

# Chinese international student recruitment during the COVID-19 crisis: Education agents' practices and reflections

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## Who are Education agents?



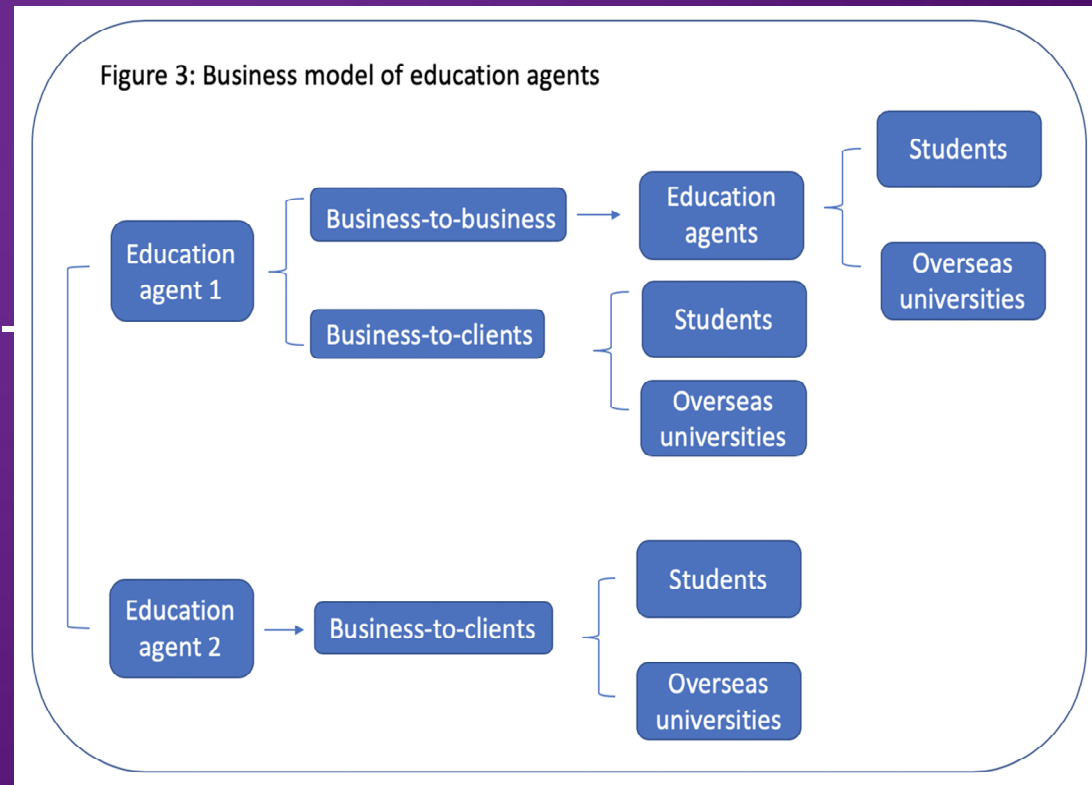
- Organizations and/or individuals who **provide a range of educational services in exchange for a fee** from their service users, which include overseas higher education institutions (Nikula & Kivistö, 2018) and/or students who will study or are studying abroad (Krasocki, 2002)



# Different types of education agents

Business models:

- 1) business-to-clients models;
- 2) combined models (including both business-to-business and business-to-clients services).

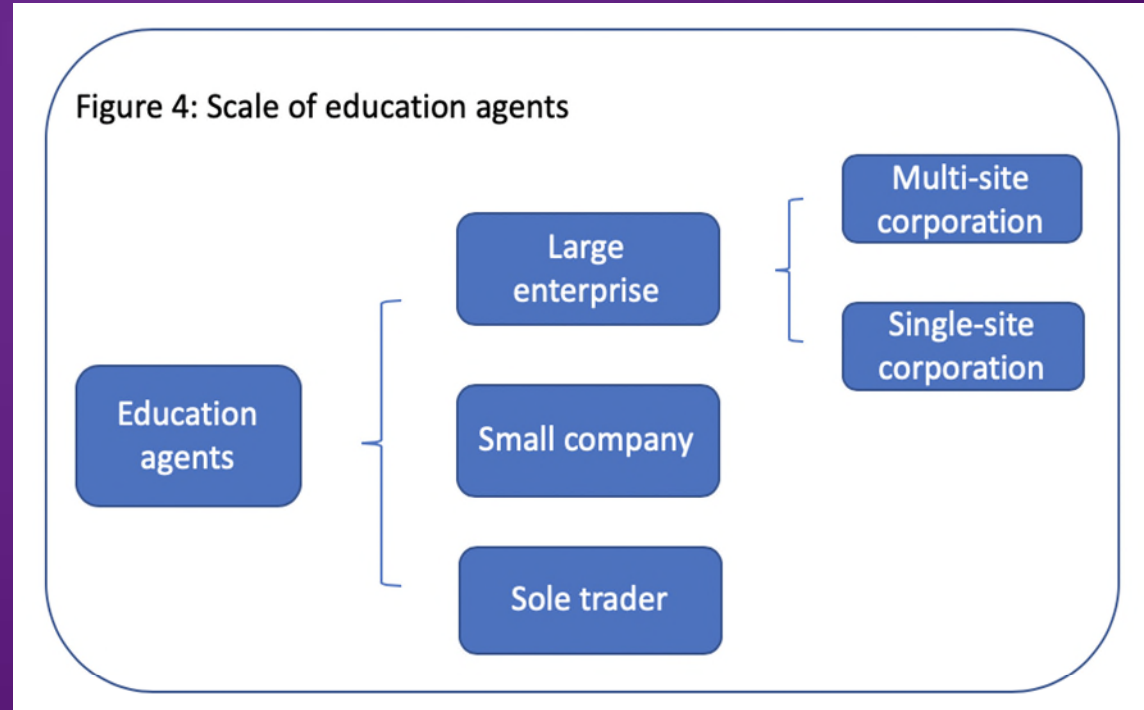




# Different types of education agents

Business scales:

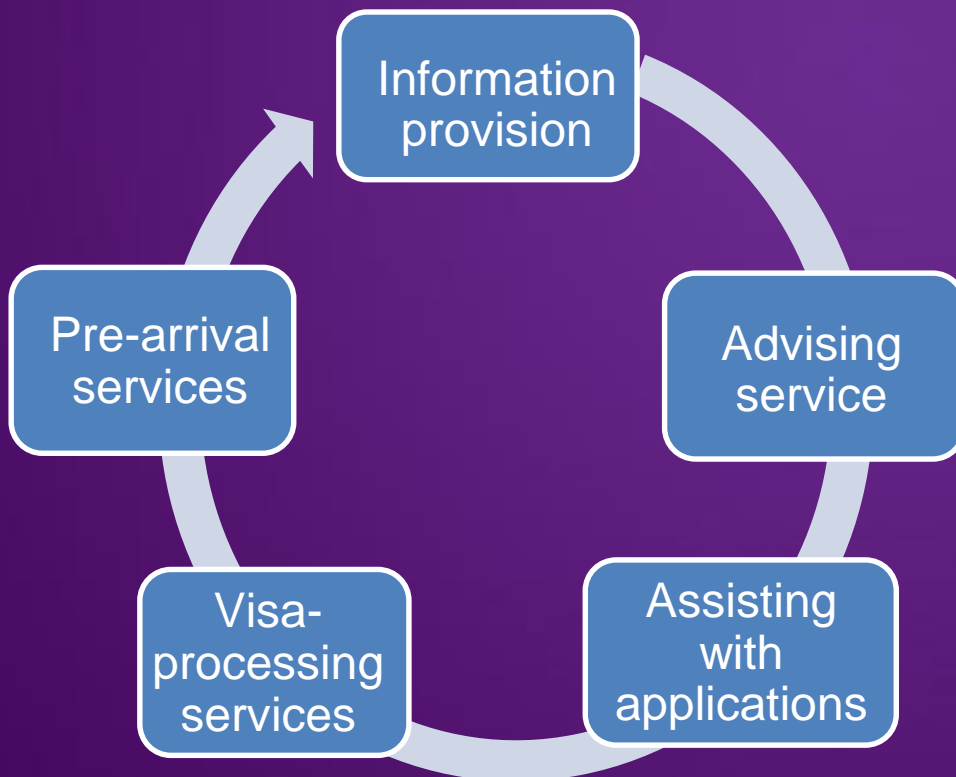
- 1) large enterprises (group company and general company);
- 2) small companies;
- 3) sole traders.





# What do education agents do in China?

Education agents tend to provide a 'one-stop shop' for overseas education services, which currently can be categorised into five main services.



## Sources:

(Zhang & Fumasoli, 2019; Robinson-pant and Magyar, 2018; Jiang, 2015; Raimo, Humfrey & Huang, 2014; Thomson et al., 2014; Yen, Yang & Cappellini, 2012; Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Yang, 2008; Pimpa, 2003)



## Why are education agents' perspectives important?

- Chinese applicants frequently use education agents' services when applying for universities abroad.
- Universities UK (2016) reports education agents have become the most important influence over Chinese students' choice of postgraduate taught programmes in the UK.

Therefore, one of the effective methods for gauging the perspectives of Chinese international students in regards to their studies in the UK is through the reflections of education agents.



## Research questions

This research seeks to understand the thoughts of Chinese applicants' and offer holders on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis from the perspective of education agents through the two research questions:

- **RQ1:** How did current and prospective Chinese international students interact with their education agents during the COVID-19 crisis?
- **RQ2:** What were education agents doing during the COVID-19 crisis?



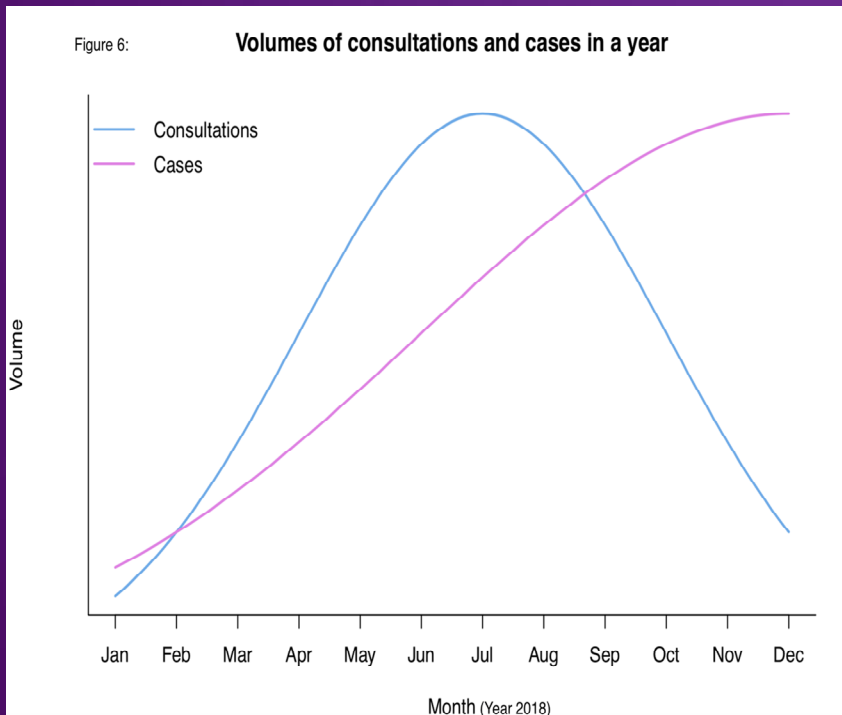


# Research methods

Time	Item	Description	Mode of Data Collection	Number	Total
May 1 to 15, 2020	Agent Consultant	Communicator	Interview	13	19
			Questionnaire	1	
		Processor	Interview	3	
			Questionnaire	2	



# Agent's timelines during COVID 19

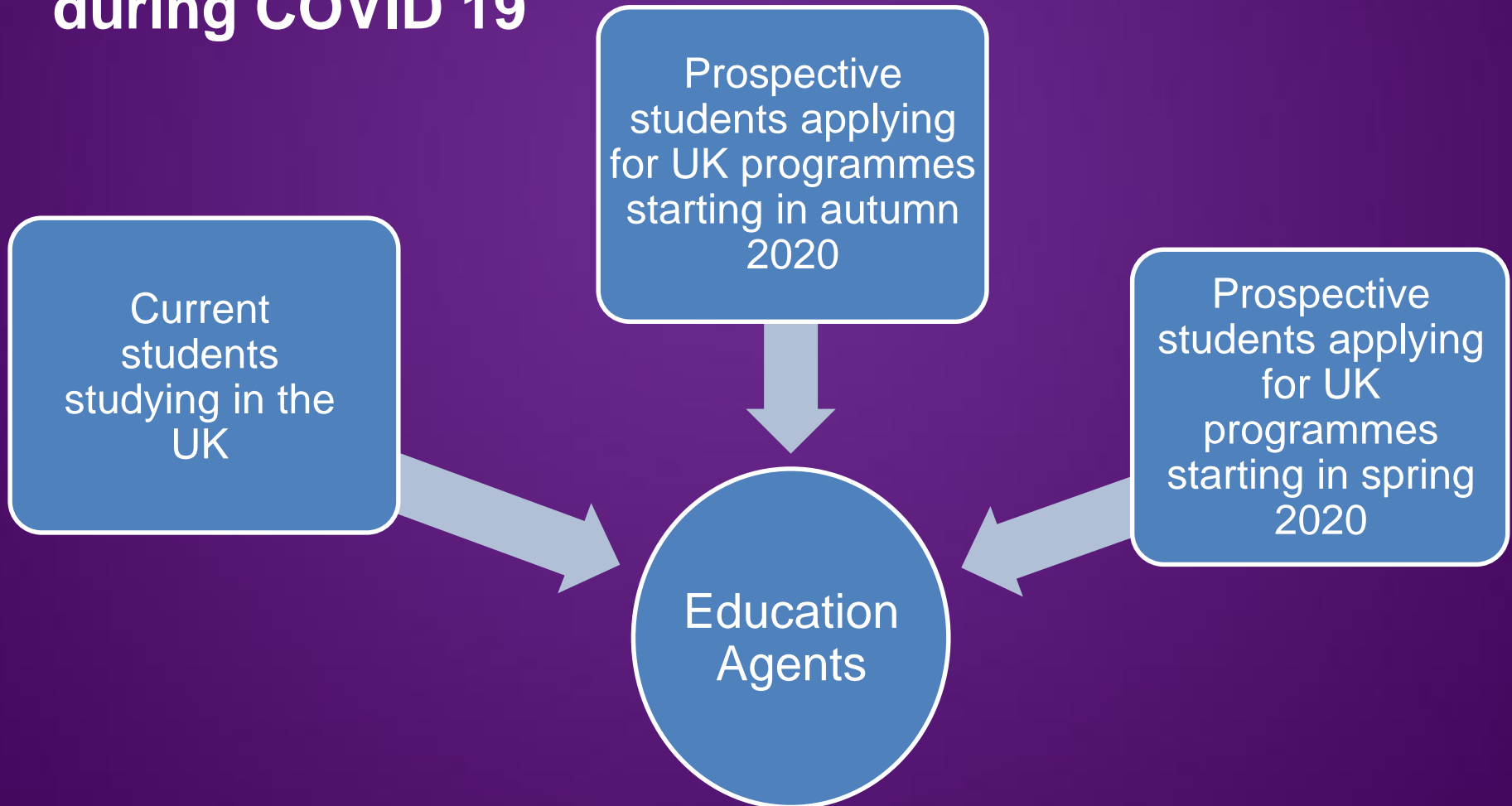


From February to May 2020, the business cycle of education agents in China was completely disrupted.

- The consulting volume of in-service applicants increased significantly.
- The number of new visits or inquiries about the 2021/22 academic year dropped off or even fell to **ZERO** in a single month.



# Groups of students education agents worked with during COVID 19





# Agents' sources of information

Representatives  
of UK  
universities

Internal working  
groups at  
agencies

University  
websites and  
official accounts  
on social media  
platforms



## Intentions to study in the UK

According to interviewed agents, the majority of Chinese applicants they worked with who had applied to study in the UK in September 2020 **still intended to study abroad as planned.**

‘Most of my students’ intention of studying abroad did not waver that much...generally, **they will enrol into their programmes this September if the pandemic situation in the UK is contained.**’ (Participant 1, processor)



## Safety in the UK

According to education agents' reflections, the safety in the UK became the fundamental factor in the decision of studying in the UK for Chinese students and their parents.

'The measure of herd immunity really scared most of my students and their parents as well as me in the middle of March...Most parents repeatedly expressed that safety in the UK was their first consideration now.' (Participant 13, communicator)



## Desire for open communication from UK universities

Agents believed that **students felt cared for and valued when universities communicated with them by email and WeChat during the COVID-19**, supporting applicants' decision making towards studying in the UK in 2020.

**'These ways can bring a different experience to students. It feels like universities pay attention to their future students. Some students viewed them as a way of democracy.'** (Participant 8, communicator)



## Perspectives towards potential online courses

Agents felt that most applicants in China would not accept fully online programmes, as **it diminished the overseas experience**: experiencing different learning and living environments, face-to-face communication with people from different cultural backgrounds, or travel to other countries.

‘At a conservative estimate, at least 80% of my students would request to delay their offer if their master’s programs were conducted online...**It is a bit absurd that you never step out of the door but achieve an overseas credential in the end, isn’t it?**’ (Participant 10, communicator)





## Agents' suggestions for UK universities

- Hold open communication with education agents and applicants about plans for the upcoming academic year
- Update and release an explicit plan for the upcoming academic year as soon as possible
- Delay the opening date of programmes OR consider offering flexible start options (i.e. to ensure that international students will be able to take on-campus face-to-face courses in a safe and healthy environment)



## Agents' suggestions for UK universities

- Consider reducing tuition fees for courses delivered online
- Put efforts into developing students' overall experience in addition to learning provisions
- Enhance recruitment activities and build up connections with potential applicants in the longer term
- Consider intentions to develop or strengthen UK universities' connections with agents in China



## Implications

Our report is consistent with the related large-scale survey results conducted by British Council (June 2020) and Association of British Chinese Professors (ABCP) (June, 2020). It indicates:

- **Education agents would effectively anticipate Chinese international students' perspectives regarding study abroad**
- **Education agents have been getting involved actively and deeply in students' decision-making about study abroad.**

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## More information

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Full report:

<https://bit.ly/39bJq9H>