

Recruitment Agents in the Grey Zone of International Student Recruitment

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International student recruitment agents have become central actors in global higher education. Yet their growing influence raises ethical, academic, and regulatory concerns. Drawing on the case of Georgia, this article examines how reliance on agents can support access while also encouraging over-commercialization and argues that agents require stronger transparency, oversight, and accountability.

International student recruitment has become one of the most competitive areas of global higher education. As universities seek to diversify campuses, generate revenue, and strengthen their international profiles, many rely on recruitment agents to reach students in markets where they have limited visibility or no permanent presence. These agents—companies or individuals contracted to identify, advise, and sometimes guide applicants through admissions and visa procedures—have become central actors in international higher education.

Their role is often presented in practical terms. Agents help students navigate unfamiliar systems, translate institutional requirements, prepare documentation, and understand application procedures. For students without strong social networks, international experience, or access to reliable public advising, agents can provide a crucial bridge to higher education abroad. They may also help universities enter new markets without establishing costly overseas offices. In this sense, agents can expand access and make international study possible for students who might otherwise be excluded.

Yet this positive view captures only part of the story. Recruitment agents also raise ethical, academic, and regulatory concerns. Commission-based work rewards the number of students placed rather than the quality of the academic match. It can create conflicts of interest, especially when students believe they are receiving impartial advice while agents are financially incentivized to recommend particular institutions or programs. These risks can be further complicated by “double-dipping,” when agents receive payments from both universities and students without always disclosing this dual financial interest.

This arrangement can distort the purposes of internationalization. Instead of promoting academic exchange, intercultural learning, or sustainable institutional partnerships, recruitment can become a numbers-driven business. Students may receive incomplete or misleading information about program quality, costs, degree recognition, employment

prospects, or migration opportunities. Institutions may admit students whose academic preparation, language proficiency, or expectations do not align with the program. In more serious cases, agents may blur the line between legitimate support and inappropriate assistance with applications, thereby undermining admissions integrity.

The central issue, therefore, is not whether agents are useful; in many contexts, they clearly are. The issue is that agents are ambivalent actors: they solve real problems while also creating opacity, dependency, and conflicts of interest. Treating them as either indispensable partners or inherently unethical actors is too simplistic. What is needed is a careful assessment of how they operate, who benefits, who bears the risks, and what accountability mechanisms are in place.

Lessons from Post-Soviet Georgia

The case of Georgia illustrates these tensions clearly. Over the past several years, Georgia has experienced rapid growth in higher education, driven in large part by international student enrollment. In 2024–2025, the country had nearly 188,000 students, a significant number for a population of approximately 3.7 million. International students numbered around 37,100, meaning that nearly one in five students in Georgian higher education came from abroad. This expansion has been especially visible in private institutions and medical programs.

Georgia’s appeal is understandable. Tuition fees are comparatively affordable, living costs are relatively low, and the country is widely perceived as safe. English-taught medical programs have been especially attractive to students from India, the Middle East, and other regions. Medical education also creates long-term revenue for institutions because programs typically last six years. As a result, international recruitment has become a major component of institutional growth, particularly for private universities.

This growth has been accompanied by a significant expansion in the role of recruitment agents. In a context where many Georgian institutions have limited international visibility and underdeveloped internationalization strategies, agents have often become the primary link between universities and prospective students. They promote programs abroad, guide students through applications, and help them manage administrative procedures. For international students unfamiliar with Georgia's language, higher education system, and bureaucratic requirements, agents often become the main source of information and support.

The Risks of Outsourcing Recruitment

The Georgian case also shows why this reliance is risky. According to interview data from a national study on academic and research integrity in Georgia, agents became especially influential after 2022, when many international students transferred from Ukraine following the Russian invasion. A significant number of these students, many from India and the Middle East, entered Georgian medical programs. Georgian institutions played an important role by allowing displaced students to continue their studies. However, respondents also described recruitment in this area as a “big business,” particularly in medicine.

This description is revealing. It suggests that recruitment was not only a humanitarian or educational response but also a commercial opportunity. Private universities benefited from increased enrollment. Agents benefited from commissions. Students benefited from continuity of study, but they were also placed in a system where academic fit, preparedness, language ability, and quality assurance may not always have received sufficient attention. In such a setting, financial incentives can begin to dominate educational judgment.

This is not a problem unique to Georgia. Similar dynamics are emerging in other countries seeking to become regional education hubs, including Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Both countries have seen rising numbers of international students and growing interest in medical education. Like Georgia, they may rely increasingly on recruitment intermediaries to access foreign markets. The lesson from Georgia is that rapid internationalization without strong governance can quickly become over-commercialized.

Balancing Access and Integrity

A more responsible approach would begin with transparency. Students should know whether an agent is paid by a university, how commissions work, and whether the agent represents one institution or many. Universities should publish clear information about authorized agents and take responsibility for their conduct. Governments and quality assurance bodies should require institutions to monitor recruitment practices and student outcomes, rather than treating recruitment as an external marketing activity beyond academic oversight.

Second, institutions should evaluate recruitment not only by enrollment numbers but also by student success. Retention, academic performance, complaints, visa problems, and graduation outcomes should be part of the assessment of agent performance. If an agent consistently recruits students who are poorly prepared or misinformed, the institution should end the relationship. Ethical recruitment must be connected to educational responsibility.

Third, students need access to independent information. Public advising services; transparent admissions requirements; and clear communication about costs, recognition, language expectations, and professional pathways can reduce overdependence on agents. Agents are most powerful where official information is weak or difficult to access. Strengthening student-facing information is therefore one of the best ways to reduce risk.

Finally, universities should resist the temptation to outsource internationalization entirely. Recruitment is not merely a sales function; it shapes the composition of the student body, the quality of academic programs, and institutional reputation. When recruitment is treated only as a revenue strategy, internationalization loses its educational purpose.

Recruitment agents will remain part of international higher education. In many systems, they are too embedded, useful, and commercially important to disappear. But the Georgian case shows how quickly agents can become powerful intermediaries when regulation is limited and institutions depend financially on foreign student fees. The challenge is not simply to use agents more efficiently but to govern them more carefully.

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