**UNDISCOVERED INSIGHTS INTO HOW
AGENT-POST SECONDARY INSTITUTE RELATIONSHIPS CAN BE EFFECTIVE**

by

Richard Foo

Dipl. T., British Columbia Institute of Technology, 2009
BBA, British Columbia Institute of Technology, 2011

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF
MASTER OF SCIENCE
IN
BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

University of Northern British Columbia

August 2023

Abstract

Canadian universities are increasingly reliant on their recruitment agency partners (Agents) to achieve their international recruitment targets, and improve efficiency, flexibility, and ensure a sustainable market presence. It is unclear if the relationship between Post-Secondary Institutions (PSI) and Agents is mutually sustainable, or what factors promote a successful Agent-PSI relationship. This study explores the Agent-PSI relationship from Agents' perspectives through the use of an analytical lens informed by supply chain theories. I aim to understand relational factors that drive satisfaction from agents' perspectives. This study uses a theoretically driven model to analyze the survey data of 91 respondents to determine positive relational factors. Initial surveys were followed by semi-structured interviews of randomly selected respondents to provide additional analysis into data anomalies. The findings show that Relationship Trust led to improved Agent-PSI satisfaction, which leads to a mutually sustainable partnership.

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Glossary

Terms	Definition
British Columbia Council for International Education (BCCIE)	BCCIE is a provincial Crown corporation that supports the internationalization efforts of BC's public and independent K-12 schools, public and private colleges and universities, and language schools (British Columbia Council of International Education, n.d.).
Canadian Bureau of International Education (CBIE)	Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) is a Canadian, not-for-profit, non-governmental membership organization composed of colleges, universities, school boards, organizations and individuals. CBIE's activities comprise public awareness, research and information services, training programs, scholarship management, professional development for international educators and a host of other services for members and learners. CBIE engages in cooperative projects in capacity building, institutional strengthening, and human resource development. CBIE promotes the transfer of knowledge across borders by providing technical assistance, information, and support services (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2022, p.19)

Canadian Federation of Students (CFS)	Formed in 1981, the Canadian Federation of Students is a bilingual national union composed of over 530,000 students from more than 60 university and college students' unions across Canada (Canadian Federation of Students, n.d.).
Education Agents (Agent)	Education agents can be individuals or organizations located in Canada or abroad offering marketing, promotion, recruitment and other services in the education sector. Education agents are known by various titles, such as student advisors, education consultants, counsellors, or representatives (CMEC, 2020).
Post-Secondary Institutions (PSI)	Post-Secondary Institutions are institutions that offer tertiary education. Postsecondary education institutions generally include public universities, colleges, community colleges, polytechnics, institutes, university colleges, and others (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, n.d.).
Supply Chain Management (SCM)	The management of upstream and downstream linkages between suppliers and consumers in the form of products and services that deliver superior value for the consumer while reducing costs to the entire supply chain (Mentzer et al., 2001).

Chapter 1: Introduction

The significance of international education in boosting our economy, education sector, demographics, communities, and promoting personal growth through experiential learning is acknowledged by the British Columbia Council for International Education (BCCIE). In a climate of reduced government funding and increased operational costs for Canadian Post-Secondary Institutions (PSI), international student tuition fees have become a critical source of revenue (Deering & Sá, 2014). Education agents (Agents) serve to advise, counsel and provide placement assistance to prospective students and their families. Due to their positioning in similar geographies, cultures and languages as prospective students, Agents have emerged as valuable intermediaries for the recruitment of international students to Canadian PSIs. Understanding Agents' perspectives is important to ensure beneficial returns on investment by, and protection of, PSIs in their relationships with Agents. However, while universities' perspectives have been explored in the literature, there remains a lacuna with regards to Agents' perspectives (Huang et al., 2016; P.-T. Nikula & Kivistö, 2018). This study applies supply chain management theory to elucidate factors that optimize the Agent-PSI relationship with an eye towards increasing international student recruitment (Nyaga et al., 2010).

Canadian post-secondary institutions face a significant challenge due to the decrease in government funding, both in real terms and when adjusted for inflation in aggregated terms (Deering and Sá, 2014). According to Usher, non-government income now represents over 50% of institutional revenue (Usher, 2020). Meanwhile, rising demands and expectations, and higher competition for faculty, students and staff have contributed to increased operational costs of an institution (Deering & Sá, 2014).The combination of decreased government funding and rising expectations has motivated PSIs to implement cost-saving measures, such as hiring more

contract or sessional faculty members on term contracts; raising the responsibilities of existing staff and reducing or eliminating non-essential services (Brownlee, 2015; Deering and Sá, 2014). While cost-saving measures should be balanced with providing essential services, these measures have their limitations. Addressing budgetary issues is particularly problematic for Canadian PSI due to government policies and regulations putting a cap on domestic tuition fee increases. Therefore, PSIs are seeking ways to grow current revenue, or find other sources of revenue to balance their budgets while meeting the expanding operational costs and expectations. Consequently, institutions are turning their focus towards recruiting international students and their coveted international tuition fees to mitigate budget shortfalls (Neathby & Yogesh, 2018).

International students bring valuable contributions both qualitatively and economically to the Canadian economy and PSIs.

"International students are an important source of revenue for the Canadian economy, and many studies and reports provide empirical data that clearly establishes their direct impact on Canada's economic growth. International students also make a signification contribution to innovation and knowledge development. Lastly, they are a source of cultural creativity, notably in regions that are less marked by diversity." (Belkhodja & Esses, 2013, p.4)

The number of international students in Canadian PSIs has grown over threefold from 101,304 in 2008/2009 to 318,153 in 2018/19 (Statistics Canada, 2020b). International students contributed $22.3 billion into the Canadian economy in 2018 according to the 2020 report presented to Global Affairs Canada). British Columbia (BC) represents the second-largest share of international students in Canada (26.24%) where annual international student expenditures amounted to $4.7 billion in 2018. These annual expenditures in turn generated additional jobs

and tax revenue for BC (Roslyn Kunin & Associates Inc., 2017). This increase of international students has contributed to PSIs' abilities to increase their overall revenue, even in the challenging environment of declining government income (Usher, 2020).

"An education agent is a third-party entity who is paid to assist a student to find, apply to, and/or prepare for college" (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011, p1). The services provided by Agents are paid for by the PSIs they represent, the students they assist, or sometimes both (Coffey & Perry, 2014). Agents understand PSI's dependent on international student tuition. (Raimo et al., 2014). Competition for international students is intense and is expected to increase as traditional source countries for international students become competitors for international students. China was the largest source country for international students 40 years prior to 2018 with more than 5.2 million students studying abroad (Ministry of Education, 2018). The number of inbound tertiary students to China in 2018 surpassed 490,000 and represented a 10% share of the global international student market. Agents have responded to this changing tide by becoming an integral tool in the arsenal of PSIs to attract international students in countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), United States (USA) and Canada.

The use of Agents is common across Canada's education system, at all levels to which international students are recruited (Coffey & Perry, 2014) . Coffey and Perry (2014) report that over 78% of their respondents affirmed the use of agents by their institutions. Canadian PSIs utilizing Agents are not required to report that they recruit through Agents or the number of Agents used by them, and no formal source exists enumerating the usage of Agent. A simple browse of prominent PSI websites such as University of British Columbia (UBC) and Simon Fraser University (SFU) reveals lists of Agents that represent them – some matching their Agents to the countries from which they recruit (UBC, 2021; SFU, 2021).

Given the widespread use of agents by Canadian PSIs, relatively little is known about how the relationships between PSIs and Agents emerge, operate and are managed, and factors that affect universities' relative success at achieving their international student recruitment targets through the use of Agents (Coco, 2015; Huang et al., 2016; P.-T. Nikula & Kivistö, 2018). Prior studies exist on relevant topics from international education to student mobility, that have focused on international students' experiences or on the rationale of students' PSI selection processes (Choudaha, 2017; Hou & Lu, 2017; Huang et al., 2016; Pimpa, 2003; Ruby, 2009; Zhang &Hagedorn, 2014). In addition, it has been asserted that the current body of knowledge also represents perspectives from the university side of the Agent-PSI relationship, but further research is needed on Agents' perspectives (Huang et al., 2016). While Nikula & Kivistö (2018) investigated the Agent-PSI relationship from the perspective of agency theory, the question of how PSIs can optimize their relationship with agents remains a knowledge gap.

Knowledge of the Agents' perspectives in an Agent-PSI relationship is valuable for two reasons: First, this research may serve to ensure more beneficial returns on investment in Agent-PSI relationships, with greater protection for universities; with potential for improved international student recruitment results. Second, the knowledge will extend theoretical foundations for agent management within the fields of international education and enrolment management.

Research Purpose

Interest in conducting this study came from my current role as an international recruiter. As a practitioner in the field, I observed that Agents that recruit more students for the institution tend to have a closer bond or relationship with the institution. However, the dynamic of such

relationship has never been quantified or studied. Instead, current literature examines the relationship from the Agency Theory lens. This study will adopt supply chain management and service marketing theory to identify and answer the following questions:

1. What factors about the Agent-PSI relationship affect the quality of this relationship?
2. What Agent-PSI relationship factors have the highest impact?
3. From the agents' perspectives, do they feel that an improved Agent-PSI relationship would make them more effective at recruiting international students for the universities they represent?

Methods

This study investigated the Agent-PSI relationships through the lens of supply chain management theory, to discover the factors that may protect, and optimize the return-on-investment for, PSI's stakes in international student recruitment; as well as to determine whether improving the Agent-PSI relationship may lead to higher efficacy at meeting international enrolment targets. Agents in China, India and Vietnam representing PSIs in BC and Canada responded to a survey that asked multi-part questions surrounding seven (7) factors of the Agent-PSI relationship, as well as four (4) demographic questions to define the respondents' positioning in their market. Three survey respondents were selected to participate in a semi-structured interview designed to gather additional insights to glean a more comprehensive understanding of the survey responses on the Agent-PSI relationship.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

International student tuition has been a critical source of income for PSIs amidst rising expenses and reductions in government revenue. International students pay much higher tuition fees than domestic students. The use of Agents has been a cost-effective way to recruit international students without significant upfront investment because Agents are usually paid a commission after the international student has been enrolled. Current research has examined Agent-PSI relationships and how they can be managed through the framework of Agency Theory, albeit from the PSIs' perspective (Huang et al., 2016; Nikula & Kivistö, 2018). It seems fitting to apply the main problem defined in Agency Theory to the Agent-PSI relationship. Principals incentivize agents and entrust them with decision-making on behalf of the principal. Principals seek methods to monitor and control agents whose goals may differ from their (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; P. T. Nikula & Kivistö, 2018; Ross, 1973b). A missing piece in this problem is that the principal does not have as much knowledge as agents about the agents' abilities and actions – yet, there remains an absence of studies that explore insights about the Agent-PSI relationship from the Agents' perspectives (Huang et al., 2016; P.-T. Nikula & Kivistö, 2018; Raimo et al., 2014).

It is important to also understand and study this relationship from the Agents' perspectives to develop an effective international recruitment strategy. Researchers investigating collaborative relationships in Supply Chain Management (SCM) found that firms that actively engage in collaborations achieved efficiencies, increased flexibility and gained a competitive advantage by creating a unique value that neither partner could create independently, contrasting with Agency Theory (Corsten & Kumar, 2005; Daugherty et al., 2006; Nyaga et al., 2010). This

study focuses on Agents' perspective and explores a collaborative framework with the aim of enabling the viewpoints of both PSIs and Agents to be represented in the literature.

International Tuition Fees as a Significant Revenue Stream for PSIs

Statistics Canada (2020a) reported that government funding was the largest source of revenue for universities and degree-granting colleges. Government sources (federally and provincially) accounted for 45.8% of overall revenue while tuition fees represented 29.4%. Although revenue from the provincial government rose by $48.1 million from the previous year to $10.9 billion in 2018/19, the overall share of PSI revenue from provincial funding has decreased over time, falling from 38.6% in 2013/2014 to 35.4% in 2018/19. Other sources of revenue include donations, private grants, investments and other minor revenue streams (e.g. Auxiliary Enterprises or Education Activities which includes executive education, consulting, lab testing). As illustrated in Figure 1, tuition and other fees witnessed substantial increase whereas provincial and federal funding remain relatively flat.

Figure 1

Institution Revenue: Government Funding versus Tuition over time
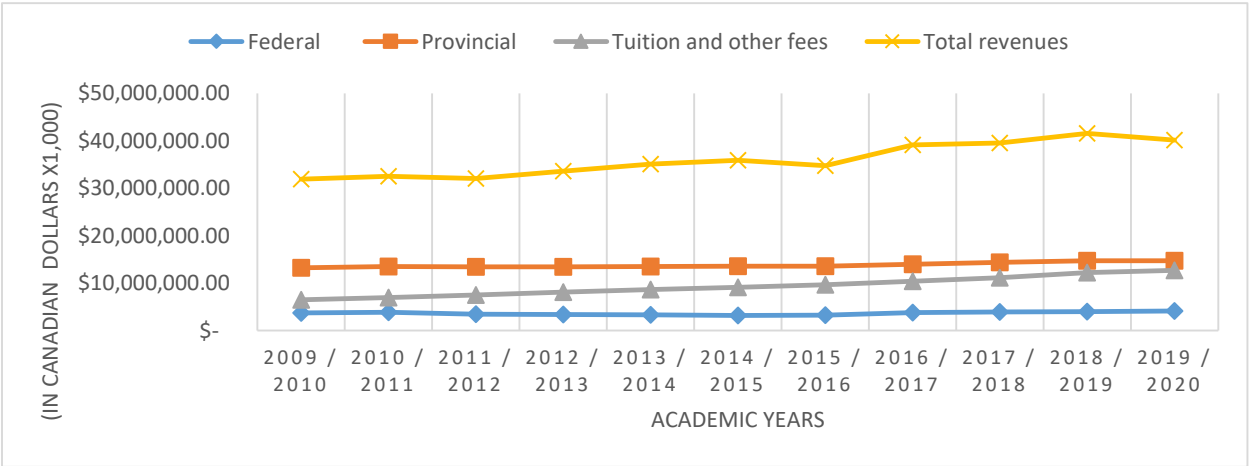
Note: Revenue of universities by type of revenues and funds (in current Canadian dollars) (x 1,000)
From Data obtained from Statistic Canada (2023a) Table 37-10-0026-01

Figure 2

Total expenditures and Salaries and benefits over time
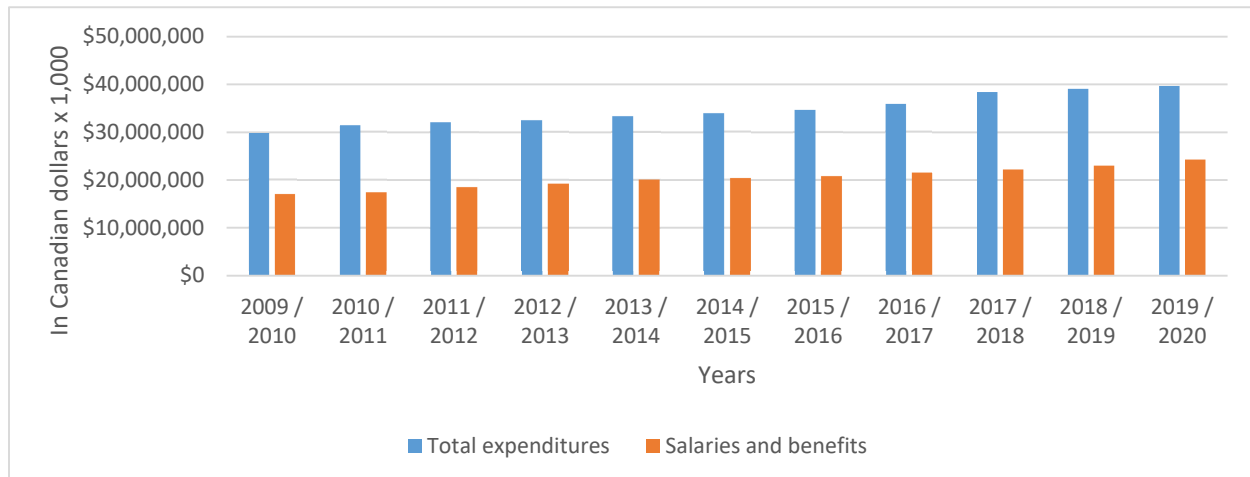
Note: Expenditures of universities by type of expenditures and funds (in current Canadian dollars) (x 1,000).
From Statistics Canada (2023b) Table 37-10-0027-01

Decreased government funding and regulated tuition policies are among the factors that have produced a financially restrictive environment for Canadian universities (Deering and Sá, 2014). The rising costs of attracting the best faculty, online library subscriptions and higher wages required by university staff are also contributing to the higher costs of operating a PSI. (Canadian Bureau of International Education, 2018). Figure 2 reveals a rise in total expenditures and salaries and benefit for institutions, spanning from 2009/10 to 2019/20. Pressure continues to rise from expectations placed on PSIs to deliver quality education by various levels of government, students and the public (Canadian Bureau of International Education, 2018). There has been ongoing and mounting pressure to provide competitive, high quality education, without increasing tuition, and in turn, national education debt. PSIs in a number of Canadian provinces – including BC – are not afforded the luxury that private businesses have of passing costs on to customers to maximize profit, which has put Canadian students and the government at loggerheads when it comes to making high quality post-secondary education equitably

accessible. The Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) argues that Canadian tuition fees, student debt, and consequently the unaffordability of post-secondary education, have been on a steep incline historically – even when adjusted for inflation (Canadian Federation of Students - Ontario, 2010). The Government of British Columbia introduced the Tuition Limit Policy in 2005 (British Columbia Government, 2007) after thousands of students took to the streets across Canada in a largely CFS-led series of protests against tuition hikes in 2004. The purpose of this policy is to limit tuition and mandatory fee (as well as those associated with professional programs and established credentialed programs) increases to the rate of inflation, currently to a two percent annual increase (BC Ministry of Advanced Education, 2018).

However, this policy does not apply to international student tuition. Therefore, to increase revenue, Neatby and Yogesh (2018) reported that universities and colleges in BC are increasingly turning to international students and their coveted tuition, to make up for the shortfall in revenue from decreased government funding and limited tuition fee increases domestically. At many PSIs, tuition fees for international students are three to four times higher than those for domestic students (Statistics Canada, 2016).

International Education Markets Globally and in Canada

The estimated value of the global international student market is around $50–100 billion USD (Altbach, 2013; P.-T. Nikula & Kivistö, 2018; Ruby, 2009). Most of this value is held by English-speaking countries like the United States of America (USA), Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and Canada (OECD, 2018), while non-English speaking and smaller nations have set national strategies aimed at increasing the number of overseas students they receive. Traditional suppliers of international students, from nations/regions like Singapore, Malaysia,

mainland China, Turkey and Mexico have begun to actively compete for overseas students (Wen and Hu, 2018) .

The Canadian Bureau of International Education (CBIE) reports that in 2017 there were 494,525 international students studying at all levels in Canada (CBIE Infograph, 2018). The top two countries sending international students to Canada are China (28%) and India (25%). International students in Canada generally settle in Ontario or BC. Ontario accounts for 48% of all international students in Canada while BC accounted for 24% (The Canadian Bureau for International Education, n.d.). Roslyn Kunin and Associates reported that in 2015, international students in BC spent over CAD $3.5 billion to pay for tuition, fees and daily living expenses. This annual expenditure in turn generated additional jobs and tax revenue for BC (2017).

International students are generally funded by sources outside of the country. Therefore, Canada and the province of BC consider international education an export of services (Roslyn Kunin and Associates Inc., 2017). Roslyn Kunin and Associates (2017) stated BC's export of international education services ranked third behind major commodity exports such as mineral fuels, mineral oils, bituminous substance (which are categorized as one group).

These figures suggest that not only is successful recruitment of international students imperative for the sustainability of Canadian PSIs; international students also hold great value for the Canadian economy. Achieving this involves marketing the PSIs' countries to prospective students, providing information about program options and admission requirements, and helping students to navigate complex immigration processes (Coffey & Perry, 2014). Agents have arisen to fill this niche and are uniquely positioned within their own countries, languages, cultures and time zones to market PSIs to potential students and their families. Many researchers have employed agency theory to describe and understand the Agent-PSI relationship.

Theories and Frameworks for Understanding the Agent-PSI Relationship

Agency Theory and the Agent-PSI Relationship

Agency theory, as an overall concept, can be applied to explain any contractual relationship of two or more parties, where one party (principal) engages another party (agent) to perform some service on behalf of the initial party (principal). The principal usually provides compensation (financial or otherwise) for the agent's service (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Ross, 1973b). Nikula and Kivisto (2018) state that the purpose for forming an agency relationship is usually that the principal requires a certain *task* to be accomplished. The principal may not have these skills and abilities, or may be less effective than the agent in completing the task. The principal generally hires the services of agents because they possess the requisite skills and abilities to perform the task (P.-T. Nikula & Kivistö, 2018) . Traditionally, agency relationships have been formed through contractual relationships that outline a mutually agreed-upon task and compensation that takes the form of a written contract (Kivistö, 2005).

Agency theory is derived from economics and has been applied in the fields of accounting, marketing, public administration, not-for-profit organizations, politics and so on (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2010). According to Eisenhardt (1989), agency theory operates on seven central assumptions: self-interest, goal conflict, bounded rationality, information asymmetry, preeminence of efficiency, risk aversion, and information as a commodity. An agency problem can occur when the desires or goals of the principal and the agent conflict, or when it is difficult or expensive for the principal to verify what the agent is actually doing (information asymmetry) (Eisenhardt, 1989). Agency theory identifies the opportunistic tendencies of agents (self-interest) or different attitudes towards risk (risk aversion) that are held by the two parties, "Agency theory

is founded on the triad of agent opportunism, information, and risk " (Sharma, 1997, p 760). While applicable in any contractual relationship, agency theory is less familiar to researchers in higher education. Hagedorn and Zhang (2010) gave an example where Kivistö (2005) depicted the inter-organizational relationship between government (principal) and publicly funded higher-education institutions (agents). Most recent studies were conducted by Nikula and Kivistö (2018) where the researchers evaluate how insights from agency theory can help mitigate problems associated with PSI- Agent relationships. Nikula and Kivistö (2018) uses agency theory to assume that Agents will act in their own self-interest, at the expense of the PSI (principal), unless protection such as reward structure and vigilant monitoring are in place. These safeguard are generally written in an agreement or a contract that are either outcome-based or behaviour-based approach. Based on their agency theory anlaysis, Nikula and Kivistö (2018) concluded a combination of both outcome-and-behaviour-based (hybrid) approach would mitigate the self-interest problems within a Agent-PSI relationship.

Defining the Agent-PSI Relationship: PSIs

Generally, one centralized unit within an institution, such as the admissions department or the international office, is responsible for managing Agents on behalf of the entire PSI (Coffey & Perry, 2014; Huang et al., 2016). PSIs as organizations exist in various configurations that differ in legal structure (i.e. public, private, not-for-profit, for-profit), academic purpose (i.e. research, teaching, vocational, medical), and offer diverse sets of academic programs (P.-T. Nikula & Kivistö, 2018; Teichler, 2008).

According to Nikula and Kivistö (2018), one of the key distinctions between the extent to which PSIs utilize Agents is perceived institutional quality. On one end of the spectrum are

Harvard, Yale, Oxford and Cambridge (with highly selective admissions processes) and what Marginson (2007) labels 'global demand magnets.' Traditionally, these global demand magnets do not engage the services of Agents, but there are a few exceptions, such as the Australian National University, the University of Melbourne and the University of Auckland (P.-T. Nikula & Kivistö, 2018). At the other end lie PSIs with lower academic status and limited brand exposure that require a more dynamic recruitment approach to attract international students, which includes collaborating with Agents (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; P.-T. Nikula & Kivistö, 2018).

Defining the Agent-PSI Relationship: Education Agents

Agents are pivotal within the international education industry. The primary purpose for PSIs to hire Agents is to recruit prospective students in regions that send a sizable number of students overseas to study at their institutions as well as to provide information about studying in a different country (Altbach, 2013).

The growth of international education has provided more choices for students who wish to study abroad not only in their preferred academic programs, but also institutions and destination countries for cultural experience. With limited information, language barriers and ever-changing visa policies, prospective overseas students who wish to study abroad often turn to student recruitment agencies for support in selecting and applying to international PSIs (Hulme et al., 2014; Ross, 1973a; Zhang & Serra Hagedorn, 2014). Hagedorn and Zhang (2011) defines an education Agent as a third-party entity who receives compensation to help a student find, apply to, and/or prepare for higher education. In North America, the use of education Agents is a relatively new phenomenon, but it is a well-established practice in other parts of the world (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011). The use of Agents, as brokers that provide guidance, counseling,

and settlement assistance to prospective students and their families, has become routine in

Canada (Coffey & Perry, 2014).

As private entitles, Agents consistently seek avenues to expand their businesses and

enhance revenue. They frequently establish non-exclusive relationships with multiple PSIs and

might even act as representative for PSIs across various countries. The desire of PSIs seeking to

increase their proportion of international students resulted in an organic explosion of Agents

collaborating with PSIs in other countries. Altbach (2013) explained that with increased

competition for international students, PSIs often turn to education Agents to help them recruit as

they perceive there is no alternate way of effectively attracting international students.

Acting as a broker for partnered institutions, these education agencies – also called

recruitment agencies – gain direct information from partner PSIs to recruit potential applicants

(Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Agents are paid for their expertise (local knowledge) by the PSIs

they represent, their clients (prospective students they service and/or their families), and

sometimes by both the PSI and the clients. PSIs often see Agents as a cost-effective way of

recruiting international students, since they understand the cultural norms and speak the local

language, but information asymmetry and distance can limit auditing and control of Agents'

behaviors (Coffey & Perry, 2014).

The "Agency Problem" and the Agent-PSI Relationship

As aforementioned, agency theory can be used to analyze the relationship between PSIs

and Agents, where one party (principal) engages another party (agent) to perform some task(s)

on their behalf. The root of this theory dictates that once the principal delegates authority to the

agent, the principal will encounter problems monitoring and controlling the agent. Furthermore,

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agency theory assumes that agents will act in their self-interest, leading to an *agent problem*. The perceived opportunistic behaviours by the Agent may contribute to *agent problem* differently. First, with adverse selection, the problem stems from the principal's uncertainty about the agent's goal(s), and the likelihood of a productive and honest relationship. Second, a moral hazard is perceived when the principal cannot directly monitor the agent's behaviours due to information asymmetry and associated costs. Moral hazard includes purposeful and intentional underperformance, using unethical or unwanted working methods or self-serving actions by the agent that goes against the principal's best interest (P.-T. Nikula & Kivistö, 2018) .

While Agents may have proven to be highly valuable in recruiting international students for PSIs, it has not been without its associated problems and risks. *Adverse selection* often occurs before the contractual relationship begins. The Agents generally have more information about the market, culture and local region than the PSI (information asymmetry). For example, an Agent may engage a highly reputable PSI offering them recruitment services, but with the knowledge that their students will not meet the PSI's admission requirements, nor have the financial means to study abroad. However, successfully establishing a relationship would mean the Agent can leverage the reputation and brand of the PSI. By linking their brand to the PSI's reputation, the Agent may increase their creditability in the market, and even change prospective students' perceptions towards the Agent (Aaker, 2004; Keller, 2020)

Acting as an intermediary between international students and the PSI, the Agent has considerable influence over the student's decision making process (Coffrey, 2014). Agents' influence and unique position have resulted in issues such as misrepresentation, misinforming and misleading students (e.g. providing inaccurate location or details about job outcomes), and even falsified documents (such as agent generated academic transcripts or language scores to

make students with lesser academic results appear more valuable to the potential PSI). These types of *moral hazards* are detrimental to the PSI's interest and any indirect stakeholders. As the use of Agents increased through the sector, problems and risks associated with this form of recruitment are increasing accordingly. An example of these problems and risks were identified by CBC News (2022) when they published their investigative report on how Agents in India use false hope to entice students to Canada. Another example would be an investigation conducted by Official CTV W5 (2023), where they recorded Agents who misinformed prospective international students about finding affordable housing and jobs while attending Cape Breton University.

The analysis by Nikula and Kivistö (2018) of Agent-PSI relationships aligns well with Agency Theory and provides a general understanding of agency problems in this relationship. Applying Agency Theory towards analysis of Agent-PSI relationships is not without limitations. Agency theory failed to accommodate a wider range of human motives - including altruism, trust, respect – and to distinguish an agent's opportunistic and non-opportunistic performance failures. Alternative theories may offer further insights into the extrinsic and intrinsic motivation of Agents and how Agent-PSI relationships can be optimized. For this approach, much-needed insights may be found through Supply Chain Management (SCM), specifically collaborative SCM.

Supply Chain Management (SCM)

The globalization of supply and manufacturing has forced companies to look for more effective ways to harmonize the flow of raw supply into products, and ultimately into consumers' hands. Introduced by Oliver and Webber (1982), SCM has had a profound impact on

companies' profit margins and additional value, and in some cases reduced cost for consumers Christopher (1992) defined SCM as the management of upstream and downstream linkages between suppliers and consumers in the form of products and services that deliver superior value for the consumer while reducing cost to the entire supply chain. Mentzer et al. (2011) defined the supply chain as a combination of three or more organizations or individuals directly unified in the horizontal flow of products, services, finances, and/or information from source to end-users. Although SCM practices are often represented from different perspectives, in general, SCM practices are categorized into demand management, customer relationship management, supplier relationship management, information sharing, information and technology management, service supply chain finance, and process management (Chong et al., 2011).

Service in Supply Chain Management

Prior to Ellram et al.(2007)'s paper, academic and scholarly discourse around operational management, SCM and purchasing and supply management, generally focused on the manufacturing sector of SCM. During the economic globalization era, the service sector greatly increased its contribution to economic growth relative to other sectors (Ellram et al., 2007). The service-producing sector is categorized as anything outside of manufacturing and farming (Ellram et al., 2004). Baltacioglu et al. (2007) defined a service supply chain as, "a network of suppliers, service providers, consumers, and other supporting units that performs the functions of transaction of resource required to produce services; transformation of these resources into supporting and core services; and the delivery of these services to consumers" (p.112). Examples of these kinds of service supply chains can be found in sectors such as telecommunication, internet service, finance, and tourism. Ellram et al. (2004) broadly delineated professional

services as, "any service of a recognized profession," such as management consulting, engineering, accounting, information technology and more (p.19). The value of this sector has been challenging to quantify due to the intangible nature of services. However, Ellram et al. (2004) define a service as, "the transfer of the service utilizing the supplier's service assets and staff. In essence, buying a service represents a transfer of service supplier's capacity to its customer in the form of a service" (p. 24).

Based on this, the definition by Ellram et al., of Supply Chain Management will be used in this study: "Supply Chain Management is the management of information, processes, capacity, service performance and funds from the earliest suppliers to the ultimate customer" (2004). Following Ellram's definition, the Agent-PSI relationship should be examined through the perspective SCM and its associated framework.

Collaborative relationships in SCM

Suppliers play a very critical role in the modern supply chain and the direct impact on the success or failure of supply chain networks. Firms are progressively building collaborative relationships with their supply chain partners to achieve efficiencies, flexibility and competitive advantage (Nyaga et al., 2010). Collaborative relationships foster a long-term approach with shared efforts by each party to create unique value that cannot be created independently (Corsten & Kumar, 2005; Nyaga et al., 2010). Daugherty et al. (2006) discovered that firms that engage in collaborative relationships achieved greater visibility, higher performance levels, increased flexibility, and greater consumer satisfaction.

Collaborative SCM and the Agent-PSI Relationship

International student recruitment, compare to domestic recruitment, can be classified as relatively complex (Coco, 2015; Coffey Jr., 2014; P.-T. Nikula & Kivistö, 2018; Pimpa, 2003) and costly endeavors. Extensive training and resources will be required to be effective in a different legal, cultural and political environment (Coffey Jr., 2014; NACAC, 2014). Due to the costly and complex activities associated with international recruitment, developing a collaborative relationship with Agents seems salient to optimizing cooperation and achieving added value that does not exist independently. While agency theory provides a framework for understanding the Agent-PSI relationship, the monitoring mechanisms and mitigation solutions may reinforce goal conflicts and exacerbate information asymmetry between the PSI and Agent. Thus, Collaborative SCM may add valuable perspective in solving the element of agent problems, while providing additional insights into variables that affects the Agent-PSI relationship. Therefore, Collaborative SCM is a foundational framework in this study.

As a systematic approach to analyzing and optimizing the various stages of the supply chain, the Supply Chain Management (SCM) framework provides a structured way to demystify the complex elements within the supply chain. As a critical component of SCM, Supplier Relationship Management is critical to achieve competitive advantages through collaborative partnership (Corsten & Kumar, 2005; Daugherty et al., 2006; Nyaga et al., 2010). Thus the foundation framework of this study was adopted from the SCM framework.

The SCM framework can be a useful model for understanding the Agent-PSI relationship from the Agent's perspective. While originally designed to study tangible product flows, the fundamental principles of SCM can be adapted and applied to a broad range of contexts, including service sector like education.

The focus on this study was to discover insights from the Agent's perspective. Thus, the study's methodologies focused on the supplier's aspect of the SCM framework to conduct survey and interviews. While Agent-PSI relationship isn't as interconnected as SCM, it is recognized that the Agent-PSI relationship is not simply the management of information or services, but also involves variables (Trust, Information Exchange, Commitment) surveyed in this study.

Summary

PSIs actively turn to international students as a solution to balance their budget to maintain the expectations placed on them by various governments, students and the public to deliver quality education. Roslyn Kunin and Associates (2017) reported that international students contributed over $3.5 billion (CAD) in tuition, student fees, and living expenses. Kunin and Associates ranked international education as the third-largest export after wood and timber, and mineral fuels and oil because of these international student expenses.

International students and their tuition fees are valuable financial supplements, but many PSIs lack the necessary resources, infrastructure, and expertise to establish their own international recruitment teams. These PSIs rely on Agents to assist in recruiting prospective international students from specific regions. PSIs would face significant financial challenges without the support of Agents. Coffey and Perry (2014) suggested that institutions often view Agents as a cost-effective way of recruiting international students, given their understanding of cultural norms and language proficiency.

Applying the concept of Agency Theory, as explained by Jensen and Meckling (1976), to the Agent – PSI relationship, PSIs (the principals) engage international recruitment firms (the agents) to recruitment international students (the task) in exchange for commission-based

compensation. Although this theory can be applied to various contractual relationships, its adoption by higher education researchers have been limited.

Agent- PSI relationship can be seen as a joint management of the international recruitment process when considering the service aspect of Supply Chain Management (SCM) as defined by Ellarm et al. (2004). The PSI and the Agent providing services to the student (the client/customer). Additional studies by Nyaga et al. (2010), Corsten and Kumar (2005), and Daugherty et al. (2006) discuss how collaborative relationships can generate unique value, improve efficiency, and enhance customer satisfactions. Examining the Agent- PSI relationship through the framework of SCM offers valuable insights into this dynamic relationship.

The application of SCM and the research methodology will be discussed in the following chapter. A mixed methodology research design will be stated in greater detail in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

Theories from Supply-Chain Management were utilized to determine the factors that best lead to an effective Agent-PSI relationship. These theories may optimize the quality and quantity of international student recruitment. This study adopts a sequential explanatory mixed methods approach and was conducted in two studies. The first study involved data collection through an online survey completed by individuals that work for Agents. The survey design was adapted from a framework by Nyaga et al. (2010) that was used to examine supply chain relationships. The data collected from the survey was analyzed through a quantitative method. The second study was designed to glean deeper insights into the survey results through qualitative analysis. This qualitative analysis provided insights into the creation of interview questions based on the results from the quantitative analysis. The interviews were conducted with randomly selected participants (Agents) from study one to aid in developing a deeper understanding of survey responses.

Mixed Methods

A sequential explanatory mixed methods approach was selected to enable this research to simultaneously answer confirmatory and exploratory questions. This allowed for the qualitative interviews in Study Two to be built directly on the results from the quantitative survey in Study One. Findings from the survey data were explored and observed through semi-structured interviews to better understand how the personal experiences of Agents match up with the survey results. The relationships between Agents and PSIs, and the activities associated with

international recruitment, are complex. The use of either a quantitative or qualitative strategy alone would be inadequate to effectively deal with the research questions under examination.

There are three research questions in this study: (1) What factors about the Agent-PSI relationships affect the quality of this relationship; (2) What Agent-PSI relationship factors have the highest impact; (3) from the agents' perspectives, do they feel that an improved Agent-PSI relationship would make them more effective at recruiting international students for the universities they represent? Of these questions, the first and second were addressed in the surveys and further explored in interviews; the third was discussed solely in interviews.

Ethics Review and Consideration

Prior to commencement, the research proposal was reviewed and approved by the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) Research Ethics Board (REB). The proposal and subsequent renewal were found to be in compliance with the University's ethics plans and Safe Research Plan. There were no risks associated with participation in this study and the participants were informed about the nature of the study and their participation as part of the consent procedure, including the assurance that they could withdraw at any time. The contact information for the researcher and supervisor were also provided. For the purpose of identifying data that should be removed if the participant no longer wishes to be part of the study, participants were assigned a unique research number that attached to their email address. The data can be identified only by this participant number, and only accessible by the researcher and supervisor.

Study One participants provided their consent within the survey platform prior to taking the survey on the same platform, including their consent for the publication of the study's results.

Participants had the ability to exit the survey if they had questions or would like to withdraw during the survey. Only completed surveys were counted and analyzed. The survey data is reported here in aggregated form, to prevent identification of individual participants and to protect participant confidentiality.

Study Two, all interviewees were sent via email a Consent Letter with the interview questions five to seven days in advanced of the meeting. Participants were also recorded giving verbal consent before the start of the interview process, as per UNBC Safe Research plan. Interviewees' names were not used in the study and only the participants' recruitment markets will be used in any report or presentation. All data, including recorded interviews, were stored on a password protected computer with access limited to the researcher and supervisor. The data will be stored for a maximum of five years.

Study One: Quantitative

Participants

Potential participants were sourced from Canadian PSIs' lists of authorized Agents in all countries that they typically recruit international students from. These Agents were selected from five PSIs across British Columbia, Ontario, and Alberta (e.g. Humber College, Simon Fraser University, University of Alberta, Southern Alberta Institute of Technology and Thompson Rivers University) in the summer of 2019. Other provinces were excluded due to the low international student population compared to the selected provinces. After the removal of duplicate listings, 150 potential participants were identified. The 150 potential participants were emailed the recruitment letter and invited to participate. As a qualifying question, invitees were asked to indicate whether they are an Agent; if they answered in the affirmative, participants

were invited to continue and complete the survey with regards to their last interaction with a Canadian PSI. Of the 150 potential participants, 91 participants completed the survey.

Survey Design

The survey tool adopted the framework from the Nyaga et al. (2010) study and were modified to fit the industry and goals of this study. The survey was initially pre-tested by experienced Agents familiar with recruiting international students for Canadian institutions. Pre-tests were used to ensure that the survey was clear and concise, and that the questions were configured correctly and relevant to the field. Agents who participated in calibrating the questions were excluded in the participant email list.

Agents were e-mailed a link they could follow to access the survey through the SurveyMonkey website. The list of items provided to the respondents can be found in the Table A below.

The 14 questions were calibrated to measure the following factors:

- Level of Manifest Conflict in the Relationship (Conflict)

- Quality of Information Exchange between the PSI and the Agents (Information Exchange)

- Length of Relationship

- Relationship Trust (Trust)

- Relationship Commitment (Commitment)

Table A - Survey Questions

Factors Measured	Abbreviation	Survey Items
Satisfaction in Agent-PSI relationship		1. Taking everything into account, how satisfied are you, overall, with the institution?
Level of manifest conflict in the relationship	Lconflict1	2. We have very few disagreements with the institution.
	Lconflict2	3. Disagreements, if they occur, are resolved quickly and smoothly
	Lconflict3	4. Any "differences of opinion" with the institution are simply treated as part of the business.
Quality of information exchange between the PSI and the Agents	QinfoX1	5. Information provided about programs and admissions are timely and accurate
	QinfoX2	6. The information provided about programs and policies is relevant to my agency.
	QinfoX3	7. My agency is satisfied with the level of information sharing provided by the institution
Length of relationships	Length	8. How long has your agency been promoting the institution's programs?
Relationship trust	Trust1	9. The institution always lives up to its promises
	Trust2	10. The institution supports expanding our client base
	Trust3	11. I have belief in the institution's ability to deliver on what they have told me they plan to do.
Relationship commitment	Rcommit1	12. I see our relationship with the institution as important to the longer-term growth of our agency
	Rcommit2	13. We have common goals with the institution and see them as a partner
	Rcommit3	14. The overall contribution to our business of the institution makes it important that the relationship continues

The survey used two seven-point Likert scales. The first Likert was anchored by *strongly agree* and *strongly disagree,* while the second scale was anchored by *extremely satisfied* and *extremely dissatisfied*. Except for *Satisfaction in Agent-PSI relationship*– which used the second Likert scale, and the Length of relationships – used a time interval, all other questions used the first Likert scale. Please see Appendix 2 for more information.

Table B - Likert Scale

Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Extremely Satisfied	Mostly Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Mostly dissatisfied	Extremely dissatisfied

Finally, the survey concludes with four demographic questions that measure: size of the organization, years of experience in the international education field, the country Agents primarily recruit from, and number of students the organization annually sends to Canadian PSIs.

Software

Quantitative analysis was conducted using the IBM Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 27.

Study Two: Qualitative Interviews

Participants

The in-depth interviews were held with randomly selected participants from the pool of survey participants; these individuals were contacted by e-mail to inform them of their selection and invite them to participate in the interview. Three invitees responded to the interview request and were scheduled accordingly. The interviewees were Agents who recruited from regions including Canada, China, South Asia, and South East Asia. These Agents have over five years of experience recruiting international students for Canadian PSIs.

Interview Design

Due to COVID-19 pandemic protocols, the interviews were held and recorded via Zoom (secure online video conferencing software) and notes were taken during the interviews. Interviewees were sent the interview questions and consent letters five to seven days before the scheduled interviews. Interview questions were informed by Study One results. These interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, which allowed the researcher to ask clarifying questions or ask for examples from respondents' lived experience. Additionally, having completed the survey, the interviewees understood the purpose of this research and were willing to provide further insights to the survey results. These interview prompts and questions can be found in Appendix 3.

Each recorded interview was reviewed and transcribed by the researcher. Then the factors from the survey in Study One were used as themes for thematic analysis (see Appendix 1) of interview responses in Study Two.

The following Chapter Four will provide the results from Study One and Study Two. Chapter Four: Analyses of Results provides quantitative results from Study One, qualitative results from Study Two, Discussions and Finding of Study Two, the interpretation of the Trust variable and a conclusion.

Chapter 4: Analyses of Results

This chapter reports the quantitative results from Study One and the qualitative results from Study Two. This research aimed to investigate Agents' perspectives on which variables – Level of Manifest Conflict in the Relationship (Conflict), Quality of Information Exchange (Information Exchange), Relationship Trust (Trust), and Relationship Commitment (Commitment) – affect Agent satisfaction in the relationships between Agents and PSIs. This research determined that Trust had a significant effect on satisfaction in the Agent-PSI relationship from Agents' perspectives and ranked highest out of all relational factors. The factor Length of Relationship was not included in the regression analysis as the question was on an interval scale.

The following research questions were examined in this study: (1) What factors about the Agent-PSI relationship affect Agent Satisfaction with the quality of the relationship; (2)Which Agent-PSI relationship factors have the highest impact?; (3) from the Agents' perspectives, do they feel that an improved Agent-PSI relationship would make them more effective at recruiting international students for the universities they represent? Research Questions 1 and 2 were addressed in Study One. Question 3 was explored through the follow-up interviews in Study Two.

Data from the quantitative survey was collected from 91 participants who are Agents that recruit international students for PSIs in Canada; three randomly selected Agents participated in the follow-up interview. This chapter summarizes the findings of this study as they relate to the research questions and highlights the significant effects of these factors on Agent Satisfaction in the Agent-PSI Relationship.

Study One Results – Quantitative

Participants Response

In addition to the survey questions regarding factors affecting the quality of the Agent-PSI relationship, participants responded to four demographic questions that help to describe the scope and magnitude of their international student recruitment work. Of the 91 participants that responded to the survey, 83.33% of participants were working in an organization with less than 50 employees. Most respondents were also fairly experienced in international recruitment, as 67.78% had more than five years of experience in their field; the remainder had less. Of the Agents who responded to this survey, 76.66% of the participants sent between 0 – 100 [82.22% of the participants sent between 0-200] students to Canada per year, while 17.78% sent over 200 students.

The top three countries that the Agents sourced students from are India (65.56%), Canada (15.56%), and China (6.67%). Canada, as a source country, may be viewed as an anomaly, whereby Agents are recruiting international students already in Canada (e.g. international students attending secondary schools) or international students in Canada engaging Agents' services to switch PSIs. Participants recruited students from other countries such as the United States (6.66%), Vietnam (2.22%), and Australia, Indonesia, and Nepal (3.33%).

Model Summary

Table C shows the results of the predictive variables in the regression analysis. Agent satisfaction in the Agent-PSI relationship was influenced by 57.4% of the factors measured, $R^2 = 0.574$, $F = 7.305$, $p = .000$. In this case, 57.4% of the variability in the dependent variable can be explained by the independent variable (Agent satisfaction).

Table C - Model Summary

Model Summary^b

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.757^a	.574	.495	.62001	.574	7.305	14	76	.000

ANOVA Results

There was a significant effect of the factors on Agent satisfaction with the Agent-PSI relationship, $F = 7.305$, $p < 0.05$.

Table D - Anova

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	39.312	14	2.808	7.305	.000^b
	Residual	29.215	76	.384		
	Total	68.527	90			

Coefficient A Results

Multicollinearity Diagnostics

      Table E displays the results from tests on whether the data met the assumption of collinearity and shows that multicollinearity was not a concern (Tolerance > 0.10, VIF < 10).

Coefficients

      Factors Trust1 and Trust2 – both of which are parts of the Relationship Trust factor – had significant effects on Agent satisfaction with the Agent-PSI relationship, $p < 0.05$ (Table E). Trust3 did not display a significant effect.

efficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95.0% Confidence Interval for B		Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Tolerance	VIF
Sat	(Constant)	.327	.265		1.236	.220	-.200	.854		
	Lconflict1	.013	.042	.028	.305	.761	-.071	.096	.690	1.44
	Lconflict2	-.010	.087	-.013	-.119	.906	-.184	.163	.479	2.08
	Lconflict3	-.101	.072	-.131	-1.405	.164	-.243	.042	.641	1.55
	QinfoX1	-.004	.114	-.004	-.033	.974	-.231	.223	.405	2.47
	QinfoX2	-.058	.103	-.060	-.567	.572	-.264	.147	.505	1.97
	QinfoX3	.087	.145	.071	.600	.551	-.201	.375	.396	2.52
	Trust1	.338	.144	.282	2.339	.022	.050	.625	.387	2.58
	Trust2	.386	.106	.417	3.650	.000	.175	.596	.430	2.32
	Trust3	-.075	.185	-.054	-.408	.684	-.443	.292	.318	3.14
	Rcommit1	.024	.213	.015	.111	.912	-.401	.448	.296	3.38
	Rcommit2	-.002	.214	-.001	-.007	.994	-.427	.424	.315	3.17
	Rcommit3	-.120	.192	-.074	-.625	.534	-.501	.262	.397	2.52

te: a. Dependent Variable: *Taking everything into account, how satisfied are you, overall, with the institution*?

onflict means Level of Manifest Conflict in the Relationship.

nfoX means Quality of Information Exchange between the PSI and the Agent

ust means Relationship Trust

ommit means Relationship Commitment

Study One: Quantitative Conclusion

The results from Study One indicate that Relationship Trust (Trust) had a significant effect on the Agent-PSI Relationship. However, not all the Trust factors had significant effects on the Agents' experience of quality of the Agent-PSI relationship. Trust1 and Trust2 had significant effects; however, Trust3 did not. The rationale behind two of the three sub-factors within the Relationship Trust factor having significant effects on Trust, and the third not having a significant effect may be explained by the way trust in PSIs is thought of by Agents, as discussed below.

Trust Questions

Table F - Trust Questions

Factors	Survey Questions	Focus/Measure/Intention
Trust1	The institution always lives up to its promises	Is the Agent confident that the PSI will deliver on its operational promises? These promises tend to be short-term and are usually within the recruitment cycle.
Trust2	The institution supports expanding our client base	Does the Agent have confidence that the PSI will help their organization's expansion?
Trust3	I have belief in the institution's ability to deliver on what they have told me they plan to do	Are Agents confident in the PSI's ability to deliver on their long-term plans?

Each Trust question was designed to measure a different aspect of the Trust Factor. Trust1 focused on the short-term and operational promises PSIs may have made to the Agent, such as resolving admissions issues, PSI representatives participating in recruitment fairs, or dedicating specific PSI staff to work with the Agent. Trust2 explored whether the Agent has

confidence that the PSI will help them expand their clientele. Examples of Trust2 might be an Agent focused on recruitment from one country who seeks to expand recruitment operations by proposing a global recruitment agreement with the PSI, or an Agent seeking to recruit students for programs that were previously restricted (i.e., competitive programs or research-based graduate programs).

Trust3 referred to whether the Agent has confidence in the PSI's ability to deliver on long-term academic or strategic plans. Institutional strategic and academic plans are conceived by PSIs based on current knowledge and trends, which can be derailed by unforeseen external events (i.e., immigration policy changes, pandemics, travel restrictions). There is uncertainty and risk in long-term plans. Gao (2005) pointed out that perception of risk and uncertainty can negatively influence trust, which provides validity to the inclusion of this question in this survey. In fact, Agents responding to this question overwhelmingly believed in their PSI's ability to deliver on long-term plans (8.79% somewhat agreed, 51.65% agreed, 39.56% strongly agreed). Further analysis showed that the Trust3 subfactor did not have a significant effect on their perceived quality of the Agent-PSI relationship. This may suggest that Agents understand that deviations from long-term plans could result from extenuating circumstances outside the control of PSIs, rather than from the PSI's own ability to attain plans as laid out.

This survey was pre-tested by experienced Agents who are familiar with recruiting international students for PSIs but did not participate in the survey. During the pre-test, these Agents indicated they understood the questions as described above and were clear about the meaning of each question.

Study Two: Interview Results – Qualitative

Thematic analysis was conducted on the interview responses. The study applied the framework with the five themes from the quantitative survey and coded accordingly (see Appendix 1). Trust was identified as an important factor that affects the Satisfaction of the Relationship between the Agent and PSI, which was in line with Study One results indicating a significant variable in the quantitative analysis.

Participants

Three Agents were randomly selected from the participants who responded to the survey in Study One. The Agents were of differing genders and recruited students from various countries, including Canada, China, South Asia, and South East Asia, which may or may not be based in Canada. The interviewees will be referred to as Agent A, Agent B, and Agent C.

Study Two: Discussion and Findings

Nyaga (2010) referred to the definition of Trust discussed by Ganeson (1994), where relationship partners believe each other as credible and benevolent. Creditability refers to the extent to which partners in a relationship have confidence in the other's expertise to complete an expected task effectively, whereas benevolence is based on the extent to which relationship partners believe that the other party has intentions and motives that will benefit the relationship (Ganesan, 1994; Nyaga et al., 2010).

Trust (Nyaga 2010) and (Ganeson 1994) generally occurs at the "courting" stage of the relationship. At this stage of the Agent-PSI relationship, usually contractual agreements have not yet been established. The design of this research study aided in examining Agent-PSI

relationships that were already established, where a contractual agreement had been signed and the relationship is now considered commercial.

The definition of Trust by Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Anderson and Narus (1990) would be more applicable. Morgan and Hunt conceptualized trust as a state that exists when one party has confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity: Trust relates to one party's confidence that the organization will reliably provide satisfactory service in a manner that is competent, honest, fair, responsible, helpful, and benevolent (1994). In another outcomes-based interpretation, Anderson and Narus defined trust in a working relationship as, "the firm's belief that another company will perform actions that will result in positive outcomes for the firm as well as not take unexpected actions that results in negative outcomes" (Anderson & Narus, 1990, p.45) The Agent understands that the option to study abroad involves a life-changing decision and often requires significant resources. Agents invest time and resources into cultivating prospective international students for PSIs. It is important for Agents to have confidence in PSIs' reliability and integrity.

The interviewees pointed out the importance of Trust in every touchpoint of the student recruitment journey, and the impact Trust has on every aspect of the Agents' business. Additionally, the interviewees emphasized that PSIs need to understand the Agents' recruitment processes, from lead generation to the start of the program, and how each stage of the recruitment process can be affected by Trust. The Agent wants to feel confident that the PSI is dependable, and their clients continue to have a positive experience; especially when their clients – both the students and their families – are making life-altering decisions and investing a small fortune to realize their aspirations.

"We [are] changing lives and that involves a lot of, a lot of money, first of all. And then a lot of trust. So both parties, institutions and Agents, they all need to understand what is in and around to make that [happen]." (Agent A statement)

"Efficiency that was referring to [in] other sectors is so important. In the fact that when a student is applying, the Agent wants to be able to move over [from one student to another]. Keeping their business efficient by finding new clientele. Where the trust factor comes in is when institutions are able to take that [application and enrolment] part [and ensure it is taken care of]. The trust comes through is when the Agent knows: I can send a lead or prospective student to this institution, it's going to be taken care of. I can focus on other things in my business that are [also] important." (Agent B statement)

"Genuine guidance [in] the relationship between student and [Agent] representative is brittle or fragile because any variation in information [would] readily trigger that mistrust. [An Agent] has to have very strong trust with the institution." (Agent C statement)

The Trust factor in an Agent-PSI relationship impacts the Agent's reputation was clearly stated throughout the three interviews. Agent A indicated that Trust impacts their ability to build their reputation with their students.

Agent B and C also associated Trust with their reputation:

The trust comes in [when] their reputation is on the line… If the Agent has trust in the institution, they're going to find the right students. (Agent B statement)

…what do we like to see in our relationship with institutions and trust is at the heart of that. And if it's there, then one can be very strategic and that has been the cornerstone of our particular [recruitment] work. (Agent C statement)

Trust in the Agent-PST relationship from the Agent perspective involves confidence in an institution's ability to be reliable and have integrity as stated in Morgan and Hunt (1994) definition of trust in a commercial relationship. Agents are intermediaries in the international recruitment funnel, which relies on PSIs to complete the recruitment transaction. The Agent must have confidence that their PSI partner will not waste their recruitment efforts or resources by inordinately delaying the admission process or negatively affecting their level of service to their clients. The Trust variable in the Agent-PSI relationship can have a positive or negative impact on the reputation of Agents. An Agent's reputation could have impact on their ability to recruit for PSI and maintain high level of Trust with PSI.

Summary

Review of research questions:

1) What factors about the Agent-PSI relationships affect Agent satisfaction with the quality of this relationship?

2) What Agent-PSI relationship factors have the highest impact?

3) From the Agents' perspectives, do they feel that an improved Agent-PSI relationship would make them more effective at recruiting international students for the universities they represent?

<u>Answers:</u>

1) Trust was the only factor that affected Agent's satisfaction in an Agent-PSI relationship.

2) The results of this study indicated that Trust has the highest impact or signification in an Agent-PSI relationship.

3) The interviewees signaled that Trust would improve Agent-PSI relationship and aid in their ability to recruit international students for the PSI they represent as indicated in the analysis.

The results of Studies One and Two were analyzed through a quantitative and qualitative analysis with the factors which affect the Agent-PSI relationship were identified. Study One concluded that Relationship Trust had a significant effect on Agent satisfaction in the Agent-PSI relationship.

In Study Two, findings from the interviews of three randomly selected Agents showed that the theme with the highest occurrence was Relationship Trust, which validates Study One. Applying Sequential Mixed Method research analysis design solidified that trust is the most significant variable in Agent-PSI relationships.

The following Chapter Five will provide the following sections as the concluding chapter of this research thesis. Chapter Five: Conclusions and Discussion provides a perspective on research implications, the research limitations and future research recommendations.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Discussion

Reduced government funding into research and higher education, combined with rising operational costs for Canadian PSIs, has made international student tuition fees an increasingly valuable revenue source (Deering & Sá, 2014) . Tuition fees for international students are three to four times those of domestic students at many PSIs (Statistics Canada, 2016) . As such, Neatby and Yogesh (2018) reported that universities and colleges in BC are turning to international student recruitment to make up revenue from decreased government funding and domestic limitations on tuition fee increases.

The use of Agents has been a cost-effective way to recruit international students without a significant upfront investment because the Agents are paid a commission after the international student has been enrolled. Using Agents as a recruitment channel has become common practice because of hypercompetitive global competition for international students. The direct bottom line can be directly impacted by how a PSI manages the Agent-PSI relationship can.

Literature on the topic reveals that Agency Theory has commonly been applied to understanding the Agent-PSI relationship, whereby PSIs may seek methods to monitor and control Agents whose goals might differ from those of the PSI (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; P. T. Nikula & Kivistö, 2018; Ross, 1973b). This approach is seated in the viewpoint of PSIs attempting to protect their investment by overseeing Agents. There is a notable absence in current research studies addressing insights about the Agent-PSI relationship from Agents' perspectives (Huang et al., 2016; P.-T. Nikula & Kivistö, 2018; Raimo et al., 2014). This absence of research limits the knowledge PSIs have regarding Agents' motivations and views on their international student recruitment work and their relationship with PSIs – as valuable as this information could be. PSIs recognized the value of Agents who possess international experience

and work directly with students within the same geographical context. To ensure successful international student recruitment, PSIs actively engage with Agents' services. Understanding Agents' perspectives on what factors contribute to the quality of the Agent-PSI relationship will have direct impact on international student recruitment.

Research in Supply Chain Management (SCM) found that organizations that approached business relationships collaboratively were able to achieve efficiencies, increase flexibility and achieve a competitive advantage by manufacturing value synergistically that neither party could attain independently (Corsten & Kumar, 2005; Daugherty et al., 2006; Nyaga et al., 2010). This study focused on Agent perspective, from the mindset of a collaborative framework that values the viewpoints of both PSIs and Agents, enabling both to be represented in the literature.

This research demonstrated that Relationship Trust is an important factor affecting the quality of the Agent-PSI relationship from Agents' perspectives. Agents specifically reported that confidence in the PSI's ability to deliver on short-term operational promises occurring within the recruitment cycle, and to help grow the Agents' businesses (e.g. through expanding their recruitment operations). This factor would affect their perceived quality of the Agent-PSI relationship. Agents seem to be reasonable in understanding that extenuating circumstances may inadvertently affect PSIs abilities to uphold long-term plans and strategies without deviation, and trust in this aspect did not significantly affect Agents' perspectives of quality of the Agent-PSI relationship.

This revelation can complement existing policy on Agent management and provide an important reference on how PSIs interact with Agents. The Agent-PSI relationship is more effective from the Agent perspective when Relationship Trust is high. Morgan and Hunt describe trust as a state that exists when one party is confident that the other will reliably provide

satisfactory service in a manner that is competent, honest, fair, responsible, helpful and benevolent (1994). The Agent can focus on developing leads and recruiting prospective students for the PSI when Relationship Trust is present in the Agent-PSI relationship.

> "… trust comes through when the agent knows the lead or prospective student sent to this institution is going to be taken care of." (Agent B statement)

Given that an Agent represents a for-profit business, the Agent must trust that the PSI will provide a positive recruitment experience and the same level of service throughout the journey. At the start of the PSI recruitment journey, the Agents are front-facing students and generally are the conduit between the student and PSI. In Study Two, Agents expressed that any negative experience during this journey could impact their business, brand and reputation.

Finally, Agents operate in an international education market that must cope with volatile market demands, complex immigration policies, incongruent admissions processes, and high-value transactions. Their business is subject to high uncertainties and their operations rely on competent employees and reliable, trustworthy PSI partners. Therefore, an improved Agent-PSI relationship built upon Trust can positively increase recruitment return on investment (ROI) for PSIs and avoid negative student experiences brought up under conditions of information asymmetry for Agents.

Implications

The introduction to this research suggests a void in the literature regarding Agents' perspectives on the Agent-PSI relationship. While there has been a large amount written on Agent management and the Agent relationship, mostly from the PSI perspective, little of the current literature explored the relationship from the Agent perspective (Huang et al., 2016; P.-T.

Nikula & Kivistö, 2018; Raimo et al., 2014). This research has provided novel findings not previously extant in the literature. First, it identified that trust affects the quality of the Agent-PSI relationship from the Agent perspective, including more specific subfactors affecting how trust – or lack thereof – is experienced. Second, it explores the rationale behind trust in the Agent-PSI relationship and how it impacts Agents' experiences of the Agent-PSI relationship. The knowledge from this research can improve ROI in Agent-PSI relationships – with the potential for better international student recruitment results – and extend the theoretical foundation for Agent management within international education and strategic enrollment management.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to this study. These limitations were primarily due to the pandemic and the timing of this study. As a result, this meant that the findings may in part be determined by a pandemic-induced experience or by external variables (i.e. travel restrictions).

Secondly, technical limitation posed by conducting virtual interviews prevented observation of participant's nonverbal communication, which made it challenging for the interviewer to pick up on subtle cues or nuances. Additionally, lack of physical presence and environmental control may have resulted in less rapport and participant distraction.

Finally, the political tension between Canada and China may have affected respondents from China, which could influence the findings.

Future Research

There are several shortcomings in this study that could be addressed in future research. First, the study focused on factors that had the highest impact in an Agent-PSI relationship while

applying a SCM framework in a mixed-methods research format. Trust does lead to an improved Agent satisfaction in an Agent-PSI relationship. However, Morgan and Hunt (1994) posited that a successful relationship requires commitment and trust. Unfortunately, Relationship Commitment was not a significant factor in this study. Morgan and Hunt (1994) identified factors such as relationship termination costs, shared values, and trust as direct contributors to relationship commitment. However, in the context of the Agent-PSI relationships characterized by their non-exclusive nature, the costs associated with relationship termination are notably lower. This aspect potentially underlies the observed insignificance of Relationship Commitment in this study's scope. Nonetheless, there remains a research imperative to determine the multifaceted factors influencing Relationship Commitment with the Agent-PSI relationship. .

Second, this study did not test for effects of power imbalances between Agents and PSIs. Despite the presence of commonalities in beliefs in certain goals and interests, an imbalance of power could impact Trust. For example, Agents and a particular PSI they are recruiting for may have the same goal of increasing the number of international students from a certain region. However, should the PSI limit the number of programs the Agent can recruit students into, or if the PSI only offers programs that are not in demand in that region the Agent recruit within, this imbalance in decision-making authority can stymy Agents' efforts in spite of shared international student recruitment goals that were previously agreed upon.

Third, this study focused on PSIs in Canada and the Agents who recruit for Canadian PSIs. Therefore, factors that impact PSIs in China and the Agents who recruit for them may differ, as the compensation model and international tuition fees are relatively lower compared to PSIs in Canada, the United States or the United Kingdom. Potentially, further enquiry into Agent-PSI relationships in PSIs in other countries could expand upon this research.

Finally, while this study identified Trust as an important factor in the Agent-PSI relationship, it would be valuable to investigate the antecedent factors of Trust in the Agent-PSI relationship, which should be explored in future studies.

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Appendix 1

Themes used for thematic analysis

Level of manifest conflict in the relationship
Quality of information exchange between institutions and Agents
Length of relationships
Relationship Trust
Relationship Commitment

Appendix 2

Survey questions

<u>Relationship Satisfaction</u> [c]

Taking everything into account, how satisfied are you, overall, with the institution?

<u>Level of manifest conflict in the relationship</u>[a]

We have very few disagreements with the institution

Disagreements, if they occur, are resolved quickly and smoothly

Any "differences of opinion" with the institution are simply treated as part of business

<u>Quality of Information Exchange between Institutions and the Agents</u>[a]

Information provided about programs and admissions is timely and accurate

The information provided about programs and policies is relevant to my agency

My agency is satisfied with the level of information sharing provided by the institution

<u>Length of the relationships</u> [b]

How long has your agency been promoting the institution's programs?

<u>Relationship Trust</u>[a]

The institution always lives up to its promises

The institution supports expanding our client base

I have belief in the institution's ability to deliver on what they have told me they plan to do

Relationship Commitment[a]

I see our relationship with the institution as important to the longer-term growth of our agency.

We have common goals with the institution and see them as a partner

The overall contribution to our business of the institution makes it important that the relationship continues

Likert Scales and Time Interval

[a] *7 – point scale anchored by "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree"*

[b] *Less than 1 year; 1-2 years; 3-5 years; 6-10 years; more than 10 years*

[c] *7-point scale anchored by "extremely satisfied" and "extremely dissatisfied"*

Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
7	6	5	4	3	2	1
Extremely Satisfied	Mostly Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Mostly dissatisfied	Extremely dissatisfied

Appendix 3

Interview Prompts

1. Tell me more about the ideal relationship you would like to have with an institution?
2. In the survey result, Trust was one of the biggest influencers to an ideal relationship. Can you provide more insight as to why this might be the case?
3. Would you say trust is associated with the institution or with the primary contact?
   a. Can you share why?
4. In your experience, have there been incidents where trust is more important to recruiting more students for a university/college than a university's ranking or brand?
   a. Can you tell me more about that?
5. How has your approach to working with institutions changed over time?
   a. What motivated this change?