



Selecting an Overseas Education Consultant or Agent in India: a Reference Tool for European universities



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This document targets universities and academic institutions' staff, based in the European Union, that wish to enhance knowledge and capacity to recruitment international students– from India – for undergraduate and/or graduate degree programs and who intend on using an intermediary agent or consultant.

Section A offers a brief overview of the opportunity and risks when collaborating with third parties as well as important first steps in narrowing down safe and trustworthy agents or consultants to interview. Section B attempts to take university staff through the selection process, specifically during the first interviews and offers key questions to ask so as to focus your search of agents/consultants worthy of future collaboration. Section C shares an evaluation matrix to help assess Indian agents'/consultants' past performance, the catalogue of services available, and the added-value to your institution should an agreement be signed.

Section A: Why India, What are the Risks and How to be better prepared?

Why India?

The 2017 issue of the HSBC series entitled Higher and Higher: the Value of Education reported that Indian parents spend, on average, over 16.000 Euros on their children from primary school to undergraduate university levels; with 79% of them wanting them to pursue postgraduate studies and almost 90% willing to 'make the necessary sacrifices'. According to the Reserve Bank of India, spending on tuition and hostel fees by Indians studying overseas has gone up by 44 per cent from \$1.9 billion in 2013-14 to \$2.8 billion in 2017-18.

Given the country's emphasis on education, a booming middle class and the third-largest educational system in the world (in terms of enrollment), the Higher Education Sector in India is rapidly growing to correspond to the needs and ambitions of the more than 550 million people below the age of 25 years. STEM courses (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) have always remained the top preferences for Indian students, and in the foreseeable future. **Attracting students from India presents an opportunity to maximize revenue streams whilst diversifying the student body of EU-based institutions and universities.** Indian students represent a lucrative and dynamic market for universities and educational institutions in Europe. In spite of the over 200,000 students leaving India annually, Europe and European universities remains under-represented.

Countries that historically receive international students (such as USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, UK) use international agents/counsellors to raise brand profile, create a market, and compete in the recruitment of the best and most appropriate international students. Their knowledge of local markets, competence in the languages of the country, cultural sensitivity, and marketing skills is vital and has become the main means towards access into the Indian market.

What are the Risks?

Included in this growth, **is the ubiquity of educational consultants or overseas agents**. Their services range from offering students information on scholarships, language testing, visa processing, educational counselling, and recruiting potential candidates for foreign universities. However, **not all agents/consultants are of equal quality and integrity**.

First, **it is important to be mindful of the types of services on offer in India** through agents or consultants and to note that the distinctions between the two are not always clear or self-evident: educational agents work with specific universities only and therefore work only for universities and promote those universities, irrespective of a student's actual requirements and profile, often focusing on maximizing profit and business margins. Other organisations, such as consultants, offer a broader range of services to students and therefore are not typically inclined to recommend any specific institute but nevertheless claim to have standing relationships with universities. **This tool is directed towards supporting European universities' relationship with educational agents in India.**

Second, it is important to be aware of the fact that there are many **unscrupulous agents in India that may deceive honest students and foreign universities** by acting as de facto employment recruiters (or immigration agents) in search of opportunities outside of India, under the guise of providing international education advice, often resulting in students losing family resources, being misplaced or misled, and inevitably left in situations of irregularity often caused by an unclear business relation between the host university and the agent. The fact that there is a business relation makes the EU institution responsible for the problems created.

Educational agents and counselling services remain to a large extent unregulated in India but the proposed 2019 Emigration Bill, does expect to impose the same set of regulations for student enrolment agents and consultants, as that for employment recruiters. All Indians students studying abroad will also be required to register themselves¹.

In spite of rough approximations placing the number of businesses, offering such services, to be in the tens of thousands, the American International Recruitment Council (AIRC) for example has (by September 2019) certified 40 agencies across India to facilitate admission counselling². A similar European certification system is not in place.

European educational institutions therefore often face a complicated task in assessing whom to work with and lack the tools necessary in evaluating potential agents.

The Basic Dichotomy

When considering working with agents or education counsellors, it is important to take into account their perspective: sending students to institutions abroad represents a majority of their revenue stream. There are several options on how they can earn this income.

Generally, agents receive a percentage of the tuition fees from the institutions where they send the students to (and are successfully enrolled). This works efficiently for institutions with significant Non-EEA tuition fees (such as the Finland, The Netherlands, Sweden). In this model, guiding as many students to a specific school that has contracted their services is vital, so that at the end of the enrollment process a commission is shared. However, many European institutions/universities have low or no tuition fees, and little distinction between Non-EEA and national students. Knowing this, agents have begun to charge students for their services, passing the financial burden from the university to the student.

All business models have a financial component and who pays is crucial to any discussion. Choosing the right agent is essential to your success.

¹https://portal2.madad.gov.in/AppConsular/user/RegistrationBaseAction?request_locale=en&userType=Student

²<https://www.airc-education.org/certified-agencies>

How to be better prepared?

The question of whether or not one should work with an agent in India is not straightforward: it very much depends on your market research, institutional familiarity (at national and local levels) and knowledge of India, and overall recruitment strategy. The agent should be part of a larger outreach framework in the country.

Before embarking on the pre-selection process, step one is to reflect on:

- › What added value would an agent offer and does it represent the best cost-benefit ratio for your university's context?
- › Are other educational institutions – similar to yours – recruiting from India through an agent or consultant? Their websites usually list agents/counselling services they work with. If so, approach them to get their advice and evaluation. Focus on reputed and established entities that work with quality institutions.
- › Does the agent possess any relevant/internationally/nationally recognised certification? If not, do they belong to an association of credible agents who recruit on behalf of a particular country? e.g. UK has Education Agent Training courses that if certified may give you a better sense of their business practices and level of professionalism.
- › Does the agent in consideration have the right tools/platform at their disposal to promote the right branding for your institution in India and build the type of engagement with Indian students that you seek?

With this first benchmark in hand, you should have a list of 5-6 educational agents that you are considering for a first interview. Once you have your confirmed list of interviews, **Section B** offers an interview 'script' to help undertake a first conversation. It is meant to help you judge their fit for your institution.

By taking into account the tips, tools, suggestions within this document, and enhancing your organizational awareness of the advantages and risks involved in employing educational agents/consultants across India, you are ensuring the best and safest fit for your international student body.

Tips:

1. It is important to remember that Agents and/or counsellors in India work with different business models – that are often contradictory – and which may not always be in the best interest of your university. Ensure that the agent/counsellor puts the student at the core of their work ensuring transparency, about the university- agent relationship, and the basis on which advice is offered.
2. To find lists of agents preselected by other destination country institutions/universities, you enhance the odds of working with trust agents: sites such as www.aigac.org or <http://www.aeri.in/> or <https://www.airc-education.org/certified-agencies> or https://agent-training.britishcouncil.org/GAL?_ga=2.214264725.360814369.1564491287-2062789326.1564491287 offer a list of possible certified agents.
3. Alternatively, consider contacting your government and university-sponsored agencies– such as the Nuffic (or local Neso office), Campus France, or DAAD, and others.
4. Be cautious of agents who work with sub-Agents! Risks are higher with use of third parties in varying jurisdictions and much less control over their behaviour!
5. It is important to keep in mind that the candidates you select for the interview phase, ought to be entities that you can easily verify and carry out the necessary due diligence (including a reference check). Section C offers a template that is to be filled in by you (post-interview) and then shared with universities already using the agent's services.
6. To ensure that you are working with a real agency, ask that the interview takes place at their offices! If possible, ask to include staff managing different services.
7. The agent needs to be aware of, and trained on, your general policies when it comes to applications, admissions and enrolment procedures specific to your institution (i.e. language requirements/application fees/application package for admission, etc.).



Section B: Questionnaire for Potential Agents

This section is meant to help university staff within the EU to interview potential educational agents under evaluation. The questions are drafted from the university's perspective and may be used whilst interviewing the candidate agency and designed to be used in complementarity with other internal evaluating procedures, thereby ensuring a thorough and careful comparison of all the agents.

About the Company

Company Name:	
Contact Name:	
Job Title:	
Contact Detail:	
Primary Address (Head Office):	
Country:	
Telephone:	
Facsimile:	
E-mail 1:	
E-mail 2:	
Company Web site/Social Media:	

Ask the following suggested questions:

1. Why do they want to represent our institution?

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2. How long have they been operating as a recruitment agent?

- Less than one year
- One year
- Two years
- Three years
- Four years or more

3. Are they already officially certified as an agent?

- Yes
- No

If yes, please give further details and the organization where we can verify this?
(By whom? When? Proof?):.....

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4. How are their staff regularly trained? Are they generally trained internally or externally?

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5. Do they employ a Code of Conduct?

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6. How do they ensure the authenticity of the documents and declarations submitted by students?

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7. How do they excel, compared to other agents, as an educational consultant? Do they use sub-agents/ counsellors? Are any of the services they offer sub-contracted externally? If yes, please attach a list of all sub-agents in use including relevant contact details (email, phone, contact person)

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8. Are they aware of the MADAD portal (Ministry of External Affairs Consular Services Management System) and the Registration of Indian Students Abroad? What resources do they offer to ensure the safety and security of their students sent to Europe? Are all their students encouraged to register through MADAD?

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9. Ask them to take you through their general student pre-screening process?
i.e. how do you determine the match between the student and our institutions requirements?

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10. Do they participate in education fairs/advertising/promotion campaigns oriented towards sending students to the European Union? If yes, do they have the capacity to represent another EU university?)

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About the Business

1. Which European countries do they currently recruit students for and what is your track record/success ratio in India, for the last year?

Institution:	Country:	Subject Areas:	Number of Students Referred:	Number of students enrolled:

2. What types of programs do they recruit students for? (Check all that apply)

Bachelor

Master

PhD

Other. Specify:

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3. Which geographical cities/regions (in India) are they active in?

Region:	Cities:	Number of Students Referred:

4. Please specify the services they provide (in detail) for students in preparation for their arrival in Europe?

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Note: Preparing a student for their journey to Europe, either with their visa application process, access to scholarships and funding, or through language training, familiarization of local customs and traditions, handbooks or guides, and tips on housing, is essential to ensure that a student is well integrated into their host communities. Some, or all, of these services may already be available through the institution/university they will join. However, the fact that they are also offered by the agent/counsellor may be an additional sign of their comprehensive approach towards the well-being (and success) of the student.



5. Do they charge the students for any of the above services?

- Yes
- No

If yes, how much do they charge for each service? Is this charged in advance?
Or, upon successful completion/placement? Are students required to put down a deposit to access your services?

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6. Please specify the services they provide (in detail) for universities:

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7. How will they promote your institution in India? Outline a couple of examples

.....

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8. Approximately how many student inquiries has their office(s) received in the last recruitment year?

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9. How will they represent your institution (within the states/regions) in India?
What support will they require from you?

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About the Contract

1. What type of contract do they normally use?

Ask them to share their contract template if available; note this contract should be checked by your legal department and clearly stipulate who pays what and clearly outline roles and responsibilities.

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2. What are their fees? For the institution and/or the student?
Is it a fixed amount or a percentage of the tuition they pay?

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3. Can you define (academic) focus areas for potential students?

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4. How many students do they think they would find that would apply at your university (in year 1, 2, or 5 years)?

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5. Do they currently carry out monitoring and performance reviews of their contracts?
If so, how do they do this?

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Tip: Selection, training, monitoring and rewarding are all part of the university-agent relationship and all closely interlinked. Your contract should include mechanisms for enforcement (penalties for fraudulent applications or misrepresentation cause for contract termination) and reward. Both are intended to lead to a better understanding of, and trust in, the university-agent/counsellor relationship. Trust and success build on one another and can make a positive, qualitative contribution to all who are involved. This qualitative element will normally result in a quantitative result.



Reference Check

This step is your opportunity to cross-reference what was said during the interview stage with the reality of the agents'/consultants' day-to-day operations. Towards the end of the interview/meeting, ask for a list of references (EU based institutions/universities using their services to recruit students from India). **Note that those listed below should receive the referee form as attached in Section D.**

Which references can you provide us with?

Referee:	Country/Institution:	Contact Details of Main Contact Person:

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Section C: Reference form

This form has been developed to gather in-depth information from other European educational institutions or universities that are already engaged in a professional relationship with the education agent in question. Fill in the name of the agent that has been interviewed, the referee's name and institution below whilst leaving the rest of the form blank. Request that each referee complete the questions and return the form to you directly.

Send the form to the individuals in question. Follow up with a phone call, if necessary.

Name of Agent:	
Country:	

Name of Referee's Institution:					
Officer's Name:					
Phone:		Fax:		Email:	

Please give a brief summary of your cooperation with this agent. Did the agent deliver on the contract?

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How long has the agent recruited students from India for your institution?

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Name one strength and one weakness you have observed in your interactions with this agent?

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How many students have this agent enrolled with your institution?
(Optional) Alternatively – Are you satisfied with the recruitment performance (including the candidates sent) of this agent?

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To the best of your knowledge, how does the agent receive compensation for their services?

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What was the quality of the agent's follow-up, paperwork or any necessary documentation?

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Would you advise others to start working with this agent? (and why?)

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Does this agent have a large and professional enough organization behind him to represent your university?

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Are there any other comments, in relation to the agent's performance, that you would like to share?

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Name of referee:

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