

feature

# Agent impasse

Many institutions in the USA and Canada harbour a mistrust of agents. **BETHAN NORRIS** looks at some of the barriers preventing a business relationship.

Education institutions in Canada and the USA have the reputation of being the least likely to use international education agents to recruit students. Penrapa Vudhivate of Pasa agency in Thailand comments that she prefers to work with institutions in other countries, such as Australia and New Zealand, "that have a better system of working with agents" or with private schools in these countries.

One of the major obstacles preventing more widespread agent usage in North America is the issue of commission, which public institutions are often prevented from paying due to their policies or finances. "We do not use agents since our university does not allow us to pay a 'finders fee' for students," says Jeff Adams-Davis from the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, NC, USA. "Otherwise, I think we would be inclined to use them."

Wendell Sparks from Lexington Community College in Lexington, KY, USA, says that budget restraints prevent them from being able to pay commission to agents, while Judy Snoke from the English Language Institute of Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, VA, USA, points out that paying for an agent's services is something that she just does not feel comfortable with. "I don't understand why I should kick back tuition to an agent when I think the agent should be charging the student for the agency's services directly," she says. "I suspect that some agents try to charge both the student and the programme for the same services. I think this is not ethical."

While institutions in other student destinations have established procedures for ensuring the ethical behaviour of their partners, and justify commission costs against the overall benefits a good agent can offer, Canadian and US institutions clearly remain distrustful in some cases.

Ryan Sullivan from St Thomas University in Fredericton, NB, Canada, says that they do not use agents on a regular basis although this could be about to change. But he notes, "Agents who do not have the students' best

interests in mind have made some universities wary of working with education agents all together."

In the USA, Michael Smith from the University of Texas in Austin, TX, says that false promises also put him off using agents. "The two main things that keep us from using agents are having to pay them commission and being unaware of hidden promises the agents have made," he says. "Most agents are trying to make a sale to students. They often make promises for the individual programmes that we have not offered and cannot keep. Things like airport pickup, or host families or other housing arrangements. The students arrive and tell us that the agent they worked with told them that we could provide those services."

However, some institutions do acknowledge that, in the right circumstances, agents are a useful recruitment tool. "I think a relationship with a trustworthy agent could be beneficial if the agent refers students to appropriate schools," says Snoke, while Sullivan adds, "A good agent can really assist the student and ensure they're comfortable with their decision."

Another important advantage of agents is that they provide native language counselling that enables institutions to reach a potential student market that is often untapped by other marketing efforts. With a little mutual understanding, therefore, education agents could yet play a wider role in Canada and the USA's international recruitment efforts, particularly in the face of increasing competition.

Institutions there need to consider how to select ethical agencies. In the meantime, agents report that they do indeed charge an administration fee if commission is not offered by a selected North American school. Andrew Shuisky of Parta in Russia says, "When you explain [to institutions] that you are ready to work without commission, most of them provide you with the necessary information." But with competition intense as ever, how long can institutions in North America afford to ignore the commission question?