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The Growing Reliance of Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology on Educational Agents for the Recruitment of International Students

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Abstract

The number of international students seeking educational opportunities at Ontario colleges of applied arts and technology (CAATs) has grown at an unprecedented rate in the past 10 years. It appears that as the number of the international college students has

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increased, colleges have also been relying more heavily on educational agents to recruit such students. To explore this assertion, the author examined institutional data provided by an Ontario college of applied arts and technology. The findings show that the proportion of international students who use an agent has indeed risen dramatically in recent years. The paper also identifies and examines various factors contributing to CAATs' increasing use of educational agents.

Keywords: International, international students, international recruitment, recruitment agencies

Introduction

The role of Ontario's colleges of applied arts and technology (CAATs), most of which were founded in the late 1960s, has changed substantially over the years. From institutions that primarily trained skilled workers and tradespeople for local communities, they have evolved into complex educational organizations that fulfill multiple functions, with the education and training of international students quickly becoming one of the most important.

According to Hurabielle (1998), only 10% of Canadian institutions of higher education had international students in the 1960s and 1970s. In a seminal 1986 work on community colleges in Canada, Denisson and Gallagher (1986) mentioned only briefly that some colleges accepted international students. But, as Galway (2000) reported, by the late 1990s all 24 of Ontario's CAATs had international students on their campuses. In the past 10 years, the percentage of foreign students at Ontario colleges has increased by a whopping 407.5%,

whereas the overall enrolment at Ontario colleges increased by only 25.7% during that period (Colleges Ontario, 2016).

CAATs employ various methods to recruit international students, including the use of educational agents. As the number of international college students in Ontario has increased, it is likely that the number of such students recruited by educational agents, rather than directly by the institutions, has also risen. If so, such a development may have a significant impact on colleges' ability to maintain control over their recruitment and admissions practices. That being said, despite the growing interest in all aspects of educational agents' activities, no empirical studies have been conducted thus far to evaluate the degree to which CAATs and other institutions of higher education have become dependent on agents for international student recruitment. The purpose of this study is therefore to investigate whether the increase in the number of international college students in Ontario has been accompanied by colleges' greater reliance on agents, and, if so, to analyze the factors that may underlie such a trend. It is hoped that the study will inform a discussion of the benefits of direct recruitment of international students by colleges as opposed to reliance on educational agents to perform this task.

Literature Review

To provide a more comprehensive overview of the subject, the literature review covers three interrelated topics: the evolving role of CAATs; international students as part of the internationalization process; and educational agents' involvement in the recruitment of international students.

Evolving Role of CAATs

Numerous scholars have observed that the historical mission of community colleges in North America has been to serve the specific needs of their local communities (Cohen and Brawer 2008; Dennison and Gallagher 1986; Roueche and Baker 1987). Reflecting on the origins of the American college, Treat and Hagedorn observe that community colleges were never designed to be international education centers. Their missions have traditionally had a local focus: meeting the needs of students in transition from college to university and providing career, technical, developmental, and community education (Treat and Hagedorn, 2013). It is quite likely that initially the overwhelming majority of college students came from the local community and after graduation found employment in the same community.

According to Levin, community colleges traditionally played three roles: they provided education and training and they served as a community resource. But in the 1990s the training role, which was previously an institutional priority of lesser status, began to gain prominence. At the same time colleges began to lose their social function as a community resource and took on a much more significant economic function. These developments paralleled (or stemmed from) the process of globalization during the late 1980s and 1990s (Levin, 2001, p. 8).

Globalization, which can be defined as social, technological, economic, political, geographical, ideological, and cultural changes affecting nations around the world (Dudley, 1998; Rojewski & Lasonen, 2004), is an inevitable process; colleges, like other

institutions, cannot avoid its forces and must respond accordingly. One way they respond is to internationalize their operations.

International Students as Part of the Internationalization Process

The most widely used definition of internationalization in higher education is that of Jane Knight: internationalization at the national, sector, and institutional levels is the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of postsecondary education (Knight, 2004). Knight differentiates between internationalization abroad, or cross-border education, and internationalization at home. Internationalization at home refers to those aspects of internationalization that take place on a home campus. They include the intercultural and international dimension of the teaching-learning process and research, extracurricular activities, and relationships with local cultural and ethnic community groups, as well as the integration of foreign students and scholars into campus life and activities (Knight, 2006). International students are central to such activities.

According to Galway (2000), the top three reasons that institutions of higher education recruit international students are to generate revenue, to bring foreign perspectives to the local student body, and to foster international trade links.

Analyzing changes in organizational behaviors at Canadian institutions of higher education, Levin observes, “Governments to compete globally adopt a neo-liberal position of contracting public expenditures. Colleges in turn adopt strategies to ensure less reliance

upon government funds. College members are motivated to form partnerships with business and industry to secure resources. The need for financial resources motivates institutional members to pursue international associations, agreements, and students” (Levin, 1999). And yet the assumption that the sole objective of colleges’ efforts to recruit international students is to increase their revenues is simplistic. Like any other institution, colleges need resources to finance their operations; in contrast to private enterprises, however, the *raison d’être* of colleges is not to maximize their profits but to provide a public service. Thus, in addition to financial motives, colleges have other important reasons to recruit foreign students.

Demographic trends are one such reason. Over the past four decades, the number of students graduating from Ontario colleges has been increasing steadily, mainly because of the fast-growing college-age population in Ontario and Canada in general. Baby-boomers and then their children, the so-called echo generation, ensured a steady flow of students. But this trend is no longer sustainable. According to Statistics Canada, the number of potential students (those aged 20 to 24) in Canada peaked in 2011, will drop sharply in the following 10 years, and then will remain flat for 5 years (Statistics Canada, 2005). Nor will this trend improve after the year 2026; if anything, today’s economic conditions are likely to make it even more difficult for Canadians to have children.

Colleges may also be interested in recruiting international students because they believe such students bring to the classroom a foreign perspective that is crucial for success in the new global economy (Cudmore,

2005; Knight, 2006).

As Taburt and Stewart (1999) point out, international students contribute to the sharing and understanding of diverse cultures, ideas, values, knowledge, technologies, and economies across borders; the result is a more interconnected and interdependent world for students of the host country and international students alike.

Educational Agents' Involvement in the Recruitment of International Students

An agent can be defined as a third-party entity (an individual or a company) that provides educational advisory services to students who want to study abroad, in exchange for a fee paid by the students and their families and/or a commission paid by the institution they represent (Coffey, 2013).

CAATs seem to rely heavily on educational agencies (in this study, the words “agency” and “agent” are used interchangeably) in their international recruitment strategies. A quick look at the websites of Ontario colleges shows that almost all are actively involved with agents. Strong anecdotal evidence, as well as some research, suggests that as the number of international college students increases, their reliance on educational agencies also rises. Research involving 500 Chinese high school students showed that 69% of them were using or planned to use an agent to assist them with the college-application process (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011). Data from 124 educational institutions in England revealed that the number of students who used agents increased by 6.4% between the 2011–12 and 2012–13 academic years (Havergal, 2015).

Much of the literature on this subject concerns the

suitability of paying agents to recruit students. In recent years, there have been numerous reports about unscrupulous agents who have taken advantage of unsuspecting students. For instance, agents have provided international students with substandard accommodation (Keung, 2012), enrolled them in the wrong institutions (Golden, 2011), and falsified application documents (Wilhelm, 2010; Ma, 2012). Moreover, as Fischer (2011) points out, paying third parties to recruit students is an inherently flawed practice that marginalizes the interests of students.

But as Coffey and Perry (2013) point out, “While anecdotal incidents of bad agent behaviour overseas have received widespread attention, little is known about the role of agents in Canada’s education system, and this has made it difficult to assess both the positive and adverse impacts of agent involvement on Canadian educational institutions and their students.”

The services that agencies normally provide include assistance with college application forms, visa interviews, travel arrangements, and other precollege requirements. Agents can also provide students with valuable advice about their choice of institution and college major.

Methodology

The data for this empirical study were collected from the internal registration database of an Ontario college with permission from the registrar and the international development department. This approach allowed for analysis of a large data set distributed over a long period and also ensured the accuracy of the information.

Research Site and Participant Selection

The registrar's office collects data only on those agents who have a formal contract with the college. Thus in this study only agents with such contracts are studied; those who are compensated for their services by students or their families are not included.

Because the data were obtained from a single institution, the name of the institution is not disclosed to preserve the confidentiality of the source. Even though the first international students began attending the college in 1991, no reliable data are available for the years before 1995.

Data Collection

All agents who have contracts with the college are required to enter their agency numbers on their clients' application forms. These numbers are then stored in the college's registration database. Those students who had a legitimate agency number in their files were regarded as students who "used an agent". Students whose files did not contain an agency number or had an invalid number were considered students who "did not use an agent".

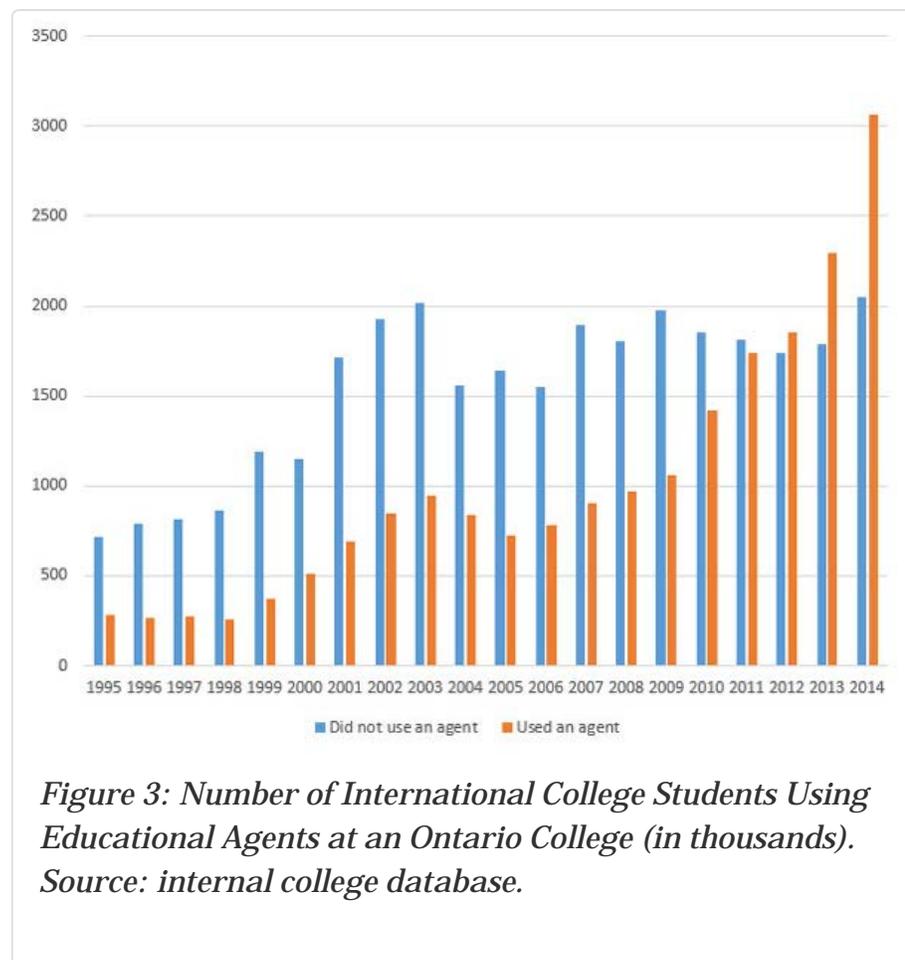
Data Analyses

The international students who attended the college from 1995 until 2014 were divided into two groups: those who used an educational agent and those who did not. The two groups were then compared and the trend analyzed.

Findings

As Figure 3 shows, the number of international students rose from 717 in 1995 to 5,113 in 2014, an annual increase of 10.9%. During that period, the number of international students who used an agent rose from 283 to 3,061, an annual increase of 13.4%.

Interestingly, the percentage of students who solicited the help of an agent remained steady at about 30% from 1995 until 2007, after which it began to increase sharply and reached almost 60% in 2014.



Analyses

Many factors may have contributed to such a dramatic increase in agent participation. The three main factors that most likely have made a major contribution to the increase are international students, agents, and colleges.

International Students

Ontario colleges are under severe pressure to admit ever-increasing numbers of international students for the reasons discussed above. There is some evidence that Canadian institutions of higher education accept international students who are academically ill-prepared

and even lack English-language skills (CBC News, 2013). An inability to understand the subtleties of written English may make it difficult for some international college applicants to grasp vital information pertaining to admission requirements, program availability, financial aid, and various other services that colleges provide. An agent can help overcome these challenges.

Hagedorn and Zhang's (2011) research revealed that Chinese international students who considered their level of English low were more likely to use an agent than their peers whose level of English proficiency was self-identified as high. The authors also observed that an increasing number of Chinese students and their parents view professional educational advising as a compulsory component of the college application process (Hagedorn and Zhang, 2011).

Obtaining advice on program selection is particularly important for international students who plan to attend a community college. Even though colleges provide a broad range of support, such services have traditionally been geared to domestic students, who normally decide on their major while at high school with assistance from a guidance counsellor. International students, however, are often completely unfamiliar with the Ontario college system, the nature of the programs available, and the extent to which such programs will enable them to find a job. A competent agent can save international applicants valuable time and resources by providing correct, up-to-date information and sound advice on the various academic and training programs offered by CAATs.

Another factor contributing to international students' increased reliance on educational agents may have to do

with changes in Canadian immigration law. Research shows that the opportunity to work, to obtain permanent residency, and to immigrate may be the main reasons students seek an education abroad (Coffey & Perry, 2013). Even though the introduction of the Canadian Experience Class immigration category in 2008 (CIC, 2008) and the Express Entry application management system in 2015 (CIC, 2015) made it easier and more convenient for international students to apply for permanent-resident status in Canada, navigating Canada's complex immigration system continues to be a challenge for them (CIC, 2008). Thus, in addition to using agents to obtain information and advice on study location, cost of living, social and cultural life, and other essential matters, international students may need agents to help them interpret and understand various immigration rules. Moreover, some cultures may strongly prefer to use an intermediary for important transactions (Bodycott, 2009; Bodycott & Lai, 2012).

Agents

Another reason for the increase in the number of educational agents assisting international college students may be that, with the slowdown of the global economy since 2008, the highly profitable business of providing services to international students has become even more attractive. As noted above, agents can generate income from both the institutions they send students to and the students themselves. A report by The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education, a think tank based in the United Kingdom, shows that most agents make the bulk of their income from commissions paid by institutions rather than from students and their families. Still, the three-quarters of the students who used agents reported paying fees ranging from \$500 or

less (15% of respondents) to more than \$5,000 (13% of respondents). Only 25% of the students reported that their agent services were free (Redden, 2014). Data on agent commissions paid by Ontario colleges are not available, but several studies in various constituencies suggest that agents are paid the equivalent of \$2,000 to \$3,000 a student (Coffey & Perry, 2013; Havergal, 2015).

Informal reports suggest that immigration consultants began to pay more attention to international students as potential customers after Canada's immigration rules were amended to make it easier for foreign students to immigrate (CIC, 2008). Moreover, a June 2011 amendment to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act prohibits college personnel from assisting students with immigration-related matters (CIC, 2011). It is only natural that immigration consultants should fill this gap and by extension move into international student recruitment as well. According to the i-graduate ICEF 2012 agent barometer report, 55% of educational agents provide immigration advice to their clients (Archer, 2012).

Colleges

According to a report by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), most of the officials surveyed at postsecondary institutions in English Canada consider agents indispensable for the recruitment of international students (Coffey & Perry, 2013). The report identifies three primary reasons that Canadian postsecondary institutions employ agents: to keep the cost of doing business abroad low, to compete effectively with other postsecondary institutions, and to have a continuing presence in culturally diverse countries (Coffey & Perry, 2013).

According to Kevin Van-Cauter, a higher education adviser at the British Council, using agents is the most cost-effective way of recruiting international students, especially when institutions do not have the staff or the budget to maintain a presence in certain countries (Havergal, 2015).

Ontario colleges are competing fiercely for international students, not only with one another but also with other Canadian higher education institutions as well as with colleges and universities in other countries. The economic value of employing agents is now widely recognized. In the United States, for example, the National Association for College Admission Counseling recently lifted its ban on the use of commissioned agents for the recruitment of students from outside the country (Redden, 2013).

According to the CMEC report, Canadian postsecondary institutions believe they need to use agents to compete with their American counterparts, which have better name recognition (Coffey & Perry, 2013). Such a view is particularly relevant for colleges because in some countries they are not regarded as institutions that provide high-quality education. Thus another reason colleges actively use educational agents may be to compensate for their lack of name recognition overseas and to make the foreign public aware of the value of a college education.

Implications for Colleges

It should be noted that agents are business people whose prime objective is to generate revenues by enrolling as many students as possible. To achieve this objective, they often cultivate close relationships with the institutional

departments responsible for admitting international students and they lobby relentlessly to ensure their clients' acceptance. Such eagerness is understandable. This approach, however, is almost certain to place international applicants who do not use agents at a disadvantage, and in some instances prevent colleges from admitting the best students, because they use a first-come-first-served admission process.

Agents have significant bargaining power with individual colleges because they can choose which CAAT or private school to promote to their clients.

Furthermore, because the majority of international college students are now recruited by agents, the role of colleges' recruitment departments is shifting from recruiting directly to providing training and logistical support to agents.

Conclusion

The research findings show clearly that as the number of international students at one Ontario college has increased, so has their reliance on educational agents. The limitation of the study was that institutional data from only that college were examined. Thus more comprehensive research involving colleges of various sizes, academic orientations, and geographical locations is required to draw broader conclusions. More specifically, it is important to examine the policies of various Ontario colleges on the use of educational agents and their views on the growing disproportion between international students who use an agent and those who do not.

If the rate of increase of agent participation

demonstrated by this study is widespread, it is quite possible that in the not-too-distant future the overwhelming majority of international students at Ontario colleges will be recruited by agents rather than by the colleges' recruitment personnel.

It was beyond the scope of this study to provide an in-depth analyses of the impact that the growing influence of agents will have on colleges and their international students; it is clear, however, that agents are quickly becoming a dominant force in colleges' international student recruitment, and that research on all aspects of this important new phenomenon is needed.

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