

feature

Direct bookings in Australia

Australian high schools are getting more direct bookings from international students, but most schools predict that education agents will always have a role in recruitment.

Many high schools in Australia have incorporated online booking facilities onto their web pages, as well as providing up-to-date information on the facilities available, the location, previous pupil achievements and personal testimonies of students. However, while the accessibility of international study options is to be welcomed, what do increased Internet access and direct bookings mean for the role of education agents?

Fiona Donagh, from St Paul's International College in Moss Vale, NSW, believes that school websites and online application will never completely replace the role of the agent. "Dealing with people and a myriad of complicated procedures could never be dealt with over the net," she says. "Education is a people business. Websites are excellent points of contact, but the person-to-person aspect will always be an essential element [of placement]."

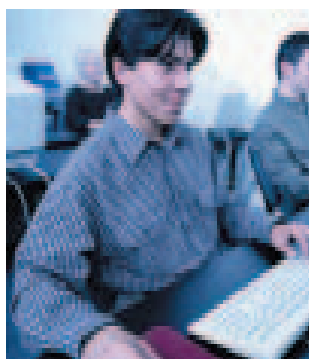
Jasmine Michelides, from St Hilda's Anglican School for Girls in Perth, WA – which accepts direct applications from its website – has a different point of view. She states that in St Hilda's case, a comprehensive website combined with online enrolment form will eventually negate the

need for education agents. "[International students find out about our school through] a combination of avenues," she says. "[Via] siblings and word-of-mouth recommendation seem [the] most important [methods], followed by our website and, least of all, education agents."

Agent use varies widely in the mainstream education sector in all countries and using agents is most common among schools where recruiting international students is a high priority. Michelides admits that overseas enquiries to the school have not been pursued recently due to space constraints. However, other schools acknowledge that Internet bookings are starting to outnumber those processed through agents.

"We receive quite a lot of enquiries from overseas [students] via our website. The number is increasing all the time," says Toni Lanphier from the Cathedral School in Townsville, QLD. "We also accept direct applications from students who have found us online. This method of enrolment now exceeds agent placements at our school."

However, Lanphier points out that agents are invaluable at providing the "face-to-face-contact" that many students



require, particularly in certain markets. "Although a high number of students may [do their research] on the net, it is the parents who make the final decisions and for them, the human touch is still important," adds Gurps Nijjar from EZ Communications in Japan.

A direct enrolment made through a school's website is often followed up by requests for academic reports, registration fees, samples of recent academic work, evidence of English language ability and, in some cases, a face-to-face interview. Combined with all the other requirements needed to apply for a long-term study visa, and the fact that the whole process is conducted in an unfamiliar language, the prospect of booking directly can become rather daunting for some.

At the Knox School in Wantirna South, VIC, online bookings are accepted from students in countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, while students from China are encouraged to go through an agent. Iris Pang at the school says, "Most parents have no knowledge of English and [would] rather go to an agent who can fill in the forms and has all the required documents to go with the visa application."

Donagh underlines this point. "Education agents can communicate directly with the applicant in the common language, ensuring full understanding, and the education agent is also informed of the visa and document issues and political nuances within that country," she says.

Overall, a comprehensive website provides schools with an easy and attractive way to promote themselves to students overseas, and an online enrolment form can be useful for students who have the knowledge to navigate the application system alone. But as Yang Xiao Heng Yang, from Australasia Sports and Cultural Exchange agency in Glen Waverley, VIC, points out, websites and agents fulfil two very different roles.

"The agents are not just doing enrolments – that is a simple procedure," he says. "Everybody can do that. The process of choosing a school necessitates advice from someone – family, friends, teachers, agents – but not just surfing the web."