

Enhancing Agent Relationships

A report on building relationships with international education agents.

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1. Executive Summary

A considerable amount of the business of educating overseas students is generated by education agents. This report, commissioned by Education New Zealand, examines the views of a range of agents, institutions and organisations associated with international education. An experienced member of the International Education Industry, Bruce Aston, was contracted to undertake this research project and completed the draft in July 2006.

Information has been collected from a total of 110 respondents, made up of 49 providers and 61 agents. The providers were randomly selected from those that are currently active in the industry. The agents were chosen from Education New Zealand's database of agents that have recently visited on a PACE Agents Familiarisation visit. This information was gathered in the form of both telephone interviews and written submissions via email. The key issues brought up by all groups have been identified and are summarised in the form of recommendations at the conclusion of each section of the report.

The aim of the report is not to provide a definitive set of rules that should be followed but simply to highlight some areas that both agents and providers may find useful in promoting strong and positive relationships between provider and agent. In addition there may be issues that arise from the report that can be looked at by bodies such as Education New Zealand (ENZ), New Zealand Trade and Enterprise (NZTE), and Immigration New Zealand (INZ) which could give guidance on future priorities.

2. Key Recommendations

There are a range of ways to strengthen relationships either between an agent and a school, or an agent and their loyalty to a country. This section looks at respondents' opinions on these varying methods.

2.1 Agent Familiarisation Visits

With only 2 exceptions, familiarisation visits to New Zealand were supported by all 61 agents who were surveyed. They pointed to the value of first-hand information about both the country and the institutions visited that would be of value to them in promoting New Zealand as a destination. However they commonly expressed the view that there must be a follow-up visit by institutions to counter the aggressive marketing of other countries.

Agents were asked to rate the New Zealand Familiarisation Visits they had experienced using a 1 to 5 scale, 1 being high and 5 being low. The ratings were consistently 1 or 2. There were also suggestions for some changes that were made by the agents. The 5 most common recommendations made in order of frequency were:

- (i) Keep the visits short with a reasonable amount of institution appointments within one day.
- (ii) Keep presentations by schools short, allowing plenty of time to learn about New Zealand's general advantages. Time to understand the New Zealand lifestyle and environment is important.
- (iii) A wider range of education institutions should be part of the itinerary. Most visiting agents would like to visit more universities.
- (iv) Spend an equal amount of time in the North and South Islands.

Of the New Zealand providers surveyed, 62% were generally in favour of the concept of familiarisation trips.

2.2 'New Zealand Representative' Agent Groups

There was support for creating a 'New Zealand Representative' group like the 'New Zealand India Education Representatives' (NZIER) group of agents in India. Indian agents must meet strict criteria to become NZIER agents, and are then provided with a number of benefits which include; an NZIER logo from Education NZ (enhancing credibility), additional training from INZ (which may lead to potential faster processing of applications), regular meetings and support from NZTE, free participation at NZ Education Fairs, priority for the PACE Indian Agents Visits, input into marketing programmes through group submissions and complimentary attendance at the Education New Zealand Conference for the top performing agent. The benefits of a system like this are seen as creating a group of focused and loyal agents whose best interests become served by doing business with New Zealand. New Zealand institutional respondents to the survey agreed on the need for rewarding a demonstrated commitment to New Zealand. The Indian agents surveyed were themselves unanimous in their support of the formation of such a group.

New Zealand institutions that supported the agent group concept also had some warnings about the methods used to compile the group and the management of the group. While acknowledging the need to identify and reward good agents and build their loyalty to New Zealand it was felt that there needed to be a pathway for other agents to achieve this status. It is hoped that joining a New Zealand agents group like the NZIER is seen as aspirational for agents, New Zealand needs to avoid creating an elitist group which would discourage other

agents from working with New Zealand. Agents that are unable to meet the criteria to join the specialist group should still continue to receive good service from New Zealand. There are very clear criteria for agents; communication needs to be transparent to show a fair, unbiased system.

It should be noted that the concept of a New Zealand Agent Group may be considered unsuitable for certain markets. The decision to create a group would need to be made on a case by case basis. The system would possibly work better for those countries where there was a proliferation of agents.

It goes without saying that individual institutions or regional groupings can also continue to reward agents in their own way, as they see fit.

Having a defined list of specialist agents in a market would help New Zealand institutions and international students find qualified agents easily. The qualified agents could be rewarded with a presentation by the New Zealand Ambassador or High Commissioner to give the occasion some status, these agents should also have the possibility of visiting New Zealand on a trip which is either free or heavily subsidised.

Providing generic promotional material such as a standard agents promotion pack was also mentioned. This distribution of material would be simple to do if there was a defined agent group in each country. The pack could include a New Zealand video, DVD, posters, pictures and maps. These items would be a helpful resource for agents to promote New Zealand, the lower value items can be used as giveaway items to potential students.

Useful links to comparative Agent Groupings:

Tourism New Zealand

<http://www.newzealand.com/travel/trade/products-services/new-zealand-specialist-programmes/new-zealand-specialist-programmes-home.cfm>

Australia Education International (AEI)

<http://aei.dest.gov.au/AEI/AboutAEI/EATC.htm>

UK Education Specialist Agents (British Council)

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/korea-educationuk-agentnan.htm>

2.3 Agent Seminars

All institutions surveyed both in New Zealand and overseas agents agreed on the need for regular training seminars and workshops to keep agents up to date and enthusiastic. Most providers also agreed that these should be open to all agents and events, such as fairs, as a good time to get agents together to build on the enthusiasm of the occasion. There was some criticism from agents that New Zealand provided considerably fewer training and information opportunities compared particularly with Australia and the U.K who seem to be very active in that area.

As one Thai agent wrote:

"As an agent I guess we hardly have support in terms of information input e.g. seminars or training. Yesterday I attended a seminar on "Pathways in Australian Education". This was held by the Australian Education Centre for agents who are doing Australia. The guest speaker was a Professor from RMIT. It was very useful as the Professor told us different kinds of pathways to study in Australia from high school right up to PhD study. This sort of thing helps the agents to get more input and can catch up the updates on the education as a whole. I do not think NZ has got that sort of aspect. Even the only annual event, NZ Agent Training, has been cancelled since last year."

Seminars such as this are seen also as an opportunity to get feedback on what things are working well for agents and what things are not and this information can be sent back to providers.

2.4 Qualification System for Agents

There was 91% support by providers for some sort of formal qualification opportunity for agents possibly similar to that offered by Australia the British Council or ESL in Canada. A trial scheme was suggested similar to that which was done by Australia with Korean agents and what is being done this month (July 2006) by the British Council in Thailand. It is interesting to note that the recent Korean Agents course was fully subscribed with 100 agents and the first trial offered gave a satisfaction rating of good to excellent for 95% of the participants. Some supporters of such a scheme being introduced by New Zealand saw it as a potential pathway to any "A list" that may be introduced as well as a worthwhile opportunity for new agents who are entering the market. Other associated factors mentioned were the need for the certificate holder to regularly up-date their certificate (which needs to be done with the Australian EATC) and the help the certificate would be in building up a data base of strong and committed agents.

One issue that arose in the context of formal training was the cost involved. There was divided opinion on whether the scheme should be free, subsidised or totally user pays. (Currently the Australian scheme is free to do the course but costs A\$400 to sit the examination and get the certificate.) Most providers felt that there needed to be some cost to give it some status but that the cost should not be prohibitive and that there should be some funding available to get the course established and trialed.

Another issue was as to who would initiate the scheme and whether or not it would have formal NZQA status as the Australian scheme does with its Australian NZQA counterpart.

Those opposed to the scheme saw it as adding an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy. It was giving the message to agents that they needed a formal qualification before they could be trusted and was an unnecessary duplication of what could be done at seminars and through newsletters.

Useful links to comparative Agent Training qualification systems:

Australian Education International

<http://www.pieronline.org/eatc>

http://pieronline.org/Upload/Files/200626162939_EATCCourseIntro060206.pdf

2.5 Collaborative Advertising

Almost all agents and providers agreed on the need for targeted and consistent advertising to raise the profile of New Zealand, but there seemed to be considerable division on the most effective method of undertaking collaborative advertising.

Following up on advertising efforts was also seen as important so that maximum value is gained. Agents should be fully included in the follow-up process.

2.6 NZ Inc Approach

The role of Tourism New Zealand in promoting New Zealand as an educational destination was also frequently mentioned by New Zealand providers and to a lesser extent by overseas agents as a way of lifting New Zealand's profile overseas and therefore helping agents.

The considerable resources available to Australia, the UK, Canada and the United States mean that these countries can afford to run more fairs, do more advertising and generally raise their profile in the countries which we all see as our main markets. Under these circumstances assistance from Tourism New Zealand in putting some emphasis in their advertising on the benefits of studying in New Zealand was seen as very valuable

2.7 Scholarships

Scholarships were seen by a number of New Zealand providers and also by overseas agents as another useful means of attracting students and supporting agents. Overseas agents especially pointed out the fact that countries such as the UK and Australia had a much larger number and range of scholarships than New Zealand. New Zealand providers could possibly offer scholarships on the basis of the number of enrolments received.

2.8 E-newsletters

Eighty percent of the New Zealand institutions saw value in a regular newsletter providing updated information to agents. However it was recognised that the information needed to be presented in an interesting and innovative way and must have information such as visa changes that are of practical help to the agent. There should also be lots of communication about good news stories from New Zealand relating to education and students, and that newsletters should arrive on a regular basis rather than in an ad hoc manner. It was considered important to have the newsletter in the language of the country it was being sent to if possible.

The 20% of respondents who did not support newsletters saw them as mainly a waste of time in view of the fact that many agents do not read e-mail newsletters, sometimes not even opening them and that face to face communication is much more effective.

3. Additional feedback received

In the course of gathering the material for this report a number of other issues arose that either providers or agents considered to be significant. The most commonly expressed issues have been outlined below.

The most recurring concern expressed by agents was the slow response to enrolments and/or enquiries by New Zealand universities. Almost without exception the agents surveyed stated that New Zealand institutions were much slower than their counterparts in other countries. Several agents believed that good quality students had been lost to New Zealand through frustration at the slow response and on occasions even a negative attitude by the universities. For example:

"NZ institutions must speed up the application process. Many of our students lose patience and finally opt for Australia or the UK.... NZ is losing out on brilliant engineering students to the UK or US" (Indian Agent)

"New Zealand Universities are not nearly as aggressive as other countries in trying to attract students. Also the reply time for schools is often too slow. This is especially a problem for NZ Universities compared to Universities in other countries." (Taiwan Agent)

"I think that most of the Universities take forever to process applications." (Indian Agent)

"Universities are too slow to reply or the reply was not clear" (Japanese Agent)

"...enrolment processing times are too slow compared with other countries. NZ needs to be moving faster." (Thai agent)

"Enrolment processes and procedures must be looked at by universities....universities often seem to have an arrogant attitude. (Indonesian agent)

Further points made by agents with regard to university study in New Zealand were the high requirements for post graduate study compared with other countries, the longer time often required for study at post-graduate level and the bureaucratic imposition imposed in some countries such as India where getting a Police Clearance Certificate is seen as a major difficulty.

As one agent stated:

"Countries like the US, UK and Canada do not need a Police Clearance Certificate. Getting this can be a frustrating experience...For example if the passport was issued at Kolkata and the student is presently living in Mumbai then he will have to go through a nightmare in order to get the PCC. There is very little relevance of a PCC in today's times in view of the rampant corruption that prevails in our society."

Other issues mentioned by agents were the 2 year work permits introduced by Canada and Scotland that are very attractive to students and the semester by semester commission payments made by some providers which will stop if a student leaves the institution even though the agent has done all the work in enrolling the student.

Comments regarding Immigration New Zealand were also mentioned. A particular concern appears to be inconsistency when dealing with applications. For example these comments were made by agents:

"I find that we never know what will happen with New Zealand applications. With Australia they have a consistent set of rules that are applied and even though they might be tough it is ok because we know where we stand. With NZ we never know. They are often asking for additional information and each visa officer has discretion. This is not consistent and the processing is too slow..." (Thai agent)

"The NZIS tend not to give enough notice on any changes." (Thai agent)

"Although visa processing time has been reduced it is still too slow..." (Indian agent)

"There are problems with NZIS... We try to promote New Zealand but it seems their work is vice-versa." (Thai agent)

"The main problem is visas which are not granted on time. Also NZIS changes their policy quite often." (Thai agent)

"We would much rather send students to Australia simply because of the policy and attitude of NZIS" (Indonesian agent)

The proposed changes in INZ policy and procedures indicate a commitment to a simplified visa system, consistent centralised decision making, enhanced on-line services and fair and fast delivery of service may well go some way to meeting the expressed concerns.

Another factor considered by some agents that made New Zealand a less attractive destination was the expensive air fares, especially from Europe and South America but also from Asia. Students in Asia for example seem more able to get cheap deals to countries like Australia and the U.K. Some New Zealand institutions suggested that Air New Zealand as the national carrier could do more to promote student travel.

In acknowledgement, I would like to thank the 110 agents and education providers who took the time to contribute to this research.

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