



# Chinese international student recruitment during the COVID-19 crisis

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# CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT RECRUITMENT DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS: EDUCATION AGENTS' PRACTICES AND REFLECTIONS

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Working Paper

# ABOUT HERE@MANCHESTER

Higher Education Research Network at  
Manchester: HERE@Manchester

HERE@Manchester is an interdisciplinary network of scholars researching and studying higher education from a range of international, critical, pedagogical and policy perspectives.

With over 60 members from a range of schools and departments across the University of Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan University, Liverpool Hope University, Lancaster University and beyond, we are open and supportive of any colleagues interested in participating in our on-going discussions.

## Key Themes

Our members work on a wide range of topics related to higher education, including:

- Internationalisation
- Higher education pedagogies
- Transitions into higher education
- Professional development
- Metrics
- Critical University Studies (CUS)





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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 crisis has generated severe challenges for UK universities. One particular challenge is the impact the pandemic has had on the plans for incoming Chinese international students, who make up a significant proportion of UK universities' annual tuition fee income (HESA, 2020). At present, there is an urgent need to understand the perspectives of current and prospective Chinese international students in regards to their studies in the UK. One method for gauging these perspectives is through the reflections of education agents. While few studies have compiled data about how many students in China use education agents each year, it is clear that the use of agents is widespread (Raimo, Humfrey and Huang, 2014; Zhang and Fumasoli, 2019). Moreover, Universities UK (2016) reports education agents have become the most important influence over Chinese students' choice of postgraduate taught programmes in the UK. **Therefore, understanding the practices of education agents during the COVID-19 crisis is essential to support international student recruitment from China for UK higher education institutions.**

**Education agents are organisations and/or individuals who provide a range of services in exchange for a fee from their service users, which include overseas higher education institutions and/or students who will study or are studying abroad.** There are wide variations in China regarding the types of education agencies, services provided by agents, and roles of education agents (See Section 2). The research outlined in this report focuses specifically on what Chinese applicants who use agents to apply for overseas programmes thought about studying abroad during the COVID-19 crisis. The research demonstrates the experiences of agents during this period and provides suggestions for UK higher education institutions to develop their plans for post-COVID teaching and student support. The findings are based on qualitative data collected from 19 agent consultants at 16 different agencies in China. Using a thematic analysis, five key themes were identified: 1) the groups of students who approached agents during COVID-19; 2) agents' timelines during COVID-19; 3) Chinese applicants' questions about the UK, 4) agents' sources of information, and 5) prospective students' plans. These are enumerated in Section 5.

During the COVID-19 crisis, education agents in China undertook a wide range of activities, including counselling, application preparation, and supporting students who had concerns about studying abroad. Their work focussed on encouraging offer holders to make informed decisions about studying in the UK and transmitting information about changing university policies and practices. Applicants and their parents expressed a range of significant concerns about studying in the UK to their education agents. The UK remains one of the most attractive destinations for Chinese applicants, and they are reluctant to change their decisions, but are anxious about a number of issues. **The questions most frequently posed to education agents from Chinese applicants were related to: 1) English language tests, 2) pre-sessional language and academic skills preparation courses, 3) safety in the UK, 4) the format of delivery of courses for the upcoming academic year, 5) Tier 4 student visa applications and 6) tuition fees.**

**Confronted with a surge in the volume of inquiries, education agents relied on several key sources of information: channels of UK university representatives, their internal working groups, universities' websites, and official accounts on social media platforms.** These enquiries vary, according to which of three groups students belong to: 1) students who are studying in the UK; 2) students who apply for British postgraduate taught programmes commencing in September 2020; and 3) students who apply for the programmes in the spring term 2021. Normally, education agents go through a business cycle with new client consultations peaking in summer, and ongoing processing casework peaking towards the end of the year. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted this. Education agents served as an intermediary between applicants and UK universities to answer students' questions. Based on agents' responses, Chinese student applicants carefully considered certain issues during the COVID-19 crisis, including their intention of studying in the UK, the new policies of UK universities, contacts between prospective students and UK universities as well as the potential of a largely online delivery of their courses.

In summary, based on information from education agents, this report identifies eight points to support developing UK universities' plans for post-COVID19 teaching, student support and Chinese student recruitment (Section 6).

According to education agents in China, UK Universities are advised to:

1. Hold open communication with education agents and applicants throughout decision making processes.
2. Update and release an explicit plan for the 2020-2021 academic year as soon as possible.
3. Defer the opening date of programmes to ensure that international students will be able to take on-campus face-to-face courses in a safe and healthy environment.
4. Consider offering flexible start options.
5. Consider reducing tuition fees for courses delivered fully or partially online.
6. Develop students' overall experience in addition to learning provision.
7. Enhance recruitment activities and build up connections with potential applicants in the longer term.
8. Develop or strengthen connections with education agents in China.

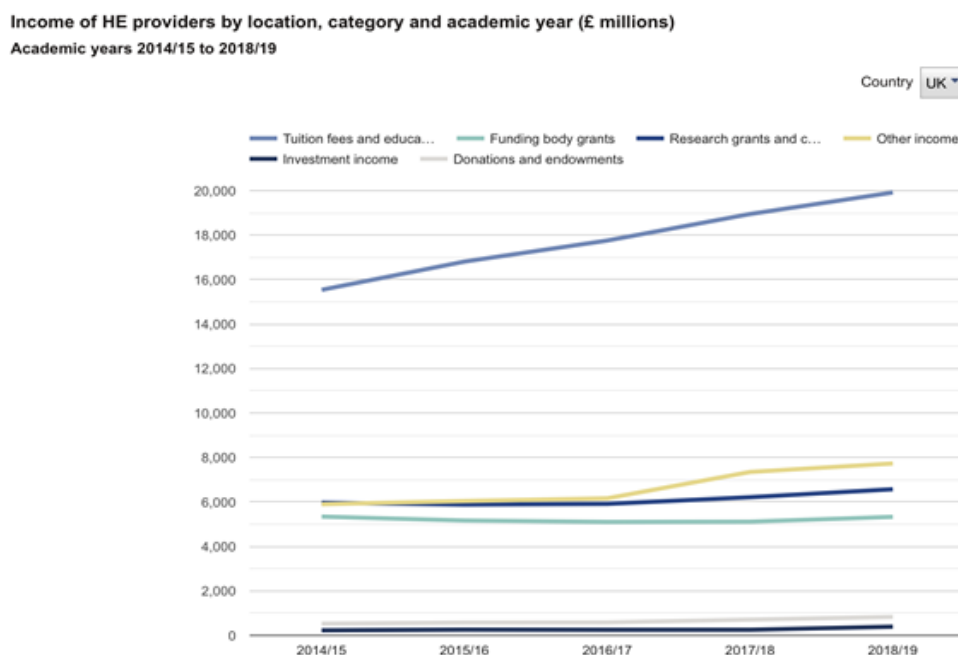
# 2. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

## Key Takeaways

- Chinese international students are the largest group of international students in the UK and UK institutions increasingly rely on their financial contributions.
- Many Chinese international students use education agents to support their university application process. Education agents are organisations and/or individuals who provide a range of services in exchange for a fee from their service users including overseas higher education institutions and/or students who will study or are studying abroad.
- There are wide variations in China regarding the types of education agencies, services provided by agents, and roles of education agents.

China has become the largest source country of international students pursuing higher education in the UK, accounting for 35% of all non-EU students in 2018/19 (HESA, 2020a). This has sharply risen in recent years, by 34% from 2014/15 to 2018/19 (HESA, 2020b). Higher education providers in the UK are also increasingly dependent on the income from Chinese international students, as demonstrated in Figure 1 and Figure 2 (HESA, 2020a; 2020b). One reason for this dependency is that international students pay much higher tuition fees than home students.

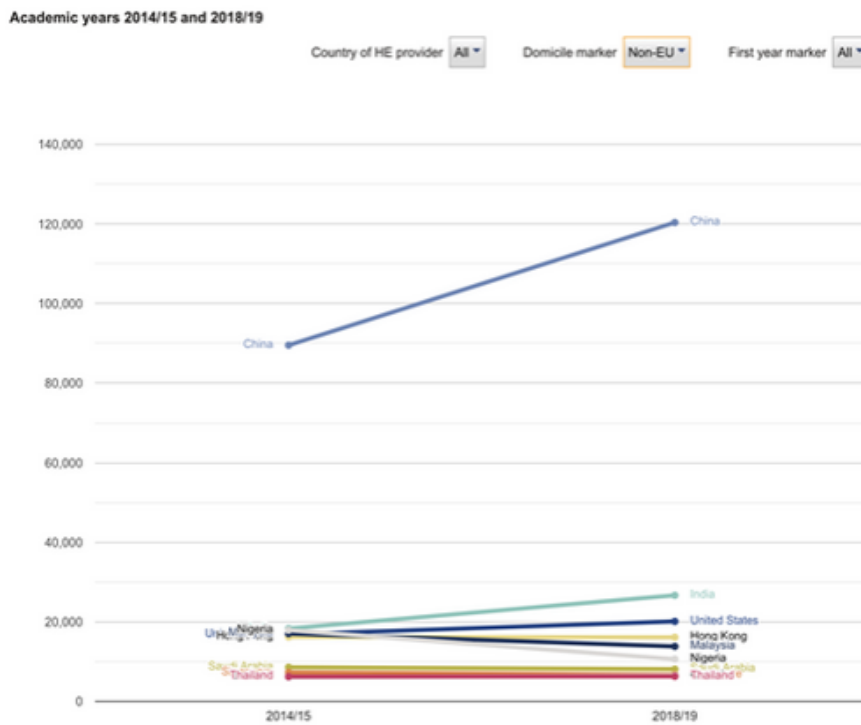
Figure 1: Income of HE providers by location, category, and academic year



Source: HESA, 2020a; 2020b



Figure 2: Top ten non-EU countries of domicile (excluding the UK) in 2018/2019 for HE student enrolments



Source: HESA, 2020a; 2020b

Nevertheless, income generated by Chinese international students is under threat following the COVID-19 pandemic. Reports were made of thousands of Chinese students in the UK who attempted to leave during the spring 2020 semester and, in some cases, even tried to charter airplanes home because they thought it would be safer to travel to China rather than remain in the UK (The Guardian, 2020). A British Council survey of prospective East Asian international students highlighted a potential £463 million drop in tuition fee contributions (British Council, 2020) across the UK HE sector. QS has similarly reported that 53% of international offer holders have had their plans to study abroad impacted by COVID-19 (QS, 2020). Taken together, many UK universities are presently concerned about decreases in international student enrolment numbers as a result of COVID-19, particularly for students from China, which could have negative financial repercussions for the future of the sector.

Chinese applicants frequently use education agents' services when applying for universities abroad. Education agents are organisations and/or individuals who provide a range of services in exchange for a fee from their service users including overseas higher education institutions (Nikula & Kivistö, 2018) and/or students who will study or are studying abroad (Krasocki, 2002). It is reported that some

higher education institutions pay agents around 10-25% of the first year's tuition fee of each enrolled student as commission (Coffey and Perry, 2013; Sarkar and Perényi, 2017; Productivity Commission, 2015); In the UK, some higher education institutions pay between 2.5% - 15% of tuition fees to agents as commissions (Raimo, Humfrey and Huang, 2014), creating a market of £783.7 million (Zhang & Fumasoli, 2019). Applicants who sign an agreement with agents or agencies can be charged at different levels, depending on the services that agents or agencies provide for them and the income source of agencies (as some agents or agencies solely rely on overseas commission). Education agents tend to provide a 'one-stop shop' for overseas education services (Pimpa, 2003; Jiang, 2015; Yen, Yang & Cappellini, 2012; Yang, 2008; Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Robinson-pant and Magyar, 2018; Thomson et al., 2014; Raimo, Humfrey & Huang, 2014; Zhang & Fumasoli, 2019), which can be categorised into five main services:

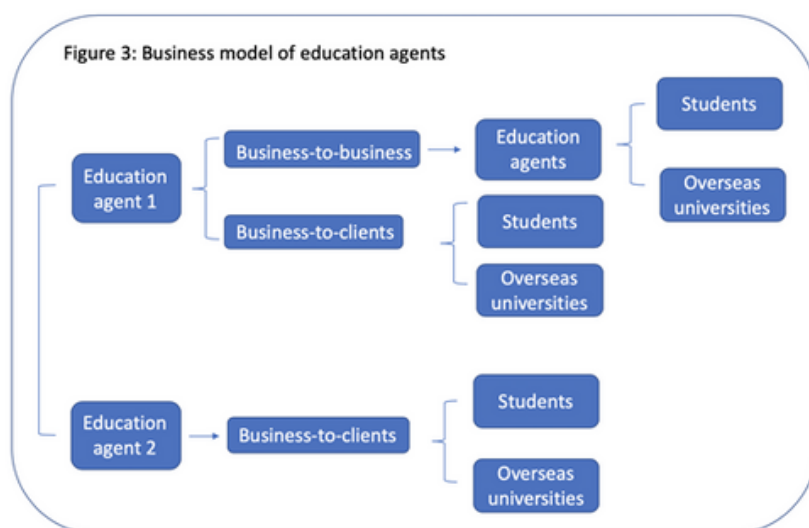
- 1. A full-range information provision regarding countries, cities, institutions, costs, food, application documents, language courses, accommodations and getting in touch with university representatives and so on;
- 2. Advising services on selecting countries, institutions or programs;
- 3. Assisting with applications, including personal essays, references, certificates, filling in application forms, submission, and tracking application status;
- 4. Visa-processing services, consisting of translating required documents, interview training, filling in visa application forms and making visa appointments;
- 5. Pre-arrival services, such as pre-departure training, alumni connections, pick-up and drop-off services, accommodation application, and deposit payment.

While there is limited data from agents' perspectives about their role in supporting Chinese applicants and offer holders, recent literature points to their importance. For example, it has been reported that more than 100 UK higher education institutions employed international student recruitment agents in 2012, with over 50,000 international students recruited via agents in 2010/12 (Raimo, Humfrey and Huang, 2014) and 690,000 in 2018 (Zhang & Fumasoli, 2019). It has also been outlined that education agents are the most important influence on Chinese students' choice of programs in the UK (Universities UK, 2016).

Thus, education agents cannot be overlooked in the recruitment of Chinese international students, as they play a crucial role in bridging the gap between students and overseas institutions (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2014; Yen, Yang & Cappellini, 2012; Yang, 2008; Collins, 2012). In this sense, education agents' reflections on their work and applicants' concerns during the COVID-19 crisis provide helpful insight into their decision-making process. Therefore, this report is intended to serve as a helpful guide to UK universities in developing their post-COVID offer holder retention and plans for teaching and learning provisions.

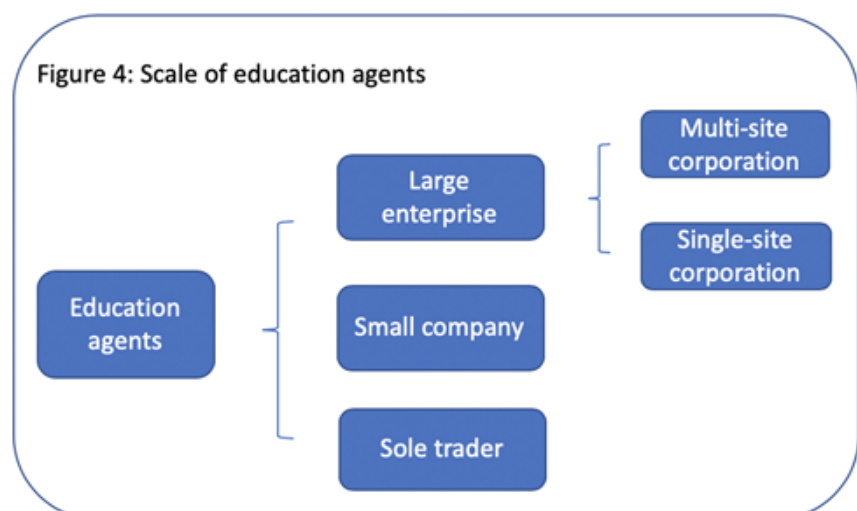
## 2.1 Different roles of education agencies and agents

Although education agents are often colloquially referred to in the UK as occupying a single role, education agents in China take on different roles within their organisations. As outlined in Figure 3, there are two main types of education agents in China, based on different business models: 1) business-to-clients models, and 2) combined models (including both business-to-business and business-to-clients services). 'Business-to-clients' means agents offer services directly to applicants and overseas universities. 'Business-to-business' means agents provide services to other education agents. These services mainly include submitting applications to overseas universities. As overseas universities are unlikely to build partnerships with every agent or agency and only pay commissions to a select number of key agencies, some education agents may rely on connections with other agencies who have established partnerships with overseas universities to submit applications on their behalf, with the intention to receive shared commissions.



In terms of scale, as Figure 4 displays, education agencies can be categorised into three types: 1) large enterprises (group company and general company); 2) small companies and 3) sole traders. This categorisation has been developed based on accounts of agents, as there is no formal categorisation or regulatory body in China, and differs from categorisations developed in other research (see Zhang & Fumasoli, 2019).

- **Large enterprises** include corporations which may have multiple locations or branches (termed multi-site here), or a single site, who generally have systematic work processes with large and experienced working teams. Large enterprises manage a large volume of students' cases, set up branches in different cities, establish market brands, and occupy a significant market share of study abroad students from China. These organisations employ a combined model of both business-to-business and business-to-clients.
- **Small companies** usually consist of several employees. These companies deal with a smaller volume of students' cases and mainly depend on word of mouth for new clients. Small companies mainly apply the model of business-to-clients.
- **Sole traders**, as the name indicates, are normally a single agent who handles all services independently. This usually means accepting a limited number of students' cases and relying heavily on word of mouth for new business. Along with small companies, sole traders mainly apply the model of business-to-clients.



Individual agents or agencies organise their work by dividing labour into two key roles: communicators and processors. Communicators are mainly responsible for promoting overseas universities and offering consultation services to potential students, along with communicating with the students who have signed an agreement with the agency. Processors, in contrast, are responsible for assembling documents, submitting applications, and monitoring application progress. In many cases, depending on business needs and the size of the agency, the work of these two roles may partially overlap.

Taken together, this demonstrates that education agents are not a singular role and that the experiences of education agents during the COVID-19 crisis are complex. The next sections outline the research aims and methods used to unpack their perspectives towards UK higher education institutions during this time.



# 3. RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS

A large proportion of Chinese students use agents to apply for overseas programmes and support with related issues, whilst more than 100 UK universities employ agents to recruit international students (Raimo, Humfrey and Huang, 2014). In the current situation, therefore, it should be of great value to understand the thoughts of Chinese applicants' and offer holders on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis from the perspective of education agents, who bridge the gap between applicants and overseas universities. This research explores the reflections of education agents in China who have been working with applicants, offer holders and enrolled students for overseas programmes about the issues of studying abroad during the COVID-19 crisis. In doing so, the project illuminates the experiences of agents during this crisis and provide suggestions for UK higher education institutions to develop their plans for post-COVID teaching through the following research questions:

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

This research also contributes to UK higher education institutions' further understanding of the role of education agents as well as future students' needs and concerns during the COVID-19 crisis, thereby building an effective communication channel with students and making practical plans for adjustments.

# 4. METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted in the immediate aftermath of COVID-19: between 1 May and 15 May 2020. The research methods used included online interviews and open-ended questionnaires, which allowed us to evaluate the in-depth experiences of agents during this period.

Altogether, as Figure 5 shows, 19 agent consultants participated in this research, including 14 communicators and 5 processors. They were from 16 different education agencies located in nine cities across China respectively. Of these agencies, 15 education agencies are large enterprises (i.e. agencies with branches located in different cities). From two large enterprises, three individual branches were included in this project. One agency is a small company (i.e. agencies without branches consisting of several members). Sixteen participants agreed to participate in an online interview, while three additional participants provided answers via email due to scheduling conflicts.

Figure 5:

Item	Description	Method of Data Collection	Number	Total
Agent/agency	Large enterprise	----	15	16
	Small company	----	1	
Agent Consultant	Communicator	Interview	12	19
		Questionnaire	1	
	Processor	Interview	4	
		Questionnaire	2	

During the interviews, participants were asked questions (outlined in Appendix 1) about work mode, consulting services, application services, students' inquiries and concerns, information sources and delivery, the impact of the crisis, as well as suggestions during the COVID-19 crisis. The open-ended questionnaires also focus on those questions. The interviews lasted for approximately 1.5 hours, by mutual agreement. By contrast, the answers received via email were relatively simple, with responses consisting of only a few words in general. This data was then analysed roughly based on the themes of interviewing questions and finally five aspects of initial findings of immediate relevance for universities were identified. All interviews were conducted in Chinese, as it was the native language of the participants and the primary researcher, and excerpts have been translated to English for inclusion in this report.

# 5. KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section outlines the key findings from interviews with education agents in China. The findings are organised around five key areas: 1) the groups of students who approached agents during COVID-19; 2) agents' timelines during COVID-19; 3) Chinese applicants' questions about the UK, 4) agents' sources of information, and 5) prospective students' plans.

## 5.1 Groups of students who approached agents during COVID-19

### Key Takeaways

- During the COVID-19 crisis, agents in China received inquiries from multiple groups of students, including current students already studying in the UK, applicants or offer holders for autumn 2020 programmes, and applicants or offer holders for programmes beginning in spring 2020.
- The queries posed to education agents varied, depending on where the individual was in their application or study process

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Agents received queries mainly from the three groups of students: 1) current students who were already studying in the UK, 2) future students who were applying for UK programmes beginning in autumn 2020, and 3) students who are applying for UK programmes starting in spring 2021. As outlined below, the topics discussed with agents varied according to the student category.

### 5.1.1 Chinese students currently studying in the UK

Many of the interviewed agents were contacted by Chinese students who had previously used their services to apply for their academic programmes who were currently studying in the UK. Agents were consulted by currently enrolled students to advise about issues such as: whether to return to China, arranging return airfare to China, how to apply for suspension of their studies in the UK, and how their parents can mail facemasks to them. As agents reflected, it was unusual to have such frequent contact with their students currently studying in the UK, which highlights the levels of uncertainty experienced by current students during this period. Such questions were reflected to be more common from students in foundation year or undergraduate courses.

## 5.1.2 Chinese students applying for UK programmes starting in autumn 2020

These students fall into four groups based on their application status.

### *Students who had already received unconditional offers*

This group included Chinese students who had already received an unconditional offer in the UK before the COVID-19 crisis. As UK universities moved their courses online and only afterwards released new policies about online pre-sessional courses, this group of students was most concerned about issues such as: when universities would reopen, what format courses would be in the upcoming academic year and various issues related to visa applications.

### *Students who had received conditional offers but could not apply for pre-sessional courses*

This group included Chinese students who did not yet submit their English language test scores when applying for their academic programmes. Other students in this category included those that did not have satisfactory English language scores to fulfil the language requirement of their programmes, as well as those who had not yet taken an English language test. Most of these students had received at least one conditional offer letter, such as requiring an English test score report and official degree certificate by January 2020. Similarly, many students in this category had planned to take the IELTS tests in February 2020. However, the IELTS tests centres were closed in mainland China following the COVID-19 outbreak in January 2020. Therefore, this group of students could not register to take the IELTS tests and consequently were unable to update their language test score report. Queries from these students mainly centred on not having a satisfactory English test score report and uncertainties around whether they would require pre-sessional language courses.

### *Students who had received conditional offers and had already applied for pre-sessional courses*

This group included Chinese students who had already received a conditional offer from at least one taught postgraduate program, typically pending the submission of an English test score report or their official degree certificate. Other students had achieved an English test score report that did not fulfil the language requirement of the program, but satisfied the requirement for pre-sessional language courses. The questions from students in this group primarily focussed on issuing a Certificate of Acceptance of Study (CAS), visa application processes, and concerns about their intended study programme.

### *Students who were waiting for their application results*

This group included Chinese students who had not yet received their application results. For some students, their applications were submitted during the COVID-19 crisis and had not yet been processed in the UK. For other students, the programs they had applied for operated a staged admission process and had delayed the date for releasing results due to the large volume of applications. For these students, their queries to agents included: the impact of the pandemic on application assessment and results, English language tests, pre-sessional courses, tuition fees, and visa applications.

### 5.1.3 Chinese students applying for UK programmes starting in spring 2020

A very small number of students applied for the programs started in the spring term 2020, as very few universities have a spring program intake. Influenced by the COVID-19 crisis, this group of students could not enrol into their programmes as planned. The frequent questions contain whether to continue to pursue the programmes, the format of upcoming courses, visa application, and tuition fees.

## 5.2 Agents' timelines during COVID-19

### Key Takeaways

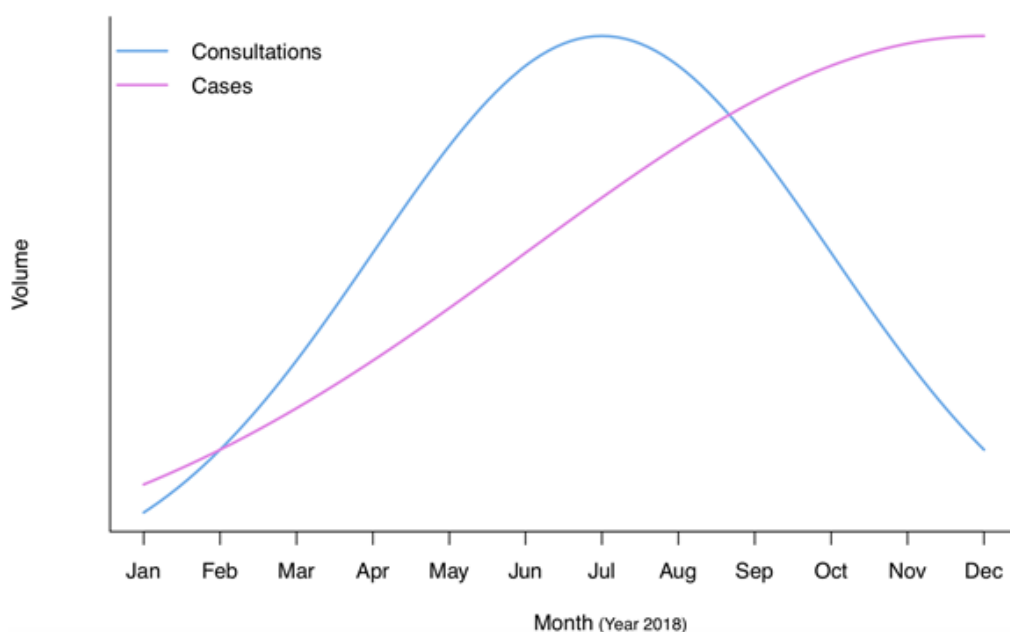
- The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the typical working patterns and cycle for education agents in China
- Education agents in China have spent significantly more time during COVID-19 counselling offer holders who faced uncertainties about their study abroad intentions
- Education agents in China have seen a significant decrease in the number of applicants approaching them about the 2021/22 academic year, highlighting that concerns about Chinese student recruitment in the UK are likely to have long term effects



As outlined in Section 2, education agents in China typically organise their work by dividing labour into two key roles: communicators and processors. According to agents, communicators and processors refer to their engagement with applicants as 'consults' and 'cases' the work volume of processors, respectively. This means that communicators and processes have very different typical yearly cycles (see below).

Figure 6 shows a highly simplified visualisation of the volume and cycle of work varies between communicators and processors in 2018. The volume of consultations from potential applicants usually swells from January, peaking in around June to August, and then gradually declines until the end of the year. By contrast from the processors' perspective, the overall trend of work volume typically increases steadily from the start of the year. From March to June, processors work on applications for pre-sessional English programmes and their corresponding visas. From July to August, processes usually work on applying for unconditional offers, preparing Tier 4 visa application documents, and processing application documents for the next application season. From September to December, processes shift focus to processing application documents and submitting applications for the next academic year, followed by a period from January to February, where they move to off-time tracking and waiting for application results. However, there is always variation and fluctuation in response to policy changes in host countries, such as the implementation of the post-study work visa in the UK announced in 2019, and recent changes to US immigration law.

Figure 6: **Volumes of consultations and cases in a year**



The COVID-19 crisis completely disrupted the business cycle of education agents in China. Both communicators and processors reflected in the interviews that from February to May 2020, the consulting volume of in-service applicants who have signed an agreement with agencies has increased significantly compared to the same period in previous years. One reason for this could be related to the overwhelming uncertainties in the application process that emerged as a result of COVID-19 crisis, leading more Chinese applicants to reach out for more support from agents. Therefore, the work of both communicators and processors mainly focused on comforting those in the process of applying, answering their questions, and delivering the latest information regarding British universities' adjustments. Particularly around the middle of March, when British universities locked down, agents reflected that more and more Chinese applicants and offer-holders, as well as their parents, became concerned and anxious about their study plans and enquired about how to manage the current circumstances.

'Every day, we received almost the same questions from in-service students...however, it is an extremely heavy workload for us, as we have to communicate with universities to confirm some issues constantly. Since university staff worked from home, we contacted them only via email and we have to explain the reason for late replies repeatedly to our students.'

(Participant 5, processor)

Processors indicated in the interviews that they would ordinarily be busy during the spring, applying on applicants' behalf for pre-sessional English courses and preparing visa application documents. However, they could not work on these jobs during spring 2020, as a large number of applicants did not have sufficient English language test scores to apply for pre-sessional courses, let alone process visa applications.

Communicators expressed that, under usual circumstances, they would start to turn their attention in the spring to the next application season and new sources of potential applicants, rather than stagnating in the work of in-service applicants. In a typical year, the volume of consultations with applicants who have not yet signed an agreement for the following academic year would increase, as many students who do not perform well in China's unified national graduate entrance examination in the penultimate week of the year would usually consider studying abroad as an alternative and contact agents during this period. However, this year, the number of visits or inquiries from potential students for the majority of agencies dropped off or even fell to zero in a single month.

'The number of new contracts has declined sharply since March. It should be said that this is the case across the industry as a result of COVID-19 pandemic.'  
(Participant 6, communicator)

This has major implications for UK universities, as it implies that recruitment for the academic year 2021/22 will be significantly impacted, in addition to the current recruitment cycle. Therefore, concerns about the recruitment of Chinese international students are likely longer term than the immediate post-pandemic academic year.

A related concern for many of the interviewed agents was the small but growing number of offer holders who requested to delay their offers, along with applicants who abandoned their plans of studying abroad during this period. The main source of revenue for agents or agencies is from their service fees and overseas commission. If applicants do not enrol into the programmes they applied for, this means that agents or agencies cannot receive the overseas commission from UK universities and may even run the risk of refunding part of the service fee to applicants. For this reason, several of the interviewed agents claimed that many small-sized education agencies (small companies) have closed down during the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, future considerations should be made about whether and how the post-pandemic roles and working patterns of Chinese education agents have shifted in international education contexts in the long term.

## 5.3 Applicants' questions about studying in the UK post-pandemic

### Key Takeaways

- During the COVID-19 crisis, education agents served as an intermediary between Chinese applicants and UK universities to answer questions
- Agents in China received a broad range of questions, most frequently relating to: English language tests, pre-sessional courses, safety in the UK, the format of courses for the upcoming academic year, Tier 4 visa applications, and tuition fees.

According to the interviewed agents, the questions most frequently raised by applicants who were intended to study in the UK immediately after the pandemic (i.e. the 2020/21 academic year) mainly focused on: English language tests, pre-sessional courses, safety in the UK, the format of courses for the upcoming academic year, Tier 4 visa applications, and tuition fees. More details about each of these categories are provided next.

### 5.3.1 English language tests and pre-sessional courses

The most frequent question received by agents from Chinese applicants was regarding English language tests and availability of pre-sessional language and academic skills preparation courses. One particular concern was around IELTS English examinations, as most testing centres in China had closed in the aftermath of COVID-19. This had direct impacts on applications to UK universities, as many students did not yet have the necessary English language entry requirements. In terms of their conversations with agents, applicants expressed anxieties about meeting the English language requirements, particularly as most UK universities did not communicate alternative arrangements for demonstrating English proficiency before April.

'A majority of my students had planned to take IELTS tests for the first time after the spring festival, but now you know they can't even register for the tests. There was a growing concern that they were ineligible for applying for pre-sessional courses then.'  
(Participant 1, communicator)

A related concern focused on UK universities' plans for pre-sessional courses. Applicants questioned their eligibility for pre-sessional courses, given the aforementioned issues with English language testing. Uncertainties were also expressed to agents in China by applicants about the format of pre-sessional courses and whether they would take place online, particularly as many UK universities had not yet made decisions for the upcoming academic year. These uncertainties were fuelled by concerns around tuition fees for pre-sessional courses, with a frequent hope that they could be reduced if offered online.

'The first question should be about applying for pre-sessional courses. Normally, it is the right time to consider this issue in recent months...As most British universities will conduct online pre-sessional courses, lots of my students are wondering whether the course fee will be reduced.' (Participant 2, processor)

As for actions taken by universities, the interviewed agents felt that several actions were perceived by applicants to help them make necessary arrangements and proceed with their plan of studying in the UK. These included accepting new types of English test scores (such as Duolingo language tests) and adjusting policies of pre-sessional courses (such as lowering the requirement of pre-sessional courses).

### 5.3.2 Safety in the UK

Interviewed agents highlighted that a key concern expressed by applicants and their parents was about safety in the UK. In particular, applicants and parents expressed concerns to agents about whether the UK government was taking strong enough measures to contain the pandemic compared to the actions that were taken by the Chinese government. Fears were also expressed to agents about the COVID-19 related death toll and the number of confirmed cases in the UK. This was influenced by social media reports in China and through other international outlets, where it was reported that not all people in the UK were following social distancing guidance or wearing masks in public. As such, agents perceived anxiety from applicants and their parents about whether it was safe to study in the UK.

'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)

Applicants and parents also expressed concerns to agents about issues of racism during the pandemic, as some incidents about Chinese international students being attacked in the UK were reported in the press. For example, Daily Echo (2020) reported Chinese university students were racially attacked in Southampton over coronavirus. These discourses led many applicants to reach out to agents with questions about whether Chinese international students might experience discrimination while studying in the UK.

'You know parents are easily influenced by social media where most COVID-19 news is negative recently. They are very concerned about their children's safety abroad' (Participant 1, communicator)



Taken together, a major category of questions raised to agents in China was about clarifying and assuring applications about the situation for Chinese international students in the UK, including whether international students can receive high-quality medical treatment in the UK and whether the UK is a safe destination.

### 5.3.3. The format of courses in the upcoming academic year

Towards the end of spring 2020, interviewed agents felt that applicants and their parents gradually turned their attention more to the format of courses in the upcoming academic year. This became a significant factor in their decision whether to attend their chosen programme as planned. After the university lockdown in the UK around 17 March 2020, all the ongoing courses were moved online. In April 2020, interviewed agents reported that most universities they worked with began announcing that their pre-session English courses would be conducted online. These announcements led many applicants and their parents to question whether universities in the UK would conduct online courses for the autumn 2020 semester as well. Additionally, some applicants enquired to agents about whether universities in the UK would reopen in September. Similarly, some applicants raised questions about whether universities would deliver both online and offline courses in the meantime.

'More recently, a growing number of students enquired about whether British universities would re-open in the second half of this year and how they would conduct the courses next semester.'  
(Participant 1, communicator)

'Besides, students and their parents are also concerned about the format of lecturing for the programs started in September recently...' (Participant 2, processor)

These questions were exacerbated by perceptions of the limited information provided by UK universities about the upcoming academic year, leading many applicants to reach out to their education agents for advice. For more information about agents' sources of information for these queries, see Section 5.4.

### 5.3.4 Tier 4 UK student visa application

Agents received a rapid succession of inquiries about Tier-4 visa applications, particularly after April 2020. Under normal circumstances, applicants should have started preparing their visa application documents for the face-to-face pre-session English courses in April. However, during the pandemic, there was no need to do this kind of work, as the pre-session English courses would be conducted online. Thus, applicants and their parents reached out to their agents to ask about whether they needed to prepare visa application documents for the subsequent programs at the moment.

‘My students are asking when to apply for a Tier-4 visa for their PGT programs and whether they can submit a visa application then...Honestly, I also want to know this sort of information.’ (Participant 2, processor)

Moreover, as UK Visa Application Centres in China were closed from February 2020, applicants were concerned about how to apply for a visa. In addition, some applicants who had intended to take pre-session courses felt confused about when they would be eligible for requesting the document of Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS) to apply for visas in China, as normally this type of students would receive the CAS as soon as passing the pre-session course, submitting a visa application in the UK. Besides, given the particular timing of the COVID-19 crisis, applicants wondered whether they should prepare additional documents in advance for Tier-4 visa applications.

‘The CAS is an essential document for Tier-4 Visa application. My students asked me when to apply for CAS for their PGT programs if they were able to take classroom courses this September’  
(Participant 12, processor)

Thus, it appears that as the format of pre-session courses changed and UK Visa Application Centres in China kept closed during the COVID-19 crisis, applicants and parents’ concerns about issues of tier 4 visa applications grew.

### 5.3.5 Tuition fees

In April 2020, some universities in the UK released measures for reducing or waiving the fees of pre-sessional English courses, which attracted the attention of some applicants and their parents. This was followed by queries and concerns about the tuition fees for the 2020-2021 academic year. The related questions to agents included whether the tuition fees in the next academic year would be adjusted because of the COVID-19 pandemic, whether the tuition fees would be reduced if online courses were provided, and whether more universities would waive the course fees.

‘As most British universities will conduct online pre-sessional courses, lots of my students are wondering whether the course fee will be reduced.’  
(Participant 2, processor)

‘As quite a few universities have reduced the fees for pre-sessional courses, some of my students are wondering whether it is likely to have more universities who are going to reduce the fees.’  
(Participant 16, communicator)

From this, it indicates that the adjustment of tuition fees draws students and their parents’ attention, which leads them to approach agents for more details and advice.

## 5.4 Agents’ sources of information during COVID-19

### Key Takeaways

- Education agents in China closely followed the changing policies announced by UK universities during the COVID-19 crisis.
  - Education agents in China promptly obtained the latest updates through multiple channels, including: representatives of the UK universities, internal working groups at agencies, university websites, and official accounts on social media platforms.
-

During the COVID-19 crisis, education agents in China kept a close eye on UK universities' teaching and learning adjustments, as well as the UK government's measures for containing the pandemic. The sources of their information included: representatives of the UK universities, work groups, university websites, and official accounts on social media platforms. These are each discussed in detail next.

### 5.4.1 Representatives of the UK universities

In terms of the UK universities' teaching and learning adjustments, education agents heavily relied on the representative of the UK universities. According to agents' feedback, most UK universities except the G5 group (University of Oxford, University of Cambridge, London School of Economics and Political Science, University College London, Imperial College London) worked with education agencies, either through direct or indirect partnerships. Normally, as Figure 7 illustrates, as soon as any teaching and learning adjustments were made, the representative of the UK universities would forward the updates to education agencies. Through synthesising information from different universities, education agencies circulated the original emails and the final report to sub-agencies or branches as soon as possible. In this way, agent consultants would be able to access timely and reliable information regarding teaching and learning adjustments.

Figure 7: process of information delivery



'In terms of updated information from British universities, we mainly rely on our liaison department who is responsible for tracking the adjustments and communicating with British universities...We will update our version promptly and disseminate it to our branches as soon as receiving their information.'  
(Participant 4, communicator [manager])

'Now we mainly depend on the information directly forwarded by the UK universities. They would circulate the related internal information to us timely, which I think it's a kind of the most reliable first-hand information.' (Participant 13, communicator)

Information provided by representatives of UK universities became the most important source of information regarding UK universities' teaching and learning adjustments for education agents, helping them to deliver information to students promptly and enabling them to answer most of the questions raised by students and parents.

#### 5.4.2 Internal working groups at agencies

Generally, education agencies had internal working groups where agent consultants share individual students' cases, corresponding replies of admission offices as well as the final solutions and results. Information shared within internal working groups at agencies played an important role in dealing with individual students' cases during the COVID-19 crisis. On one hand, agents perhaps obtained the latest university policies ahead of that were forwarded by university representatives. As individual students had urgent and special questions or requests, processors helped them to consult admission offices by email directly. Sometimes, the replies would indicate the policies that UK universities just made. On the other hand, agent consultants were able to take the cases for reference to solve other similar problems efficiently.

'Our work groups have really helped us a lot recently. As for the similar questions or cases, we just directly copy the replies of admission offices and send them to students, which saves us a lot of time.'  
(Participant 2, processor)

Sometimes I would send the replies to Chinese representatives of UK universities to double confirm, as I did not receive any related information from our headquarters or university representatives. The result was consistent.' (Participant 5, processor)



### 5.4.3 University websites and official accounts on social media platforms

During spring 2020, agents felt that information was being updated by universities too frequently, so they relied upon information listed on university websites when applicants asked for details. For example, as for the acceptance of Duolingo English test scores, one university updated related information three times in a month.

'Students and parents felt grateful for our repeated information confirmations to help them avoid making mistakes. For example, one university accepted Duolingo test scores at the beginning, but didn't recognise it later, and now accept the score report again.' (Participant 6, communicator)

Agents in China also tracked the updates of the universities' official accounts on social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo in case of any information delay, as most students and parents followed the official accounts. Applicants who use agents often prefer to read the information in Chinese and most university official social media platforms have Chinese versions. Therefore, future students and their parents like to check updates there regularly.

'My students followed some universities' WeChat official accounts recently. Sometimes they popped up some questions based on the updated articles published by the accounts.' (Participant 12, communicator)

Taken together, education agents attempted to deliver accurate information to applicants during the COVID-19 crisis promptly by obtaining the latest policies of UK universities. This was accomplished through channels of UK university representatives, internal work groups, university websites, and official accounts on social platforms.

## 5.5 Prospective students' plans

### Key Takeaways

- Agents believe that the majority of Chinese applicants they worked with still intended to study in the UK in the 2020/21 academic year.
- Applicants have continued to reach out to education agents in China about new policies adopted by UK universities, about receiving contact from UK universities, and about the potential online delivery of courses

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Agents interviewed for this study indicated that applicants and offer holders reflected in their interactions on four key areas: intentions to study in the UK, new policies towards language requirements and pre-sessional courses, open communication from UK universities, and the potential use of online courses. These will each be addressed in detail next.

### 5.5.1 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. Although agents reflected that the COVID-19 crisis did impact upon applicants' decision-making process, those who had already submitted applications or were preparing applications were not strongly influenced. For most applicants they worked with, the decision to study abroad had already been fully and carefully considered, with decisions made by themselves, often in collaboration with their whole family, which could not be easily changed.

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

'In fact, from the recent reactions of our students and their parents, we can see that most of them wait and see the pandemic situation in the UK at the moment, and they hope to enrol as planned if the pandemic is contained well.'  
(Participant 7, communicator)

'...the decision of studying abroad is made through students' full considerations, which is not shaken easily. The pandemic is only a kind of epidemic after all, which can't last forever. Education cannot be obstructed by it...'

(Participant 6, communicator)

Agents also reflected that many Chinese applicants believed that the UK was presently the most attractive or ideal country to pursue overseas programmes. This reflection was in view of situations around the world that were perceived as volatile, such as the current tension between China and the USA, the 2019-2020 protests in Hong Kong, and Australia's coronavirus travel ban from China at the outset of the COVID-19 crisis. Comparatively, agents found that applicants and their parents remained optimistic that the UK government could contain the pandemic soon, considering the measures and policies being taken by the UK government so far.

'In April, it seems that the British government changed its regulations strictly, and the police issued fines. Britain's medical standards are not worse than ours, and we and some parents are relatively optimistic about the epidemic in the second half of the year.'

(Participant 6, communicator)

Together, these findings indicate optimism for the UK higher education sector in terms of retaining Chinese applicants for the upcoming academic year. However, this optimism is contingent upon continued perceived public safety, fair treatment, and transparency from universities.

### 5.5.2 New policies towards language requirements and pre-sessional courses

Since April 2020, UK universities have consecutively released new policies regarding pre-sessional English courses and minimum English language entry requirements. For example, a large number of the UK universities have announced plans to conduct online pre-sessional courses while accepting other new types of English language tests, such as Duolingo English test and Pearson Test of English Academic (PTE).

'Students can use other English language test scores such as Duolingo and PTE to apply for pre-sessional courses. Even some universities can accept CET 4 and CET 6 scores to apply...Currently, my students are preparing other English language tests or have already submitted the application for pre-sessional courses.' (Participant 8, communicator)

Moreover, some universities lowered the English language requirement for pre-sessional courses, reduced the tuition fees, and even recognised the final report of pre-sessional courses from other universities. Agents thought current adjustment policies were playing a positive role in progressing applicants' plans and stimulating their learning initiatives during the COVID-19 crisis. Most of their applicants who applied for British PGT programmes starting in September were actively preparing for the English language tests, as well as applying for pre-sessional English courses.

'As more universities accept Duolingo language tests, at present, most of my students who don't have language scores so far are preparing for the Duolingo language test, which enables them to have a chance to apply for pre-sessional courses at least.'

(Participant 6, communicator)

'For example, some top-ranking universities, they recognise the pre-sessional report from relatively low-ranking universities. This enables students who have IELTS language test scores that could not fulfil the condition of pre-sessional courses of top-ranking universities, to apply for and take pre-sessional courses of lower-ranking universities first and then transfer to the top-ranking university to pursue master's programmes.'

(Participant 4, communicator and manager)

This transparency and flexibility was perceived as helpful by applicants, particularly those who had not met English language requirements or had not yet submitted applications, allowing them to proceed with their plans of studying abroad. Therefore, one key takeaway for UK universities for retaining Chinese applicants is to ensure flexibility in language requirements and clearly communicate intentions for pre-sessional courses.

### 5.5.3 Open communication from UK universities

Interviewed agents reflected positively on many UK universities' open communication with their prospective international students by email and WeChat during the COVID-19 crisis. These communications were helpful to support applicants' intentions and decision making towards studying in the UK in 2020. Agents felt that direct communication with applicants generated a good image of UK universities, making students feel cared for and valued by overseas universities at an uncertain time.

'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)

Many (un)conditional offer holders joined university WeChat welcome groups, where university staff circulated the latest adjustment policies and answered students' inquiries. Agents spoke highly of offer holders receiving regular updates from universities by email, covering the new adjustment policies, postgraduate offer holder surveys, the COVID-19 updates, etc. These helped offer holders to keep in touch with UK universities and make sense of the changing situation.

'Some students told me they received surveys about the plans for the next semester from British universities recently. It's very helpful. They felt happy to receive this kind of email even though most of them did not fill out the surveys. They think those universities are good.'  
(Participant 9, communicator)

Thus, one key factor for supporting and maintaining applicants from China is in fostering channels for open communication. This includes making transparent plans and intentions for the upcoming academic year, as well as opportunities for applicants' voices to be heard by their intended institution about policies that will impact upon their experiences.

#### 5.5.4 Potential online delivery of courses

Agents reflected in their interviews that applicants emphasised the importance of having an experience abroad, often characterised by experiencing local cultures and gaining new intercultural skills. They did wish to simply receive an overseas credential, but were motivated by the additional personal benefits that occurred as a result of studying abroad. For this reason, agents felt that most applicants in China would not accept fully online programmes, as they could not experience 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 also found that many applicants felt that a programme which was fully online, particularly for one-year taught postgraduate (PGT) programmes, was not equal to a campus-based experience. For example, some applicants and parents questioned the learning experience and learning outcomes of online courses.

'Some parents are really worried about the learning outcome and whether their children can keep up with courses in the second semester if they can take them on campus.'  
(Participant 9, communicator)

'Perhaps they think this format doesn't make any sense. Many students thought this way did not work for them. Indeed, in view of the learning state of our students who engaged in our online projects, I think online courses only suit students with a strong self-discipline ability'  
(Participant 8, communicator)

Moreover, agents held the view that reducing fees for online courses perhaps worked for a small number of applicants under current circumstances.

'Honestly, many students would feel less value for money, as they paid the same amount of money but had different learning experiences. Obviously, offline courses enable students to learn the language more effectively.'  
(Participant 1, processor)

Their applicants had good financial capabilities and could afford the total cost of studying in the UK. However, their applicants thought the tuition fees were inappropriate if only online courses were provided because the services were lessened without an international experience involved.

'Generally, if you were born in a public-servant or an average-income family, you could afford CNY 300,000 to 400,000 to pursue one-year programmes abroad. That is why those people from the UK initially. Very few people care about the little reduction of fees compared to the experience.'  
(Participant 9, communicator)

'Applicants are more concerned about online courses that involve lots of issues...applicants asked whether universities offer discounts for online courses...what is the difference between online programmes overseas and our online programmes?'  
(Participant 4, communicator and manager)

In summary, interviewed agents felt that the majority of applicants might choose not to accept online courses in the upcoming academic year, as they were concerned about the quality of online learning and would miss the experience of being abroad. Agents also underlined their applicants could afford the full cost of studying abroad and expected to have a high-quality learning and living experience, however, in terms of the current tuition fee, their applicants thought it would be inappropriate if the upcoming courses were conducted online.



# 6. AGENTS' SUGGESTIONS FOR UK UNIVERSITIES

In the course of this research, we consolidate the following suggestions from agents for UK universities in the coming academic year to support and retain Chinese international student applicants:

**1. Hold open communication with education agents and applicants throughout decision making processes.** Based on agents' reflections, Chinese applicants do appreciate UK universities' open communication using emails, group chats through social media, and surveys. However, it was reflected that communication from some universities was inconsistent or insufficient, particularly in terms of the clear plans for the upcoming academic year. This led applicants to those universities to feel confused and anxious about their plans to study abroad and more likely to reach out to agents for advice. Agents reflected that they attempted to comfort these applicants and help them keep positive attitudes towards their initial plans. However, their efforts felt limited, as they also did not have the necessary information and could not resolve students' concerns. In other words, the lack of timely and consistent messaging from some UK universities constrained agents' potential to help convert offer holders to enrollments. Therefore, UK universities are advised to hold open conversations with education agents and offer holders, increasing transparency of decision-making timelines and processes. This might also include opening avenues for offer holders to express their concerns or comment on intended actions before plans are finalised. (For more details, see Section 5.5.3)

**2. Update and release an explicit plan for the 2020-2021 academic year as soon as possible.** Agents felt in limbo during the summer 2020 period, as offer holders and their parents anxiously waited for universities' explicit plans for the September academic intake. For example, students had serious concerns about issues such as whether classes would be online or face-to-face and whether they needed to be physically present in the UK. Further, concerns about whether online provisions would be of satisfactory quality weighed on students' decision making processes about studying abroad. At the same time, agents found that offer holders and their parents expressed frustrations at the lack of clear guidance or explicit plan published by their intended institutions. For this reason, it is recommended that UK universities update and release detailed arrangements as soon as possible, which would enable education agents to deliver support, guide students to make corresponding preparations, and relieve offer holders' anxiety to some extent. Without this information, agents thought that offer holders were unlikely to make decisions about studying abroad as intended. (For more details, see Sections 5.3.3)

**3. Delay the opening date of programmes to ensure that international students will be able to take on-campus face-to-face courses in a safe and healthy environment.** Agents reflected that a key priority for Chinese offer holders' decision to study in the UK was their personal safety. The pandemic situation in the UK is a fundamental factor in offer holders' decision to enrol. Therefore, deferring the open date of programmes would allow more time for both universities and offer holders to wait for signs of improvement of the COVID-19 pandemic. Agents felt that offer holders may feel uncomfortable or unprepared to decide in summer 2020 until there are signs of improvement and re-opening in the UK. (For more details, see Section 5.3.2)

At the same time, agents highlighted that most offer holders were unlikely to accept online courses, as the delivery of on-campus courses were an important factor in the study abroad experience. Therefore, delaying the opening date could support possibilities for universities to begin on-campus teaching activities in the upcoming semester, while simultaneously allowing students more time to make necessary preparations for moving abroad. From the perspective of agents in this study, delayed start dates would also help them to encourage offer holders to progress with their original study plan. Similarly, it would help agents demonstrate to offer holders that their concerns and expectations have been taken into account. (For more details, see Sections 5.5.4)

**4. Consider offering flexible start options.** Given offer holders' positive feedback on the flexible approaches intended for pre-sessional courses in autumn 2020, agents suggested that universities should consider providing similarly flexible options of course formats for the autumn semester. For example, each course of the first semester could have both online and offline options, allowing students to take the course in the format of their choice. Nonetheless, it was recognised that such approaches may be administratively difficult for programme staff. (For more details, see Section 5.3.3)

**5. Consider reducing tuition fees for courses delivered online.** If UK universities intend to conduct exclusively online courses, agents felt that reducing tuition fees would be a positive move. Although agents felt that most applicants could afford full tuition fees, the majority of applicants they worked with felt that online delivery diminished the value of the degree. In this sense, applicants were less likely to want to pay the same tuition fees for what was perceived to be a lesser service. Based on applicants'

reactions to reduced pre-sessional course fees by some institutions, they felt that applicants would be similarly pleased with a tuition fee reduction for online courses. Reducing tuition fees, even marginally, for online learning would be seen as a welcome gesture that would be interpreted as more fair, in recognition that there has been a substantial change to the overall student experience. (For more details, see Section 5.5.4)

**6. Put efforts into developing students' overall experience in addition to learning provisions.** When considering studying internationally, one essential factor for the applicants that agents worked with was the overall social and cultural experience of living in another country. In this way, studying in the UK was viewed not just as an educational opportunity, but as a holistic life experience. Therefore, agents reflected that many applicants and offer holders questioned whether that broader experience would be diminished due to online courses and campus closures. Therefore, if courses for the first semester are to be conducted online, UK universities should demonstrate to offer holders their explicit plans developing social and cultural experiences for students beyond their academic courses and in subsequent semesters. These considerations might include online social events, opportunities to learn about UK culture in and outside of courses, and increased induction or social opportunities after arrival for the spring semester. Similarly, signalling opportunities for personal engagements with staff, both during open days and during term time, would be welcomed by applicants to help forge meaningful connections with their institutions. Altogether, agents felt that offer holders' anxieties about a diminished experience might be decreased by universities if they demonstrated that effort and consideration will be put into extracurricular experiences. (For more details, see Section 5.5.4)

**7. Enhance recruitment activities and build up connections with potential applicants in the longer term.** As opposed to the same period in previous years, agents reflected that the volume of consultations from potential applicants declined sharply as a result of the COVID-19 crisis (i.e. those who intended to apply for programmes in 2021 - 2022). Although speculative, this could imply a potential risk of decline in prospective Chinese international students in the UK for the 2021 - 2022 academic year. Based on this indication, UK universities must make proactive efforts for recruitment not just in the immediate academic year (2020 - 2021), but also in the longer term. This might include enhancing

recruitment activities and building up connections with agents and potential applicants, to strengthen interest and confidence in UK programmes and develop visions of international experience. Altogether, it is worth reflecting that potential decreases in international student enrolments are likely to exist longer-term and that more efforts will be needed to sustain relationships with applicants for the years ahead. (For more details, see Sections 5.2 and 5.5.1)

**8. Develop or strengthen UK universities' connections with agents in China.** This research has outlined that education agents play a powerful and important role in supporting Chinese applicants' decision to study abroad and enrol in particular universities, particularly in times of crisis or uncertainty. Agents in this research reflected that Chinese applicants and offer holders frequently approached them throughout the COVID-19 crisis for advice and support, meaning agents have acted as mediators between applicants and universities. Therefore, it is suggested that UK universities work to develop meaningful and cooperative connections with agents in China, which can in turn support retaining high-quality applicants. This might mean, for example, identifying common agencies that applicants work with, developing communication lines with agencies, and forging reciprocal connections between student recruitment teams and agencies.

# 7. LIMITATIONS

This research has outlined the experiences and perspectives of education agents in China while working with prospective applicants and offer holders during the COVID-19 crisis. In doing so, we recognise several limitations of this work. First of all, this research only investigated education agents' reflections, and cannot draw firm conclusions about students' attitudes or intentions. While education agents may have accurate perceptions of students' views, and a close understanding of the issues that concern them, direct investigations on applicants and/or offer holders would be essential to uncover their authentic thoughts on the impact of COVID-19 crisis. Second, most participants in this research come from large enterprises, which might side-line the experiences of small companies and sole traders during the COVID-19 crisis. Future work should build sampling strategies on the analysis of the different types of education agencies presented here. Third, length and type of work experience in this industry is likely to influence perceptions, and precisely how these experiences shape agents' perceptions have not been explored in sufficient detail here. Again, we recommend that future work extrapolate from this insight and incorporate this into the sampling strategy and research design.

# 8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research has added to our understanding of the work of education agents in China during the COVID-19 crisis in five main areas. First, different groups of current students, applicants, and offer holders frequently interacted with their education agents in China about their concerns about studying in the UK during and post-COVID. Second, this research has highlighted the effects of COVID-19 on the business timeline of agents, which was substantially altered and shows ongoing concerns for future cohorts of Chinese international students beyond the 2020/21 academic year. Third, we have outlined concerns brought to agents by applicants and their parents, including English language tests and pre-sessional courses, safety in the UK, the format of courses in the upcoming academic year, Tier 4 visa applications, and tuition fees. Fourth, we have outlined the various sources of information that agents have relied upon, within and outside of formal communication channels with UK universities. Finally, applicants' and offer holders' reflections on UK universities during the COVID-19 crisis have been addressed through the lens of education agents.

Based on the initial findings of Chinese international students' concerns and education agents' work, we have provided suggestions for UK universities to make effective adjustments in the coming academic year. We have found that the UK remains an attractive destination that is internationally competitive, despite a troubling public health context. Indeed, most applicants from China working with education agents are reluctant to change the carefully considered decisions to study in the UK that they have arrived at in consultation with their families. However, effective cooperation between universities and education agents will allow offer holders and applicants to convert to enrolments and to sustain recruitment in subsequent academic years. Altogether, it is essential to take a medium and long-term view to maintain positive relationships in international higher education recruitment, even in this period of crisis.

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Sylvie is Lecturer in Policy and Practice and founding co-convenor of the Higher Education Research Network HERE@Manchester in the Institute for Education at the University of Manchester. An established researcher in international higher education studies, and critical higher education policy, her book is entitled *Recruiting international students in higher education: Rationales and representations in British policy* from Palgrave Macmillan. An HEA Fellow with 10 years of teaching experience with international students in UK higher education, she has published on national branding of UK higher education and policy analysis, and is currently researching pedagogies of internationalisation in higher education, and international postgraduate employability. Read [internationalisationinhighereducation.wordpress.com](http://internationalisationinhighereducation.wordpress.com).

# APPENDIX

No.	Theme	Critical Point	Question	Follow-up / prompt questions
1	Warming up	Warming up	How is everything going?	Everything is fine, good or bad?
2	What are education agents doing during the COVID-19 outbreak?	Work mode	Can you tell me about your working patterns during the COVID-19 outbreak? How did that compare with your working patterns before COVID-19?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How did you work during the days of working from home?</li> <li>2. Did you have any holiday during the COVID-19 outbreak?</li> <li>3. How many hours did you have to work during the days of working from home?</li> <li>4. Do you think working from home influences your work?</li> <li>5. Do you work as usual recently? When did you go back to your workplace?</li> <li>6. Is everything returning to normal?</li> </ol>
3	What are education agents doing during the COVID-19 outbreak?	Consulting services	Can you tell me about the inquiries you received during the COVID-19 from potential clients who intended to study in the UK? How did they compare to the requests you received before COVID-19?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What kind of questions did most potential clients raise during the COVID-19 outbreak? (such as the pandemic in the UK, universities, applications, teaching and learning activities in the UK, accommodation, living life, finance, etc.)</li> <li>2. What question(s) did clients ask most?</li> <li>3. How did you respond to them?</li> <li>4. What did you do after the clients' inquiry? Such as updating personal WeChat moments.</li> </ol>
4	What are education agents doing during the COVID-19 outbreak?	Consulting services	Can you tell me about the inquiries you received during the COVID-19 from post-service clients who are studying in the UK? How did they compare to the requests you received before COVID-19?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What questions did clients enquire about?</li> <li>2. What was the application status of those clients?</li> <li>3. What questions did clients ask most?</li> <li>4. How did you respond to them? What did you do after the clients' inquiry? Such as updating personal WeChat moments or website information.</li> </ol>

5	What are education agents doing during the COVID-19 outbreak?	Application service	Can you tell me about your approach to processing applications during the COVID-19 process? How did this compare to the process you followed before COVID-19?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Did you submit applications as usual during the COVID-19 outbreak?</li> <li>2. How many applications did you submit?</li> <li>3. How did you collect clients' information during the COVID-19 outbreak?</li> <li>4. Did you have online chats with clients? How did you feel that way? Did it influence your communication with clients or progress your application work?</li> <li>5. Did you do any work concerning preparation for application such as writing, filling in forms, and sorting files?</li> </ol>
6	What are education agents doing during the COVID-19 outbreak?	Application service	During the COVID-19 outbreak, did you receive any offer from British universities?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Did you receive any offer? What condition do the offers indicate? Is there any specific note?</li> <li>2. Did you inform clients of the application updates timely?</li> <li>3. Did clients ask about their application status during the COVID-19 outbreak? What did they ask about?</li> <li>4. How did you react to the offers and clients' inquiries about the application status?</li> </ol>
7	What are education agents doing during the COVID-19 outbreak?	Application service	During the COVID-19 outbreak, what did you do for the clients who received unconditional and/or conditional offers?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Did you proactively contact clients who received offers?</li> <li>2. What issues would you talk about with them? Did you plan something for the clients during the COVID-19 outbreak? What suggestions or guidance did you offer to your clients?</li> <li>3. Did your clients contact you as soon as the COVID-19 outbreak? What questions did they ask?</li> <li>4. How did you respond to them?</li> </ol>
8	What are education agents doing during the COVID-19 outbreak?	Concerns	Is there any other specific thing for clients during the COVID-19 outbreak?	

9	How do education agents perceive British universities' teaching and learning adjustments?	Information source	What information did you pay attention to during the COVID-19 outbreak? where did that information come from?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Did you pay attention to some specific information? Like what (such as IELTS, visa policy, university website)?</li> <li>2. How did you get the information?</li> </ol>
10	How do education agents perceive British universities' teaching and learning adjustments?	Information source & information delivery	How did you know the teaching and learning adjustments of British Universities during the COVID-19 outbreak?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How much information have you received in terms of the teaching and learning adjustments of British universities?</li> <li>2. How did you get access to the latest information regarding the teaching and learning adjustments of British universities?</li> <li>3. How did you ensure the information reliability and the timeliness of achieving information?</li> </ol>
11	How do education agents perceive British universities' teaching and learning adjustments?	Information source & information delivery	How did you interpret these adjustments?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What do you think of the teaching and learning adjustments of British universities?</li> <li>2. Do you think the adjustments will impact clients' choice of studying in the UK? How?</li> </ol>
12	How do education agents perceive British universities' teaching and learning adjustments?	Information delivery	How did you deliver this information to clients?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Did you process the 'raw information'?</li> <li>2. Did you convey information selectively? If so, why did you do so? How did you select information?</li> <li>3. How did you disseminate the information?</li> </ol>
13	How do education agents view prospective students' concerns and decision-making of studying British PGT programs?	Reflection on clients' feedback	What do you think are clients' main concerns for studying in the UK?	