



East Asia Agent Conference

**Empowering professionals
and building connections**

Kuala Lumpur
26 February 2024

Executive summary

Against these challenges, how can agents adapt and sustain their business? How can UK institutions ensure they are working with quality and professional agents? How can British Council play a role to ensure these key influencers and service providers continue to be 'pro-UK' and that UK is positioned as the preferred partner?

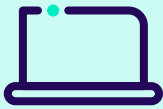
The East Asia Agent's Conference 2024 was an opportunity for international education agents in East Asia to be updated on region-specific industry information and knowledge relating to the representation of UK higher education (HE), including latest market trends, as well as gain insight into the UK Agent Quality Framework (AQF) and its significance for their business. It offered a platform to share recruitment strategy best practice and inform the UK HE sector on how best to effectively support agents. In addition, the conference facilitated networking

amongst agents and universities, enabling them to build a network of inter-regional collaborations in student recruitment.

Among the attendees, 214 agents from 142 organisations and 97 representatives from 60 UK higher education institutions joined the event. The conference programme consisted of 5 plenary sessions and 2 interactive panel discussions, featuring 18 speakers representing the UK higher education sector and the East Asia agent industry. An award ceremony was also held to celebrate the success of the UK AQF in the region.

The event received a coverage on a major International Education specialist publisher in the UK and generated significant buzz on social media, with agents, sector leaders, BUILA, and their members sharing the news widely.

Key statics



323

Attended physically and online



19

Countries and territories



28

Certified agents attended the ceremony



97%

Agreed that the event met their expectations



Context

According to latest statistics from HESA, more than 220,000 international students who chose to study in the UK are from East Asia; representing about 32 per cent of the total UK international student market. Research shows that more than 55 per cent of non-EU students who headed to the UK consulted an education agent who in turn, influenced their decision-making in choosing the UK as a study destination. It is therefore essential for the British Council to work closely with education agents to ensure that they have in-depth understanding of UK education and provide a positive representation of the UK.

Agents, however, are facing challenges in an industry where it is no longer too difficult for students to obtain information and connect directly with institutions. The barriers to entry in setting up as an education agent are low; leading to an increasingly competitive environment. In addition; changing demographics, a digital savvy client, demanding clients, growth in transnational education, and ever -changing policies, as well as geopolitics all present challenges to the agent industry.

Key findings

Tech-related impacts on the operating landscape

Technology has affected the operating landscape dramatically...

- **Technology has made the young generation more diverse, more elusive and more difficult to reach.** Generation Z (born 1995-2010) are between 14 years – 29 years, representing a huge span of difference in aspirations and life stages. Generation Alpha (born 2010-2024) is projected to be the largest generation in history. Both groups have vastly different media preferences ranging from Minecraft, Roblox, YouTube, Twitter, TikTok (Facebook is the ‘middle-aged uncle’), and countless other social media platforms, making advertising to students extremely challenging compared to the past where advertising could be done through television, posters, magazines and radio. Gen Z and Gen Alpha are fickle audiences whose tastes will change quickly and they are experts at blocking out ads.
- **Technology has opened up the young generation to a world of choices and changed their decision-making process.** The emergence of Google and university rankings, have changed the international education world by expanding the choices available to the students and presenting them with all the routes to new exciting opportunities, with a resulting impact on international of demand for international study, reputation and mobility.
- **Technology has changed the way businesses and industries operate and the kind of employees they want.** Businesses are increasingly looking for multi-disciplinary knowledge, entrepreneurialism, creativity and skills that enable people to move between roles, disciplines and countries. People need to be “portable”, able to transition from industry to industry and to “hit the ground running”. Students are increasingly aware that they can no longer simply rely on just technical or professional qualifications but need to be equipped with knowledge, confidence, experience and attributes that a changing world expects to be in their ‘backpack’.

...but people-to-people engagement is still desired

- **Technology changes, people (at the core) don't.** People, including students, still want the same things and have the same needs. They still feel the same emotions – joy, anticipation, nostalgia, fear of failure. What kids talked about “back then” is what kids talk about now. Students still desire face-to-face interaction - insights from surveys conducted among Asian students studying in the UK and Australia revealed valuable trends, including the significant role of agents in facilitating the study abroad process and the enduring preference for physical learning experiences over remote options.
- **Agents desire engagement from UK institutions.** Agents value regular and respectful engagement with UK universities, through which they can exchange knowledge and insight with the universities on markets, student needs and product information, including unique selling points (USPs) of the institutions. Strong engagement and communication between an agent and a university are significant for effective student recruitment and quality customer service for students, ensuring counsellors continue to keep such universities on their radar. Non-attendance by institutions at agent events is viewed negatively, but strong engagement out of events can help clarify expectations and mitigate negative perceptions.

Successful agent-institution partnership

- **Good university – agent partnerships.** Representatives who understand and communicate the selling points of their universities are the most effective as agents do not have time to identify the USPs of each of the universities themselves. A less good university partner is one who has little sense of the operating market. A bad university partner is one that does not see the agent as an equal partner, but just someone who exists to ‘do the university’s bidding,’ and also one who doesn’t take the time to talk to and listen to the counsellors.

- **Training for agents is valued.** The AQF and training help to protect the integrity of the UK’s higher education brand. It’s about consistency in terminology, USP and messaging rather than different institutions delivering different messages. It brings compliance and best practice standards to communications delivery, service quality and information for students, parents and partners. There is also a huge amount of value in the training from UK universities, particularly where the training is more bespoke, more niche and includes subject-specific training with materials and up dates from each institution, rather than just a trainer coming with ‘stock’ slides. As retaining knowledge is tough given the number of institutions, frequent refresher training and engagement with institutions in-country is very useful for agents and counsellors.
- **UK performs well, but could be better.** Regional agent benchmarking surveys of institution engagement and relationships with agents suggested that the UK is perceived as good overall in providing agent channel support, attending or hosting in-country events and responding to agent requests. However, across SEA, agent perceptions of Australian institutions are highest and perceptions of UK institutions are lowest. In China, Canada is ranked lowest and Australia highest. On the ability of UK institutions to adapt to market changes, contrasting trends were observed - while positive perceptions of the UK from SEA agents have increased, a decrease in perceptions of UK client institutions among agents in China is noted. This underscores the importance of UK responsiveness to market changes.

Recommendations for UK Institutions

- Institutions that already have agents and have worked with them for a long time should stick with them and support them better.
- Recruitment success doesn’t come quickly; investment of time and resources must take a long-term view.
- UK institutions should not spread themselves too thinly; there is no need to attend all events all the time but engage more and work better with your agent on conversion.

Quotes from the East Asia agent conference

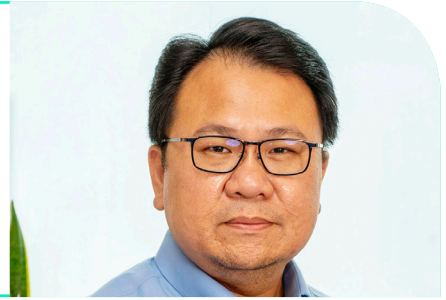
Michelle Tinloi
 Managing Director, Education Tower, Thailand

“Recruitment success doesn't come quickly, and so invest some time and resources in your agent for the long-term. Don't come in and then quickly leave if your numbers don't come through immediately and then find you must come back years later to start all over again.”



Satyadhi Hendra
 Director, Indonesia-Britain Education Centre (IBEC), Indonesia

“Good university partners are those who have a strong engagement with their agents and those who respect equality. We are not just your agent, but your partner.”



Jazreel Goh
 Director Malaysia, British Council

“Education agents continue to be central to the recruitment ecosystem that supports the growth of international education.”



Resources and links for agents and counsellors

British Council

Agent and Counsellor Training and Engagement Hub

The new UK Agent and Counsellor Training and Engagement Hub provides all education advisers with the latest information and guidance on UK international education, post-study work and employment opportunities. It offers a package of training and engagement events for agents and counsellors to help students and parents make the right decisions that enhance the experience of a UK international education.

www.britishcouncil.org/education/education-agents/training-agents



Join the hub today

www.britishcouncil.org/education/agents-counsellors/the-hub

Alumni UK

A global digital platform for UK alumni to engage with peers and build their own global networks including mentoring, professional development workshops and industry engagement.

www.britishcouncil.org/study-work-abroad/alumni-uk

UK Visa and Immigration (UKVI)

Student routes visa guidance

www.gov.uk/student-visa

Immigration rules for students

www.gov.uk/guidance/immigration-rules/appendix-student

Caseworker guidance – student and child-student

www.gov.uk/government/publications/points-based-system-student-route/student-and-child-student-accessible

Approved SELT centres

www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-applying-for-uk-visa-approved-english-language-tests

Biometric residence permits (BRP)

www.gov.uk/biometric-residence-permits

TB (tuberculosis) test

www.gov.uk/tb-test-visa

Latest student visa decision waiting times

www.gov.uk/guidance/visa-decision-waiting-times-applications-outside-the-uk

Contact UK Visas (UKVI)

www.gov.uk/contact-ukvi-inside-outside-uk

UKVI on Twitter

<https://twitter.com/ukvigovuk>

