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## **CS 3: Role of the agents in widening participation in the UK higher education**

**Author: Johnson Jament**

### **Background**

UK Higher Education has been a major attraction for Indian students for many years. This is mainly because of two reasons; firstly a deeply rooted contribution which has been made by UK educated people to India in terms of all professions, and in many walks of Indian life; socially, economically, educationally and administering duties depending on their individual and professional backgrounds. Within this there was initially predominance of upper-caste and upper-class, and of men. However recently there has been growing desire for inclusion of students from other social groups and of women who had previously not been able to access UK Higher Education. The second reason is that possession of a UK higher education degree confers benefits for the individuals concerned. This therefore creates two areas of impact: capacity building for the nation spreading through inclusion of wider social groups, and individual advancement of people within those groups.

### **Key learnings up front**

- **CS 3.1.** There has been a widening of recruitment from India to UK universities, moving from a former predominance of upper-caste and upper-class students, and of men. Recently there has been growing inclusion of students from other social groups and of women, who had previously not been able to access UK Higher Education.
- **CS 3.2.** There are two areas of impact: capacity building for the nation via inclusion of wider social groups; and individual advancement of people within those groups.
- **CS 3.3.** Current drivers are partly that agents in India work actively to recruit students, and changes in financial laws have allowed students to borrow money for overseas education.

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- **CS 3.4.** UK media reports that some students are seen to be economic migrants rather than genuine students.
- **CS 3.5.** Some students are misled about UK education and part-time work opportunities, and are the victims of false information.
- **CS 3.6.** Support from agents is useful, saves time and effort, and reduces concerns and worries about UK Higher Education application procedures. The support from agents is particularly useful during the visa application process.
- **CS 3.7.** There is only limited guidance from agents concerning academic procedures of UK Higher education, which has led them to come to the UK with limited preparation and understanding about UK Higher Education.
- **CS 3.8.** Some of the information provided by agents is not accurate and irrelevant to their academic career, students reporting that the education agent in many senses was an immigration or travel agent rather than an education specialist.
- **CS 3.9.** Students were wrongly advised that they were able to find professions relevant to their academic backgrounds.
- **CS 3.10.** The agents receive financial returns for their services from multiple sources; processing fees from the students and parents, commissions from universities, commissions for arranging bank loan and air tickets for students
- **CS 3.11.** The data shows both a virtuous circle and vicious circle of UK education for the students from India: the virtuous circle concerns students who enjoy their education, and earn money by combining both study and work. The vicious circle concerns students with misguided expectation of earning money and career opportunities, who return home without qualifications, money and limited opportunities.

In the last few years, there has been tremendous increase in recruitment of students from India to the UK. The reason for this is partly that agents in India work actively to recruit students and changes in financial laws which allowed students to borrow money for overseas education. There are hundreds of agents working in different parts of India to recruit students to UK universities. They provide information about UK education to students considering their diversity in terms of social development. This case study concerns one such education agent in India, based in the Southern Indian state of Kerala. Initially, the organisation focussed their recruitment process in Cochin; recently they have extended their centres in Trivandrum and Calicut areas of Kerala. They widely recruit students from the state for several UK universities.

More recently, they have developed their own website to attract students from Kerala to the UK. At present, they are the solely responsible student recruitment agency for one UK University, though several agents were involved in the past.

Over the years, this agent's recruitment from Kerala to the UK University has been dramatically increased. However, a limited number of students have gone back to India after their education and there are indications of several of them discontinued their study. A vast majority of them have continued to stay in the UK through different immigration routes. As UK media reported some students are often seen to be economic migrants rather than students and they have limited motivation to be genuine students. It is because many students are given 'false' information about UK education and part-time work opportunities. However, some others are having a genuine desire to be students but are the victims of false information.

### **Data Set**

The fieldwork was carried out in 2010 and data were collected from students from Kerala in the UK University, also observation visits to agents in Kerala were used to inform the development of this case study as follows:-

<b>Reference</b>	<b>Interviews</b>	<b>No.</b>
<b>CS2ISB</b>	Students of Business	X4
<b>CS2ISE</b>	Students of Education	X3
<b>SS2ISH</b>	Students of Health	X2
	<b>Total number of interviews</b>	<b>09</b>
	<b>Observation visits to Agent</b>	
<b>CS2OVA1</b>	Observation Visit Agent 1	X1
<b>CS2OVA2</b>	Observation Visit Agent 2	X1
<b>CS2OVA3</b>	Observation Visit Agent 3	X1
	<b>Total number of observation visits</b>	<b>3</b>
	<b>Documents</b>	
<b>CS2NPA</b>	News paper advertisements	X2
<b>CS2NDA</b>	Notice distribution	X1
	<b>Total Number of Documents</b>	<b>3</b>
	<b>Photographs</b>	
<b>CS2PH</b>	Pictures of flex boards	X2
	<b>Total Number of Photographs</b>	<b>2</b>

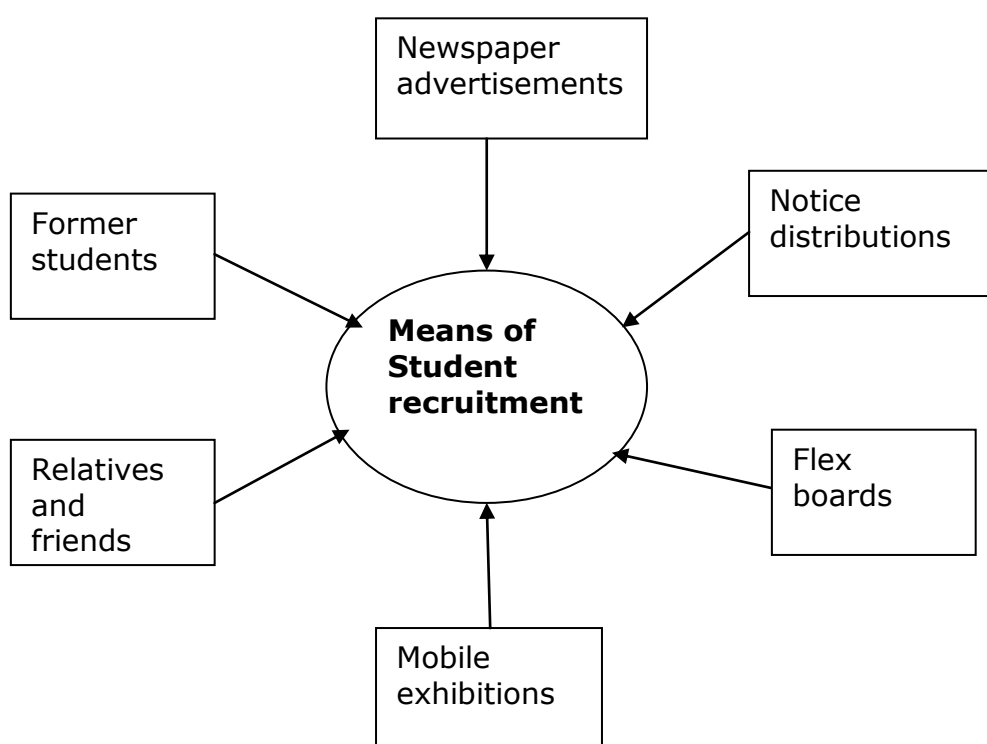
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CS2WEB1	Agent website	X1
CS2WEB2	University website	X1
CS2WEB3	<a href="http://www.britishcouncil.org/eumd-agents.htm">http://www.britishcouncil.org/eumd-agents.htm</a>	X1
CS2WEB4	University website	X1

### Findings

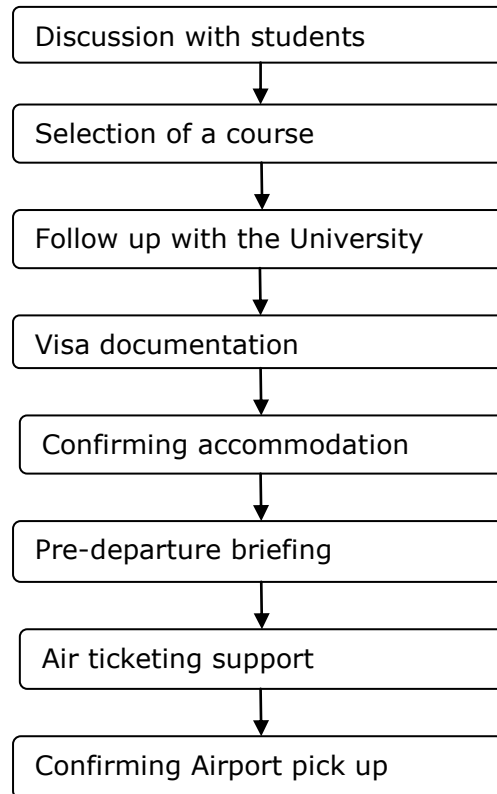
From 2005 onwards, the agency has recruited a couple of hundred students from Kerala to the UK University. The students have been from almost all parts of Kerala comprising a recognisable international students group within the University. A vast majority of the students have been for postgraduate degrees, increasingly women and students from lower class backgrounds. They have been placed in the schools of Business, Law, Health and Education. The agency recruits students through different sources of information including social media like Facebook as shown in the figure (F1).

**Figure 1: means of student recruitment**



The agency supports the students from their initial process of selection of a particular course until their arrival to the UK as entered in the figure (2).

**Figure 2: support for students by the agent**



Students found this support was useful and saved much of their time and effort. This has also reduced their concerns and worries about UK Higher Education application procedures. The agent had mentioned the students about different universities and their courses; this enabled them to choose relevant courses. The support from the agent was particularly useful to them during the visa application process.

*Agents were supporting for visa process and we are responsible for the other matters such as academic requirements...*

### **Information by agents**

Though a higher level of information have given to the students, limited guidance was based on academic procedures of UK Higher Education. This is one of the major concerns expressed by the majority of the interviewed students. Some students found this as unhelpful and problematic, and they realised this after their enrolment in the process. They commented that the agent has limited understanding about UK Higher Education and academic life. This has led them to come to the UK with limited preparation and understanding about UK Higher Education. The students also opined that this has hugely affected their academic performance for their written assignments in their chosen academic programmes.

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*...sorry...actually I did not receive any useful information about academic matters...*

*...agents have limited understanding of UK education and life...*

Some of the information provided by the agent was not accurate and irrelevant to their academic career. Students stated that the education agent in many senses was an immigration or travel agent rather than an education specialist. Much of the information was about visa application procedures and part-time job opportunities. Students were also advised that they would be able to find professions relevant to their academic backgrounds. For example, postgraduate students of education were advised that their programme would be a qualification for teaching in English schools. The students of Business were informed that they would be placed in companies as part of their masters' programmes.

*Initial process was helpful, but they (agents) were giving me more fake information than educational...or agents were giving more information on non-academic matters, most of them were fake...*

*I was advised that I am able to find a teaching job in English schools as if my course is a direct qualification to teaching. When I reached here, I realised that it was not the case. I am not able to do so...*

*I am not happy that I am not placed in any company or...this is against what agents told me...*

This is also evident from the agency website that shows 6 flash points of their success in recruitment of students to the UK were:

- Unlimited scholarships and bursaries
- Stay back option (immigration route)
- Free service
- Affordable fees
- Part time jobs
- Almost 100% visa success rate

Furthermore, in their description of the services rendered, two of the key areas were not highlighted such as counselling for choosing right course and charges for their service.

This finding in a sense is against the British Council's guidance for good practice in recruiting students by agents in India<sup>1</sup>. The guidance document (3 and 5) suggests:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.britishcouncil.org/eumd-agents.htm>

*3. In summary, this standard requires agents to provide full, honest and accurate information about client institutions and the courses and facilities they offer.*

...

*5. An example of inappropriate advice would be encouragement of a student to enter a course of study for which they were inadequately prepared in terms of language proficiency or academic attainment. The standard also includes advice or information given to sponsors of students and other such bodies or persons as well as directly to students. Again, the omission of salient information in an effort to secure the placement of a student is likely to be judged as a breach of this standard.*

### **Economic Imperatives of Agents**

The agents received financial returns for their services from multiple sources and some of them are mentioned here:

*Processing fees from the students and parents.*

*Commissions from university.*

*Commissions for arranging bank loan for the students.*

*Commissions for arranging air ticket for students.*

However, the agency did not charge any processing fee from the students in the initial stage of their application. There are some sub agents who charged a certain amount of fee for their service to the students in relation to arranging bank loans. There is not enough data to postulate this.

### **Virtuous circle and vicious circle**

The data shows the virtuous circle and vicious circle of UK education for the students from India. The virtuous circle suggests that students come to the UK and enjoy the education, and earn money by combining both study and work.

The students were seen as happy with the international qualification in an affordable cost with an opportunity of meeting new people from different cultural backgrounds in the University. The students had the opportunity to work at the same time studying, opportunity to develop some values (personal and professional), work based experiences and qualifications and improve their English language and communication skills. The students found the learning at the University is very different



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from what they used to back home. This has given them opportunity to learn new ideas, develop independent thinking, and work in an international environment. However, some occasions these acted as devalue or negative factors because most of them have been working below their capacity and their qualifications in order to maintain their financial burdens because their educational cost.

Nevertheless, the students seemed to be anxious about having too much independent work, limited support from tutors, and their slow pace of understanding UK Higher Education system. Some students were concerned about the narrow focus of the study procedures as small things considered important; curriculum is not comprehensive enough and often they felt left with isolated work.

*...There are many international students at [this university], it is really good for me to make connection with other people from different cultural backgrounds...I consider my education in UK will become a highlight in my academic career.*

*...The course I choose is too valuable in the future...*

This suggests that students have better prospects about their UK education.

By Contrast, there can be also vicious circle; students come to the UK with the expectation of earning lots of money and opportunities for their career ended up in a position to earn money to support their repaying their bank loans and eventually stopping education and returned to the country without qualification, money and limited opportunities.

*...my study is funded through bank loan; scholarship was helpful one, even though it was less...*

*...no much job opportunity/placement offers...*

*I am not sure what I do with the qualification in the UK as I have limited exposure and understanding about it....*

The data showed that many of the students end up in a vicious circle as they were not motivated to continue their education because of lack of preparation and limited skills to pursue the postgraduate level education and concerns about financial burdens.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

Agents play an important role to recruit students from India to the UK University. This has increased widening participation of students from Indian in UK universities. For example, most of the students participated

in this study have come from lower income families and were women, this opportunity was previously limited to people from rich family backgrounds and men. However, there are concerns about the accuracy of the information provided by agents and meeting students' expectations about their Higher Education. The following recommendations can be useful:

- The University should continue to work with the agents as they have increased the recruitment of students from India, but should encourage them to provide accurate information about UK Higher Education process and English language requirements of the courses whilst continuing the information about admission, finance, visa processing and part time job opportunities in the UK.
- Though the disadvantaged groups have benefitted from arranging bank loans for the students for their education in the UK, they have to pay back high commissions for this service. It should be better if there could be a financial plan for the agents in India.
- The University should understand international students' expectations about UK higher education such as there should be a provision of career opportunities and validation of their qualifications in the UK in India.
- The University should design its own recruitment processes which remove false information whilst encouraging the widening participation of disadvantaged groups in UK Higher Education from India. The University should have the ethical responsibility to support these students.