

# The Good Practice Guide for UK Education Agents Partnering for Quality

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# Introduction & Background

UK education sector bodies have jointly reviewed the national approach to education agent management. Initiated by British Universities International Liaison Association (BUILA) and the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA), the review found that education agents are valued partners of the sector, offering important services to prospective international students and their families. Education agents work hard to get good outcomes for their clients and are essential to the sector's success. This has been true for many years, but especially during the difficult COVID years. As a sector, we would like to extend our sincere thanks to our recruitment partners.

'Without agents it would be very difficult to convert and get students to the UK. There are so many steps in applying to a university overseas and the agents can help answer questions saving reps a lot of time.'

**UK HEI INTERNATIONAL STAFF**

The *Partnership for Quality: A Pathway to a Quality Framework* report, by BUILA and UKCISA, in March 2021<sup>1</sup> demonstrated the strategic importance for the UK of education agent relationships – circa 50% of all international students currently studying in the UK used an education agent's services. Most education agents are working in an ethical fashion to help students achieve their dreams of studying in the UK and delivering an excellent service.



**85%** of HEI agree 'agents are well informed and up-to-date on the higher education sector in the UK'

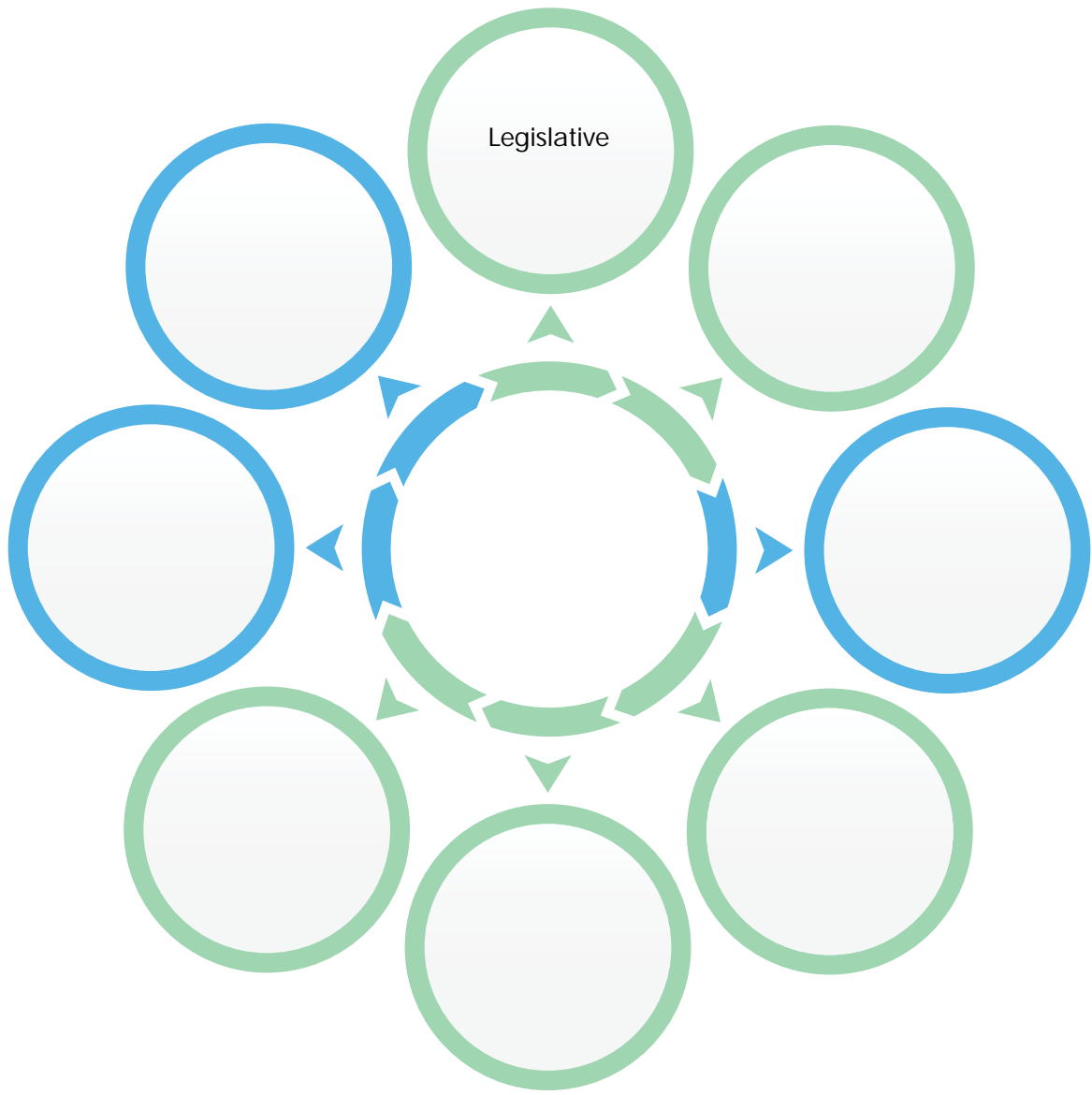


**85%** of students who used an agent agree 'the information provided by my agent was accurate'

Education agents have identified opportunities to help the sector improve even further. To this end, the report recommended, three integrated initiatives:

- A National Code of Ethical Practice for UK Education Agents
- An updated and revised UK agent and counsellor training and engagement hub
- A Good Practice Guide for UK Providers Using Education Agents

1. [A Partnership for Quality: A route to a UK Quality Framework with Education Agents](#)



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# The National Code of Ethical Practice for UK Education Agents

The 'National Code' outlines the Standards expected of education agents and digital agent networks (agent aggregators, brokers, and marketplaces) representing UK providers.

Standards are broken into five areas. Under each area are a series of expected and desirable practices with suggestions for how you can provide evidence to your partners. Compliance with the National Code will increasingly be a requirement of institution's contracts as they reach renewal periods. The British Council has included a module on the National Code in its Education Agent Training. The five Standards are:

Education agents and digital agent networks commit to professional business governance and practices. You conduct yourselves with due regard to the regulatory conditions in the market(s) in which you operate as well as complying with all applicable national laws, regulations and official policies. Furthermore, you act with integrity and in a manner that reflects positively on the image of the profession, of your educational institution partners and of the UK education sector as a reliable

# UK Agent and Counsellor Training

In response to the recent BUILA and UKCISA research, and informed by education agent and counsellor feedback, the UK agent and counsellor training and engagement hub was updated and relaunched in December 2022.

There are many benefits of completing the training:

- The UK training certification, provided by the British Council, has value in market as a badge of excellence.
- Provides comprehensive knowledge of the UK as an international study destination for new counselling staff.
- Provides a timely refresher and knowledge update for more experienced staff.
- Globally recognised certification which provides clear evidence for UK education providers and other organisations wanting to work with certified agents.
- Certified agents have passed the training and signed the National Code of Ethical Practice.
- The certification gives reassurance and confidence to students and parents when selecting education agents.
- Certified agents and counsellors will be published on the British Council database of certified agents and counsellors.
- Improved overall international student experience.

Your feedback told us that in the past there were too many barriers, making it difficult for you and your colleagues to

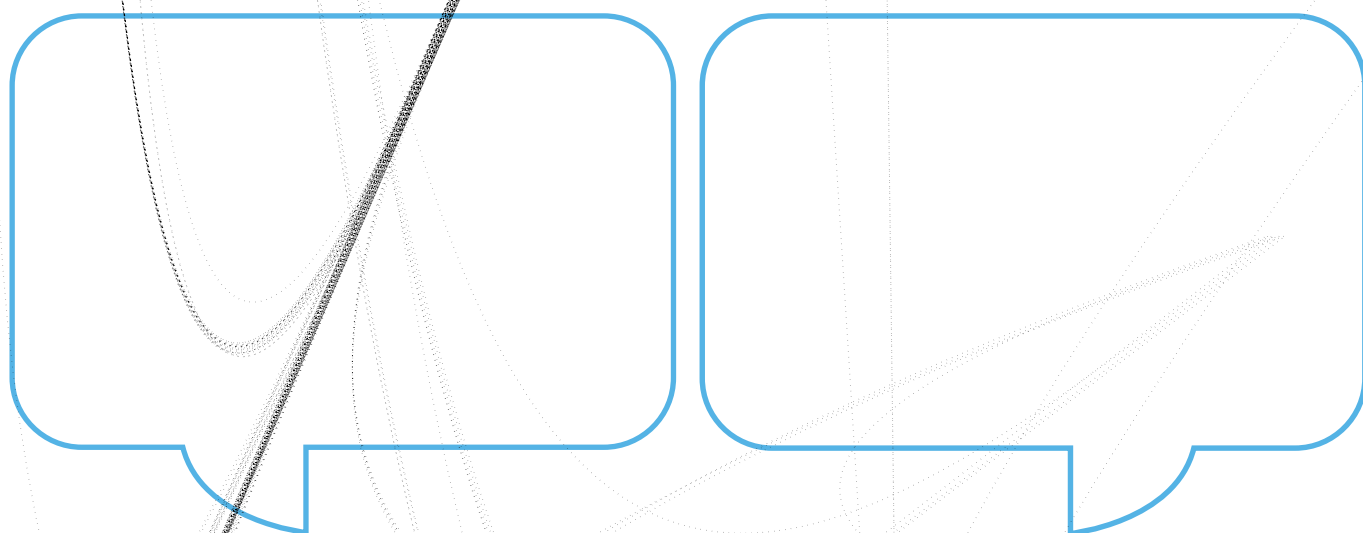
# The Good Practice Guide for Providers Using Education Agents

Developed by Universities UK International and BUILA, the Good Practice Guide for Providers Using Education Agents is designed to help UK institutions and education providers enhance their education agent management practices. Training has been rolled out to all sectors as the Guide has been distributed. The benefits of the institutions adopting best practice activities outlined in the guide include:

- Raising standards in education agent management across the UK international education sector.
- Providing essential guidance for newer entrants and a process health check for experienced providers.
- Providing tools for education providers to further evaluate and continually improve their education agent management practices.
- Streamlining operations and administrative procedures, leading to increased resource efficiencies.
- Maximising the return on investment through international student recruitment channels.
- Increasing opportunities for international student feedback and consequently raising service levels among education agents and providers, and improving the student experience.
- Delivering improvements at the early stage of the student journey and subsequently increasing overall student satisfaction levels of international students studying in the UK.
- Enabling education agents to represent their partner providers more effectively.
- Ensuring adherence to compliance parameters such as contracting, audit trails, procurement, etc.
- Raising the profile of the UK education sector as robust, transparent and well managed, ultimately leading to sustained international student recruitment and a healthy, diverse UK education landscape.

The Guide produced for education providers was central to the development of this Good Practice Guide for UK Education Agents.

# Education Agent Good Practice Guide







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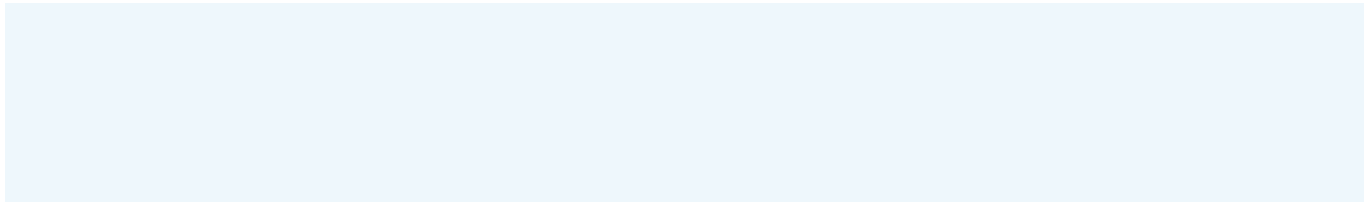
## **SELECTING - NAVIGATING DUE DILIGENCE PROCESS**

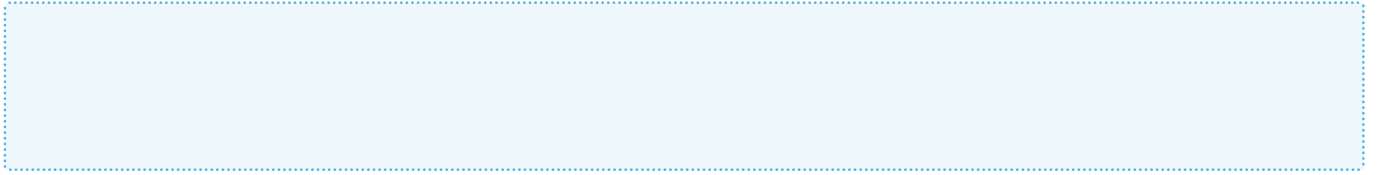
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## **APPOINTING (CONTRACTING)**

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#### EXPERT TIP

Ensure you work together with your educational institution partner during the planning stage to set realistic expectations around ongoing response times and communication updates on both sides. This collaboration will maximise the effectiveness of your partnership and ensure you work together do deliver an outstanding international student experience.



#### EXPERT TIP

Ensure your objectives are planned and agreed together with your educational institution partner and that they are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound). Ensure they do not only refer to student recruitment targets and conversion rates. These objectives will then be used to measure your performance and should be reviewed yearly and updated as an addendum to your contract.



#### EXPERT TIP

Education agents should be able to demonstrate, to their partners, how they intend to manage their sub-agent network in line with their expectations (e.g. application quality, transparent complaints process, market diversity, conversion rate, etc.) and demonstrate how it will work in practice. Again, transparency and honesty will be key here. Ensuring the quality and accuracy of advice given to students is the most important element of the provider-education agent relationship.



#### EXPERT TIP

**Objective Setting** - In the planning stage it is essential that communication is honest and transparent on both sides. When agreeing to SMART objectives, it is important that the agent can have a conversation about what support they will need from the educational institution to meet those objectives from the outset.



#### EXPERT TIP

Education agents and Digital Agent Networks (agent aggregators, brokers, and marketplaces) should be able to tell their partners how they intend to manage their sub-agent network in line with their expectations (e.g., application quality, transparent complaints process, market diversity, conversion rate, etc.) and demonstrate how it will work in practice. Again, transparency and honesty are key here.



## OPTIMISING THE RELATIONSHIP

### EDUCATION PROVIDER BEST PRACTICE:

Think about the student's perspective throughout the decision-making journey and tailor your support for your education agent to meet those needs.

Make sure the outcomes of your activity with your education agents can be measured so you can make informed decisions about future activity.

Effective education agent relationships work as partnerships rather than supply-chain relationships.

Be proactive and responsive, particularly in relation to making decisions on applications. Ensure the education agent always has somebody to speak to at your institution.

Evaluate the cost benefit of using technology platforms to support your education agent management which have self-service functionality.


When the *Good Practice Guide: Prospective Student Journey Mapping Exercise* was being developed, a prospective student journey mapping exercise detailed the different emotions of students, actions of education agents and possible support opportunities for institutions, at each stage of the journey. The quotes below are from the original research and highlight the importance of effective communication at every stage of the journey. This is true in both directions and with the student.

"Regular communication and updates/  
training support, swift response to emails and  
applications, in person visits to agents."

**AGENT**

"Proper training to agents, assist them to know  
all details of Universities to advise students  
properly, closely follow-up with agent and their  
activities, marketing or promotional supports,  
quick feedback on admission process."

**AGENT**

		AWARENESS			
JOURNEY STAGE		DISCOVER First Impressions (of country/agent/provider)			
STUDENT PERSPECTIVE	THINKING	I need to make a good investment	A highly ranked university must be good quality	Which country is best for me?	I want to have good career prospects
	FEELING				
	DOING	Talking with friends, parents, teachers about study options		Attending expos and study fairs (virtual and online)	Studying English, high school, training course or at tertiary provider
EDUCATION AGENT VIEW	OBJECTIVE	Raise awareness of the company among prospective students		Generating prospective student leads	
	ACTION				
PROVIDER SUPPORT	ACTION	List education agent on website	Affiliate / Endorsement marketing	Assets / Info available on demand in an online agent portal	Approval to develop own promotional materials on provider behalf (Planning chapter)





JOINTED FRUSTRATED

Applying for finance  
e.g. bank loan, grants  
Considering offers from other providers  
Looking for alternatives if I don't receive any of offers  
e.g. other country, different

Managing the student's (family's) expectations'

Getting offers on behalf of the student

Completing application on behalf of student (some countries)  
Assisting student with Statement of Purpose (some countries)  
Translating documents

Requesting any additional documents / items on behalf of provider  
Running provider  
Document verification

Chasing providers for decision  
Relaying information from the provider  
English language preparation (as required)

Ensure agent knows the likely turn-around times so they can manage student expectations

Try to keep the application process and requirements as simple as possible and online

Make application decisions within the time-frame expectations you have set

Where appropriate provide information targeting parents and guardians

Integrate agent CRM with application system

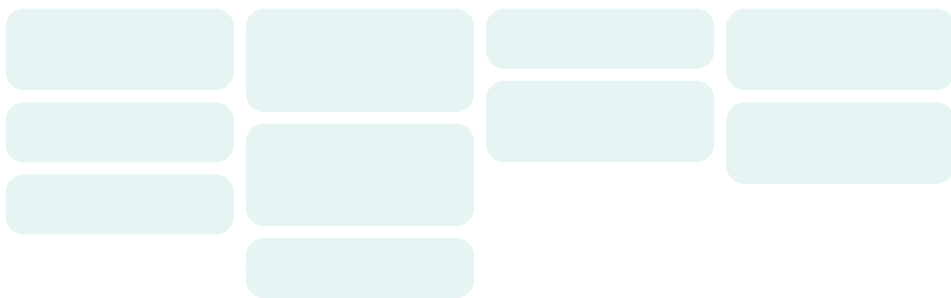
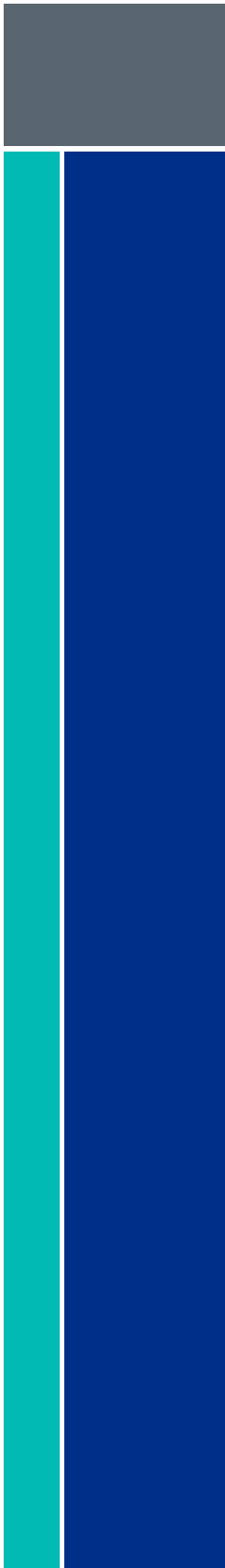
Simple and quick scholarship application and recognition process

Send all communications to the education agent or agent and student (NOT STUDENT ONLY)





Acknowledge application and outline time-frames (including for selection activities)

If student is not eligible for their preferred course offer an alternative (check with education agents if this strategy is appropriate in their markets)





# COMMENCE

JOURNEY STAGE		ENROLMENT Getting ready to study		STUDY Comparing the learning experience/ content with your expectations	
STUDENT PERSPECTIVE	THINKING	<p>The provider doesn't have one of my documents and won't let me enrol</p> <p>Provider person X was amazing and helped me through the enrolment</p> <p>They've cancelled unit X from my course which was one of the main reasons I came here</p> <p>Why is this all taking so long?</p>	<p>Everybody speaks English so fast - I don't know what is going on</p> <p>They have some really cool clubs that I'm going to join</p> <p>I've made it!</p> <p>I miss my family/friends/home</p>	<p>I'm finding it really hard to adapt academically and culturally</p> <p>I don't understand my lecturer</p> <p>I haven't got access to the provider IT systems</p> <p>Where is my classroom?</p>	<p>The facilities are amazing</p> <p>How do I use the library?</p> <p>Everybody seems to know what they're doing</p> <p>My first assignment is due in 3 weeks - it's too soon!</p>
	FEELING				
	DOING	<p>Attending welcome programmes/orientations</p> <p>Completing enrolment formalities</p> <p>Receiving and analysing class timetable</p> <p>Registering with Police/Doctor/Embassy, etc</p>	<p>Searching for part-time work</p> <p>Making friends</p> <p>Accessing provider support services</p> <p>Setting up a bank account/mobile phone/internet/utilities, etc</p>	<p>Start classes - English/Degree/A-Levels, etc</p> <p>Tell friends and family about your experience</p>	<p>Going through academic culture-shock</p>
EDUCATION AGENT VIEW	OBJECTIVE	Being seen as professional and supportive – receiving student / provider endorsements		Be paid for work undertaken	
	ACTION	 <p>Problem solving on behalf of student</p> <p>Confirming enrolments</p>	 <p>Requesting student / provider endorsements and testimonials</p>	<p>Invoicing provider (commission)</p> <p>Reviewing intake and preparing for next intake</p>	
PROVIDER SUPPORT	ACTION	<p>Send agent student enrolment details to education agent so they can invoice you quickly</p> <p>Assisting agent/student with issues in a timely manner</p>		<p>Pay commission in a timely fashion</p> <p>Send anonymised student feedback on services to agent as appropriate</p> <p>Provide student testimonials</p>	<p>Remind agent of any trailing commissions as student progresses</p> <p>Send feedback on students to agent</p>

## REVIEWS AND RECOGNITION



### EXPERT TIP

Understand the metrics that you'll be reviewed against – As mentioned earlier in 'planning', spending time setting and understanding expectations and metrics early on with your educational Institution is essential. They will use these expectations and targets to measure your performance.

### EXPERT TIP

The educational institution can scan a wide range of qualitative and quantitative measures (e.g., student complaints or response/turnaround times) leading up to an intake. Ask them to share this with you as it will help you be successful and minimise more significant issues later in the cycle or after enrolment.

### EXPERT TIP

Educational Institutions may carry out Mystery Shopping to determine areas for training and other incremental improvements in the way they support you. Low conversion rates, anecdotal feedback that you do not prioritise a particular institution, or that you are breaching some element of the National Code, or your contract are common reasons why education institutions carry out mystery shopping. They should inform you this will be carried out well in advance.

## PAYING



### EXPERT TIP

The financial relationship between an educational institution and education agents must comply with several UK laws, and education providers and education agents must be fully aware of this. In addition, you must be mindful of your responsibilities to comply with the Competition and Markets Authority regulations. Of particular importance is that you are honest about the commercial relationship you have with your educational institutions, ideally through a signed contract with them. You do not need to state the value of your commission, just that you receive a commission for helping a student to enrol at that institution and that that pays for a defined set of services you will provide the student.



<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/higher-education-consumer-law-advice-for-providers-and-students>



### EXPERT TIP

**Split Commissions** - In support of student choice, some institutions allow for split commission payments when a student decides to change agents. As an agent, you could still receive a commission based on the stages of the application process completed at the time of the change. Please note that this is not an incentive to 'poach' students from other education agents. If you do, you will be in contravention of Standard 2.3 of the National Code.



### EXPERT TIP

Some educational institutions take a hands-on approach to payments by proactively invoicing education agents based on the enrolment data in their student admissions systems. Again, this is a gesture of goodwill to help build long-term partnerships, which should always be a high priority.



### EXPERT TIP

It would be unethical and against agent good practice to refuse to submit applications for fully qualified prospective students simply because you are non-contracted and may not receive a commission from an education provider. Educational institutions have a rigorous selection, appointment and contracting process and trying to bypass that forcefully reduces the likelihood of the education provider considering your appointment for a future enrolment cycle.

## FUNDAMENTALS

### GOVERNANCE



#### EXPERT TIP

Focus on embedding a student-centred approach across your company - Educational Institutions' agent governance and policies are developed using the prospective students' perspective to increase the likelihood of students receiving excellent service. This will ensure that you continue to meet both your own and the education providers' requirements.

### RESOURCES (STAFFING)

#### EXPERT TIP

Business continuity is vital for education agents and educational institutions. Education agents should have a plan to mitigate disruptions or staff changes as should the partner institution. Maintaining good communication with more than one key contact will reduce the likelihood of a once successful relationship with an education provider disintegrating when the relationship manager moves to another institution. Having UK or institution experts to call on for more specialised support is also good practise.

### SYSTEMS AND BUSINESS ANALYTICS

#### EXPERT TIP

Talk to your educational institution about the CRM system that you use. With the growing advancements in systems integrations, there could be a variety of ways to save a significant amount of time, reduce error rates and reduce set-up times.

#### EXPERT TIP

Web analytics is a powerful tool that you can use to gather more insights on prospective students. You can share those insights with your education provider partners to contribute more to their marketing strategy and generate additional value. They may wish to engage your help similarly to test potential market demand for certain courses or other things indicated by their web analytics

## STUDENTS FEEDBACK FROM BUILA & UKCISA REPORT

The original research that informed much of this work is available to download from UKCISA website:

[A Partnership for Quality: A route to a UK Quality Framework with Education Agents](#)

We asked students how education agents could improve their services? We hope the following student insights will be helpful:

**IMPLICATION:** This may mean doing more promotion, but also being clearer about the range of services you provide.

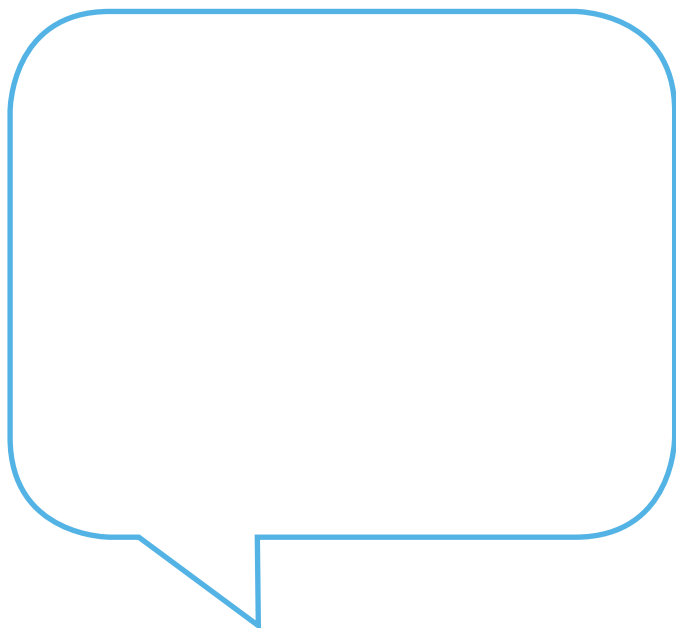
**IMPLICATION:** Note the earlier comments about having a student-education agent contract, or signed declaration, which list the services provided and any fees that you may charge the student. You do not have to say how much you receive from the partner institution, but it is important that you tell them that you have an agreement with the partner institution, and you will receive a payment if the student enrolls with them.

**IMPLICATION:** This insight influenced some of the content of the National Code of Ethical Practice for UK Education Providers. We do understand that you are a commercial entity, so this is not always an easy one to navigate, but note it is something students are aware of. As word-of-mouth is your number one marketing tool, it is in your interest to 'guide' rather than 'place' students.

**IMPLICATION:** Or go one further and engage some of your enrolled students in partner institutions to chat with prospective students through peer-to-peer software. There is an increasing amount of evidence that using your enrolled students to help with promotion and explain your services will result in better recruitment outcomes.



We will leave you with a few student quotes:



"It is common for someone who is not familiar

