to examine the whether this finding can be applied to a wider population. However, it is suspected that applicants who are over 31 years old are more mature and informed and subsequently, more apt to finish the application independently in comparison with applications that are between 26 to 30 years old. These findings confirmed a latent relationship that can be useful to admission offices knowing which age group to target.

Financial preparedness was proved to be another important indicator of agent-users' experiences. Those who were financially prepared had a significantly higher mean score on Experience Scale in comparison to those who felt less financially unprepared. Presumably, students who do not need to be concerned with their financial expenses would be less sensitive to any gaps between service fee and service quality, thus having a more positive experience with education agents.

The findings in this study also provided some preliminary information regarding the student segmentation in Canada. In contrast to the profile of 1,600 U.S. bound international students (Figure 19) as summarized by Choudaha et al. (2013), it can be seen that Canada bound international student segmentation revealed in this study was very different. Based on the findings in this study contextualized in Canada, 62% of participants were highfliers and only 11% of participants reported low academic competence, it is possible that a more robust or diversified sample might result in a different finding. Therefore, it is important that this finding be corroborated with additional research.

Figure 19

International Student Segmentation Canada vs. the United States



International student segmentation can be used for HEIs to develop better recruitment strategies (Choudaha et al., 2013; Choudaha et al., 2012; Kauppinen et al., 2014).The percentage of Canada-bound international students in each section predicts the characteristics of incoming international students that Canadian HEIs can anticipate receiving which is useful in tailoring recruitment strategies. However, given that participants in this study were asked to self-report their academic competence and financial preparedness, it is likely that these self-reported scores were inflated as it is common for people to inflate self-reported measures (Krumpal, 2013). If this finding was to influence practice, it would be reasonable to lower international students' self-reported measures.

In addition, the segment information can be used to design support systems to help international students achieve success. These findings revealed that Canada is a targeted destination for students with high academic competence and financial preparedness. Further, the findings from the item asking about participants highest degree their parents held (D06) also revealed that almost a quarter of participants

indicated that their parents did not hold post-secondary certification, which makes them first-generation college/university students. Hence it is possible that this group of international students requires more support in navigating overseas application processes. In addition, given that findings previously noted in this study revealed that Chinese students in particular, relied on agents to help with their overseas applications, it is reasonable to recommend that HEIs review the complexity of their application process to ensure greater clarity and simplicity in completing the steps involved in the application process.

Research Question Two: What is the Prevalence and Factors Influencing Agent Use among International Students in Canada?

As noted in the findings section, nearly half of the participants (46.8%) used agent services during their application process. This finding goes slightly over the 41% as estimated in a study eight years ago (Observatory of Higher Education, 2012, as cited in Jaschik, 2014). Due to strong support from Atlantic Canada, it is possible that the higher percentage may be influenced by the recruitment needs of Atlantic Canadian communities. Still, this percentage reveals that Canada still lags behind Australia where 75% of international student enrollment was facilitated through the use of education agents in 2018 (Department of Education Australia Government, n.d.). Since participants represented in this study are weighted more heavily from the Atlantic Canadian provinces (i.e., 76% from Atlantic Canada) where there are only two HEIs ranked among the top 30 Canadian HEIs (“Best Universities”, 2019), it is possible that the higher number of agent-users may be because students have lower language and academic skills thus they are

applying to universities where they may have a better chance at being accepted due to a perceived lower competition level.

The descriptive findings items from the Perception Scale and Experience Scale indicated in a few items might have implications on participants' choice of using or not using education agents. Regarding perception, agent-users agreed on the accessibility of education agents, which aligns with previous findings that noted the role of agents in efficiently delivering services to international students and facilitating communication between students and HEIs (Bista, 2017; Dunstan, 2009; Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018; Yu, 2016). Agent-users also agreed on the great influence of education agents over international students' decision in selecting countries, institutions, and programs to study (Coffey, 2014; James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017; Jiang, 2015; Zhang, 2011). Meanwhile, the two items from Perception Scale that received the highest and second highest mean score from both agent-users and agent-knowers were about the lack of regulation on education agent businesses and high service price, indicating that these two factors may have influenced agent-use among international students (Bista, 2017; Tuxen & Robertson, 2017; Yu, 2016; Zhang, 2011).

When reviewing the reasons participants did not use education agents, it was revealed that self-confidence and cost issues were the top two reasons. This finding corroborated with qualitative findings where participants commented on the price of education agent services as well as the importance of international students being independent in their application even with the help of education agents. It appears that high levels of self-confidence motivated international students to apply to foreign schools

independently. A second reason for not choosing to use an agent was the high price for their services.

In further exploring the utility of education agents, participants reported using four of the five mostly widely used agent companies which were Chinese companies. This confirms a previous finding that China is one of the top sending countries of international students and is an active agent market that promotes education at overseas HEIs (ICEF, 2019; Tian, 2017; Yen et al., 2012). Both Chinese students and the education agent businesses in China should be studied to improve Canadian HEIs' understanding of trends and conventions in recruiting Chinese students using education agents. Cases where students described the corroboration of two agencies included a comment in the open-ended item about how frustrated they were when they found that their agents had sent them to another agent [Participant 63]. To my knowledge, the use of sub-agents was common in education agent businesses in China. While HEIs established formal contracts with a few big agencies in the hope that this would regulate the collaboration and lead to mutual beneficial results, big agencies sub-contracted with smaller agencies whose practices were under less scrutiny. The findings provide evidence that when participants worked with education agents, some encountered sub-agents, which would increase the difficulty for relevant parties to regulate and monitor education agents.

Research Question Three: What are International Students' Perceptions and Experiences with Education Agents and Factors Influence their Perceptions and Experiences with Education Agents?

The Perception and Experience Scales revealed participants were not overly positive about agents nor were they overly negative (M_p = 2.88; SD_p = 0.62; M_E = 3.2; SD_E = 0.78). Only 49.7% of agent-users expressed satisfaction regarding their experience with agents, as measured by the four items that explicitly surveyed about satisfaction level, while previous studies on United States-bound international students and New Zealand-bound international students all showed greater satisfaction levels that were between 71.5% and 85% (Generosa et al., 2013; Roy, 2017; Zhang, 2011).

The four themes emerged from qualitative data confirmed the survey findings as well as previous findings in relation to students' perceptions and experiences with education agents. Mutual trust between students and education agents (Robinson, 2007) and high professionalism of education agents would improve students' perception toward education agents. For example, friendliness and accurate information provided by agents were mentioned by participants when commenting on their experience with education agnets. However, issues associated with education agents' low professionalism, high price, and lack of transparency in benefit orientation were proved to be the common elements that led to negative experiences with education agents (Yu, 2016). For example, the feeling of being intentionally kept in English programs (operated by agents) longer led to criticisms on the greediness of education agents. This issue also appeared in Wang (2016)'s study on drop-out Chinese international students. Wang noted that some students from the English language program believed that the program was designed as

too many levels and increased difficulty of examinations to keep students in program longer to increase the amount paid in the form of tuition fees.

The lack of professionalism in education agents has been noted in previous studies (Roy, 2017; Yang & Akhtaruzzaman, 2017). Meanwhile, students and parents who know little about overseas study tend to rely heavily on education agents' suggestions, which lead to a mismatch between students and schools as well as negative experiences (Pimpa, 2003; Su & Harrison, 2016; Tuxen & Robertson, 2018). The benefit orientation of education agents as the second emergent theme resonates with previous findings about international recruitment regarding the lack of transparency in HEI-agent relationship and the lack of research and regulation on independent agents, thus confirms the need to regulate agent services to ensure that the wellbeing of students, HEI, and agents are equally protected (Altbach, 2015; Roy, 2017; Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018; Su & Harrison, 2016; Trilokekar & Kizilbash, 2013). Issues related to the payment of fees to agents raised another concern as participants believed that the agent services were overpriced. This could be attributed to agents' lack of professionalism instead of excessive fees. For example, if the agent was stellar in delivering the services promised, fees of $3,000 and above may seem reasonable. Meanwhile, together with the benefit orientation theme, these two themes reflect the neoliberal discourse in the education agent businesses and in the broader context of international recruitment (Kauppinen et al., 2014).

The themes not only affirmed previous findings and the researcher's own understanding about the positive and negative impacts made by education agents, but also raised a new question about how to support international students to apply directly and

independently to overseas schools. In addition, feedback related to fostering students' independence highlighted the need for HEIs to reflect on their current practices in international recruitment and provide more support to prospective international students in the application process rather than growing a reliance on agents (Su & Harrison, 2016).

Participants who were are misinformed about the services provided by agents and the cost of agent services might have less than positive perceptions and experiences. As presented in the findings section, factors that contributed significantly to group differences regarding the Perception and Experience Scales included service fee, age range, financial preparedness, and recognition of HEI-agent relationship. It is suspected that service fee range and recognition of HEI-agent relationship might have caused agent-users' relatively low mean scores on the Perception Scale and Experience Scale. Qualitative findings further supported the assumption the gap between high price and low quality of the agent services as well as participants not knowing whose best interests that education agents serve caused the increased dissatisfaction level as the service increased. The differences in perceptions and experiences with education agents influenced by the two factors revealed issues such as double-dipping, low-quality agent services, and the lack of accountability in the agent practices.

Double-dipping

Service fee range and recognition of HEI-agent relationship provided valuable insights into the double-dipping situation and its potential relation to international students' perceptions and experiences with education agents. The crosstab of the two items of HEI-agent relationship also shed light on the extent to which double-dipping existed in the case of Canada-bound international students. In addition, the agents who

did not disclose information regarding their connection to other education institutions calls for further investigation as this absence of transparency is a cloak for the double-dipping situation. The findings in this study related to double-dipping align with previous literature that reported the existence of such practices (Brabner & Galbraith, 2013; Nikula & Kivisto, 2018; Raimo et al., 2014; Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018; Roy, 2017; Su & Harrison, 2016; West & Addington, 2014). Further, the ANOVA revealed that service and HEI-agent relationship has influenced participants' perceptions and experiences with education agents. Given the closeness of the two factors and the double-dipping situation reported in this study, it is possible that double-dipping is a widespread practice that is experienced by participants but has remained largely unknown to the participants. The mitigating factors of this practice have contributed to the low mean scores on both Perception Scale and Experience Scale. A clear recognition of HEI-agent relationship would presumably reassure agent-users, thus improving participants overall experience in the recruitment process.

Quality of Agent Services

Drawing insights from quantitative and qualitative findings, it was apparent that there is room for both institution-sponsored agents and independent agents to improve their services, especially agents that serve Asian students given that this group of international students had a significantly less positive experience with education agents in comparison to international students from other regions. Independent agents and agents that do not explicitly disclose their connections with HEIs should be further investigated because of their prevalence among international students and lack of accountability (Roy, 2017). Institution-sponsored agents, too, should work on improving ethical standards as

well as better performance (Tian, 2017). Recalling the ANOVA results, there was a significant difference in the experience with education agents between the group that used independent agents ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 0.64$) and the group that used institution-sponsored agents ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.8$). When responding to the open-ended item, participants reported that agents who were representatives of HEIs or language schools were more likely to direct them to the certain HEIs/ programs instead of the programs the participant wanted to attend. Participants described being sent to a private language school instead of the language program hosted by the HEI where they intended to enroll because of the benefit connection between agent and the private language school. Previous literature also reported that agents worked for their own profit such as persuading students into choosing a certain program or HEI where they would receive a commission (Roy, 2017; Su & Harrison, 2016). This finding calls for HEIs to be more vigilant of agent practices to ensure that agents are steering potential students towards their language preparatory programs thus serving the well-being of the student and the university.

Accountability in Agent Practices

A recommendation that Canadian HEIs could consider would be holding institution-sponsored agents accountable for the services they provided to international students. International recruitment is not a one-time transaction; rather, the students being enrolled at the institution will stay with the host institutions for a prolonged period of time. The long-term impact caused by problematic recruitment will become burdensome for both HEIs and students. Accountability in the use of education agents for international recruitment has been largely neglected despite the rapid growth of

collaboration between HEIs and education agents and is long overdue for a program evaluation (de Wit, 2016). As the commercial and marketing ideology in international student recruitment grows, so should the corresponding measures that can protect HEIs and international students from becoming the prey of profit-seekers such as unscrupulous agents. With a functioning regulatory framework that holds relevant parties accountable, responsibilities and duties could be clarified, and the efficiency of international recruitment can be improved (Brabner & Galbraith, 2013; Bridge Education Group, 2016; Coco, 2015; Coffey & Perry, 2013). Further, a simple measure of students' satisfaction, perception, and experiences with agents will provide indicators of how well institution sponsored agents are meeting the needs of international students. Responding to the outcome of such measures would promote a sustainable recruitment initiative.

The aforementioned issues call for attention from HEIs, since HEIs pay education agents that work for the institution thus aligning their benefit orientation to the same as those of the HEIs rather than the international students that agents give suggestions to, and subsequently, has the responsibility to monitor and train the agents properly (Ashwill, 2016). The power dynamics among HEIs, agents, and international students would influence application results and satisfaction levels. Since terminating the HEI-agent agreement is not an option for many HEIs who rely on education agents to fulfil recruitment goals, it is more practical to think about regulations and accountabilities that are central to the agreements and all stages of the recruitment process (Zhang, 2011).

HEI-Agent-Student Relationship

The transaction relationship among HEIs, agents, and international students influences recruitment numbers as well as students' application experiences. Using the

international student market model (Kauppinen et al. (2014) to analyze HEI-agent-student relationship, transaction process, and mutual impact, was proved suitable in this study. The original international student market model worked as a conceptual lens through which international students' perceptions and experiences with education agents were examined. With the findings from this study, more details can be added into the model for future research to reference when analyzing the complex relationships between international students and HEIs.

For the purpose of improving recruitment efficiency of international students as facilitated by education agents, it is necessary to identify students' background, attributes, as well as perceptions and experience with education agents. Effectively using students' background information and various attributes to analyze and predict their agent-use behavior could help HEIs develop more targeted recruitment strategies and decide between collaborating with education agents and relying on admission offices when entering a new student market. In particular, normalizing practices such as the segmentation of international students may provide valuable insights for HEIs as this segmentation employs academic competence and financial preparedness to group international students, which are deemed as two important factors influencing the HEI-student transaction process. Meanwhile, students' perceptions and experiences with education agents can provide feedback to HEIs regarding the performance of contracted agents and independent agents and reveal practices that may be unknown to HEIs. Such surveys can provide continuous feedback to HEIs so that they can adjust constantly their recruitment strategies and relationship with education agents (Coffey, 2014; Yang & Akhtaruzzaman, 2017).

Through expressing their perceptions and experiences with education agents, international students provide HEIs with a valid rationale based on which HEIs take their collaboration with education agents to the next step. This would in return help international students as HEIs discern and stop unscrupulous agents from entering the market while promoting ethical agent practices. Experienced and professional education agents would be of help to international students in the preparation stage, application stage as well as post-enrollment stage (Tian, 2017).

Admission Practices of Canadian HEIs

HEIs may need to consider other ways to validate students' potential such as interviews or timed writing tasks rather than relying heavily on transcripts and application essays (Hudson, Rhind, Shaw, Giannopoulos, & Mellanby, 2013; Leshem, 2012). As revealed in the qualitative findings, ghost-writers of application essays existed. Comments from three participants (all Chinese) mentioned the application essays that were written for them were of poor quality. Interestingly, these students did not question the ethical issues with this practice. According to the three students, the agents' low English and writing ability were to blame. This finding extends previous research reporting forged essays by education agents (Bista, 2017; Newcomb, 2017; Raimo et al., 2014; Roy, 2017). The template mentioned by one participant provides evidence that agent roles includes ghost writing using templates to write student applications. Drawing on my personal experience, it was common practice in education agent businesses to use ghost-writers and templates when preparing application essays for Chinese students. However, obtaining a better understanding of the scale and scope of this practice requires further research. Monitoring the scale and scope of such practices would be a very

difficult task for Canadian HEIs to take by themselves due to issues related to cross-border communications and the various cultures and agencies involved in the situation (Kauppinen et al., 2014). Therefore, utilizing a variety of means to verify the quality of students' language abilities is required.

Qualitative findings also confirmed that collaborating with language preparation schools and pathway programs is an admission practice that requires more scrutiny (McCartney & Metcalfe, 2018). The frustrated experiences shared by two participants who were directed to language preparation schools by education agents indicated that language schools could become another competitor for international students. International students might be sent to language preparation schools, regardless of their level of English competence, if language preparation schools offered higher commission to education agents than the HEIs. Another participant noted that language preparation school intentionally scored students lower to keep them longer in the program, which is an example of how business interest has been placed in front of students' wellbeing in these schools (Wang, 2016). The profit-oriented operation model of English language preparation schools and the lack of strict governess might be taken advantage by education agents, thus hindering the benefits of international students and HEIs (McCartney & Metcalfe, 2018).

Implications

Mapping out Agent Practices in Canadian Context

Greater effort from different sectors should be put into documenting agent practices in the Canadian context, as the volume of work would be too large for any single institution. In contrast to the efforts from governments in surveying and

synthesizing information about agent practices in Australia, there is an absence of government involvement in surveying the landscape of agent use among Canadian HEIs and Canada-bound international students. Benefitting from mutual efforts of government and HEIs, countries like Australia have been the forerunner of international recruitment for decades (Trilokekar & Kizilbash, 2013). Canada needs to learn from the experience of Australia, starting with soliciting insights from its vast number of international students and monitoring agent practices in international recruitment.

In addition, attention should be paid to the sample composition to avoid over-representation of Asian students. The fact that approximately 70% of Canada-bound international students were Asian students made Asian students the dominant group in studies involving international students in Canada (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2018). The same issue occurred in this study as 70.6% of participants were Asian students and subsequently, a stratified sampling technique is recommended in future studies (Creswell, 2014). Asian international students' perceptions had a significant impact on the findings of this study. Future research can be designed specifically for students from other regions of the world to explore their perspectives and magnify their voice in the debate on agent practices.

International Student Segmentation

Based on the international student segmentation, HEIs can provide tailored support to different groups of international students. Particularly, the findings have implications for University of Prince Edward Island, as a large part of participants came from this institution. For example, strivers could be provided with more information regarding financial aid, scholarships, and on-campus jobs. While for strugglers,

academic workshops, training sessions, and tutoring services can be provided to help them excel.

The international student segmentation items in this study were used for a preliminary grouping of international students based on two self-assessment items: academic competence and financial preparedness. Future research should develop more advanced tools to group international students in their own countries with more objectivity and accuracy.

Regulatory Framework

Building a regulatory framework would be a joint effort made by government, HEIs, and self-regulatory organizations (Brabner & Galbraith, 2013). Among HEIs, compiling information regarding the existing monitoring mechanisms of education agents and promoting information exchange would help Canadian HEIs learn to better scrutinize and manage education agents. Insights can be gleaned from studies that focused on HEI-agent relationships, such as the five types of management mechanisms as proposed by Huang et al. (2016): strategic investor (performance-driven/hybrid power), mutual enterprise (performance-driven/non-coercive power), tough banker (performance-driven/coercive power), market trader (income-driver/hybrid power), and flexible friends (income-driven/non-coercive power). Meanwhile, HEIs can put effort into increasing transparency in HEI-agent relationship. A transparent environment where HEIs' selection, training, and management of their contracted agents are public is of great importance for relevant parties to build a regulatory framework (Ashwill & West, 2018; Brabner & Galbraith, 2013; Bridge Education Group, 2016; Raimo, 2013; Raimo et al., 2014; Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018). In this context of transparency, students would

gain access to certified agents that are endorsed by HEIs. Subsequently, HEIs could benefit from such action as it would make the effort of discerning unofficial education agents easier, thus protecting the institution reputation from being damaged by unethical behaviors of certain agents. In particular, similar to the current designated learning institutions (DLI) number, government and HEIs could work together to develop and publish a list of certified education agents on government websites that could be accessed by international students, especially students from regions where internet is limited due to national censorship.

Provincial governments could help develop and facilitate the implementation of a code of practice to regulate education agents. An example would be The Guide to the Code of Practice and Conduct Regulation for Manitoba Designated Education Providers, Their Staff Recruiters, and Contracted Agents (The International Education Branch of Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning and the International Education Act Working Group (IEAWG), 2015). In addition, self-regulatory organizations, such as the Canadian Consortium for International Education (CCIE) and Association of Atlantic Universities can be developed or given resources needed to regulate unethical agent behaviors and build a healthy international student market.

CHAPTER SIX

Limitations and Conclusion

In this chapter, I identify the three limitations with this study, focusing on sampling procedures and survey items. Next, conclusions to this study are summarized, which consists of a short review of research findings, implications for Canadian HEIs as well as relevant parties, a call for attention on the agent issue, and two recommendations for future research.

Limitations

The limitations of this study center on the sampling procedures and the design of survey items. First, the survey sample was not entirely random as survey participants self-selected to complete the online survey out of personal interest. Second, the majority of the participants were Asian students. In hindsight, better networking with international students from other cultural background would have improved the representation of participants in each of the grouping variables. Lastly, survey items could be designed to solicit opinions from participants. Several items from this survey had a high ratio of participants selecting the middle or neutral option on the scale. Including statements that ask participants to indicate the extent the agree or disagree with the items might reduce the number of neutral responses.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to survey internationals students in Canadian HEIs about their perceptions and experiences with education agents with the purpose of providing feedback to help Canadian HEIs improve their international recruitment efficiency. Findings from this survey of 385 international students representing 59

countries were analyzed. It was concluded that approximately half of the international students in Canada used education agents during application, which affirms the necessity for Canadian HEIs to collaborate with education agents for international recruitment. Hiring education agents to assist with overseas study was most prevalent among Asian students but was rare among students from the Americas or Europe, probably because of their high English competence. The international student segmentation information derived from the self-assessment items of the survey can be used by interested parties such as HEIs, governments, and recruitment organizations for developing diversified approaches to attract a wider range of student sources.

Quantitative data suggested that Canada bound international students' perceptions and experiences were not overly favourable. Particularly, participants from Asia/Faculty of Education had a much less positive experience with education agents, in comparison to participants from non-Asian countries or other faculties. Factors including participants' age range and the amount of service fee paid to education agents caused significant differences in the mean scores between groups on the Perception Scale. Factors that contributed significantly to the fluctuations on the Experience Scale included participants' age range, the amount of service fee paid to education agents, participants' financial preparedness, and their recognition of the HEI-agent relationship. Qualitative data revealed insights into the importance of mutual support between international students and education agents, yet most of the experiences with agents were negative which could explain the low satisfaction level. The professionalism and benefit orientation of education agents and money issues involved in the agent-student relationship were under question, while independence in the application process was referenced as an important

quality for international students. In addition, hidden issues such as ghost-writing and sub-agents surfaced from the comments of the participants.

The insights that were drawn from international students' perceptions and experiences with education agents can help Canadian HEIs revise their collaboration with education agents and build a healthy and stable relationship with education agents, thus improving recruitment efficiency. With a growing dependency on the benefits brought by international students, Canadian HEIs should be more aware of the consequences of losing international students to competitors or due to other unpredicted factors, such as political or economic situations (i.e., Saudi Arabic students left Canada due to diplomatic conflicts between Saudi Arabia and Canada). In that sense, a strong and formal connection with the ethical education agents in top sending countries of international students could presumably provide more advantages, such as insider information and possible solutions, to Canadian HEIs.

Relevant parties in Canada should shoulder more responsibility in monitoring the agent practices so that both the institutional reputation and international students' benefits can be protected from unethical behaviors of education agents. Researchers have noted that the power dynamics between HEIs and education agents resulted in various managing mechanisms (Huang et al., 2016). These mechanisms could be adapted by Canadian HEIs to properly manage the agents they have contract with. Meanwhile, the unique segmentation of international students in Canada requires Canadian HEIs to tailor their recruitment strategies to the needs of applying international students rather than directly adapting experiences and practices from other countries. Government-level support from provincial education departments, immigration offices, and embassies

overseas, should also be in place to help HEIs reduce barriers in recruiting international students and implement tools such as large-scale surveys to collect feedback from international students regarding the agent practices, as this would be too much of a responsibility for HEIs to take on by themselves. Sector-wise efforts can also be made from setting up organizations that have the capacity to monitor and suggest practical changes to Canadian HEIs.

Education agents, either as a facilitator or obstacle of the internationalization of Canadian higher education, deserve more attention from academia because of their impact on the wellbeing of international students and HEIs. It is time for Canadian HEIs to recognize and take advantage of the marketing ideology while serving the public good. The merits of education agents should be promoted and connections with them strengthened so that Canadian HEIs could achieve sustainable international recruitment. Meanwhile, a functioning regulatory framework should be developed to progressively shape unethical behaviors by education agents under control. Most importantly, international students should not be removed from this studying this relationship as they provide valuable feedback regarding the agent practices as service users.

There are two recommendations for future research. First, attention should be paid to document agent-use among international students in Canada in a more systematic and detailed approach and on a larger scale so that the international student segmentation can be better constructed and used by Canadian HEIs to improve their international recruitment efficiency. Second, researchers could examine other factors that contribute to internationals students' levels of perceptions and experiences with education agents to inform changes in HEI-agent collaboration and HEIs' recruitment strategy.

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Appendix A

Survey (Printed Version)

Agent Satisfaction Survey for International Students
Faculty of Education, UPEI

Letter of Consent

I have read the information sheet for this study and know that I can print a copy for my records. This study is led by Han Xu, a master's student at the University of Prince Edward Island. This study is for undergraduate and graduate students who are paying or paid international fees within the past three years. If you have any questions about this study, you can contact me at 613-255-2371 (hxu3@upei.ca) or my supervisor Dr. Tess Miller at 902-620-5072 (tsmiller@upei.ca). If you have any concerns about the ethics of this study, you can contact the UPEI Research Ethics Board at REB@upei.ca. You are welcome to keep the letter of information.

Welcome to our survey! After you read the letter of consent, you can start the survey.
I understand...

- that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my legal rights being affected and I give consent for any data already given to be retained and used.
- that I will not benefit financially if this study leads to the development of education and training or future research/education/technological developmental outcomes.
- that the act of completing the survey will be my consent to participate in the study.
- how to contact the study team if necessary.

This survey is part of a study on international students' satisfaction with education agents. **Education agents go by different names in different context, such as education consultants, admission counselors, and school recruiters. Basically, they help international students to apply for overseas schools. Their services may cover school application, visa application, airport pick-up, residence arrangement, etc.**

Your opinion will help the researcher build arguments that may influence the current policy on agent practices in Canadian higher educational institutions. Please complete this survey based on your true experience – your responses are anonymous. **This survey will take approximately 10 minutes. You are welcome to forward this survey to your friends so that additional international students' feedback can be collected.** Thank you again for your time and contribution to the study. By writing the survey, you give the researchers your consent.

If you want to receive the findings of this study, please leave your email address:_____

Section 1: Demographic questions

These questions help me know a little more about you :)

D01	What is your nationality?					
D02	Which University are/were you attending?					
D03	Which faculty are/were you in?					
D04	Which age range fits you?					
	≤20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	≥ 41
D05	What is the primary source of income paying for your overseas education (choose one)?					
	Parents or relative (s)	Friend (s)		Scholarship (s)	Personal savings	
	Other sources					
D06	What is the highest degree your parents have?					
	High school or lower	College or Bachelor's		Master's	PhD or higher	

Section 2: Self-assessment

This part helps us know how confident you are with your overseas study.

SD=Strongly Disagree; SA=Strongly Agree		SD 1	2	3	4	SA 5
S01	I have/had the English ability to handle life in Canada.					
S02	I have/had the academic ability to handle schoolwork in Canada.					
S03	I can/could afford the tuition and living costs in Canada.					

Now, you have three options to finish this survey:

A) If you answered Yes to N01, 😊 congratulations! You are eligible to answer all the survey questions. Still, you can skip any question if you don't feel comfortable answering it or the the question does not apply to your situation.

B) If you answered No to N01, and have never heard of the education agent business, you can answer N02 and submit the survey 😊

C) If you answered No to N01, but have a general impression of the education agent business, you can finish the questions in Section 3: Q01-Q11 and then submit the survey 😊

N01	Did you use agent services during the completion of your college/university application?			
	Yes	No		
N02	Top reason for not using agent services (choose one)			
	Cost issues	Trust issues	Self-confidence	Other available help
	Other reasons			

Section 3: If you used agent services, and/or have some ideas about the education agent business…

This part helps us know your impression of the education agent business.

SD=Strongly Disagree; SA=Strongly Agree		SD 1	2	3	4	SA 5
Q01	It is better for international students to use education agents rather than applying directly to Canadian colleges/universities.					
Q02	Education agents are more accessible than the admission offices of Canadian colleges/universities due to time zone issues, language problems, cultural differences, etc.					
Q03	Education agents' service fees are too high.					
Q04	Education agents' services are worth the price.					
Q05	Education agents are not trust-worthy.					
Q06	The education agent business needs more regulation.					
Q07	Students' well-being is protected in the student-agent relationship.					
Q08	Education agents have great influence on international students' choice of overseas study.					
Q09	Education agents should replace admission offices of Canadian colleges/universities.					
Q10	Canadian colleges/universities should not work with education agents.					
Q11	I would recommend others to use education agents.					

Section 4: If you used education agent services …

This part helps us know your impression of the agent you used.

Q12	What is the name of your agent's company?				
Q13	What was your agent's relationship with the colleges/universities you applied for?				
	Business partner	No connection	I have no idea		
Q14	To help us understand the financial burden experienced by international, please tell us how much you paid for your agent services (in Canadian Dollar)				
	Free	≤1000	1000-3000	3000-5000	≥5000

SD=Strongly Disagree; SA=Strongly Agree		SD 1	2	3	4	SA 5
Q15	My agent significantly influenced my choice of Canadian colleges/universities.					
Q16	My agent provided me services that the admission offices of Canadian colleges/universities were unable to provide.					
Q17	My agent did not improve my efficiency during application.					
Q18	My agent did not increase my chance of being accepted into Canadian colleges/universities.					
Q19	My agent gave me accurate information regarding the academic experiences (programs, courses, assignments, etc.) in Canada.					
Q20	My agent gave me accurate information regarding the life experiences (housing, shopping, commuting, etc.) in Canada.					
Q21	I am concerned with some unethical practices of my agent.					
Q22	I am satisfied with the work competence of my agent.					
Q23	I am satisfied with the price of my agent's services.					
Q24	Overall, I am satisfied with the services provided by my agent.					
Q25	I would recommend my agent to a friend.					
Q26	Please share any other experience of agent services (good or bad). You can write in English or Chinese.					

Appendix B

Original and New Variables

Original Variable	New Variable	New Options
D01. What is your nationality?	D01G. Nationality region.	Asia, Africa, Americas, Europe, Unspecified
D02. Which university are (were) you attending?	D02G. University region.	Atlantic Canada, Central Canada, Prairie Canada, Western Canada, Other
D03. Which faculty are (were) you in?	D03G. Faculty grouped.	Education, Arts and Science, Business, Math & Computer Science; Agriculture & Animal Science, Engineering, Others
D04. Which age range fits you?	D04G. Age range.	≤ 20, 21-25, 26-30, ≥ 31
D06. What is the highest degree your parents have?	D06G. Highest degree.	High school or lower, Bachelor's or College, Master's or higher
S01. I have the English ability to hand life in Canada.	S01G. English ability.	Disagree, neutral, Agree
S03. I can afford the tuition and living costs in Canada.	S03G. Financial preparedness.	Disagree, neutral, Agree
10. Did you use agent services during the completion of your college/university application?	10G. Agent-use	Yes, I did. No, I didn't.
Q14. Service fees paid to agents.	Q14G. Service fees.	Free, Less than 3,000 Canadian dollars, Over 3,000 Canadian dollars

Appendix C

M and SD of 22 Scale Items by Group

	All (n = 281)		Agent-users (n = 180)		Non-agent-users (n = 102)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Q01. It is better for international students to use education agents rather than applying directly to Canadian colleges/universities.	2.99	1.132	3.25	1.051	2.52	1.128
Q02. Education agents are more accessible than the admission offices of Canadian colleges/universities due to time zone issues, language problems, cultural differences, etc.	3.34	1.220	3.51	1.161	3.06	1.273
Q03. Agents' service fees are too high.	3.88	1.230	3.83	1.295	3.96	1.107
Q04. Agents' services are worth the price.	2.81	1.091	2.89	1.156	2.68	0.958
Q05. Education agents are not trust-worthy.	2.92	1.098	2.87	1.148	3.01	1.000
Q06. The education agent business needs more regulation.	3.98	1.089	3.99	1.110	3.96	1.058
Q07. Students' well-being is protected in the student-agent relationship.	3.18	1.017	3.34	1.058	2.88	0.868
Q08. Education agents have great influence on international students' choice of overseas study.	3.78	1.116	3.91	1.105	3.53	1.101
Q09. Education agents should replace admission offices of Canadian colleges/universities.	2.06	1.193	2.10	1.184	2.00	1.211
Q10. Canadian colleges/universities should not work with education agents.	2.61	1.188	2.50	1.177	2.80	1.186
Q11. I would recommend others to use education agents.	2.99	1.170	3.17	1.175	2.67	1.096
Q15. My agent significantly influenced my choice of Canadian colleges/universities.			3.61	1.365		

Continued

	Agent-users (n = 180)	
	M	*SD*
Q16. My agent provided me services that the admission offices of Canadian colleges/universities were unable to provide.	3.05	1.166
Q17. My agent did not improve my efficiency during application.	2.50	1.171
Q18. My agent did not increase my chance of being accepted into Canadian colleges/universities.	2.81	1.264
Q19. My agent gave me accurate information regarding the academic experiences (programs, courses, assignments, etc.) in Canada.	3.12	1.200
Q21. I am concerned with some unethical practices of my agent.	2.65	1.325
Q22. I am satisfied with the work competence of my agent.	3.25	1.210
Q23. I am satisfied with the price of my agent's services.	2.91	1.342
Q24. Overall, I am satisfied with the services provided by my agent.	3.34	1.234
Q25. I would recommend my agent to a friend.	3.10	1.409